

THE ARABIC-SPEAKING PEOPLE IN RHODE ISLAND

A Centenary Celebration

By

ELEANOR A. DOUMATO



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Rhode Island Ethnic Heritage Pamphlet Series

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EDITOR'S FOREWORD

In 1975 and 1976, on the eve of the bicentennial observance, in my capacity as chairman of Rhode Island's celebration (ri76), I established eighteen ethnic heritage committees, consisting of recognized leaders of this state's major ethnocultural groups. One purpose of this move was to involve in bicentennial activities those ethnic communities whose contact with this country did not extend as far back as the Revolutionary era. I urged such groups to observe and commemorate the contributions they had made to the American and Rhode Island experience from the time of their arrival down to the bicentennial year. A much more important reason for establishing the ethnic heritage program, however, was to allow each group to present its unique contributions, customs, and folkways to its neighbors from other cultural backgrounds. Formulated under the premise that knowledge promotes understanding and understanding begets brotherhood, the program was designed to break down the ethnocentric barriers and antagonisms that hindered us from achieving that lofty motto and goal—*E pluribus unum*, one out of many.

The one task assigned to each group upon its formation was to write a brief interpretive account of its Rhode Island experience—its motives for migration, areas of settlement, cultural survivals, and economic, political, and social activities—together with an assessment of its contribution to the development of our state. Though some efforts are more sociological, subjective, anecdotal, or selective than the neat, precise historical narrative that I envisioned, each of these pamphlets in its own way makes a valuable statement to all Rhode Islanders and provides a useful self-evaluation for the group that is the subject of analysis.

After the bicentennial's expiration, the concept of an ethnic heritage pamphlet series was kept alive by the Rhode Island Heritage Commission and its tireless chairman, Robert J. McKenna. Albert T. Klyberg of the Rhode Island Historical Society, Dr. Hilliard Beller of the Rhode Island Publications Society, and, especially, the authors of the various essays have also labored to bring this project to fruition as their contribution to the 350th anniversary of the founding of the state. No historical enterprise could be more appropriate for this 1986 celebration than a recounting of the toil and the triumph of our diverse peoples: From American Indians to Southeast Asians, we are Rhode Islanders all!

Patrick T. Conley

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Cover photo: The Shabo family in Damascus, about 1909, before emigrating to Pawtucket. *Courtesy of Rose Shabo Risho.*

PREFACE

The information in this pamphlet has been drawn primarily from original research based on local Rhode Island sources. These sources include Rhode Island newspapers, city directories, church histories and church records, and state and federal census reports. Of the latter, of particular value is the raw data from the 1910 United States census, which provides house-by-house information on the occupations, literacy, language, countries of birth, dates of entry to the United States, number of children born and number surviving in each family, and size of each household of the early Arabic-speaking settlers in Rhode Island. For the larger immigrant groups in the state, this information from the 1910 census is tabulated and published and thus readily available; but because of their small numbers Syrians were not included as a separate ethnic category in the published data. To my knowledge, the data for Syrians that I have recorded has not previously been assembled or tabulated.

The people of Rhode Island's Arabic-speaking ethnic communities were my most important source of information. Without their interest and cooperation this history could not have been written. I would like to thank all those who contributed their time to meet with me personally and share the experience of their families in coming to America and in becoming Americans. In particular, I would like to thank the priests of the Arabic-speaking ethnic churches, Father Timothy Ferguson of St. Mary's Antiochian Orthodox Church, Father Joseph Haggar of St. Basil's Melkite Catholic Church, and Father Paul Mouawad of St. George's Maronite Catholic Church. Most of all I would like to thank Father Abdelahad Doumato of St. Ephraim's Syrian Orthodox Church, who not only shared with me his knowledge of the people in his parish, rich with a professional perspective of some forty years, but also opened all the doors that made my research possible. In addition, I would like to thank all those who participated in my survey questionnaire, which was sent to over five hundred Rhode Island householders of Arabic-speaking extraction, and I would like especially to thank Rose Poole and the members of the Arab Subcommittee of the Rhode Island Heritage Commission for their efforts in distributing it.

I am grateful to Dr. Robert Laffey for his close reading of the text, for his suggestions and comments, and for the information that he provided on the Syrian community in Pawtucket and on Arabic ethnic organizations of which he was a founding member. I would like to thank him too for the personal insights, as well as the photographs, that he contributed. My thanks are also due to Dr. Yusuf Mussalli for his reading of the text and for his comments, and to Dr. Eric Hooglund for his suggestions on organizing the material. I am also grateful to Dr. John Nazarian for sharing with me the history of his family and for his insightful comments on the movements of Arabic-speaking people from their countries of origin and their patterns of settlement in America. Any errors or omissions, of course, remain my own responsibility.

I hope that this history will help younger generations of Rhode Islanders of Arabic-speaking extraction to gain both a better appreciation of their ethnic heritage and a greater understanding of their grandparents' experiences in becoming Americans. I hope, too, that the reader will recognize that these experiences, while in some ways unique to his own community, are also experiences that have been shared by people of other ethnic immigrant groups across Rhode Island.

Eleanor A. Doumato

Prologue

In Rhode Island, as in other places across the United States, many Americans of Arabic-speaking descent who were born before World War II can remember growing up in an ethnic neighborhood, where the church, the Syrian social club, and the Syrian grocery store were just around the block. By 1950 most of the ethnic enclaves had disappeared. Assimilation, intermarriage, and affluence had brought the children of Arabic-speaking Americans out of the old neighborhoods. At the same time, urban decay and redevelopment simply removed some of the old familiar places altogether. Yet in Rhode Island today a few neighborhoods of Arabic-speaking people remain, dating from the years before World War I. At least one such neighborhood is even thriving, as new people freshly arrived from countries of the Middle East fill the places of those who have moved away. But whether or not the ethnic neighborhood, defined by streets and houses and stores, still exists, wherever there is a Syrian church there is also a community of people who share day-to-day experiences and support each other through the major passages of life. Over the past century in America, the church has emerged as the single most important institution—probably the only institution outside the family—to nurture and pass on the cultural values of the Syrian people and to provide the focus through which Arabic-speaking peoples remain a community.

Immigration, Identity, and Origins

The Syrian Immigration

The first known Arabic-speaking person to make his home in Rhode Island was David Saaty. He arrived in Providence alone in 1886, hoping to find a Protestant missionary whom he had known back home in Mosul. That missionary was the Reverend Thomas Lowry, pastor of the Pilgrim Congregational Church. With Lowry's help, David found work in William Kerr's watchmaking shop on Westminster Street. In a few years he had saved enough to send for his brother Nowman, and by 1895 the two brothers had a watch repair business of their own. In 1901 they took a trip back to Mosul and returned with an Assyrian boy named Tooma Zora, who had worked in the Mosul rug bazaar and who was later to become a prominent rug merchant in Providence.

By 1905 there were enough people of the Saatys' religious confession in the Rhode Island area to establish a religious society. Over the next twenty years a succession of cousins were to follow the Saatys' path to America. In this way the link that had been forged in Mesopotamia between a Protestant missionary and a Christian boy was to result in the beginnings of the Arabic-speaking community in Rhode Island. In this way too, Arabic-speaking people of other religious confessions, coming individually and in small family groups, trickled into the state and established their church communities.

The vast majority of Arabic-speaking people in Rhode Island were Christians. However, the 1910 census for Central Falls alone reveals more than 20 Muslim names, and some two dozen Muslim names appear in the 1919 Rhode Island draft registry. In 1911 a survey of Syrians in the United States

suggested that Providence, with some 150 Muslims, had the largest Muslim community in the United States at the time. Examination of the 1910 census reveals that these Muslims were Turkish-speaking, and unlike the Syrian Christians they were all single men or married men without their families, living predominantly as transients in boardinghouses. Whether these Muslims returned to the Middle East, moved elsewhere, or simply merged into American society is unknown, for there are no local institutions through which they can be traced.

The Christians who came before World War I were known in America as Syrians. Not a nation of people, these Syrians were rather a collective of peoples related by geography, a common language, and a shared historical experience. They came from the land of ancient geographical Syria, which includes Palestine and the modern states of Syria, Jordan, and Lebanon, as well as part of the eastern Mediterranean coast in southeast Turkey. They also came from northern Mesopotamia, a land the Blackstone Valley Syrians called Bain Nahrain, meaning "between the two rivers." The Syrians of Central Falls, Pawtucket, and Woonsocket came especially from Aleppo, Damascus, and Marrat Saydnaya, and from the villages of Midyat and Mardin in Turkey and the city of Mosul in Iraq.

Those who settled in Providence were Maronite Christians who came primarily from the city of Tripoli and the villages of Kfarsghab, Becharre, Ehden, Baan, Blouza, Hadchit, Edde, and Seer Dennieh in northern Lebanon. When the turn-of-the-century Maronites came to America, Mount Lebanon had been separated from Syria and had been under autonomous Christian rule since 1861. Still, Lebanon as a nation-state, expanded to include the coastal cities and fertile plains behind the mountain, did not exist until the 1920s. Because the Maronites, like all the other Arabic-speaking Christians, were called Syrians in America, this survey will include them as Syrians until the end of the first quarter of the century, when they may more appropriately be called Lebanese.

The Syrian newcomers to Rhode Island were primarily Antiochian Orthodox, Old Syrian Orthodox, and Maronite and Melkite Catholics affiliated with the Church of Rome. Each of these groups had established a church or religious society before 1910. Also among the Syrian immigrants were a handful of Syrian Protestants, people who had been proselytized by

American or English missionaries and had joined Protestant splinter churches in Syria. In Rhode Island they drifted in and out of their original ethnic communions, and most eventually joined "American" parishes and were ultimately separated from the ethnic Syrian community.

