Hidden
GEM

FIRST SHEARITH ISRAEL CEMETERY

On September 7th of 1654, 23 Jews who had escaped the Spanish Inquisition held Rosh Hashanah services in New Amsterdam. They came to what is now New York via Portugal and then Recife, Brazil, and founded the Congregation Shearith Israel, which remained the sole Jewish congregation in New York until 1825—and remains the oldest in the United States.

Asser Levy, the first Jewish houseowner in America, was one of those first 23 settlers. Many of the group's members proceeded to establish some of America's most distinguished Jewish families and personages. Poet Emma Lazarus, as an example, who penned the inscription on the Statue of Liberty ("Give me your tired…") was a member of the congregation. Revolutionary War veterans are buried in First Shearith Israel graveyard, and so is Jonas Judah, the first American-born Jew to enroll in medical school.

> **"Many of the group's members proceeded to establish some of America's most distinguished Jewish families and personages."**

The small graveyard was established as a New York landmark in 1966 and was listed in the National Register of Historic Places in 1980. Also known as Chatham Square Cemetery, it is almost hidden at 55-57 St. James Place, between James and Oliver streets, just south of Park Row, near City Hall. It was one of the few historic cemeteries that endured urban planning and renewal, which consistently moved historic cemeteries further uptown to create commercial space. As a result, it is the only 17th-century structure remaining in Manhattan.

First Shearith Israel Cemetery is an almost unnoticeable, yet powerful, reminder of New York's diverse past and the hardship endured by its early settlers. Governor Peter Stuyvesant called the 23 settlers "hateful enemies and blasphemers of the name of Christ." Such comments are hard to reconcile with the compassion of Jonas Judah, whose tombstone reveals his self-sacrifice: "To the inhabitants of this city treating them with loving kindness / When they were visited with the yellow fever / He gave money from his own purse to buy for them beneficent medicines / But the good that he did was the cause of his death."

—BETTINA WEINER