

Hagerstown Memorial and Center to Honor ‘Jew Bill’ Legislator

by [Judy Colbert](#) | Oct 4, 2017 | [Local](#), [Maryland](#), [News](#)



As a native of the Free State, Rabbi Ari Plost says he’s never been more proud.

“I’m so proud to see Marylanders coming together — city, county and state, Jewish and non-Jewish, government and private — all working together for a greater purpose,” said Rabbi Plost, spiritual leader of Hagerstown’s historic Congregation B’nai Abraham. “As a son of Maryland, now a rabbi in Maryland, it is awe-inspiring to bear witness to such love, especially during a time of divisiveness.”

Rabbi Plost was referring to the planned creation of a statue, memorial park and learning center in honor of Thomas Kennedy (1776-1832), a member of Maryland’s House of Delegates and State Senate.

The Scottish-born Kennedy, who is buried at Hagerstown’s historic Rose Hill Cemetery, is best known as author and diligent proponent of “The Jew Bill,” which allowed Jews the right to hold public office in Maryland. (He was also a strong opponent of slavery.)

A previous version of the bill had been rejected, largely because of legislators' concerns that it might extend new rights to other groups such as free black men. The final version stipulated that "every citizen of this state professing the Jewish Religion ... appointed to any office or public trust ... [shall] make and subscribe a declaration of his belief in a future state of rewards and punishments, in the stead of the declaration now required."

A devout Presbyterian, Kennedy reportedly never met a Jew throughout his lifetime. Only about 150 Jews lived in Maryland while he worked on his bill, which passed in 1826.

The Thomas Kennedy Park will be located across the street from B'nai Abraham, which is at 53 E. Baltimore Street in downtown Hagerstown. The plaza will be on a site where a pair of blighted buildings were demolished about two years ago.

The small public plaza will feature a bronze figure of Kennedy as well as educational inscriptions about the life, legacy and contributions of the Washington County lawmaker.

The Thomas Kennedy Center will serve as a cultural and educational attraction for visitors from throughout Maryland and beyond. As an educational focal point for students, the center will be a public-private partnership. A nonprofit was established earlier this year to make the memorial and center a reality.

The idea for the statue was conceived by Rabbi Plost and approved by the board and congregation of B'nai Abraham. The Hagerstown City Council recently provided the space for the park and center.

Park and center supporters say they plan to raise the \$350,000 required for the project at the city, county, state and private sector levels. An anonymous seed donor is currently willing to match up to \$50,000 in donations.



Washington County artist Antonio Tobias Mendez will create the sculpture of Thomas Kennedy, author of the “Jew Bill.” (Photo Provided)

Antonio Tobias Mendez, a Washington County native and resident and internationally known artist, was selected as the sculptor for the Kennedy project. Among Mendez’s local works are statues of the late Supreme Court Justice Thurgood Marshall on the grounds of the Maryland State House in Annapolis and six Hall of Fame Orioles baseball players at Oriole Park at Camden Yards.

The grand opening for the Kennedy park and center is tentatively scheduled for July 4, 2018. Private donors can purchase bricks for \$500 or pavers engraved with two or three lines of text at \$500. Sponsorships go up to \$25,000.

Tom Riford, executive director of the planned Thomas Kennedy Center, said he feels the memorial for Kennedy is long overdue.

“He believed in the removal of religious prejudice as both an embodiment of his Christian character and his patriotism as an American,” Riford said. “As a courageous symbol of fighting anti-Semitism as a greater cause of liberty, he maintains worldwide recognition. Among the Jewish community, he is an ongoing source of prideful appreciation, not only throughout Hagerstown but across Maryland and internationally.”

The purpose of the statue and park, said Riford, is to teach “how [Kennedy’s] legacy applies today, regardless of differences that might exist among us in religion, color, gender, race and nationality.”

At B’nai Abraham, a Reform congregation of approximately 127 families founded in 1892, Rabbi Plost said there is a broad consensus of support for the Kennedy park and center, as well as “in the Jewish community across Maryland. He’s an important figure for Maryland Jewish history.

“There’s a reason we say two Jews, three opinions,” he said. “It’s important that despite our differences of opinion, we are bound together to challenge anti-Semitism and to offer how proud we are as Americans to live in a country of liberty where our religious freedoms are protected. Thomas Kennedy’s fight for full religious equality for Jews is a reminder of our collective need for vigilance against anti-Semitism — even in America.”

For information, contact Tom Riford at tom@thomaskennedycenter.org.

A Glen Burnie-based freelance writer, Judy Colbert is author of “100 Things to Do in Baltimore Before You Die” (Reedy Press).

Top Photo: Thomas Kennedy, 19th-century Washington County lawmaker and author of the “Jew Bill.” (Public Domain)