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The Lost Synagogue of Speightstown: New Findings in the Light of Recent Investigations

Rachel Lichtenstein

Abstract

A small but influential community of Sephardi Jews settled in the port-town of 'Speights' (Speightstown) in the seventeenth century and established a synagogue. Congregants from Speightstown subsequently became founding members of the Rhode Island Synagogue (Newport) and the Bevis Marks Synagogue (London). This paper explores for the first time the historical details of the beginnings of this community and posits a new theory as to the possible survival of the synagogue after its alleged destruction in 1739. This preliminary research highlights the urgent need to conduct a major study into this fascinating –and almost forgotten—episode of the Caribbean Jewish presence.

Early Jewish Settlement in Barbados

When British Jewish historian Wilfred Samuel presented his paper 'A Review of the Jewish Colonists in Barbados in the Year 1680'¹ to the British Jewish Historical Society in 1924 he stated in the introduction that his 'pioneer attempt' was intended 'as a stimulus to further study' for historical students of the future. Nearly a century later, inspired by

Samuel's excellent work, this paper will attempt to expand on one of the research threads in *The Jewish Colonists* - the little known story of the former Jewish community of Speightstown.

Situated in the Parish of St. Peter in the north west coast of Barbados, Speightstown (formerly known as Spyke's Bay after landowner and member of Barbados's first Assembly, William Speight), quickly developed into a bustling 'seaport town'² after it was settled in 1630. It was 'the most considerable place on the island next to Bridgetown'³ with a sizeable mercantile and military presence in the early days of British settlement. By the time Schomburgk wrote his *History of Barbados* in 1848 he described the place 'as formerly much frequented, and a great deal of sugar was exported directly to Europe: it appears to have been chiefly visited by vessels from Bristol, and from this circumstance it received the name Little Bristol.'⁴

The exact date a Jewish community was established in Speightstown remains unknown, however due to the town's direct trading links with 'the mother country', the importance of Sephardic Jewish (also known Sephardim, originally from Sepharad, Spain or the Iberian peninsula) expertise in the sugar industry and the dominance of that business in the town by the 1640s, it is likely there was a Jewish presence in Speightstown from around this date if not earlier. Barbados switched from the main cash crops of cotton and tobacco to sugar in the 1640s due to: 'The war in Brazil...[which] caused a sugar supply crisis in the European markets....This gave Barbados an opportunity to break into the European sugar market. Colonists in Dutch Brazil began assisting the English colonists of Barbados with capital, technology, know-how markets, and credit lines for the production of sugar.'⁵

According to Schomburgk, the settlement of Jews dates back to the earliest times of British settlement on the island in 1628.⁶ Ligon mentions 'an ingenious Jew' (Ligon 1647, 42) a brick maker by the name of Solomon who was allegedly living on the island

when he visited in 1647. However the first documented evidence of Jewish habitation on Barbados is in the Colonial records of 1653⁷ with the Brothers Simon and Benjamin DeCaceres from Gluckstadt (Germany). Simon was born in Amsterdam but had lived in London and was close to Lord Protector Cromwell.⁸ The brothers were certified by the English governor as being 'inhabitants of this island of Barbados and have a plantation and also a storehouse at Bridge Towne'. In 1654 a contingent of former Jewish colonists from Recife (north-eastern Brazil) made their way to Barbados via Amsterdam after Dutch-occupied Brazil (Pernambuco) fell to the Portuguese. The Council Minutes of 8 November 1654 provide documentary evidence of their arrival: 'that consideration of the Jews and foreigners brought from Brazele to the island be presented at the next sitting of the Governor and Assembly.' The Jews from Brazil requested permission from Oliver Cromwell to stay⁹, which was granted in January 1655 (a few months before Jews were readmitted to England on 24 March 1656). Readmission was achieved after a petition directly to Cromwell from the learned Amsterdam Rabbi Menasseh Ben Israel who wrote a book in 1650 *The Hope of Israel*¹⁰ which claims that Messianic redemption would not come to the Jewish people until they were 'scattered to the four corners of the earth' as laid out in the scriptures. Menasseh convinced the puritan Cromwell that the return of the Jews to England was essential to complete this dispersal.

Early Jewish Settlement in Speightstown, Newport and London

The Jewish refugees from Brazil who arrived in 1654 were amongst the founders of the Nidhe Israel Synagogue in Bridgetown. There are no such direct references to be found of the Jewish community arriving to Speightstown in the Council minutes. However, there is information in the Jewish Notarial Archives in Amsterdam, which suggests Jews were living and

worshipping in Speightstown by the 1650s. Doctor Issac Emmanuel of Curaçao studied the Jewish Notarial Archives in Amsterdam in depth in the 1950s and concluded: 'the Parnassim [community leaders] of Amsterdam were the ones who encouraged the migration of Portuguese Jews, first to the Dutch and later to the British and English colonies. They were the ones that provided these new communities with Holy scrolls and sacred ornaments.'¹¹

