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Building a Community Among Early Arab Immigrants in Milwaukee, 1890s–1960s

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BY ENAYA OTHMAN

Like other immigrant groups that came to Wisconsin, most of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century Arab immigrants came to the United States for economic betterment, as well as political and religious freedom. From the start, most immigrants intended to work for a few years and then return to their villages and towns after accumulating some wealth, although that original goal evolved over time as many early immigrants found success in their new country. Most of the community originally settled in a tightly-knit community located in the Third Ward area. Over time, the settlement pattern of the Arab community changed as subsequent generations were Americanized.

The immigrants came from Greater Syria before World War I, which included today's Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, Palestine, and Israel. After the war, the Arab community began to distinguish itself as Syrian Lebanese, and Milwaukee became the site of the largest Arab community in the state.¹ These immigrants established a thriving and energetic community that contributed to the social, economic, and religious diversity of Milwaukee society.

Syrians belong to the Semitic ethnolinguistic group of peoples. Over the ages there has been assimilation with many other peoples through conquest, migration, and intermarriage. Today, the Arabs are the largest branch of Semitic people. They share language, customs, values, history, and geographical area, though they practice a variety of religions.² While the vast majority of Greater Syria's population is Arab, several other minorities also live in the region, including Armenians, Circassians, Kurds, and Turks.³

The story and the experience of one Syrian immigrant to Milwaukee, Najeeb Arrieh, exemplifies the hopes and determination many Arab immigrants carried with them to their new home in America. Arrieh was a twelve-year-old boy in 1906 when he immigrated from Ain al-Bardah, a Syrian village in the Bekka valley located 55 miles west of Homs, Syria.⁴ Arrieh chose to settle in Milwaukee to join his uncle from the Herro family.

Pioneering Syrian immigrants like Arrieh were followed by their relatives and friends, either from similar villages and towns such as Zahleh and Baalbek in present-day Lebanon and surrounding areas, or from other parts of Greater Syria⁵ including Jerusalem and Ramallah in the Palestine region. The World's Fairs in the United States introduced many Syrians to the land of the free, including the 1893 Chicago fair and the 1906 Saint Louis fair. In the late 1880s, American World's Fair agents traveled to Middle Eastern cities and villages, introducing the fair and encouraging many villagers to participate as performers, including folk dancers and horsemen. Those who decided to stay in the area wrote letters back to family and friends, telling them of the many opportunities in the United States.⁶ As Alixa Naff, author of *Becoming*

American: The Early Arab Immigrant Experience, explains, "Peddlers then trekked northward and established a settlement in Milwaukee. From there, smaller settlements began to dot eastern Wisconsin, places like Oconomowoc, Watertown, Fond du Lac, Oshkosh, and Green Bay."⁷

The majority of early immigrants came without money or knowledge of the English language. They were usually peddlers by profession, which did not require much capital. Peddling and communicating with nonimmigrant Americans helped Syrian immigrants learn English and adapt to American society.⁸

In general, most of the peddlers in the Milwaukee area were Syrian Christians from the Melkite sect of Catholicism, which belongs to the Byzantine Eastern rite. They have been affiliated with Rome since 1724 and are known as Roman Catholics of Byzantine-Melkite rite or Greek Catholics.⁹ The Maronites were another major Eastern Christian group that lived in Syria, but after the Arab-Islam spread in the area, they migrated

to Mount Lebanon. They also stayed in communion with the Roman Catholic Church.¹⁰

Another Eastern Christian group is the Copts of Egypt. The Copts are mainly Orthodox and Catholic and live in the cities and villages of Egypt. Many of them view themselves as true Egyptians of Pharaonic ethnic descent. Milwaukee began receiving a noticeable number of Egyptian Copts after World War II.¹¹

There is also a small segment of Arab American Christians who are Protestants—mainly converts from the three major religious sects, the Maronite, Greek Orthodox, and Greek Catholic. Most came from Palestine, where English and American missionaries converted them, however, their number is relatively small.¹² During the nineteenth century, in all parts of Syria, the Christian Orthodox outnumbered other Christian sects, except in Mount Lebanon, where the Maronites are the majority and the Melkite sect is considered to be the smallest.¹³ Because Christians in the Arab world had minority status and suffered persecution along with Arab Muslims under Turkish rule, some decided to immigrate.¹⁴

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(Opposite) Modern interior photo of Saint George Melkite Church, 2013

(Above) Najeeb Arrieh and his wife Helen Herro. Najeeb immigrated from Syria at age twelve and worked at his uncle's fruit stand initially. Like many Syrian immigrants, he Americanized his name and became James Arrieh. He ultimately became a successful business owner and moved to the suburbs.



Middle East map, 1918

In 1915, among the eight hundred Syrians living in Milwaukee, ninety percent were Melkite.¹⁵ The Syrian community maintained its ethnic and religious identity by preserving its Eastern faith and keeping close ties with extended family members and fellow villagers. The community founded the oldest Middle Eastern Church in Milwaukee, Saint George Melkite Church, to establish their religious and social organizations.

