

# History of Mt. Carmel Cemetery

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*NOTE: Much of the following information came from an article by David Mayer Gradwohl and Hanna Rosenberg Gradwohl published in "Persistence and Flexibility: Anthropological Perspectives on the American Jewish Experience" by Walter P. Zenner, February 1, 2012, SUNY Press. More often than not, material is copied word-for-word.*

## Background:

Since biblical times and, indeed, farther back according to archaeological evidence, gravestones have been one way of marking the burial places and honoring the memory of the deceased. In their form and manner of embellishment, gravestones are material symbols of personal identities. Cemeteries thus provide a basis for studying not only cultural traditions through time, but also the manner in which individuals identify themselves within the group of which they are members.

Mount Carmel Cemetery, originally known as Chebra B'nai Jehuda Cemetery, has served as the burial ground for Orthodox and Conservative Jews whose families live in and around Lincoln, Nebraska. Historically these Jews have been primarily affiliated with the Tifereth Israel Synagogue in Lincoln, although the Mount Carmel Cemetery Association is a separate legal entity and the graveyard is available to any Jew who is a member of that Association, regardless of other affiliations.

Some of what follows in terms of statistics is based on an August 1985 study. Current figures can be found by looking at the Records section of our site. On the date of the survey, Mt. Carmel Cemetery had a total inventory of 857 stones (grave markers).

## History:

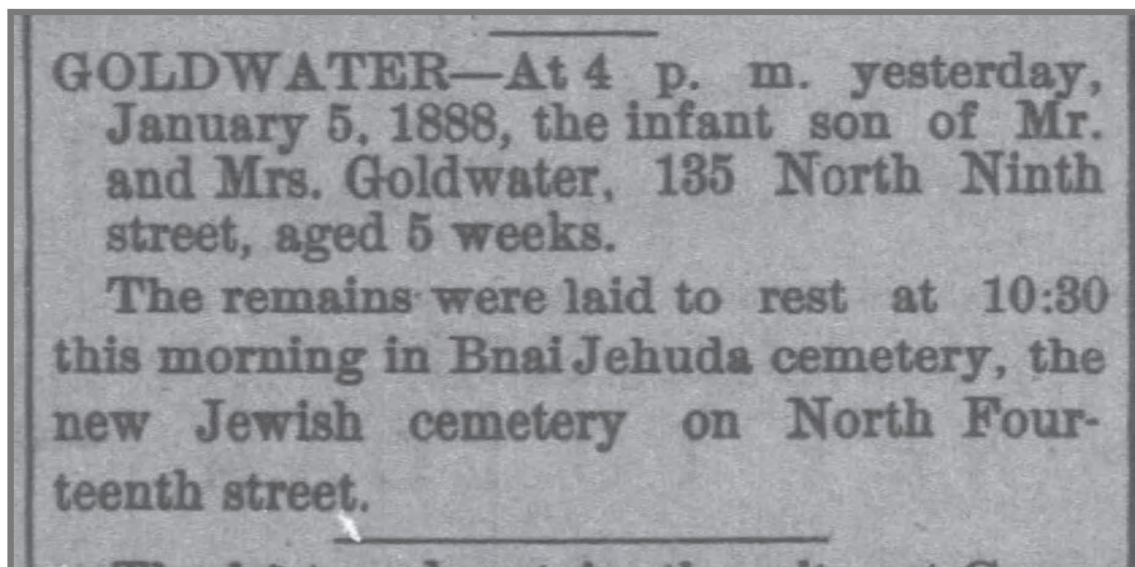
The first Jewish cemetery in North America was established in 1656 by the Dutch Sephardic Jews in what is now New York City.

The Nebraska Territory was created in 1854 and a year later the territorial capital was established in Omaha. Nebraska statehood was ratified in 1867. The capital was then moved to the town of Lancaster which was subsequently renamed Lincoln. Prior to the 1860's, with the exception of California during the era of the Gold Rush, most Jewish citizens had settled in the eastern United States. After that time, however, Jews started to settle in communities located in what are now the Midwestern and western

states of America. During Nebraska's Territorial days in the late 1850's and early 1860's, for example, some Jewish traders were among the inhabitants of Omaha. Settlement of the area by Jewish families increased following the admission of Nebraska as a state. Although the history of Jews in Nebraska has not yet been fully documented, it is known that during the 1870's and 1880's members of the Jewish faith established themselves in several cities and larger towns and were primarily engaged in business and commercial enterprises.