By the early-seventeenth century Amsterdam was the great centre of Sephardic Jewry.¹² Rabbis were trained at seminaries there and sent to communities all over the world, including the Caribbean. In the resolutions of the Parnassim from 1655 and 1676 Emmanuel discovered the community of Barbados received 'from the Parnassim of Amsterdam two Holy Scrolls with their ornaments, the first having been delivered to Abraham Chillon and Abraham Messias' on 29 April 1657¹³ and on 16 September 1657 'the Paranassim gave Aarao Israel Capadose a second Sepher Torah (Torah Scroll) with its yellow taffeta lining and the following ornaments: a band of red damask; a cloak; a white camelhair cloth for the reading desk; some curtains for the altar; a flowered satin cloth for the reading desk; some curtains for the altar; a flowered satin cloth to cover the Sepher at the reading desk: two wooden rimmonim (decorative bells usually made of silver or gold on top of the staves of the Torah Scroll); and a box containing all these'¹⁴

The Barbadian historian Eustace Shilstone surmises in his introduction to *Monumental Inscriptions* 'that perhaps the island's second synagogue at Speightstown had intended for it [the second Torah Scroll].'¹⁵ This suggests that around 1657 there was a synagogue in Speightstown ready to receive a Torah Scroll from Amsterdam, although without further evidence this remains speculative.

During his researches at the Amsterdam archives Emmanuel also discovered that nine months before the first scrolls were

sent from Amsterdam to Barbados, on 14 August 1656 (5416), the Parnassim delivered to Jonas Abravanel (brother-in-law of Manasseh ben Israel) 'a Sepher Torah of fine parchment with its band and cape of yellow velvet; a red damask cloth for the reading desk; and a pointer lined with red taffeta...for delivery to Haham Manasseh ben Israel in London.'¹⁶ Emanuel states: 'As Manasseh ben Israel was not able immediately to found a community in London, Jonas returned the Holy Scroll with its ornaments to the Parannassim of Amsterdam four months later, on 22nd Kislev, 5417 (8 December 1656).'¹⁷ From the description this appears to be the exact same scroll the Parannassim then gave to Abraham Chillao and Abraham Messiah in April 1657 'with its yellow taffeta lining; a band of red damask...for delivery to the Island of Barbados.'

Other evidence supports this theory that the Speightstown Jewish community was functioning by around 1657. According to Kohler's *The Jews in Newport*¹⁸ 'the original settlers in the 1650s [to Newport Rhode Island in America] came directly from Holland, as well as Speightstown Barbados.' Gutstein's *The Story of the Jews of Newport*¹⁹ states the community was spearheaded by the arrival of 15 Jews from Speightstown in 1658.²⁰ The leader of this congregation was Mordechai Campanal, an experienced colonist who encouraged families from Speightstown to migrate to Newport.²¹ Amongst these Speightstown Jews were: Simon Mendez, Moses Israel Pachecho, Abraham Burgos, Jacob Tinoco and David Nassy.²² Gutstein states they brought a Torah scroll with them (which may have been the scroll mentioned above from Amsterdam), formed a *Kahal Kadosh* (Holy Congregation) and 'as with the other settlers, the services of the Jewish congregation took place in private dwelling houses'²³ probably in the home of Mordecai Campanal. In 1677 Campanal along with Moses Israel Pachecho from Speightstown signed a deed to purchase a plot of land for a *Beth Chayim* (Jewish cemetery). Gutstein adds that 'because of the Jewish cemetery, the "Highway that Leads Down

from ye Stone Mill toward Benjamin Griffins Land" came to be known as "Jew's Street."²⁴

From this information it appears Jews from Speightstown were amongst the founders of what is widely considered to be the first established Jewish community in America. It is highly probable the Speightstown Jews were worshipping in 'a private dwelling house' like the Jews of Newport and the early Jewish community of London who worshipped in a private house known as the Creechurch Lane Synagogue before they were officially allowed to worship and reside in the U.K.²⁵

The first direct mention of 'synagogues' functioning on Barbados is found in a letter written by Nicholas Blake, an English planter living in Barbados at the time, to King Charles II in 1669 in which he states: 'the chief Church is mostly Presbyterian; the Independents have their conventicles; the Quakers are erecting a house for their ceremonies; the Jews have their sinagogs; others are mere Athiests.'²⁶ We know by this date the Nidhe Israel Synagogue in Bridgetown had been functioning for sometime, this excerpt suggests another synagogue was operative in another part of the island by this date, as does the following excerpt from a pamphlet by Quaker leader George Fox written in 1686²⁷ to attempt to convert the Jews of Barbados: 'The two Hebrew printed papers were delivered to the Jews at their two synagogues...at the one they were indifferent at the other they were not.'

Official records of the Speightstown Jewish community start in 1679 when the Governor of the island Jonathan Atkins, after an appeal from the Board of Trade Plantations, conducted the first census on the island. He found 54 Jewish families in Bridgetown, 6 in St Peter (Speightstown) and a single individual, David Nemias living in Christ Church. British Jewish historian Wilfred Samuel based '*A Review of the Jewish Colonists in Barbados in the Year 1680*'²⁸ on these census records, alongside other seventeenth century records available to him at the time in the Chancery Lane

Records Office in London (Samuel never visited Barbados). From this information he deduced the Speightstown Jewish community of the late seventeenth century consisted of a small tight-knit interrelated group of Sephardi merchants and their families, who were most likely involved in the sugar trade and that at least 70 Jewish persons were living and worshipping in Speightstown by 1680 who were originally 'mainly Portuguese' but 'had come together from all parts of the world' including Holland, Brazil, France, Germany, Suriname and other places.

