

Congregation Sons of Abraham

La Crosse County, Wisconsin

Name of Property

County and State

United States Department of the Interior

National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places Registration Form

This form is for use in nominating or requesting determinations for individual properties and districts. See instructions in National Register Bulletin, *How to Complete the National Register of Historic Places Registration Form*. If any item does not apply to the property being documented, enter "N/A" for "not applicable." For functions, architectural classification, materials, and areas of significance, enter only categories and subcategories from the instructions.

1. Name of Property

Historic name: Congregation Sons of Abraham

Other names/site number: n/a

Name of related multiple property listing: n/a

(Enter "N/A" if property is not part of a multiple property listing):

2. Location

Street & number: 1820 Main Street

City or town: La Crosse State: WI County: La Crosse

Not For Publication: Vicinity:

3. State/Federal Agency Certification

As the designated authority under the National Historic Preservation Act, as amended,

I hereby certify that this nomination request for determination of eligibility meets the documentation standards for registering properties in the National Register of Historic Places and meets the procedural and professional requirements set forth in 36 CFR Part 60.

In my opinion, the property meets does not meet the National Register Criteria. I recommend that this property be considered significant at the following

level(s) of significance: National Statewide Local

Applicable National Register Criteria A B C D

Signature of certifying official/Title:	Date
Tricia Canaday, Wisconsin State Historic Preservation Officer	
State or Federal agency/bureau or Tribal Government	
In my opinion, the property <input type="checkbox"/> meets <input type="checkbox"/> does not meet the National Register criteria.	
Signature of commenting official:	Date
Title:	State or Federal agency/bureau or Tribal Government

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4. National Park Service Certification

I hereby certify that this property is:

- Entered in the National Register
- Determined eligible for the National Register
- Determined not eligible for the National Register
- Removed from the National Register
- Other (explain:) _____

Signature of the Keeper

Date of Action

5. Classification

Ownership of Property

(Check as many boxes as apply.)

- Private:
- Public – Local
- Public – State
- Public – Federal

Category of Property

(Check only **one** box.)

- Building(s)
- District
- Site
- Structure
- Object

Number of Resources within Property

(Do not include previously listed resources in the county)

Contributing	Noncontributing	
<u>1</u>	<u>0</u>	Buildings
<u>0</u>	<u>0</u>	Sites
<u>0</u>	<u>0</u>	Structures
<u>0</u>	<u>0</u>	Objects
<u>1</u>	<u>0</u>	Total

Number of contributing resources previously listed in the National Register 0

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6. Function or Use

Historic Functions

(Enter categories from instructions.)

Current Functions

(Enter categories from instructions.)

RELIGION / religious facility

RELIGION / religious facility

7. Description

Architectural Classification

(Enter categories from instructions.)

MODERN MOVEMENT

Materials: (enter categories from instructions.)

Principal exterior materials of the property: foundation: CONCRETE; walls: BRICK;
roof: ASPHALT

Narrative Description

Summary Paragraph

The Congregation Sons of Abraham is a 1-story Contemporary-style synagogue that was constructed in 1948. The building has a compact plan and balanced massing consisting of several flat-roofed building portions; their heights and placement are dictated by interior function. The building is clad in brick with limestone trim. The exterior of the building is almost entirely devoid of ornament except for two limestone plaques located in a tall front entry portal. Significant features of the interior include the historic sanctuary and its associated religious objects; classrooms; and a lower-level social hall. Congregation Sons of Abraham is significant under *Criterion C* in the area of Architecture both as an example of the Contemporary style and as an example of a synagogue property type. The building retains sufficient historic integrity to convey its significance.

Narrative Description

Setting

The Congregation Sons of Abraham synagogue is located in a predominately residential section of Main Street, one of the primary east-west streets in La Crosse that runs from the downtown business district directly to the bottom of Granddad Bluff, where it turns into Bliss Road and ascends the bluff that overlooks the city and the river beyond. The synagogue is located on the south side of Main Street and is bordered on the east and west by single-family houses with residential landscaping. Directly across Main Street is a large paved parking lot for a social services organization located in the former La Crosse Hospital building at the corner of Main Street and 17th Street North (AHI 33204). The houses south of the synagogue are part of the NRHP-listed Cass and King Street Residential Historic District (NR ref. no. 97001410), although the houses immediately east and west of the synagogue are not included within the historic district boundaries.

Exterior

The Congregation Sons of Abraham synagogue is roughly barbell-shaped in plan, with distinct cubic masses of varying heights and a tall, deep entry portal extending from the front elevation. The building is clad in golden brick laid in common bond with limestone sills and decorative panels. The building has a concrete foundation and a flat roof; the exterior brick walls form a low parapet and are capped with metal coping.

North (primary) elevation (Photos 1, 2, 6, 7, and 8)

The north elevation is symmetrical and consists of the tall entry portal flanked by the lower front walls of the main building. (Photos 1 and 2) Each of the side bays is identical and contains two glass block basement-level windows. A projecting brick water table is located along the base of each elevation. The water table has a decorative stringcourse of rowlock brick along its base and cap. These stringcourses continue around all four elevations of the building, and a small, decorative limestone accent cube is located at each outside corner of the stringcourses on each elevation. In the northwest corner of the building, a limestone cornerstone is set into the masonry wall. The cornerstone contains a Star of David and the date 1948 in English and Hebrew letters. (Photo 6)

Above the stringcourse, in the symmetrical east and west bays of the north elevation, is a large three-part picture window with a sloped limestone sill and a concealed steel lintel. The windows consist of a large central window with three vertical fixed lights and amber-colored glass with a dimpled texture commonly known as "hammered glass." Each central window is flanked by side windows with five horizontal lights and similar amber hammered glass. Each of the symmetrical large windows has a five-light aluminum storm windows consisting of three fixed lights flanked by tall fixed lights above a single-hung operable lower light. Each of the symmetrical east and west bays of the north elevation is capped by the same aluminum coping that continues around the entire building.

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The central portal is taller than the flanking bays. The flat-roofed portal is rectangular in plan and consists of thick side walls at the east and west around a large rectangular opening. The north (front) edges of the thick side walls are ornamented with vertical grooves of recessed brick, suggesting stylized fluted classical pilasters. A wide band of brick masonry, supported by a hidden steel lintel, stretches across the top of the portal between the side walls. The floor of the portal is raised up three steps from the sidewalk and has concrete stairs and floor.

Each of the side walls of the portal contains a carved limestone panel set flush into the brick wall surface. The east (left) wall depicts the two arched tablets of the law, containing the Ten Commandments in Hebrew, and surmounted by a Star of David. (Figure 7) The west (right) wall contains the text "MY HOUSE SHALL BE CALLED A HOUSE OF PRAYER FOR ALL PEOPLES / ISAIAH," surmounted by a Star of David. (Figure 8) Below the panel in the west wall is a metal mailbox.

The north side of the main building forms the rear (south) wall of the entry portal. A pair of wood-clad steel entry doors are centered in the wall. The doors contain semi-circular glass lights set into a recessed panel. These doors were installed in 2000; the original doors had been replaced at least once prior to this as well. Above the front entry doors is a large opaque panel that stretches to the ceiling of the entry portal. Originally this panel contained an abstract window of amber hammered glass designed by craftsman Roland Holy of the Segelke-Kolhaus Company.¹ Because of security concerns, in the late 1970s the original window was covered with the current panel, leaving a circular cutout where the Star of David from the original window remains visible. This alteration occurred after the period of significance for the building but reflects its continuous use to the present as a house of worship by its Jewish congregation.

West elevation (Photo 3)

The west elevation also displays two later alterations that reflect the ongoing use of the building to meet the needs of its congregation. The west elevation consists of several flat-roofed building masses of varying heights that project and recess to create a complex cubic composition. From north to south (left to right) the elevation consists of the blank west wall of the entry portal; the blank wall of the projecting northwest corner building portion; the taller wall of the sanctuary; a projecting addition at the southwest corner; and the side wall of the tall square chimney on the south elevation. The projecting northwest bay of the west elevation contains a single glass block window in the raised basement. The central bay contains three visible glass block windows in the basement story and a large opening with a limestone sill in the first story (corresponding to the sanctuary inside). The window opening above originally contained tall steel sashes. Because of previously-mentioned security concerns, the original windows were replaced in the late 1970s with the current stucco-over-wood frame infill and three tall fixed-over-hopper windows.

A flat-roofed projecting addition is located at the southeast corner of the west elevation. The addition was constructed in 2000 to improve accessibility to the building by adding an elevator. The lower part of the addition is clad in light orange brick and continues the same water table, stringcourses, and limestone corner blocks as the original portion of the building. Above, the

¹ Rausch, 53.

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walls of the addition are clad in stucco, and the addition is capped with flat metal coping. A small flat-roofed porch is located at the southeast corner of the addition and is supported square metal piers with brick bases. The addition contains a single vertical fixed-light window at the north (corresponding to the sanctuary-level elevator lobby) and a single steel entry door at grade at the south corner.

South (rear) elevation (Photos 4 and 5)

From west to east (left to right), the south elevation contains the ADA-compliant elevator addition (constructed in 2000), and the symmetrical portion of the original 1948 building. The elevator addition has the same light orange brick cladding to the height of the water table and is topped by stucco cladding. A single vertical fixed-light window is centered in the wall of the addition. The original 1948 elevation is three bays wide. The east and west bays each contain the same water table and stringcourse as the other elevations. Centered in the first story of each bay is a large glass block window opening with limestone sills and two inset hoppers in each window. Visible above the walls is the set-back taller volume of the sanctuary space, whose parapet walls contain cast-stone drainage scuppers. The center bay of the south elevation contains a square exterior chimney with two basement windows (one glass block, one metal louvers) at its base. The chimney steps back in three stages as it rises: the first step back is at the water table stringcourse level. The second step back is at the top of the bay wall, which itself is taller than the flanking bays. This portion of the chimney is capped by a thick concrete band. The upper portion of the chimney, above the bay wall, has a thin concrete cap and a metal ventilator.

East elevation (Photo 5)

The east elevation is partially obscured due to landscaping and its proximity to the adjoining residential properties. The east elevation is four bays wide and continues the same brick cladding patterns as the other elevations. Like the west elevation, the east elevation consists of several flat-roofed cubic masses of varying heights which project and recede according to the barbell-shaped plan and entry portal. The southern (left) bay is blank and projects slightly. The next bay is taller, corresponding to the sanctuary inside, and contains three glass block basement windows and a large main-floor opening with limestone sill, four tall fixed-over-hopper windows, and stucco-over-frame infill that replaced the original single-pane steel windows in the late 1970s due to security concerns. The next bay projects slightly and contains a single glass block basement window. Visible at the northern end of the east elevation is the blank side wall of the taller entry portal.

