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VOLUME THIRTY-FIVE, NUMBER TWO



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“THE LARGEST SYRIAN COLONY OUTSIDE OF NEW YORK”

Syrian-Lebanese Immigration to Fort Wayne

EDWARD E. CURTIS IV

By 1900 there were vibrant Arabic-speaking communities across Indiana, including in Indianapolis, Terre Haute, and Michigan City. But Fort Wayne was special, at least according to its Syrian residents. Alixa Naff, who developed the Smithsonian Institution’s collection on Arab American history, wrote that Fort Wayne “was among the largest and most flourishing [Syrian] peddling settlements in the United States.”

Opposite, above: From 1880 to 1920, about a half-million Arabic-speaking Ottoman citizens immigrated to the Americas from what the U.S. Census Bureau first designated “Turkey in Asia” and then Syria. Thousands came to Indiana. Opposite, below: Many of the first Syrian Hoosiers would have seen the Allen County Courthouse under construction during 1897 and 1898, since most of them lived on East Main Street or Lafayette Street a few blocks away.

The immigrants who settled in Fort Wayne, like other people from Greater Syria, which included modern-day Lebanon, Syria, Jordan, and Palestine, were part of a mass immigration of perhaps half a million people—one out of every five Syrians—from the Eastern Mediterranean to the Americas before 1920. The reason they arrived in Fort Wayne was because it was a quickly growing community that offered economic opportunity, especially for those going into the peddling business.

Although it is difficult to estimate exactly how many Arabic-speaking people from the Eastern Mediterranean went to Fort Wayne—and even more so, how long they stayed—Syrian Fort Wayne had quite the reputation in its day. An *Indianapolis Star* reporter, surely exaggerating, said that it was the “the largest Syrian colony outside of New York,” writing that the population was between 225 and 250. One population estimate in the *Fort Wayne Weekly Sentinel* in 1894 was 100 to 120 people from fifteen to sixteen families. The 1900 census counted at least 110 Syrians, which was close to the “eyeball” estimate of 150 of the many oral histories that Naff collected; however, this was an estimate of people who lived in Fort Wayne at any one fixed point in time.

Because the peddling business was by nature itinerant, the number who migrated to and from Fort Wayne was likely much higher. For example, in an 1898 population estimate by the Right Reverend Raphael Hawaweeny, the first Syrian Orthodox bishop in America, Fort Wayne ranked second to New York with 424 peddlers, and this number only referred to the number of Orthodox rather than the Melkite, Maronite, Roman Catholic, Protestant Christians, not to mention the few Muslims, Jews, and Druze among the immigrants. According to Naff, the bishop’s list likely counted people who had come to Fort Wayne and departed. Because it was a

TWELFTH CENSUS OF THE UNITED STATES.
SCHEDULE No. 1.—POPULATION.

State Indiana County Allen Supervisor's District No. 21 Sheet No. 4
 Enumeration District No. 24

Township or other division of county Wayne Township Name of Institution, _____
 Name of incorporated city, town, or village, within the above-named division Fort Wayne Ward of city, Second
 Enumerated by me on the 15th day of June, 1900. Albert Burtchfield Enumerator.