From The Militia List of Soldiers dated 1679 out of the 118 males from the Parish of St. Peter 12 were identified as Jews: Jeremiah Burges, Abram Tenock, Moses Delyon, Daniell Campernell, Jacob Messias, David Chillion, David Delyon, Abraham De Silva, Sampson Delleon, Symon Mendes, Jacob Barrow and Ephram Elrick.²⁹ The census for 1680 names 15 Jewish heads of households living in Speightstown: Jacob Defonsequa, Deborah Burgis, Sollomon Chafe, Jerrimiah Burgis, Abraham de Silva, Joseph Mendes (Mendes, Mendez), David Chelloe, Mosias Delyon, Sollomon Mendas (Mendes, Mendez), Davis Velloa (Ulloa), Abraham Barrow, Simon (Symon, Symeon) Mendas (Mendes, Mendez), Simon Ffretto and Paule De Verde.

The principal Jewish families in Speightstown during that time were the Mendes, Dellyons, De Silvas and Messiahs. The most prominent member of the community was a wealthy merchant called 'Joseph Mendes of Speights a considerable landowner' who Samuel believed was the founder of the Speightstown Synagogue, information which he probably gleaned from the Portuguese codicil of Joseph Mendes will dated 17 July 1707 in which Joseph Mendes leaves 'my 3rd part which I have in the holy synagogue called *Snead* (? *Semah*) *David* consecrated to the Poor.'³⁰ Being a part owner of the synagogue in Speightstown evidences his position in the community. His brothers Joseph and Menasseh were also influential members of the Speightstown community who immigrated to London around 1680. Menasseh became

'one of the rulers of Creechurch Lane Synagogue.'³¹ His signature appears in a list of the Elders of the Creechurch Lane Synagogue in 1693³² and he is later named on the list for the legal agreement for the building of the new London synagogue of Bevis Marks.³³ Menasseh, Joseph and Mosseh (Moses) Mendes are all listed as 'amongst the subscribers for the new building [of Bevis Marks] and when Bevis Marks was consecrated and the building that had housed the Creechurch Lane Synagogue became a private property again Solomon and his son Jacob Mendes of Speightstown became its tenants.'³⁴ The Speightstown Jews were therefore extremely influential members of founding Jewish communities in both Newport and London.

The Story of the Speightstown Synagogue

Until recently it has been widely believed the Speightstown Synagogue was destroyed during the first Anti-Semitic attack in the New World, which occurred in Speightstown in 1739.³⁵ Samuel stated in his paper that this incident 'led to the demolition of the Speightstown Synagogue.'³⁶ This information appears to have been deduced from brief reports in two American newspapers. In one of these *The New York Gazette* (8 October 1739)³⁷ it is stated inter alia as follows: 'By A Letter from Barbados dated August 1, we have an account That an ugly Affair happen'd there a few days ago: A young man who goes by the name of Burnet, and says he is a son of the late governor Burnet happening to be at a young Jew's wedding, whose father was named Lopus, this Lopus made very much of him, and being at dinner Burnet, as his name goes, complain'd of the head ach: whereupon Lopus advis'd him to step to his House hard by and lye down. Accordingly he accepted and went: about half an Hour after, Lopus with five or six of his companions came and took him by the collar, strip'd him, and gave him several blows on the face, and charged him with robbing some money which so supriz'd him that he could hardly speak: upon this the people of Speightstown in which they were all in

uproar. And tho' the Jew was not able to fasten the theft upon the young man yet a justice bound him over to the grand session; and the Jew is sued by the said Burnet in two actions of 10,000 and the leeward people have upon this occurrence been so irritated that they raise'd a mob and drove all the Jews out of town and pull'd down their synagogue. The Jews have thereupon got together at Bridge, Resolving their satisfaction; they being generally pretty rich, 'tis reported they will be protected by one of the greatest men in the island.'

In the second newspaper, *The Boston Gazette*, we are informed that : 'Sometime in 1739, a man claiming to be Gilbert Burnet, son of the late governor of New York, New Jersey, and Massachusetts, arrived in Barbados. Named after his eminent grandfather, a key figure in England's Glorious Revolution and Hanoverian Succession, the visitor moved among the upper echelons of Barbadian society. He persuaded local worthies to lend him £250 and ingratiated himself with the Jewish Lopez family, whose head "made very much of" him-until the visitor was caught stealing at a family wedding. The father beat the guest and took him before a magistrate. Professing shock at the affront, Burnet sued Lopez for ten thousand pounds. The incident sparked anti-Jewish outrage. Local merchants petitioned the president of the council about the conduct of "the Jews towards the Christians," citing especially "their daring Insolence to . . . a Gentleman of a distinguished Family." A crowd took more direct action; it **destroyed** the Speightstown synagogue and drove the Jews out of town. Soon afterward, even Burnet's most ardent defenders changed their minds. The visitor surreptitiously attempted to catch a boat to Jamaica and, when these plans were thwarted, he went into hiding. A week's search located a disguised Burnet lurking outside the town. Replies to inquiries sent to the mainland identified him as the Bostonian Tom Bell. According to a former supporter, who now pronounced him "the greatest Villain that was ever born," Bell

