A PASSAGE TO LEBANON:

THE ENCAPSULATION OF LEBANESE CULTURAL

IDENTITY IN UTICA, NEW YORK

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ABSTRACT

A Passage to Lebanon:
The Encapsulation of Lebanese Cultural Identity in Utica, New York

Doctor of History and Culture Dissertation by

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This work contextually illustrates how Lebanese immigrants established and maintained a Lebanese community in Utica, NY through the encapsulation and perpetuation of cultural practices. This will be accomplished by combining perspectives from both within the community and from the city of Utica itself. The vast majority of the Lebanese in Utica, unlike other major enclaves in the U.S., came from very small, very specific areas of Lebanon, including an array of cosmopolitan towns and rural hamlets. Knowing this, we have the unique opportunity to explore how a very specific group of immigrants, transplanted into a new country, were able to sustain a community and preserve their unique cultural practices.

This work characterizes the planting of a particular community's seed in foreign soil and to better understand the type of fruit it would bear. While jobs and opportunities were once the allure, what allowed the Lebanese community in Utica to maintain itself even after those opportunities would dry up? I will answer this question by exploring how the community constructed an image of Lebanese identity and perpetuated itself through the encapsulation of certain religious and cultural practices.

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INTRODUCTION:
On the Shoulders of New Utica

At the foot of Mount Sannine, where once the palaces of Greek and Phoenician explorers stood, the village of Baskinta in Lebanon remains a monument to natural beauty. While a well-insulated region surrounded by nearly impassable mountains, this village maintains a storied history. Before Christianity found its way into Baskinta, the people of this region worshipped the nature deities San and Nine (Neen) after whom the mountain is named. The world-renowned cedars of Lebanon stand watch on the slopes of this mountainous and ruddy landscape much as they have since the earliest days of human civilization. It is the cedars from these particular slopes which Solomon chose to build the temple in Jerusalem with. However, life in Baskinta, whose name means "house of wisdom," was being marred by a myriad of external forces in the mid-nineteenth century.

The Ottoman Empire had conquered Lebanon and Syria in 1516 and reorganized the area into a single district known as Greater Syria. However, the empire had little interest in the Lebanon region other than the collection of its taxes. Lebanon had long been granted a degree of semiautonomy under Ottoman rule, but this only realistically applied to the major cities. For a place like Baskinta, tribal and familial loyalties governed its affairs. These loyalties in the numerous villages across the region would lead to bitter feuds within communities and between religious groups. Old tensions would be exacerbated, and neighborhoods would be divided. This would culminate in the British-backed and Ottoman-ignored massacre of Maronite Christians by a small

Islamic sect, the Druze, across the countryside in 1860. Relationships between those who had lived peaceably enough with each other for decades would be strained and finally broken. On top of these woes, widespread famine had become the norm for much of Lebanon and Eastern Syria. Life in this environment was one of fear—the fear of hunger, the fear of one's neighbors, and the fear of the government or lack thereof.

Wishing to escape this rather harsh way of life, numerous young Lebanese men would leave the country in an effort to find peace and prosperity elsewhere. Many would leave never to return home, while some would return to their families with the money they had earned in the West. Additionally, there were others who would persuade their relatives to leave Lebanon altogether and follow them into the West. The exchanging of stories about life abroad would find its way into every household, village, and city, even Baskinta. The stories were generally similar: they told of the prosperity to be had in the West, whether that be in Europe or the Americas. In Baskinta, a young man listened intently to his neighbor's account of life in the United States, resolving almost immediately to make the crossing to the New World.

That youth was Betrus Saad, and, along with three other companions from Baskinta, he would set out on a journey to the United States in 1888. The group would make stops in Paris, Dublin, and Belfast on their way to New York City. At this time in the U.S., the majority of immigrants from Lebanon were entering the country via Ellis Island and an expatriate colony had been set up in Lower Manhattan on Washington Street. Since Lebanon was technically still under the jurisdiction of Greater Syria, their country of origin was often listed as Syria in their immigration paperwork, but many of

these émigrés clearly identified as Lebanese—not Ottoman or Syrian. When the youths from Baskinta originally arrived in New York City, they were met with welcome and familiar faces. Desiring to get to work and begin earning money, the young men were introduced to the business of dry goods peddling or traveling sales which was the job most widely available to Lebanese immigrants. Many of the initial Lebanese pioneers had begun in peddling and were now starting to open their own importing and exporting firms. These business owners would send out these newly arrived Lebanese as door-to-door salesmen, traversing the country from coast to coast and selling wares only they could import from Lebanon and the Middle East. These would be bought up by fellow émigrés in different cities across the country as well by those interested in such exotic and rare items. When the four companions began their first expedition in the Fall of 1888, their journey would eventually take them all the way to California and back. These men, traveling mostly on foot and having been informed of the whereabouts of other Lebanese communities, would stop at each along their route like nomads between oases. One such community was a small yet vibrant city situated on the Erie Canal in central New York state's Mohawk Valley: Utica.

