

A Jewish History of Scarsdale

The first Jews didn't arrive in Scarsdale until the late 19th century. Today it's estimated that Scarsdale has a Jewish population of 5.2 percent out of a total population of 17,890, or about 930 individuals. At its height in 1980, it is estimated that about 50 percent of Scarsdale's population was Jewish. However, it is important to realize that the Federal Census does not collect information about religious affiliation, and therefore all population estimates based on religion are speculative at best. While 50 percent may be an overestimate, it is also possible that 5.2 percent is too low. Read on to learn about Jewish immigration to New York and the eventual movement into Westchester and Scarsdale.

The First Jews of New Amsterdam

In 1654, 23 Jewish refugees from the Dutch colony of Recife in Brazil arrived in New Amsterdam. Recife had recently been captured by the Portuguese, who expelled the Jewish community. The Dutch Jews fled on sixteen ships to Holland, but one didn't make it home. Piracy and bad weather are often cited as reasons for this 16th ship's diversion to New Amsterdam. Whatever the reason, when they arrived at the port in 1654, they were unable to pay their debt to the captain of the ship, but were able to borrow enough money, backed by Jews in Holland. Governor Stuyvesant wished to expel the new arrivals, who did not have proper passports. However, Jewish backers of the Dutch West India Company overruled Stuyvesant and the Jews were allowed to stay. They established the first Synagogue in New York, Shearith Israel, soon after they arrived. The Congregation constructed a synagogue in 1730, now known as the Mill Street Synagogue. Shearith Israel is currently located at West 70th Street, where it has been since 1897. It was the only Jewish congregation in New York City until 1825. These first Jewish immigrants were Sephardic, tracing their ancestry to Spain and Portugal, and they practiced a strict Orthodox version of Judaism.



Congregation Shearith Israel, 2010. Located at 2 West 70th Street in Manhattan



To the left is a depiction of Asser Levy created by artist Alex Shagin for the Jewish American Hall of Fame. Levy was one of the 23 refugees from Recife who arrived in New Amsterdam in 1654. He helped to file petitions that won rights for the Jewish immigrants. He was the first Jew to own a house in North America, and became involved in the purchase and sale of real estate as early as 1662. He was wealthy enough to lend 100 florins to the city in 1664. The Asser Levy Recreation Center and Public Baths in Manhattan are named for him, along with Asser Levy Park in Coney Island and PS 19, known as the Asser Levy School.

The Jews of Westchester: 17th & 18th Centuries

Traditional Jewish surnames began to appear in Westchester colony records as early as the end of the seventeenth century. One of the earliest was Nathan Gold of Rye. He served on committees for the Town as early as 1669. In 1684, Richard and Jacob Abrahamson of New York City received a license to purchase 300 acres along the Hudson near present-day Peekskill. Asser Levy expanded his trading operations north into Westchester in 1664. The wealthy merchants Luis Gomes (or Gomez) and his son Moredecai established an agricultural trading base in Westchester in the early 18th century, and in 1729, Mordecai purchased a twenty-acre summer residence in Eastchester. Throughout the 18th century, Westchester Jews settled in Rye, Cortlandt, Eastchester, North Castle, Yonkers, Bedford, New Rochelle, and Tarrytown.

