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United States Department of the Interior National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places Inventory—Namination Form

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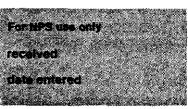
Landmarks Association of St. Louis, Inc.

721 Olive Street, Room 1113

OMB No. 1024-0018 Exp. 10-31-84

United States Department of the Interior National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places Inventory—Nomination Form



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2. Missouri State Historical Survey March 1983	State
Historic Preservation Program Missouri Department of Natural Resources P. O. Box 176	WO (57.00
Jefferson City,	MO 65102

7. Description Condition — excellent — deteriorated — ruins — ruins — fair — unexposed Check one — X original site — moved date — moved date

Describe the present and original (if known) physical appearance

The Romanesque temple B'nai El with its octagonal twin towers is a handsome and compatible accent in the streetscape of red brick houses on Flad Avenue. Except for the loss of the central lantern, the exterior of the temple is little changed since its completion from plans drawn by John L. Wees in 1905. (Photo #1) The corner site, 100 front feet by a depth of 123 feet, was purchased by the congregation in October of 1904 for \$6,500. The building permit of April 13, 1905, projected a construction cost of \$36,000; later reports set the actual cost at \$60,000. The building contractor was Evert P. Maule, Jr.

Above the rough-faced stone foundation, walls of red pressed brick laid in common bond with red mortar present a smooth foil for the crisp detailing of molded brick, rich terra cotta ornament and stone trim. (Photo #2) The entrance portal on Flad Avenue projects between two buttress-like forms with imbricated terra cotta caps. Below a pent roof with cornice of ornamented dentils, brackets, egg and dart molding and corner gargoyles (Photo #3), the three equal arches of the portal spring from spiralled terra cotta columns with stylized composite capitals and ornamented abacus bands. Pressed brick moldings outline the heads of many of the arched openings of the temple and are linked at the entrance by terra cotta cartouches. The stilted, round arch form introduced at the entrance is repeated in the windows, the open arcades of the towers and the corbel tables. (Photo #4) Terra cotta finials crown the towers and gable of the front elevation. finials, somewhat deteriorated, appear at the east and west gables. The original gray slate remains on some roof surfaces; on others, it has been replaced by asphalt shingles. The octagonal, sheet metal base which once elevated the central lantern with domical roof and surmounting star of David is visible in Photo #5.

The drawing of the front elevation published in The Jewish Voice late in 1904³ (Photo #1) documents Wees' original plans to balance the school portion of the structure by parapet gables. Deviations from that design include a hipped roof (Photo #5) and the substitution of rectangular window openings for arched. Only the large window lighting the stairs on the school's west elevation continued the motif established in the temple. Inside the school the rabbi's study and the director's room on the first floor still retain original fireplace mantels and gas grates. Upstairs, the much-altered organ and choir loft looks out into the upper auditorium space of the temple through a maze of wires holding a dropped ceiling. A gallery supported by iron columns is above the vestibule. (Figure #1) Below the temporary ceiling the auditorium floor which originally sloped down toward the rabbi's rostrum and the Ark at the south wall was levelled for use as a gymnasium. Current plans for conversion to housing call for the removal of the dropped ceiling to expose the original coved ceiling which rises from massive arched brackets above four engaged and ornamented columns. Outside, the recent cement stairs and stone-faced embankment will also be removed.

FOOTNOTES

¹John Ludwig Wees (1861-1942) was born in Alsace-Lorraine and educated at Heidelberg. He studied architecture in Paris for a year before emigrating to the

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United States in 1879. He arrived in St. Louis around 1882 and became draftsman for August M. Beinke, a former carpenter who opened an architectural office in 1873. Wees was Beinke's partner from 1890 until he opened his own office in 1894, the year he became a member of the St. Louis Chapter of the American Institute of Architects. Wees' work in St. Louis ranged from prestigious commissions for houses, commercial and institutional buildings to modest stores, flats and houses. Of his major works still standing, the seventy-five thousand dollar, French Renaissance palazzo designed for L. D. Dozier at #10 Westmoreland Place (circa 1896), the eight-story Wohl Building at 1224-26 Washington Avenue (1902) and the Renaissance Revival Lister Building (1904-05) at 4500 Olive Street are particularly noteworthy.

²St. <u>Louis Globe-Democrat</u>, 3 February 1906.

³The Jewish Voice, 9 December 1904.

