



## Season 6, Episode 9: Connecticut Farmhouse

Elyse Luray: Our next story investigates a Connecticut farmhouse with an unsettled past. As the 20<sup>th</sup> century dawns, America cities are industrializing and growing at an explosive rate. They are being filled by a tidal wave of immigrants from Europe and native born Americans who are abandoning their family farms for the opportunity and better wages of the industrial revolution. More than a hundred years later, Chris Remy of East Haddam, Connecticut believes his home may somehow be connected to this dramatic period in America past.

Chris: I would like to know a little bit more about the history of my house; who were the people that lived here?

Elyse: What a great house.

Chris: Thank you.

Elyse: So how long have you owned it?

Chris: We bought the house six years ago, it's five acres part of what was originally a 60 acre farm. This is the map from when it was subdivided back in the 70's... and here's our five-acre plot right here.

Elyse: What sparked your interest in doing research?

Chris: Well I knew the house was built in 1804, obviously, when I bought it, so I wanted to research what I could find out. Who built it? When? And who has lived here?

Elyse: What did you find out?

Chris: Well, I found out that around the turn of the last century, that the property seemed to change hands a lot of times, every year, every two years for a good 15 to 20 years and they seemed to have Russian and Eastern European names.

Elyse: Well what specifically do you want me to find out?

Chris: I'd like to know who these people were and what they were they doing here. And why did the property change hands so many times in such a short time frame?

Elyse: Do you have anything else for me to go on?



Chris: Well, when I was doing some remodeling on the house, inside the walls I found this old wallpaper, on the other side is newspaper with Hebrew characters. And at the top of this page you can see it's the Jewish Morning Journal.

Elyse: All right. Well I'm going to go walk outside to take a look around, and then I guess I'm off to the town hall.

Chris: Okay.

Elyse: I'm especially interested in this story. My own family arrived from Eastern Europe and settled in New York City and Baltimore, Maryland three generations ago. But it's not clear why so many Eastern European immigrants – if that's what they were – rotated through this farmhouse at the turn of the century. My first stop is the town hall. There are land deeds here going back two centuries. Before I scour these bound records, I want to learn more about the old newspapers from inside the walls of the house. The Jewish Morning Journal was apparently an ultra-orthodox newspaper that started printing in the United States in New York City in 1902. Listen to this, the paper wasn't written in Hebrew, it was actually written in Yiddish. Yiddish is written with Hebrew characters, but it is different. It's derived from the German language. There's probably only a quarter of a million people in the United States today that speak Yiddish, including my grandmother. I know from her that back then the language was spoken widely among Jewish immigrants from Eastern Europe. All right, let's see what the land deeds can tell us. Here's the first record of the sale of the land. On July 17<sup>th</sup> 1798, Justin Worthington sold the land to Cyrus Willey. The farm stayed in the same hands for more than three quarters of a century. The Willey family sold the farm in 1878, and the real estate transactions look pretty normal... until 1891. On June 15<sup>th</sup> 1891 it looks like the land was sold to David Dinson. Only four months later, Dinson sells the farm to Louis Namerov and Louis Natezon of New York City. Just nine months after *that*, it's sold again. Between 1891 and 1906, the farm changes hands six times. Dinson ... Namerov and Natezon... Maller... Boox... Katz and Kurier... Ritter and Aswolensky...and the sale price often included livestock and various farm equipment. Something else appears to link the families who passed through Chris's home. A few of these people have mortgages from the same lenders: the Baron de Hirsch Fund and the Jewish Agricultural and Industrial Aid Society, both New York corporations. Census records confirm several of the farm's early owners were from Russia. Max and Gussie Maller, or Müller, as it's written in the census, came to America from Russia in 1886. And the entire Ritter family was born in Russia also. So far I have Russian immigrants moving from New York City. I have a Yiddish paper that was published in New York City. And I have loans given by two corporations in New York City. Everything is pointing to Manhattan. I'm meeting immigration historian Daniel Soyer at New York's Lower East Side Tenement Museum.