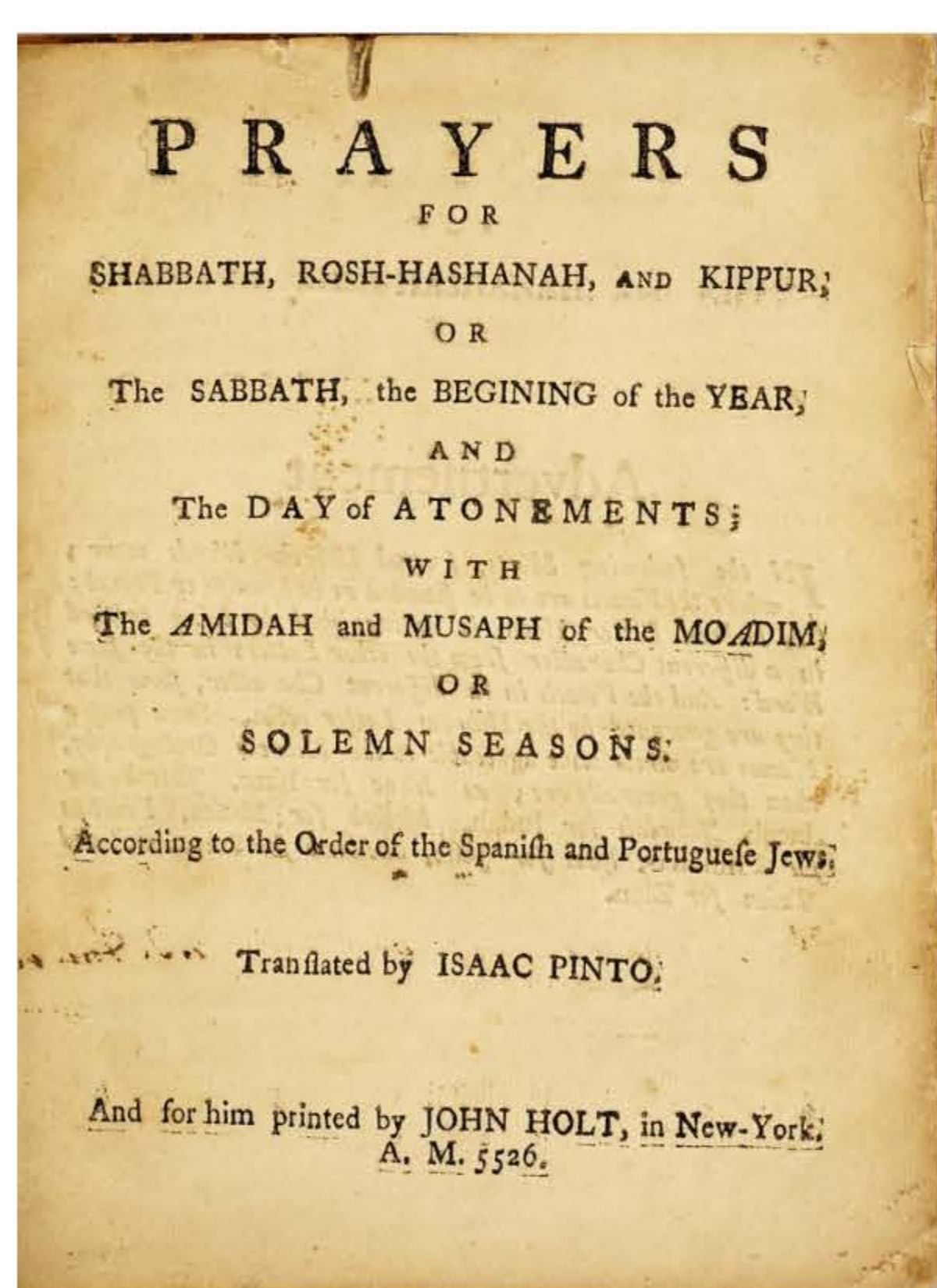


Portrait of Moses Levy, attr. to Gerardus Duyckinck I, c. 1735



Judah Hays, c. 1810. Attr. Gilbert Stuart

Moses Levy was the first definitively identified Jewish settler in Westchester. In 1716 he purchased 75 acres of land on what is now Manursing Island in Rye. Levy was one of the largest overseas traders of the early 18th century. When he died in 1728, he left an estate of over 6,874 pounds.



Prayers for Shabbath, Rosh-Hasbanah, and Kippur translated by Isaac Pinto, 1766

Religious Life

There was no synagogue in Westchester during the 17th and 18th centuries. Those who wished to formally practice their religion were reliant on Congregation Shearith Israel in New York City. Those who chose not to become members of Shearith Israel were mostly left to their own devices, though the Congregation did attempt to collect tithes by denying access to the Synagogue's burial grounds. Shearith Israel issued a number of edicts chastising Westchester Jews for flouting dietary rules and for conducting business on the Sabbath. For those who wished to practice Judaism at home, standard prayer books, such as David Levi's *Form of Prayer*, were widely available, as were lunar calendars to keep track of the changing dates of the holidays.

The Hays family was possibly the most durable of Jewish Westchester families. In 1721, Jacob Hays bought land in Rye for mining purposes. In 1743, Jacob's brother Judah Hays purchased Thomas Purdy's homestead in Rye as a summer residence. Jacob Hays' sons all lived and died in Westchester.

They were Michael, David, Benjamin, and Moses Hays. Eldest brother Michael kept a general store in North Castle, where he also began to purchase land.

From 1760-1793 he made at least nine farmland acquisitions totaling approximately 465 acres. In the 1750s, David joined Michael in running his store in North Castle. In the 1760s, while living in New Rochelle, he financed his younger brothers' innkeeping business in Bedford. In 1765 his oldest child, Rachel, became the first identified Jewish female born in Westchester.