8. Significance

Period prehistoric 1400–1499 1500–1599 1600–1699 1700–1799 1800–1899 1900–	Areas of Significance—C archeology-prehistoric agriculture X architecture art commerce communications		landscape architecture law literature military music philosophy politics/government	e_X religion science sculpture social/ humanitarian theater transportation other (specify)
Specific dates	1905-06	Builder/Architect John	Ludwig Wees, archite	ect

Statement of Significance (in one paragraph)

The former B'nai El Temple is eligible for inclusion in the National Register of Historic Places under Criteria A and C and is significant in the following areas: ARCHITECTURE: The temple on Flad Avenue, constructed in 1905-06, is significant as the oldest surviving structure built for a Jewish congregation in St. Louis. Rejecting the high style statements popular with contemporary St. Louis Jewish and Christian congregations, the members of B'nai El chose the conservative Romanesque Revival idiom with subdued Byzantine massing designed by architect John L. Wees. RELIGION: The history of B'nai El, formed in 1852 and today the second oldest Jewish congregation in St. Louis, exemplifies the evolution of Judaism in the American "West" from the exotic customs of the immigrants through the progressions of Reform. Dr. Moritz Spitz (the congregation's rabbi at the time of the construction of the temple) was important as editor from 1880 to 1920 of The Jewish Voice, a nationally circulated English-language weekly newspaper.

While a trickle of Jewish traders, peddlers and merchants arrived to settle in St. Louis following the 1803 purchase of the Louisiana Territory, the first recorded Jewish religious observance was not until 1836. The Jewish population of St. Louis was estimated in 1840 to be less than one hundred. Early congregations were formed based on country of origin: United Hebrew Congregation, organized in 1841, conducted services in the Polish tradition; newly arrived settlers in the late 1840s organized the German Emanu-El congregation (1847) and the Bohemian B'nai Brith (1849). Despite efforts to merge all three, the two younger congregations were apparently opposed to the more rigid orthodoxy of United Hebrew and in 1852, joined forces—depleted by cholera and departures for the gold fields of California—and merged their names as B'nai El.²

Reform Judaism, with origins in Germany in the first half of the nineteenth century, called for the reinterpretation of the Torah (Pentateuch) to accord with present realities thus replacing reliance on the elaborate body of Talmudic law to govern the conduct of everyday life. The use of organs and choirs, the introduction of sermons in the vernacular and confirmation services for youth were to replace traditional religious observances. While both pragmatic and theological modifications occurred early, mutually agreed upon reform ideas did not formally link congregations in the United States until after the Civil War when Rabbi Isaac M. Wise of Cincinnati organized the Union of American Hebrew Congregations. Because of the exigencies of life in a new country, the nature of the immigrants themselves and the isolation from trained religious leadership, Jews in America (particularly west of the Alleghenies) "created their own brand of Judaism." The history of B'nai El supports this pattern. The congregation's 1853 constitution indicated the relative liberality of its members. Unlike United Hebrew Congregation which endorsed the laws of orthodox Judaism, B'nai El would "not condemn" or "exclude" anyone for his "religious" or "irreligious" views.4

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Until 1855, the congregation rented rooms for religious services. The building fund, augmented by donations by St. Louis Catholic, Presbyterian and Baptist churches, was dramatically increased by a three thousand dollar bequest which Isidor Bush is given credit for obtaining from philanthropist Judah Touro. Born in Prague in 1822, Bush fled to the United States after pro-revolutionary publishing activities in Vienna. In St. Louis from 1849 until his death in 1898, Bush consistently supported Jewish institutions and helped found both the western branch of the fraternal Independent Order of B'nai Brith and the Jewish Orphanage in Cleveland—a charity aided by congregations and institutions all over America. Bush was politically active as an ardent Pro-Unionist and in post-bellum Missouri was a member of the State constitutional convention. He was a St. Louis Alderman (1866), member of the Board of Education (1881-84) and served on State and local boards constituted to encourage immigration.