Utica, New York is known for a few things. Throughout the nineteenth century, it had boasted its vital role as a central hub for trade and culture along the Erie Canal. At this time, it had a vibrant textile and manufacturing industry which resulted in the opening of multiple mills and factories, making Utica and its surrounding areas a vital commercial center. In this era, Utica gained a small measure of fame and had played host to a variety of cultural figures. It was populated largely by immigrant communities of

Irish, Italian, and Polish heritage. The quartet from Baskinta would find welcome lodging in Utica, and, since their resupply orders from New York City were delayed, they decided to spend the winter together in this welcoming community. There being a small but growing Lebanese population in Utica and since the bonds of hospitality still reigned supreme even abroad, the four young men were immediately welcomed into their homes. While selling what wares they had and taking orders for future visits, the most vital commodity exchanged between them was information—specifically news about home. Since the young travelers and many of the émigrés in Utica were from Baskinta, there was a lot of catching up the young men were asked to do for these people. This information, ranging in topic from new stories from the village to the situation of particular family members still residing in Lebanon, was precious as it could only be provided by these newly arrived immigrants. The foursome would be traded between households to share this information, and it was during this time that they would also begin to take night classes in order to hone their English-speaking skills. In the spring, with the weather improved and armed with a better command of the language, the four would set out to continue their expedition. Venturing all the way out to the West coast and back to New York City, these four young men, like so many other Lebanese peddlers throughout this era, would see much and more of the United States than most of its native citizens.

Why should we begin with this story of Betrus Saad and his journey all the way from Baskinta to Utica? It is surely a great insight into the working lives of early Lebanese immigrants, but, more importantly, it is one of the first times a community of

Lebanese émigrés is actually confirmed to have existed in Utica. Until Betrus Saad's story was first published as part of Adele Younis's dissertation: *The Coming of the Arabic-Speaking People to the United States*, there was only vague reference to the existence of a Lebanese community in Utica in the late nineteenth century. This anecdote illustrates a few things in particular about this community. Firstly, Saad and his companions give us the first real glimpse of how strongly regional loyalty and hometown devotion still were even in a small enclave across the Atlantic. The former natives of Baskinta living in Utica surely monopolized the time of these young men as they had a shared connection greater to them than simply being Lebanese. Secondly, the story shows the value placed on education within this community as the four youths were encouraged to perfect their English while wintering in the small town. And finally, this extended stay in Utica illustrates the importance of cultural preservation and the maintaining of a cultural identity through the immense hospitality shown to Saad and his companions. It exemplifies the continued tradition of hospitality among Levantine cultures that stretches back beyond time recorded. Like the coming waves of immigrants that would arrive after Saad, the Lebanese in Utica would seek to encapsulate and perpetuate their cultural practices as their population steadily grew, and certain traditions would become indispensable to expressing that cultural life. While the story of Betrus Saad's arrival in Utica may remain a mere footnote in the long and storied history of Lebanese immigration to this country, it undeniably demonstrates the impact these particular immigrants would have on their new home. These distinct factors, as exemplified in Betrus Saad's story, are the defining qualities that reflect a strong version

of Lebanese identity long maintained in the Utica area. Through the study of its history, as well as its cultural and religious practices, we will understand exactly how this Lebanese enclave has maintained itself for nearly 150 years in Utica. Along the way, we shall also discover why certain practices were necessarily abandoned while others were frozen in place.

This work seeks to characterize the planting of a particular community's seed in foreign soil and to better understand the type of fruit it would bear. While jobs and opportunities were once the allure, what allowed the Lebanese community in Utica to maintain itself even after those opportunities would dry up? Immigration to Utica would continue for some decades, even after the Erie Canal and the mills ceased to be the focal point of commerce. But how and why did Utica remain an established Lebanese enclave albeit a small one? I will answer this question by exploring how the community constructed an image of Lebanese identity and perpetuated itself through the encapsulation of certain religious and cultural practices.

Before we begin, we must clarify an important issue of nationality. Those living in Lebanon now are politically recognized as Lebanese and as part of a distinct nation, and, as alluded to earlier, this area was part of Greater Syria under Ottoman rule until the end of the First World War. When the French declared its mandate over the region after the war, the Lebanon region was separated from the rest of Greater Syria. France had developed a close relationship with fellow Catholics, the Maronites, who constituted the majority of people in that particular region at the time. But realistically, until its independence in 1943, Lebanon and its citizens were considered Syrian by nationality to

the outside observer. The Lebanese had considered themselves part of a distinct region that was not Syrian long before the Ottomans even conquered the area, but, to the rest of the world, they were simply viewed as still a part of Greater Syria.