Available sources conflict as to the time of earliest Jewish pioneers in Lincoln. It is known, however, that Jewish people had indeed settled in Lincoln prior to the 1880's, and most probably as early as the late 1860's. According to available information, these citizens of Jewish faith held religious services in private homes. Historical sources indicate that two separate congregations were formed during the 1880's: Congregation B'nai Jeshurun was incorporated in 1884 and Tifereth Israel Congregation was established in 1885. B'nai Jeshurun, also known today as the South Street Temple was founded on the principles of Reform Judaism. In contrast, the original members of Tifereth Israel were essentially Orthodox although the synagogue soon came to incorporate Conservative as well as Orthodox Judaism. During the 1880's the Nebraska state legislature deeded lots to congregations of various religious denominations in an attempt to encourage the construction of houses of worship in the state's capital city. In 1885, two lots on the northwest corner of 12th and D Streets were deeded to Congregation B'nai Jeshurun and they constructed their first temple in 1893. Tifereth Israel Congregation build a synagogue at 13th and T streets in 1903.

The earliest identified Jewish gravestones in Lincoln date from the late 1880's. Several are contained within the burial ground known today as the Mount Carmel Cemetery. Deeds on file in the Recorder's Office at the Lancaster County Courthouse reveal that on August 17, 1886, the property comprising the cemetery was sold by Grant A. Bush and Mabel A. Bush to S. Polwosky for the sum of \$300. On September 15, 1886, this land was transferred by S. Polwosky and Rachael Polwosky to the Chebra B'nai Jehuda Cemetery Association in consideration of \$350 to cover the cost of the mortgage undertaken in the original land acquisition. The earliest extant gravestone is that of a Mrs. Levy who died in January of 1888. Rachael Polwosky died in 1892; she is interred along with other early burials in the first row of graves facing east onto North 14th Street. The graves of both Mrs. Levy and Mrs. Polwosky can be found in the Records section of this website. An article in the January 6, 1888 issue of the *Lincoln Evening Call*, indicate that the first burial was that of the infant son of Mr. and Mrs. Goldwater on January 5, 1888. However, at this time, we have no record of that burial or of the Goldwater family; we have not found the grave site yet.



Particularly striking when one views the Mount Carmel Cemetery is the fact that it is a carefully enclosed and explicitly Jewish space. The perimeter of the cemetery is bounded by tall pine trees, thick shrubs, and an iron fence. A large entrance arch exhibiting a Star of David and the words, “Mount Carmel Cemetery” demarcates the space as a Jewish burial ground. Two six-pointed stars also embellish the locked gates – a material symbol of the mandate in Deuteronomy (11:20) to abide by the words of the Lord and remember the commandment that “Thou shalt write upon the doorposts of thy house and upon thy gates...” It should be noted in this regard that Hebrew cemeteries have traditionally been referred to as *bet olam*, House of Eternity, and *bet chayim*, meaning House of Life. Within the gates of Mount Carmel Cemetery are buried Lincoln’s Orthodox and Conservative Jews, although this cemetery is a legal corporation separate from Tifereth Israel Synagogue. Restrictions of the cemetery to Jews is manifested in a deed on file at the Lancaster County Court in which a plot is granted by the Chebra B’nai Jehuda Cemetery Association by Louis Orlofsky on January 18, 1901. This deed stipulates that “All internments must be made according to Jewish rites.” The interpretation of Jewish rites by the Association has historically been that for an individual to be buried in this cemetery they must be Jewish and must be a member of the Association. Louis Orlofsky was buried at Mt. Carmel on January 31, 1922. It should be noted that a new section inside the grounds of Mount Carmel Cemetery, surrounded by a

barrier, has been created where non-Jewish family members of Jews who are members of the Association can be buried.