A serial history of the congregation published in The Jewish Voice as B'nai El observed its fiftieth anniversary noted the changes which moved the congregation into the Reform position. Many reforms may have been stimulated by the 1869 departure of a "large number of the very best and influential men" (including Isidor Bush) to Shaare Emeth, founded circa 1869 as the first Reform congregation in St. Louis. While the defection may have been the result of residential patterns, The Jewish Voice in 1903 interpreted it as due to the "conservative spirit in religious matters" which "permeated" B'nai El. Although an organ (a Reform innovation) was used at the 1855 dedication of B'nai El's first temple at Sixth and Cerre Streets, women were isolated in an upstairs gallery and men wore hats and prayer shawls.8 Women were permitted to sit with the men at B'nai El following the loss of congregation to Shaare Emeth; other changes came rapidly with the appointment of a new rabbi: Fees paid by parents for religious instruction were eliminated in favor of support by the entire congregation and B'nai El was one of the first five American congregations to support the formation of Rabbi Wise's Union of American Hebrew Congregations. However, in 1872, B'nai El adopted as its prayer book the new Avodet Ysrael published by Benjamin Szold and Marcus Jastrow and characterized as "moderate Reform or protoconservative" rather than Rabbi Wise's Minhag Amerikah. In 1877, it was deemed "proper for Jews to uncover their heads" at B'nai El. 10

Following the southwestward residential movement of its members, the congregation purchased a Presbyterian church building at 11th and Chouteau in 1875 and sold their synagogue to the Episcopalians for use as the Good Samaritan Church for blacks. Rabbi Wolfenstein resigned in 1878 to become Superintendent of the Jewish Orphanage in Cleveland, Ohio. He was replaced by Dr. Mortiz Spitz, B'nai El's rabbi for the next forty-one years. Born in Csaba, Hungary, in 1848, Spitz was the son of a rabbi and was educated at the University of Prague where he also trained for the rabbinate. In America, beginning in 1870, he was rabbi for congregations in Chicago and Milwaukee before coming to St. Louis.

A more active role for women in congregational affairs was promoted early in Dr. Spitz's rabbinate when he organized in 1879 the B'nai El Ladies' Aid Society

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(later the B'nai El Sisterhood) which undertook fund raising for a classroom addition and began a tradition of bazaars and annual Thanksgiving Day Balls. In 1880, Rabbi Spitz was named editor of the St. Louis-published, English-language weekly The Jewish Tribune (begun in 1876) which became The Jewish Free Press and finally The Jewish Voice -- "A Weekly Newspaper Devoted to the Cause of Judaism and of the Jewish People." The Jewish Voice was nationally circulated, particularly in the southwest. It printed local social, cultural and religious news, poems and serialized novels by Jewish writers, articles by guest columnists on Jewish issues, news capsules about world-wide events affecting Jews and Rabbi Spitz's often pungent editorial commentary.

Anti-Semitism became more overt following the Russian pogroms which forced huge numbers of Russian Jews to flee to America beginning in 1881. By 1889, from twelve thousand to fifteen thousand had settled in St. Louis. ¹² The Jewish Voice mirrored the sometimes ambivalent response of the well-established German Reform Jews of St. Louis (whose congregations totalled only about eight hundred in 1905) to the new arrivals who were poor, ill-educated and either loyal to religious orthodoxy or radical and irreligious. Rabbi Spitz editorially supported the many charitable and educational efforts organized and financed by the Reform community but sometimes wrote condescendingly of the newcomers: "It would be an excellent idea for our rabbis to go, each in his turn, to one or the other of our Russian Jewish places of worship and do some work of uplifting." However, he was quick to protest in "Not Even in Russia" the suspension of "hundreds" of Russian Jewish children from Jefferson Public School for being absent to attend holiday observances. ¹⁴

Spitz was watchful for what he considered threats to Judaism from within the St. Louis Reform congregations which by 1886 consisted of B'nai El, United Hebrew, Shaare Emeth and the new and most affluent Temple Israel. He was highly critical of the "St. Louis Jewish minister of a prominent congregation who favors Sunday morning services" and deplored those who left the temples of their parents to join another "with the idea of being raised in the social scale of being able to say, 'I am a member of the circle of wealthy Jewish ladies.'" Near the turn of the century, Rabbi Spitz wrote of B'nai El: "While outwardly this is a radical congregation, the conservative spirit has never left it, and it continues to be Jewish to the core." If

While all the Reform congregations shared mutual problems such as anti-Semitism and the need to provide help for the refugees from eastern Europe, the above statement reflects distinctions which had developed among them. B'nai El, with 150 families and 130 children in religious school, was located on a major thorough-fare in a dense "walking neighborhood" south of the rapidly growing downtown. Continuing their southwestward pattern of residential migration, many members had purchased lots and built houses in Tyler Place -- a subdivision near Tower Grove Park attracting middle-class merchants and professionals with German backgrounds. The other St. Louis Reform congregations, relocated in the more heterogeneous central corridor west of downtown, included the most affluent members of the Jewish community.