This presents a unique situation in terms of nomenclature, especially when piecing together the history of this immigrant community in Utica. While these immigrants all technically came from Syria and even included the title of Syrian in naming some of their organizations/clubs, they have all vehemently identified themselves as Lebanese through the years. Because, as we shall observe, the Mount Lebanon and Akkar regions from whence the majority of this community originated was itself a unique geopolitical region. A strong affinity for being identified as Lebanese runs through it even when they were technically part of Syria. For our purposes, I shall be referring to the members of this community as Lebanese unless otherwise noted. It is integral to that selfhood which they identify with and doing otherwise would only be a disservice.

This project is a necessary addition to immigration scholarship as well as cultural history and diaspora studies. Like some other immigrant experiences in the United States, the voices of early Arab immigrants are often fragmented or nonexistent. That circumstance is not surprising in this case as there was little documentation of those initial, and relatively few, arrivals of Lebanese to a place like Utica. Consequently, the ways in which these first immigrants established and, most importantly, maintained immigrant enclaves has had little attention paid to it by students of American history. To be fair, there is little also in the way of self-reflection on the community in regards to this. This lack of communal written material leaves a largely unfulfilled gap for future

generations. Instead, this study relies heavily on as much primary source material as can be found in the forms of print media, first-hand accounts, correspondence, church records, meeting minutes, and interviews with members of the community. From both the city/county offices and church archives, there is valuable information in terms of population statistics, family size, careers, and much more.

This work will be framed in terms of this community's identification as an ethnoreligious group, and this is the key facet to understanding its characteristics within the context of Utica, NY. Doing this, I shall be able to engage and contribute to both the literature of diaspora studies as well as the creation of ethnic identities. When discussing the nature of the Lebanese diaspora particularly in this context, I will be approaching the subject from the methodology laid out by Avtar Brah in his work, *Cartographies of Diaspora: Contesting Identities*. Brah employs the diaspora as a framework to analyze the, "economic, political, and cultural modalities of historically specific forms of migrancy."[1] This will prove highly useful for understanding the Utica community as this allows for the close examination of "the relationality of these migrancies across fields of social relations, subjectivity, and identity."[2] Alongside this employment of diaspora theory, I shall employ the perspectives of ethnicity scholars like Michael Humphrey in his work on the Lebanese diaspora. Furthermore, I shall seek out the new formula, as Youssef Choueiri sought in his work on Lebanon developing into a sovereign nation, but instead of applying this to the formation of a country, I will implement it in terms of a

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[1] Avtar Brah, *Cartographies of Diaspora: Contesting Identities* (London: Routledge, 1996), 16.

[2] Ibid.

small immigrant community. By examining, "the local, regional, and external factors," that led to both the Lebanese community in Utica's creation as well as its maintenance.[3] Understanding these methodologies, I will then recast the prevalent narrative of traditionally large immigrant communities—those at the macro level—and hone in on the small, yet sustained communities—representing the micro level. This will illustrate how even partially assimilated, smaller communities can act as time capsules to particular histories of Lebanon.

While there has been excellent scholarship on the history of the Lebanese diaspora, there is a marked shortage of analysis on the small to mid-sized enclave. Leaving aside the larger Lebanese communities such as New York City or Montreal, there are places like Utica where immigration to it has all but ceased—yet a distinct Lebanese identity is still prevalent. This work seeks to contribute to the larger realm of Lebanese diaspora theory by focusing in on a very specific case study and marking its uniqueness in terms of its more populated brethren. We cannot accomplish this through a straightforward historiography alone; what is needed here is a reframing of what constitutes being Lebanese in the diaspora. It is vital for this work, and for understanding the Utica community, that we make a distinction in terms of its ethnic and religious identity. The majority of these immigrants to Utica—from the late nineteenth to the early twenty-first century—have come from the same regions. For the most part, they worship three interconnected branches of Christianity, and they politically identify as Lebanese.

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[3] Youssef Choueiri, *Modern Arab Historiography: Historical Discourse and the Nation-State* (New York: Routledge, 2003), 134.

By understanding these conditions, we can make the case for this group being ethnoreligious. From there, we can begin to unravel just how this community has managed to perpetuate a particular history and its practices.