The emigration of Syrian peoples to the West began only in the 1870s. Those who came to America before 1924 arrived in two waves, the first ending with the outbreak of World War I and the second from the end of the war until the quota system went into effect. By 1914, 100,000 Syrians had been admitted into the United States. By 1924 that number had risen to 122,000. However, the passage of the quota laws of 1921, 1924, and 1927 greatly limited the number of people from the Middle East who could enter the country, with the result that Syrian immigration to the United States was reduced from 5,105 in 1921 to 1,595 in 1924, and then to 450 in 1925 and 632 in 1929. These quota restrictions effectively ended Syrian immigration until the system was abolished in 1965.

At the turn of the century, the textile mills of Rhode Island were a magnet for immigrants—at that time almost one-third of the state's population was foreign-born. The majority of these immigrants were western European and Canadian. By World War I, however, the immigrant complexion in Rhode Island had been changed by the influx of greater numbers of southern and eastern Europeans and people from the Near East, especially Armenians and Syrians.

Compared to the European groups, the Syrian population in Rhode Island was tiny. Rhode Island census figures on the number of Arabic-speaking immigrants are not entirely reliable, since we cannot be certain who were counted as Syrians. It is likely that the Old Syrian Orthodox, who called themselves Assyrians, and the Muslims, who were often classified as Turks by U.S. immigration officials even after the Christians from Syria became classified as Syrians, were not included. However, the small size of the early community can be gleaned from a 1905 census which indicated that 379 foreign-born Syrians were living in the state. In the context of a total foreign-born population of 153,156, the number of Syrians was minuscule.

In 1920 the census for Rhode Island revealed 1,285 Syrian-born persons and 2,203 persons whose mother tongue was listed as "Syrian and Arabic." The large discrepancy may be

explained by the latter group's inclusion of American-born children, Muslims, and others who might not have called themselves Syrians but who were bilingual Arabic-speakers, such as Syrian-born Armenians and Syriac-speaking Christians. By 1929, with first-generation descendants, the strength of the Rhode Island community was estimated by the *Providence Journal* to be about 2,500, a total that appears to be low if the 1920 figures are accurate. Even with their small numbers, however, the Syrians had established themselves by the First World War as a distinct ethnic community in the same neighborhoods where many of them still live today.

The Arabic-speaking community in Rhode Island has now grown to include some 6,000 to 7,000 persons, among them people from Jordan, Palestine, the Persian Gulf, and Egypt—Muslims as well as Christians. For the most part, Arabic-speaking people who came from these places arrived after 1965, when the quota system was abolished. The Muslims among the newer arrivals have established no religious institutions that parallel the Christian churches in their ability to forge an ethnic community, and for a variety of reasons not all of the new Christian immigrants have joined a Syrian parish. For many of the recent immigrants, their relationship with the descendants of the pioneer Syrians remains almost solely one of a common, though increasingly remote, cultural and linguistic heritage.

Syrians, Lebanese, Arabs, and Aramaics: A Question of Identity

David Saaty was an Arabic-speaking Christian of the Old Syrian Orthodox Church, and he spoke Syriac, or modern Aramaic, as well as Arabic. He was born in the Mesopotamian city of Mosul, which was the capital city of an Ottoman province of the same name, and he was a subject of the Ottoman sultan. His family, his religion, and the town or district in which he lived formed the basis of his identity—in that order. If, however, someone were to have asked this first Arabic-speaking immigrant to Rhode Island the question "What are you?" Saaty would have had difficulty giving an answer that would have made sense to an American. Saaty lived in the Ottoman Empire and his passport said he was a Turk, but he certainly did not consider himself to be Turkish. He probably would have named his religion first, but he would

likely have seen that his listener had never heard of his church and was confused by his answer. Saaty might then have mentioned the city of his birth, or he might have said "Mesopotamia," a place more familiar to Americans. Still, the puzzled look on his listener's face would not have gone away. The American asking the question would have wanted to know what country Saaty was from and what ethnic group he belonged to, but these were matters that were no doubt difficult for Saaty to comprehend.

Upon coming to the eastern seaboard of America, immigrant Christians from the Ottoman Empire met with confusion in defining themselves in terms that were intelligible in their new homeland. In the East they belonged to "religious nations." Secular nation-states did not come into being in the Middle East until after World War I, and by that time the major influx of Eastern Christians coming to America had already occurred. For the Christians, their nation was the body of people who belonged to the same religious confession.

In the Middle East the umbrella of the church and the extended family networks under it predefined almost the whole of one's social relationships, including those of potential marriage. Even in towns in which a number of different churches existed amicably together, an individual's identity with his religious community was so strong that a coreligionist from any other town, even if he was not personally known, would be more worthy of loyalty than a neighbor who belonged to another confession. The stranger would always be thought of as "one of our people"; it was the neighbor who could ultimately be the outsider.

In the Ottoman Empire the political structure in regard to minorities both echoed and reinforced the bond between the individual and his church. Non-Muslim minorities were ruled according to their millet—their religious community. The patriarch was the head of the millet and the official intermediary between his people and the Ottoman government. Within the millet the patriarch, the bishops, and the priests were the arbitrators for the community and the authority in all matters relating to personal status, such as marriage, divorce, child custody, and inheritance.

The Syrian Christian thus had no idea of national origin, in the sense that one might be Irish or Italian or Portuguese. His nation was his religious community, regardless of where

the adherents to his faith happened to live. These divisions among the religious confessions still persist today. Each of the four Syrian churches in Rhode Island is a separate community, socially as well as confessionally.

When the people of these religious communities came to America, however, they shared a common identity in the eyes of the American government and in the eyes of Americans. In America they were all considered Syrians without distinction. This was not without justification. All of the Christians shared a common historical experience and an appreciation of the same foods, music, and dance. In Western literature, all people native to geographical Syria had been historically and collectively called Syrians. Beginning in 1899, all Christians who came from the Ottoman province of Syria (except Armenians), as well as those who came from Mesopotamia, were designated as Syrians by United States immigration officials, while the Muslims, who were called Turks by Americans, continued to be categorized as Turks regardless of the land of their origin. The Christian Arabic-speaking arrivals rapidly assumed the national identity that was so necessary in defining themselves in America. Their Syrian nationhood was thus born not in the Middle East, but in America.

Over the past century the question of ethnic identity has never been fully resolved in this country except by those who are separated completely from their ethnic origins. For most of the descendants of the Syrian immigrants, the first source of identity still remains the church, and each of the churches has a different orientation toward describing its own ethnic identity.

The Maronites wish to be known as Lebanese, even though most of their predecessors had emigrated long before 1926, when Lebanon as a nation-state came into being. They are adamant about not being Syrians, although, interestingly, the pre-World War I Maronite pioneers from whom they are descended did not share this view. Today a Maronite—even one whose predecessors did not come from Mount Lebanon but from, for example, Tripoli—will call himself Lebanese, whereas an Orthodox or a Melkite Christian descended from an immigrant from the same city will call himself Syrian. It has been suggested that the geographic identity follows the religious identity: the patriarchal center of the Maronite faith is in Mount Lebanon, while the patriarchs of the other three churches reside in Damascus. The currently popular claim of

the Maronites to Phoenician descent, however, is without historical justification.

The people of the Old Syrian Orthodox Church are strongly divided on the subject of who they are. Some wish to be considered Aramaic, after the language of their liturgy; others regard themselves as Siryan, after their vernacular language and the name of their church, or Syrian, if they came from towns in Syria. Some think of themselves as Assyrians—their church in Central Falls was sporadically called Assyrian Orthodox until 1950—although there is no historical connection between themselves and the people of the ancient Assyrian Empire. Both the Maronites and the Old Syrian Orthodox protest vigorously that they are not Arabs.

The Antiochian Orthodox and the Melkite Catholics tend to call themselves Syrians, whether their predecessors came from a village in Mount Lebanon or from one of the towns in Syria. Of all the descendants of the Arabic-speaking people in Rhode Island, they are also the ones most likely to call themselves Arabs.

Today it is commonplace to hear a person describe himself as an Arab-American and trace his ethnic roots back to the Arab world. Yet, historically, the word *Arab* does not relate to the roots of the Syrian Christians, or to those of most other Americans of Middle Eastern descent. An Arab was a bedouin, a desert nomad. *Arab* was a name spoken pejoratively by Christians to refer to Muslims, and by Muslims to refer to the desert wanderers.

The notion that people who speak the Arabic language share a common culture and a common history, and therefore constitute an Arab nation whose people may be called Arabs, is an idea that gained currency only in the present century after World War I. Many Christians in the Middle East subscribed to the idea of Arab nationalism, and some were among the vanguard who promulgated it. Many of the people from the Middle East who came to America after 1965 were nurtured in this ideology and today consider themselves to be Arabs.

The idea of being part of an Arab nation had an appeal to Syrians in America. The grandchildren of the pioneer immigrant generation did not share their parents' sense of religious nationhood. On the other hand, they valued the cultural aspects of their Syrian heritage, a heritage shared in common with other ethnic Syrians regardless of religious

affiliation. For them, being Arab provided the framework within which they could express their growing sense of mutual interest and commonality.

Political events in the Middle East after World War II brought to these Americans an increased consciousness of their ethnic roots, and the feeling of being part of a wider community of Arab peoples began to have even greater appeal. The war in the Middle East in 1967 was a catalyst in transforming the rising Arab ethnic consciousness into new self-definition. The refugees who poured into the United States after the war were educated people with whom the American of Syrian descent could readily identify and sympathize. More important, the criticism heaped on people from the Arabic-speaking world by the American press and government subsequent to this war forced every American with an Arabic name to feel immediately sensitive toward his ethnicity, regardless of his own personal outlook on political events in the Middle East.

Coincident to the situation surrounding the 1967 war was the rise in ethnic consciousness among other American ethnic groups. In the 1960s such designations as Irish-American, Italian-American, and Afro-American were becoming prominent in the American vocabulary. For Americans newly arrived from Arabic-speaking lands and those descended from the earlier immigration, their language was the one unifying bond. What else could they be as a group but Arab-American?

