

Arab Americans in the Southern United States

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Purpose of the Oral History Research

Arab Americans living in the southern United States are the focus of my oral history research project. Scant research has been conducted on Arab Americans in the South, and even fewer oral history projects encompass this minority ethnic group's experiences. Because ethnic diversity is perceived as a northern urban phenomenon, many are surprised to learn that Arab Americans exist in the South, even though some of these communities were established in the 19th century. Nevertheless, little substantive research has been done on these southern Arab American communities. My oral history research project will contribute to collecting and preserving the history of this largely unknown aspect of the southern United States' heritage, with the support of the Charlton Oral History Research Award.

Arab Americans trace their roots from 22 diverse countries of western Asia and northern Africa. Arab immigration to America reached significant proportions in the late 19th century. Most of these early immigrants (1880s-1920s) were poor and working class Syrian/Lebanese Christians from mountain villages. Yet, these frequently illiterate immigrants primarily and initially settled in or near cities in the northeast, such as Cleveland, Boston, Chicago, Detroit, and New York. The first waves of Arab immigrants came to America to seek economic opportunities, freedom, and equality, and to escape oppressive Ottoman rule, conscription, and taxes.

A second wave of immigrants (1950s-1960s) fled the 1948 Palestine/Israel war and revolutions in Egypt, Lebanon, Jordan, Iraq, and Syria. About half of these immigrants were Muslims and many were from the upper and more educated segments of their societies.

A third wave of immigrants (1970s-to present) fled after the 1967 Middle East war—most of these immigrants were Palestinians and Egyptians, and during the Lebanese civil war, beginning in 1975 (to 1982). Many Iraqis also fled their country during the protracted war with Iran (1980-1988). During the first and second Gulf wars, many Iraqis fled the fighting, mainly Christians, and they are still fleeing the current violence.

While the majority of Arab Americans reside in the northern tier of the United States, numerous Arab American communities exist in the southern United States, for example in Austin, Beaumont, Birmingham, Dallas, Jacksonville, Houston, New Orleans, San Antonio, Sherman, Shreveport, Tyler, and Vicksburg. (Ironically, predating these modern day Arab immigrants, slave traders brought Arabs from North African countries to labor in North and South Carolina and in Georgia.)

How and when did these Arab immigrants arrive in the South? We do know that some were turned away at Ellis Island because of their young ages or for health reasons. Not to be dissuaded from their goal of reaching America, some traveled to South or Central America before migrating north. Some entered through New Orleans or Galveston and settled near their ports of entry. Others were the unwitting targets of Middle East ship owners, who promised passage to “Amerika” but transported their passengers to South America instead. Some of these immigrants landed in Cuba or the Caribbean Islands and traveled to the United States from the islands. Others immigrated twice: once from their home countries in the Middle East and then from Mexico, Chile, Argentina or other Latin American countries by ship or sometimes overland through Texas. By the 1900s, many Arab immigrants to Texas had arrived via Mexico. Some immigrants remained in Latin America where there are numerous Arab population centers, e.g., Belize, Brazil, and Mexico, splitting families between North and South America.

Most of our general knowledge about Arab Americans immigrants is derived from the research of the following scholarly studies: Adele L. Younis, *The Coming of the Arabic Speaking People to the United States* (1995); Alixa Naff, *Becoming American: the Early Arab Immigrant Experience*, (1985); Philip M. Kayal, *The Syrian-Lebanese in America: The Role of Religion in the Assimilation Process* (1975); Gregory Orfalea, *Before the Flames: A Quest for the History of Arab Americans* (1988), and *The Arab Americans: A History* (2006); and, Eric Hooglund, ed., *Taking Root, Bearing Fruit: Arab American Community Studies*, (1985). These studies tend to be overviews of the first wave of immigrants and focus on migration in northern urban areas, with the exception of the Hooglund volume, which contains two brief chapters on Arab Americans in Mississippi, one of them based on archival material and the other on an interview with a family.

While the literature on Arab Americans is growing, there is general lack of detailed information documenting the Arab American experience. Most studies focus on major population centers in the North, e.g., New York City, Chicago, and Worcester, MA, and specifically on the Lebanese and Syrian families from the first wave of immigrants. Regional studies on Arab American communities in the South are scarce, as indicated by Professor Michael Suleiman’s classified, annotated bibliography, *The Arab-American Experience in the United States and Canada* (2006). He lists three studies on Arab Americans in Mississippi (two are from the Hooglund book mentioned above), ten studies on Texas, and no studies on Louisiana or Virginia. Oral histories with Arab Americans are few and scattered. The Naff collection at the Smithsonian has one of the largest oral history collections, but most of these are focused on the first Arab immigrants who settled in northern communities.

To document the Arab American experience in the South, I propose to interview Arab Americans living in Louisiana, Mississippi, Virginia (my resident state), and Texas to learn how these families became residents of the South, as well as answers to such questions as: How do they self-identify? How did eastern sensibilities adapt to southern culture? What challenges did Arab Americans encounter in the segregated South? (There is at least one well-documented case of an Arab American lynching.) How did Arab immigrants adjust to southern society in rural vs. urban areas? How do they earn their livelihoods? What traditions and cultural practices have they preserved, e.g., foods, language, religion? How do issues of race affect them? What is the experience of Arab American women in the South? Did they experience discrimination in housing, religion, or jobs? For immigrants who are more recent: Have their lives changed since 9/11? How have the recent revolutions in the Middle and North Africa affected them and their families still living in their countries of origin?

While none of the first generation of Arab immigrants are alive, their children and grandchildren will know some of their stories and the challenges they faced. I am locating immigrant families from the second, third, and most recent waves of Arab immigrants, many who fled wars. They will have different stories to tell about how and why they came to America and how they have or have not assimilated. I would like to interview at least four families from each of the four southern states where I plan to conduct research.

My Previous Research on Arab Americans

I have interviewed Arab Americans in the Midwest and in Virginia and conducted archival research on Arab Americans in various collections. To prepare for a long-term research project on Arab Americans in the South, I have been doing research at the Library of Congress, including at the Folklife Center, and at various universities and special libraries in Washington, DC, as well as the US National Archives in College Park, MD. For some years, I have been doing research at the extensive Faris and Yamna Naff Arab American Collection at the National Museum of American History at the Smithsonian Institution. I visited the Institute of Texan Cultures in San Antonio, Texas to tour the Arab American exhibit and research the Texas Arab American community. I attended the 2011 Southern Federation of Syrian Lebanese Clubs (est. 1931) convention in New Orleans to make the acquaintance of potential southern families to interview. In addition, I have been reading available published and non-published historiographical literature on Arab Americans and plan to do research at the Center of Migration in Staten Island, NY, which houses the Syrian American Archival Collection.

Prior Interviews on the Topic

I interviewed Arab Americans living in Ohio, who were among the first wave of immigrants, as well as their children. In the Virginia area, I have interviewed first generation Palestinian Americans who left their homes after the 1948 Palestine war for my Ph.D. dissertation and book, *Under the Cover of War: the Zionist Expulsion of the Palestinians*. I videotaped 130 oral histories with Palestinians living in refugee camps across Jordan and in Lebanon during three months of fieldwork. A Council of American Overseas Research Council Centers (CAORC) fellowship sponsored my research. The Library of Congress's Arab and Africa Division is interested in being the repository of my refugee interviews.