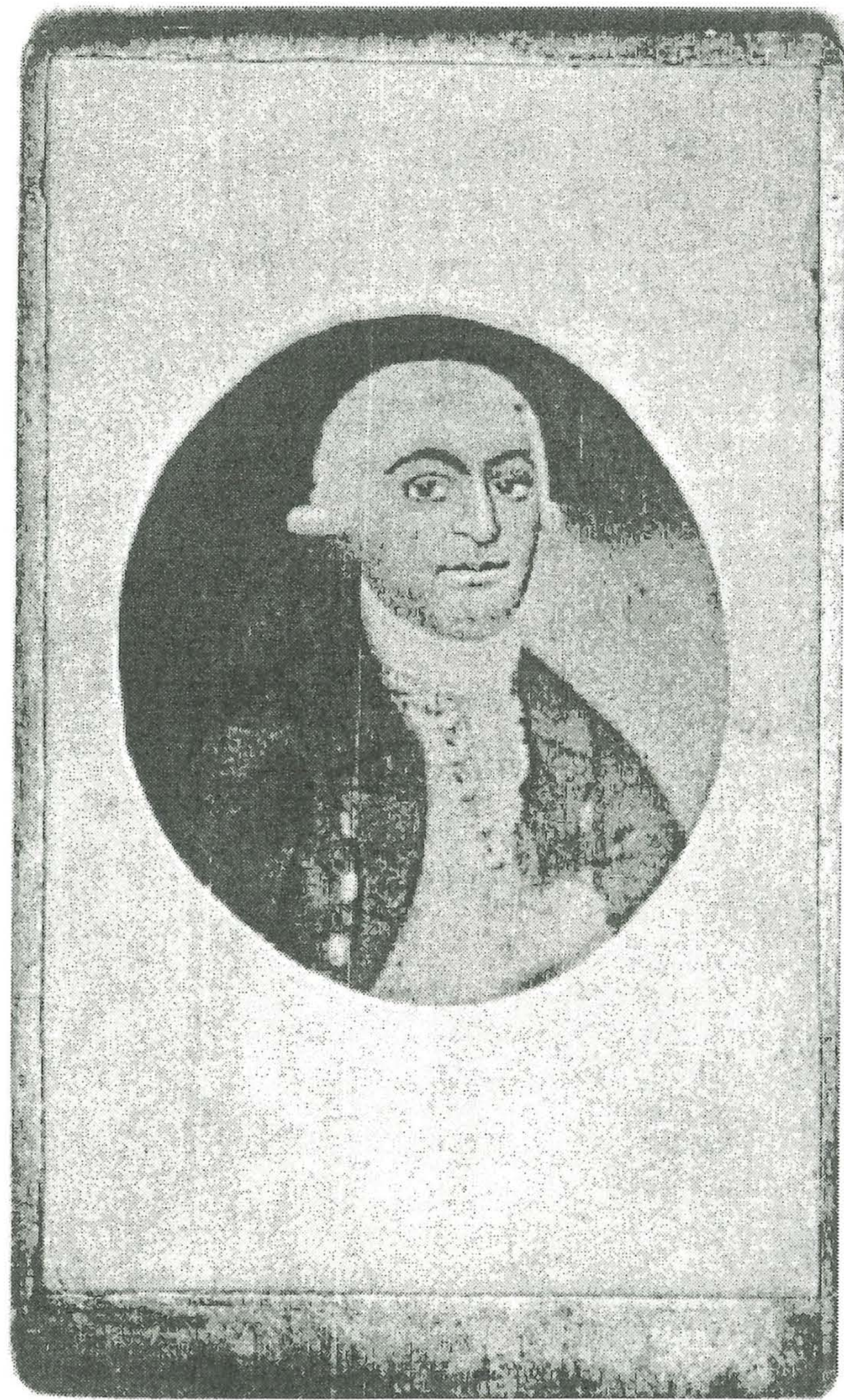
The Manor of Scarsdale

There were no known Jewish residents in Scarsdale in the 17th and 18th century. Caleb Heathcote, the 6th son of Mayor Heathcote of Chesterfield in the Hundred of Scarsdale, Derbyshire, England, found his way to the new world in 1692. He soon prospered in trade, and began to buy up land in Westchester. In 1701 he had these lands elevated into a royal manor, which he named Scarsdale, after his native home. The first population count, taken in 1712, listed 12 people, 7 of which were slaves. After his death in 1721, the land was inherited by his two daughters. In 1774 the manor was broken up, and the tenants became the owners.

