



UNDERSTANDING OUR HERITAGE

Women of Reform Judaism Atlantic District

There is background information to share in order to appreciate how the Atlantic District was formed. Under the direction of WRJ President Helene Waranch (2001-2005), WRJ entered into a strategic planning process designed to look critically at WRJ, its strengths and challenges. Current URJ Vice President Amy Asin was the independent consultant who advised the committee. One of the outcomes was a decision to consolidate several districts in order to strengthen the work of the districts and their outreach to local groups. Twelve districts were to be reduced to eight. Additionally, the districts were to be renamed.

In 2005, Rosanne Selfon began her WRJ presidential term (2005-2009) and determined, with Executive Committee approval, that bringing the consolidations to fruition as quickly as possible was a priority. First Vice President Lynn Magid Lazar, charged with oversight of the districts, collaborated with Fredi Bleeker Franks who was responsible for working through the technicalities of consolidation with the districts.

It is noteworthy to acknowledge that the eight new WRJ districts are named according to geographic areas. Hence, Districts 4 and 5 are now WRJ Atlantic District. In 2006 Districts 4 and 5 were the first consolidation to take place, creating the Atlantic District, covering New Jersey, Pennsylvania (excluding Erie), and Steubenville, OH. The tasks of consolidation required writing new by-laws, honoring each district's special awards and traditions, dealing with financial merging, and determining new leadership. These all required patience and perseverance.

Rosanne recalls spending time the same weekend with both districts. District #4 women felt that their district was being overwhelmed - that it was not being honored as an equal partner. District #5 members, caught unaware of the emotions felt by the District #4, vowed to work to honor both districts in the consolidation. Joan Blum was elected first president of the newly-created WRJ Atlantic District.

Meetings within the district are moved throughout the geographic area of the district. WRJ Atlantic generously supports both NFTY PAR and NFTY GER. Our geographic resident overnight camp is URJ Camp Harlam which women visit in the summer and are represented with a seat on the Camp Harlam Council.

The geographic footprint of the Atlantic District expanded in recent years with the addition of Wheeling, WV as they realigned to the Atlantic District in 2011 and expanded again in 2014 with the addition of the sisterhood in Morgantown, WV. In 2012, Steubenville, OH retired from the district as sisterhood members aged. The Atlantic District continues to seek unaffiliated sisterhoods/women's groups and individual members and warmly welcomes all who join this vibrant organization. See the current District board manual for up-to-date membership status of the Atlantic District and the geographic configuration of all WRJ districts.



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What follows is the history of District #4 and District #5 prior to merger:

Women of Reform Judaism District #4

Women of Reform Judaism – District 4 was established in the 1940's. The role of District 4 was to support and foster the sisterhoods in the district through workshops and biennials. District 4 had a proud history of supporting district sisterhoods, Women of Reform Judaism (WRJ) programs and initiatives, Reform Jewish Youth, and the Union for Reform Judaism (URJ). District 4 was a member of the Union for Reform Judaism's New Jersey-West Hudson Valley Council.

District 4's biennials were focused on programs and study sessions that benefited sisterhoods, as well as the individual women of District 4. Leadership Development, Sisterhood Mission Statements, Membership Growth, Programming, Fund Raising, Women's Health Care, Shabbat Worship, and Meaningful Rituals were a few of the workshops offered by District 4 through the years.

District 4 supported the URJ's youth programming with donations to Camp Harlam, and Camp Kutz. District 4 was a continuous supporter of the North American Federation of Temple Youth – Garden Empire Region (NFTY-GER) Summer Mitzvah Corps Program, since Mitzvah Corps began in the 1980's

District 4 supported Women's Health Education, contributed to Breast Cancer Research and to the NJ Religious Coalition for Reproductive Rights.

District 4 supported WRJ's Founders Endowment Fund, the Fund for the Generations, the Speakers Bureau, the YES Fund, the Jewish Braille Institute of America, and the World Union for Progressive Judaism.

