

WRJ ATLANTIC DISTRICT HISTORY

UNDERSTANDING OUR HERITAGE

Women of Reform Judaism Atlantic District

In 2006, District #4 and District #5 were merged to form the WRJ Atlantic District, covering New Jersey, Pennsylvania (excluding Erie), and Steubenville, OH. Wheeling, WV was moved to the Atlantic District in 2011. In 2012, Steubenville, OH retired from the district as sisterhood members aged. In 2014, the sisterhood in Morgantown, WV joined the Atlantic district. See page 49 for the current membership status of Atlantic District and all WRJ districts.

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.

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.

A SPECIAL PART OF DISTRICT #5 HISTORY - JEANNETTE MIRIAM GOLDBERG YOUTH FUND

At the 5th Biennial Assembly in York (Mrs. Edgar W. Warner, nee Clarice Lavine, President) in 1929, Rabbi Nathan of Philadelphia, a visually handicapped Rabbi, addressed the Assembly concerning the situation prevalent among the Jewish youth at Penn State College. Jewish boys did not want to have to fulfill the college's mandatory requirement of attendance at religious services by attending Christian services. Rabbi Nathan requested that, PFTS assume the responsibility of correcting the situation and arranging for Reform Rabbis in Pennsylvania to travel to Penn State College to conduct Jewish religious services and deliver religious lectures. The 5th Biennial Assembly voted sufficient funds to pay the traveling expenses of Rabbis living within reasonable proximity of the college and authorized additional funds for equipment and maintenance of a meeting place.

At the 7th Biennial Assembly in Scranton (Mrs. Max Grumbacher, President), Dr. Abram Sacher, National Executive Director of Hillel, was the keynote speaker. Mrs. Grumbacher convinced him of the urgent need for a Hillel Chapter at Penn State College and Dr. Sacher agreed to initiate such a chapter. Hillel at Penn State was established in 1935.

In the interim, Jeannette Miriam Goldberg, an active PFTS member, from Temple Rodeph Shalom Sisterhood, Philadelphia, had passed away. During her lifetime, Miss Goldberg had been greatly concerned with the welfare of Jewish youth. Shortly after her death, while PFTS was looking for a fitting memorial to this dedicated woman, the director of Hillel at Penn State College, related the need for a rotating loan fund for Jewish students, and in 1936 the "Jeannette Miriam Goldberg Fund (JMG)" was established. The fund was to be administered by the Hillel Director in cooperation with the PFTS Chairman of the Jeannette Miriam Goldberg Fund. The use of this fund by Penn State

College students continued until the early 1950's when, according to the Director of Hillel, the need for such a student loan fund was no longer necessary.

At that time, PFTS, voted to channel the fund into the recently established Camp Joseph and Betty Harlam at Kresgeville, Pennsylvania, for the purchase of needed permanent camp equipment. Since then it has been the fund for permanent camp equipment and Pennsylvania Federation of Temple Youth (PAFTY) scholarships. JMG was a special fund and consequently, contributions were not a part of the operating budget of NFTS District #5.

In 1999, the use of the Jeannette Miriam Goldberg Youth Fund was extended to include the youth of NFTY and NFTY-PAR Region.

In 2006, when District 5 merged with District 4 to become the WRJ Atlantic District, the use of the Jeannette Miriam Goldberg Youth Fund was extended to Reform Judaism youth organizations within the entire district.