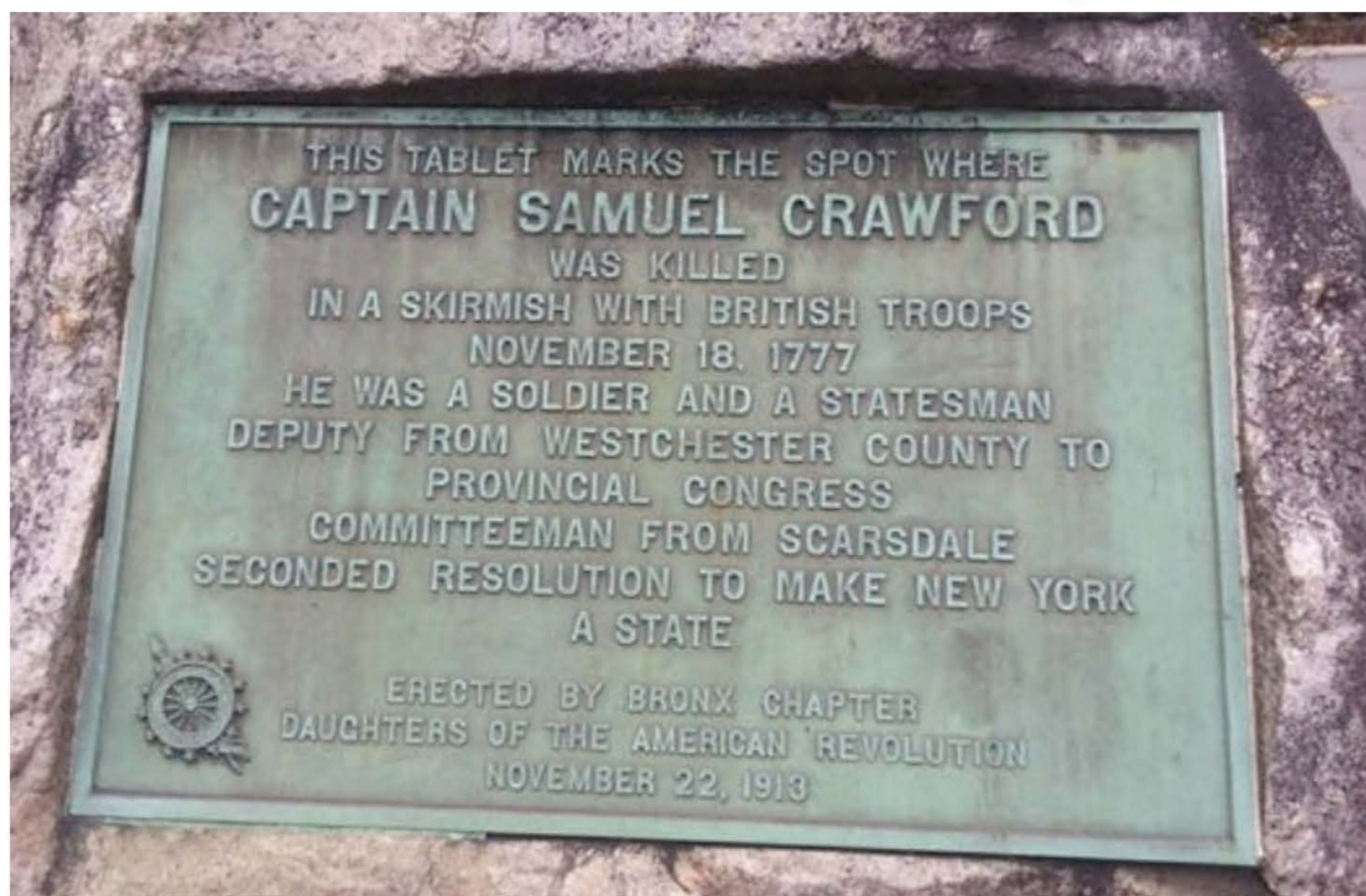
The American Revolution

Westchester During the American Revolution

When the American Revolution erupted in 1776, Westchester became a battleground not entirely controlled by either side. Westchester's Jews were similarly split in their loyalties. Michael Hays was involved in selecting representatives for the New York Provincial Congress and led the North Castle delegation to the meeting of Westchester freeholders who met on the steps of the County Courthouse on May 13, 1776. His brother Benjamin Hays' Bedford inn, which was known as a hotbed of Patriot fervor, was singled out for burning by the British during Tarleton's first raid on Bedford on July 2, 1779. A few days later Tarleton burned most of Bedford to the ground, including David Hays' home. David Hays and his first cousin Barrack Hays were among six New York Jews to sign a document, which gathered 948 signatures, proclaiming loyalty to General Howe. Two of the Gomes family also signed, along with Abraham Abrahams, the mohel for Shearith Israel. David renounced his loyalty to the crown in December, 1777 after the Patriot victory at Saratoga.



*Barrack Hays, Loyalist, first cousin of David Hays.
Courtesy AJA.*



Samuel Crawford Memorial in Tuckahoe, N. Y.

