In the seven years since its inception, the Jewish Community Legacy Project has touched more than 50 communities. There are now an estimated 100 additional communities that meet the criteria to benefit from engaging with JCLP. According to those who have, plans facilitated by JCLP help navigate the unique challenges such communities face as the only Jewish communal organization in their small-town America locations.

JCLP is the connector for those that can share knowledge and insight. Please reach out if you or anyone you know might benefit from the assistance of the JCLP network of helpful organizations. We are here to listen, to guide, and to help small Jewish communities shape their own legacies.

This edition of The Legacy highlights an example of such a location that was once off the map, and also addresses a topic of concern for many communities when they first acknowledge a need to plan for the future.

Sincerely,

David Sarnat

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No Longer a Secret

Oak Ridge, Tennessee, was originally established in 1942 as one of the clandestine production sites for the government initiative to develop nuclear weapons during World War II that was known as the Manhattan Project. Jews were a presence in Oak Ridge from the very beginning, with many scientists and engineers moving in to work on the Project.

To this day, the small city built on what had been isolated farming land approximately 25 miles from Knoxville is celebrated as the "Secret City" because its existence was classified until two years after the conclusion of World War II when civilian leadership took over from the U.S. Atomic Energy Commission.
Among the first Jewish residents of Oak Ridge was William Bernstein, an army physician and the recognized founder of the Jewish Congregation of Oak Ridge (JCOR). When security fences around the area came down in 1949, the Jewish Congregation of Oak Ridge was one of the first religious organizations to acquire land for its new structure.

Since all who moved to Oak Ridge came from somewhere else, an especially close-knit Jewish community evolved. The warmth and inclusiveness that characterizes the small congregation today began in those early years. “Everyone in that synagogue was like a mother or father to me,” recalled Ronnie Bogard in an interview at the Center for Oak Ridge Oral History.

Throughout subsequent decades, in addition to receiving awards and national recognition for outstanding achievement in scientific and engineering endeavors, especially as they contributed to the development of nuclear technology, Oak Ridge Jews also played a vital part in the commercial and cultural life of the community. They helped create local art, music, and theatrical institutions. During the turbulent 1960s, Oak Ridge Jews championed civil rights and were advocates of interreligious and interracial cooperation.

Businessman Mel Sturm—an early and still integral member of JCOR who, among his many accomplishments, established a scholarship fund for Oak Ridge high school students—was recently the honored recipient of a Rotary Club of Oak Ridge Award recognizing extraordinary vocational service.

Oak Ridge today has less than half the population it did at its peak, and that change in demographics has taken a toll on JCOR as well since programs and funding of the National Laboratory by the Department of Energy directly affect the congregation’s membership.

"Given the general situation in Oak Ridge and our own aging community, we’ve known for a while that we must address the future,” says Al Good, chair of JCOR’s legacy committee. “Richard Klein of Jewish Federation of North America’s Network of Independent Communities introduced us to the Jewish Community Legacy Project and, from Noah Levine’s first visit with the board, we understood that engagement with JCLP would be a gentle guide into how to proceed.”

A JCLP plan includes an assessment of a community’s financial, material and intangible assets along with recommendations and introductions to helpful entities. Five oral histories of Jewish Oak Ridge residents have already been recorded, and key historical documents have been transferred to collections of both the regional Knoxville Jewish Archives and JCLP national partner American Jewish Archives.

"It’s gratifying for us to know that JCOR is acting responsibly towards what may eventually come. At the same time we are observing holidays and planning new events and renovating our sukkah and taking part in all of the activities that continue to keep the Jewish Congregation of Oak Ridge a very special place,” Al Good added.

For additional information, please contact Noah Levine at (678) 429-8895 or by email: l_noah@bellsouth.com
Consider the Cemeteries

JCLP regional partners share their knowledge about this and other sensitive subjects through connections facilitated by JCLP. Local partner Jewish Federation of Cincinnati introduced JCLP to David Hoguet, recently retired executive director of Jewish Cemeteries of Cincinnati.

Cemeteries connect us to our customs and beliefs and are visible evidence of deep feeling. While each JCLP community has a unique story and each strives to fulfill the obligation to honor the memory of their own ancestors, concern about the care of existing and historic cemeteries is often among the first issues raised by all communities when legacy plans are considered.

Jewish Cemeteries of Greater Cincinnati (JCGC) is a consortium comprised of 24 of the 27 Jewish cemeteries in that region and was inaugurated in 2008 after a years-long effort to bring all of the Jewish cemeteries under one operational roof. This cemetery management collaboration among Orthodox, Conservative and Reform Judaism—where virtually all the cemeteries in the community are owned and operated by one organization—is unique in the nation.

The history of the Jews in Cincinnati is an extensive and storied one, with the first cemetery, the oldest Jewish cemetery west of the Alleghenies, dating back to 1821. Luminaries of the community including Rabbi Isaac Meyer Wise, Rabbi Alfred Gottschalk, Rabbi Eliezer Silver, and David Urbanski, who was one of the few Jewish soldiers to receive a Congressional Medal of Honor during the Civil War, are buried in cemeteries there.

At the time of JCGC’s inception many of the forming congregations had ceased to exist or had an aging leadership base, a situation familiar to many congregations engaged with or identified as one that could benefit from the services of the Jewish Community Legacy Project.

A study undertaken by Cincinnati community leaders of problems facing functioning cemeteries determined that it was in their mutual best interest to create a new organization to assume responsibility for perpetual care as well as the creation of new cemeteries as necessary to serve the Jewish community’s future needs.

JCLP communities by their nature are not part of an extensive urban/suburban Jewish environment like Cincinnati, but David Hoguet offers lessons earned there and suggestions for what JCLP communities might begin to think about in order to preserve their own heritage.

- Start with who is taking care of the cemetery now and determine if that arrangement could be continued. If not, talk with non-Jewish cemeteries to see if services can be contracted.
- Prepare a financial projection to determine how large an endowment will be needed to take care of the cemetery in perpetuity. If the existing cemetery endowment is not adequate, secure funds to bring it up to this level. If other community assets, such as buildings, are being sold they can be a source of funds.
• Determine if Federation or neighboring Jewish communities with historic ties can take over oversight of whoever is taking care of the cemetery grounds, as well as management of the endowment, or otherwise, can be helpful.
• It may be necessary to go out of the Jewish world to a bank trust department.
• Prepare all agreement after careful deliberation.

Communities can look to the relationship brokered by JCLP between the Jewish Federation of Greensboro and Congregation Ohev Zion of Martinsville, Virginia, as an example of one of David Hoguet’s points. As part of their legacy plan process, congregational leadership realized a number of years ago that they needed to figure out how to manage ongoing care of their historic community’s cemetery. Greensboro Federation now has financial and administrative oversight of the cemetery, an outcome reached after much sensitive discussion. Consultation is ongoing with other Virginia and West Virginia communities in similar situations.

JCLP fosters connections.

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