
MAIN STAY

by MINDY FRIDDLE

It's vacant now. An elegiac, stubborn building, shrugging off the Virginia creeper scaling its shady side. On my daily neighborhood walks in the Heritage Historic District on North Main, I find myself being drawn to it.

Perhaps it's the majestic silver dome—now peeling—and the tiled Stars of David that still grace its entryway, but the history of the place is hard to ignore. It was, after, all, Greenville's first synagogue. It was built with one million bricks. Included on the lower level was a *mikvah*, a bathing pool for ritual cleansing, that is there still, as is a chandelier with a chain, originally lowered to light candles.

The Beth Israel congregation formed in 1910 with 25 families who worshipped at various rented places before constructing the synagogue in 1929. Greenville's Jewish population had been increasing since the turn of the twentieth century, and most of the members of Beth Israel owned retail stores located on Main Street in downtown Greenville. By 1947, at a time when Jews were excluded from the Greenville Country Club and the Poinsett Club, the synagogue had grown to 300 members, including Max Heller, who was elected mayor of Greenville in 1971. According to newspaper clippings from the era, during World War II, Beth Israel Synagogue sponsored a servicemen's center, and the American actor Zero Mostel is said to have performed at one of the synagogue's USO shows.

Beth Israel's congregation transitioned from orthodox to conservative practices in the late 1940s, and in 1957 purchased land on Summit Drive for a new synagogue. Grace Evangelical Methodist Church moved into the Townes Street location next and held services there until 1964, when a cooperative of labor unions took up residence. A 1968 city directory lists local union offices for carpenters, electrical workers, plumbers, steamfitters, and Teamsters who provided aid and relief to workers for 13 years. Occasionally, there were bread lines. In 1978, the building was sold to the Faith Tabernacle Apostolic Temple.

A decade later, David Crosby opened his photography studio there, Crosby Stills. Crosby found the building had suffered various indignities. Leaks had been ignored, literally papered over, and stained glass removed. Faith Tabernacle had replaced most of the windows with red Plexiglass. "It gave you an awful headache," Crosby says. "Everything was red inside." The *mikvah* had been fashioned into a makeshift baptismal pool, he says, with a system of rigged heating coils that was downright dangerous. "It was a wonder no one had been electrocuted."

But there were happy surprises, too. He found a dozen, small tin menorahs in a closet, the Hebrew still legible under the rust. The dome, once a majestic centerpiece in the auditorium, had been boarded up from the inside, blocking out light, which Crosby uncovered. "Right after the real-estate closing, the first thing I did when I owned the building was knock out the panels to see the dome. I couldn't wait to see that dome." He and a friend built an intricate covering of 12 hand-painted panels over the dome that could retract and open like flower petals with a system of pulleys and a commercial garage opener. People stopped

by often, he says, wanting a look inside, including Max and Trude Heller, and, once, a group of children from the Beth Israel Synagogue on Summit Drive. Crosby renovated the place twice in the 17 years he owned it, constructing an apartment on the lower level in which he lived for a short while, and later rented out. "We had gallery openings, parties. It was a great, great time," he says with a pensive sigh. He reluctantly sold the building in 2004. The new owner put the property up for sale several years ago.

Mark Bergstrom, restaurant consultant and a culinary chef and instructor, is smitten with the old synagogue and nearly rescued it last fall. A Charleston native who now makes Greenville his home, Bergstrom "fell in love" with Greenville and says the old synagogue is "a great historical building." Last year, Bergstrom's company, Feast or Famine, spent considerable time and resources recruiting an investor and assembling an elaborate plan of tax credits and loans to restore the building and transform it into a wine bar and restaurant called the Madeline, "a paring of eclectic wine and food grown from local farms." The plan would have spent more than 6 million dollars restoring the building to original historical standards, he says, replacing copper and stained glass, and uncovering oak floors and plaster walls, as well as installing energy efficient heat and air, and solar panels. "That building has a great feel. You just can't buy that feel," he says. "There's not enough historical landmarks like this in Greenville." Bergstrom had the building rezoned to Office District, the "least invasive," he says, with a special exception added for a restaurant with indoor and outdoor seating.

Unfortunately, the plan didn't clear all hurdles by January 1, when laws changed and tax credits disappeared, and the deal fell apart. Bergstrom says the current owner hasn't sold the property, and it has been in foreclosure since February. It's likely the bank will soon auction off the building to the highest bidder, and without historical protection the old synagogue could even be torn down. "I'm heartbroken about it," Bergstrom says. "It's perfect for a combined restaurant and historical landmark. I really think that's the best fit for the structure and the neighborhood."

Mike Mecklenburg, president of Colonel Elias Earle Historic District Association (CEEHDA) and active with Friends of Stone Avenue, laments such a historical gem is vulnerable to being demolished. "We don't have the laws here to protect historical buildings. In fact, we have no local landmark law." The old synagogue, he says, "has such a great history, but it has a very cloudy future."

Surely a city that has drawn accolades from all over the country and beyond for its lively, gorgeous downtown—a rediscovered waterfall, an elegantly restored Westin Poinsett Hotel, a newly

erected Mayor Max Heller sculpture in Legacy Plaza—will save the old synagogue on Townes Street. I have faith Greenville will see how crucial it is to preserve this vulnerable landmark. Meanwhile, it wouldn't hurt to pray for a miracle.

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