## Interesting Facts:

When the Gradwohl's conducted their study of Mount Carmel Cemetery they made several observations.

*Inside the Mount Carmel Cemetery is a central, tree-lined, road which separates the northern and southern halves of the burial ground. The road curves around the southern perimeter of the cemetery to facilitate vehicular traffic. Initially we had several strong visual impressions standing just inside the central gates and looking into the area of the gravestones. First, there seemed to be a good number of gravestones and the burial area looked somewhat crowded. Second, many of the monuments were red or pink granite. Third, Judaic symbols – writing in Hebrew characters and/or motifs such as the Star of David or menorah – characterized most of the stones.*

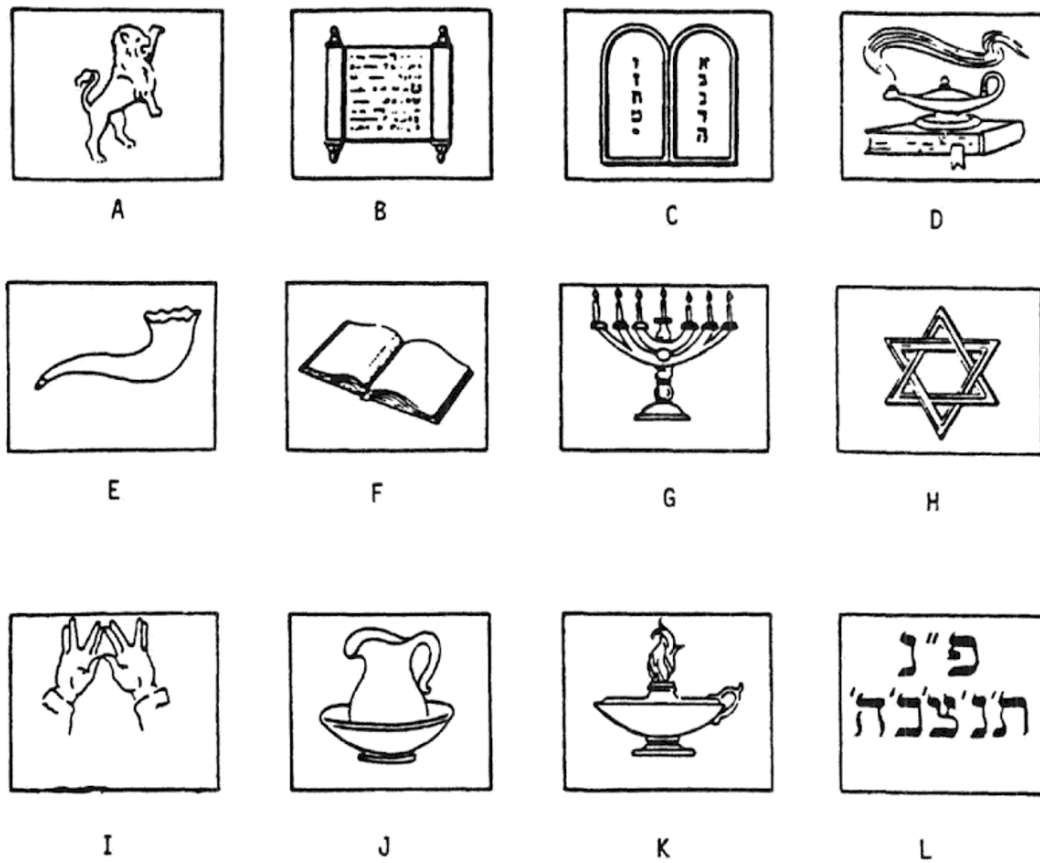
*Analysis of our data collected stone-by-stone, indicates that these initial impressions are correct. Furthermore, there are other significant factors in the database. At the time of our field study there were 537 gravestones at Mount Carmel. The majority (63%) of these are monuments – that is, relatively large stones set perpendicular to the ground surface, while the minority (37%) are markers – relatively small stones set parallel to the ground surface. As in other American cemeteries, monuments can be used as separate memorials to designate the grave of one or more individuals. Monuments also can be used to designate individuals or other social units (families, spousal pairs, siblings, etc.) in conjunction with separate markers which specify the particular graves of the husband, wife, or other kinfolk. As indicated, markers can be used in conjunction with monuments; or they can be employed separately to indicate individual graves. Specifically at Mount Carmel, 46% of the stones are monuments only, 16% are monuments associated with markers, 7% are markers only, and 31% are markers associated with monuments. The forms of gravestones at Mount Carmel reflect those which one would expect to find in late nineteenth and twentieth century cemeteries throughout the United States. Nearly two-thirds of the gravestones are horizontal blocks followed in frequency by vertical blocks or compound vertical-horizontal blocks, wedges, columns or gabled obelisks, tablets, and other forms which include a cylinder, heart-shaped stones, two ledger-like slabs, and two angels carved in the round. In regard to our initial visual impression – beyond the actual number of*