In 1911, when the Syrian Melkite community became large enough, the Milwaukee archbishop, Sebastian G. Messmer, appointed Father Timothy Jock as the first pastor of the Syrian community. The parishioners used a vacant dance hall rented by Archbishop Messmer from the Pabst Brewing Company on State Street.¹⁶ The church was named Saint George after the Melkite parish in Ayn al-Bardeh.

In 1914, Arrich cofounded the Syrian-American Men's Club, a cultural and social society, to increase fellowship between members. In 1915, Arrich, and the rest of the Syrian community, welcomed one of its most distinguished pastors in the congregation's early history, Father Anthony Aneed, who replaced Father Jock. He was an active priest who encouraged and helped the Catholic Melkites construct their own church.

On November 28, 1917, Saint George Church opened to the Syrian community for worship. The building was constructed on State Street between 16th and 17th Streets. Its architecture is Eastern Byzantine style with sand-lime bricks and three sheet-metal, onion-shaped domes. Two side stairs lead to the main wooden entrance, which is surrounded by five beautiful stained glass windows, two on each side (one small window close to the entrance and one large), and one on the top. Under the stairs, another separate entrance leads to the basement, where all cultural and social functions take place. The church architect was German-born Erhard Brielmaier, who designed many other important buildings in Milwaukee.¹⁷

Arrich was among the many community members who had pushed hard to establish Saint George, rooting his family in the community. His children attended Saint George Church and took part in the church activities, clubs and Sunday school. After construction of the church building in 1917, other social and religious organizations formed. Women in the community joined charitable institutions, such as the Syrian Women Progressive League in 1918; and Saint George's Altar Society for older women and the M. C. Club for girls in the 1920s.¹⁸ The women's organizations offered both social and religious support,¹⁹ along with others that helped Arab Christians preserve some of their homeland's culture and customs. Church members felt comfortable eating, dancing, and dressing in ways that reminded them of home, and through these organizations, Syrians learned to fulfill their civil and national duties as American citizens. They voted in local and national elections, served in the military, and raised funds for war efforts during the two World Wars.²⁰

Most Syrian immigrant men had wives and children and became attached to life in the United States. Many believed it was a more suitable place for their descendants than their homeland because of the political unrest in the Arab world and the opportunities available to them in America. Owning property and shops furthered the assimilation of Syrian immigrants and kept them in contact with civil and legal agencies including police, and business enterprises like banks and wholesalers.²¹

Americanizing their Arab names was one of the ways these early Arab Americans attempted to combat racism, smooth their acculturation, and help promote their sense of belonging in their new society. Some Syrians, for example, altered their names from Abraheem to Abraham, Yaqub to Jacob, and Dau'd to David. The racism experienced by first-generation immigrants from Greater Syria was similar to the experience of Eastern and Southern European immigrants during the same time period.²² It was often the result of the immigrants's inability to speak English and their limited income. There were very few immigrants who arrived as skilled laborers, which limited employment opportunities and income levels.²³ Ultimately, upward mobility was achieved through strength of community and the stressed importance of education.²⁴

Most of the Syrians initially lived in the Greek and Italian neighborhood on Huron Street in the Third Ward.²⁵ Syrians in general were known for their trading skills, and their settlement in this part of Milwaukee was no accident. The area contained both commercial stores and residential buildings, making it the ideal place for their typical occupations of peddling and shopkeeping. The initial draw to the area was economic, and as the community grew living within their religious community became important as well.

When Arrieh arrived in the United States, he received help from his uncle, who hired him to work at his fruit stand for fifteen dollars a month. Like many other Arab Christians of this early generation, Arrieh understood that integration into American culture and society relied on economic success.²⁶ He changed his first name from Najeeb to James, learned English, and worked hard to improve his economic condition. He would also identify himself as Syrian Melkite, not Arab, because of the perception that was held among Americans and publicized through the media that linked Arabs to the Ottoman Turks. Many Americans held negative images about both groups originating from writings



Men at the World's Columbian Exposition Arabian village, 1893



Lebanese-Syrian American Club on Highland Avenue, Milwaukee, 1960s



The Third Ward on Huron Street, undated. Most of the Syrians initially lived here in the Greek and Italian neighborhood.



State Street, Milwaukee, 1910. Arrieh opened his own fruit store here in the 1920s.

by travelers and missionaries²⁷ that typically stereotyped and created myths about them.²⁸

By the time Arrieh had immigrated to Milwaukee in 1906, many Syrians had relinquished peddling, their first trade, and opened small shops, such as dry goods and food stores, in the Milwaukee downtown area.²⁹ This included Arrieh's uncle, who had given up peddling to open the fruit stand. Between 1900 and 1920, members of the community started to shift their settlement to Kinnickinnic Avenue near Second Street, a move allowed by upward economic mobility.³⁰ Arrieh lived there for few years, though by 1910, many other Arabs shifted their settlement to State Street between Highland and Kilbourn. The new neighborhood became the place of settlement for many Syrians for at least five decades, especially after the construction of their church.³¹ In the 1920s, after saving some money, Arrieh opened his own fruit store on State Street. He worked hard and saved enough money to buy more property, most of it located along State Street and Wisconsin Avenue. Like Arrieh, many Syrian immigrants became successful business owners.