Interior

The interior of the synagogue contains an entry vestibule, the main sanctuary space, two classrooms, the rabbi's office, a secondary staircase, and the elevator and lobbies on the first floor. The basement level contains a social hall, a kitchen, restrooms, and a furnace room.²

Character-defining features of the interior include architectonic elements such as the Torah ark, a recessed cabinet containing the Torah scrolls, and the bimah, the platform and reading table from

² Floor plans, overt descriptions, and current photos of the interior arrangement of the synagogue are not included out of a respect for security concerns.

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which the Torah is read; and spatial elements such as the main sanctuary containing congregation seating; educational classrooms; and a social hall with kitchen facilities. Other character-defining features include the eternal light above the Torah ark; several wall-mounted Yahrzeit boards, ornamental panels bearing the names of deceased congregation members; and original materials and finishes such as amber-colored hammered glass windows and doors, tiled entry vestibule, plaster walls, and acoustical tile ceilings.

The entry vestibule is a split-level space, with the main entry doors located at the landing. A wide staircase leads up to the sanctuary, and narrower staircases along the side walls lead down to the social hall. The sanctuary stairs are bordered by a half-height wall. The staircase treads, risers, and baseboard, as well as the top edge of the half-height wall, are clad in the original small tile of variegated shades of buff, browns, and blues. (Figure 5) The upper and intermediate landings have cream-colored linoleum tile floors with a deep red border. The entry vestibule also contains original hanging light fixtures with cylindrical milk glass shades with floating polished brass collars and turned fittings.

The sanctuary is roughly square in plan and retains its original wood-and-hammered glass entrance doors topped with a tall, three-light amber-colored hammered glass transom. (See Photo 12 for a representative door) The Torah ark is located at the front of the sanctuary space, opposite the main entrance. The ark is recessed into the wall and has wood paneled doors that slide into hidden side pockets to reveal the Torah scrolls inside. A wide wood band runs across the bottom of the ark and is ornamented with a carved Star of David, and carved wood panels depicting the two Tablets of the Law are inset into the wall above the ark. (Photos 10 and 11) Each door of the ark, and the areas above and below it, were originally paneled with single large slabs of wood; and the walls on either side of the ark were covered with wide flush-joined vertical paneling. In the late 1970s, the current paneling was installed over the original wood. The ark is normally covered with a modern ark curtain. (Photo 9) An electric eternal light known as the ner tamid, consisting of an upturned candelabra bulb within a small oval frame, is suspended from the ceiling above the ark.

The bimah, consisting of a raised platform and the original wood-paneled reading desk, is located in front of the ark. The front of the bimah platform is faced with its original wood and is accessed by small staircases on either side. The walls on either side of the bimah are curved, lending a streamlined, Art Moderne touch to the recessed area containing the bimah and ark. Additionally, the curved walls, like a theater proscenium, also help with acoustics in a space where the reading of the Torah and spoken sermons are an integral part of the worship service. (Figure 6) In one side wall of the recessed area, a simple, unornamented doorway leads to the rabbi's office.

The side walls of the sanctuary originally contained large multi-light steel-framed windows with single pane hammered glass. In the late 1970s, as a security precaution, the congregation made the decision to eliminate the large expanses of glass. A wood framed wall was constructed within the original large openings and narrower fixed-over-hopper windows were installed. The infill section is recessed from the face of the main wall and the original window sills remain, leaving the location, size, and scale of the original openings plainly visible. Around the same time as the

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window replacement, the original plaster side walls of the sanctuary were covered with the current wood paneling, and the original acoustical tile ceiling was replaced with the current acoustical tile ceiling.

The sanctuary retains its original rows of wood pews, the endcaps of which each contain a carved Star of David. (Figure 6) The space also retains its original movable lectern, clad in the same wood as the reading desk, and now located on the main floor of the sanctuary in front of the bimah. In addition to its wood furniture, the sanctuary also contains a pair of bronze electric Temple menorahs, along with four bronze Yahrzeit boards, tablets inscribed with the names of deceased congregation members and commemorating the yearly anniversary of their deaths. (Photo 13) The Temple menorahs and the Yahrzeit boards were added after the period of significance and reflect the ongoing usage and evolution of the building as a worship space.

Two classrooms are located on the main floor. They retain their original tall folding doors, consisting of two leaves, each with narrow rails and stiles surrounding three lights of amber-colored hammered glass. (Photo 13) The classrooms also retain original entry doors, with wood frames, amber hammered glass, and paired push bar hardware. (Photo 12) The classrooms also retain their original plaster walls and acoustical tile ceiling, although carpeting was installed over the original linoleum floors around the year 2000.

The building also contains a social hall, with original wood paneled walls and a replacement acoustical tile ceiling. A raised stage is located at one end of the social hall. Adjoining the social hall are a kitchen and restrooms (which were remodeled in 2001).

Landscape

The synagogue is located in a residential neighborhood and has moderately dense landscaping, primarily along its north (street) side. Four mature street trees are located along Main Street at the north (front) of the property, and several additional mature trees are located in the property's grassy front yard and at the northwest corner. The building has foundation plantings consisting of flowers and low ornamental shrubs on its north side. The west side of the property contains a large raised flower bed along the street, and the remainder of the west landscape consists of a large mowed grass area. The south (rear) of the property contains a blacktop parking lot, and the east side of the building contains a narrow strip of lawn between the synagogue and a line of mature trees on the adjoining residential properties.

Integrity

The Congregation Sons of Abraham synagogue retains historic integrity in five of the seven aspects. Alterations after the period of significance have somewhat impacted two aspects of integrity. However, these alterations directly reflect issues and events faced by the building's Jewish congregation that have occurred throughout the building's continuous use as a house of worship. Additionally, the building retains enough overall historic integrity to convey its architectural significance as a Contemporary-style synagogue.

Major changes that occurred after the period of significance include the late 1970s-era replacement of the original large sanctuary windows with smaller windows and a solid infill

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wall, offering increased security against potential antisemitic violence. The original masonry openings remain legible and unchanged: on the exterior, the infill sections are clad in a contrasting stucco to differentiate them from the historic wall fabric, and on the interior, the infill wall section is recessed from the main wall, leaving the shape of the original opening highly legible. In addition, the wood-framed infill wall could conceivably be reversed and the original steel-framed hammered glass windows could be replicated based on original architectural plans. Similarly, the original large stained glass window in the front elevation has been partially covered with opaque panels and the original wood front entry doors were replaced with modern steel entry doors. The original masonry opening remains legible and unchanged, and the original window, which remains intact under the opaque panels, could be uncovered and restored. The only other major change to the exterior consists of the elevator addition, constructed in 2000 to accommodate an aging congregation. This addition is located at the rear of a non-primary elevation; is small in size; and is sympathetic in scale, massing, and materials to the original building. In addition, the original brick exterior wall remains nearly completely intact behind the addition, with only a single new doorway to connect the historic space to the new elevator addition.

Interior alterations include the replacement of the original large windows in the sanctuary, discussed previously, and the addition of wood paneling over the original plaster on the side walls of the sanctuary. Although the wood paneling changes the character of the sanctuary somewhat, the replacement materials do not detract from the character-defining volume of the sanctuary space; the original curved walls that frame the bimah; or the character-defining original placement and spatial relationship of the Torah ark, the bimah platform and reading desk, and the congregation seating.

The synagogue retains integrity of location and setting: it has remained on the same residential street and has retained its urban setting of adjacent street, grass terrace, and sidewalk, along with its landscape of mature trees and ornamental plantings.

The synagogue retains integrity of design as conveyed through its Contemporary-style flat-roofed cubic massing; the deep rectangular frame of its entry portal; and its minimal exterior ornamentation. The building also retains integrity of design as conveyed through the unchanged interior arrangement of spaces (entry space, worship space, classroom space, social space). The building also conveys integrity of design through the original placement of the congregation seating, the bimah platform, and the ark, the spatial relationship of which are character-defining elements of a synagogue. Although the later elevator addition and alterations to the sanctuary windows have somewhat altered the historic appearance of the exterior, they do not significantly detract from the symmetrical composition of the primary façade or the character-defining shape and massing of the building.

The synagogue retains integrity of materials on the exterior as conveyed through its original brick cladding, limestone sills, limestone decorative panels, hammered glass classroom windows, and glass block basement and rear windows. The synagogue retains integrity of materials on the interior as conveyed through original tiled staircase, wood and hammered glass doors, hammered glass transoms, plaster walls in classrooms, and paneling and acoustical tile ceiling in the social

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hall. The original furnishing in the sanctuary, including the original pews, original reading desk, and original pulpit, all contribute to the interior integrity. The changes of materials in the interior, especially the installation of wood paneling in the sanctuary, do not significantly detract from the character-defining exterior materials that make the building a good example of the Contemporary style.

The building retains integrity of workmanship as conveyed through its original carved limestone panels in the portal, its exterior masonry, its interior tilework in the vestibule, and its original wood-and-hammered glass interior doors.

The building retains integrity of both feeling and association. The building has functioned continuously as a synagogue since its construction, and its Contemporary-style exterior and its character-defining interior spaces remain just as recognizable today as they did when Congregation Sons of Abraham was dedicated nearly 80 years ago.

END OF DESCRIPTION, DO NOT DELETE

8. Statement of Significance

Applicable National Register Criteria

- A. Property is associated with events that have made a significant contribution to the broad patterns of our history.
- B. Property is associated with the lives of persons significant in our past.
- C. Property embodies the distinctive characteristics of a type, period, or method of construction or represents the work of a master, or possesses high artistic values, or represents a significant and distinguishable entity whose components lack individual distinction.
- D. Property has yielded, or is likely to yield, information important in prehistory or history.

Criteria Considerations

- A. Owned by a religious institution or used for religious purposes
- B. Removed from its original location
- C. A birthplace or grave

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- D. A cemetery
- E. A reconstructed building, object, or structure
- F. A commemorative property
- G. Less than 50 years old or achieving significance within the past 50 years

Areas of Significance

ARCHITECTURE

Significant Person

n/a

Period of Significance

1948

Cultural Affiliation

n/a

Significant Dates

1948

Architect/Builder

Boyum, Schubert & Sorenson, architects
Theo. Molzahn & Sons, Inc., general contractor

Statement of Significance Summary Paragraph

The Congregation Sons of Abraham synagogue is significant under National Register *Criterion C* in the area of Architecture at the local level of significance. Described as “modernistic” at its completion in 1948, the synagogue remains an outstanding example of the Contemporary style with its flat-roofed cubic massing, its broad exterior expanses of brick, and its minimal ornamentation. Congregation Sons of Abraham is the only extant synagogue in La Crosse, and the character-defining elements of its interior set it apart from other Christian houses of worship in the city and make it a good example of a well-defined synagogue property type. The building retains historic integrity to its period significance. As both a good example of the Contemporary

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style of architecture, as well as an intact (and only local) example of a distinctive property type, the Congregation Sons of Abraham synagogue is being nominated to the National Register under *Criterion C*.