SEX	AGE	NAME	RELATION	PERSONAL DESCRIPTION	NATIVITY			CITIZENSHIP	OCCUPATION, TRADE, OR PROFESSION	EDUCATION			SPEECH
					Place of birth of this person	Place of birth of father of this person	Place of birth of mother of this person			Years of school attendance	Years of college attendance	Years of technical school attendance	
Male	Female				Foreign born	Foreign born	Foreign born						
65	20-29	— Laura	Daughter	22 Apr 1878 4 08	Indiana	Indiana	Germany						
		Beschmann, Nabil M	Son	7 Jun 1882 23 08	Germany	Germany	Germany	1891 10 00	Free peddler				
		Takharah, Nabil M	Son	27 Apr 1883 16 04	Lebanon	Lebanon	Lebanon		Free peddler				
		— Mary	Daughter	22 Feb 1873 27 02	Lebanon	Lebanon	Lebanon						
		— Helen	Daughter	12 Jul 1876 24 07	Lebanon	Lebanon	Lebanon						
		— William	Son	20 Dec 1873 26 12	Lebanon	Lebanon	Lebanon						
67	31-34	— Barbara	Daughter	27 Sep 1873 26 09	Lebanon	Lebanon	Lebanon		Free peddler				
		— John	Son	27 Sep 1873 26 09	Lebanon	Lebanon	Lebanon		Free peddler				
		— George	Son	27 Sep 1873 26 09	Lebanon	Lebanon	Lebanon		Free peddler				
		— John	Son	27 Sep 1873 26 09	Lebanon	Lebanon	Lebanon		Free peddler				
		— Joseph	Son	27 Sep 1873 26 09	Lebanon	Lebanon	Lebanon		Free peddler				
		— George	Son	27 Sep 1873 26 09	Lebanon	Lebanon	Lebanon		Free peddler				
68	34-36	— Sarah	Daughter	22 Oct 1865 34 10	Lebanon	Lebanon	Lebanon		Free peddler				
		— Elizabeth	Daughter	22 Oct 1865 34 10	Lebanon	Lebanon	Lebanon		Free peddler				
		— Mary	Daughter	22 Oct 1865 34 10	Lebanon	Lebanon	Lebanon		Free peddler				
		— John	Son	22 Oct 1865 34 10	Lebanon	Lebanon	Lebanon		Free peddler				
		— George	Son	22 Oct 1865 34 10	Lebanon	Lebanon	Lebanon		Free peddler				
		— Joseph	Son	22 Oct 1865 34 10	Lebanon	Lebanon	Lebanon		Free peddler				
		— William	Son	22 Oct 1865 34 10	Lebanon	Lebanon	Lebanon		Free peddler				
		— Sarah	Daughter	22 Oct 1865 34 10	Lebanon	Lebanon	Lebanon		Free peddler				
		— Elizabeth	Daughter	22 Oct 1865 34 10	Lebanon	Lebanon	Lebanon		Free peddler				
		— Mary	Daughter	22 Oct 1865 34 10	Lebanon	Lebanon	Lebanon		Free peddler				
		— John	Son	22 Oct 1865 34 10	Lebanon	Lebanon	Lebanon		Free peddler				
		— George	Son	22 Oct 1865 34 10	Lebanon	Lebanon	Lebanon		Free peddler				
		— Joseph	Son	22 Oct 1865 34 10	Lebanon	Lebanon	Lebanon		Free peddler				
		— William	Son	22 Oct 1865 34 10	Lebanon	Lebanon	Lebanon		Free peddler				
		— Sarah	Daughter	22 Oct 1865 34 10	Lebanon	Lebanon	Lebanon		Free peddler				
		— Elizabeth	Daughter	22 Oct 1865 34 10	Lebanon	Lebanon	Lebanon		Free peddler				
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		— George	Son	22 Oct 1865 34 10	Lebanon	Lebanon	Lebanon		Free peddler				
		— Joseph	Son	22 Oct 1865 34 10	Lebanon	Lebanon	Lebanon		Free peddler				
		— William	Son	22 Oct 1865 34 10	Lebanon	Lebanon	Lebanon		Free peddler				



Top and opposite: The 1900 U.S. Census revealed the names and professions of the forty-six people who lived in community leader Salem Bashara’s building on Main Street in Fort Wayne. Almost all listed their profession as peddlers. Above: A number of early Syrian immigrants to Fort Wayne came from the village of Rashaya, today located on the slopes of Mount Hermon in Lebanon, not far from its border with contemporary Syria.

TWELFTH CENSUS OF THE UNITED STATES. 1900

SCHEDULE No. 1.—POPULATION.

State Indiana, County Allen, Township Wayne Township, Name of Institution, X, Name of incorporated city, town, or village, within the above-named division, Fort Wayne, Ward of city, Second, Enumerated by me on the 15th day of June, 1900, Albert Furtmiller, Enumerator.

Table with columns: LOCATION, NAME, RELATION, PERSONAL DESCRIPTION, SATIVITY, CITIZENSHIP, OCCUPATION, TRADE, OR PROFESSION, EDUCATION, OWNERSHIP OF HOME. Includes handwritten entries for various individuals like Sam Salim, Nuzeh Otto, etc.

kind of running tab of the 1890s population, it indicates just how important of a hub Fort Wayne was in the migration of Syrians to and around the Midwest.

Key to Fort Wayne's early success as a peddling settlement was Salem Bashara. Credited in the earliest newspapers accounts of the Syrian community in Fort Wayne as the founding figure of the community, he was also remembered as such in oral-history interviews recorded over a half century later. Bashara, who became a U.S. citizen in 1896, was from Dahr al-Ahmar,

a small village currently located near the Lebanese border with Syria. Many of Fort Wayne's first Syrian citizens came from the same area, especially from nearby Rashaya, a larger town located on the western side of Mount Hermon with an elevation of almost 4,000 feet. Most of Fort Wayne's Arabic-speaking people had grown up on mountains and in valleys rather than in deserts.

The Weekly Sentinel called Salem Bashara the "high mogul of the Syrian population . . . a first-class sort of a man

who tries to live up to the Golden Rule." He opened his first store selling "importations from Damascus, Beirut, and Constantinople, consisting of tapestries, laces and rare pieces of linen." He then became a supplier to numerous peddlers, whom he would sometimes greet as they arrived in Fort Wayne by rail to make their fortunes in the New World. He supplied them with "notions" that they could carry over long distances in their peddler packs, including such items as buttons, needles, thread, collar stays, seam rippers, and snaps.



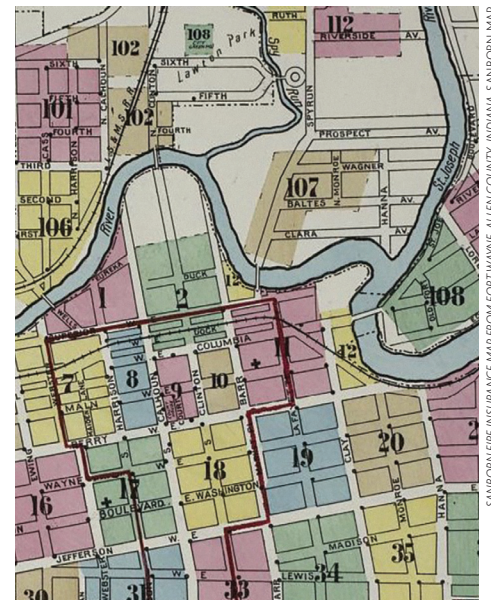
ALLEN COUNTY FORT WAYNE HISTORICAL SOCIETY

On Mondays, according to the *Fort Wayne Morning Journal Gazette*, the peddlers, both men and women, traveled up to seventy miles by rail into the countryside, then they walked back to Fort Wayne, selling their goods as they went. “They trudge mile after mile down the hot, dusty highways with great packs on their backs. Their only companion is a rude walking stick,” wrote W. M. Herschell.

In 1900 more members of the community, almost all peddlers, lived as boarders in Bashara’s building at 59 East Main Street than at any other single location. Including his own family, forty-six

Syrians—almost half of all the people recorded in the census that year—lived in his brick building, located in the city’s Second Ward, home to the courthouse, shops, saloons, and boardinghouses.

As a symbol of success, Bashara was a target for a variety of schemes. Sometimes the peddlers to whom he extended credit simply disappeared and never paid their debts. Other times, he fell victim to embezzlement. In 1901 his bookkeeper, Michael Bosmarra, devised a plan to supply customers with free goods in exchange for a kickback. Bosmarra would ask that the money be sent to a sex worker on Columbia Street who was evidently “his steady.”



SANBORN FIRE INSURANCE MAP FROM FORT WAYNE, ALLEN COUNTY, INDIANA. SANBORN MAP

By the early 1900s Bashara had fallen on hard times and was no longer the only powerful leader of the Syrian community. A fire at his store destroyed perhaps \$5,000 in merchandise. The business went bankrupt, and the district court took possession of what remained. His main rival, according to the press, was Kaleel Teen, the manager of the popular Abdallah S. Daas store at 19 Lafayette Street. Of the 110 Syrian-born residents that the census counted in 1900, thirty-seven of them, both men and women, lived under Teen's roof in a large three-story house.