Women of Reform Judaism District #5 (formerly The Pennsylvania Federation of Temple Sisterhoods)

The Pennsylvania Federation of Temple Sisterhoods was formed in 1918 to promote the objectives of NFTS (National Federation of Temple Sisterhoods), to bring the various Sisterhoods of Pennsylvania into closer cooperation and association with one another and to further new lines of services.

In 1918, twenty Sisterhoods met in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, to discuss the feasibility of forming an organization of Sisterhoods of the Reform Movement in Pennsylvania. This discussion led to a meeting in 1919 in Philadelphia for the purpose of forming a Federation of (Reform) Sisterhoods in the Commonwealth. Mrs. Ferdinand Dilsheimer was elected temporary President at that meeting and was subsequently elected the first President of the Pennsylvania Federation of Temple Sisterhoods (PFTS) at the first Biennial Assembly in 1921 in Pittsburgh. Since Jewish youth were a primary concern of PFTS, it was logical for them to establish a specific program in this field.



PFTS thus became a pioneer in the movement to sponsor youth groups; with the first youth group, called PAFTY, being founded in Harrisburg in 1937. PAFTY was known, according to Rabbi Samuel Cook, UAHC Director of Youth Activities, "as the child of PFTS."

In Philadelphia, about the time the first Youth Group was organized, Rabbi Cook became the Assistant Rabbi at Temple Keneseth Israel and Rabbi Eugene Sack became the Assistant Rabbi at Temple Rodeph Shalom. In Rabbi Cook's previous position at the University of Alabama, he became interested in the Retreats of the Methodist Church for their youth. Simultaneously, Rabbi Sack was in Topeka, Kansas and had studied similar conclaves held by the Christian youth groups. Both Rabbis were eager to bring this type of program to the Jewish youth of the nation.

Mrs. Gertrude Freedman, President of PFTS during the time of the inception of the Youth Group program, was a tremendous source of encouragement to these pioneering Rabbis, not only as a representative of material assistance which was readily available from PFTS, but also as a guiding spirit and a driving force behind the program. In 1939, Mrs. Freedman was appointed Chairman of the Youth Program for PFTS and led PFTS to appropriate the necessary funds for the first Reform Youth conclave held at Pinemere Camp in the Poconos over Labor Day weekend. The conclave, headed by Rabbis Cook and Sack, was intended to bring Jewish youth together to hear and learn the message of Reform Judaism from experienced Rabbis and teachers.

Publication of the state newsletter, "Keystone Topics", was begun in 1947 during the presidency of Mrs. Carl M. Bachrach. Other important PFTS programs included: Service to the Blind; the promotion of study groups; the encouragement of Temple attendance; the use of religious ceremonial objects in the home, the collection of ceremonial objects for Temple exhibits, Speakers Bureau, etc.

By 1951, there were 29 affiliated Sisterhoods in the Commonwealth. At that time, while Mrs. Daniel Benheim was president, Harrisburg was chosen as the permanent site for Interim Board Meetings. Also in 1951, the dedication of the HOUSE OF LIVING JUDAISM in New York was held. The sisterhoods of Allentown and Wilkes-Barre were the first in the United States to meet their quotas for this project.

In 1957 all Sisterhoods of NFTS were realigned into district federations. Pennsylvania Federation of Temple Sisterhoods became NFTS District #5 - PFTS. In 1963, with the inclusion of the Cherry Hill Sisterhood in New Jersey, NFTS District #5 became the official designation. In 1999, with the addition of four New Jersey sisterhoods, there were a total of 39 affiliated sisterhoods. According to the by-laws of NFTS, Article 31, Section A, "The District Federations, which are subsidiaries of the National Federation of Temple Sisterhoods, shall be constituted as service organizations on behalf of their member units and dedicated to the carrying forward to the program of NFTS."

In 1960, NFTS District #5 - PFTS contributed to the building of the Jeanette Miriam Goldberg Faculty House at Camp Joseph and Betty Harlam. A few years later NFTS District #5 contributed to the kitchen facilities for the Faculty House, presented a Torah, contributed \$8,000.00 for the Teen Camp, and presented the Jewish Encyclopedia to the camp.