Period of Significance and Justification

The property is being nominated to the National Register under *Criterion C* in the area of Architecture. The period of significance for Congregation Sons of Abraham is 1948, the year of its construction.

Criteria Consideration

The Congregation Sons of Abraham synagogue is both owned by a religious institution and used for religious purposes. Such properties typically are not eligible for listing in the National Register. However, Congregation Sons of Abraham meets Criteria Consideration A since it is being nominated for its architectural significance alone, not for any religious associations.

Narrative Statement of Significance

The Congregation Sons of Abraham synagogue is an architecturally significant Contemporary-style building completed in 1948. It was the first “modern” religious building in La Crosse, and its distinctive architectural style sets it apart from other Christian churches in the city. The synagogue was built by the city’s oldest active Jewish congregation, and although the building is not being nominated for its historic associations, the history and legacy of the Jewish community in La Crosse adds to the significance of the building as a synagogue, a property type that traditionally encompasses worship, learning, and social gathering.

The following historic context includes a brief history of La Crosse and its Jewish community; the planning and construction process of the Congregation Sons of Abraham synagogue; a brief biographical statement on the architects of the building; and discussions of both the synagogue as a property type as well as the Contemporary style.

Historic Context

Present-day La Crosse is located in western Wisconsin, on a prairie flanked by tall bluffs at the confluence of the Mississippi and Black Rivers. The Ho-Chunk, Ojibwe, and Sioux used the area as a meeting place and location for trade for centuries. When European fur traders and missionaries began moving into the Upper Midwest in the nineteenth century, the area became a popular location for fur traders, and a trading post was established in 1841 in a log building. In 1843, the post was moved to the site of present-day downtown and renamed “La Crosse” after the name of the field sport that Native Americans had played in the area.³

³ Sanford, Albert and H. J. Hirschheimer, *A History of La Crosse, Wisconsin, 1841-1900* (La Crosse: La Crosse County Historical Society, 1951).

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Within a decade, the settlement began to see rapid growth. The surrounding prairie proved to be excellent farmland, and the geographical advantage of the high banks of the Mississippi River made the location an excellent dock for river traffic and steamboats as well as being immune to flooding. River trade spurred on economic growth, and the population increased from 573 inhabitants in 1853 to 3,860 people in 1860.⁴ The Chicago, Milwaukee, and St. Paul Railroad reached La Crosse in 1858 and offered larger markets for the city's industries of lumber and grain milling and brewing.⁵

The 1860s and 1870s saw the establishment in the city of large industries, railway lines, banks, local government, and an economy based on transportation and access to a large river port. Because of its river connection to the pineries of northern Wisconsin, La Crosse developed into a lumber boom town, with thirty-three mills located along the Mississippi and Black Rivers. Lumbering helped propel La Crosse into the second largest city in Wisconsin by 1880, with just over 25,000 inhabitants.

The Jewish Community in La Crosse

The Jewish community has been part of La Crosse since the earliest days of the city. Two of the area's first white settlers were a Jewish family: John Meyer Levy and his wife Fredericka Augusta Levy, who came to La Crosse in 1845, three years after the first permanent trading post was established. Throughout his career, John was an entrepreneur, hotel keeper, banker, alderman, and three-time mayor of La Crosse.⁶ In the 1850s and 1860s approximately seventeen Jewish families settled in La Crosse, coming predominantly from German states. Members of the German Jewish community were prominent in business and trade and settled largely in the eastern part of present-day downtown.⁷

The first Jewish communal organization in La Crosse, the Hebrew Indigent, Sick, and Burial Society (later known as the Hebrew Benevolent Society) was founded in 1857 to establish a cemetery and provide funeral and burial services. The Congregation Anche Chesed (a Reform congregation) developed out of the benevolent society around the same time. Anche Chesed initially held religious services at the Masonic Lodge building until the congregation established a synagogue in an existing building near Jay St. and 5th St. North in 1867. In 1880, Congregation Anche Chesed moved again, to 521 4th St. South.

La Crosse's Jewish community also established fraternal organizations in the late nineteenth century, including chapters of the Independent Order B'Nai B'rith and the Keshet Shel Barzel, along with a Hebrew Ladies Benevolent Society.⁸ By the 1890s, La Crosse had the second

⁴ Susan Hessel and Gayda Hollnagel, *A History of La Crosse, Wisconsin in the Twentieth Century*, (La Crosse: La Crosse Historical Society, 2007); Joan Rausch and Richard Zeitlin, *City of La Crosse Intensive Architectural/Historical Survey Report* (La Crosse: City of La Crosse Department of City Planning, 1984).

⁵ Rausch and Zeitlin, 17-20.

⁶ "Congregation Sons Of Abraham Synagogue Dedication Marks More Than 100 Years Of Jewish Activity In La Crosse Area," *La Crosse Tribune*, Sept. 12, 1948, p. 4.

⁷ Rausch, 292-293.

⁸ "Congregation Sons Of Abraham Synagogue Dedication Marks [...]"; Dedication booklet, p. 32.

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largest Jewish community in Wisconsin, surpassed only by Milwaukee. As noted in *Cultural Resource Management in Wisconsin*,

In 1891, [La Crosse's] community of nearly 100 German Jews flourished among a population of approximately 25,090 people. Its members were economically secure and enjoyed a high degree of social acceptance by the general La Crosse populace. But 30 years later, all but one of the original Jewish families had disappeared. Though one or two had married non-Jews and assimilated into the larger La Crosse community, most moved to larger cities with more flourishing Jewish communities. With the decline of La Crosse's lumber industry in the 1890s, many lost hope that La Crosse would one day become a thriving metropolis. In their attempt to become part of a functioning Jewish community, one large enough to furnish their children with spouses, to provide various social and philanthropic activities, and to support a viable synagogue, most of La Crosse's German Jewish settlers and their children eventually moved to larger cities such as Milwaukee, Chicago, New York, St. Louis, and Minneapolis.⁹

All of these German Jewish families were part of Congregation Anche Chesed, and as families moved away from La Crosse, the congregation dwindled in size. By the turn of the twentieth century, the congregation consisted of only fourteen members, and the Anche Chesed Reform synagogue held its last service in 1901.¹⁰

Around the same time, however, between about 1890 and 1915, another group of Jewish settlers had begun to immigrate to La Crosse in a pattern similar to the rest of the state. Unlike the earlier German Reform Jews, this second wave of Jewish immigrants to La Crosse came primarily from Eastern Europe and Russia and followed Orthodox Jewish traditions. Members of the Orthodox community initially held religious services at members' homes. By the early twentieth century, the community had established its own religious congregation, Sons of Abraham, named for congregation organizer (and owner of a metal foundry) Abraham Goldish.¹¹ The congregation purchased a former Lutheran church in 1905 at 414 11th St. North and established their Orthodox synagogue.¹² Congregation Sons of Abraham continued to serve La Crosse's Jewish community for the next four decades.

Plans for a New Synagogue

The congregation began planning for a new building in the early 1940s, referred to throughout the subsequent planning process as the "shule" (a Yiddish term for synagogue) or the "center," reflecting the building's role as a community gathering place. As recorded in the Sons of Abraham congregation minutes from May 2, 1943,

⁹ Wyatt, Religion.

¹⁰ "Congregation Sons Of Abraham Synagogue Dedication Marks [...]"; Dedication booklet, p. 31.

¹¹ Hessel and Goldnagel, 400.

¹² Dedication booklet, 31-32; Hessel and Goldnagel, 400; "Congregation Sons Of Abraham Synagogue Dedication Marks [...]".

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“Mr. Max Bemel [the congregation president] spoke about building a shule and suggested to buy a lot, and to take up with the City Council and see whether they would permit us to build a shule. A motion by brother Bemel seconded by brother Lindenberg that the president appoint a committee of five members namely bros. Heend, Ebin, Epstein, Bemel, Glickman and Lindenberg. The president to be chairman of this committee to take an option on a lot not to exceed \$2,000 subject to the approval of the congregation.”¹³

Discussions and fundraising for a new synagogue building moved forward slowly throughout 1943 and 1944 since the congregation was also managing a refugee committee to assist displaced European Jews as well as actively fundraising for relief aid organizations such as the United Jewish Appeal and the United Charity Institutions of Jerusalem.¹⁴

By June of 1945, the congregation’s building committee had raised about \$10,000 towards construction costs. The committee had also purchased a plot of land for \$2,800 on Main Street, directly east of the Green Bay & Western Railroad tracks. Later that autumn, congregation president Max Bemel once again spoke of the urgency of the project, imploring the building committee to start building as soon as possible. Bemel also stressed the need to hire a rabbi, particularly to instruct the children of the congregation.¹⁵ President Bemel’s encouragement proved fruitful, and a few months later, the building committee hired the architectural firm of Boyum, Schubert & Sorensen to design their new synagogue.¹⁶

Boyum, Schubert & Sorensen, Architects

The firm of Boyum, Schubert & Sorensen was formed in 1928 and maintained offices in La Crosse and Winona, Minnesota, approximately thirty miles upriver from La Crosse on the opposite bank of the Mississippi River. Benjamin Boyum (1884-1954) graduated from the University of Minnesota with a degree in engineering and worked in the architectural office of Long & Long (later renamed Long, Lamoreaux & Long). Boyum briefly established his own office in Saskatoon, Canada and then returned to the US, setting up an architectural and civil engineering office in Peterson, Minnesota (approximately 30 miles due west of La Crosse.)¹⁷

¹³ Minutes included in “Sons of Abraham Congregation (La Crosse, Wis.) Records, 1918-1958,” box 1, folder 1. Congregation minutes from 1939-1945 (in Yiddish with later English translations in pencil) are included at the back of a financial ledger titled in the finding aid as “Records of Cash receipts and disbursements, bank, deposits, and check register, 1944-1945.”

¹⁴ Dedication booklet, 33; multiple charitable donation receipts included in “Sons of Abraham Congregation (La Crosse, Wis.) Records, 1918-1958,” box 1, folder 1.

¹⁵ Congregation minutes, June 25, 1945; Oct. 7, 1945, “Sons of Abraham Congregation (La Crosse, Wis.) Records, 1918-1958,” box 1, folder 1.

¹⁶ “Congregation Sons Of Abraham Synagogue Dedication Marks [...]”. The details of how Boyum, Schubert & Sorensen were selected remain unclear. However, the firm also designed a small auto tire and repair shop for Max Bemel and included a photo in the 1948 monograph of their work (without noting an address or construction date, unfortunately.) Bemel had opened Max’s Auto Wrecking Company in 1934 in an existing building, so it is possible that Boyum, Schubert & Sorensen designed his auto shop prior to receiving the synagogue commission. A brief history of the company can be found at: <https://archives.lacrosselibrary.org/blog/maxs-auto-wrecking-company/>.