finally confessed his identity but not his guilt, arguing that "he [had] done no Harm." The court disagreed. He was sentenced to be whipped, placed in the stocks, and branded on both cheeks with the letter R (for "Rogue"). Unfortunately for his later victims, a new governor remitted the branding.'

The reason American newspapers were so interested in this story is because of the antihero of the tale, the notorious American fraudster Tom Bell described as 'a man devoted to making money the easy way....Bell's primary *modus operandi* was to assume the name of a prominent family of another colony, approach a wealthy resident with a tale of distress, borrow money and depart.'³⁸ A news item in the *Pennsylvania Gazette* during Bell's visit to Philadelphia in 1743 demonstrates that his beating, arrest and then near branding in Speightstown some four years previously had not curtailed his activities: 'He has it seems made it his Business for several Years to travel from Colony to Colony, personating different People, forging Bills, Letters of Credit, &c. and frequently pretending Distress....He has been in every Colony on the Continent, and in some Parts of the West Indies; knows and talks familiarly of all Persons of Note as if they were of his Acquaintance. In Barbados he was the Thomas Burnet that rais'd the Persecution against the Jews. In the Jerseys he was the *Rowland* that occasioned so many Prosecutions, which ('tis said) he now owns. In Virginia, Maryland, the Carolinas, New-York and New-England, he has been Fairfax, Wentworth, &c. &c. &c. We hear that a very exact Description of his Person, &c. is intended to be published, and dispersed thro' all the Plantations to prevent future Impositions.'³⁹

Tom Bell's criminal activities in Speightstown made the story of the synagogue there notorious. However these American articles were most likely written sometime after the event by journalists who never visited the island even though the language they used 'pull'd down their synagogue' and 'destroyed the Speightstown, Barbados synagogue' have been often repeated since in numerous

accounts of Jewish settlement on Barbados.⁴⁰ Because of this, these American reports cannot be relied on as being historically accurate, therefore it is not clear if the Speightstown Synagogue was completely destroyed during this incident, particularly since the emergence of fragmentary but contradictory evidence that suggests both the synagogue and the Jewish community in Speightstown were functioning after this date.

On 31 August 1756 a levy was passed in Barbados in addition to general taxation⁴¹ 'for raising a sum of money to assist the expenses of the government...Jews dwelling in this island, may also bear a just proportion of this tax...Jews dwelling in Bridge Town, shall pay the sum of one hundred and ninety: and the Jews dwelling in Speight's-Town, the sum of twenty pounds over and above their Levies on Negroes, Mills, Kilns and Houses.' This government order evidences a Jewish presence in Speightstown some seventeen years after the alleged 'destruction' of the synagogue and dispersion of the community. Further proof in the archives of the synagogue still functioning after the attack can be found in the will of Moses Mendes dated 1758, where he leaves £100 to the synagogue in Bridgetown and 'to the synagogue of Saint Peters in Speights Town in Barbados aforesaid one hundred pounds...'⁴² And much later, in an article written in the *American Jewish Historical Society* the author describes visiting the caretaker of the Nidhe Israel Synagogue in 1909 and states: 'The caretaker further said that at Speightstown there used to be a synagogue which was destroyed in the hurricane of 1831 and never rebuilt.'⁴³

These fragments of evidence suggest a synagogue existed in Speightstown from approximately 1657 to potentially as late as 1831, a much longer period than previously thought, making further study of this building and the fascinating community who worshipped there an essential addition to studies of the Jewish Caribbean. Since uncovering this information attempts to find the location of the building and the former Jewish settlement of

Speightstown have been made, including exploring the possibility that there may have once been a Jewish burial ground in the town.

'Jew Street', Burial Grounds and the Search for the Lost Synagogue of Speightstown

Samuel deduced that the Speightstown Jews 'shared [the Bridgetown Jewish burial ground] from the start.' Gravestones in the Nidhe Israel cemetery do prove that prominent Jews from Speightstown were buried there. In Shilstone's, *Monumental Inscriptions in the Jewish Synagogue at Bridgetown* we find evidence of Joseph Mendes and eight members of his family being buried in the Nidhe Israel cemetery, along with the other 3rd part owner of the synagogue Daniel Ulloa. However there are many missing tombstones from the Speightstown Jewish community in the Nidhe Israel cemetery. For example from the census list of 1680, of the 15 named heads of household only four can be found in *Shilstone's Monumental Inscriptions*. From the Militia List of the 17 Jews named only four are buried in the Nidhe Israel Jewish cemetery. This could be because the majority of people from that community left the island, because there are still graves submerged beneath roads or buildings that have not been discovered yet in Bridgetown or because there may have once been a Jewish burial ground in Speightstown (although no visible trace remains today) which has not yet been discovered.