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B'nai El purchased two lots on Flad Avenue in Tyler Place in 1904. The cornerstone for the new temple was laid on May 25, 1905, and the building dedicated in February the following year with a membership of almost two hundred families. 17

In the first half of the nineteenth century, those American Jewish congregations which could afford to build their own temples and synagogues tended to employ currently fashionable ecclesiastical styles. B'nai El's 1855 synagogue, the first built in the Mississippi Valley, was independent, however, of known European or American nineteenth century church or synagogue models. It was a picturesque, castellated octagon with Romanesque detailing and a low domed roof. The 1869 temple of Shaare Emeth represented a post-Civil War trend among American Reform congregations (and well established in Germany by mid-century) towards an architecture evocative of the eastern origins of Judaism. The large structure employed minarets, horseshoe arches and a massive semicircular pediment at the front elevation. Restrained Richardsonian style was used for Temple Israel's quarry-faced stone building of 1888. Shaare Emeth's temple of 1897, with dominant corner tower and a central dome, was a more flamboyant manifestation of the Richardsonian idiom with a marked Byzantine component.

Ignoring the Graeco-Roman and classically derived styles nationally fashionable for Jewish temples by the turn of the century, ¹⁹ as well as the asymmetrically massed Christian ecclesiastical styles popular in St. Louis, the B'nai El congregation opted instead for a symmetrical Romanesque Revival building. (Photo #2) Unfortunately, no discussion about the choice of style was recorded. The plans drawn by architect John L. Wees (a non-Jew) emphasized the Roman derivation of Romanesque and Byzantine architecture, rather than the European and American Christian manifestations of the style, through the use of symmetry and the employment of triple-arched entrance portals and window groupings. The rather squat octagonal towers, the breadth of the facade relative to its height and the spiralled columns at the entrance suggest an intent to establish an architectural presence which alluded to Jewish middle-eastern origins.

Rabbi Spitz continued in his dual role as editor of <u>The Jewish Voice</u> and rabbi of B'nai El, preaching sermons in German, until his death in 1920. During his last year when he was Rabbi Emeritus, the congregation's first American-born and trained rabbi, Julian M. Miller, was appointed. Rabbi Miller introduced the Union Prayer Book, which since the turn of the century had been the standard for Reform congregations, replacing the more conservative ritual which had been used at B'nai El for nearly fifty years.

During the 1920s many members of B'nai El moved into the city's west end. A desire to relocate the temple coincided with the Crash of 1929 and the beginning of the Depression. While a search was made for a new building, the temple was shared with the Compton Heights Christian Church. In 1930, B'nai El moved into a church

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at the southeast corner of Delmar and Clara Avenues in the west end and remained there for thirty-five years. Compton Heights Christian Church rented the temple on Flad for fifteen years before B'nai El sold it to St. Margaret's of Scotland Catholic Church in 1944 for use as a parish high school. The school was discontinued after two years and the building was used as a gymnasium and recreation center by the parish until 1969 when it was sold to the St. Louis Board of Education. After six years as the Sherman Branch School, the building was boarded.

All six structures built by Jewish congregations in St. Louis prior to the construction of B'nai El have been demolished and the Flad Avenue temple is one of only a handful from the first decades of the twentieth century. Recently purchased by a neighborhood organization, the former B'nai El Temple is an important presence on the street and a symbol of the Jewish contributions to St. Louis history.

FOOTNOTES

lencyclopaedia Judaica, 16 vols. ([New York]: The Macmillan Company, 1971), 14: 662; and Isidor Bush, "The Jews in St. Louis," <u>Bulletin of the Missouri Historical Society</u> 8 (October 1951): 63. Reprint of 1883 articles.

²Donald Irving Makovsky, "The Origin and Early History of the United Hebrew Congregation of St. Louis, 1841-1859" (M.A. thesis, Washington University, St. Louis, Missouri, 1958), p. 304.

³Max Dimont, <u>The Jews in America</u> (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1978), p. 12. B'nai El was without a rabbi until the 1859 appointment of Rabbi Henry Kuttner.