¹⁷ Firm and biographical information taken from “Questionnaire for Architects’ Roster” and Supplemental Data Sheets, dated Oct. 3, 1947; May 3, 1949; May 9, 1949; and Feb. 10, 1953, on file at American Institute of Architects and accessed at http://public.aia.org/sites/hdoaa/wiki/AIA%20scans/Rosters/BoyumSchubertSorenson_roster.pdf.

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Carl Schubert (1898-1988) was born in La Crosse and attended Lawrence College in Appleton, Wisconsin, and the University of Minnesota before working as a draftsman-architect for the La Crosse office of the Standard Oil Company. Roy Sorensen (1891-1960) was also born in La Crosse and did not formally study architecture at a university. After graduating from high school, Sorensen worked as a draftsman for the Trane Company, a La Crosse-based producer of heating products, and then briefly as superintendent of the Wood Parts Division of the Curtiss Aeroplane & Motor Company in Buffalo, New York, during its World War I wartime production efforts. Sorensen later returned to La Crosse and apprenticed in the architectural office of his father Ori Sorensen, a contractor, builder, architect, and two-term mayor of La Crosse.

In 1928, Boyum, Schubert, and Sorensen went into partnership. The firm established two independent offices in La Crosse and Winona, Minnesota. The firm's early work consisted of public buildings, and Boyum helped secure several lucrative commissions in Winona, including the Winona Athletic Club, five private and public schools, and the Winona City Hall (an imposing Stripped Classicism-style New Deal-era project funded by the Public Works Administration.)¹⁸

The firm also completed a vocational school and four elementary and junior high schools in La Crosse in the late 1930s, as well as a new high school building in Tomah, Wisconsin. Like many firms, design work slowed during World War II as construction came to a halt. After the war, the firm would go on to design county hospitals for Trempealeau, La Crosse, and New Richmond Counties; numerous schools and university buildings in Wisconsin, Minnesota, and Iowa; industrial buildings; public housing; office buildings; and religious works before the firm was reorganized and sold in 1973 to Kratt-Lachecki-Meyers & Solberg.

When Boyum, Schubert & Sorensen received the commission for the new Congregation Sons of Abraham synagogue in 1946, their most prominent project in La Crosse was the recently-completed Sears-Roebuck store at the corner of King St. and 5th Ave. South (AHI 32305). The building had Streamline Moderne-style wide horizontal banding that incorporated ranks of ribbon windows and incised concrete ornamentation. Their design for the new synagogue pushed the "modernistic" style even further and reduced the building to a composition of cubic forms whose graceful proportions and broad expanses of golden-colored brick became the ornament itself.

Groundbreaking, Construction, and Dedication

The congregation applied for a building permit for the new synagogue on August 4, 1947, and the groundbreaking ceremony was held the next day.¹⁹ A few days later, the *La Crosse Tribune* published the architects' rendering of the new building, calling it "modernistic in exterior

¹⁸ Many of the firm's Winona commissions are listed in the National Register: the Winona Athletic Club, built 1931 (NR ref. no. 10005359); Central Grade School, built 1930 (NR ref. no. 12000071); Madison School, built 1932 (NR ref. no. 12000073); Washington-Kosciusko School, built 1934 (NR ref. no. 12000074); Jefferson School, built 1938 (NR ref. no. 120072); and the Winona City Hall, built 1939 (NR ref. no. 99000806).

¹⁹ "Officially Beginning Construction," *La Crosse Tribune*, Aug. 5, 1947, p. 2.

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design” and highlighting the building’s planned interior facilities.²⁰ The flat-roofed building would have looked quite distinctive from other religious buildings in La Crosse. Modern architectural styles had begun to appear in the city – a few Art Moderne commercial buildings downtown and a handful of International-style houses along Losey Boulevard – but all of the other churches in La Crosse were traditional structures in historicist styles, with steeply-pitched Gothic roofs, rugged Romanesque towers, or Neoclassical colonnades and pediments. The calm and compact new synagogue was both distinctive architecturally and perhaps the congregation’s way of quietly asserting their unique Jewish identity in a city full of Christian churches.

The new synagogue was completed at a cost of approximately \$70,000 and was dedicated on September 12, 1948, during an afternoon program and evening dinner attended by religious clergy, city officials, and community leaders. Members of the building committee took place in the symbolic dedication of the building: Mrs. Lewis Phillips unveiled the cornerstone, Mrs. Sam Levy cut the ribbon across the entrance doors, and Mrs. Max Bemel unlocked the doors. Rabbi Abraham Album then lit the eternal light above the ark, and the congregation’s Torah scrolls were transferred from the old synagogue into the new building. Louis Ebin, chairman of the building committee, symbolically presented the key of the new building to Max Bemel, the congregation president; and Bemel, Ebin, and Rabbi Album all offered remarks, interspersed with choral music sung by the choir from Adath Jeshurun synagogue in Minneapolis, along with their cantor, Morris Amsel.²¹ (The *La Crosse Tribune* noted that the dedication was so well-attended that it was necessary to seat part of the overflow audience in the two classrooms while other people stood on the stairs in the entry lobby.)

The afternoon events were followed by an evening dedication banquet. The banquet began with the singing of “America,” followed by an invocation by Rabbi Album. A string trio played during dinner (the menu of which was not recorded but which cost \$664.60, according to congregation records); afterwards speakers gave remarks, including La Crosse Mayor Charles Beranek; Rev. Harold Stoffel (representing the English Lutheran Church); Rev. Ralph Kuether (representing the La Crosse Area Federation of Churches); the Rt. Rev. Monsignor George Hammes (representing the Catholic Diocese of La Crosse); and Rabbi Album, the congregation’s own spiritual leader.²²

The main speaker of the evening was Rabbi Morris Gordon, also of Adath Jeshurun Synagogue in Minneapolis. Gordon spoke on the shared ideals of the Jewish congregation and their fellow Americans, citing the Bible as the shared wellspring of Judeo-Christian faith, American democratic ideals, and shared prayers among Christians and Jews. In a printed message in the dedication booklet, Rabbi Gordon also addressed the challenge presented to the congregation, using the three concepts traditionally associated with a synagogue building:

²⁰ “New Synagogue Will Be Modernistic In Style,” *La Crosse Tribune*, Aug. 10, 1947, 8.

²¹ “Plan Dedication [...]”; “Congregation Sons Of Abraham Dedicates New City Synagogue,” *La Crosse Tribune*, Sept. 13, 1948, 10; Dedication booklet, 37.

²² Congregation minutes, Sept. 18, 1948, “Sons of Abraham Congregation (La Crosse, Wis.) Records, 1918-1958,” box 1, folder 1; “Congregation Sons Of Abraham Dedicates [...]”.

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It calls upon us as Jews to make of it a “Beth Tefilah,” a “Home of Prayer,” so dignified and so inspiring that we might never leave its precincts but be uplifted for having worshipped there. It bids us make of it a real “Beth Medrash,” a “House of Learning,” so modern and so progressive that our children will delight in studying the history of our past in this pleasant atmosphere of our present. It seeks of us to make of it a true “Beth Keneseth,” a “House of Assembly,” so attractive to young and old that it will become a vibrant Synagogue Center, bringing its rays of spiritual strength to every Jewish heart in La Crosse.²³

Just over a decade after it was constructed, the synagogue was vandalized, an event that led the Wisconsin State Legislature to change the state law regarding religious and racial crimes. On a Friday evening in early January 1960, two large red swastikas and the words “Jews Get Out” were painted on the doors of the building. Local police began an investigation, and several days later, five teenagers were arrested. Three of the boys were juveniles under age 18 and were not charged. The other two, ages 18 and 19, admitted to the vandalism and were charged with criminal damage to property. During the course of the investigation, the two also admitted to burning the Star of David at the synagogue three months earlier, an event that had been investigated but not publicly reported by the local newspaper.²⁴

The La Crosse police chief downplayed the incidents, referring to the boys as “pranksters” who did not realize the serious of their actions. Wisconsin Attorney General John Reynolds stepped into the case, dispatching the superintendent of the state crime laboratory to assist local police, and issuing public statements noting that:

The crime of desecrating synagogues and churches is one of the most heinous ones that society can be confronted with. I wish to make it perfectly clear that the full power of the attorney general’s office and the State of Wisconsin and all the facilities at our command will be brought to bear to bring those responsible for perpetrating such crimes to justice.

The State and local governments of Wisconsin do not intend to treat these crimes as merely boys’ pranks and to permit them to continue.²⁵

The desecration at Congregation Sons of Abraham in January 1960 was actually part of a worldwide wave of anti-Jewish incidents that scholars later termed the “swastika epidemic” of 1959-1960. Beginning on Christmas morning in 1959, antisemitic slogans and symbols began appearing on synagogues in West Germany and quickly spread to 34 countries around the globe. In the US, the Anti-Defamation League recorded 637 antisemitic incidents in 236 cities during

²³ Dedication booklet, 4.

²⁴ “5 Youths Admit Painting Swastikas At Synagogue,” *La Crosse Tribune*, Jan. 14, 1960, p. 1; “Investigation Set For Synagogue Desecrators,” *La Crosse Tribune*, Jan. 15, 1960, p. 1.

²⁵ “Wilson To Aid In Probe Of Paint Incident,” *La Crosse Tribune*, Jan. 12, 1960, p. 9.

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the span of December 1959 through March 1960.²⁶ In La Crosse, the two boys charged with desecrating Congregation Sons of Abraham pleaded guilty. However, because Wisconsin state law only classified property damage as a misdemeanor, regardless of the property type, the presiding judge was only able to impose community service as a sentence, despite community outcry.²⁷

That same month, as a direct result of the trial and ensuing verdict, Wisconsin Attorney General Reynolds drafted a new bill that would make vandalism based on religious or racial hatred a felony.²⁸ Governor Vernon Thomson gave his blessing to the bill, and the Wisconsin Assembly unanimously passed the legislation in May 1960, resulting in stiffer penalties of fines or up to three years in prison.²⁹

The synagogue saw another act of vandalism as well. In August of 1980, one of the large sanctuary windows was broken.³⁰ No one was arrested for the vandalism, and the event was one of the main factors that led the congregation to replace the original large windows with the current smaller windows and solid walls.

Congregation Sons of Abraham has continued to use the synagogue to the present. Its congregation increased from the thirty-five families who built the new synagogue, peaking in the late 1990s, and then decreasing slightly again to its current membership.

The Synagogue as a Property Type

The Congregation Sons of Abraham building is significant for two interrelated reasons: as a distinct property type that incorporates the interior spaces that are historically associated with a synagogue; and as an example of the Contemporary style of architecture, which expresses the purpose and function of the interior as structural forms on the exterior.