Jews also served in Washington's army. In the muster rolls for the Westchester militia, 23 have recognizably Jewish names. The Westchester militiamen saw their only action during the Battle of White Plains on October 28, 1776. They were relegated to rear guard action, where their delaying tactics assisted Washington's retreat after an inglorious defeat. After the Battle of White Plains, the Westchester militia's job was to protect central Westchester from loyalist raiders such as De Lancey's Refugees, who sought to capture agricultural supplies and livestock to supply British forces in New York City. This led to De Lancey's raiders nickname, De Lancey's "Cowboys."

Scarsdale During the American Revolution

There were no known Jews in Scarsdale during the Revolutionary period. Westchester during the Revolution found that both sides were willing to raid its many farms for food and supplies, often without compensation. In Scarsdale, then a farming community, the same patterns played out. The large Quaker population refused to take sides, opposing war in principle. A few families declared their desire for a break with England, including the Crawfords, Varians, and Tompkins. Samuel Crawford, a cooper, represented Scarsdale on the Committee of Safety and served as a militia captain. The Varians, who had purchased the Wayside farm, were outspoken rebels, as was Jonathan Tompkins, father of the future U.S. Vice President Daniel Tompkins. The Battle of White Plains saw large armies passing through Scarsdale. A column of British troops marched up what is now Quaker Ridge Road to Weaver Street and up Mamaroneck Road to White Plains. The first exchange of fire was in Greenacres. General Howe briefly had his headquarters at the Griffen farmhouse at 31 Mamaroneck Road, where he stayed until November 5th, 1776. Scarsdale's only casualty during the Revolution was Samuel Crawford, who was killed in 1777 after conducting a raid near Morrisania. When he stopped to visit his sister in Tuckahoe, the Queens Rangers caught up to him and he was run through by a bayonet.



Griffen Farmhouse in 2017



Marker at the Griffen Farmhouse, installed 1922

The 19th Century

Scarsdale Antebellum Years

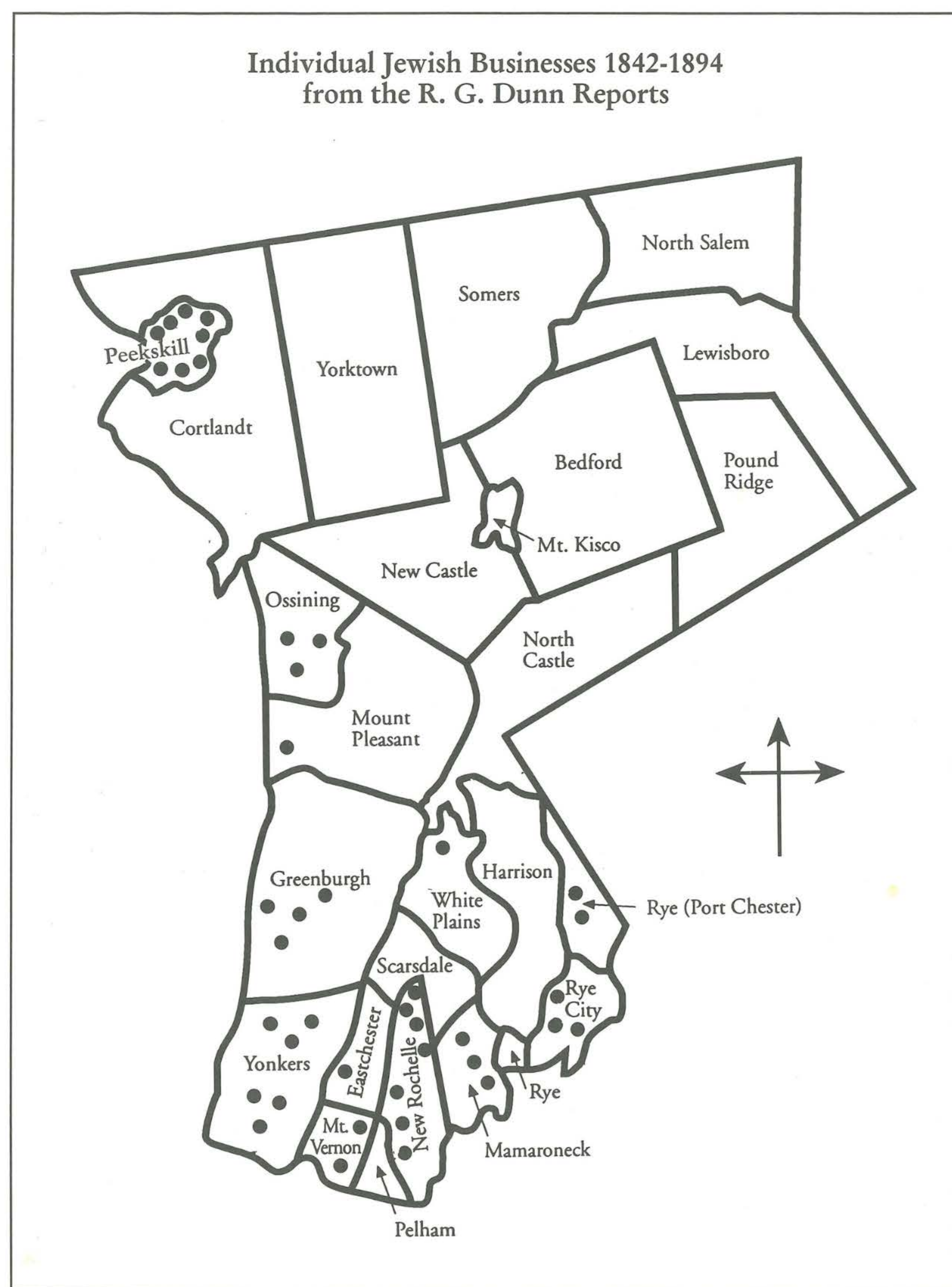
Scarsdale at the turn of the 19th century was a small town of farmers and country homes. While a handful of wealthy individuals bought Scarsdale land early in the 19th century, the community remained largely a farming village until after the Civil War. Scarsdale remained the smallest of Westchester towns for decades. As late as 1870 the population was only 517. The coming of the railroad would change Scarsdale forever. In 1846, the first trains sailed through Scarsdale without stopping. Scarsdale didn't become an express stop until 1877. Even then, only one train stopped in the morning, and one in the evening. Many of the first people lured to Scarsdale by the railroad also kept houses in New York City. They bought Scarsdale farms for summer places or country estates. There was a significant population of Quakers living in Scarsdale at this time, but there is very little evidence of any Jewish population.