It is highly probable there would have been a separate burial ground in Speightstown, predominately because of the hot climate in Barbados. Jewish law regarding burial states that if permissible a Jewish person should be buried within a 24 hour period. If a Speightstown Jew had died in the seventeenth century on a Friday they would not have been able to have been buried until the following Sunday. If they shared their burial ground with the Bridgetown Jews then they would have needed to transfer the body by boat to Bridgetown after this long wait. The roads were described by Nicholas Cresswell in his journal 'as very bad'

(Friday, 16 September 1774) and were 'nearly impassable' between the two places during that period, therefore it is most likely the Jewish community would have had alternative plans for burial in Speightstown.

Schomburgk states in 1846 there were 'five [Jewish] burial-grounds [on the island], three of which are completely filled'. In an article written by Eustace Shilstone in 1956⁴⁴ he writes: 'Schomburgk states that there were five burial grounds of the Jews, three of which were completely filled at the time of writing his History, although he makes no attempt to identify them. Most certainly he would or could have seen the graveyard in the synagogue grounds, and perhaps the smaller one in White's Alley, and possibly the burial ground which received the bodies of the Speightstown congregation in the parish of St Peter, more than twelve miles away.'

As with the early Jewish cemetery in Newport the Jewish cemetery of Speightstown (if it existed) could have been located on 'Jew Street'. There was certainly once a Jew Street in Speightstown. French surveyor John Oldmixon writes in 1708: 'Speight's Town lies about 3 miles and a half from the Hole, and was at first called Little Bristol. 'Tis the most considerable place in the island next to the Bridge. It consists of one long street, call'd Jew Street; and three others, that lead down to the waterside; the whole making above 300 houses. It was much frequent by the Bristol men when t'was first built.'⁴⁵

In the will of Rachel Mendes⁴⁶ dated 1711 she bequeaths to her niece Sarah Messiah: 'one certain house situate in Speightstown in Jew Street bounding east on a house of Daniel Ulloa, west on a house belonging to myself, south on the pond and north on the street to her the said Sarah Messiah.' This is of great interest for a number of reasons; it is the first direct mention of Jewish property ownership on Jew Street, which appears to have been a place of Jewish settlement in the town during the early eighteenth century. By the time this will was written Rachel Mendes was bound

for London, her husband Joseph (founder of the Speightstown Synagogue and 3rd part owner) died in 1707. In her will she mentions a house 'bounding east on a house of Daniel Ulloa'. He is described in his will in the Archives Department of Black Rock as a merchant 'of the town of Speights' who owns '3rd part in the synagogue in Speightstown.'⁴⁷ The fact that two of the '3rd part owners' of the synagogue (which was most likely a private dwelling) had properties on Jew Street bounding the Salt Pond, suggests this site as a likely location for the former Speightstown Synagogue.

So where would 'Jew Street' have been located? An analysis of historical and cartographic sources appear to suggest two



FIG. 1 Drawing based on William Mayo's 1721 Detail Map of Speightstown, Barbados (Lichtenstein)

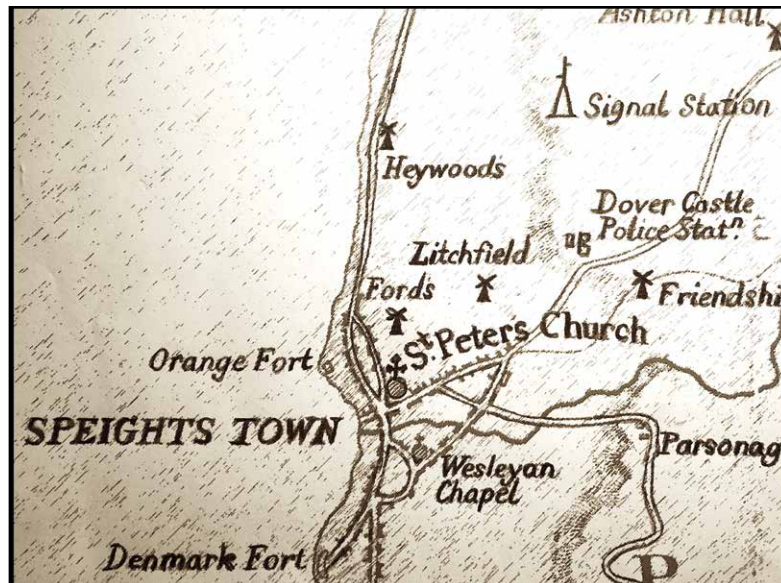


FIG. 2 Drawing based on Schomburgk's 1848 Detail Map of Speightstown (Lichtenstein)

possibilities: Jaques-Nicolas Bellin in his *Description Geographique de la Guyane* 1763⁴⁸ states: 'Speightstown consists of a hundred beautiful houses, well constructed. It has four big streets, very straight. The longest is called 'The Street of The Jews' that conducts up to the seashore.' This description mirrors Oldmixon's description of Jew Street as 'one long street.' Ligon's map (1657) and William Mayo's map (1721) both show two long streets which appear to meet at the junction of modern day Church Street (identifiable by St Peter's Church) in an east-west orientation, therefore 'Jew Street' would most likely have been modern day Church Street or possibly even Chapel Street.