The Jewish synagogue is one of the world's oldest property types, and its basic functional requirements, an enclosed space in which a congregation can assemble for worship and hear the reading of the Torah, have remained unchanged for millennia.³¹ The three primary elements in the interior of every synagogue are the ark (*aron ha-kodesh* in Hebrew), a cabinet that houses the Torah scrolls, the most sacred objects in a synagogue; the *bimah*, a platform from which the Torah is read aloud to the congregation; and an eternal light (the *ner tamid*) located near the ark and kept burning constantly to recall the menorah that burned in the Temple in Jerusalem before its destruction. The synagogue must also include seating for the congregation, as well as good

²⁶ Howard Ehrlich, "The Swastika Epidemic of 1959-1960: Anti-Semitism and Community Characteristics," *Social Problems*, vol. 9, no. 3 (Winter, 1962) p. 264-265; "Anti-Jewish Acts Spread From West Europe To Australia, US," *La Crosse Tribune*, Jan. 4, 1960, p. 1; "Swastikas Linked To Hoodlums, Pranksters," *La Crosse Tribune*, Jan. 10, 1960, p. 2.

²⁷ Editorial page, *La Crosse Tribune*, Feb. 11, 1960, p. 4.

²⁸ "Swastika Case Spurs State Plan for Stiff Penalty," *Wisconsin State Journal*, Jan. 16, 1960, p. 1.

²⁹ "Lawmakers Dusting Off Bundle of Old Bills For Legislative Session," *La Crosse Tribune*, May 13, 1960, p. 2.

³⁰ "Windows Broken," *La Crosse Tribune*, Aug. 11, 1980, p. 22.

³¹ Dr. Julian Morgenstern, "The Temple and the Synagogue: To 70 C.E.," in Peter Blake, ed., *An American Synagogue for Today and Tomorrow*, (New York: The Union of American Hebrew Congregations, 1954), 23-27; Gruber, 15.

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acoustics, sufficient illumination, and clear sight lines between the congregation, the bimah, and the ark.³²

The location of the ark and the bimah has varied throughout history based on the denomination and ancestral rituals and traditions of the congregation. In the Sephardic tradition (historically associated with Spain and Portugal) the ark and bimah were placed at opposite ends of the room, and congregation members “turn their heads from one to the other, as if the two furnishings were in dialogue.”³³ In contrast, Ashkenazi Jews (associated with Germany and Eastern Europe, and the ethnic group from which the Congregation Sons of Abraham descends) placed the ark in the end wall and the bimah in the center of the room, with worshipers seated in a U-shape around the bimah and facing the ark. This placement later evolved in the nineteenth century and the bimah moved to directly in front of the ark, creating a stage-like platform that was the focal point of the space, with congregation seating arranged facing forward as in a theater or auditorium.³⁴

Paradoxically, although the placement of the ark, bimah, and seating has been the central and unchanging character-defining feature of any synagogue, the exterior appearance of a synagogue has varied widely over the centuries, as emphatically stated in a post-World War II handbook on synagogue design: “...An important question must surely be: Was there ever such a thing as a single architectural style which synagogues alone possessed and which distinguished them from the architecture of their surroundings? The answer is: No.”³⁵

The exteriors of synagogues historically adopted the prevailing architectural style of their surroundings, often as a direct result of political insecurity and economic uncertainty.³⁶ Throughout much of Europe up until the nineteenth century, Jewish culture was suppressed, including restrictions on owning property or on building size, resulting in synagogues that were “as inconspicuous as possible from the exterior to avoid drawing the attention of the often hostile populations within which the Jews lived.”³⁷ Beginning in the nineteenth century, however, Jews began to receive the same civil rights and legal privileges as other European citizens, leading to the construction of architecturally ambitious synagogues in urban centers which had large Jewish populations.³⁸

With few historic precedents to draw on, nineteenth-century European Jewish congregations often adopted Greek or Roman temple styles for their houses of worship in order to distinguish them from Christian (read: Gothic-style) churches. The Moorish style, which combined Byzantine, Oriental, and Arab elements, was another popular architectural option, with

³² Gruber, 15; Geva, 31-32.

³³ Gruber, 17.

³⁴ Geva, 32-33; Gruber, 17, 19. A more detailed analysis of the history and meaning of bimah placement can be found in Lee Shai Weissbach, “The Architecture of the Bimah in American Synagogues: Framing the Ritual,” *American Jewish History*, vol. 91, no. 1 (March 2003), 29-51.

³⁵ Dr. Franz Landsberger, “From 70 C.E. to the Present,” in Blake, 35.

³⁶ Wischnitzer, 3.

³⁷ Les Vollmert and Carlen Hatala, “Congregation Beth Israel Synagogue, Milwaukee County, Wisconsin, National Register #92000107,” National Register of Historic Places Nomination Form, (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of the Interior, National Park Service, 1992), sec. 8, p. 9.

³⁸ Vollmert and Hatala, sec. 8 pp. 9-10; Gruber 24-25.

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prominent examples in the main synagogues of Dresden, Vienna, Budapest, and Berlin.³⁹ Early American Jewish congregations followed a similar general arc, with classically-inspired synagogue architecture, including Georgian Revival and Greek Revival examples. In the second half of the nineteenth century, many German-American Jewish congregations in urban centers had become prosperous enough to build large synagogues; some of them turned to the contemporaneous Moorish style that was a reassuring reminder of their European homelands.

Beginning in the early twentieth century, American congregations increasingly turned to historical revival styles for new synagogue construction, including high-style classicism inspired by the 1893 World's Columbian Exposition or grand domed examples inspired by the Hagia Sophia and other Byzantine structures.⁴⁰ In Wisconsin, this trend is perfectly illustrated by the two most architecturally significant synagogues in Milwaukee, home of the largest Jewish population in the state. Congregation Beth Israel (2432 N. Teutonia Ave., AHI 29082, NR ref. no. 92000107), built in 1925, is a massive, twin-towered Byzantine Revival building with brown tapestry brick, elaborate stone trim, and paired copper domes. In contrast, Temple Emanu-el B'ne Jeshurun (2419 E. Kenwood Blvd., AHI 15931), built three years earlier, is a sober limestone Neoclassical-style building with a shallow-domed classical auditorium.

Despite their various architectural styles, the synagogue as a property type had retained its same basic functional requirements for worship. Synagogues also often became the center of Jewish life and community identity, serving as religious schools and places for social gatherings. This threefold function – often referred to as a House of Prayer, a House of Study, and a House of Assembly – formed the basis for most synagogues constructed prior to World War II.⁴¹ The three components of the building (a worship space, classroom space, and a social hall) could be arranged as a straightforward rectangular building, with the sanctuary on the main floor, the social hall in the basement, and classrooms tucked in on either floor; as a one-story linear arrangement, with all three components on one level; or extended out into a multi-building complex, often arranged around a courtyard. The three components of social hall, classroom space, and worship space with ark, bimah, and eternal light, constitute a distinct synagogue property type that was widely used until World War II.

Another synagogue property type also emerged beginning in the 1920s with the addition of recreational spaces to the already-existing synagogue elements. Commonly referred to as “synagogue centers,” these facilities offered recreational and entertainment programs to augment Jewish education and to strengthen Jewish identity. Initially, the social center was usually located in a separate building near the synagogue, but by the end of World War II, architects and congregations began exploring multi-purpose space and flexible open plans that accommodated all the needs of the congregation within a single building or complex. Synagogue centers were most commonly built in newly-developing post-WWII suburbs, where they offered a mix of religious and secular activities aimed at retaining the Jewish identity of their congregation, particularly its children.⁴²

³⁹ Gruber, 24.

⁴⁰ Kline, 39-43; Gruber, 25-68.

⁴¹ Gruber, 18; Alexander Kline, “The Synagogue in America,” in Blake, 46.

⁴² Wischnitzer, 136-137, 165, 8; Gruber 83.

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Synagogue property types occur less frequently in Wisconsin than houses of worship of other denominations. The Jewish population of the state has always been extremely small, and Wisconsin's population was historically predominantly Roman Catholic and Lutheran, largely due to immigration patterns and ethnicities. In 1950, two years after Congregation Sons of Abraham was built, there were 34,741 Jews in Wisconsin, approximately 1% of the state's total population of 3.4 million.⁴³ Similarly, although the total number of extant synagogues in Wisconsin has not been identified, the Wisconsin Architecture and History Inventory (AHI), an online, publicly-accessible database of historic properties maintained by the Wisconsin State Historic Preservation Office, records 28 synagogues out of 3,293 total houses of worship in the state, making synagogues a relatively rare resource type.

Congregation Sons of Abraham (the subject building of this nomination) is one of these twenty-eight known examples in the state. Although Congregation Sons of Abraham was built after World War II, it represents the earlier synagogue property type, more suitable to its modestly-sized urban lot and its relatively small congregation of thirty-five families. Within its compact footprint, the Congregation Sons of Abraham building incorporates the three "House of Prayer, House of Study, House of Assembly" elements required for a synagogue property type. It retains the original configuration of its sanctuary, with the ark, bimah, and eternal light. It retains its two classrooms in their original configuration. It retains its social hall in its original configuration with attached kitchen and restrooms. The Congregation Sons of Abraham synagogue retains integrity of its character-defining interior spaces and spatial relationships of elements within those spaces. It embodies the distinctive characteristics of a synagogue property type and therefore is eligible for listing in the National Register under *Criterion C*.

The Contemporary Style

Congregation Sons of Abraham is being nominated to the National Register as a good example of the Contemporary style of architecture. The character-defining functional features of the synagogue mirror the principles of the Contemporary style, where a modern form is built from the inside out and expresses the purpose, function, and spirit of the interior in structural forms visible on the exterior.

The Contemporary style is recognized in Wisconsin as one of several architectural styles that rose in popularity after World War II. The style reflected new building materials and building technologies developed in the 1930s and 1940s. The Contemporary style embodied an approach to building design that was guided by the requirements of the specific building, rather than starting with an exterior appearance and then making the interior plan fit within those constraints – a perfect illustration of the Modernist axiom of "form follows function." Architectural historian Virginia Savage McAlester, author of the *Field Guide to American Houses*, observes of the Contemporary style:

⁴³ Ben B. Seligman, "United States: Jewish Population Estimates," in Morris Fine, ed., *American Jewish Year Book*, vol. 52, (New York: American Jewish Committee, 1951), 21.

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Earlier [historical revival] styles were generally defined by the types of decorative detail applied to their exteriors – on doors, windows, porch supports, wall surfaces, dormers, and roof-wall junctions. The Contemporary style rejects this approach and is instead [...] created from the inside out, with the attention not on details visible as one approaches [...] but rather on the functionality of the interior space [...]⁴⁴

Because of its innate flexibility, the Contemporary style was used on nearly every type of building: residences, commercial and industrial buildings, schools, and civic buildings. The Contemporary style was especially popular for houses of worship since it could easily accommodate larger building complexes that often grew to include worship spaces, schools, administrative offices, social halls, and recreational spaces.⁴⁵ Character-defining elements of Contemporary-style houses of worship can include long or rambling one-story plans; flat roofs, sometimes supported on exposed rafters; recessed entrances; broad, uninterrupted wall surfaces; and compositions that contrast the contrast between vertical and horizontal elements.⁴⁶ Natural materials are popular, especially wood, stone, or brick. Contemporary-style houses of worship typically have minimal ornamental details, and when it is present, ornament is often integrated into the overall design in the form of architectural sculpture or panels with text inscriptions.