By 1970 these factors had coalesced and given form to a new Arab consciousness. Organizations that transcended boundaries of religion and national origin came into being, organizations that linked Americans of Arabic heritage across the country. The Association of Arab-American University Graduates, founded in 1967, was followed in 1972 by the National Association of Arab-Americans and in 1981 by the Arab-American Anti-Discrimination Committee. In 1973 the Arab-Americans and Friends for Justice in the Middle East Committee of Rhode Island was formed, a group that merged four years later with the Arab Subcommittee of the Rhode Island Heritage Commission. Descendants of the Syrians in America, joined by the new Arabic-speaking immigrants of every nationality, were new-born as Arab-Americans.

The Syrians in Syria

"If Paradise is to be found in this world," wrote an English lady while traveling in the mountains of the Lebanon in 1860, "it must be in the feel of the air early in the morning in those mountains." There are "miles of olive and pine-woods, valleys richly wooded and luxuriant with flowers"; "every stream teems with oleanders, the pines perfume the air, and every height, if not covered with a village, is topped by a convent." Although by 1920, toward the end of the period of Syrian immigration, more than three times as many Rhode Island Syrians came from Aleppo and Damascus than from Mount Lebanon, today more than half of the Syrians living in Rhode Island claim to be descended from people who came from villages in these mountains.

Most of those who arrived with the first wave of immigrants before World War I came not out of dire poverty, or because of political turmoil or religious strife, but rather with the hope of finding an economically better life and of raising the standard of living of their families back home. In the Lebanon these immigrants had been a self-sufficient people who raised sheep and goats; in terraced fields they grew wheat and grapes and tended fruit gardens and mulberry, olive, and fig trees. They manufactured wine and milled their wheat at home. In Aleppo and Damascus the immigrants had been tradesmen and shopkeepers, but their homes had also been a place of industry. Nearly every home had a loom situated in a depression in the floor, with a bench for the weaver to sit. Cushions, slippers, bags, caps, and other garments were woven of silk and cotton thread, sometimes with gold and silver thread inlaid. Coarser fabrics were made for the *abaaye*, *'amis*, *shirwal*, and *kaffiyeh* (cloak, shirt, trousers, and headcloth). These articles were sold in the local market or manufactured for personal use.

Everywhere in rural Syria and Lebanon silkworms were raised at home as a type of cottage industry. Agents from the silk mills went from village to village collecting the cocoons, which would be unraveled, washed, and spun into silk thread. Scattered all though the region were spinning factories, in which men and women sometimes labored from sunrise to sunset for less than subsistence wages. The highest-quality finished thread produced in these factories was exported to Europe.

When the earliest immigrants from the Syrian villages and towns left for America, their departure was viewed as an economic investment. A whole family, or even a village, would contribute to the cost of the passage. Usually the eldest son went first. He was expected to work, save, and send money back to his village. Eventually he would bring over a younger brother or other relative to work with him and make more money to send back home. So substantial were the amounts of money sent that according to a report published in 1916, 41 percent of the total income of the inhabitants of Mount Lebanon was composed of remittances from America.



The Noury family in Aleppo, 1906, shortly before George and Jameela Noury (far right) emigrated to Rhode Island with their daughter Julia (at her father's knee). The clothing reflects the mixture of Western and local cultural influences in Syria at the time. The men are wearing European jackets over the traditional 'umbaz (ankle-length coat), 'amis (long shirt), and shirwal (baggy pants), with a cummerbund at the waist, and each wears the tarbush, or fez, that had been made compulsory for all male citizens of the Ottoman Empire in 1829. Courtesy of Emily Noury.

"They tell me," wrote an American observer in Lebanon in 1922, "that the first thing that a Lebanese emigrant does when he has achieved a little prosperity in the new country is to send home to his relatives the price of a tiled roof." In the

space of about twenty years, the traditional flat roofs made of timbers, mud, and dried grasses had all but disappeared. The red-tiled roofs that today are the hallmark of the Lebanese coastline are the legacy of the Syrians in America.

In the early years of Syrian immigration, not everyone who came to this country was determined to settle here permanently. The idea of making the United States a permanent home evolved over a period of years as the immigrants began to realize that even though life was economically very difficult for them, if they worked hard America held the potential for a far better life than could be hoped for in Syria. In addition, some were starting to raise children who had educational opportunities in America that were unheard of in Syria, and as soon as these children began to attend school, they began to lose their Arabic language.

The temporary emigration of Syrians for economic reasons had been a fact of life since ancient times, for the land could support only a limited population: in Mount Lebanon the reason was the quality of the land itself, while in Syria the reason lay in political instability. Toward the end of the nineteenth century, however, new factors came into play which encouraged the emigration of Syrian people to other countries, especially Egypt, and later to North and South America. The most significant factor was the rising expectations that came about among the Syrians as a result of the European presence and European investments in the region. Increased educational opportunities brought about through Western missionary activity, together with improved transport, better communications, and, ultimately, word of mouth of the first successful pioneer Syrians returning from America, awakened the Syrian people to the potential for a better future through working abroad.

Changing conditions within the traditional economy were important factors too. The native silk industry had been in decline since the Suez Canal opened the silk markets of India and Japan to Europe, and after 1840 cotton growing and cotton textile production fell sharply as a result of finished cotton goods from England flooding the local market. Still, the problems resulting from foreign competition should not be overemphasized. In the 1880s, when emigration to America began, the textile industry was still viable. Silk production was being revived by the introduction of scientific methods of

rearing silkworms, and new breeds of eggs were being imported from France. Spinning factories and the manufacture of soap remained important industries, and over thirty thousand handlooms were in operation, responding to a healthy market for traditionally styled garments.

Conscription was also a factor in the emigration of Syrians to America. After the 1908 revolution in Ottoman Turkey, Christian boys, who previously could pay a sum of money to avoid military service, were being drafted into the Ottoman army. A number of Blackstone Valley Syrians, in fact, cite conscription as the reason for their fathers' coming to America.

A final circumstance affecting emigration was the tensions that sometimes existed between the Christians and the Muslims. These tensions, however, were highly localized, and they were significant as a factor in emigration only in specific areas at specific times. For the majority of Blackstone Valley Syrians, problems with the Muslims were not a factor at all in their parents' coming to America. Of those who were interviewed in the preparation of this survey, none whose ancestral roots are in Aleppo, Damascus, or the surrounding villages mentioned antagonism with Muslims as a reason for their parents' emigration. When one Syrian-American woman was asked directly whether her parents, in talking about the old country, ever discussed the Muslims, she responded with surprise. "You mean there are Muslims in Syria?" she answered. In fact, the vast majority of Christians from the towns and cities of Syria lived so closely within their Christian communities that apart from taxation and commerce, their contacts with Muslims were minimal.

On the other hand, the Maronites in Mount Lebanon had suffered as a result of fighting between themselves and the Druze; but this had occurred a generation before the beginning of Syrian emigration to America, and since 1861 the Maronites had lived under an autonomous Christian government protected by the great powers of Europe. In 1914, however, World War I brought about a return of Ottoman rule to Mount Lebanon. To the Ottomans the Christian Lebanese were partisans of western Europe, and the resources of the country were stripped to support the Ottoman army. So great was the suffering that between 1915 and 1918 Lebanon is estimated to have lost 100,000 of its 420,000 population to disease and starvation. More might have died but for the philanthropic

efforts of Syrian emigrants in America, such as the Maronites of Rhode Island, who sent aid during the war through their Syrian Relief Committee. The war temporarily halted the movement of Syrians to America, but it convinced thousands more to leave. Consequently the war's end prompted the second wave of Syrian emigrants—emigrants who were coming to America to stay.

For the Old Syrian Orthodox people in the Blackstone Valley whose origins are in Mosul and eastern Turkey, tensions between the Muslims and Christians played a direct role in their emigration to America. "There was just no justice," says one Syrian from Central Falls whose father first came to America in 1912. He says that "problems with the Muslims" were the reason his father determined to bring his family back with him to Rhode Island, as he did after the First World War. The family came originally from the region around the northern Mesopotamian towns of Midyat and Mardin. In 1895 this whole area in what is now eastern Turkey had been the scene of massacres aimed by the Ottomans especially at the Armenians, but many Syrian Orthodox were killed and uprooted as well. A great number of the Old Syrian Orthodox of Central Falls and Pawtucket came from this region. Some at first fled to Aleppo or Damascus, where they stayed briefly before coming to America. Assad Shabo, whose family live in Pawtucket, used to tell how he walked the 250 miles from Midyat to Aleppo, leading a donkey cart which carried his little brother and sister, in order to escape the killing.

During World War I the disaster was repeated—except that this time many more people were uprooted and many more died. A woman of the Old Syrian Orthodox community from Midyat tells her children and grandchildren in Cumberland how her own mother carried her on her back as they ran to escape the Turks. The child was grabbed from her mother's shoulders, but the mother in her terror kept on running. By luck the child survived and was cared for in a Muslim home until the war's end, when she was restored to her family. Like many other Christian survivors in Turkey, she was taken to Damascus with her family, whence her Rhode Island descendants came to America.

Many of the survivors were to move to the relative security of the Jeziereh, to Aleppo, Damascus, Beirut, and Homs, where within a matter of a few years they too were caught up in the

fervor of their new Christian neighbors to see if there might be a better life in America.

The Coming of the Syrians to Rhode Island

"They used to say we would find gold in the streets," Majeeda Shabo Gilbert (called "Auntie Jennie") once said. "But I was off the boat one day and in the factory the next, and I was fourteen years old." That was in 1912. The textile mills of the Blackstone Valley were a natural place for the Syrians to go in search of work, since many had been weavers back home. In 1902 a group of Syrians who arrived in Providence during a strike by textile workers in Olneyville went straight from the boat to the looms of the striking workers. They knew no English, but they knew they needed to work, and soon after the strike was over they settled permanently in the factory towns of Pawtucket and Central Falls. In 1910 fully 91 percent of all the Blackstone Valley Syrians who were employed worked in the mills.

While the Christians from the urban areas of Syria were settling down to factory life in the Blackstone Valley, Maronite Catholics from Mount Lebanon—especially from the village of Kfarsghab—were arriving in the Federal Hill section of Providence. Possibly the first Maronite to come to Rhode Island was George Roukous, who settled in Providence between 1889 and 1894. Roukous worked as a door-to-door salesman, and as he saved, he was able to stake newer arrivals in the peddling business. Eventually he became a wholesale supplier of peddlers' goods. His occupation was typical of the Maronites who followed him to Rhode Island. By 1910, 60 percent of employed Maronites were peddlers or shopkeepers (the rest worked as laborers in jewelry shops, coal yards, or textile mills). The Maronites of Providence displayed the penchant for salesmanship for which their countrymen were known. By 1900 the Syrian peddler and the Syrian supplier of peddlers' goods were familiar figures on the American landscape, especially in the Midwest.

By the beginning of World War I, the Blackstone Valley Syrians and the Maronites of Providence were both well established. When the second wave of Syrians began to arrive in Rhode Island after the war, they entered the trades of those who had preceded them. For example, when Joseph Solomon (the father of Anthony Solomon, former general treasurer of

the state and 1984 Democratic candidate for governor) came to Providence in 1918, he sold coal out of a backpack and became successful selling clothes door-to-door on credit. Like today's proverbial Beirut merchant, he became fluent in the language of his customers, the Italian immigrants who were his neighbors on Federal Hill.

Syrian Churches

The Churches and Their Background

When the flow of Syrian immigrants ended with the quota laws of the 1920s, there were in Rhode Island about 460 Maronites, 150 Old Syrian Orthodox, and from 1,400 to 1,800 others, divided between the Melkites and the Antiochian Orthodox. For the most part, their coming to Rhode Island had been a movement of interrelated families and confessional alliances—so much so that the Syrian churches were made up of extended families and people whose predecessors came from the same villages. Today one will still hear a Syrian-American refer to the others in his church as “our people,” and in every sense they are.

Yet Syrian churches in Rhode Island do not lend themselves to easy definition. In origin they are all related to the schisms that afflicted the church in the East as a result of theological disagreements during the fifth century. Known as the Christological controversies, these disagreements concerned the nature of Christ, to what extent he was divine and to what extent human.

Before and after the Council of Chalcedon in 451, groups holding their own opinions about the nature of Christ broke away from the Church of Constantinople, with each one claiming orthodoxy. Ultimately most of Christendom in Syria, Palestine, Mesopotamia, and Egypt was separated from Constantinople. Most of the new churches were to some extent divided along ethnic and linguistic lines. These churches include the Nestorians, who speak a dialect of Syriac, in northern Mesopotamia and northwestern Persia; the Old

Syrian Orthodox, who speak another dialect of Syriac, and who were most numerous in Syria and Mesopotamia; the Armenian Orthodox; the Coptic Orthodox in Egypt; and the Abyssinian Church in Ethiopia.

St. Mary's Antiochian Orthodox Church in Pawtucket represents the church that remained faithful to the authority of Constantinople in the fifth century when the other Christians broke away. It maintains the Greek rite, but it has used Arabic in its liturgy since the ninth century. A small minority among other Syrian Christians, its adherents were contemptuously called Melkites, or "Emperor's Men," by the other Christians. The patriarch of the Antiochian Orthodox in America resides in Damascus, where he presides over half a million Christians in Syria and Lebanon and some 200,000 in North and South America.

As with other Syrian churches, the identity of this church has been complicated in America by difficulties in translating its name into English. In Arabic the name of the church is Rūm Orthodox, *Rūm* meaning Greek, or Constantinople, which was known as the New Rome. The Rūm Orthodox came to America predominantly from Syria and Lebanon. The name of their church was sometimes translated literally into English as Greek Orthodox, but this was not entirely accurate. Although their church was in communion with the Greek Orthodox Church, the Rūm Orthodox were under the patriarch of Antioch; their language and most of their liturgy were Arabic, not Greek, and the people themselves were from Syria and Lebanon. Anyone who spoke Arabic knew that *Rūm* meant the Syrian people who adhered to Byzantine Orthodoxy. In America, however, the Greek Orthodox were the members of the Greek-speaking national Greek church. Furthermore, the relationship between the people of the Rūm church and their Greek prelates in Syria and Palestine was one of animosity. On coming to America the Rūm Orthodox therefore chose to be called Syrian Orthodox, in accordance with their ethnic identity and language and to distinguish themselves from the Greeks.

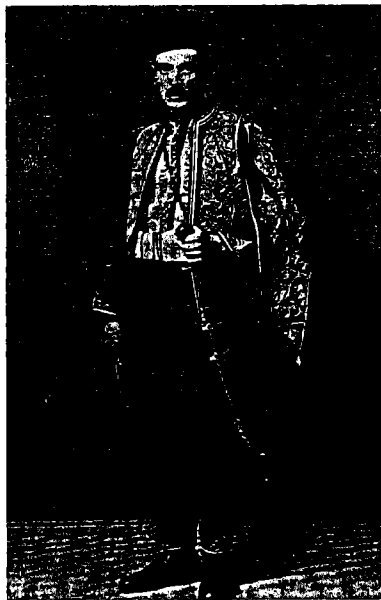
The question of the church's name was revived in the last two decades. One difficulty lay in the confusion in English between the name Syrian Orthodox and the name of the Old Syrian Orthodox Church. More important, the rise of nationalism in the Middle East had made the name Syrian something of an anachronism: whereas Syria had been basically

a large geographical area that encompassed almost all of the territories in which the Rūm Orthodox people lived, now it was a small nation-state. To be named Syrian Orthodox, some people felt, implied that the church was a national church of Syria and that its adherents were somehow allied to it. Like the Rūm Orthodox who had come at the turn of the century, these Syrians did not wish to be called Greek, and at the same time they wanted to distinguish themselves from the other Orthodox churches. A solution was found in the name of the city which is the ancient seat of their patriarchate, the city of Antioch, and the Syrian Orthodox thus became Antiochian Orthodox.

St. Ephraim's Syrian Orthodox Church in Central Falls represents the church formed by those who broke away from the Greek Orthodox Church at Chalcedon in 451. They held to the Monophysite position in the Christological controversies, believing that Christ was of one nature, both human and divine at the same time. The Syrian Orthodox Church was the dominant church of native Christians in Syria from the sixth century until the twelfth century, when the combination of conversion to Islam, the invasion of the Mamluks, and the Mongol invasions of Taimur Lang finally took its toll. By the second half of the thirteenth century, the Christian population was reduced to a minority, and the Syrian Orthodox retreated to the mountains of southeastern Anatolia. Today there are about 175,000 Old Syrians in Lebanon, Syria, and Iraq and about 35,000 in North and South America.

As an Old Syrian Orthodox church, St. Ephraim's bears a relationship to St. Mary's Syrian (now Antiochian) Orthodox Church in English name only. In Arabic and in Syriac the people of St. Ephraim's call themselves Siryan Orthodox and their church Siryan Orthodox el-Qadim. *Siryān* in Arabic means the Syriac language or, collectively, the people of the Old Syrian Church. In fact, all of the Christians who use or have used Syriac in their liturgy or as a vernacular have called themselves Siryan. Although *Siryān* is transliterated in English with the same sound and spelling as *Syrian*, the two words have no relation to each other (the Arabic word for a person from the geographical land of Syria is *Suri*, a person from the land of Sur). The Old Syrians are also known as Jacobites, from the name of Jacob Baradai, a missionary who revived the church in

the sixth century; and both in America and in the Middle East, some of the Old Syrian Orthodox call themselves Assyrians.



Mousa, the bodyguard of the patriarch of the Old Syrian Orthodox Church, in his formal uniform. Courtesy of Father A. Doumato.

Centuries after the Roman Catholic West and the Greek Orthodox East separated, each of the Eastern churches produced a splinter group which united with the Roman Catholic Church. Collectively known as Uniates, these splinter churches are individually called Catholic—Rūm Catholic, Syrian Catholic, and Armenian Catholic—while the Nestorian Catholics are called Chaldeans.

St. Basil's Melkite Catholic Church in Central Falls is Catholic and follows the Greek rite. The people of this church were originally Rūm Orthodox, but they broke with Orthodoxy in 1724 upon selecting their own patriarch. The Melkite patriarch holds the highest position within the Melkite Church, which is also under the jurisdiction of the Sacred Oriental Congregation in Rome. As with the Orthodox, and for all the same reasons, the name of the church is variably expressed as Greek Catholic and Syrian Catholic. The adoption of the name Melkite, which is rarely used by the Rūm Catholics in Syria and Lebanon, came into regular use in America and represents an

ironic twist of history. As mentioned above, *Melkite* is the pejorative term that Christians who had broken with the Greek Orthodox Church used to refer to the Christians who had remained faithful to Constantinople. By the eighteenth century the Rūm Orthodox had ceased to be known as Melkite, but the newly formed Rūm Catholics picked up the name and carried on with it. Consequently, a name which once applied only to a group loyal to the imperial church has come to be applied to a group which broke away from it and united with Rome.

The Melkite patriarch is styled "of Antioch" and lives in Damascus. In Lebanon, Syria, and Palestine, Melkite-rite Catholics number about 250,000, and there are about 150,000 in North and South America.

St. George's Maronite Catholic Church in Pawtucket is Roman Catholic but follows its own Maronite liturgy and rite. Maronites claim never to have been in schism with Rome, but the earliest evidence documenting their relationship with the Catholic Church dates only to the late twelfth century, during the time of the crusader kingdoms. The origins of the Maronites are traced to a priest named Maron who lived in the district of present-day Hama in Syria, probably in the fifth century. The Maronites began migrating into the northern Lebanon from the end of the seventh century. Centered at Becharre and Ehden, they eventually spread south to Kisrawan and to the outskirts of Beirut. The Maronites are unique among the Christians of the East in that they are concentrated mainly in one location, and they have a strong sense of religious and political unity and a feeling of national identity with Lebanon.

Like the patriarchs of the other churches, the Maronite patriarch is styled "of Antioch," but he resides in Qannubin, a village near Becharre. There are 750,000 Maronites in Syria and Lebanon. Outside of Lebanon, Maronites live in Damascus, Cairo, Aleppo, and in a few villages inside Israel, and these total some 40,000. There are also 250,000 to 300,000 Maronites in America, Australia, and Europe. In contrast to the other Christians of Lebanon and Syria, the majority of Maronites are peasantry living in small towns and villages on the western slope of Mount Lebanon. Only in Beirut is there a sizable urban concentration, although even there the Maronites are outnumbered by Sunni Muslims and Rūm and Armenian Orthodox Christians.

Keeping the Faith in America

In 1907 Father Hannah Khoury was ordained in Jerusalem to minister to the Old Syrians of North America. His mission was to keep his people true to the doctrines of their church and to the faith of their fathers, but he had another mission as well: to guide his people toward becoming American citizens. In November 1908 Father Khoury celebrated the first Old Syrian Orthodox Mass in Rhode Island in the Syriac-Aramaic language. "If you intend to stay in America," he told his congregation on that occasion, "become citizens and support the Constitution always." Advising his congregants that they owed much to the American people for allowing them to share in the liberty of America, he urged them to live the lives of good citizens and keep up the good name of their people in this country. The priest concluded his comments by offering a special prayer for President William Taft.

The secular words of the priest spoken in the context of a Mass might sound out of place to the ears of the immigrants' children, but to the new arrivals his words could not have been more appropriate. In Ottoman Syria the priest was the community leader and the church was the government in the immediate lives of its people. The priests and bishops were the intermediary between the people of the church and everyone else. To be concerned with secular matters was integral to the role of the church. But this was America, and now the church was relinquishing that part of her role. "Become Americans," was the message, "but do not lose touch with the faith, the people, and the traditions from which you came."

The path of the new Americans was in fact in these two directions—directions which were in some ways contradictory. "Americans" were Protestant or, like most of the other immigrant people in Rhode Island, Roman Catholic. The Syrians were either Eastern Orthodox or Eastern-rite Catholics who followed liturgies and rituals that appeared strange to other Americans. Other immigrants spoke English or languages related to English, but the Syrians spoke Arabic, a language utterly foreign and written in a script unintelligible to Americans. The Syrian immigrants were used to a way of life founded on intimate and constant family contact, with time devoted daily to religion, but in America they would be workers wedded to a time clock. For the Syrians, the process of

"becoming American" meant moving very far away from the religion and traditions they were entrusted to preserve.

The Syrian Churches in Rhode Island

The Syrians' first priority in preserving their heritage was founding a church. The Catholic Syrian churches received the financial support of the Catholic Diocese of Providence. By the time the first Old Syrian Orthodox Mass was celebrated by a visiting priest, Melkite Catholics had already engaged a permanent priest for their parish, the Reverend Ananias Boury, and were having regular services in the basement of a Polish Catholic church. In 1909 the Melkites bought a piece of land on Broad Street in Central Falls, and the Catholic diocese provided the money to build a church, St. Basil's, which was completed in 1911. In that year the community numbered about 400. It had grown to over 1,000 in 1931 when a new church, St. Elias's, was founded for the 250 Melkite Catholics living in Woonsocket.

Over the years the church has tried to answer the need to preserve the heritage of her people. In 1920 St. Basil's priest, Father Timothy Jock, started the first Melkite parochial school



First communion at St. Basil's, 1934. The priest is Father Timothy Jock, who served a parish of almost thirteen hundred people and established the first Melkite parochial school in the United States. Courtesy of Rose Poole.

in the United States, which opened with 45 students. The object of the school was "not only to educate the American-born Syrian children in the tongue of their parents but also to so thoroughly Americanize them that they will give earnest support to American institutions when they arrive at manhood



Arabic-language theater was an important element in the social and cultural life of the Syrian ethnic community. Here is the cast of Bring Me the Ironing, Mister!, a comedy performed by students at St. Basil's School in Pawtucket. Courtesy of Dr. Robert Laffey.

and womanhood." In the school's thirteen years of operation, 156 students graduated. Today, with 350 families, St. Basil's is the largest of the Syrian churches in Rhode Island. Under the guidance of Father Joseph Haggar, who ministers to both St. Basil's and St. Elias's, the church fosters the study of Arabic and ethnic history among the youth of the parish.

The impetus for the small number of Maronite families in Providence to build a church of their own was their inability to gain recognition as Catholics by the priests in the Federal Hill area where they lived. Local Catholics initially believed that the Maronites were Muslims, and they did not accept them as fellow Roman Catholics even after later acknowledging them as Christians. Michael and Yasmin Hanna, who arrived in Providence from Kfarsghab in 1901, found a priest to marry

them only with difficulty, and then this priest would not marry them in the church. This event confirmed to the Maronites that they must have a church of their own, and they began work toward this end.

Eventually the Catholic diocese responded to their need. Bishop Matthew Harkins helped them obtain a loan for the 1911 purchase of a tenement house on America Street, a building that was to become St. George's Maronite Church. Over the years the support of the Catholic diocese proved invaluable to the Maronites. To assist the church, the diocese provided nuns to teach in the Maronite Sunday school. In 1922 the church's new priest, Father Ne'matallah Gideon, received the permission of Bishop William Hickey to solicit contributions from the other Catholic parishes in the neighborhood to pay off a debt owed by the church. In so doing, the priest established a precedent which was to be profitably pursued whenever the church was in need throughout his



Parishioners of St. George's Maronite Catholic Church on America Street in Providence in the mid-1940s. The priest is Father Ne'matallah Gideon, who served the Maronites of Providence for twenty-five years. Courtesy of Father Paul Muawwad.

twenty-five years at St. George's. "I can remember my mother standing at the steps of the other churches on Sunday mornings with our priest and two other women, their aprons raised to accept donations," says Elias Badway. "Times were very, very hard."

The parish had 460 members, 200 of them children, when Father Gideon became its priest. The church was rebuilt and enlarged over the years, but it remained on America Street until 1977, when an Episcopal church building in Pawtucket was purchased and dedicated to St. George. Today there are at least 400 to 450 Maronite families in Rhode Island, and 200 of them are active members of St. George's. Under the leadership of Father Paul Mouawad, the Maronites sponsor many educational, social, and religious activities for their members.

The Orthodox Syrian churches did not have the same financial help that the Catholic churches received, and they had to wait many years before they had church buildings of their own. The Syrian Antiochian Orthodox people in Pawtucket joined together in 1910 as St. Mary's Syrian Orthodox Charitable Society, although they had neither a permanent priest nor a building of their own in which to worship. The society and its women's auxiliary met at various homes, where occasional services were celebrated by visiting priests. About 1917 the community bought the High Street property where St. Mary's Church now stands. The church's basement was constructed in that year, and services were held there until 1928, when the building was finally completed. Throughout the 1920s children attended Arabic language classes in St. Mary's basement church after school. According to the earliest surviving records, James, the infant son of Richard Hanna and Edna Hashim, was in 1918 the first child to be baptized in the basement church.

During the late 1920s and 1930s the parishioners of St. Mary's put on several plays in the local junior high school auditorium under the direction of the Reverend George Nahas of St. Mary's and Jameela Takmonsli. Many of the plays were written by the Reverend Slamon Fernainy, the pastor of St. John of Damascus Antiochian Orthodox Church of Boston. Set in the Middle East, these plays were written in Arabic; but for second-generation actors who could speak but not read the language, parts were written phonetically in English.

Today St. Mary's Antiochian Orthodox Church continues

its commitment to its cultural heritage with a summer camp for Orthodox youth, an active choir, and an extensive program of ethnic social events. With a parish of 187 families, the church is now under the pastorate of Father Timothy Ferguson.

The people of the Old Syrian Orthodox community formed an Assyrian Charitable Society to provide for the religious education of their children as early as 1905, but like the Antiochian Syrian Orthodox, they waited many years before they had a church. In 1913 they formed St. Ephraim's Society, with the purpose of working toward the building of a church. It took ten years to raise the twelve thousand dollars necessary to buy the land on Washington Street in Central Falls and to complete the church, and this was accomplished only with the assistance of the society's sister parish in New Jersey. When the Syrian Apostolic Church of St. Ephraim was consecrated in 1926, it was the second Old Syrian Orthodox church in America. Including men, women, and children, there were 150 people in the parish.

Unfortunately the parish could not always afford to support a priest. In 1932 its "borrowed" priest left for Worcester, and subsequently the church was used only for special occasions. Weddings and baptisms would be planned for the same time so that the expense of securing a priest could be shared by more than one family.

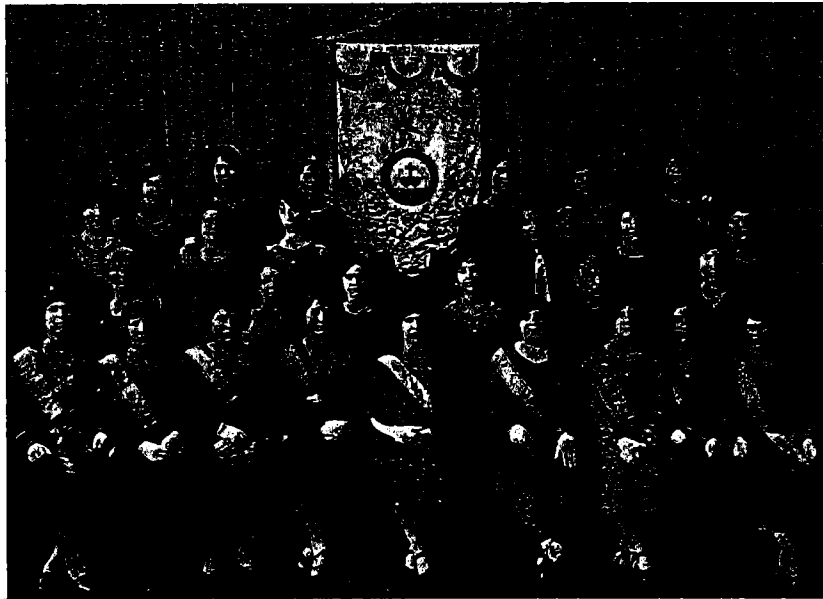
In 1941 the church building burned, and the parish remained inactive for the next eight years. That over all those years St. Ephraim's community did not disperse, nor even temporarily attend one of the two other Syrian churches in the neighborhood, is a testament to the strength of the Syrians' identity with the church to which they belonged. "It was unthinkable," says Weeda Gabriel, who was married in St. Ephraim's church in 1931. "You went only to your own church."

During those bleak years the Episcopal diocese lent the Syrians support. The Venerable Anthony Parshley gathered up St. Ephraim's children into his Sunday school, and he helped too in planning a new church, which was completed in 1949. Finally, a priest, Father Abdelahad Doumato, was ordained in Homs, Syria, especially for St. Ephraim's parish. When he arrived in 1952, the Old Syrian Orthodox had a permanent priest of their own for the first time after over sixty years in America. Today the parish numbers about 120 families.

The World of the Rhode Island Syrians

The First Syrian Societies

One of the chief concerns of the new Syrian arrivals to Rhode Island was the welfare of their families back home. The earliest Syrian societies reflected that interest. They were made up of people from the same town of origin, or of people who belonged to the same church. The Syrian Relief Committee, for



The Ladies' Auxiliary of the Aleppian Aid Society, located in Central Falls, about 1929. The auxiliary's first president, Eva Azrak, is seated in the middle of the front row. Courtesy of Joseph Raheb.

example, was a Maronite organization which sent clothing to Syria and Mount Lebanon during World War I. In 1919 a United Assyrian Christian Association in Central Falls sent a delegation to New York to petition President Wilson to convince the Paris Peace Conference that Mesopotamia should be placed under American trusteeship.

The Aleppian Aid Society, still on Washington Street in Central Falls, was founded in 1916 by people from Aleppo and Damascus as a united way of sending money to their families.



The cast of a play, King Solomon and the Queen of Sheba, performed at the Aleppian Aid Society in 1939. Courtesy of Emily Noury.

The Syrian-American Association and the Aleppo Young Men's Club brought people from the same villages together for social occasions. The Providence Council of the Becharre Welfare Association of America sent aid to families in Lebanon, and the Lebanon Fraternal Society of Providence was a social club for Maronites in the 1930s.

Between 1930 and 1940 the focus of Syrian-American societies turned from Syria to the land that was now their only home, and the societies' concerns came to embrace other Americans of ethnic Syrian descent, whatever their religion or place of family origin in the Middle East.

The Syrian Communities: Central Falls, Pawtucket, and Providence

Up and down Washington Street in Central Falls beat the heart of Syrian-American life from the 1920s to the 1950s. Within a few short blocks were the Syrian-American Club, the Aleppian Aid Society, and St. Ephraim's Church. Two- and three-story clapboard tenement houses were home to the Syrians.

"Life was lonely at first," says Joseph Anter, who moved to Central Falls in 1919, "but there were other people from Aleppo to play cards with." His family—ten of them had all come together—lived in a tenement with two families to a floor sharing one toilet. "Back in Aleppo we all lived together in one house with a big open courtyard in the middle . . . but in Central Falls we had running water inside the house!"

The Syrians of Central Falls, who had been mostly silk weavers back home, worked in textile factories with names like Coates, Sayles, and Wayposet, mills which a 1934 *Providence Journal* article called "Central Falls's staff of life." According to this article, nearby Jenks Park was a favorite haunt of Syrian men, who used to gather under a massive metal umbrella for an afternoon of cards.

The Syrians began moving into the Washington Street area before 1910. By the 1920s the names of the families along the street would be familiar to the neighborhood sixty years later—names like Peters, Hanna, Sharki, Corey, Anter, Homsy, Aisis, Shabo, Danho, Abdelahad, Deebo, Alkas, and Risho. Clustered along the street were businesses like Yooraki Mshati Shoes; Hamood's Central Quick Lunch; Jarjoura Assad, Barber; Banna Shackrey Lunch; George Massin Shoe Repair; Joseph Tajra Variety; and Hafeefa Kaspar's Restaurant. Washington Street boasted no less than six grocers: George Donato, Peter Tohan, the Sayegh Brothers, George Joseph, Amin Kilsey, and Toufiq Hamood (with his "Fruit and Pool Room").

"We had no money, but we had the best of everything," recalls Alicia Peters, whose mother came from Aleppo in 1920. Alicia remembers that all Central Falls was divided into ethnic enclaves. "At our end of the street we were all Syrians." The Irish were mostly on Dexter Street and the French on Lonsdale Avenue, while the Poles lived on High Street. "All the Syrians would gather on Washington Street," recalls Alicia. "The men were at the club playing cards. We had bonfires on the Fourth



Lorice Sayegh Salem (center) with her sister and her parents in the family grocery store on Washington Street in Central Falls about 1935. Courtesy of Lorice Sayegh Salem.

of July, *mabrajans* [picnics], *haflas* [parties with dancing], and weddings. Everything was such fun . . . and we learned honesty and to be compassionate of others."

It is fortunate that the newly arrived Americans from such diverse backgrounds got along so well, because according to the 1934 *Providence Journal* report, Central Falls was the most densely populated municipality in the United States. In the town's one square mile, 26,000 people made their home. Half of these were French, 4,000 were Poles, 1,000 were Syrians, and 600 to 700 were Portuguese.

In 1934 a Providence woman named Marjory Dayton Williams, who had just returned from an overland journey to Iraq, went to Washington Street in search of "Arabians." She gives us this picture of what she found:

Not far from the city limits is a street where people born on the banks of the Tigris and Euphrates river assemble. Some will be seen smoking their elaborate water pipes as they sit on long Arabian benches. And if you look in a little coffee shop you will find the same fare that you would be served in Mosul. There is a bright samovar, and you will be served Arabian coffee in tiny cups. Hot tea in glasses and flat bread may be had . . . and you may even rent a water pipe to smoke while here. . . . The true politeness born in these people, the natural graciousness and hospitality that all these people possess made an atmosphere greater than its surroundings.

What Mrs. Williams didn't see on her visit to the coffeehouse was the still in the basement, where Toufiq Hajjar produced the homebrewed *araq* he sold for twenty dollars a gallon. Today his children recall with hilarity the messy after-school chore of crushing the grapes for the still—with their bare feet! It was the depression, and the *araq* was, after all, the family's real source of income.

To the Syrians of Central Falls, the Pleasant View section of Pawtucket was known as "Foun-toon." Fountain Street was the steep uphill route to the neighborhood bounded by Central Avenue, East Street, Middle Street, and the Industrial Highway, in which about a thousand Syrians made their home. Though the distance by foot, as well as the terrain between Washington Street and Pleasant View, was formidable, many Syrians walked between the two cities every day on their way to work at the Green Hall Mills or at the Royal Weaving Company, which employed about 240 Syrians in the 1930s. As a young man, Joseph Risho used to accompany his father every day on the long trek to work. The hardest part was getting up the Fountain Street hill. "In good weather it was okay," he said, "but in the winter my father couldn't make it. I used to run ahead of him and pull him up the hill behind me with a rope, and on the way back down the hill I stayed at the top holding onto one end of the rope to keep him from slipping on the way down."

The Pleasant View Syrians worked, played, married, and worshiped with the Central Falls Syrians, but they had a community of their own as well. Having come primarily from Damascus, they formed their own St. Vincent de Paul Society, Branch of Damascus, and the Syrian Ladies' Catholic Relief Society for Damascus in 1919. These were charitable organizations that supported various benevolent causes in Syria. The neighborhood, which embraced Greek and Armenian families along with the Syrians, supported Syrian-

owned tailoring shops, variety stores, ethnic groceries and bakeries, and a number of coffeehouses.

Baseball and football were major activities for Pleasant View families in the 1930s and 1940s, and the Syrians, like other ethnic groups, had their own ball clubs. Among the star players when the Woodbine Aces challenged the Central Falls Wildcats were George Matook and Cappy Asermely. The ball clubs were such an important part of life in Pleasant View that a reunion of Blackstone Valley Syrian ball clubs in the late 1970s brought together over three hundred players and their families.

The Maronites came to Rhode Island already imbued with the entrepreneurial spirit. The families who arrived in Providence in 1901 had chosen the state specifically because they had heard that one could make a living selling door-to-door in Rhode Island. A living was all it was, for in the early years life was a struggle. The Maronites settled on Federal Hill in one square block bordered by Cedar, Acorn, West Exchange Street, and Arthur Avenue. From a 1973 article in the Italian newspaper *The Echo*, we have a window on the Maronite experience as seen through the eyes of an Italian neighbor. According to the author, the Italians called the Maronites "Rabi-ans," meaning Arabians, just as people called the Italians "Wops" and the Irish "Harps." But in the 1930s, he says, the Maronites made it known that they were not Arabians or Syrians but "Lebanese-Americans." He goes on to describe them in this way:

The first Lebanese people that lived in the section struggled, suffered and worked hard to bring their children up, the children who became the second and third generation Lebanese on the Hill. In the olden days, there were just a few that worked in a factory. There wasn't a Lebanese store or business place around this section for a long time after they immigrated. Most of their means of support was the womenfolk. . . . In the early 1900s, as I recall it, the women would start early in the morning with a load on their shoulders, and they would trot from house to house. Some of them would even trot to Silver Lake and Eagle Park on foot. We would call them the Walking Dry Goods Store. Some of the items they would sell were sheets, pillow cases, spreads, blankets and curtains, and a large variety of dry goods.

