

Congregation B'nai Israel Galveston, TX

Robert P. Davis, Architect
Houston, Texas
June 1997



Rabbi Henry Cohen was a legendary figure in Galveston and the State of Texas having served from 1888 to 1950 (and as Rabbi Emeritus for two years thereafter). The community house built in his honor sits beside a truly monumental temple building, unlike the other synagogues examined in this series which lack the capacity and architectural pretension. Galveston had a well-established Jewish community before the Civil War and was a major port of entry for Jewish immigration before WWI through Cohen's "Galveston Plan". The railroad funneling immigration into the interior of the state and up into the Midwest was largely financed and developed by his congregants. B'nai Israel is in many ways the "Mother of All Texas Synagogues" as Henry Cohen is the father.

These are large and imposing buildings each nearly 125 feet long. The Norman Gothic temple building was designed by the architect, Fred Stewart, and erected in 1870. Nicholas Clayton, one of Texas' most famous architects, remodeled the building in 1886-87. It weathered the great storm of 1900 and was probably raised five feet afterwards in the general reconstruction of the island. It was an ornate and lavishly detailed structure but has been considerably debased after the congregation moved



out in 1952. Only fragments of the original stained glass remain, and most openings have been bricked up. The Cohen Community house to the left was built in 1928 as an office and Sunday School building.



The carved limestone portal entry into the Cohen Community House on the left and the wrought iron gate into the space between the buildings show the use of the "Magen David" as the primary iconographic element in the decoration of both buildings. They turn up everywhere and are the only solid indication that these buildings once had a Jewish purpose.