

Primary Source: Washington Hebrew Congregation

Charter (1856)

Quote of Note:

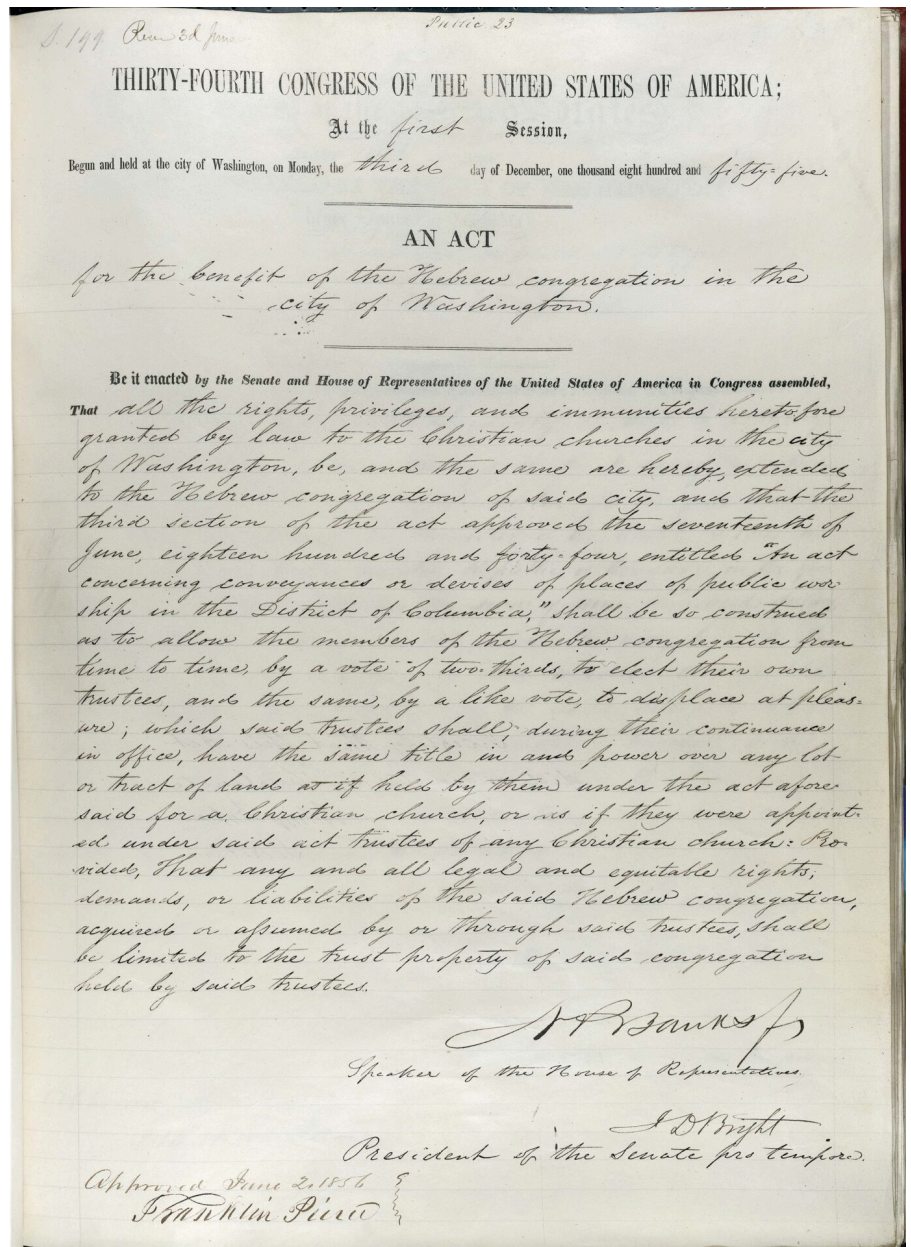
"All the rights, privileges, and immunities heretofore granted by law to the Christian churches in the city of Washington, be, and the same are hereby extended to the Hebrew congregation of said city."

Background:

The first Jewish congregation in Washington DC, Washington Hebrew Congregation, formed in 1852. An 1844 DC law established the right of religious "sects" to own property in the District, but the Congregation's founders feared that this law would only apply to Christian churches. In order to ensure their protection, the founders petitioned the US Congress (DC had no "local" or "state" government). In 1856, Congress issued a charter for Washington Hebrew Congregation to affirm the property rights of DC's Jewish congregations to own houses of worship. It was signed by President Pierce in June 1856. Shortly thereafter, WHC purchased a former Methodist church on 8th and I St NW and converted it into a synagogue.

Themes: religious liberty, civic action, synagogues

Questions: 1. Why might the founders of Washington Hebrew Congregation distrust the protection of the 1844 law?
2. Why might the 1844 law be necessary?
3. What is the significance of this act taking place in the US Congress?



Item Information

Original document is at the National Archives and Records Administration.
Image courtesy of Washington Hebrew Congregation.

Full Text

THIRTY-FOURTH CONGRESS OF THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICAN at the first Session, begun and held at the city of Washington, on Monday, the third day of December, one thousand eight hundred and fifty five.

AN ACT for the benefit of the Hebrew congregation in the city of Washington.

Be it enacted by the Senate and House of Representatives of the United States of America in Congress assembled, that all the rights, privileges, and immunities heretofore granted by law to the Christian churches in the city of Washington, be, and the same are hereby extended to the Hebrew congregation of said city, and that the third section of the act approved the seventeenth of June, eighteen hundred and forty-four, entitled "An act concerning conveyances or devises of places of public worshiped in the District of Columbia," shall be so construed as to allow the members of the Hebrew congregation from time to time, by a vote of two thirds, to elect their own trustees, and the same, by a like vote, to displace at pleasure; which said trustees shall, during their continuance in office, have the same title in and power over any lot or tract of land as if held by them under the act aforesaid a Christian church, or as if they were appointed under said act trustees of any Christian church : Provided, that any and all legal and equitable rights, demands, or liabilities of the said Hebrew congregation, acquired or assumed by or through said trustees, shall be limited to the trust property of said congregation held by said trustees.

NP Banks

Speaker of the House of Representatives

JD Bright

President of the Senate Pro Tempore

approved June 2, 1856

Franklin Pierce

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