

CURACAO

The Mikweh Israël Synagogue, built 1692, enlarged or rebuilt 1733 by the master-carpenters Pieter Roggenburg and Hendrik Schielagh.

Probably soon after 1634, when Curacao was conquered by the Dutch, the first Jews settled on the island. But the first written proof of Jewish settlement dates from 1650, when **Prins Maurits van Oranje Nassau granted permission to 12 Jewish families to settle on Curacao. Their names:** Aboab, **Cardoze**, Chaviz, Henriquez Coutinho, Jesurun, de Leon, Marchena, de Meza, Oliveira, la Parra, pereira, and Touro. The land that they received, at a distance of two miles north of Fort Willemstad, is still known as the "Jewish quarter". In 1654, numerous Jews arrived from Brazil after the Portuguese conquest of the Dutch colony. They arrived with all their possessions, and invested heavily in trade. They could do so easily, as they simply continued their numerous trade relations from Recife. In time, they came to possess the best land and the most beautiful houses. In 1656 the congregation "Mikweh Israel" was founded. In 1692, at Pesach, the beautiful synagogue was inaugurated. In the years 1731-1733 it was enlarged, or maybe completely rebuilt. It is the oldest functioning synagogue of the New World.

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The Jewish community continued to prosper. In 1750 Curacao counted 2000 Jewish inhabitants. The large Curacao community became the "mother community" of the Americas and assisted other communities in the area, mainly in Suriname and St. Eustatius. It also helped to finance the construction of the first synagogues in New York and Newport. The Mikweh Israël Synagogue of the Dutch Portuguese-Israelite congregation stands at the corner of Columbusstraat and Kerkstraat (nowadays called Hanchi de Snoa), and was modelled on the Portuguese synagogue of Amsterdam. It is surrounded by a wall in order to create a precinct isolated from the outside world, as prescribed by Jewish liturgy. The block-shaped building with its plastered walls is divided into sections by heavy pilasters and cornices. Arched windows run all the way around the exterior. The main front is divided into three distinct zones, crowned by an undulating gable line. This threefold division corresponds to the interior, which is a tripartite hall with wooden vaulting. Within the rectangular area are four freestanding columns supporting the barrel vault. The women's gallery, which is reached by steep staircases, rests on smaller columns. The finest part of the furnishings is the Hechal (Bema), containing the chests with the Scrolls of the Law. It dates from 1709, and was built to the Dutch model but in a local idiom. The four brass chandeliers, each with three rows of arms for the glass-encased candleholders, came from Amsterdam. The 17th-century Jewish cemetery "Beth Haim" at Blenheim is one of the oldest in the New World. Unfortunately, it has been seriously damaged by smoke from the oil refinery.

sources: