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IMMIGRANT RACES  
IN  
MASSACHUSETTS

THE SYRIANS



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WRITTEN FOR  
THE MASSACHUSETTS DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION  
Division of Education of Aliens

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IMMIGRANT RECORDS  
MASSACHUSETTS

THE SYRANS

PUBLICATION OF THIS DOCUMENT  
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SUPERVISOR OF ADMINISTRATION.

# IMMIGRANT RACES IN MASSACHUSETTS

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## THE SYRIANS

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### **Background.**

The background which the Syrians bring with them to this country, and against which they are seen, is composite. In this respect it is not unlike the backgrounds of most of our immigrant races. Fragments of many different places and times, of many different peoples and civilizations, enter into it. There are the snowy peaks, the lonely villages, the ancient cedars, the olive and mulberry plantations, and the grain fields of Mount Lebanon. There are the Tyre and Sidon of to-day, towns insignificant in themselves, but shining in the reflected glory of the Tyre and Sidon of the remote past, the wealthy and powerful cities of King Hiram. There is Damascus, thriving and populous, "beautiful for situation" in the luxuriant plains of Anti-Lebanon. It, too, is seen against a far older and more splendid self, — the Damascus toward which Saul of Tarsus journeyed. There are also fragments of many races and civilizations. We get glimpses of the Bedouins, those nomadic Arabs of the desert; and, far in the distance, the shadowy figures of other Arabs and hints of a civilization which has made Bagdad forever the city of romance. There are, finally, although dimly seen, the hills and valleys, the cities and towns of the Holy Land; and, rising far beyond, the misty outlines of Mount Sinai.

This is the background against which our Syrian immigrants are living their lives. That it is rich as well as varied we must admit. Indeed, it is a splendid piece of tapestry hung behind our "foreign-born neighbors" from Syria.

### **Number and Distribution.**

The number of Syrians in this country is and must be more or less conjectural. In endeavoring to arrive at it, the census gives us only limited assistance, partly because of its classification by "country of origin" or "mother tongue" instead of by race, and partly because of the difficulty in enumerating the foreign-born. Some of the best informed of the Syrians themselves believe it to be

a quarter of a million, an estimate which is probably as correct as any that can be made. Of this number, approximately 20,000, or less than 10 per cent, are in Massachusetts.

Although the total is comparatively small, no immigration here is more widely distributed. Syrians are now to be found in every State in the Union and even in Alaska. In Massachusetts they have established themselves in nearly 100 cities and towns.

Outside a few principal cities, however, there are no large colonies of this people. Of the approximately 100 cities and towns in this State where Syrians are to be found, more than one-half have less than a dozen of them, and many only one or two.

The largest colony in the country is in New York, where the Syrian population numbers between 18,000 and 20,000; and the next largest is in Detroit, where it is approximately 10,000. The 6,000 to 7,000 in Boston make the third colony in point of size; and, in Massachusetts, the 3,000 to 4,000 in Lawrence, the second to that in Boston. There are smaller colonies in this State in Worcester, Springfield, Quincy, Fall River, Lowell, New Bedford, North Adams, Brockton, and Methuen. None of them, with the exception of those in Worcester and Fall River, consist of more than 100 or 200, or, in a few cases, 300. The colonies in Worcester and Fall River include each somewhat less than a thousand.

### **Sources of the Immigration.**

B'sherreh, a village high up in Mount Lebanon and far from the usual routes of travel, is generally regarded as the center of the first Syrian emigration to America. Where it is situated the country is wild and rugged, and the people, although illiterate on account of their remoteness from any center of learning, are brave and hardy, not lacking in native intelligence, and possessed of that spirit of independence natural to a mountain folk. The Mount Lebanon people in general have been likened, not inaptly, to our own mountain whites of the south. But conditions of life in and around B'sherreh are hard, as would be expected in a region where, because of the altitude, the villages are buried in snow several months during the year. Therefore the starting of an emigration from there, even before the Syrians in general had felt any strong impulse to leave their native land, is not surprising. People and conditions were precisely such as, sooner or later, would make a migratory movement inevitable without any special extraneous influences.