The majority of this project's primary research comes in the form of periodicals; for example, the newspapers of Utica slowly start mentioning their new "Syrian Colonists" more frequently after 1900. Just as important are the Arabic language newspapers produced in the U.S. for Arab immigrants (*Al-Hoda*, *Al-Shaab*, and *Al-Alam* to name a few). Working in the St. Louis Gonzaga Church archive, I unearthed a unique periodical resource in the form of hundreds of clippings from several of these newspapers. The majority of these clippings were titled "Utica News" and were the ongoing column of local journalist, Yussef Elasmar. These newspapers were written by and for Syrian and Lebanese immigrants in the U.S., and Elasmar's writings were only concerned with the news from the Utica community. They are an invaluable look into this journalist's observations of the community over a period of over forty years (1920-1968) which we will delve into early in this work.

In addition to the periodicals, a number of texts and memoirs serve as glimpses into the early waves of immigration and life amidst the East Utica enclave of Lebanese immigrants. Thanks to the efforts of Drs. John G. Moses and Eugene P. Nassar as well as the writings of James Zogby, much of the early history of this community has been preserved through their extensive efforts. Scholars and avid local historians, their research into the lives of early Lebanese immigrants stands testament to the importance of chronicling this community's development.

Another invaluable source of information has been the interviews I was able to conduct with community members from a variety of standpoints. The memories and perceptions these community members related, with some dating as far back to 1908 up to the present day, have been an indispensable source for understanding the Lebanese experience in Utica and the U.S. writ large. Along with these first-hand experiences, through the archive maintained at St. Louis Gonzaga Church (the local Maronite congregation), the meeting minutes from the earliest clubs and societies these immigrants organized provide an amazing look into the aspirations and motivations behind many of the initiatives undertaken by the community.

In terms of secondary sources, there has been a swell of scholarship on the Arab American immigrant experience particularly in the last twenty years. These include voices from within the community through oral history as well as broader studies of demographics and the movement of people and customs. These works have vastly diversified since the 1990s, and their focus on the individual communities and not painting Arab immigration with broad strokes has contributed greatly to this kind of study. Observing the particular movements of various Arab groups and their diaspora have produced nuanced and complex histories which are valuable references for the study of this particular community. Notably, the work of local historians and enthusiasts in Utica have culminated in a fair share of published material concerning both the roots and future of this community. In the research for this work, many previously untapped resources were unearthed. Many were simply stored and have been forgotten while others were in Arabic and required translation to understand their true importance. In a

way, this project will shed light on unique aspects of this community by understanding its essential characteristics, and it will be accomplished through this holistic approach to research and resources. It is through the combination of these resources that I feel confident in exploring those factors that encapsulate a particular kind of Lebanese identity in Utica.

Before going any further, I must remark upon the use of the term encapsulate or encapsulation for the purposes of this study. This term is used to describe the conscious or unconscious action of preserving a series of cultural characteristics. It does not necessarily denote the placing of something within a time capsule although that sentiment may be felt by those actively trying to preserve their culture. Instead, I implement this term as a way of understanding the very act of preservation or attempts to maintain cultural stasis. As much as the cultural characteristics discussed in this work are notable because of their lack of change, this does not denote that they reflect identical copies of their original iterations—far from it. This work employs this term encapsulation not to identify elements that have remained unchanged over decades. However, the conscious or unconscious acts of attempted cultural preservation are what I deem to be encapsulations. Defined as such, this term will help anchor us wen discerning the type of Lebanese identity expressed in this community.

I believe this work is of the utmost importance to Lebanese cultural history and identity in a Western context. While the scholarship in this field has increased, little has been done to discern how small immigrant communities, particularly from Arab/Middle Eastern nations, have managed to maintain themselves for decades long after their initial

draws have dried up, and this work also seeks to rectify this. For example, a very useful but necessarily broad resource on Arab immigration to the United States was accomplished by Alixa Naff in her book, *Becoming American: The Early Arab Immigrant Experience*. The work is a great contribution to the studies of Arab immigrants, but it lacks the specificity of a particular ethnoreligious group's experience in the United States as well as a reflection on the current realities within those smaller communities. Also, Gregory Orfalea's work, *The Arab Americans: A History*, is highly regarded by some for his contribution to the study of Lebanese and Syrian immigration to the U.S. But, in truth, it tends to oversimplify the experiences of these cultures and treats them more as a novelty for popular consumption than as an actual part of American society. Between the very best work in this field and the very worst, there is a hopeful trend in the study of nuance, and this work seeks to add to that growing scholarship.

This work will contextually illustrate just how these Lebanese immigrants established and maintained a Lebanese community in Utica through the encapsulation of cultural practices—even long after the traditional enticements had dissolved. This will be accomplished by combining perspectives from both within the community and from the city of Utica itself. The reflexive nature of this immigrant community and its adopted home will be revealed through those key factors reflected in Betrus Saad's voyage through Utica. The vast majority of the Lebanese in Utica, unlike other major enclaves in the U.S., came from very small, very specific areas of Lebanon, including an array of cosmopolitan towns and rural hamlets. Knowing this, we have the unique opportunity to understand how a very specific group of immigrants, who were literally transplanted into

a new country, were able to create an immigrant community with cultural practices that have remained fixed for decades.