Congregation Sons of Abraham is an excellent example of the Contemporary style as shown through its plan and massing; its exterior materials; and its minimal, yet carefully chosen, details. The building was planned from the inside out, and its exterior forms are determined by the interior functions. The symmetrical “cubes” on the front of the building are smaller spaces, with lower ceilings, that are placed next to the main circulation space of the vestibule. The sanctuary, at the heart of the building, has a taller ceiling because it is both a larger and a more important space. And the furnace chimney – a necessary but not attractive element – is placed at the rear, on the least visible side of the building. The prominent front entry portal, in addition to providing a vertical contrast on the front elevation, creates a recessed entryway and gives the building a dignified and monumental presence within its residential surroundings.

Windows and entrances are placed on the exterior according to interior functions, and the broad expanses of windowless walls create “restful bare surfaces,” a favorite motif of midcentury synagogue designers.⁴⁷ The golden-colored brick walls, likewise, create a rich, warm texture that emphasizes the inherent nature of the material. Ornamental details on the exterior are limited to the smooth limestone windowsills, small limestone blocks in the brick stringcourses, and the two carved panels in the entry portal. All of these elements come together to illustrate that even a modestly-sized building can embody a fully-realized example of a distinct architectural style. With its functional arrangement of flat-roofed building masses; its broad, uninterrupted wall surfaces; and its minimal ornamentation, the Congregation Sons of Abraham synagogue remains an outstanding example of the Contemporary style.

⁴⁴ McAlester, 630.

⁴⁵ Geva, 29.

⁴⁶ McAlester, 629-630, 632.

⁴⁷ Wischnitzer, 139, 142.

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Comparative Analysis

Congregation Sons of Abraham is being nominated to the National Register under *Criterion C* in the area of Architecture as an example of the Contemporary style and as a synagogue property type.

Synagogue Property Type

There are no comparable synagogues in La Crosse. As noted previously, synagogues remain a relatively rare property type in Wisconsin. The Wisconsin Architecture and History Inventory records 28 synagogues out of 3,293 total houses of worship in the state. Similarly, the statewide directory maintained by the Milwaukee Jewish Federation lists only 36 active synagogues in Wisconsin.⁴⁸ Congregation Sons of Abraham is the only synagogue in La Crosse County. The closest synagogues are located in Eau Claire (Eau Claire County); Rochester (Olmsted County, Minnesota); and Madison (Dane County).

Cultural Resource Management in Wisconsin, the state's guiding document to preservation activities, notes that "very little has been written about Jewish settlement and cultural development in the state" and recommends the identification of synagogues and other related structures as a preservation priority.⁴⁹ To date, only four synagogues in Wisconsin have been individually listed in the National Register of Historic Places: Old Synagogue in Madison (AHI 16103, NR ref. no. 70000030); Temple Beth Israel in Stevens Point (AHI 27631, NR ref. no. 07000101); Temple Zion in Appleton (AHI 42667, NR ref. no. 78000123); and Congregation Beth Israel in Milwaukee (AHI 29082, NR ref. 920000107).

All of these are nineteenth-century buildings. Madison's Old Synagogue has been moved; Temple Zion in Appleton has been extensively altered; and Congregation Beth Israel in Milwaukee was converted to a Baptist church in the 1960s. Of the four NRHP-listed synagogues, Temple Beth Israel retains the best integrity of its interior character-defining spaces, although it no longer serves as a house of worship. Congregation Sons of Abraham retains equal integrity to the character-defining features of the NRHP-listed Temple Beth Israel.

The Contemporary Style

Congregation Sons of Israel is also being nominated as a good example of the Contemporary style. There are six other post-WWII houses of worship in La Crosse recorded in AHI. All six of these are Christian churches, and all of them were constructed after Congregation Sons of Israel, making the synagogue the earliest example in La Crosse of a "modernistic" style religious building. Congregation Sons of Abraham retains equal or better integrity than all the examples except one. The First Congregational Church (designed by the same architects as Congregation Sons of Abraham) can be considered a slightly more intact example of the Contemporary style since it retains its original sanctuary windows.

St. Joseph the Workman Cathedral
530 Main St., AHI 33133

⁴⁸ Milwaukee Jewish Federation, *A Guide to Jewish Wisconsin 5768 / 2025-2026*, accessed from: <https://www.milwaukeejewish.org/communityguide/>.

⁴⁹ Wyatt, Religion.

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Edward Schulte, architect, completed 1962

St. Thomas More Catholic Church

2000 Weston St., AHI 33785

Hackner, Schroeder, Roslansky & Associates, architects, built 1961

St. Joseph the Workman Cathedral and St. Thomas More Church are both classified as Art Deco in AHI. St. Joseph the Workman's prominent tower incorporates the step-backs typically associated with Art Deco, and its dramatic interior represents a transitional style that merges elements of Art Deco and Late Gothic Revival. St. Thomas More is teardrop-shaped in plan with an Art Deco tower. Neither of these churches are considered comparable in style to Congregation Sons of Abraham.

St. Paul's Lutheran Church

420 West Ave. S., AHI 80210

Edward Sovik, architect; built 1956

St. Paul's Lutheran Church consists of a tall, shallow-pitched gable-roofed sanctuary and an adjoining 2 ½ story educational wing which forms a C-shape around a central courtyard. The church has the ubiquitous broad expanses of bare wall; here they are clad in rough Lannon stone and smooth Kasota limestone, which contrast with sections of panelized window walls. The church closed in 2019 and the building no longer serves as a house of worship. Congregation Sons of Abraham retains equal integrity to St. Paul's.

Seventh Day Adventist Church

2117 La Crosse St., AHI 238856

architect unidentified, built c. 1960

The Seventh Day Adventist Church has a shallow-pitched gabled roof with deep overhangs and exposed beams. The exterior is clad in broad expanses of Lannon stone alternating with a panelized window wall assembly with alternating bands of glass and solid panels. The church represents a different, and later, phase of the Contemporary style than Congregation Sons of Abraham. Both buildings display relatively similar numbers of character-defining features, and the synagogue retains equal integrity to the Seventh Day Adventist Church.

First Congregational Church

2503 Main St., AHI 247174

Boyum, Schubert & Sorenson, architects; built 1955

The First Congregational Church is the most comparable to Congregation Sons of Abraham as an example of the Contemporary style, perhaps because both buildings were designed by the same architectural firm. First Congregational was completed seven years after Congregation Sons of Abraham, and like the synagogue, it has a flat-roofed cubic massing, a tall, deeply-set entry portal, and broad expanses of uninterrupted wall. First Congregational Church is significantly larger than the synagogue and incorporates three distinct building wings within a large complex.

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Congregation Sons of Abraham retains comparable integrity to the exterior materials, workmanship, and cubic composition of the church; however, this Christian church retains slightly better integrity than the synagogue since it retains its original large windows in the sanctuary.

First Baptist Church of La Crosse

1209 Main St., AHI 247371

Harry Schroeder, architect; built 1962

First Baptist Church has a shallow-pitched gabled roof, a combination of smooth limestone and panelized brick cladding, and vertical slit windows. The overall building complex incorporates three distinct building masses in a rambling, asymmetrical plan. Congregation Sons of Abraham retains equal integrity to First Baptist, although the finer proportions, balanced composition, and the quality of its masonry workmanship make the synagogue a better example of the Contemporary style.

Concluding Significance Statement

The Congregation Sons of Abraham was the first “modernistic” religious building in La Crosse when it was completed in 1948, and its functional plan, flat-roofed cubic massing, broad expanses of wall, and minimal ornamentation make it an outstanding local example of the Contemporary style. Congregation Sons of Abraham also retains the distinct character-defining elements associated with Jewish synagogues, including the sanctuary with its ark, bimah, eternal light, and seating; classroom space; and a social hall, making it a good and intact example of a distinctive property type. Synagogues are a comparatively rare property type in Wisconsin, and the fact that the building has remained in continuous use by its original congregation adds to its significance as a house of prayer, a house of study, and a house of assembly. Its Contemporary-style architectural design and its distinct property typology make the Congregation Sons of Abraham synagogue worthy of inclusion in the National Register of Historic Places.

Land Acknowledgement (will be reviewed by the Office of the State Archaeologist)

This nomination recognizes the depth of human presence here, the ancestral homeland of American Indians for millennia. From as early as the seventeenth century, Euro-American exploration and settlement, military campaigns, and government programs, all had the effect of repeated displacement of Indians of many tribal affiliations. This continuous tribal movement resulted in Wisconsin being home to many tribes who originated from other parts of the country, generating a pattern of immigration, relocation, and formation of a new homeland. Some of these tribes remain in Wisconsin but others may not. We acknowledge that the property that is the subject of this nomination is located on land long occupied by American Indians.

Archaeological Potential (will be drafted and reviewed by the Office of the State Archaeologist)

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Preservation Activities

The Congregation Sons of Abraham was evaluated for the NRHP during a survey of La Crosse conducted in 1984, at which time the property was less than fifty years of age. Eligibility was reaffirmed prior to the writing of this nomination. This nomination is being funded by the City of La Crosse as a Heritage Preservation initiative.

END OF STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE DO NOT DELETE

DRAFT

Congregation Sons of Abraham
Name of Property

La Crosse County, Wisconsin
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9. Major Bibliographical References

Previous documentation on file (NPS):

- preliminary determination of individual listing (36 CFR 67) has been requested
 previously listed in the National Register
 previously determined eligible by the National Register
 designated a National Historic Landmark
 recorded by Historic American Buildings Survey # _____
 recorded by Historic American Engineering Record # _____
 recorded by Historic American Landscape Survey # _____

Primary location of additional data:

- State Historic Preservation Office
 Other State agency
 Federal agency
 Local government
 University
 Other
Name of repository: University of Wisconsin-La Crosse Murphy Library Archives

Wisconsin Architecture and History Inventory # and/or Archaeological Site Inventory #:

AHI 33259

Bibliography (Cite the books, articles, and other sources used in preparing this form.)

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- “Anti-Jewish Acts Spread From West Europe To Australia, US.” *La Crosse Tribune*, Jan. 4, 1960.
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Congregation Sons of Abraham

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Congregation Sons of Abraham

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END OF BIBLIOGRAPHY DO NOT DELETE

10. Geographical Data

Acreeage of Property: less than one

UTM References

Datum (indicated on USGS map):

NAD 1927 or NAD 1983

1. Zone:	<u>15N</u>	Easting:	<u>642461</u>	Northing:	<u>4852448</u>
2. Zone:	<u> </u>	Easting:	<u> </u>	Northing:	<u> </u>
3. Zone:	<u> </u>	Easting:	<u> </u>	Northing:	<u> </u>
4. Zone:	<u> </u>	Easting:	<u> </u>	Northing:	<u> </u>

Verbal Boundary Description (Describe the boundaries of the property.)

