

## **Arab Americans of the South**

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When I tell people that I am researching Arab Americans in the South, they usually respond: “Are there Arab Americans in the South?” Yes, there are. In fact, Arab Americans live in all parts of the United States.

Thanks to the Charlton Oral History Research Grant from Baylor University, I spent 2013 conducting oral histories with Arab Americans in Louisiana, Mississippi, Virginia, and Texas. The transcripts of my interviews will be available in the collection at the Baylor University Institute for Oral History in Waco, Texas.

The earliest presence of Arabs in the Southern United States is not definitive. Historical accounts exist indicating Arabs may have explored the Americas hundreds of years before Christopher Columbus. Moreover, he likely arrived in America with Arab navigators and scholars from Andalusia—present-day southern Spain, which was inhabited by Arabs for over 700 years. Rare narratives of African Arabs indicate some were abducted and held as slaves in the South.

However, most immigrants to America from Arab speaking countries have come in large numbers since the late 1800s. They have established permanent roots in the South and throughout the nation, and they continue to arrive and thrive in America.

### ***A Diverse Cultural Heritage***

For the Charlton Oral History project, I defined Arab Americans as anyone with roots in the 22 countries of the Arab League. The Americans I interviewed had a variety of ethnic and religious backgrounds including Iraqi, Lebanese, Palestinians, Syrians, and a Sephardic Jew from Palestine / Israel. They were Roman Catholic, Episcopalian, Maronite, Orthodox Christians, Jewish, Sunni and Shia Muslim, and an atheist.

The interviewees ranged from new citizens to well-established second and third generation Americans. They included a 19-year old university student and a 94-year old retired professor, and many ages in between.

### ***Why did they come to America?***

The early immigrants came mostly from “Greater Syria,” which was later separated into Lebanon, Palestine, Israel, Syria, and Jordan after World Wars I and II. They came to America primarily for economic reasons—for a better life. They also came seeking freedom, equality, liberty, and security from hunger and war. Whatever their reasons for coming to America, “it takes enormous courage to leave your home,” as Melanie, the third-generation daughter of an Orthodox priest living in Houston notes, recalling her ancestors.

George told me his father left Lebanon in 1908. He was 14 years old with little money, if any. The young boy traveled from Beirut to Cyprus, then to Marseille, France. He took a boat to

Boston, then he went to Detroit, and finally to Tyler, Texas. It took George's father three years to get to Texas, all in pursuit of a better life. He walked much of the way and he worked all the time. He would buy something for a nickel and sell it for a dime. George said, "We were poor but we didn't know it."

### ***Early Entrepreneurs***

Early Arab Americans often earned a living by peddling their housewares across the United States. It was something they could do, even though most could not read or write English. The peddlers went everywhere, both men and women. Usually, they walked from farmhouse to farmhouse carrying their goods on their backs—the packs weighed as much as a hundred pounds. The work was grueling. They carefully saved to buy a cart and horse to carry more things and cover more ground to support their families.

Many immigrants also became farmers in the South. Hannah told me her father grew tobacco and potatoes, and peddled to support his large family. President Franklin D. Roosevelt saved the family farm in Kentucky during the depression by interceding with the bank when her father unwittingly co-signed a loan for another farmer.

### ***Living the American Dream***

When the immigrants saved enough money, they started restaurants, bars, and grocery stores. They also purchased real estate to rent. The early Syrian immigrants developed the renowned commercial strip on Sixth Street in Austin Texas. A number of interviewees also told me about their bond with Jewish American immigrants. Jewish storekeepers often bankrolled, supplied, and mentored the newly arrived Syrians, helping them to get started in peddling and business.

Another reason people come to the United States is for education. In 1952, Muhammad traveled to America from Palestine to study chemical engineering. Muhammad went to a university in Arkansas. There he married Betty Sue and had two boys, Jamal and David. The family travelled all over the country for Muhammad's work, eventually settling in Texas.

### ***Seeking Acceptance***

Many of the people I interviewed, both Christians and Muslims, experienced hurtful discrimination, even though they often shrugged it off. Nevertheless, Jamal said living in West Virginia was "a year of hell." He said, "They still looked at us as foreigners. I had a funny name, and they didn't like outsiders. So I got beat up every day."

His Palestinian Muslim father and white Christian American mother received hostile stares. Despite his difficulties growing up, Jamal said, "I think I was given a very great gift to be able to see the different cultures and understand and see how similar they were. I mean, people are people in the end. I think I was blessed in some way."

Nadine from Mobile, Alabama said, "I definitely tried to be a white southern girl. I was really trying to fit in. I wanted my Mom to stop giving me pita bread sandwiches, mamoul, and

baklava. I wanted her to give me chocolate chip cookies, white bread sandwiches, and peanut butter and jelly.” Nadine said, “I wanted to fit in. I even wore SPF-50 so that I wouldn’t tan as bad.”

Samer experienced considerable racism growing up in the United States. He arrived as a young boy from Egypt. While he was in high school, Samer tried to reach out to his local community and teach them about Islam. No one wanted to hear about it. He told me that his mosque was shot at and the municipality did nothing. He lives and teaches in Austin now and finds it friendly and cosmopolitan. Janine who grew up in Beaumont, Texas also said that Austin was more tolerant and welcoming to different minorities.

Discrimination seemed less prominent among those I interviewed from Christian Middle Eastern communities that had established churches, such as in Austin, Texas and Vicksburg, Mississippi.

### ***Faith, Family, Food***

Despite the diversity of the Arabic-speaking peoples, one thing everyone agreed upon is the beauty of Middle Eastern culture and the deliciousness of the food. George from Tyler, Texas said, “We’re faith, family, food, friendship. That’s our culture.”

Ruth Ann from Houston said, “I thought I was the all-American girl who was lucky enough to have kibbe and grape leaves for lunch and for Sunday dinner.” “Everything we do as Arabs is food. No matter what—there is a lot of good food!” In addition, Nadine commented, “It’s cooked with so much love.” Everyone I interviewed was also a fan of the local American Southern cuisine whether Cajun, barbecue or hamburgers!

### ***Proud to be American***

War is often a reason for immigration. Nadine’s mother fled the civil war in Beirut while her father fled the dictatorship in Egypt. They met in Beirut and ended up in Alabama. Noor, a linguist and translator, moved her family to Texas to save them from the second Gulf war in Iraq. Her entire life has been marked by violent regional conflicts. Even though recent immigrants are often educated professionals, the transition is still difficult, especially adapting to a new culture and language while struggling with the ongoing trauma from the experiences of war.

A first generation Palestinian American—who endured the Arab-Israeli conflict all his life—told me that soon after arriving in Savannah, he was summoned for jury duty. Even though he was ineligible to serve at the time, Osama said, “I am so proud that I am part of the system,” and “they can trust me!” He said, “I love this country, the people, the place, the kind of empowerment it gives me. I count in this country!”

Arab Americans are deeply rooted in the South and new Arab immigrants keep coming to America for the same reasons that they have always come to America: for the pursuit of happiness. They aspire to a better life for themselves and their children. They seek freedom, equality, and liberty, and the promises that the U.S. Constitution makes to all its citizens. Arab Americans are “just regular folk,” as George, an American diplomat originally from Belton,

Texas, puts it. They just happen to celebrate their Sunday family dinner with kibbe and fried chicken. And if you happen to stop by their homes, you will be warmly welcomed and very certain to be well fed!