Also, the relevance of this kind of study lies not in just the simple history of an immigrant community within the United States, but how that community radically effected its new home and the perception of Arabs within it. For example, unlike many parts of the country that experienced a rise in suspicion, anger, and even violence towards Middle Eastern peoples in the wake of the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, Utica instead rallied behind its Lebanese and Syrian population to exemplify the long and peaceful relationship present in the city—of which the rest of the country should take note. The local newspaper illustrated that these people, particularly immigrants, have been a strong, integral part of American communities for decades, and they should not be lumped together into a faceless group of fundamentalists. This was an idea few would hear in the dreadful weeks that followed that attack, but it stands as a testament to just how much a part of Utica's community the Lebanese had become. This example showcases just how entwined the two have become, and why a comprehensive study of what distinguishes this particular Lebanese community is vital for American cultural history.

The first chapter of this work details a brief history of Lebanon from its Phoenician roots to Ottoman rule. It will explore how the region was socially, culturally, religiously, and linguistically distinct from the rest of the Ottoman empire, including much of Syria. It will explore the reasons that caused so many Lebanese to leave their home country in the first place, and the chapter will also examine what other instances in

history inspired larger and larger waves of immigration to the West. We shall see what types of places these immigrants fled to including Europe and the Americas—basically, we shall gain an understanding of the Lebanese diaspora through the population statistics from the late nineteenth century to the present.

The history of Lebanese immigration to the U.S. and Utica itself will also be examined in this chapter. As other ethnic groups have already immigrated to Utica by the nineteenth century, particular attention will be paid to how the city of Utica handled immigrant communities becoming a part of it, including Irish, Polish, and Italian communities. Since the Lebanese community began as an enclave in East Utica, where an already sizable enclave of Italian immigrants had long been established, this chapter will examine whether or not the assimilation into American society was eased by living in proximity to another Mediterranean culture. We shall also explore whether or not we can classify the Eastern Christians of Lebanon—those who make up the overwhelming majority of immigrants to Utica—as an ethnoreligious group. This classification will aid us in understanding just how the cultural practices of this community differentiated them from other Lebanese immigrants.

The second chapter will examine the spaces shared by both religious and secular life in this community. After establishing its ethnoreligious nature, we will naturally be able to interpret how the efforts of the earliest Lebanese settlers in Utica would forge a community that allowed for its own unique mix of religious and cultural expression. These elements include the church, social groups, Arabic newspapers and even the bootlegging of liquor. We shall examine their function within the community, which ones

have endured while others have necessarily been forgotten. They are important to note as they have large implications for how the community would perpetuate those traditions originally set down by the first wave of immigrants for generations to come.

The third chapter is presented as a case study for understanding the impact of regional prejudices between towns/villages in Lebanon upon the development of their immigrant communities. Here we have the opportunity to analyze a specific endeavor taken up by the Utica community—the building of its own Lebanese school—to illustrate how Lebanese hometown rivalry actually impeded their most ambitious project yet. First introduced in the second chapter, this practice of hometown devotion would necessarily be deemphasized as time wore on, and, as long they were a central part of identity formation, they remained an obstacle to community cohesiveness. The feats these early settlers were able to accomplish—in a short period of time considering the plight of most immigrant communities—are nothing short of amazing, and it is a wonder to think what more they might have been able to accomplish if this divisiveness had not been a factor. Overall, utilizing sources long since forgotten or unknown, we will be able to mark how and why this facet of Lebanese identity was not encapsulated in the community and how its preservation would have marred future cooperative progress.

The final chapter explores two specific cultural signifiers that have remained fixed in this community despite decades of change in both Lebanon and other Lebanese diaspora communities. These signifiers represent the most outwardly recognizable cultural characteristics of "Lebaneseness." The dialect of Arabic spoken as well as the staging of communal celebrations are two facets that have remained resistant to outside

influence, and this chapter seeks to understand why. First, in order to critically examine the use of the Arabic language within the Utica community, a brief overview of the linguistic nuances of Levantine Arabic (the prominent dialect in Lebanon and Syria) will be provided. Additionally, we shall explore how advancing communications technologies allowed for the preservation/perpetuation of Arabic dialects—a factor particularly useful for diaspora communities like Utica. This will culminate in a close examination of the current state of the language by comparing the personal observations of those who descended from the original wave of settlers in Utica (1880s-1940s), those who migrated in the 1960s-1970s, and those who arrived in the 2000s to the present. These personal experiences illustrate exactly how the Utica community was able to encapsulate a particular version of Levantine dialect over many decades.