Elyse: Daniel I'm investigating this farmhouse that's in Connecticut and in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century there was a lot of turnover, the people were generally coming from New York City and there were two names on the mortgage that I kept seeing over and over again, there was the Baron de Hirsch Fund and the Jewish Agricultural and Industrial Aid Society.

Daniel: Well, the Baron de Hirsch Fund was set up in 1891 by Baron Maurice de Hirsch, who was a European Jewish philanthropist, in order to help the Eastern European Jewish immigrants to the United States to get established in their new home.

Elyse: Daniel explains that in March 1881, the assassination of the Russian czar Alexander the Second triggered a massive Jewish migration to the U.S.

Daniel: There was a popular feeling that the Jews had been behind this, and so there was a wave of pogroms, which were anti-Jewish riots, in which many people were killed and much property was destroyed.

Elyse: Over the next decade, more than 200,000 eastern European Jews flooded into the main east coast ports, particularly New York. By the turn of the century, more than half a million had arrived. So they came here seeking a better life?

Daniel: Absolutely, they came here seeking jobs and a way to make a living.

Elyse: Many of these Jewish refugees settled in New York City's Lower East Side – surrounded by people who shared a common background, faith, and language. But Daniel explains that packed into in the slums of one of the most densely populated neighborhoods on earth, the new arrivals also found themselves at odds with the established, Americanized Jewish community.

Daniel: They had a very ambivalent feeling towards these newcomers. On the one hand, they felt a kinship with these people and wanted to help. On the other hand they were foreign, they spoke Yiddish, they were poor, and the established Jewish community was afraid that they would reflect badly on them. And so they felt an added impetus to help people establish themselves, Americanize and get established economically as well.

Elyse: How does the Baron de Hirsch Fund and the Jewish Agricultural and Industrial Aid Society fit into all this?

Daniel: The Jewish Agricultural and Industrial Aid Society was a spin-off of the Baron de Hirsch Fund which provided people with mortgages when they wanted to get set up as farmers, on the land and with houses.



Elyse: He says our deed holders were part of a plan to ease overcrowding by relocating Jews outside of New York City, where they could earn a living off the land. But he can't shed any light on who our Russian immigrants were, or why so many seemed to have stayed for such a brief period at Chris's farmhouse. The Centre for Jewish History houses the papers of the Baron's fund and the Jewish Agricultural Society. In a volume about the social conditions facing Russian Jews at the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, I discover the Jewish Agricultural Society – or J.A.S. – set families up on farmland all across New England. Individual Jewish farmers are scattered through the New England states and owned farms in Rhode Island, Massachusetts, Connecticut, Maine, Vermont and New Hampshire. By far the greatest number are located in Connecticut and had formed the most important section of the Jewish farming community in New England. This is a ledger book that lists loans from the Baron de Hirsch Fund. Let's see... ah Connecticut. Although there's no information on our families, the original loan applications describe how the lending process worked. Successful applicants were Russian Jews who were healthy enough to handle farm work and who also had a little bit of money to get started. For those who didn't qualify, the fund provided trade schools, English classes, and scholarships for students in the city. But I'm not finding any information on our farmers.

Briann: Hi Elyse.

Elyse: I'm meeting Connecticut historian Briann Greenfield at the State Archives. She explains why Connecticut was such a popular choice for the immigrant farmers.

Briann: Well the short answer is available land. A lot of old Yankee farmers were moving away from the farms, they were being pulled out west where agriculture was more productive, or they were coming to the factory jobs that were available in the city.

Elyse: Briann tells me that the state worried about the "abandoned" farm problem and the decline of rural communities. In 1892 they began to publish lists of farms for sale.

Briann: This is a description of farms for sale in Connecticut that was published in 1899.

Elyse: So it's a real estate listing.

Briann: That's exactly right, they have maps and there are some pictures in here as well. This is everything you would need to know about the kinds of farms that you were looking at. There's even some in East Haddam.

Elyse: Briann explains the Russian Jews weren't the only newcomers settling the old Yankee farms.



Briann: It was all sorts of different immigrant groups. And this was a period of heavy immigration. Take a look at this article.

