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AMERICAN JEWISH ARCHIVES

Judah Touro

Retrospect after a Century

The simple annals of the rich, like those of the poor, may be briefly told. On June 16, 1775, on the eve of the Battle of Bunker Hill, Judah Touro first saw the light of day in Newport, R. I.

The Revolutionary War that now followed disrupted the life of the Touros. The father, Isaac, the Newport cantor, was a Loyalist and fled the city and, ultimately, the country, to die a few years later in the West Indies.

The widow and children were taken in by her brother, Moses Michael Hays of Boston. Under the tutelage of his uncle, Judah Touro became a competent merchant before he sailed for the French city of New Orleans, in 1801, to make his fortune. He was successful.

Judah lived for about fifty-two years in that city. As it grew, he grew with it. He was a shopkeeper, merchant-shipper, and buyer and seller of real estate. Because he had no wife or children or close kin, Touro began to give away his wealth while he was yet alive. It was his

\$10,000, together with a similar amount from Amos Lawrence, that made it possible to complete the building of the Bunker Hill Monument. The Touro Infirmiry, a Jewish hospital, was opened by him shortly before his death. He gave New Orleans a Free Library, and for his fellow-Sephardic Jews in that city he established a synagogue: The Dispersed of Judah.

There are numerous stories of his private benefactions. Many of them are true. It was his generosity that made it possible for the First Congregational Church to remain in its sanctuary when poverty threatened to close its doors. And when that building burnt down, he offered the congregation another, and encouraged its members to remain there free of charge.

He died on January 18, 1854. When his will was probated that year—just a century ago—it was found that the bulk of his large estate was given to charity.

His benefactions made him the first great American Jewish philanthropist. Practically every Jewish synagogue, benevolent society, and hospital in the country was remembered in his will. Even the poor of Jerusalem were given a substantial sum; they received \$50,000. Newport, Boston, and New Orleans, cities which he loved, were given legacies for general hospitals, parks, and almshouses. Catholics and Protestants shared in his estate equally with Jews.

Judah Touro is remembered today because of his broad, universal approach to philanthropy. Probably he built better than he knew. The 1840's and 1850's saw the coming in of thousands of Jewish immigrants. Jewish religious and cultural institutions were struggling to maintain themselves; they could not cope with the thousands who were pouring in. The older Jewish settlers, the natives, were too few, or too poor, or too reluctant to provide adequately for the newcomers, to provide the institutions they needed. Large benefactions were scarce; the industrialization of this country was in its infancy, and few Jews, very few, were in industry. There was no "big money." It was the large sums left by Touro to the Jewish religious and social-welfare agencies—all the way from Boston to New Orleans—that made it possible for them to establish themselves firmly. They were able to hold out until the day came when the newcomers could carry their share of the load. From the vantage point of a century, it is obvious that Touro's benefactions were most timely. It is our realization of this factor that makes the epitaph engraved on his tombstone take on added significance:

The last of his name
He inscribed it in the Book of
Philanthropy
To be remembered forever.