Also, this chapter will examine the practice of celebrations within this community. This will detail the particular celebratory traditions that were perpetuated in the diaspora and examine the differences between their practice in Lebanon and in Utica. Breaking down each facet of the celebration—from the food, the dance, the music, and the church's role in all this—we shall be able to fully understand the importance of adhering to traditions that are decades old and may not necessarily still be a central part of modern Lebanese identity. Particularly, we shall examine how its celebrations preserved a cultural relevance for the community. We shall also mark what these celebrations accomplish for the community including how they represent a cultural solidarity. In the same vein of language as an identifiable cultural feature, the chapter

will explore how, like the Arabic language in Utica, the practice of these celebrations is frozen in a particular time that reflects a specific image of Lebanese identity.

Finally, after close examination, we will be able to answer how and why the nature of Utica itself allowed for this established enclave to become a time capsule for a particular version of Lebanese cultural practices and identity. Through the exploration of these key themes detailed here, we will understand just what maintained this community for so long, and why, even after all the original allures of immigration have dissolved, this enclave remains as strong as it does. To begin illustrating this, the following paints a picture of this community's attachment to Utica. In 1914, to show their gratitude to the city which allowed them their pursuit of happiness, the members of this community organized a pageant to honor Utica. It portrayed ancient Utica the magnificent on the Mediterranean in all its splendor. Equal parts historical fiction and epic ballad, the pageant portrayed the glory of Phoenician rule all the way to Roman occupation. When ancient Utica falls and drops her glorious mantle, the Spirit of Light lifts this mantle, and she places it on the shoulders of New Utica personified. It was this connection between ancient Utica and Utica, NY that these Lebanese players wished to portray, illustrating just how appreciative they were of their new home. For on the shoulders of New Utica, these immigrants found freedom, not simply from oppression or hardship, but the freedom to preserve and mythologize a version of their Lebanese cultural heritage across the Atlantic.

CHAPTER 1:
Ethnoreligious Affirmation and a Short History of Lebanese Immigration to Utica

The Lebanese are a people that have been classified in many different ways. Some proclaim that they are the descendants of Phoenicia, sharing kinship with the Greeks at the height of their Mediterranean dominance and, therefore, unrelated to the Arab world. Others insist that they are full members of Arab society and always have been, and the denial of this is just a way to curry favor in Western eyes. Regardless of opinion, certain aspects of Lebanese history and culture are indisputable. Firstly, their culture has evolved distinctly from the rest of of the Arab world, but it still remains a reflection of it. Sandra Mackey relates:

> Almost all Lebanese, regardless of religion, possess a strong pride in Lebanon and feel a sense of superiority over the peoples of the rest of the Arab world. There is both a superficial and deeper truth to this claim…There is a sophistication and worldliness among the Lebanese that distinguishes Lebanon from the countries of the Arab hinterland.[4]

As an important Mediterranean port, the region has tended to be more cosmopolitan, and Beirut, its capital, has remained a vital locus point in intercultural connections. While small, the country has historically been fairly insulated from Arab affairs—a mountain chain in the east prevented major incursion from the broader Arabian world while its inhabitants enjoyed diverse contacts with various traders across its coastline. But at the same time and especially in the last two hundred years, it is increasingly a place where borders are often blurred and tribal or familial regionalism still holds the most power—like much of the Arab world. In fact, Mackey continues that, "Despite its unique

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[4] Sandra Mackey, *Mirror of the Arab World: Lebanon in Conflict* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2008), 13.

characteristics, Lebanon provides a case study for the Arab world because it is, and has always been, the most open Arab society."[5] Although its central government is strongly democratic, and has been since its independence from France in 1948, it still bears a resemblance to its neighbors in terms of the real power structures that govern the country. As such, identity formation in Lebanon, "is rooted in family, clan, sect and ideology more than in the nation."[6] Secondly, Lebanon has the distinguishing factor of having a diverse religious makeup. More prevalent than many Arab states, Lebanon has long-established regions with Christian majorities. According to the U.S. State Department in 2012, the country's "population is approximately 4.3 million. An estimated 27 percent is Sunni Muslim, 27 percent Shia Muslim, 21 percent Maronite Christian, 8 percent Greek Orthodox, 5.6 percent Druze, and 5 percent Greek Catholic, with the remaining 6.5 percent belonging to smaller Christian groups. There are also very small numbers of Jews, Bahais, Buddhists, Hindus, and members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons)."[7] Finally, its Eastern Christian groups have traditionally lived in the same parts of the countryside for more than a couple centuries. For example, most of Lebanon's Maronites lived in the Mount Lebanon region which stretches across one-third

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[5] Ibid, 14.

[6] Michael J. Totten, "Between West and East," *The New York Times*, March 30, 2008.