They would have to trust to make the sale, and the payments were as small as 25 cents a week. Just think of it, they would have to trot back every week to collect a miserable 25 cents to support the family. One that I recall very well was Lulu Betar. . . . Every single morning Lulu would go to the produce market on Canal Street at Market Square with

"See What I Got Today!"



This 1929 photo in the Evening Bulletin is of Moura Kabbas, said to be one of the first Maronites to come to Rhode Island. She and her daughter Lulu Kabbas Betar were well-known door-to-door dry goods sellers. Courtesy of the Providence Journal Company.

her 5 and 10 cent store, which was the basket full of items from collar buttons to shoe laces. . . .

The Lebanese of old were very shy. They were innocent and honest and never once can I recall that they mingled in with the stone fights that the Italians would have with the Irish of Smith Hill. They would never mix into a brawl that the street corner kids would have, although they might have a battle or two, but it was among themselves. I recall how the oldtimers would lounge around the sidewalks and smoke the bottle of water that was called "Arkeely." We kids would call it the pipe of peace.

Becoming American

"Yankee Invades Arabia" read a Providence newspaper headline in 1918. Next to the headline was a photograph of a balding, dark-haired man of middle age. It was David Saaty again. Now he was exporting American goods to Iraq from his Westminster Street business establishment, dealing in minerals, and being praised as a "Yankee" by an American newspaper for his entrepreneurship. Other members of his family were gaining comparable success as well: by 1918 his brother had received a patent from Washington for his invention of a single-movement pocket watch; his Rhode

Island-born niece was a New York designer; one of his sons was a commercial illustrator; another son was an engineer.

The rise of the Arabic-speaking people to economic viability and acceptance into mainstream America consumed barely a generation. Part of the reason for this rapid assimilation lay in the small size of the Syrian community. While this community was large enough to cushion the adjustment to American life and to sustain tradition, it was not sufficiently large to fully respond to its members' widening aspirations. Moreover, because there were so few Syrians, they did not have to deal particularly with negative stereotypes developed by the larger society, and whatever discrimination they faced was usually quickly overcome. For example, Joseph Anter remembers that at first the neighbors called his family "black Syrians." "But then we opened our own store. Once we had money, we got respect, and we didn't hear any more about 'black Syrians.'"

On the other hand, the Syrians were "more foreign" by culture, language, and tradition than the Americans of European stock. The quota system had separated them from their families in Syria, insured that their community would remain small, and by implication set them apart as immigrants who were less desirable than those from Europe. "When I was growing up in Central Falls in the 1930s and 1940s," says a Syrian-American woman, "all the boys wanted to marry an American girl. But what did it mean to be an 'American'? If she were Irish, she was American; if she were Polish, she was American. But what about us? Why weren't we Americans?" Another Syrian-American remembers to this day the painful embarrassment he would feel when, as a boy in the 1920s, his mother would call to him in Arabic. "We were trying so hard not to be different," he says today, but he now regrets that he never learned to speak the only language that his parents ever used at home when he was a boy. Older Syrian-Americans remember asking their mothers not to pack sandwiches made with Syrian bread in their school lunches. Although Syrian pocket bread is now so popular that a "Syrian" in Rhode Island has come to mean a type of sandwich, in the 1920s children at school sometimes poked fun at the flat bread with the hole in the middle.

Immigrant parents, perhaps unconsciously, reinforced the sense of differentness among their first-generation offspring.

At the very time that parents were struggling so that their children could share the fruits of being "real Americans," they were also reminding their children that they were a people distinct from their neighbors, with their own values and ways of doing things. When a mother wanted to remind her child to be on his best behavior, she might say to him, "Always remember you are *ibn Arab*." When a child asked if he might join in some neighborhood activity of which his parents did not approve, he might be reminded, "Maybe the *Aamer-kaan* do that, but not the *Syrian* people . . . !"

For many Syrian-Americans, their parents' admonitions, far from making them feel different, encouraged a sense of pride and self-confidence that remained an inner strength throughout their lives. For others, however, the sense of being different produced a strong motivation to accept and to be accepted by American society—in effect, to loosen their ties with the ethnic community. Intermarriage and economic mobility were the shortest routes.

A change in customs and traditions, together with the adoption of more "American" values, was already in evidence in the 1920s. Proclaimed a *Providence Journal* reporter in 1929:

The Syrian's (and the Assyrian's) world revolves around three institutions: the home, the church and the coffee house. The ties of family life are strong. The claims of kinship are highly respected. A Syrian will make any sacrifice for a relative. Disobedience to a parent is almost as unknown as unfaithfulness to a spouse in Syrian families. In the home a man is king. Housework and the rearing of children fall entirely on the wife, and in Syria or Mesopotamia it is a disgrace for the man to bestir himself about such tasks. This tradition is rapidly crumbling here, however.

Women could hardly be expected to continue to perform all the labor of the household when they were working in factories all day or in the family grocery. They were also out on the street selling along with the men: "Unfailingly goodnatured, honest to the last penny of their tiny transactions, they trudge from office to office or from factory to factory with their baskets on their arms," the reporter wrote.

So many traditions were crumbling. Marriage customs began to change almost upon the immigrants' arrival in America. In Syria marriages were family arrangements; often the bride and groom did not know each other until the

exchange of their marriage vows. "When I was about fifteen years old," says a woman who came to Rhode Island from Beirut, "we lived in Homs, in Syria. One day a man from our church in Damascus arrived at our house with his son. We knew that the son was to marry either me or my sister, Salima, but we didn't know which one of us it was to be. That hadn't been decided yet."

Right from the beginning in America, young people were meeting and choosing each other through school, church, work, or the neighborhood. Young couples not only knew each other before marriage but were even choosing marriage partners from a Syrian church other than their own. Intermarriage—that is, marriage uniting a Syrian with someone from a different ethnic background—was rare in the 1920s and 1930s, according to early church records, and it remained uncommon through World War II, but by 1950 most marriages performed in the Syrian churches united a Syrian-American with someone of another ethnic background.

Celebrations of religious holidays were changing too. The Fast of Nineveh used to be observed by three days of fasting in commemoration of Jonah's visit to the Assyrian city of Nineveh. By the late 1920s the observance was kept only by the older people, for the factory week had made the fast too rigorous for those who were working. St. Barbara's Day is a religious holiday now rarely observed, but it is warmly remembered as a day for serving a sweet dish called *slee'a*, made of wheat, raisins, walnuts, cinnamon, and sugar and decorated on top with blanched almonds and colored candies. In the evening relatives would come over for a *sabra*, an evening party of visiting and dancing to the *derbeke*, the Syrian drum. A New Year's Day tradition no longer observed is that of offering holiday visitors a dish of *kibbeh lebaniyeh*, fried ovals of ground lamb and cracked wheat stuffed with onions and pine nuts and cooked in yogurt spiced with garlic and mint. On this day families and friends would greet each other with a wish for a "white year," meaning a year of happiness.

One tradition that was not to disappear over the years is the Syrian's respect for family life. "No nation in all the world has a more intense feeling of family, and the clan loyalty extends to sixth, seventh, and eighth cousins," wrote a visitor to Lebanon in 1922. If one were to ask Americans of Syrian descent today which traditions of their ethnic heritage they

consider valuable, respect for parents, respect for family life, and loyalty to the family unit are certain to be included in the list.

From Syrians to Syrian-Lebanese-Arab-Americans

The organizations formed by the first- and second-generation Syrians in Rhode Island reflect an involvement in the broader society that was unknown to the immigrant generation. With assimilation came political awareness, and Rhode Island politicians began to court the Syrian-Americans as a voting constituency. The passage of time also began to dilute the differences among the people of the four Syrian churches and to magnify the things they held in common. Once the younger generation of Syrians began to feel secure as Americans, it could appreciate the fruits of embracing the larger ethnic community.



With the Statue of Liberty added as the background in this composite photo, Bashir Koussa (right) and his wife Ameena are shown on their arrival at Ellis Island from Syria about 1930. Courtesy of Alberta Rudy.

In 1932 a Syrian-American Federation of New England was set up to include Arabic-speaking people from all over the area. When the Syrian-American Club of Central Falls hosted a federation convention at the Biltmore Plaza in Providence in 1934, a thousand people attended. Regional luminaries such as Rhode Island governor Theodore Francis Green, the mayors of Central Falls and Providence, a United States congressman, and

the Massachusetts state treasurer were there to court the Syrian ethnic vote. In his address to the convention, the governor praised the ancient roots of Syrian civilization and described the Syrians as "high-type citizens." Then, turning his attention to a subject of great concern to the Syrians, he declared that he was not in favor of "racially based" immigration quotas.

At this meeting the Maronites petitioned to join the federation as the Lebanese Club of Providence, asking that the federation's name be changed to include all Arabic-speaking peoples. By the mid-1920s the Maronites of Providence were calling themselves Lebanese. No longer Syrians from Mount Lebanon, or Maronites from Mount Lebanon, they had begun to identify with Lebanon the nation-state, an entity newly formed under French mandate subsequent to the First World War, and to separate themselves consciously from a Syrian identity.