The Milwaukee City directory of 1920 shows that members of the Syrian community worked as owners of grocery stores and small businesses that sold goods like ice cream, fruit, souvenirs, confections, and meats. State, Wells, Prairie (Highland

today), and Kilbourn Streets had the most commercial density. State Street alone had over fifty businesses by 1909, most of which were owned by Syrians. There were also various businesses in the neighborhood of Saint George Church, including saloons, meat markets, bakeries, fruit stands, and dry grocery stores. Some Syrians, especially women, worked as clerks in the stores of their husbands or other relatives. However, many women in the Syrian community identified as housewives because mothers are seen as hallowed figures in Arab culture, and men continued as the main providers for the family.³²

By the late 1920s, ninety percent of the Syrian community's members were also homeowners.³³ They were active in various social and cultural functions in Milwaukee and participated in the city's ethnic functions. They presented some traditions of their cultural and folk heritage, like Debkah folkdance and songs, Arabic food, and opportunities for socializing together. Syrian community members and their organizations made an ongoing effort to strike a balance between Americanization and their determination to preserve the Syrian Arab culture and heritage.

In May 1919, the community started participating in Milwaukee Folk Festivals. In 1923, the Syrian community assisted in founding the International Institute to assist immi-

IMMIGRATION HISTORY RESEARCH CENTER



(Left) Syrian section at the Chicago Liberty Day Parade, 1918

(Below) Milwaukee Syrian community, 1918

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grants and refugees transitioning into the community through programming and support services, and they provided their assistance to it for years to come. In 1936, the Syrian community performed in the midsummer Folk Festival. In addition, they also organized their own social and cultural activities for the community, such as the *Hafla*, where they socialized with each other, served Arabic food, and danced the Dabkeh, the Syrian folk dance. For the 1938 and 1939 Folk Festivals, James Arrich and Charles Nabkey, a Syrian immigrant who was active in the community, were members of the advisory board.³⁴ Helen, James Arrich's wife, was involved in these festivals along with other Syrian women, some of whom wore cultural Syrian clothes including the long dress called the *thob* and a head shawl. They sang at functions like the Harvest Festival of Many Nations at the Milwaukee Midsummer Festival on the lakefront.³⁵

Old pictures of Syrian community members dating back to 1918 show images that include men and women in traditional Syrian clothing holding American flags with American soldiers.³⁶ During World War II, the Syrian community contributed their share to American patriotic efforts and raised up to \$76,000 in war bonds. In 1945 alone, three hundred Syrians raised \$22,850,³⁷ and nearly forty Syrian soldiers from Milwaukee joined the US military during the war.³⁸

In general, family traditions were a hybrid of cultural traditions from immigrants' old and new countries. Integration was a gradual process, and some Arab cultural and social customs persisted to a considerable degree for immigrants and into the next generation, including marriage conduct. Arranged marriages were an important social norm for most of the early Arab Christian immigrants.

The majority of the Arab Christians in the early 1900s arrived as single men. Syrian men either married single women immigrants from the same community or went back to Syria to return with their brides. The number of women in the first wave of immigration in the United States

Milwaukee, Wis. Tuesday, June 19, 1945 Copyright, 1945, by The Journal Company

Milwaukee's Syrians Are Prosperous and Patriotic

Old Colony Outgrown, but Peaceful Folk Still Meet at Church and Clubhouse

When the news spotlight focused recently on Syria and its troubles, older Milwaukees recalled this city's "little Syria" and wondered what had become of the dark haired, mild mannered people whose fruit stores, confectionery stores, linen shops and novelty shops used to be centered on W. State st., from N. 6th st. to N. 16th st.

No longer are they settled in one district. Depreciation of their property coupled with comparative wealth saved day by day out of the earnings of successful businesses and time have served to disperse the Syrian population. The long mus-taches and colorful fezzes which once could be seen as the Syrians sat outside their tiny shops, smoking narghiles and reading Arabic newspapers are nowhere to be found.

The Syrian population in Milwaukee, however, still numbers more than 500—mothers and daughters of those who once stood in front of the bazaars of far off Ain-Berslay or Zahia and talked in excited whispers about "wonderful America."

Colony Church Remains

St. George's church at 1615 W. State st. is practically all that remains of the once colorful colony. Built in 1917, it is the only Roman Catholic church of the eastern rite in Wisconsin. The majority of the Milwaukee Syrians are Roman Catholics, although there are about six families who are Orthodox Cath-

olics, and about 40 Mohammedans. Orthodox Syrians do not have a church of their own here but for special occasions one of their priests comes from Detroit. Also too small a group to support a church, the Mohammedans follow the teachings of their prophet and when they pray they face Mecca, their sacred place of worship.

Father Raphael Gedah, white haired pastor of St. George's, is a learned and friendly man, whose tiny office in the wing of the church is lined with books. He is a native of Palestine.