The Civil War and the Gilded Age

The Civil War had little effect on Scarsdale. A powder mill which had been operating on the Bronx River since the 1840's provided gun powder for the Union. Westchester and Scarsdale voted to pay volunteers to fill conscription quotas. After the Civil War, life in Scarsdale began to pick up. Two families put in the first telephones in 1882, but by 1900 there were enough that the town needed its own switchboard. In 1895, the first trolley began traversing the Post Road. Arthur Manor in the 1890s was one of the first Scarsdale developments, built on 150 acres of farmland which overlapped the boundary with Eastchester. The 20th century would see an explosion in Scarsdale's population, as large farms and estates were broken up into the residential community we know today. For most of the 19th century there was little evidence of Jewish life in Scarsdale. There was one Jewish land purchase in the town from 1850-1880. This may have been Isaac Murray, silversmith, listed as a head of household in the 1860 census. The R. G. Dunn Mercantile Agency Reports from 1844-1892 show not a single Jewish business in Scarsdale.



Arthur Manor, one of Scarsdale's first developed communities, circa 1898.



Map taken from "The Jews of Westchester: A Social History" by Baila R. Shargel and Harold L. Drimmer.

Westchester's Jewish population declined during the antebellum era from 1800-1850. From 1800 into the 1840s there were no more than eighteen identifiable Jewish families in Westchester. In the 1850s, national, state, and county Jewish populations exploded. In Westchester, which was now accessible by three railroad lines, the total population increased from 50,000 to 100,000 between 1840 and 1860. During that same period, the Jewish population in the County increased from about 350 to 750. Many of the new Jewish residents were recent immigrants from Central Europe.

Approximately 40-50 Westchester Jews served in the Union militias during the Civil War. By 1870 the Jewish population of Westchester had risen to an estimated 1762. By 1880 that number fell to 1079 due to the annexation of Morrisania, West Farms, and Kingsbridge by New York City. The partitioning of Poland that began in 1872 led to a large influx of Eastern European refugees, including many Ashkenazi Jews. Most Jewish immigrants who made their way north from New York City settled in either the industrial communities of southern Westchester or the river towns. By 1880, an estimated 70% of Westchester's Jews lived in Yonkers, Ossining, Peekskill, Mount Vernon, New Rochelle, Port Chester, and Tarrytown.