In an 1898 map of Speightstown at the junction of Church Street and Around-the-Town there is a narrow turning called Bone Alley, which suggests a memory trace of a burial ground. Archival and archaeological investigations are clearly required but

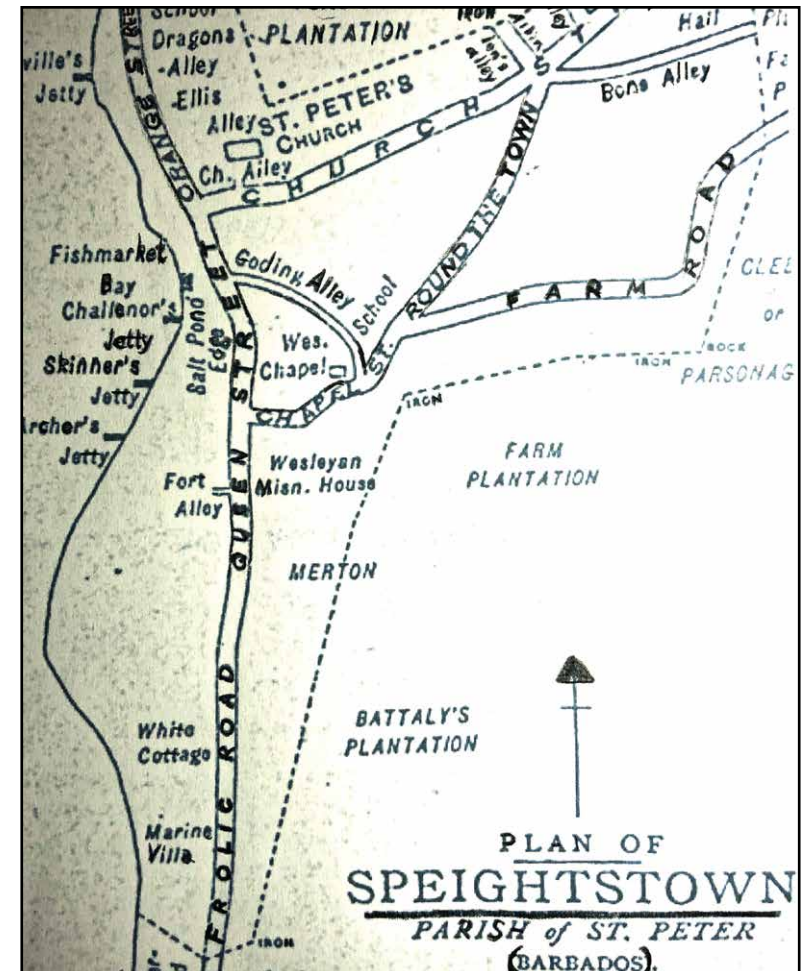


FIG. 3 Drawing based on an 1898 Plan Map of Speightstown (Lichtenstein)



FIG. 4 Fisherman's Pub (2018)

if Church Street was once known as 'Jew Street' it is possible, as in 'Jew Street' in Newport, that a Jewish cemetery could once have been located on or near Bone Alley at the top of Church Street.

As late as 1805 we find another mention of Jew Street in the will of a non-Jewish resident of Speightstown called Patience Kellman⁴⁹: 'Together with my house adjoining Jew Street, in Speights Town.' And even today a folk memory of former Jewish habitation in Speightstown lives on for the people of that place. The proprietor of the Fisherman's Pub in Speightstown Mr Clement Armstrong (a resident and unofficial custodian of Speightstown's history) told me older people of Speightstown used to call Church Street 'Jew Land'.

Adrian Roach, former owner of the Pharmacy in Speightstown said elderly relatives of his told him the synagogue had once been situated in Church Street somewhere near the location of Eddie's supermarket today bounding onto the salt pond. This



FIG. 5 Church Street, Speightstown showing Eddie's Supermarket, which backs onto the Salt Pond (2018)

description mirrors the approximate location of the properties once belonging to Rachel Mendes and Daniel Ulloa, former part owners of the synagogue.

Careful analysis of the Oldmixon and Bellin quotes, the Ligon and Mayo maps, the 1711 will of Rachel Mendes, the relationship of the houses it describes in Jew Street and the position of the Salt Pond as well as the living memory of Church Street as being the focus of Jewish settlement in Speightstown strongly suggests that modern day Church Street was once historic Jew Street.