⁴Encyclopaedia Judaica, 14: 663, and Makovsky, p. 350. United Hebrew congregation joined the Reform ranks by 1878.

⁵Touro, the son of eighteenth century Sephardic leader of the Jewish congregation of Newport, Rhode Island, made a fortune in New Orleans as a commission merchant and left almost a half-million dollars to both Jewish and non-Jewish causes. <u>Encyclopaedia Judaica</u>, 15: 1288-90.

6The Jewish Encyclopdia, 12 vols. (New York: KTAV Publishing House, Inc., [c. 1905]), 3: 442. Bush in 1883 wrote a brief history of early St. Louis Jews, "The Jews in St. Louis," published in The Jewish Voice and reprinted in the Bulletin of the Missouri Historical Society 8 (October 1951): 60-70.

⁷The Jewish Voice, 2 February 1903. The series on B'nai El's history, written by Rabbi Spitz, ran weekly, 18 December 1902 through 20 February 1903.

⁸The first synagogue built in the Mississippi Valley, the domed, octagonal and castellated structure (known as "the coffee mill" -- razed) was a favored subject of engravers.

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⁹Encyclopaedia Judaica, 14: 990-992.

10 The Jewish Voice, 20 February 1903.

11Rabbi Spitz also contributed to Rabbi Wise's weekly, The American Israelite, and his German-language monthly <u>Die Deborah</u>, and in St. Louis edited with another rabbi a monthly, German-language literary supplement, <u>Sulamith</u>. The Jewish <u>Encyclopedia</u>, 2: 259.

¹²The Jewish Voice, 23 September 1898 and 12 October 1898. Jewish population figures are imprecise; census figures do not include religion. While the sizes of congregations are known, not all Jews were members.

13The Jewish Voice, 4 October 1889.

14 The Jewish Voice, 26 May 1899. Rabbi Spitz was also attuned to anti-Semitism of a more intellectual nature. In "Home Grown Anti-Semitism" (22 December 1899), he translated and printed an article from the German-language Westliche Post which compared the "Semitic" unfavorably with the "Arian" views of nature.

¹⁵The Jewish Voice, 19 July 1901.

¹⁶The Jewish Voice, 23 September 1898.

¹⁷Congregation of B'nai El Temple, <u>B'nai El Temple</u> ([St. Louis: Congregation of B'nai El Temple, c. 1970]), unpaged.

¹⁸The unusual octagonal form may have been chosen as an economical means of accomodating the liturgical practices which then included the reading of the Torah from a centrally placed platform. A possible formal prototype in St. Louis was the much larger octagon of McDowell's Medical College completed in 1849 just two blocks west of the synagogue.

¹⁹Rachel Wischnitzer, <u>Synagogue Architecture in the United States</u> (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society of America), pp. 95ff. As early as 1899, <u>The Jewish Voice</u> published a paper read before the American Institute of Architects on discoveries of Graeco-Roman synagogue remains in Galilee which recommended the use of classical styles for contemporary synagogues. <u>The Jewish Voice</u> 22 September 1899. The year after the completion of B'nai El's temple, Temple Israel laid the cornerstone for its new building with colonnaded temple front.

9. Major Bibliog	raphical	Refere	nces	
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organization Landmarks Associ	ation of St.	Louis, Inc.	date 15 March 19	83
street & number 721 Olive Stre	et, Room 1113		telephone (314)	421-6474
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12. State Histor	ic Prese	rvation		ertification
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As the designated State Historic Presence 665), I hereby nominate this property according to the criteria and procedure State Historic Preservation Officer signature.	for inclusion in the res set forth by the	National Registe	r and certify that it h	ct of 1966 (Public Law 89- nas been evaluated
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Keeper of the National Register			date	

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Chief of Registration

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B'NAI EL TEMPLE, ST. LOUIS, MO