[7] Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor, "2012 Report on International Religious Freedom," *United States Department of State,* May 20, 2013, http://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/irf/2012/nea/208400.htm, accessed February 22, 2015.

of the country's northern Mediterranean coastline.[8] This deep connection between their spiritual lives and the physical soil of Lebanon is not only amazing, but it provides us with a trove of cultural and religious history and is certainly worth exploring further in terms of this project.

As it concerns this study, we presently have two goals: first, we shall determine whether or not these people constitute an ethnoreligious group. Doing so, we can then explore the ramifications which this classification would imply. Secondly, we shall be exploring the reasons why many Lebanese left their homes and learn about how they were able to carry their culture and plant it in new soil abroad. Those who would settle in Utica, NY were coming from a land of contradictions: Middle Eastern yet Eurocentric, cosmopolitan yet monastic. Regardless of these attributes, Lebanon's social reality is uniquely multifaceted, and it has influenced the ways its sons and daughters have integrated into American society. Defining and determining if they can be classified as an ethnoreligious group will aid us in understanding how their cultural practices have been perpetuated—particularly in the Lebanese diaspora.

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[8] United States Central Intelligence Agency, *Contemporary distribution of Lebanon's main religious groups* (Washington, D.C.: Central Intelligence Agency, 1988), accessed Feb 29, 2016, https://www.loc.gov/item/91684898.

Recognizing Lebanese Christians as an Ethnoreligious Group

But who are the Christians of Lebanon? Let us examine this question not through the typical lens of defined national lines or borders. To truly understand who the Lebanese Christians are, one must understand the role religion plays in in the quotidian life of Lebanon. The blurring of the lines between everyday life and religious life is often associated only with certain denominations of Islam or Judaism. The most common examples of this can be found in how each religious tradition prescribes rules about the consumption of food, the act of tithing, and, most importantly, the central role of familial life. The fact remains that Eastern Christians—Christians of the Middle East—are equally devoted to the inseparable nature of worship and everyday life. In terms of that most important signifier, family in Lebanese and Arab culture, Pierre Bourdieu relates: "the family is the alpha and omega of the who system…the indissoluble atom of society which assigns and assures to each of its members his place, his function, his very reason for existence and, to a certain degree, his existence itself."[9] For that reason, we cannot simply refer to the Lebanese, particularly those whom this study is based upon, as simply a nationality or a religious group. In a pamphlet published on the Utica Lebanese community in 1981, local historian John G. Moses explains that because of the "centuries-old political turmoil and oppression that prevailed in the Near East under Ottoman rule, the only loyalty, aside from devotion to family, clan and village that Christians of the region professed, was to their faith and their religious leaders…[They]

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[9] Pierre Bourdieu, quoted in David Pryce-Jones, *The Closed Circle: An Interpretation of the Arabs* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1991), 27.

have generally felt a stronger religious consciousness than a political identity."[10] For this reason, we must understand that Lebanese identity is not solely concerned with loyalty to a geographic location, but, instead, it is also an identity that inextricably binds ethnic and religious heritage. They are a group which recognizes that both its religious and cultural heritage is tied inextricably to a particular region. It is, therefore, more fully accurate to identify the Eastern Christians of Lebanon as a unique ethnoreligious group.

How we define an ethnoreligious group is an important matter we must attend to first; in many ways, its definition can be seen as a view of cultural boundaries. These boundaries often define whether one is a part of said group or outside of it. Simon Harrison relates that these cultural boundaries serve as, "discursive devices with which actors try, successfully or otherwise to convince others of the truth of their perceptions and definitions of certain social divisions."[11] This expansive nature is certainly found in the diaspora communities where so much of one's identity must be explained to mark his/her difference from the rest of the larger community of which they are a part. But to see where Eastern Christians mark these cultural boundaries, we must understand the duality of asserting any kind of division of this nature. "The demarcation between in-group and out-group is drawn in the idiom of cultural purity…[and] in the idiom of cultural ownership."[12] On one hand an ethnoreligious group may attempt to exclude or keep

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[10] John G. Moses, *From Mt. Lebanon to the Mohawk Valley: The Story of Syro-Lebanese Americans of the Utica Area*, Utica, NY: Beacon Press, 1981, 18.

[11] Simon Harrison, *Fracturing Resemblances: Identity and Mimetic Conflict in Melanesia and the West* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2006), 120.

[12] Ibid.

secret its religious and cultural practices, and, on the other, it may seek to simply keep outside/foreign influence out, prizing purity above all else. This dual nature is a line that all ethnoreligious groups skirt, and we shall observe this phenomenon made manifest in the Eastern Christians of Lebanon.

