

## *Jewish Houses in Colonial America*

Jews in the colonies tended to live in four different kinds of houses: Merchant houses, Plantation (or Country) houses, Rabbi's houses, and Urban villas.



Merchant houses: usually located in the center of town or near the wharves. Contained both work and living spaces. Examples: Penha House (Curaçao), Lopez-Rivera House (Leicester, MA), Gomez Mill House (Marlboro, NY).



Plantation or Country houses: usually located out of town on large tracts of land. Examples: *landhuizen* (Curaçao), Plantation houses (Jodensavanne, Suriname), Country Houses outside of Amsterdam.



Rabbi's houses: usually located in the Synagogue compound along with the synagogue, school, and ritual bath. Examples: Rabbi's House (Curaçao), Rabbi's House (Paramaribo, Suriname), Rabbi's House (Barbados).



Urban villas: Found later in the colonial era. These houses were in town but farther from the commercial center. They provided some of the sense of nature found on plantations and in country houses, often through gardens or enclosed patios. Examples: Jewish Houses in Scharloo (Curaçao), Pinto House (Amsterdam).



## WEATHER

Houses are meant to shelter us from the out-of-doors. Thus, they often reflect local weather. Houses in New England are built for the long, cold winters. Colonists there used to stuff the walls with reeds and grasses to help insulate them. Houses in the Caribbean were built to help keep out the summer heat. Their walls were sometimes over a foot thick to keep the house cool. In places where there was very little water, houses had special gutters that collected rainwater to be reused. Islands with hurricanes sometimes had houses with special roofs or windows to help keep the

houses together during violent storms. What is the weather like where you live? How hot does it get? How cold? Is there a lot of rain? What features does your house have to make it a better place to live given your local weather?

What differences do you notice between these two houses? How are they similar? What kind of weather do you think was typical where these houses were built? Why?



## MATERIALS

Houses also reflect what materials were available. There were lots of very large trees in Suriname and near Newport, so many houses were built out of wood. There were very few trees on the desert island of Curaçao, but there was lots of coral. Many of the walls of older houses in Curaçao were built out of coral and then covered with plaster to make them smooth. Unfortunately the salt in the coral ate away the plaster and the houses decayed from the inside out. Today this problem is called “wall cancer” but it is from salt, not a disease!

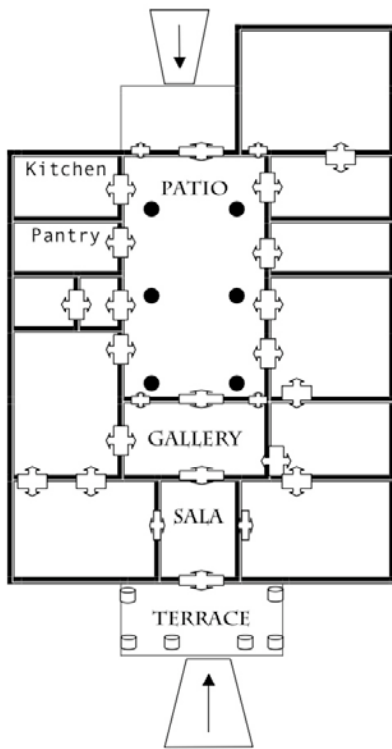


Above is a beautiful old house in Curaçao in the old Jewish neighborhood of Scharloo that has wall cancer. You can see they are replacing the coral with cement blocks. Once it is finished it will look more like this exquisite house down the street:



What was used to build your house? Why do you think that material was chosen?

## FLOOR PLANS



The layout of a house can reflect either the weather or the way a family wants to use it. Plantation houses in early Curaçao often had a “gallery” around the main part of the house that provided a place open to the island breezes. Later houses in Scharloo (Right) had only a small gallery, but were built around a patio which had an enclosed garden. All of the rooms opened onto the garden to allow the breeze to flow through the house. The patio was a great place for people to sit in the shade during hot summer days.

This open-air was a great design for a hot place, but it would have been very cold during the winter in New York or Newport! Houses there tended to be built around a central fireplace that often was so roomy you could actually sit inside it. The fireplace was a wonderful place to keep warm in the winter and women would sit there to spin wool and do their housework.

This is the front room of the Gomez Mill House in upstate New York. Later a kitchen was added, but early on, cooking would have been done here at the main fireplace.

What is the main place people hang out in your house? Why?

Draw a floor plan of your house. What are its most important features?





## WHAT MAKES A HOUSE JEWISH?

Are Jewish houses any different than other houses? What makes a house Jewish? Here are some photos from an old Jewish plantation house in Curaçao that is now a museum. What items do you notice in the house? What values do the objects suggest? Do any possibly reflect the family's sense of Jewishness?



Draw a picture of a room in your own house and make a list of things that you think reflect your family's sense of what it means to be Jewish.