The boundary of the Congregation Sons of Abraham synagogue consists of a roughly rectangular shape that coincides with the current legal parcel, described as Hosley's Addition, Block 4, Lots 2, 3, and 11.

The boundary can be described as follows: beginning at the northwest corner of the property, the boundary runs east for approximately 100 feet. The boundary then turns and runs south for 194 feet. The boundary then turns and runs west for 114 feet. The boundary then turns and runs slightly northeast for approximately 195 feet to return to the point of origin.

Boundary Justification (Explain why the boundaries were selected.)

The boundary has been delineated to include the property's one contributing building and to provide an appropriate landscape buffer around the resource. The boundary coincides with the property's existing legal tax parcel. The boundary is visually defined by the edge of sidewalk on the north (Main Street). There are no visual landscape markers to define the boundary on the east, south, or west sides.

END OF GEOGRAPHIC DATA DO NOT DELETE

Congregation Sons of Abraham
Name of Property

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11. Form Prepared By

name/title: Justin Miller, Architectural Historian
organization: University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee Cultural Resource Management
street & number: P.O. Box 3413
city or town: Milwaukee State: WI zip code: 53201
Email: jcmill@uwm.edu
Telephone: 414-229-3078

Additional Documentation

Figure Log

Figure 1. UTM map

Figure 2. Sketch map

Figure 3. Photo key (interior photo locations not shown on key for security reasons)

Figure 4. Historic exterior photo, circa 1948. From *Architecture and Design*, vol. XII no. 8 (August 1948)

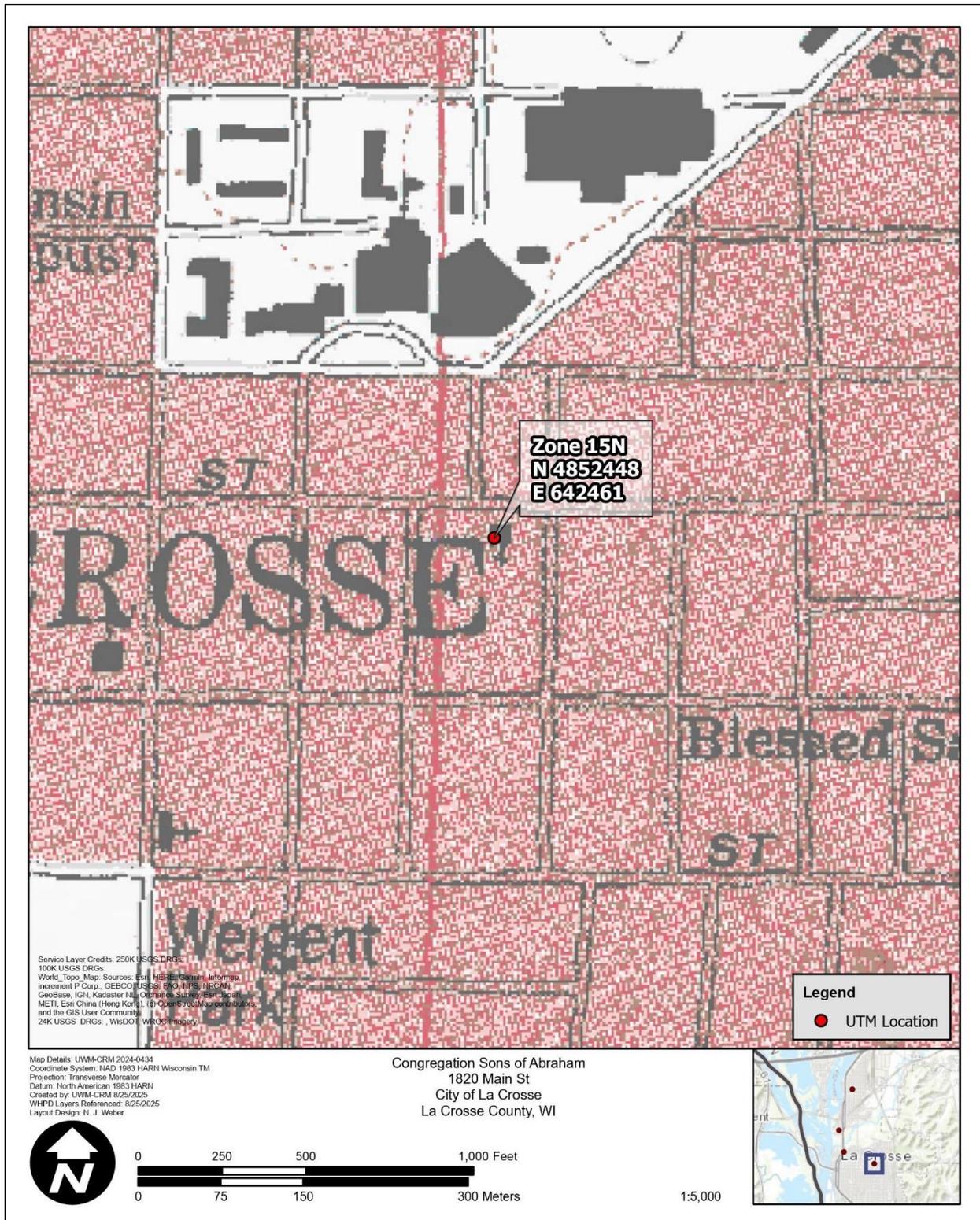
Figure 5. Historic interior photo of vestibule, circa 1948. From *Dedication of the New Sons of Abraham Synagogue, La Crosse, Wisconsin* (courtesy of University of Wisconsin-La Crosse Murphy Library Special Collections and Archives)

Figure 6. Historic interior photo of sanctuary, circa 1948. From *Dedication of the New Sons of Abraham Synagogue, La Crosse, Wisconsin* (courtesy of University of Wisconsin-La Crosse Murphy Library Special Collections and Archives)

