

# ‘If it’s Jewish, we have it’: Inside D.C.’s new Jewish history museum

*The Capital Jewish Museum, which opened last summer, asks visitors to think about their own place in history. A new exhibit about Oct. 7 makes that task even more urgent*

By [Gabby Deutch](#) February 15, 2024

In the century after the first synagogue in Washington, D.C., was built in 1876, the small building housed many things — various churches, a motorcycle shop and, ironically, a pork barbecue store.

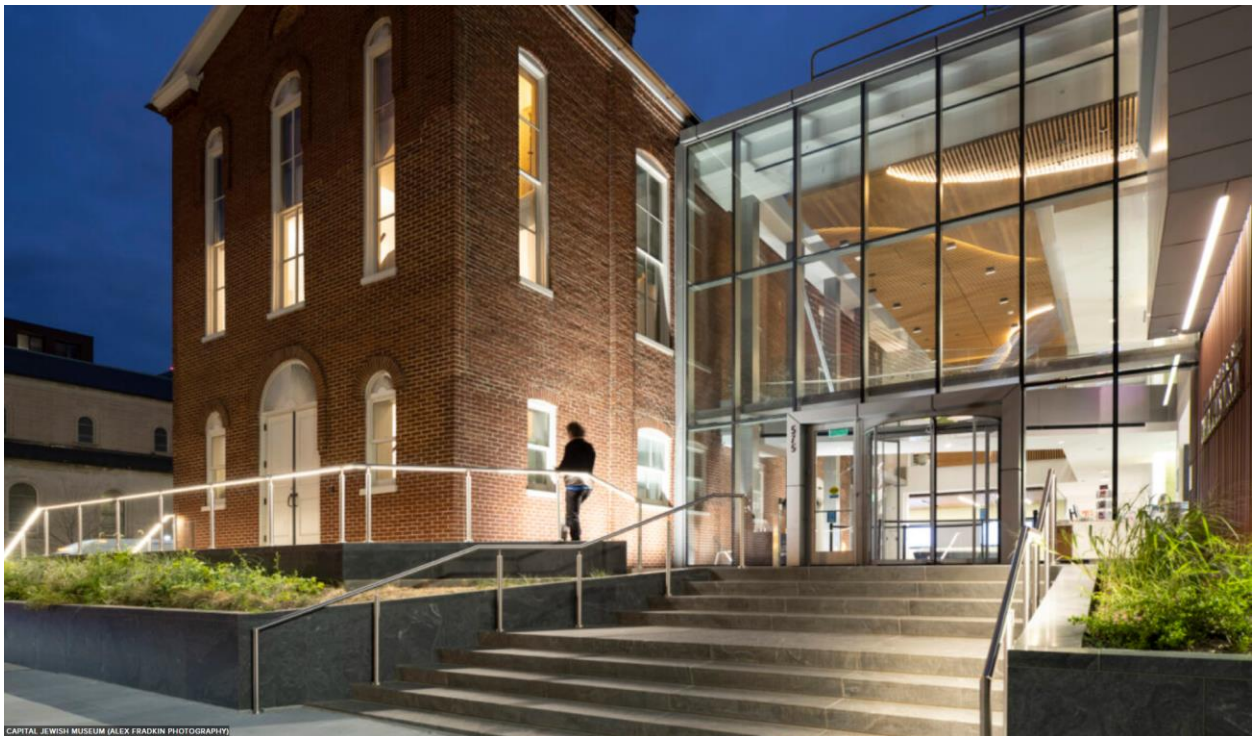
The story of the building, which was the original home of Adas Israel Congregation, is distinctly Washington. The guest of honor at its grand opening was President Ulysses S. Grant. American flags appeared on the *bimah* behind him; what is now a regular feature within U.S.

congregations was then scandalous, an unholy marriage of church and state. Later, when a group of Jewish Washingtonians wanted to purchase the building back in the 1960s for historical preservation purposes, they had to lobby Congress to approve the sale.

Now, for the first time in more than 100 years, that building is again a gathering place for Washington’s Jews. This time, it’s the home of the new Lillian and Albert Small Capital Jewish Museum, the first museum dedicated to examining the history of Jewish life in the nation’s capital and the ways Jews engage with Washington in the present. A small exhibit now on display is one of the first at a Jewish museum to deal with the Oct. 7 terror attacks in Israel and their aftermath in the U.S.

Washington’s Jewish community has largely been ignored by historians and scholars, who have focused on Jews who come through the nation’s capital

for other reasons, like politics. The museum’s curators decided to address both the unique history of how Jews first settled in Washington and what their lives looked like in the nation’s capital, as well as the many ways American Jews have been an integral part of the U.S. political system. The stories are irrevocably linked, according to the Capital Jewish Museum, and worthy of exploration — particularly since Washington is among the top-five largest Jewish communities in the country.



“It’s this massive Jewish community, but there’s never really been a book or any primary sources used to write about its history. It’s always Jewish members of Congress, Jewish members of the Supreme Court. It’s the national story,” said Jonathan Edelman, collections curator at the museum. “We felt this responsibility to not only teach the wider community about our Jewish community, but also to teach the Jewish community about itself.” The museum opened last summer after a yearslong construction process that required moving the building, on wheels, from its prior location a block away, where developers wanted to build a parking lot. Now, the two-story

brick building anchors the 32,000-square-foot museum, with a modern glass structure connected to the original synagogue. It was designed by the same firm that created the National Museum of African American History and Culture; like the many Smithsonian museums in Washington, admission to the Capital Jewish Museum is free.

Visitors are encouraged to think about their place within Washington's history — whether it's racial history (for more than five decades, Washington was the largest majority-Black city in the country), social history (political activism is an undercurrent in each exhibit) or cultural history (like the kosher delis and Jewish bookstores that were once common downtown).