stones – the higher percentage of monuments to markers accentuated the apparent density of graves. In addition, it is interesting to note that the 537 gravestones at Mount Carmel represent 534 people. Of that total, 62.5% of the individuals are represented by monuments only, 6.5% by markers only, and 31% by a combination of monuments and markers. Regarding the materials from which the memorials are manufactured, 47% of the gravestones at Mount Carmel are of red or pink granite.

As would be expected in a cemetery where Orthodox and Conservative Jews are buried, the placement of Hebrew inscriptions and Judaic art motifs on gravestones at Mount Carmel is very frequent. In terms of meeting this need, Lincoln's cemetery monument companies have brochures from which Jewish symbols can be selected. Customers purchasing monuments and markers are thus offered a number of choices in terms of gravestone forms and the kinds of artistic embellishments they wish to be cut into the memorials for their deceased family members. The monument companies also have templates from which Hebrew letters, as well as different styles of English letters, can be put together for the names and vital statistics of the deceased or for epitaphs if such are desired. For the purposes of accuracy, a rabbi or religious leader usually prepares the draft of the templates for the Hebrew inscriptions and then proofreads them before they are cut into the stone. Of the 537 gravestones at Mount Carmel, 72% contain Hebrew inscriptions and/or Judaic symbols. In some instances, individual stone markers may contain no Hebrew lettering or Judaic symbols; rather, those elements are carved into the monument with which the markers are associated. In that perspective, the explicit Judaic identification of individuals buried at Mount Carmel is even more striking. Of the 534 people represented in this cemetery, 91% are associated with Hebrew inscriptions and/or Judaic art symbols.

As indicated above, at Mount Carmel many gravestones contain inscriptions in Hebrew, most often in conjunction with inscriptions in English. Within the total inventory of gravestones, 1% are in Hebrew only; 65.9% in English and Hebrew; 32.7% in English only. 0.2% bilingual in English and in Yiddish with Hebrew characters; and 0.2% which have not yet been inscribed. According to Orthodox tradition, Jewish gravestones contain certain specific information pertaining to the deceased. This information, usually written in Hebrew, includes the full Hebrew name of the deceased, the Hebrew name of his or her father, the date of death (and sometimes the date of birth) according to the Jewish calendar, and – if the deceased was a male, his status as a Kohen, Levite, or Israelite (Kohen and Levite are members of the priesthood in Judaism). Traditionally

there is no reference to a woman's relationship in the priestly castes since membership in the Kohanim and Levites is a male status which is inherited patrilineally. However, the priestly status of a deceased woman's father was usually stated on her gravestone. Generally two additional letters in Hebrew are placed at the top of the inscription. These letters represent an abbreviation of the phrase 'Po Nikaver' meaning "Here is buried" or "Here lies". At the end of the inscription are typically placed five Hebrew letters standing for the phrase 'Tehee nafsh(h) tzerurah bitzor ha-hayim' meaning "May his (her) soul be bound up in the bond of eternal life."



