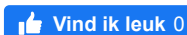


D.C. Jewish museum moves – on a truck – with the times



By [Jordan Gass-Pooré - Spring 2015](#) Jan 29, 2015



Click on photo to enlarge or download: Adas Israel, Washington's oldest synagogue, stands beside the Center Leg Freeway, but not for long. The building, now home to the Lillian and Albert Smalls Jewish Museum, will make its second move in less than 50 years, in 2020, to make room for a downtown development project. SHFWire photo by Jordan Gass- Pooré

WASHINGTON – Congress proved that the way to help reunite a community was to saw one of its beloved buildings in half and put it on a truck.

Adas Israel, Washington's oldest synagogue and one of the oldest still standing in the nation, was moved three blocks from its original location in 1969. Officials wanted the land the synagogue sat on to

build a headquarters for the city's new Metro system.

There were even engraved invitations to commemorate the move of a building whose furniture has seen the derrières of presidents Ulysses S. Grant and Lyndon B. Johnson.

It took three hours to get the two-story red brick building from Sixth and G streets Northwest, to the triangular patch of land where it now stands at Third and G.

Now the building faces another move to make way for a glossy downtown development project called [Capitol Crossing](#). The move is still about five years away, but plans are underway for the one-block move to Third and F.

The [Adas Israel Congregation](#) had moved across town in 1951, leaving the old building to violate kosher dietary laws in its 20th century incarnation as a pork shop. Later the building housed a bike shop, a grocery store and a Christian church.

Now the building houses the Lillian and Albert Small Jewish Museum. It takes a certain chutzpah for Adas Israel to move again, but it's not like it had a choice. The building sits on land leased from the D.C. government for \$1 a year, and D.C. wants the land for the new development.

Wendy Turman, the [Jewish Historical Society of Greater Washington's](#) director of collections, is optimistic that the move will help paint a fuller picture of Washington's Jewish community. The museum will get added space for storage and offices in an adjacent building.

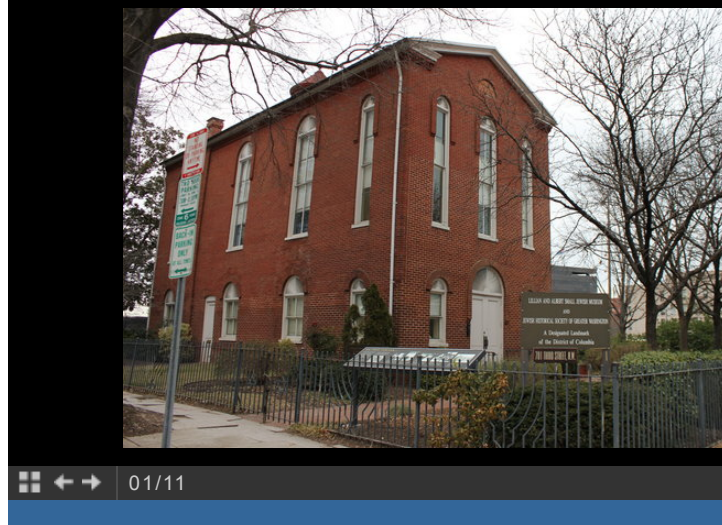
The ties that bind

[Adas Israel](#), built in 1876 at Sixth and G streets Northwest, was at the center of the Jewish communities in downtown Washington in the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

Around the corner, I Street was so crowded on Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur that it reminded some people of Broadway in New York. Teens skipped the religious services to hang out at the small park nearby.

These are the youthful memories recounted in the Jewish Historical Society of Greater Washington's ongoing [oral history](#) project, Turman said.

What's left of downtown Jewish Washin



Many members of Adas Israel's first congregation emigrated from German states and present-day Poland, the Netherlands and Russia, Turman said.

"You really started to see some culture clashes between the eastern and western, the older and the newer immigrants," Turman said.

This is reflected in some of the congregation's recorded minutes, when its leadership proved to be divisive.

But that was old hat for some of the congregation's members.

[Washington Hebrew Congregation](#), the city's first Jewish congregation, formed in 1852. As that congregation reformed its religious practices, about 30 of its members left to form the more orthodox Adas Israel.

As president, [Grant](#) was present for Adas Israel's groundbreaking. Turman said this was a surprise because of Grant's [anti-Semitic order](#) to expel all Jews from Kentucky, Tennessee and Mississippi as a Union general.

The wandering building

For about 50 years there were three synagogues within a few blocks of each other, representing an array of Jewish customs and beliefs.

Many members had come to Washington because they knew people who lived here, and others were drawn to jobs in the federal government, Turman said.

Then the melting pot began to boil.

In the 1960s, some Jewish business owners moved out of downtown Washington to the suburbs, Turman said, but still ran businesses off H Street Northeast, and Seventh and 14th streets Northwest – the areas hit hardest by the [1968 riots that followed the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr.](#)

Some of these business owners suffered severe financial loss because of the riots. There was also emotional loss.

The Adas Israel building's original purpose seemed to have faded from people's memories after decades of commercial use.

Then it was slated for demolition to make room for the Washington Metropolitan Area Transit Authority headquarters, and interest in the building's history was resurrected.

The congregation had moved in 1908 to a larger sanctuary at Sixth and I streets, after selling the original building to a family that reconfigured it for commercial use.

The support of federal and city agencies, as well as the Jewish historical society, saved the building from demolition in 1969, but the first floor was left behind because it wasn't structurally safe to move. It was later demolished.

In return, the society has continued to lease the building and property from the District. When the museum moves, its property lease will be given to the developer, which has given the society land for an undisclosed price, Laura Apelbaum, the society's executive director, wrote in an email.

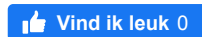
Turman said she hopes Adas Israel's encore move will renew interest in Washington's Jewish history. At its new location, the building will face east toward Jerusalem, where it had been positioned in 1876 at Sixth and G streets Northwest.

Reach reporter Jordan Gass-Pooré at jordan.gass-pooré@scripps.com or 202-408-1490. SHFWire stories are free to any news organization that gives the reporter a byline and credits the SHFWire. Like the Scripps Howard Foundation Wire interns on [Facebook](#) and follow us on [Twitter](#).



About Jordan Gass-Pooré - Spring 2015

Jordan Gass-Pooré is a Spring 2015 reporter for the SHFWire from Texas State University.



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