

*Privilege and Prejudice: Jewish History in the American South*  
NEH Summer Institute  
Elizabeth Johnson, Ph.D. Candidate  
Middle Tennessee State University

## **Lesson Plan: Tennessee’s Jewish Religious Architecture**

### **Introduction**

This lesson plan is for a week of “American Religious Architectural History,” a special topics historic preservation course. The “American Religious Architectural History” course is designed to introduce students to the religious landscape in the United States from 1776 – present. Building off of the student’s knowledge of the American religious landscape, this unit will narrow the focus to Nashville and explore the interpretive value of architecture associated with the city’s Jewish communities. Nashville’s Jewish community dates back to the 1840s. However, by the onset of the Civil War, Nashville had three Jewish congregations and no synagogues. After being said by Rabbi Isaac Mayer Wise to have “the unfortunate spirit of quarrel and small ambition,” in the next thirty years the Nashville Jewish community acquired or constructed three separate synagogues.<sup>1</sup> While Jewish institutional life is in no way focused solely on the synagogue, in many Jewish communities a synagogue is often the most visible Jewish institution. This unit will examine the history of Nashville’s early synagogues and contrast them with the three suburban synagogues constructed by the same congregations in the 1950s and 1960s.

### **Readings:**

- Fedora S. Frank, *Beginnings on Market Street: Nashville and Her Jewry, 1861 – 1901*. (Nashville: Frank, 1976).
- Saskia Coenen Snyder, *Building a Public Judaism: Synagogues and Jewish Identity in Nineteenth-Century Europe*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2013), 1 – 23.
- “The Life of the Synagogue.” College of Charleston Jewish Heritage Collection. <https://lifeofthesynagogue.library.cofc.edu>.

### **Day 1: Nashville’s Early Synagogue Architecture and Jewish Identity**

*Topics:* The first part of this lesson will require students to examine how architecture has played a role in the development of a Jewish identity. Focusing on the first wave of synagogues in Nashville will require students to become familiar with the broad overview of Nashville’s Jewish history and to analyze the architectural styles employed in the first three synagogues: the Vine Street Temple (constructed 1876, demolished 1955), the Gay Street Synagogue (constructed 1901, demolished 1947), and the Fifth Avenue Shul (constructed 1920, demolished 1948).

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<sup>1</sup> Institute of Southern Jewish Living, “Stories of the Jewish Community in Nashville,” <http://www.isjl.org/Tennessee-nashville-encyclopedia.html>. Accessed August 28, 2019.

## **Day 2: Moving to the ‘burbs: the suburban synagogue in the Music City**

*Topics:* The second part of this lesson will examine the cultural forces that drove Nashville’s Jewish community out of downtown and into the suburbs of West Nashville. Students will explore the architectural styles employed by each of the three congregations during construction of their mid-twentieth century synagogues and practice “reading” the Jewish religious landscape to learn about Jewish life in Nashville. Because each congregation has developed its own culture and identity in the city and experienced different degrees of acceptance and antisemitism, this section will challenge students to consider how the congregation’s specific history can be interpreted and understood through the lens of architecture.