"Almost all of the Syrians here came from the Lebanon, a coastal district of Syria," he explained. "Nearly all of them are related. More than 150 of them are named Herro. I understand the first man came here in 1897 and then the uncles, mothers-in-law, brothers and sisters followed."

Profit in Food

Asked why the majority entered the food business, Father Gedah smiled and said, "No reason but good profit, I guess."

Father Gedah explained that the eastern rite of his church differs from that of the other Roman Catholic churches in the city only in that the services are conducted in Arabic. "We have cantors instead of a choir," he added.

An old red brick home at 4001 W. Highland Blvd., on the fringe of Highland park, purchased by the Syrian-American Club of Milwaukee three years ago, is the hub of the Syrian colony's social life here. James Arrich, grocer at 2701 W. Wisconsin av., president, explained that there are four similar clubs in the state.

"There are many Syrians living in Wisconsin but the largest groups are here, in Fond du Lac, where there are two clubs, and in Madison and Janesville. Any Syrian in Milwaukee is welcome at our clubhouse, but only those who are American citizens may join the club."

Recalls First Member

Arrich, who came to Milwaukee as a small-boy in 1906, remembers the old Syrian colony.

"A man named Nicholas Barrack was the first Syrian to come to Milwaukee and Charles Herro came here the same year," he said. "Many Syrians came to America for the world fair in Chicago in 1893. They had concessions on the midway and when they went back to Syria they told about their wonderful trip and many people became interested in the United States and started to come here. There are just about as many Syrians in Chicago as there are here—but the largest groups are in Detroit, New York, Rochester and Boston. Most of the Mohammedans came here after the first World war."

"When the Syrians came to this country many went into the linen business but in Milwaukee today we have only one linen store left, James Himeh's shop at 723 N. Milwaukee st.," he continued. "One of the first Syrians who came here bought a grocery store. He did well and an other Syrian saw his success they tried the same business. But today we have two or three boys who are engineers, four lawyers, two or three doctors, and my daughter, Yvonne, is the only Syrian girl in the mid-west who is a teacher."

38 in Service

Proudly telling of the part his people have played in the war effort, Arrich said, "There are 38 Milwaukee Syrian boys in service. We have only one gold star, for George Bashour, who was killed in Normandy shortly after D day. Our victory committee writes regularly and sends special packages to the boys in service. Our biggest war project has been our bond rallies. We've had a rally for the last five drives. One June 3 we sold \$22,850 worth of bonds. Our total to date is \$76,000 and I have a check with me now for a \$1,500 bond for one of the members. The rest of our war work is left to the ladies. There are two women's clubs. The St. George's society and the Syrian-American Ladies' club."

Turn to SYRIANS, page 3, col. 4

MILWAUKEE JOURNAL, MARCH 10, 1936

TUESDAY, MARCH 10, 1936 THE MILWAUKEE

Milwaukee Syrians Hold Folk Festival

THE first Syrian folk festival in the city's history was held Monday night at Siefert social center and Mrs. James Arrich, 1437 W. State st., is shown in native costume as she served native delicacies to (left to right) Margaret Herro, 954 N. Thirty-fifth st.; Margaret Barrock, 2436 W. State st., and Helen Herro, 954 N. Thirty-fifth st.

[Journal Staff Photo]

John F. Dore, in 1932 that Seattle his wife was ill. Winslow made res- midst of his trial, with money con-
is bankrupt due to her plunge into titution of the entire \$9,954.82 in the tributed by fellow teachers.

(Above Right) *Milwaukee Journal* article "Milwaukee's Syrians are Prosperous and Patriotic," June 19, 1945

(Right) The first Syrian folk festival in Milwaukee's history was held Monday night, March 9, 1936, at Siefert Social Center. Mrs. James Arrich wore native costume as she served delicacies from her country to (left to right) Margaret Herro, Margaret Barrock, and Helen Herro.



(Above) The Milwaukee band Desert Ensemble performs at Arab World Fest, undated

(Below) Al Ramtha Jordanian Folklore Troup performs at Arab World Fest, undated

began to increase gradually and made up thirty-two percent of Syrian immigrants in 1910 and forty-four percent in 1940. For the most part they followed their husbands, brothers, fathers, and sons to America as a result of the changing conception of settlement that solidified after World War I.³⁹

When Arrieh decided to marry, he looked in his small community in Milwaukee and accepted his relatives' assistance to help him select his Syrian bride. He chose Helen Herro, a Lebanese girl from his village who had immigrated around 1916 to join her brothers and help take care of the household chores. Arrieh and Helen retained aspects of Arab culture and heritage by keeping direct contact with their homeland and by following the Melkite Christian faith. As a family man, Arrieh believed in the importance of raising his children according to his culture and Eastern religious ties. Significantly, however, Arrieh, who spoke the Arabic language well, failed to teach it to his children who attended American public schools. They socialized with other non-Arab children in their neighborhood and tried as much as possible to be more Americanized than their father by mastering the English language, an experience common to many of their peers. The loss of the Arabic language was the result of a desire to assimilate into American culture, but the effects included minimizing the communication immigrants and the following generations had with their families in their homeland.

