

Our history: Photo collages bring Jewish history back to life

[Jeff Sues](#), Cincinnati Enquirer Published 12:44 p.m. ET Oct. 10, 2018



(Photo: J. Miles Wolf/Provided)
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It may be difficult to picture now, but once there were several Jewish synagogues in the heart of downtown Cincinnati. These were neighborhood synagogues near where the people lived, mere blocks apart in a densely populated city.

Those long-forgotten places of worship have been brought back to life in the exhibition, “Jewish Cincinnati: A Photographic History” by J. Miles Wolf, opening Oct. 11 at the Skirball Museum at Hebrew Union College–Jewish Institute of Religion in University Heights.

Wolf, a local photographer known for his “Cincinnati Images” books, partnered with Skirball to create the exhibit as part of FotoFocus Biennial 2018.

“It was a little bit of a grandiose idea to show the entirety of Judaism in Cincinnati,” Wolf said.

He spent months researching local Jewish history to create photographic collages with vintage images digitally superimposed over current photographs of the sites, which serves to place them in context.

“The goal was to remember the feeling of what it was like in the day when these were active synagogues and temples,” Wolf said.

The vintage photographs were culled from postcards, synagogue libraries, the American Jewish Archives at HUC and personal collections. People sent in copies of family photos in response to an ad in American Israelite, a weekly Jewish newspaper published in Cincinnati since 1854.

Wolf even managed to slip his own grandmother, Minnie Hoffman, into the image of Ohav Shalom in Avondale.

Of the 18 collage-style images he made, nine of the buildings are gone, five are used as churches, two are used as housing and only two are still active temples, Wolf said.

Since the first Jewish services were held in Cincinnati in 1819, the congregations have grown, split, merged and migrated to where the people lived.



The Moorish-styled Broadway Shul, a synagogue that became the Allen Temple AME Church, was torn down to build the Procter & Gamble Co. headquarters (background). (Photo: J. Miles Wolf/Provided)

For example, K.K. Bene Israel, the first congregation founded in 1824, moved from a Moorish-styled synagogue at Downtown's Sixth and Broadway streets to Mound Street Temple in West End, then became Rockdale Temple in Avondale and finally settled in its current location in Amberley Village.

Among the interesting facts the exhibition uncovers is that the beautiful edifice of Plum Street Temple – built by Rabbi Isaac Mayer Wise, leader of American Reform Judaism and founder of Hebrew Union College – was originally painted gray. The red brick wasn't exposed until the walls were sandblasted in 1969.

Other highlights of the exhibition include:

- Three rare photographs of Cincinnati taken by local photographer Charles Waldack during a visit by the Prince of Wales (the future King Edward VII) in 1860. The photographs are part of the Royal Collection Trust, courtesy of Queen Elizabeth II.
- A door handle from the original Rockdale Temple and a door key from Mound Street Temple.
- The ceremonial key (with the real key on the tip) for the dedication of Plum Street Temple on Aug. 24, 1866.

There will also be a Jewish Cincinnati bus tour on Oct. 14, led by the staff of the Jacob Rader Marcus Center of the American Jewish Archives, that will visit the historical Jewish sites in Downtown and Avondale.

“We’re actually going to be migrating the same way the Jewish people did,” said Abby Schwartz, director of the Skirball Museum.

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What: “Jewish Cincinnati: A Photographic History” by J. Miles Wolf, Skirball Museum, HUC-JIR campus, 3101 Clifton Ave., University Heights.

When: Reception 5:30-8 p.m. Oct. 11; exhibit open 11 a.m. to 4 p.m. Tuesdays and Thursdays and 1-5 p.m. Sundays through Jan. 6.

Cost: Exhibit free.

Bus tour: 10 a.m. to 2 p.m. Sunday. Cost: \$36. Registration required.

Information: jmendelson@huc.edu; 513-487-3098.