If Jew Street was once Church Street there is another research thread to explore concerning the possible location of the former Speightstown Synagogue. There is also a memory trace in the town of the synagogue being sited on the other side of Church Street, near or in the grounds of St Peter's Parish Church. A number of older people I spoke to in the town believe this to be the case based on stories that have been passed down to them through

time. This would appear at first to be highly unlikely. However, the first synagogue of the Resettlement in the City of London, the Creechurch Lane Synagogue (which was functioning around the same time-period from 1657) was situated in a property opposite the Anglican Church of St Katherine Cree. Wilfred Samuel's paper 'The First London Synagogue of the Resettlement (founded in 1657), enlarged in 1674'⁵⁰ uncovers information about the early history of this synagogue through examining the churchwardens's accounts 1650 – 1691 for St Katherine of Cree Anglican Church and the original title deeds of the Whitby's House (which later became the location of the Creechurch Lane Synagogue). He finds a direct reference to "the workmen . . . that were Employed in building the Jewes Synagogue"⁵¹ in the Parish Account Book's entry February/March 1657 and in the summer of 1657 the freehold of the two brick messuages in Creechurch Lane as well as the remainder of a ninety-nine years' lease were acquired by the parish of St Katherine Cree. From this and other documents Samuel concludes the parish authorities, knowing that the Jews had installed a Synagogue in Mr. Whitbey's former mansion, decided to purchase the property out of church funds, and thus become the Jews' superior landlords from 1657. In later records he finds further evidence of the good relations between these two communities when members of the Jewish community gave funds towards the new organ installed inside the church of St Katherine Cree.⁵²

This surprising connection between an Anglican Parish Church and a seventeenth century Sephardi Jewish community could have potentially been repeated in Speightstown. To date no comparable seventeenth century church warden accounts for St Peter's Church have been located making an attempt to find such a connection currently impossible.

If we have deduced that 'Jew Street' in Speightstown was once Church Street this could, considering all the other evidence mentioned above, lead to the conclusion that the Speightstown



FIG. 6 St Peter's Church Speightstown on Church Street (2018)

Synagogue was located on 'Jew Street' as in Newport, which may well be correct. However in Bridgetown there was also a 'Jew Street', which is identified as modern day Swan Street.⁵³ 'Jew Street' was the focus of Jewish settlement and commerce in Bridgetown, with many merchants living there above their places of work. However the site of the synagogue of the Bridgetown Jews, *Nidhe Israel*, is located a short distance away in Magazine Lane, a former military zone, which was originally swampy land away from the main commercial district of the town.

C.S. Monaco states in his article on Port Jews that 'the location of the synagogue and cemetery in the least desirable section of the capital of Charlestown [South Carolina] —literally between a brackish, mosquito-laden bog and the town jail—in still another "Jew Street" illustrates how the Sephardi merchants' subaltern status was rejected in the built environment.'⁵⁴



FIG. 7 Former Methodist Boys School Speightstown (2018)

British Archeologist Dr Niall Finneran of Winchester University has been conducting a series of archeological investigations in Speightstown over the last decade. In his paper *'This Islande is Inhabited with all Sortes': The Archaeology of Creolisation in Speightstown, Barbados, and Beyond, AD 1650–1900* he states: 'Jew Street... might be identified with modern Chapel Street... as the focus for all Nonconformist and non-Christian religious observance.'

The Nonconformist religious group known to have established themselves in Chapel Street in Speightstown were the Methodists, however they were not active in Speightstown until 1821. If there had been Jewish occupation in Chapel Street before this date it is possible that the street formerly known as 'Jew Street' could have become known as Chapel Street with the arrival of the Methodists and the erection of a chapel there in 1859. Before this larger chapel was erected a smaller building was established (date

unknown) on the corner of Chapel Street and the junction with Goddings Alley. This building appears as a Methodist Chapel on Schomburgk's map dated 1848 and exists today. When the larger chapel was erected opposite in 1859 this building became a church hall, then later the Methodist Boys School in Speightstown and is now used as a community hall. The appearance of the Methodist Chapel superficially suggested to the author a general similarity to synagogue buildings in Eastern Europe, and first suggested the possibility that the structure may in fact still be standing albeit much altered.

Attempts to find out more about the arrival of the Methodists to Speightstown and the erection of the first Methodist Chapel on this site to see if there was ever a connection with the Speightstown Synagogue remain inconclusive, however this site continues to be a contender as a potential former location of the Speightstown Synagogue. Firstly because of the location, which much like the Sephardi synagogues in Bridgetown, Charleston and other parts of the Caribbean, is in a swampy less desirable part of the town, which correlates with other locations of synagogues in the New World from this period. The date the synagogue was allegedly destroyed (according to the eye witness account in 1909) and the arrival of the Methodists to Speightstown also make the location of this building a possibility. The lack of support for both the Methodists and the Jews during this period amongst the general white populace in Barbados also implies their places of worship could have been situated near to each other, away from the dominant Anglican Church in the town.

The Wesleyan Methodists were anti-slavery, which made them extremely unpopular. In fact so much so that their main Wesleyan Chapel, which was situated in James Street near to the Nidhe Israel Synagogue in Bridgetown was destroyed in 1823, not long after the church had been established. 'Not one stone was left upon another, they carried the fragments for miles from the site, and scattered them about in every direction, so that the chapel might

never be rebuilt'⁵⁵ The attack was provoked by the publication of an abolitionist letter written by controversial and outspoken Methodist leader Reverend Shrewsbury 28 March 1820 to the Wesleyan Missionary Society, which stated: 'Slaves should take their freedom if it is not freely offered.' Shrewsbury was openly confronted in the street on June 1823 and called a villain, who was undermining the interests of the West Indies 'and little better than an enemy of slavery.'