**Figure 4.** Jewish symbols from pamphlet, "How to Choose Your Monument," printed by Rock of Ages Monument Company. (A) Lion of Judah; (B) Torah, Scroll of the Pentateuch; (C) Ten Commandments, Mosaic Decalogue; (D) Bible and Lamp—Light of the Soul; (E) Shofar; (F) Bible, book, knowledge; (G) Menorah; (H) Star of David, shield, divine protection; (I) Kohanim hands raised in priestly benediction; (J) Pitcher and bowl, symbol of the Levites; (K) jahrzeit lamp, remembrance; (L: upper) "Here lies"; (L: lower) "May his/her soul be bound up in the bond of eternal life."

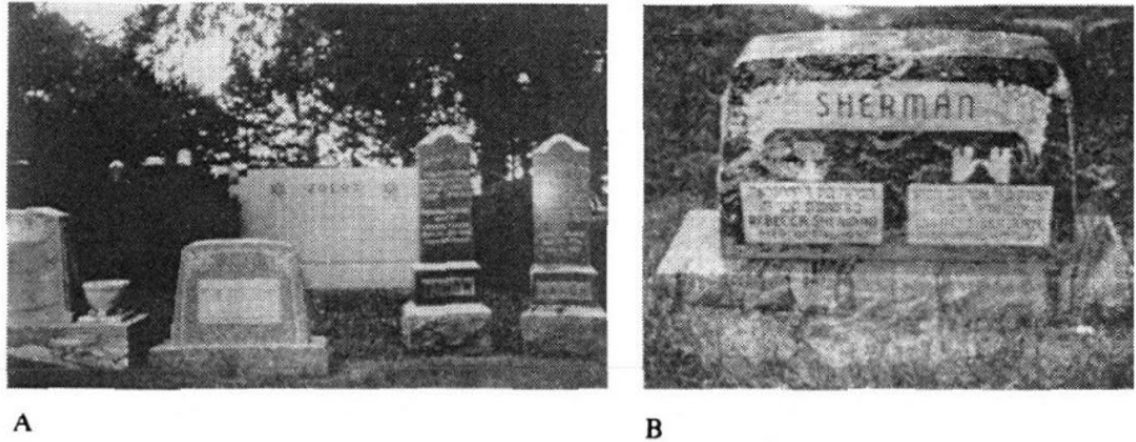
*The above, epigraphic formula is found on the majority of gravestones, both monuments and markers, in the cemetery. Also at Mount Carmel two other formulaic abbreviations in Hebrew are frequent: the first often found at the top of monuments, is translated as "For Eternal Memory"; the other, usually found within the inscription after the name of the deceased, stands for the phrase "May His (Her) Memory Be A Blessing." As is typical of gravestones in Christian cemeteries at the turn of the century, some of Mount Carmel's older monuments contain long epitaphs. Some of these are derived from biblical passages; others extol the virtues of the deceased. Adjectives often employed are: dear, famous, praiseworthy, righteous, modest, pious, generous, simple, upright, and virginous. Other endearing phrases are also present, for example "apple of our eye," and "crown of our head". Titles (Mr. and Mrs.) are used frequently. The term "reb" appears often as an honorific title rather than designating a rabbi per se. In one case, a woman who was indeed the wife of a rabbi, is referred to as a "rebbetsen". Many inscriptions at Mount Carmel include not only the date of death in the Jewish calendar, but also, if appropriate, reference to the fact that the deceased died on the Sabbath, a religious holiday, or the High Holy Days. In addition to the Sabbath, special days so noted on Mount Carmel gravestones include Yom Kippur (Day of Atonement), Succos (Festival of Booths), Pesach (Passover), Shavous (Pentecost/Festival of Weeks), and Rosh Hodesh (the New Moon). Many of the references are even more specific, for example, stating that a person died on "erev (the evening) Rosh Hodesh" or on the "sixth day of Pesach". One epitaph entirely in Hebrew is typical of this pattern we have been discussing. In translation the inscription reads: "Here lies the woman, Esther, the daughter of Isaac, the Kohen, the wife of Abraham J. Bricker, who died in her thirtieth year, the last day of Pesach, 5680" (5680 in the Hebrew calendar or 1920 in the Gregorian calendar).*