But the first permanent Syrian emigration to this country was from Zahleh, also a village in Mount Lebanon, situated at the top of the pass between Beirut and Damascus. Zahleh is the largest village in Mount Lebanon, and its people are to be found to-day not only in all the States in the Union, but in practically every city and town where there is any considerable number of Syrians.

While Syrian immigration into the United States has continued to be largely from Mount Lebanon, it has been also from other parts of Syria. Among the more important cities and towns in Syria, outside of Mount Lebanon, from which immigrants have come in considerable numbers, are Damascus, Beirut, Joppa, Homs, — the ancient Emesa, — Aleppo and even Jerusalem. Thus our Syrian immigrants are widely representative, at least geographically, of their home country.

### **Occupations.**

Born traders, the Syrians on reaching this country naturally turn to some form of buying and selling as the readiest means of gaining a livelihood. The peddler's basket represents, in numberless instances, their first venture here in business. After this comes the small basement store, then the larger store on the level of the street, then an additional store, or the factory, or the office of the importer. The basement store, before it gives way to its successor, often becomes a center where peddlers are supplied, or from which they are sent out by the proprietor on some basis of profit-sharing. There may also be a short cut from it directly to the factory. Every branch of commerce and many branches of manufacture have been entered by this immigrant people.

But all Syrians here are not traders or manufacturers. Large numbers of them are factory operatives, mine workers, brass polishers, mechanics, carpenters, masons, and even farmers. There are also Syrian priests, lawyers, doctors, ministers, writers, editors, teachers, and musicians.

Nevertheless, trade in some form or other is the occupation in which the great mass of our Syrian population is engaged. As carried on by this majority it ranges all the way from "hawking" with a basket to "distributing" through the medium of a well-appointed office the most costly rugs, laces, and embroideries; and the peddler of to-day may be the prosperous importer of a few years hence.

## Character.

Pride of race, a high degree of native intelligence, an individualism which retards co-operative effort and often passes into factionalism, shrewdness and cleverness in business, devotion to the institutions of this country, imaginativeness, religious loyalty, love of domestic life, courtesy and hospitality, eagerness for education, fondness for music and poetry, temperance in the men and chastity in the women, self-respect and self-reliance, — such are some of the more obvious traits of the Syrians.

“The glory of ancient Syria” is a favorite theme of Syrian orators. “Our Phœnician ancestors,” one of these is represented as declaring grandiloquently, “invented the alphabet, manufactured glass, carried on a vast commerce with Egypt, and planted colonies on the western shores of the Mediterranean. Our Arabian ancestors invented algebra, developed the science of medicine and chemistry, and excelled the world in poetry. . . . And it was in our country that the crowning glory of all human possessions, the Bible, the word of God, was revealed.”

But while “Syria with its great moments of history” is in the background of this immigrant race, “America with its seemingly boundless opportunities” is in the foreground; and the extolling of the former seems to detract in no way from the fullest appreciation of the latter. “The Syrian,” says a college-bred member of the race, “is first and last and always an American in spirit and in action. He has no other country which claims the slightest part of his allegiance.”<sup>1</sup> In support of this statement might be cited the fact that during the recent war over 300 Syrians enrolled under the American flag in Massachusetts alone.

The spirit in which our Syrian immigrants saw these and other Syrian young men depart for the scenes of conflict finds expression in a poem which appeared in “Fatat — Boston,” a Syrian magazine published, as its name indicates, in Boston. This poem, which is in Arabic, bears the title the English equivalent of which is “Farewell to the Heroes.” A few lines from the poem, roughly rendered into English, are as follows: —

“This country called on you, you brave men.

You accepted the noblest call, which made us jealous of you.

She asks you to break the power of the autocrat and to protect the weak from the oppressor.

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<sup>1</sup> M. N. Maloof in “Boston Evening Transcript,” August 22, 1917.

What a great day when you shall come back victorious!

It will be a glorious holiday.

Hasten and let each of you write a line of valor with his sword!