Arabic-speaking people were a small percentage of the total population of this German-majority town of 45,000 in 1900. Nevertheless, Syrians certainly made an impression in the town's public life. By the early 1900s, forty-six members of the community formed the Syrian Patriotic Society to encourage patriotic identification with the United States and to aid its poor members. As a voting bloc, they were credited

with uniting behind the election of Democrat Henry Wiebke as city councilman from the Second Ward, even though they were members of both the Republican and Democratic parties. Opponents labeled Wiebke "the Syrian councilman," implying that he was beholden to a somewhat untrustworthy group of Hoosiers. Republican polling officials repeatedly challenged the eligibility of Syrian voters, but they showed up at the polls with their citizenship papers.

Because many of them were foreign-born peddlers who constantly interacted with members of the public, Syrians were a population in the public eye. Native-born Hoosiers reacted to them with a combination of prejudice, curiosity, and/or admiration. On the plus side, successful merchants such as Bashara and Teen were seen as respectable people. So were those willing to fight for their country. When in 1898 some Syrian immigrants from New York became part of Major General

William R. Shafter's volunteers and the U.S. Army's Fifth Corps to fight in Cuba against the Spanish, one particularly brave Syrian soldier was cited by a Fort Wayne newspaper as an exemplar of "someone who shows that the Syrians make as patriotic American citizens as any of our foreign-born citizens."

There was also plenty of prejudice aimed at Syrians. Classified as racially white in the census, they were often referred to as "Orientals" in local newspapers. As such, they were seen and often treated as people of color by fellow citizens. A negative newspaper story, reprinted from the East Coast, claimed that Congress should enact immigration restrictions against the Syrians, who were dishonest, scandalous, promiscuous "pests," a population increasing with "alarming rapidity."

The presence of female Syrian peddlers was often shocking to the middle and upper classes in Fort Wayne and across the country. In the dominant "respectable"

Opposite, top: Taken sometime in the last decade of the 1800s, this photo shows Fort Wayne's Main Street looking east from Calhoun Street. *Opposite, below:* In 1900 most Syrians in Fort Wayne lived on East Main, Lafayette, and Calhoun Streets, all a few blocks from one another. Although they were a minority of the downtown's population, newspapers often referred to this area as the "Syrian Colony." *Right:* This line drawing depicts a Syrian pack peddler calling upon a rural homemaker—a scene repeated throughout the Midwest in the 1890s. *Far right:* Unlike Abdallah S. Daas, working-class Syrian peddlers were sometimes seen as a menace or at least a pest. Others viewed them as an exotic curiosity, a stereotype the peddlers played on if it increased their chance for a sale.



FORT WAYNE DAILY GAZETTE, JANUARY 12, 1898



FORT WAYNE DAILY GAZETTE, JANUARY 12, 1898



FARIS AND YAMANA NAFF ARAB AMERICAN COLLECTION, ARCHIVES CENTER, NATIONAL MUSEUM OF AMERICAN HISTORY, SMITHSONIAN INSTITUTION

This photograph from the Smithsonian Institution's Naff Collection is likely Fort Wayne's Amelia Bashara, the daughter of Elizabeth Bashara, a one-time child peddler who married Salem Bashara's brother.

society of the Gilded Age, the ideal woman was often seen as a person devoted to “hearth and home,” as well as to church, social clubs, and philanthropic endeavors. Public space was segregated not only by race at this time, but also by gender, and women were unexpected in the rough-and-tumble world of street-side retail sales.

Bashara's sister-in-law, Elizabeth Bashara, née Nazha Risk, was a case in point. Born around 1883 in the beautiful mountainous village of Hasroun, today located in northern Lebanon's Qadisha

Gorge, Elizabeth left her native land around the age of eight or nine. Arriving with her father and his mother-in-law first in Toledo and then moving to Columbus, Ohio, she accompanied her father on his peddling runs in the country for a practical reason. Without her, no one would offer him shelter for the night. But “when the farmers would see, a little girl, they would feel sorry for me and let us in,” she remembered.

In a couple of years, Elizabeth started peddling in the city on her own: “They

gave me a notions case with icons, crosses, and pictures.” One day, after a couple of women answered her knocking at the door, they decided that Elizabeth's clothes were shabby. “I bet if she had a nice dress on, she would look nice,” one of them said to the other. So, they took two or three hours of her worktime to hem a dress and even put a sailor's hat on her. Elizabeth returned home to change. No one would buy anything from her if they thought she was wealthy, she said. But the women saw her walking without the new dress and insisted that she put it back on.