“We're moving away from romanticizing history and just nostalgia to more, like, looking at a fuller picture of the history, and then also sending visitors away with something,” Edelman said, describing the museum's mission: connect, reflect, act.

“The ‘act’ part is really, I think, what sets us apart from, ‘Let's just collect documents and artifacts.’ This is Washington. This is a place where important decisions are made. You can have an impact on these decisions,” said Esther Safran Foer, the museum's president. Safran Foer was previously the CEO at Sixth & I, the pathbreaking downtown synagogue and cultural center that she helped revitalize. (It's an appropriate transition for Safran Foer; Sixth & I was the next home of Adas Israel, after it left the small building that is now home to the Capital Jewish Museum.)

The first floor of the old synagogue building, which used to house a classroom and a *mikveh* (ritual bath), now tells a chronological history of Washington's Jews, beginning in 1790. Upstairs, visitors can sit in the original wooden pews from the synagogue and watch a short film about its history.



At each point, the number of Jews in the region is shown alongside the total population of the District and the size of the District's Black population.

“From 1955 to 2011, D.C. was a majority Black city and the largest majority Black city [in the country],” said Edelman. “D.C. is a very Southern city. It doesn't feel Southern today, as it did back then, but it certainly was, and being white and being Black meant very different things for you in Washington. And that included for the Jewish community.”

Like others who move to the nation's capital, Jews came to Washington to work in the government. That meant wars brought Jewish population booms — first the Civil War, and then both World Wars. Jews faced fewer restrictions when seeking jobs in the federal government than when looking for jobs in fields such as law and medicine.

Many other Jews arrived in Washington to work as merchants, or in family-run businesses. Often, they already had relatives in D.C.

“No Jews literally got off the boat here,” Edelman said, explaining why Washington didn't have the same kind of high-density tenements that were a feature of Jewish life in New York City in the 20th century. “Jews came in from other places, so Jews were in all four quadrants of Washington. There was no one Jewish neighborhood.”

The rest of the museum is more contemporary and interactive, tying the political history of the nation's capital to the city's Jewish story. Fun relics of now-defunct Jewish institutions line the walls. Visitors walk by a bright neon sign that once hung outside an old Jewish bookstore, which declares, "If it's Jewish we have it!"

Museum visitors are greeted with a prompt: "Who is Jewish Washington?" Interactive plush blocks (a plus for young visitors to the museum) show photos of Jewish Washingtonians, ranging from disability rights activist Judith Heumann to Jewish AIDS educator David Green to a local girl who recently celebrated her bat mitzvah, along with more famous Washingtonians such as Supreme Court Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg, who died in 2020. This section is meant to allow visitors to see themselves among the Jewish residents of the city, whether that's a high-powered political official or standard K Street employee. It is also an invitation to non-Jewish visitors to learn more about Washington's diverse Jewish community, and even about Judaism.

"Our hope is that we will be communicating with the larger community," said Safran Foer.

After a group of local social media influencers went on a press tour of the museum last year, "they just were really grateful to see that they didn't feel like they had to come in knowing what it was to be Jewish, or what Judaism has been like," said Maura Scanlon, the museum's communications specialist. "They learned it, but they learned it at the same time as learning the history of D.C. and Virginia and Maryland."

A large permanent exhibit on debate and *tikkun olam* documents Jews who have come to Washington to engage in activism. One wall shows a collection of Jewish political buttons dating back decades (From 2012: "Vote Romney, it's a Mitt-zvah." From 2000: "MOT [member of the tribe] for Gore/Lieberman.") It also highlights moments that Washington's Jewish community played a key role in organizing, such as the original Freedom Seder in 1969 and the Soviet Jewry march in 1987. The museum encourages

action; one interactive wall, for instance, guides people to take steps to support refugees.



On the top floor, in a makeshift exhibit that is filling the space until an exhibit on Jewish delis opens in May, is a ragtag collection of interesting, largely unrelated objects from the museum's permanent collection. In the back of that room is perhaps the most surprising area of the museum: A small section focused on Israel-related activism since Oct. 7.

“It’s just showing people, telling them, ‘You are also living through history,’” said Edelman. He recalled sitting on his phone, “doomscrolling,” a couple days after the Hamas attacks, when he realized he needed to start collecting objects from the protests that were happening. He’s used to showing up at protests and rallies, asking people if he can keep their signs to display in the museum.

A display case showcases posters of Israeli hostages and signs Edelman collected at the November pro-Israel march on the National Mall, as well as material from pro-cease-fire protests organized by Jews. Hanging on the wall is a handmade object made to look like a Torah, created out of cloth banners and PVC pipes, that says “All human life is sacred and precious.” Edelman saw someone holding it at a Rabbis for Ceasefire protest, and he ultimately had to go to Philadelphia to pick it up to bring back to the museum.

The items “reflect the museum’s goals of recognizing and amplifying the wide variety of opinions among D.C.’s Jewish community,” a placard on the wall reads.

But perhaps the most D.C. part of the entire museum is an object that sits near the Oct. 7 exhibit: a double Rolodex, open to the contact cards for iconic *Washington Post* reporter Carl Bernstein and Linda Tripp, a key figure in the Clinton impeachment. It belonged to a former head of the IRS.

“There’s a direct line to the Oval Office. Yasser Arafat was in there. Nora Ephron. It’s completely random, but a very Washington thing,” said Edelman.

“Those people do live here. They work here. They impact the city, but they also impact the country,” Safran Foer said, referring to the Washington big-wigs who call the city home. “That’s one of the things that sets us apart — this city apart and the museum apart.”