James Arrieh also believed in the importance of education, which he stressed to his family. He had two sons, Ibrahim and Marshal, and two daughters, Fay and Yvonne, who all earned college degrees during the Great Depression. While this was a hard time for all, the Arab community did not experience as much of a setback as many other Americans. Because most were small entrepreneurs, they did not undergo the diffi-



culties of being laid off, but they were also not rich enough to have invested and lost money in the stock market. Any hardship and struggle Arrich experienced during the Depression did not deter him from saving all that he could to keep his children in college. His daughters and one son became teachers. His other son, Marshal, graduated from Harvard and became an attorney.¹⁰

Marshal Arrich, as a second generation Arab Christian, tried to teach his children to speak the language, but he did not succeed because he himself did not speak Arabic fluently. Marshal had five daughters, Michele, Camille, Danielle, Marielle, and Gabrielle, two of whom married Arab men and three of whom married non-Arab Americans. Marshal declared that his daughters, third-generation Syrians, are “completely Americanized.” They are all university graduates and have professional jobs, including doctor, lawyer, and banker.¹¹

Even though James Arrich and his children left the Saint George neighborhood for the Milwaukee suburbs in the 1950s, they stayed loyal to the church and active in the Syrian community’s social and cultural functions. His move to the suburbs reflects the upward mobility of the Syrian immigrants as well as the falling housing market. This move, however, did not change the loyalty that some members of the Syrian community had for Saint George. For example, among Arrich’s children, Marshal, who stayed in Milwaukee all his life, at 80 years of age indicated that he still attended Saint George Church every Sunday. He remained active in the Syrian-Lebanese Club and was an avid member of the Midwest Federation of Syrian-Lebanese American Clubs. In addition, Marshal, a veteran of World War II, also served as a secretary of the advisory council of the mayor and a director of Greater West Wisconsin Avenue Advancement Association.¹²

1950s–Present

While the Syrian community helped maintain its ethnic and religious identity by preserving its Eastern faith, education was one of the important variables that led to greater integration of second- and third-generation Syrians. In 1912, among the sixty-five Syrian children, forty-two attended the Gesu Catholic School and most of the rest attended a public school on Prairie and Seventh Streets. This number decreased significantly over time as parents challenged the advice of the community priest to send their children to Catholic schools and insisted that their children were better off in the public schools learning good English and more secular subjects.¹³ As it was for James Arrich and his family, the occupational pattern for the second- and third-generation Arab Americans is different from their fathers. Seventy-six percent of second- and third-generation Arab Americans held professional jobs such as attorneys, civil engineers, and teachers.¹⁴

PHOTO BY WAYNE ROKICKI



Modern exterior of Saint George Melkite church, Milwaukee, undated

The custom of arranged marriage that the immigrants brought with them from the homeland also ended with the second- and third-generation Arab American Christians, even though the American approach to mate selection was not fully acceptable. One solution was to combine both, so the younger generation met through ethnic federations and local clubs, such as the Ramallah convention, the Syrian-Lebanese Midwest convention, and other ethnic gatherings where interaction between the two sexes took place as the youth danced and socialized under the watchful eyes of community elders.¹⁵

Many community members’ strong affiliation with Saint George began to fade in the 1950s and 1960s. The fluctuation in the number of baptisms among the Syrian community at Saint George is a good indication of the urban sprawl and white flight that affected the Syrian community and Saint George neighborhood. In 1949, there was a decline in the birth rate in the Syrian community, but a look at the baptism record of the two years before shows an increase in 1947 and 1948. The years between 1953 and 1957 still show a considerable increase in baptism numbers,¹⁶ but a sharp decrease after 1960 could reflect the influence of different factors including white flight and major changes in the commercial and residen-

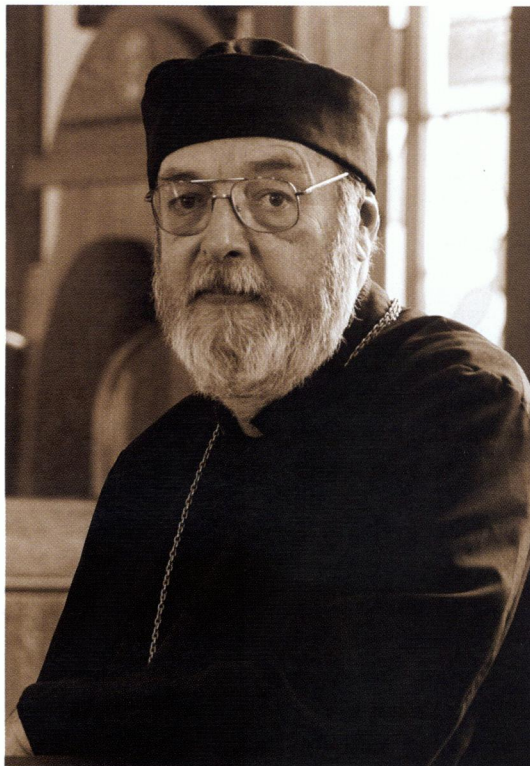
tial buildings of the area during this period.⁴⁷ Urban renewal affected the area dramatically and helped change the demography of this neighborhood, especially the construction of the highway that demolished many homes and businesses in the area around Saint George. The value of the property decreased, which gave other minority groups the opportunity to move in due to lower housing costs, including African Americans, who arrived in the neighborhood following World War II. Their number increased significantly and by the late 1960s and 1970s, they constituted the majority in the neighborhood.⁴⁸ Despite changes over time, however, the Saint George Syrian Melkite Catholic church continued to function as an anchor for some of its parishioners who moved out of the neighborhood, as it did for James Arrich and his family. It gave them and the Syrian community spiritual, cultural, and religious support.⁴⁹