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Figure 1. UTM map



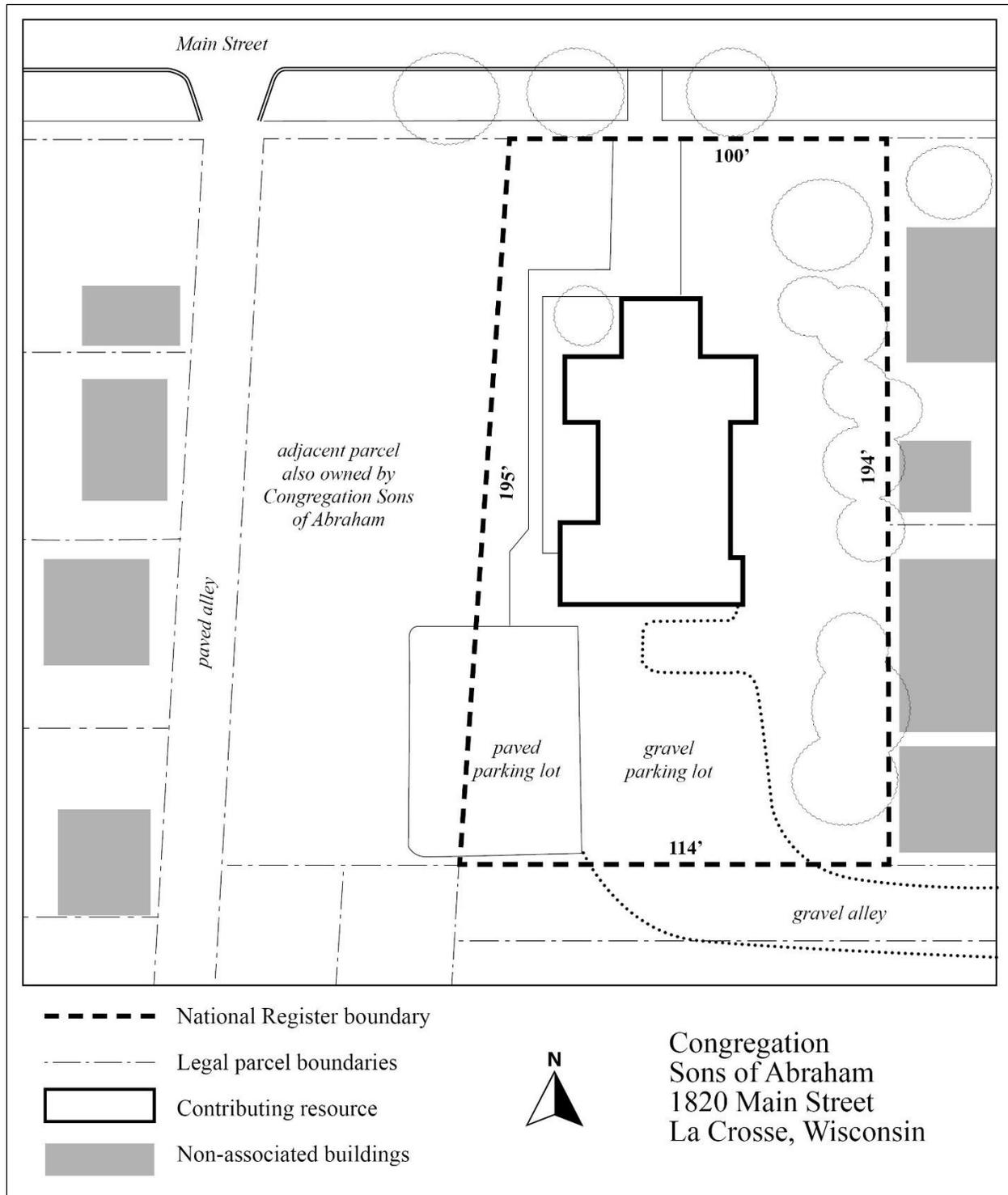
Congregation Sons of Abraham

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Figure 2. Sketch map



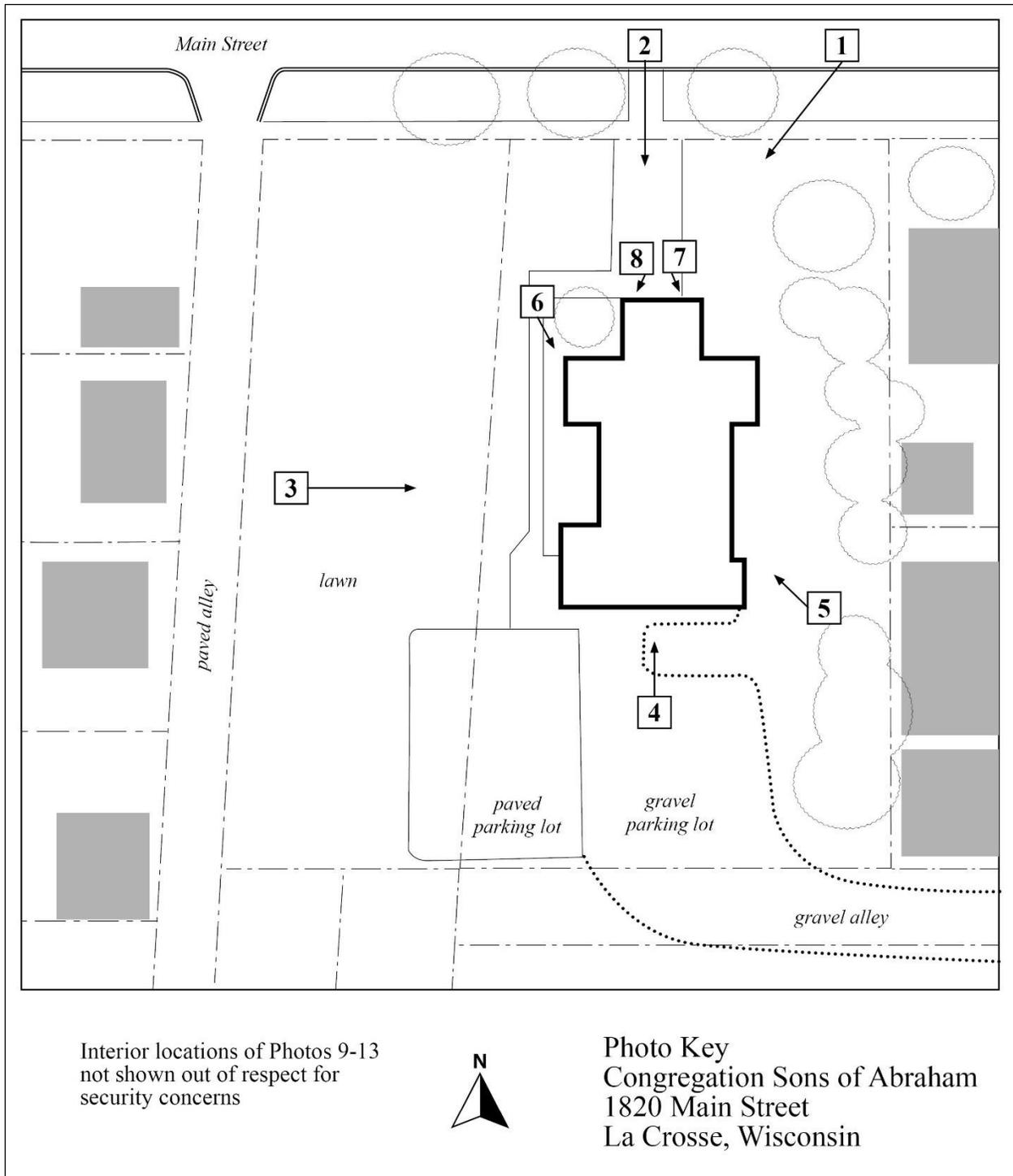
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Figure 4. Historic exterior photo, circa 1948. From *Architecture and Design*, vol. XII no. 8 (August 1948)



SYNAGOGUE, LA CROSSE, WIS.

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Figure 5. Historic interior photo of vestibule, circa 1948. From *Dedication of the New Sons of Abraham Synagogue, La Crosse, Wisconsin* (courtesy of University of Wisconsin-La Crosse Murphy Library Special Collections and Archives)



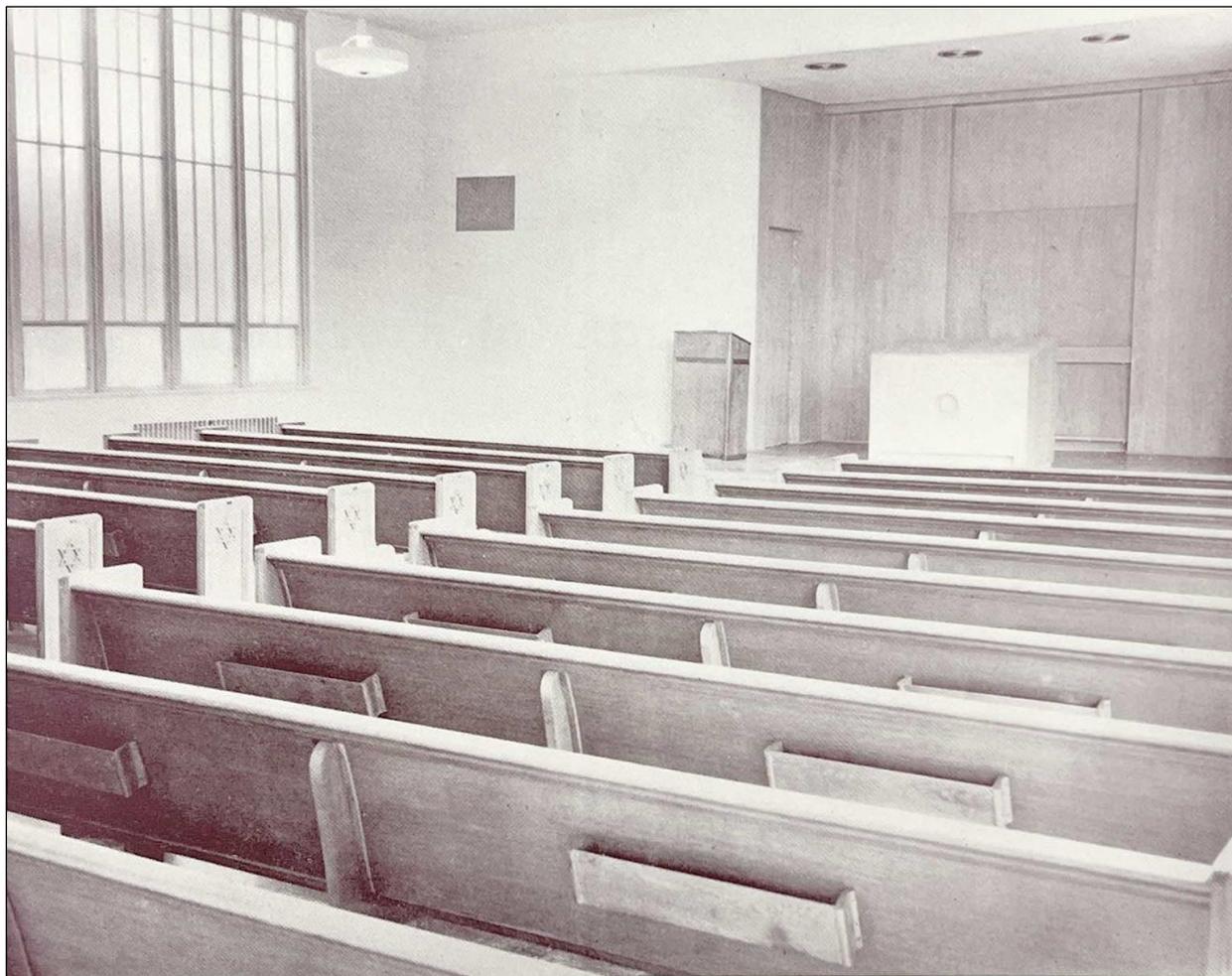
Congregation Sons of Abraham

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Figure 6. Historic interior photo of sanctuary, circa 1948. From *Dedication of the New Sons of Abraham Synagogue, La Crosse, Wisconsin* (courtesy of University of Wisconsin-La Crosse Murphy Library Special Collections and Archives)



END OF FIGURES SECTION DO NOT DELETE

Congregation Sons of Abraham
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Photographs

Submit clear and descriptive photographs. The size of each image must be 1600x1200 pixels (minimum), 3000x2000 preferred, at 300 ppi (pixels per inch) or larger. Key all photographs to the sketch map. For simplicity, the name of the photographer, photo date, etc. may be listed once in the photograph log. The photograph order must correspond with the photograph log.

Photo Log

Name of Property: Congregation Sons of Abraham
City or Vicinity: La Crosse
County: La Crosse County State: WI
Photographer: Justin Miller, UW-Milwaukee Cultural Resource Management
Date photographed: August 19-20, 2025 (photos 1-8); December 18, 2025 (photos 9-13)

Description of Photograph(s) and number, include description of view indicating direction of camera:

Photo 1 of 13. Overview of north (primary) elevation, looking southwest

Photo 2 of 13. North elevation, looking west

Photo 3 of 13. West elevation, looking east

Photo 4 of 13. South (rear) elevation, looking north

Photo 5 of 13. South and east elevations, looking northwest

Photo 6 of 13. Detail of cornerstone, looking southeast

Photo 7 of 13. Detail of panel in east wall of entry portal

Photo 8 of 13. Detail of panel in west wall of entry portal

Photo 9 of 13. Interior, detail of ark curtain

Photo 10 of 13. Interior, detail of ark (closed)

Photo 11 of 13. Interior, detail of ark (open) and Torah scrolls

Photo 12 of 13. Interior, detail of typical interior door

Photo 13 of 13. Interior, detail of bifold glass doors; Yahrzeit board visible at left

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Paperwork Reduction Act Statement: This information is being collected for nominations to the National Register of Historic Places to nominate properties for listing or determine eligibility for listing, to list properties, and to amend existing listings. Response to this request is required to obtain a benefit in accordance with the National Historic Preservation Act, as amended (16 U.S.C. 460 et seq.). We may not conduct or sponsor and you are not required to respond to a collection of information unless it displays a currently valid OMB control number.

Estimated Burden Statement: Public reporting burden for each response using this form is estimated to be between the Tier 1 and Tier 4 levels with the estimate of the time for each tier as follows:

- Tier 1 – 60-100 hours
- Tier 2 – 120 hours
- Tier 3 – 230 hours
- Tier 4 – 280 hours

The above estimates include time for reviewing instructions, gathering and maintaining data, and preparing and transmitting nominations. Send comments regarding these estimates or any other aspect of the requirement(s) to the Service Information Collection Clearance Officer, National Park Service, 1201 Oakridge Drive Fort Collins, CO 80525.

Congregation Sons of Abraham
 Name of Property

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Property Owner

Complete this item at the request of SHPO or FPO.)

name/title	Adam Reich, Congregation President			date	Dec. 19, 2025
organization	Congregation Sons of Abraham			phone	608-784-2708
street & number	1820 Main Street			zip code	54623
city or town	La Crosse	state	WI		

If there are other interested parties that should be noticed, please provide in the tables below

name/title	Tim Acklin, Deputy Director, Planning and Development			date	Dec. 19, 2025
organization	City of La Crosse			phone	608-789-7391
street & number	400 La Crosse St.			zip code	54623
city or town	La Crosse	state	WI		

name/title	_____			date	_____
organization	_____			phone	_____
street & number	_____			zip code	_____
city or town	_____	state	WI		

name/title	_____			date	_____
organization	_____			phone	_____
street & number	_____			zip code	_____
city or town	_____	state	WI		