Other people's sympathy was useful to increase sales, but Elizabeth did not feel sorry for herself. “We had a lot of fun,” she said, referring to the peddling business. She relished the challenge of getting people to buy something that they did not want. It was a difficult life that included suffering, Elizabeth later reflected, but that did not make her pathetic. It made her proud.

In just three or four years, Elizabeth's father and mother-in-law wanted to return home, but instead of taking Elizabeth with them, they decided to “marry me off,” she bluntly observed. She wed Kaleel Bashara in Springfield, Ohio, in the late 1890s. The couple moved to Fort Wayne and then, with his brother Salem's help, to Hartford City, a town about fifty miles south that was, according to Elizabeth, “booming with gas and oil.” When the oil and gas ran out, she said, they settled permanently in Fort Wayne.

The prejudice directed toward Syrians was not always as benign as the patronizing attitudes from Elizabeth's customers. For example, one Sunday afternoon in November 1899, Habeeb Farah was riding his new bicycle with a couple of friends on Lafayette Street when “three men in a noisy state of intoxication . . . called the Syrians ‘dagoes’ and told them that they could whip any foreigner who came to

town.” The boys assaulted the Syrians, using “clubs, bricks, stones” and even a beer bottle, which one man used to cut “ugly gashes in the faces of three Syrians.” But “the boys” had chosen the wrong place for the attack. Most Syrians lived on and around Lafayette Street, and several soon came to Farah’s aid. The boys were arrested and charged with assault and battery.

Sundays were an important day of gathering for the community. “Every Sunday,” remembered Elizabeth, “we would take the 9 o’clock train from Hartford City to Fort Wayne and return on the 6 o’clock train.” Since most Syrians in Fort Wayne were Christians, many would attend church. The most popular places to worship, she noted, were the Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception and Saint Patrick, where many of the community’s baptisms and funerals took place. Most Syrians in Fort Wayne had been born into the Orthodox, Maronite, or Melkite Christian community, but because none of these denominations had built churches in Fort Wayne, many families attended Roman Catholic parishes, as well as Episcopalian, Presbyterian, and other Protestant congregations.

Sunday was about much more than church. It was also about eating, drinking, and dancing together. Sometimes, when the community gathered, there would be a new case of arak—distilled wine made of grapes and anise seed. Some community members would “enjoy a dance and a feast of wine” that might last for days, depending on when the arak ran out. Oral-history interviews and contemporaneous press coverage indicate that these communal gatherings among Arabic-speaking people included people from different villages, classes, educational backgrounds, and religious denominations. There were disputes among Syrians, of course, but such disputes did not seem to threaten the conviviality of these occasions.



Many Arabic-speaking immigrants in Fort Wayne were born Orthodox Christians. Because there was no Orthodox church in the city, many of them baptized their children or held their funerals at the Roman Catholic Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception.

It was different in the world outside the bounds of ethnic solidarity. In the English-speaking world, a Syrian's class affected their life opportunities and social networks. Press accounts spoke about Syrians in two registers—one dubious of poor Syrians and one full of praise for the respectable, Christian, educated middle class. For example, Abdallah S. Daas, a Syrian Presbyterian merchant who lived in Fort Wayne during the 1890s, was described by the *Fort Wayne Daily News* as an “able and highly educated business man. He is a fluent speaker of English and is thoroughly Americanized in his business methods and a very progressive young man.” When the Teen family hosted him and his bride for a party on Lafayette Street, the house was described as “elegantly furnished.” The ladies were “received in the rear parlor” while the gentlemen were in the front. The good taste of the Teens was evident in their decision to hold “festivities . . . of a more lively social character” on a day other than Sunday, the Sabbath.

The word “surprising” was used more than once in the newspapers to describe the English literacy of middle-class Syrian Americans. Local journalists did not know that many had studied English before leaving their country. In addition to the Ottoman-run schools where students learned Arabic and Ottoman Turkish, Christian missionaries from the United States, Russia, France, and other countries operated schools across the region. The most prestigious U.S. university was the Syrian Protestant College, founded in 1866 (it later became the American University of Beirut). People such as Daas were either literate or proficient before departing for the Americas.