The four major Syrian clans, Barrock, Herro, Mettery, and Trad, did not abandon their ethnic church after more than three generations and continued to align themselves with their Eastern parish. For example, in 1959, there were more than forty-five church members from the Herro family. By 2004, over thirty from the Herro family still considered themselves members of Saint George.⁵⁰

Between the 1950s and 1970s, the settlement pattern of the Arab community changed. They moved to live near universities, and employers. Then, in the 1980s and 1990s, their settlements were spread further throughout the city and its suburbs. The majority of second- and third-generation Arab Christians now live in suburban Milwaukee and the old settlement of the Syrian Christians has been abandoned. Members of the Melkite community come to their former settlement area only on Sundays to attend church services. Since the Arabic language is not essential in the Arab Christian religion, the Sunday services in the Melkite Church are conducted in English, and they are often led by a non-Arab American priest.⁵¹ Today, only one-third of Saint George parishioners are of Arab descent, although many social and religious activities are still performed in the church, such as Middle Eastern dinners and other holiday gatherings.

Over time, the number of Arabs of Eastern Christian heritage has decreased in Milwaukee, but they still play an important role in organizing and leading the Arab Fest, one of the largest

PHOTO BY JOEL HEIMAN



Father Philaret Littlefield, pastor of Saint George Melkite Church, 2013

and most important Arab ethnic and cultural functions. It attracts a large number of people from across Wisconsin and nearby states.

Ultimately, like many other immigrant groups, the Arab-American immigrants in Milwaukee adjusted successfully to their new homeland. In the words of Marshal Arrich:

*They succeeded primarily by working long hard hours. Almost every Arab-American family and even the people who come here today, they will work ten to twelve hours a day seven days a week to get on their feet and to bring the family up, and through this hard work they managed to be very successful and these elders, most of whom used to live around the Church when it built in 1917. As their circumstances changed and improved, and as this area went down they moved out and scattered all around Milwaukee. Most of them live very well, and one of the things that we are proud of is that all through the bad years no family of Lebanese descent ever went on welfare.*⁵² ❧

Notes

1. For example, in La Crosse, the Syrians established one of their first Arab communities and built the first Melkite church in Wisconsin. Our Lady of Lourdes, in 1908. Syrians came from different parts of Wisconsin, Minneapolis, and Chicago to receive marriage and baptism services at the church. However, the church was short lived and by September 15, 1923, Our Lady of Lourdes Melkite Church was closed and torn down by its new owner, Mazel Haddad.
2. Enaya Othman, "History and Assimilation: Arab-Americans in Milwaukee" (masters thesis, University of Wisconsin Milwaukee, 1998), 5.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Enaya Othman is a visiting assistant professor at Marquette University. She received her master's degree from the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee and her PhD in American and Middle East history from Marquette University in 2009. She serves as the president of the board of directors of the Arab and Muslim

Women's Research and Resource Institute (AMWRRRI). She directs the AMWRRRI Oral History Project, which seeks to document lives of American Muslim and Arab women and to disseminate information about their histories and experiences through educational programming and exhibits. Find out more about the AMWRRRI at <http://amwrrri.org/aboutUs.htm>.