Syrian ethnic groups were active during these years in a variety of ways. By 1930 St. Mary's Syrian (Antiochian) Orthodox Church had its own band, with banner and uniforms, that marched in city parades. In the 1950s the Syrian Orthodox Youth Organization for the New England Region attracted hundreds to its social activities. The Aleppian Aid Society, no longer concerned primarily with sending money back to Syria, sponsored *hafilas* and programs of Arabic films and speakers. The Maronite Men of New England sponsored *mabrajans* that each year brought together as many as five thousand people. In 1956 the Rhode Island Order of the Middle East, "a civic, charitable, cultural organization devoted to the interests of all peoples of Arabic background," was successful in gaining the support of U.S. senators Green and Pastore in its effort to rescue a blind Syrian woman from certain deportation.

In 1947 Charles Slemon began producing a local radio program called "Songs of Syria." It was the second Arabic-language program in the United States. Broadcast live on Sunday mornings, "Songs of Syria" offered music and announcements of social events in the Central Falls, Pawtucket, Providence, and Woonsocket communities. In 1968 the name of the show was changed to "Music of the Near East" to reflect changing perceptions of the listeners' ethnic identity. In 1982, after thirty-five years of production, the program was turned over to Thomas Sabbagh, who renamed it "Music of the Middle East."

Perhaps the most significant and enduring of the Syrian organizations today is the Arabic Educational Foundation, initiated in 1967. Under the able leadership of Fred K. Nashawaty, Jr., its founder, and John Nazarian, who succeeded



Dr. John Nazarian sings and plays classical Arabic music on the oud for the concert stage and is also a much-acclaimed and sought-after musician for parties and dances. He is the vice president for administration at Rhode Island College. Courtesy of May Nazarian Gabriel.

him as its chairman, the foundation has brought together the three Syrian churches of the Blackstone Valley to provide scholarships for persons of Arabic-speaking descent. By 1986 the foundation had awarded scholarships to over six hundred students.

In October 1973, as the fourth Arab-Israeli war was in progress, several concerned individuals met at St. Mary's Church in Pawtucket and formed the Arab-Americans and Friends for Justice in the Middle East Committee of Rhode Island. Dr. Robert Laffey was one of the cofounders of AAFJME and its first secretary. The purposes of the organization were three: on the humanitarian level, to provide aid for the Arab civilian victims of the war; on the political level, to be sure an Arab viewpoint about the Middle East conflict received public expression; and on the cultural level, to

better inform the American public of the cultural heritage of the Arab world. It was also hoped that AAFJME would bring the people of the Arab-American community closer together and help them feel pride in being Arab-American. The organization's activities included public lectures, ads in newspapers, letters to the editor, and radio talk-show and television news appearances. Father Athanasius Saliba, then the pastor of St. Mary's and now bishop of Damascus, played a crucial role in the work of AAFJME. Other officers of the organization were Joseph Jabbour (its president), Gabriel Altongy, and Thomas Lazieh.

In 1977 AAFJME merged with the Arab Subcommittee of the Rhode Island Heritage Commission, a group created in 1976 as part of the state's bicentennial observance. Under the direction of its successive chairmen—Dr. Robert Laffey, Virginia Trahan, and Rose Poole—this association has carried on since then as an organization oriented toward Arab-American cultural enrichment. The Arab Subcommittee is one of the few completely secular Arabic-speaking ethnic societies to thrive without some degree of church participation. In 1981 a number of Arab-Americans, led by Dr. Laffey, organized the Rhode Island chapter of the American-Arab Anti-Discrimination Committee in order to take part in political concerns of Arab-Americans on a national level.

The Arabic-Speaking Communities Today

There are now some six to seven thousand people living in Rhode Island who trace their ancestry to Arabic-speaking countries. The 1965 immigration act opened the path to America for people from the Middle East once again. Since that time more than a thousand Syrians, Lebanese, Egyptians, Iraqis, Palestinians, Jordanians, and Christians from eastern Turkey have come to Rhode Island. Half of St. Ephraim's parish today are newcomers to America. A Coptic church, St. Mary and St. Mena Coptic Orthodox Church, was started in 1968 by new arrivals from Egypt, and today it has a membership of thirty-five families and its own church building in North Providence. There are perhaps a hundred Egyptian Muslim families in Rhode Island as well.

Many of the Arabic-speaking newcomers to the state came as students to obtain professional degrees, married in America, and stayed. Others came—like their turn-of-the-century counterparts—because of political turmoil, or to avoid conscription, to join relatives, or to improve their lives economically. Their experience in becoming Americans, however, is not the same as that of their predecessors. For many of the recent arrivals, education and intermarriage have provided comfortable access to American society. Furthermore, these immigrants are not a single ethnic community, and most are not associated with ethnically based organizations. With the exception of the Old Syrians and the Copts, most Christian immigrants have not joined an ethnic church.

The tight community bonding that characterized the

earlier immigrants no longer serves a purpose, for American society is not the same in 1986 as it was before World War II. The mainstream American society to which the ethnic communities once aspired as outsiders is now more tolerant of ethnic diversity. Furthermore, the new immigrants have come to America far better educated than the tradesmen and mountain folk of the earlier immigration, and thus they can achieve social and economic mobility impossible to their predecessors. They are better educated not because they derive from a different sector of society but because social advantages and education over the course of the century have been made available to every level of society in their native countries. In addition, the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965, which replaced the old quota system, gives preference to individuals with professional and other qualifications in determining eligibility to immigrate to America.

For Muslim newcomers to Rhode Island, there are additional reasons why no institutions have been established that parallel the churches in their endurance and their ability to form a center of ethnic expression. In the countries from which the Muslims come, no such institutions exist: the mosque is a place where men (and usually only men) go to pray, and the obligation to pray can be equally fulfilled in one's own home. Furthermore, a center in which families meet for social purposes—as they do in the churches—would be incompatible with the traditional values of Muslim society, in which men and women do not socialize together except in a close family context. Without any ethnic institutions, it is possible that like their predecessors who came to Rhode Island at the turn of the century, the newer Muslim immigrants will find their identity quickly overshadowed by the larger society in which they have come to live.

For some of the recent Arabic-speaking immigrants, being better educated has been a mixed blessing. Individuals qualified to work as bank employees, teachers, office managers, clerks, salespersons, and bureaucrats in their native language and in their native country are often not able to translate their experience and education into marketable skills in America. Because they have high personal expectations for themselves, having to work as laborers has meant a difficult adjustment. The children of these recent immigrants, however, have the

advantage of being raised in homes that value education, and these children are generally college-bound.

For those of Arabic heritage, actively identifying with Arabic-speaking ethnic communities is not always easy. It would be impossible to overstate the effect that the Arab-Israeli conflict has had on Americans of Arabic descent. For the vast majority, the conflict in the Middle East arose long after their parents and grandparents came to America; it concerns territories which are not the lands from which they trace their descent; and it involves issues over which they feel no particular concern or involvement. Yet, whatever their personal views of the conflict, they have been cast as participants and receive the spillover from the vilification directed at the Arab people in the American media. Consequently, fear of prejudice, of losing business or a job, or of not being hired or promoted is a pervasive concern for many Americans of Arabic-speaking descent.

Arabic-speaking people who came to Rhode Island in the last twenty-five years, along with the Syrian-Lebanese-Arab-Americans descended from the earlier immigration, have made substantial contributions to the state and to society. Today they are found everywhere across the economic and social spectrum, in every profession and in every business. They are judges, laborers, industrialists, pharmacists, lawyers, physicians, politicians, professors, teachers, shopkeepers, dentists, and engineers. Among those of Arabic-speaking heritage in the Greater Providence area, there are at least thirty practicing physicians, as well as a large number of persons who have been elected to local political office.

But beyond the obvious importance of economic and professional success, it is, perhaps, other characteristics—decency, the stability one brings to the family, the ability to raise children prepared to assume a responsible place in society—that most truly measure one's social worth. The people of the Arabic-speaking community are proud to point out that crime and delinquency are almost unknown among them, and that to this day families are very stable, with divorces rare.

Perhaps the finest tribute to the Arabic-speaking ethnic communities in Rhode Island has been expressed by Weeda Gabriel of Cumberland, who was born in Central Falls of Syrian parents before World War I. When asked, "Who in the Arabic

ethnic community has contributed to the betterment of Rhode Island and the nation?" she replied, "My four children, who in their own little way, I believe, are an asset to this nation."

* * * * *

The Syrian churches continue to be the focus of Arabic-speaking ethnicity in Rhode Island, even though some aspects of this ethnicity have disappeared within the four churches. For example, in all of the churches except St. Ephraim's, the main language of the worship service is now English, not Arabic or Syriac. The priest of St. Mary's and the assistant priest of St. Basil's are not of Arabic-speaking ethnic background. Furthermore, so many new Maronite parishes are being established in the United States that there are not enough priests for them, and so it is possible that St. George's may one day be without a Lebanese priest.

With intermarriage, assimilation, mobility, and the general drifting of Americans away from the church, together with the community's loss of ethnic leadership, one might have expected that the role of the churches in preserving ethnicity would have diminished. Yet, at a minimum, 65 percent of the



Boys from St. Basil's Melkite Catholic Church performing in Syrian costumes at a dance festival in the late 1970s. Courtesy of Rose Poole.

people of Arabic-speaking heritage in Rhode Island are members of one of the Syrian churches. With a combined active membership of some eight hundred families, the churches are thriving.

After four generations of Syrian people in America, the churches emerge as a fulcrum of stability in a world in which families are pulled apart and people are separated from their ethnic roots. In the churches, the generations meet. Scattered families reunite in church at holiday times and take up again the old traditions, traditions to be treasured and passed on to the generations to come. In the churches, people who have turned away from religion return to reenact the rituals of life's passages in the ancient tradition of their forefathers.

Through the church societies the pleasure of Arabic music, dance, and food is shared in the company of others who trace their heritage to the Arabic-speaking countries of the Middle East. However assimilated Americans of Arabic descent ultimately become, so long as there are people who love their heritage remaining in the parishes of the Syrian churches, the future of Arabic ethnicity in Rhode Island is secure.

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