If you conquer the enemy, do not be surprised. That is the custom of your fathers and grandfathers.

Man's credit is in his honorable deeds. These deeds are the honor of the country."

Further evidence of the "straight Americanism" of the Syrians in this country is furnished by the writer already quoted when he says that the Syrians have "never associated with any radical movements, and there is no such thing as a socialist or radical among them."

Religion with the Syrians is, apparently, less a creed than a conviction. It seems to be an innate part of his being, "intermingled," to cite the same writer again, "with his everyday vocabulary, entering into his thought on almost every occasion and in the commonest action."

Practically all of the Syrians coming here are adherents of some form of the Christian faith. Indeed, the migration from Syria has always been mainly a Christian migration. This is explained by the fact that it was started and all along has been more or less stimulated by the persecution of the Christians in Syria by the Moslems, especially by that sect of the Moslems known as the Druses. Aside from the Protestants, converts of the Presbyterian missions in Syria, the Christian Syrians here are divided among three branches of the Catholic Church, — the Orthodox Greek Catholics, the Maronites, and the Greek Catholics. The Maronites and the Greek Catholics do not hesitate to join with the Roman Catholics where there is no church of their own form of faith and worship; but the Orthodox Greek Catholics, even where there is an Orthodox Greek Church, are inclined to gravitate toward the Protestant Episcopal Church. About one-third of the Sunday school of a large and important Protestant Episcopal church in Boston consists of Syrian children. The working staff of this church includes a deaconess who devotes a large part of her time to visiting among the Syrians.

To games of chance the Syrians, in common with all the immigrant races from southern Europe and the East, are very generally addicted. Aside from these, they find their chief means of diversion

in music and poetry. They care little for the theatre, and regard acting as a profession with more or less contempt. Their nearest approach to a drama of their own consists in a few simple plays depicting their native customs, or, after the manner of the old moralities, the teachings of their church. These plays are invariably performed by amateurs. But the story-teller still survives among them, and is not an altogether unfamiliar figure at their social gatherings. As he recites, or rather chants, in almost pure Arabic, tales of love and adventure he gives a vivid reminder of the days of the Thousand-and-one Nights Entertainment.

As business men the Syrians are naturally conservative, seldom engaging in any undertaking which involves great risk, but generally following well-trying and safe ventures. Their probity is of a high order. "Allowing for their oriental cunning," some one has remarked of the Syrians as a race, "they are thoroughly honest."

The blotters in our police stations seldom disclose a Syrian name, a fact significant of the infrequency of law-breaking of any sort among the Syrians. When such a name does appear it is almost invariably in connection with some minor offence, such as peddling without a license, due more likely than not to ignorance of the law. Among a people so individualistic as the Syrians altercations are bound to arise more or less often, but while they may wax violent for a time they seldom bring the participants into the hands of the police. Practically no Syrian becomes an out-and-out criminal. In Boston a single case only of murder by a Syrian can be recalled. Drunkenness is not a Syrian vice, and cases of it among the Syrians are rare. Domestic disturbances are not unknown in the Syrian household. When they occur, they usually arise from the lack of adjustment between the oriental ideas of the family and the larger freedom of this country. However, Syrian home life is, on the whole, peaceful and even singularly happy. In fact, it often contains much that is beautiful. The Syrians are pre-eminently a home-loving people. Of divorce they know almost nothing.

Almost as free from Syrian names as our police blotters are the books of our public relief societies. As the Syrian's respect for law keeps his name from the one, so his personal pride and self-reliance keep it from the other. That "no Syrian ever asks for charity" is as true as most generalizations. Whatever destitute there may be among the Syrians are looked after privately as a rule. Most of them are cared for by the benefit and relief societies

of their own race. Of these societies there are a good number and variety, but most of them are educational as well as philanthropic in purpose.