3. *Ibid.*, 4.
4. The Arabic name *Ain al-Bardeh* means “the cold spring.”
5. Greater Syria before World War I was a large region that included today’s Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, Palestine, and Israel. After World War I, the Arab community in Milwaukee started to distinguish itself as Syrian Lebanese as the region was divided into separate political entities by the colonial powers, namely Britain and France.
6. Samir Khalaf, “The Background and Causes of Lebanese/Syrian Immigration to the United States before World War I,” in *Crossing the Waters: Arabic-Speaking Immigrants to the United States before 1940*, ed. Eric J. Hooglund (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1987), 27.
7. Alixa Naff, *Becoming American: The Early Arab Immigrant Experience* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1993), 141.
8. *Ibid.*, 26. Peddling helped Arab immigrants learn the English language faster through exposure to American-born citizens. In addition, peddling helped these immigrants save money to eventually open their own shops; “A Peculiar People That Has Settled in Milwaukee: Are Peddler by Profession,” *Milwaukee Journal*, June 29, 1891.
9. Paul Douglas Stamm, *A History of St. George Melkite Greek Catholic Church, 1911–1986* (Milwaukee: Saint George Melkite Greek Catholic Church, 1986), 11. Historically, Arab Christians were part of the Holy Apostolic Church until the major separation of 1054 CE. The Holy Apostolic Church was divided into two major churches, the Roman Catholic Church in the West and the Eastern or Greek Orthodox Church in the East. The differences between the two major churches were in their creed and some rituals and day-to-day practice. Constantinople was the headquarters of the Eastern Syrian Arab Orthodox Church, called the Melkite. Meanwhile, with the eleventh century ecumenical drive by the Pope, the Melkite as well as the earlier Syrian Monophysite churches were split between Orthodoxy and Catholicism. The main distinction between the Christian Easterners and the Westerners is that the latter are unified under one church, which gives its adherents one religious tradition knitting together the area. Meanwhile, Eastern Christians developed their own faith with religious pluralism. They developed themselves under different religious “rites” in which each was characterized by its own spiritual and liturgical expressions and by its regional locality. Each rite represents a different local Christian community, built on a special and mutual interaction between religion and culture.
10. Othman, “History and Assimilation,” 8.
11. Robert B. Betts, *Christians in the Arab East: A Political Study* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1978), 44–50.
12. Philip Khuri Hitti, *The Syrians in America* (New York: George H. Duran, 1924), 40.
13. Naff, *Becoming American*, 41.
14. Othman, “History and Assimilation,” 25.
15. Stamm, *A History of St. George*, 10.
16. Paul Stamm, “The Melkites of Wisconsin,” unpublished draft prepared for the 100th anniversary of Saint George Melkite Greek Catholic Church, 716 State Street, Milwaukee, Wisconsin, 2010, 22.
17. Stamm, “The Melkites of Wisconsin,” 33. Later, in 1976, Saint George was nominated as the “best example of Byzantine Revival-inspired architecture in the city” and registered as a historic landmark in Milwaukee. Erhard Brielmaier also built Saint Joseph’s Basilica in 1910, Saint Benedict the Moor in 1923, and Saint Mary’s Convent and Saint Joseph’s Hospital in 1929.
18. Interview with Marshal Arrieh, September 14, 1997, Saint George Melkite Church, Milwaukee, Wisconsin; Irene Nicholas and the Young Women’s Christian Association of the USA International Institute, *The Syrians of the City of Milwaukee, Wisconsin* (n.p.: YWCA International Institute, 1929), 5–9.
19. Nicholas, *The Syrians of the City of Milwaukee*, 5–9.
20. Arrieh interview; “Syrians Top Bond Quota,” *The Milwaukee Journal*, June 4, 1945.
21. Naff, *Becoming American*, 128, 140.
22. Stamm, *A History of St. George*, 27.
23. Alixa Naff, “Arabs in America,” in *Arabs in the New World: Studies on Arab-American Communities*, eds. Sameer Y. Abraham and Nabeel Abraham (Detroit: Wayne State University Center for Urban Studies, 1983), 14; Khalaf, “The Background and the Causes of Lebanese/Syrian Immigration,” 24.
24. Arrieh interview; Stamm, *A History of St. George*, 23–27; Philip M. Kayal and Joseph M. Kayal, *The Syrian-Lebanese in America: A Study in Religion and Assimilation* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1975), 54.
25. Paul Stamm, “The Melkites of Wisconsin,” 10; “A Peculiar People That Has Settled in Milwaukee.” Some Syrians were industrial workers. Esa Saffori was employed at Allis-Chalmers as a molder in the 1927. He lived at 701 West Walker Street with his wife and seven children. Elias Faris, who arrived in 1913 from Lebanon when he was thirteen years old, worked as a day laborer. By 1950s, he was a grinder worker and mill operator for International Harvester for \$1.85 an hour. Other Syrian immigrants worked in factories or firms, including Frank Ayob, Mike Malik, and some members of the Herro family. There was a small number among the immigrants who were skilled laborers. Abrem Baho worked as a carpenter in Milwaukee when he first immigrated in the beginning of the twentieth century.
26. Arrieh interview. Marshal had a law office in one of these properties on Wisconsin and 27th Street until the 1990s.