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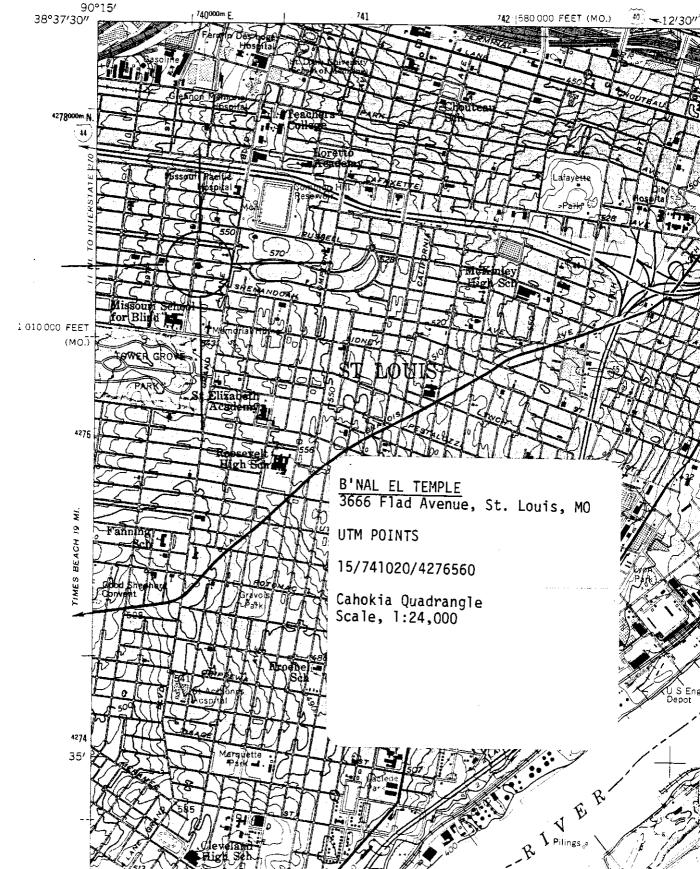
The Modern View, 12 November 1920.

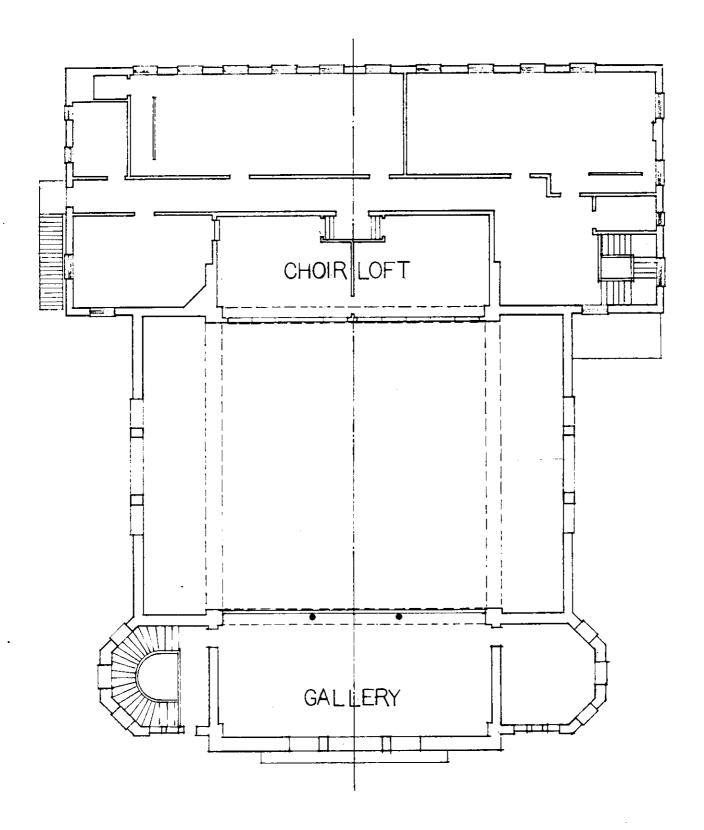
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UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR GEOLOGICAL SURVEY

STATE OF GEOLOGICAL SURVEY





PLAN - 2ND FLOOR



Photo Log:

Name of Property:	B'Nai El Temple
City or Vicinity:	St. Louis [Independent City]
County: St. Louis	[Independent City] State: MO
Photographer:	Hunter Breyer (unless otherwise noted)
Date Photographed:	Dec. 1981 (unless otherwise noted)

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

- 1 of 5. N elevation drawn by J.L. Wees, architect. Photocopy from The <u>Jewish Voice</u>, 9 Dec. 1904. 2 of 5. N (principal) and W elevation, facing SE. 3 of 5. Detail of entrance, N elevation, facing SW.

- 4 of 5. Detail of W elevation, facing N.
- 5 of 5. W elevation of temple and school, facing NE.

