

Administrative Note

JCCs in the District of Columbia: 1911-2003

The modern day Jewish Community Center of Greater Washington evolved from The Young Men's Hebrew Association (Y.M.H.A.) It was founded on November 10, 1912 by Henry Hirsch, Moe Offenberg, Edward Rosenblum, Benjamin Robin, William Roberts, Percy Stein and other young men between the ages of 18 and 21 as a way to bring men of all Jewish backgrounds together. A Jewish women's group (Y.W.H.A.) was organized by Anne Hornstein a few months later in early 1913. The clubs worked together and separately, organizing sports and musical events, and fundraising for persecuted Eastern European Jews. At the advent of World War I, and with some funding from B'nai B'rith, they opened the first Servicemen's Club in the country for soldiers, Jewish and otherwise, stationed in the District of Columbia.

Starting with 150-200 members in 1912, Y.M.H.A. quickly ballooned to 1,200-1,500 members at the end of the war, in 1919. By 1920 Y.M.H.A. had moved four times, including to 415 M Street, NW, which was later turned into the first local Hebrew Home for the Aged, and 1347 E Street near Pennsylvania Avenue, which served as the Servicemen's Club. With assistance from the national Jewish Welfare Board in New York, which was founded in 1917 to aid Jewish soldiers but focusing after the war on civilian services, the Jews of Washington decided it was time for their own community center.

JWB donated \$50,000 to the project provided the D.C. community could match it. A local fundraising campaign was organized by Morris Cafritz in November 1923, consisting men's and women's teams. The three female "generals" were Elizabeth Kahn, Hannah Lansburgh and Sylvia Lansburgh, alongside eight male "generals" including Morris Garfinkle, Sol Herzog, Maurice Kafka, Hyman Levy, Maurice Narcissenfeld, Joseph Stein, Albert Steinem and Jos Wilner. One of the largest donations came from a group of 25 men who pledged in the spring of 1923 to donate \$100,000.

The building was ultimately constructed at 16 & Q, then within visual distance of the White House. President Coolidge gave an address as the cornerstone was laid down in 1925. The original board of directors included R.H. Behrend, Morris Cafritz, Morris Gerwiz, Fred Gichner, Paul Himmelfarb, Moe Offenberg, Edward Rosenblum, J.B. Shapiro, Abe Shefferman, Louis Spiegler, David Weiner and Joseph Wilner. The JCC was opened to the public in February 1926, featuring vast athletic space, an auditorium, and smaller meeting rooms for a variety of activities. Dances featured music by live orchestras, and the JCC joined Washington sports leagues as well as making its own intramural leagues for men and women's teams. Adas Israel hosted Sunday School classes in the meeting rooms in the 1930s, and in 1942 staff opened a successful city summer camp on the roof for Jewish youth. The JCC added a new wing to the property in 1939 after a donation from *Washington Post* owners Eugene and Agnes Meyer. Members also joined the war effort for World War II, opening the building to all servicemen and organizing volunteering activities for the home front.

As Jews started to move out of downtown by the middle of the 20th century, the JCC decided to sell

the building on 16 & Q. Charles E. Smith, a local developer and philanthropist, played a major role in selecting a plot on Montrose Road and raising the funds for the JCC and two other Jewish organizations looking to relocate to the suburbs in 1969. The other two groups were the Jewish Social Services Agency and the Hebrew Home of Greater Washington, which create a “campus” with the community center. The JCC was renamed the Jewish Community Center of Greater Washington (JCCGW), where it still offers services to the Jewish community today.

A group in Fairfax, Virginia started offering programs for Jews migrating south of the District in the 1970s, originally as the Northern Virginia Extension of the Jewish Community Center of Greater Washington. It ultimately formed into the independent Jewish Community Center of Northern Virginia (JCCNV), which is also still active today.

The original JCC property at 16 & Q was vacant since 1985 after a number of local tenants moved in and out, including Federal City College, the forerunner to the University of the District of Columbia. But the end of the 20th century saw renewed Jewish migration to the city, and a new group of Jews was ultimately able to raise the money to buy the building back from the District in 1990, opening its doors again in 1997. Since that time, the new D.C.-JCC continues to serve the local community with athletic, artistic and educational programming for all ages. The group had a much earlier start, however, and offered programs at their old offices at 2027 Massachusetts Ave, N.W. and around the city since the 1979. The DCJCC was established as an independent agency in 1985.