Syrians in Fort Wayne were aware of the stereotyping of their community, and in at least one case, one of them asked newspapers to change it. Joe Bonahoom

[also cited as Bonahoom], a fruit-stand owner, told the *Journal-Gazette* in 1903 that Herschell's article on the Syrian community made it seem as if “the rank and file of the colony are led about at will by the leaders.” He argued that, while newly arrived immigrants needed help in getting a start, the community did not support the idea of “kings and castes,” adding, “As a race we have done well. We have made money and kept out of serious trouble. We like the idea of being equal and because one of us makes more than some of the rest, we do not think he is any better than the rank and file.”

Bonahoom's words were a fitting eulogy for the former “king” of the Syrians, Salem Bashara. In 1908 Bashara's death was front-page news in the *Fort Wayne Sentinel*. The paper repeated the same tired

ideas about how Bashara had once been an “autocrat” and all Syrians “followed his bidding without question.” That was untrue, but the newspaper did get something right about the magnitude of his contributions to building the Arab community in Fort Wayne: “His countrymen turned to him in every emergency for advice and assistance and followed his direction implicitly in business. . . . He settled disputes and adjudicated differences . . . and new recruits were unfailingly recipient of his bounty.”

The newspaper associated the values of mutual aid and ethnic solidarity with an individual, the first de facto leader of the community, but these traditions were embraced by the Syrian community as a whole. Individuals had little hope of success if cooperation and assistance were not



Storeowner Abdallah S. Daas became one of the most-admired Syrian citizens in Fort Wayne. His fine middle-class dress and ability with the English language testified, in the words of one journalist, to his thorough assimilation.

FORT WAYNE DAILY NEWS, MAY 4, 1904



FORT WAYNE DAILY GAZETTE, JANUARY 12, 1888

Some observers thought it was odd or perhaps uncouth that many Syrian men were openly affectionate with their wives and children. The exchanges of kisses when greeting or saying goodbye to family members, however, was seen as meritorious, if not obligatory, in many cultures, especially Mediterranean ones.

forthcoming from the entire group. These practical ethics led to the establishment of a community now more than 130 years old. It is the reason why some of those original families still live and prosper in the Summit City. It is hard to imagine how it would have happened otherwise.

The legacy of Fort Wayne's Syrian community is an important reminder of how many more stories of ethnic history are left to be told in the Hoosier State. Too often assumed to be racially and religiously homogenous, Indiana's historical archives are

full of details of our shared past. There are more than traces here. There are complex, essential details about the lives of Hoosier ancestors who have shaped our life together in ways yet to be discovered.

Edward E. Curtis IV is the William M. and Gail M. Plater chair of the liberal arts and professor of religious studies at Indiana University, Indianapolis. Curtis is the author of fourteen books, including Muslims in America: A Short History, which was named one of the 100 best books of 2009 by Publishers Weekly. His two-volume

Encyclopedia of Muslim-American History was deemed one of the "best reference works of 2010" by Library Journal. Curtis's most recent works include Muslims of the Heartland: How Syrian Immigrants Made a Home in the American Midwest and Arab Indianapolis. In addition to works written for general readers, Curtis has penned scholarly articles for the Journal of American History, American Quarterly, and the Journal of the American Academy of Religion. •

FOR FURTHER READING

Elizabeth Bashara, Joe David (Yusuf Sim'an Daud) in Faris and Yamna Naff interviews. Arab American Collection. Archives Center, National Museum of American History, Smithsonian Institution, 1962. | Brown, Nancy Eileen. "The 1901 Fort Wayne Indiana City Election." Master's thesis, Indiana University, 2013. | "Former Syrian Leader is Dead." *Fort Wayne Sentinel*, December 8, 1908. | Herschell, W. M. "Our Syrian Colony." *Fort Wayne Journal Gazette*, June 22, 1903. | Naff, Alixa. *Becoming American: The Early Arab Immigrant Experience*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1985. | "Not Lead [Led] About by the Nose." *Fort Wayne Journal-Gazette*, June 24, 1903.