Elyse: "Alien invasion of Connecticut farms, every third farm in Connecticut is now in the hands of a man of foreign birth".

Briann: "There was no corner of the state into which the immigrant farmer has not penetrated and that he comes from the lands the poles apart in customs, language, religion and morality."

Elyse: That seems pretty negative to me.

Briann: Well to be very honest I think they saw it as both a blessing and as a threat, a blessing because they needed agricultural labor, but also a threat because people feared the loss of Yankee culture.

Elyse: The families who lived in Chris' home swapped the overcrowding and class tension of the Jewish community in New York, for the xenophobia of the Yankees in Connecticut. Does that explain why the arrivals only stayed for such a short time? Mary Donohue is an architectural historian with the Connecticut Commission on Culture and Tourism.

Elyse: Hey Mary, Elyse.

Mary: Hi. Let's head in here.

Elyse: Mary, I'm investigating a farmhouse in Connecticut that during the early 20<sup>th</sup> century had a tremendous amount of turnover with Russian Jews. And I am trying to figure out why?

Mary: Well they settled on the Lower East Side of Manhattan, in a very Jewish area. But then to move to the country was a very hard move. Suddenly they're in the Connecticut countryside, where there's not a ready-made Jewish community, they didn't speak English and that made it harder.

Elyse: But Mary doubts resentment of the newcomers was the reason for the high turnover.

Mary: I think if the Jewish farmers worked hard and became successful, they really had the Yankee farmers' respect.

Elyse: But if it wasn't xenophobia, why weren't the families who lived in Chris' farmhouse able to make a go of it?



Mary: The real breakthrough came through in 1908 when...

Elyse: What Mary tells me next puts all of the pieces of the puzzle in place. It's time to head back to Chris. Chris, I wasn't able to find out a lot of information about the people that lived here, but you were right, they were Russian Jews.

Chris: That's great.

Elyse: Pretty cool, right?

Chris: Pretty cool.

Elyse: I tell Chris how, with the help of organizations like the Jewish Agricultural Society, immigrants escaped from the slums of New York City to farms such as his. But when they got here it was a different story.

Mary: They really didn't have training as farmers. These are people that were refugees, they were in the trades, they were professionals, they were almost anything but a farmer. You weren't even allowed to own land in Russia if you were Jewish. It was also very marginal land, Connecticut potatoes are really rocks. This is farmland that's been used hard for over 200 years.

Elyse: Many simply couldn't make it, and the old Yankee farms kept changing hands.

Chris: Wow, that I would not have guessed. Well, I guess that explains why there was so much turnover – they didn't really know what they were doing and decided to give up.

Elyse: But the story doesn't end there. Mary explained that the organizations that helped buy the farms realized the early immigrants needed further assistance.

Mary: The real breakthrough came through in 1908 when they also started to produce a newspaper in Yiddish for farmers called the Jewish Farmer, which was the first Yiddish agricultural magazine in the world.

Elyse: Mary's friend Avi has agreed to help translate some of the Yiddish. All right, help us out here.

Avi: The first article you have is "how to best understand your cow" and then it goes on to say in Yiddish what every farmer should know about their cow. Every Jewish farmer who has eyes has noticed that some cows



give milk better, and some cows give milk worse. What you have here is this how-to-guide for Jewish farmers, everything they need to know how to be a farmer. All the basics written in Yiddish.

Elyse: Mary, with all this information from the Jewish farmer, how did they do?

Mary: They did great. In 1908 it only had 638 subscribers and five years later it had thousands. In Connecticut Jewish farmers developed a niche market for things like tobacco, poultry, eggs, dairy, and second and third generation Jewish farmers really prospered.

Elyse: You know, some people didn't make it and they went back to the city but other people were smart and they found other ways to make money, and they turned their farms into either boarding houses or weekend resorts. So much so that at one time this area was called the Catskills of New England.

Chris: The idea that you know this house was more than a house that it could have been a sanctuary for people. It's just fantastic.

Elyse: Well it was a great experience. Thank you very much.

Chris: Thank you.