*The inscriptions in English are typically brief and limited to the deceased's name, date of birth and death in the Gregorian calendar, and perhaps an affinal (husband or wife) and/or consanguineal (mother, father, daughter, son, grandmother, or grandfather) kinship term. There are cases of three-generational kinship terms – for example, "husband, father, and grandfather". Epitaphs in English are rare and generally short. For example, one inscription reads: "A beloved man who will live forever in the hearts of all who knew him." Interestingly enough, several of the longest epitaphs in English date to the 1960's and 1970's. One monument (representing 0.2% of the inventory of Mount Carmel) refers to the fact the deceased person was born in Mannheim, Germany. Gravestones provided by the U.S. government to former servicemen usually include data pertaining to the deceased's rank, military branch and unit, and period of service or*

*participation in a specific war. There are eight such stones at Mount Carmel; all of them exhibit Stars of David.*

*Artistic embellishments on gravestones at Mount Carmel include the repertoire of non-religious motifs which one can find generally in other cemeteries in Lincoln, and, indeed, throughout the United States. The most frequent design consists of flowers including roses, lilies, daffodils, tulips, and stylized blooms. Oak leaves, ivy leaves, combinations of leaves and flowers, and combinations of leaves and geometric designs are also common. Monograms, banners, urns, fruit (especially grapes), trees and birds are also represented. Single occurrences include a lamb (associated with the stone of a child), snowflake, pinecones, and crossed rifles. The most frequent Judaic symbols at Mount Carmel are the Star of David, menorah or candelabrum, lamp (representing the 'yahrzeit' light or 'ner tamid', the everlasting light), scroll (the Torah or Pentateuch), book (the Bible), and the tablets (the Ten Commandments). Stars of David are typically associated with males while the menorah is correlated with females. Women, it will be recalled, are the kindlers of Sabbath candles. More specific are the insignia of the priestly castes. The symbol of the Kohanim consists of two hands, with the middle fingers parted, raised in priestly benediction. The Levites who traditionally, as temple attendants, washed the hands of the Kohanim prior to religious services, are symbolized by a pitcher or by a 'ewer' and basin. At Mount Carmel there are six monuments with the insignia of the Kohanim and one with the symbol of the Levites. In cases where a single gravestone serves as the monument for a Kohen and his wife, the blessing hands symbol is placed by the husband's inscription while another motif (usually a menorah) decorates the woman's side of the stone. Not all Kohens and Levites at Mount Carmel Cemetery are memorialized by the insignia of their castes.*





**Figure 7.** Selected Gravestones from Mount Carmel Cemetery. Photographs by David  
 A. General View. Note all gravestones with Judaic symbols (Stars of David)  
 B. Gravestone with menorah motif and the symbol of the Kohanim (hands raised)  
 C. Gravestone with pitcher and basin motif (symbol of the Levites).

*In most cases, however, the priestly status of these individuals is indicated within the Hebrew inscriptions on their gravestones. Symbols on two monuments signify two sodalities: a Masonic emblem and the crest of B'nai B'rith (a Jewish organization). Two other monuments which memorialize children contain carvings of angles in the round. Photographs of the deceased are attached to several other monuments in the Mount Carmel Cemetery. While we initially thought this practice would be contrary to the Orthodox tradition which abhors graven images, we have observed the use of photographs on gravestones in a number of Orthodox and Conservative cemeteries throughout the central and eastern United States. Similarly, the presence of small pebbles left on some tombstones at Mount Carmel is a practice we have observed in other Orthodox and Conservative cemeteries in the United States and Europe. This ritual is of long standing in European Jewish cemeteries."*

The leaving of a pebble is in a way the erection of a small, new monument—a tombstone to honor the memory of the dead. Indeed, the custom may have evolved from an ancient method of marking graves. So in one sense, it is simply a way of saying: here lie the remains of a person worth remembering." Rabbi Jeremy Schwartz.

Though some gravesites had small metal markers from the American Legion and other military organizations, beginning in 2018 Mount Carmel Cemetery volunteers placed metal markers denoting service in the military next to the headstones of all veterans.