Scarsdale Jews: 1880-1945

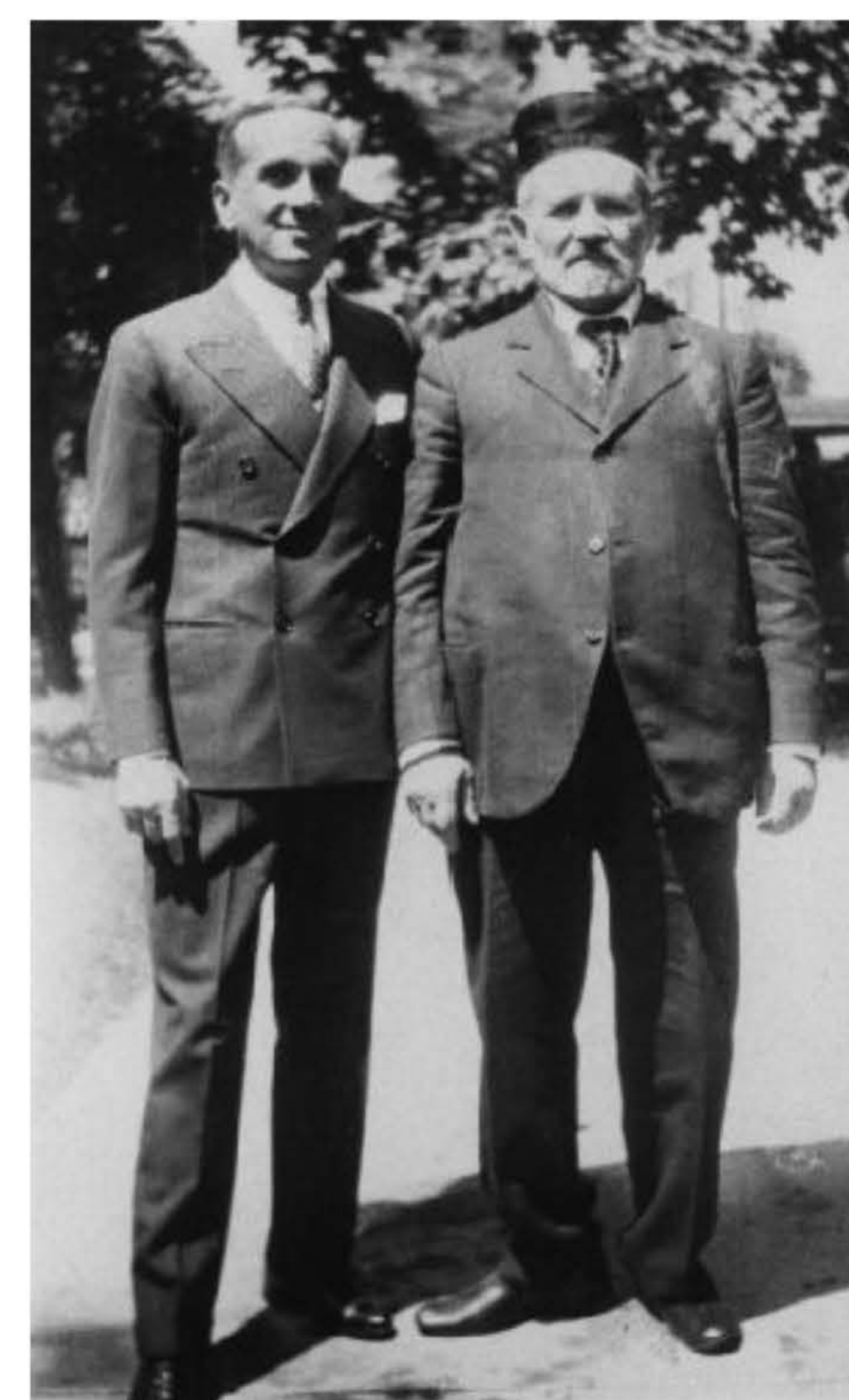
Between 1880 and 1920, one-third of Eastern European Jewry emigrated from the lands of their birth, and a large majority headed for North America. It was this migration that created the first large Westchester Jewish communities. By 1920, Westchester Jews numbered approximately twenty thousand, compared to only one thousand in 1880. Some of the wealthiest and most assimilated Jews purchased homes in Scarsdale. Most of them were commuters, which fit Scarsdale's role as a bedroom community.

Home ownership by Jews was limited to certain areas and unofficial quotas. Though generally unwelcome in Edgewood, Jews acquired property in Murray Hill and Heathcote. Fox Meadow was developed by the Jewish brothers Everett and I. Randolph Jacobs, opening up a large area of Scarsdale in the 1920s and 1930s to Jewish homeowners. By 1925, Scarsdale's Jewish population had reached an estimated ten percent of the Village total.



Mary Antin, 1914. She lived with her husband Amadeus William Grabau on Cooper Road. She is best known for her autobiography "The Promised Land," published in 1914.

The Town Club was somewhat alarmed by the increasing Jewish population. In 1924 it was discussed whether to have a limit on the percentage of Jewish members of the Club, but no action was taken. Another sign of latent anti-Semitism occurred at the Scarsdale Golf Club in the 1920s, when The New York Harvard Club held a branch meeting there at which a Jewish member of the Harvard Club attended. The Golf Club informed the Harvard Club that they would be denied future use of the premises. Nonetheless, Jews continued to move to Scarsdale. A search of the 1940 census rolls for Jewish-sounding names revealed approximately 96 Jewish households out of a total of 1,710, or about 5 percent.



Al Jolson and his father, Cantor Moishe Rubin Yoselson, taken in Yonkers in 1931. Jolson lived in Scarsdale during the 1930s on Fenimore Road.

Scarsdale's Jewish Country Clubs

Wealthy Westchester Jews who wanted the luxury of the Country Club, and the emerging leisure activity called golf, were forced to create their own clubs since they were excluded from the Christian clubs. Scarsdale was home to two Jewish country clubs, both of which still exist today. Sunningdale Country Club was founded in 1913 in Mt. Vernon, and moved to Scarsdale in 1916 to its current location on Underhill Road. Quaker Ridge Golf Club was chartered in 1916, and still exists at its original location. Early members included Louis Gimbel, Samuel Bloomingdale, Alfred Knopf, and George Gershwin.



Scarsdale Golf Club, 1906. It was the first Country Club in Scarsdale, founded in 1898, but was not open to Jews.



The Jewish Community Center's 1923 building on Sterling Avenue in White Plains. The congregation later moved to Soundview Avenue and changed its name to Congregation Kol Ami.

Religious Life

Scarsdale Jews were involved in the formation of the Jewish Community Center of White Plains, which grew out of the Scarsdale-White Plains Parents' Association. While the membership of the founding congregation was evenly split between Scarsdale and White Plains, the first synagogue was built on Post Road in White Plains, near the Scarsdale border, in 1927. It would later move to Soundview Avenue, where it remains as Kol Ami. Scarsdale didn't get its own Synagogue until 1954, when Westchester Reform Temple was built at 255 Mamaroneck Road.

Scarsdale, 1950-Present

Scarsdale Synagogues

In the 1950s Scarsdale saw an influx of wealthy Jews from Mount Vernon and Yonkers. This movement from southern to central Westchester exerted growing pressure on central Westchester's only Reform Synagogue, The Jewish Community Center, in White Plains. With the blessing of the JCC's Rabbi, Lawrence Schwartz, Scarsdale finally formed its own congregation. Westchester Reform Temple was established in 1953 at 255 Mamaroneck Road, supported by 120 families. Its founding Rabbi, David Greenberg, went on to form the Scarsdale Synagogue in 1961, which is now known as Scarsdale Synagogue Temples Tremont & Emanu-el and is located at 2 Ogden Road.



Westchester Reform Temple as it was originally designed by Marcel Brueur in 1954. It was the first Synagogue in Scarsdale.

According to "The Jews of Westchester: A Social History", the Jewish population of Scarsdale made up 30 percent of the total population in 1960, and rose to 50 percent by 1980. While these percentages are estimates, it is clear that the Jewish population of Scarsdale peaked in the late 1970s and early 1980s. As a result, more synagogues were formed in the Village. The Orthodox Young Israel of Scarsdale was formed in 1970, and is currently located at 1313 Weaver Street. The Conservative Shaarei Tikvah was formed in 1998 through the merger of two nearby congregations: Emanuel Jewish Center of Mount Vernon and Genesis Agudas Achim of Tuckahoe. Together they bought the former Christian Science Church at 46 Fox Meadow Road. Most recently, Chabad of Scarsdale formed in 2013 at 14 Harwood Court, Suite 415.

Anti-semitism and Social Acceptance

In 1960, the daughter of a member of the Scarsdale Golf Club invited a young man to attend the Club's Holly Ball as her date. Though he had a Jewish father, he attended the Church of St. James the Less, as did his date, and considered himself Episcopalian. Nonetheless, the Club would not let him attend. Told to find another partner, she refused. The incident gained national attention when the pastor of St. James the Less, George F.

Kempell, published an editorial in the New York Times in which he declared that he would deny Holy Communion to any members who, as members of the Scarsdale Golf Club, had been involved in the decision to deny the young man entry to the Ball. The uproar over the incident forced the Scarsdale Golf Club to change its policies so that members were allowed to bring guests of their own choosing. The first Jewish member was admitted in 1970. While Jews had always been allowed to join the local civic clubs, there had existed a social separation.



The debutantes of the 1960 Holly Ball as pictured in the Scarsdale Inquirer of December 29th, 1960.

The opening of the Scarsdale Golf Club to Jews was a sign of the social change that took place in the 1960s and 1970s. This social unification between Jews and Christians was reflected in Village government, where more Jews were elected to the Village Board and other committees.

During the '70s and '80s, Jews regularly held multiple seats on various civic boards, and several Jews, including one woman, were elected as Mayor. This trend has only continued since then, as Scarsdale's Jewish community has become fully integrated into Village life.