27. Philip Kayal, “Arab Christians in the United States,” in *Arabs in the New World*, 47–48; Michael Sulciman, “Early Arab-Americans: The Search for Identity,” in *Crossing the Water*, 441. The Arab community dislikes identifying itself as “Arab” because of the widely-held misconception that all Arabs are Muslims. During this period, the perception of Muslims in the American society was negative and associated Arabs, Islam, and Muslims with the Ottoman Turks, whom Americans perceived as exotic, backward, and barbaric. However, Arab Christians would change their position on their Arabism with the rise of the Arab nation state in the period of decolonization after World War II. They would become more comfortable identifying themselves as Arabs for different reasons, including the arrival of a new wave of immigrants from different countries in the Arab world who were proud of their Arabism. Other significant factors included the social developments taking place in the United States, chief among them the civil rights movement and its encouragement of pluralism in American society.
28. Timothy Marr, “‘Drying up the Euphrates’: Muslims, Millennialism, and Early American Missionary Enterprise,” in *The United States & the Middle East: Cultural Encounters*, conference proceedings, eds. Aabbas Amanat and Magnus T. Bernhardtsson (Connecticut: Yale Center for International and Area Studies, 2002), 130.
29. Arrieh interview.
30. Stamm, *A History of St. George*, 8.
31. Arrieh interview; Stamm, *A History of St. George*, 27.
32. Othman, “History and Assimilation,” 17. These statistics are based on a survey conducted among the Arab Christian community in Milwaukee area in 1997; Milwaukee Sanborn Maps, 1910–1926 and 1926–1961, Milwaukee Public Library; Less Vollmert Les, Robin Wenger, and Carlen Hatala, *West Side Neighborhood Historic Resources Survey* (City of Milwaukee: Department of City Development, 1984), 2. The streets kept their character until the late 1940s.
33. Nicholas, *The Syrians of the City of Milwaukee*, 3–6; Stamm, 10, 17, 27.
34. Arrieh interview; Stamm, *A History of St. George*, 27–28.
35. “Milwaukee Syrians Hold Folk Festival,” *Milwaukee Journal*, March 10, 1936, 13; photograph, “Women Handing Coffee,” March 1936, Collection of Saint George Melkite Church; “Helped Entertain at Lakefront,” *Milwaukee Journal*, July 22, 1936; Arrieh interview; Stamm, “The Melkites of Wisconsin,” 35.
36. Private collection of Joseph Makhluif.
37. “Syrians Top Bond Quota.”
38. Stamm, “The Melkites of Wisconsin,” 36.
39. Samir Khalaf, “The Background and Causes of Lebanese/Syrian Immigration,” 22–23.
40. Arrieh interview.
41. *Ibid.*
42. *Ibid.* Marshal was eighty years old when interviewed.
43. Stamm, “The Melkites of Wisconsin,” 23.
44. Othman, “History and Assimilation,” 69.
45. Arrieh interview.
46. Saint George Melkite Church, Baptism Record.
47. While previously the three blocks between Prairie and State streets had served mainly as residential and commercial units, by 1961, the number of stores had decreased to just nine. Many of the dwellings units and stores would disappear. The area experienced changes in the structure and use of the buildings, and the number of stores decreased while the number of auto shops increased. Many dwelling units converted into flats, and apartment buildings became more prominent.
48. *West Side Neighborhood Historic Resources Survey*, 13.
49. United States Census of Housing, City Blocks, Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, 1940. Tracing the numbers and categories of population change between the 1940s and 1960s will give a clear picture of the different demographic and urban developments that happened to the Saint George neighborhood and the Syrian community during these years. The neighborhood of Saint George belonged to tract 25 in the census of 1940. The total population was 4,837. Of this number, 4,288 identified themselves as US natives while 545 considered themselves foreign-born. There was only one African American living in the neighborhood. Those who occupied dwelling units numbered 1,217, while the rest owned homes. The majority of the population was listed as Germans, Hungarians, Yugoslavs, and other Europeans. The Syrians were not listed in the census. This is not surprising because Syrians or Arabs were mainly listed under Turk, Asian, European, Greek, or others to avoid the stigma carried with the label Arab. The major occupations for the population that lived around Saint George were clerical and sales jobs (26.40 percent), operatives (11.94 percent), professionals (14.88 percent), craftsmen, foremen, and kindred workers (11.94 percent), service workers [not domestic] (14.20 percent), and laborers (4.71 percent). According to the United States Census of Housing in 1940, the neighborhoods were almost exclusively white before the 1950s. Although some Syrians held clerical and professional jobs, the majority were still engaged in commerce and shopkeeping, with a few in industrial jobs. In 1950, the total population of downtown increased to 5,516. However, it was still a primarily white neighborhood. Occupational patterns did not differ markedly from those in 1940. The change is marked in 1960, as the total population decreased to 4,516 and its composition started to change. The nonwhite population was 9.5 percent, and the African American population reached 7 percent. The census shows that the professional class disappeared completely. The German and other European population numbers decreased. For example, there were only 52 Hungarians by 1960. John Gurda, *The Latin Community on the Milwaukee’s Near South Side* (Milwaukee: Milwaukee Urban Observatory, University of Wisconsin–Milwaukee, 1976), 6, online facsimile at: <http://www.wisconsinhistory.org/turningpoints/search.asp?id=1261>.
50. Saint George Melkite Church, Parish Directory, 2003–2004. Even after the Syrian community left the neighborhood for the Milwaukee suburbs, a significant number came from a long distance to worship at Saint George. The church membership list included names with addresses in Port Washington, Delafield, New Berlin, Brookfield, Hales Corners, Franklin, Greendale, Greenfield, Menomonee Falls, Sussex, Glendale, Grafton, and other areas in the periphery.
51. Othman, “History and Assimilation,” 126.
52. Arrieh interview.