Significant of the eagerness of the Syrians for knowledge is the fact that the numerous Syrian societies and clubs are, without exception, mainly for purposes of education. Not one of them is an out-and-out social organization. The Syrian newspapers and magazines, of which half a dozen are published in this country, are also primarily so many agencies of education and enlightenment. In evidence of this last assertion might be cited the table of contents of an issue of the "Fatat — Boston," the magazine to which reference has already been made. As translated, this table of contents is as follows, with the addition of explanatory notes: —

- O Syrian Young Man. A poem in prose. Kahlil Gibran.  
Shintoism, or The Way of the Gods. Prof. John Khabaz,  
President, Syrian National College, Homs, Syria.  
The Beautiful American. A story. Elian Chakour.  
Whence and Whither. A poem. Dr. Anees Jurige.  
A Complaint. (A dialogue in which a priest tries to answer  
the questionings of a young man in regard to the seeming  
lack of goodness in the world.) Rev. Soloman Fernany,  
Priest of the Greek Orthodox Church of St. John of Damascus,  
Boston.  
Farewell to the Heroes. A poem. Elias Salbag. (This poem  
furnished the quotation which has been given.)  
Wit and Humor (a page of jokes and funny sayings).  
Two Young Married Women (continued). Balzac.

But such encouragement of this eagerness for knowledge is still much more in behalf of the men than of the women. Formerly education was intended almost exclusively for the men, the oriental ideas with regard to women prevailing very largely among the Syrians here as well as at home. Now, however, under the liberalizing influences of this country, the Syrian immigrants are giving considerable attention to the education of their women. Indeed, one of their important organizations, the Syrian Educational Society, definitely undertakes, among other things, to promote the higher education of Syrian youth of both sexes.

### **Length of Stay.**

When once fully settled the Syrians appear to be established for life. This does not mean any weakening of their spirit of adventure, but a satisfactory adjustment to their surroundings. Aside from a sentimental regard for the land of their birth, there is little to draw them back home for more than a visit. The conditions there from which they sought escape in coming to this country remain about as they were. But their love for Syria, as well as pride in its great past, remains, and they are alive to the claims upon them of their relatives and friends left behind. Ten years ago the immigrants from Zahleh were, so it was said, sending back to that little town in Mount Lebanon \$500 every day in the year.<sup>1</sup> Generally speaking, the Syrian immigration is a permanent immigration. The Syrians are here to stay.

### **Assimilation.**

In the process of the assimilation of the Syrians, the Syrian societies play an important part. One of the most significant of these is the Syrian Educational Society, already referred to, composed of Syrian young men who have received a college education. This society undertakes "to encourage higher education among the younger generation of Syrians, and to fit all Syrians for American citizenship." Its Boston chapter comprises about a score of members, mostly graduates of Harvard, the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, and the American College of Beirut.

The Syrian American Club of Boston is no less significant. Its membership consists of prominent Syrians who have been naturalized, or at least have taken out their first papers for naturalization; and its purpose is "to encourage Syrian immigrants in the United States to become American citizens." The patriotism of this organization is indicated by the fact that the 50 members subscribed over \$3,000 to the Liberty Loan, and were instrumental in securing \$20,000 more.

These and other similar Syrian organizations, combined with the usual agencies and influences for "Americanization," are achieving excellent results. An important reason for their success is the assimilability of the Syrians.

The number of Syrians that have become naturalized probably does not exceed 10 per cent of the entire number of Syrians here.

<sup>1</sup> Louise Seymour Houghton in *The Survey*, July, 1911.

Perhaps this is too large an estimate. But various lines of evidence point to a rapidly increasing relative proportion as well as actual number. The era of naturalization seems to have really begun for this immigrant people.

### **As Residents and Citizens.**

What sort of residents and citizens do the Syrians in this country make or are in the way of making?

A general answer to the first part of this question is implied in what already has been said, and its meaning is unmistakable. What sort of residents and citizens are they likely to make? This question can be answered only in the spirit of prophecy. But taking into account their inheritance, their native mental and moral traits, and the way in which, on the whole, they are conducting themselves here, it would not seem too much to say that when, through the opportunities and influences of America, they shall have come fully to their own, we shall number among our "foreign-born neighbors" no better residents and citizens than this people from Syria.