An extract from a letter in the *Wesleyan Methodist Magazine* from the same Mr Shewsbury dated 8 November 1821 states: 'Speights Town – Here we preach once a fortnight in the Sabbath evening; in the forenoon we attend service at the church. This town contains about 700 inhabitants.... as the Sabbath evening arrives, there are two or three public dances in the open air, to which they flock in great numbers. Our predecessors have often tried this place, and they have as often failed.'

In the Wesleyan Methodist Archives at SOAS and Oxford Brookes University there are multiple references to an increasing Methodist presence in Speightstown. By the early 1830s the Wesleyans missionaries 'set up in Speights Town a Preaching Place.' When Rev William Fidler arrived in June 1835 he found a fairly well established congregation there based in a rented building. In this report he continues to describe the need for a new 'chapel- school' and provides 'a drawing of a combined chapel and house for the minister, all on one floor.'⁵⁶ The Barbados Circuit Accounts 1839 (Wesleyan Archive SOAS) state: 'Speightstown Chapel...To the rents to date £15,19,9.' Proving that the Wesleyan Methodists were still renting their Chapel up to this date.

It is possible the Wesleyans rented the former synagogue on the same site. Local historian Morris Greenridge suspected that this building was the former Speightstown Synagogue because of 'the Methodists long history on the island of appropriating former religious buildings until they could raise the funds to erect their own chapel.' The Jews and Methodists on Barbados were located

in the same area in Bridgetown, with the first Methodist chapel on the island in James Street Bridgetown near to the site of the Nidhe Israel Synagogue.

The current caretaker of the former Methodist Chapel local tour guide Reynold McClean recalls an orchard and gardens existing in front of that site when he was a child. As an interesting aside Reynold, whose father was the Minister of the Methodist Chapel (1859) opposite and the headmaster of the Speightstown Boys School, for unknown reasons decided to live on a kibbutz for sometime, due to his unexplained fascination with Jewish culture. Reynold has tried for a long time to locate the original deeds and plans for 'the pink building' without success.

A local character in Speightstown known as King remembers graves lying in the place where the car park for the Methodist Chapel across the street in Goddings Alley now sits. There is a remote possibility that the synagogue building survived the hurricane of 1831. However by that date the Jewish community in Speightstown would have been extremely diminished. Looking at the Mendes family as an example by then all the surviving relations of Joseph Mendes had settled in London, America or Amsterdam. Even in the larger community of Bridgetown the majority of Jews had left the island by then. The remains of a mikvah (ritual bath) and burial ground could potentially be located somewhere near the former synagogue site in Speightstown. As with the mikvah that was recently uncovered in Bridgetown it is probable a mikvah in Speightstown would have been fed by a natural spring.

This research was presented to Niall Finneran, Director of The Speightstown Community Archaeology Project who felt this work to date 'suggested strong potential locations for the synagogue site'. Since then he has returned to Barbados with a team of archaeologists from Winchester University in July 2016, September 2017 and September 2018 to conduct surveys on potential synagogue sites I identified in Church Street and Chapel

Street using various archaeological techniques to locate areas of rebuilding, demolition and spatial reconfiguration. Pending funding the aim is to conduct a geophysics survey in the open areas around these potential sites using magnetic gradiometers to measure anomalies in the sub-surface zone caused by human intervention; to then map human intervention in the natural environment using the gradiometer deployed along a 20 metre by 20 metre grid system alongside creating one by one metre test pits excavated by hand.

Further archival and archaeological investigations are clearly required to uncover more information on this fascinating subject. To date an extensive study of this very early synagogue and the lost Jewish community of important merchants who founded it has not been attempted beyond the early work conducted by Wilfred Samuel and this paper. Alongside the intensive archival and archaeological studies a series of oral history interviews with local people in Speightstown, from many different backgrounds and ages, has been conducted. These interviews record the extraordinary stories within living memory of a unique place: a working fishing village, a town with trace memories of sugar cane fields and slavery, a place under threat of change from tourism, a place with its own particular identity and sense of community. These interviews will be included in a forthcoming book and will also be placed in the Barbados Museum & Historical Society after the completion of this project. In collaboration with Dr Niall Finneran, from Winchester University we have launched The Speightstown Project; an inter-disciplinary research and community heritage project based in Speightstown, which includes our ongoing search for the lost synagogue of Speightstown, with further archaeological investigations and excavations planned alongside other digital heritage and outreach activities with students on the University of Winchester's MA in Cultural Heritage Management (CHARM). We are currently seeking further funding opportunities to continue with this project.

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¹²Hebrew term applied to Jews from Spanish and Portuguese origin. *The New Jewish Encyclopedia*. 1976. Edited by David Bridger and Samuel Wok. pp.439

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