To assert that this group satisfies this ethnoreligious classification, let us turn to the first document that legally defined what constituted an ethnoreligious group. We shall examine the following document and its conclusions closely for the purposes of clarity—redefining what has been traditionally classified as either a religious or nationalist group is no small task, and it is certainly not one this author takes lightly. The term "ethnoreligious" was not easily identifiable even into the late twentieth century; instead, it is a term that has been both embraced and contested in the communities it has been applied to. For example, the classification of Christian, Jewish, or Muslim communities as ethnoreligious is often a double-edged sword. "To require a religious person to compartmentalize his mind into 'public' secular and 'private' religious halves is neither possible nor desirable; it is oppressive to require a citizen to forsake his religious identity when addressing public issues."[13] This issue is further complicated when notions of ethnic identity and race are conflated, for the association between race and Judaism or Islam has been historically used to reinforce negative stereotypes. Some elements of ethnicity and religion are not easily joined, and, when applying the label of ethnoreligious to a group, we must do so with caution. For our purposes, claiming the Eastern

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[13] Li-ann Thio, *Mind the Gap: Contending for Righteousness in an Age of Lawlessness* (Singapore: Genesis Books, 2009), 316.

Christians of Lebanon constitute an ethnoreligious group is not sufficient; we must prove it. Therefore, it is imperative to this study that we illustrate how and why this group is clearly ethnoreligious before moving on to how and why its émigrés encapsulated those religio-cultural practices in a foreign land. To accomplish this, we must turn to a 1983 court case in the United Kingdom.

The case I am referring to is *Mandla v. Dowell-Lee*—one which is often cited for its verdict concerning racial discrimination as well as determining an official definition of an ethnoreligious group (by the British government at least). The case deals with the classification of Sikhs and whether or not that may be referred to as a race or ethnicity. While the Court of Appeals initially denied this definition, the appeal to that verdict, which took place in the House of Lords, ruled in favor of the classification of Sikhs as an ethnicity—more specifically, an ethnoreligious group. Lord Fraser of Tullybelton, one of the Lords seated as judge in this case, set forth parameters which, if met, determined satisfactorily to the court what constituted an ethnoreligious group. He stated:

> The conditions which appear to me to be essential are these: (1) a long shared history, of which the group is conscious as distinguishing it from other groups, and the memory of which it keeps alive (2) a cultural tradition of its own, including family and social customs and manners, often but not necessarily associated with religious observance. In addition to those two essential characteristics the following characteristics are, in my opinion, relevant: (3) either a common geographical origin, or descent from a small number of common ancestors (4) a common language, not necessarily peculiar to the group (5) a common literature peculiar to the group (6) a common religion different from that of neighbouring groups or from the general community surrounding it (7) being a minority or being an oppressed or a dominant group within a larger community,

> for example a conquered people (say, the inhabitants of England shortly after the Norman conquest) and their conquerors might both be ethnic groups.[14]

It is through these conditions, used as a template, that we may recognize the Christians of Mount Lebanon as an ethnoreligious group. I choose these parameters not as an arbitrary set of signifiers. Indeed, of the seven characteristics described, I daresay we cannot envision them as a checklist which solely and simply determines whether a group is considered ethnoreligious. Instead, I see this court ruling as a guideline—an opportunity to illustrate just how qualified the Lebanese Christians of Mount Lebanon are in terms of this determination. While some of these parameters had to have been satisfied for the court in this particular case, we shall find that our group in question far exceeds these standards set forth as an example.

According to the case, there are two essential elements as well as five additional indicating characteristics that, in terms of this debate, define what would constitute an ethnoreligious group. The first of these essential conditions is "a long shared history, of which the group is conscious as distinguishing it from other groups, and the memory of which it keeps alive."[15] As discussed earlier, our group in question has long identified itself as unique from its surrounding neighbors. The Christians of Mount Lebanon, flanked in the east by that same mountain chain and in the west by the Mediterranean Sea, have historically experienced change and cultural exchange slowly and usually on their own terms. Conversely, claiming a lineage that dates as far back as ancient

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[14] *Mandla v Dowell-Lee*, House of Lords, March 24, 1983, http://www.hrcr.org/safrica/equality/Mandla_DowellLee.htm, para. 10.

[15] Ibid.

Phoenicia, they also embrace a cosmopolitan nature from contact with other cultures across the Mediterranean. They are a people that boast of an unbroken, seemingly monolithic past since antiquity all the way through their occupation under the Ottoman Empire which ended in the early twentieth century. While there are other religious groups in nearby areas, Mount Lebanon has maintained, even unto the present, its unique heritage in terms of its religious and cultural practices. For example, the Druze, an Islamic sect, has lived side by side with the other faiths/peoples of this region, but, as we shall explore more fully later in this chapter, their culture and history diverges sharply from that of the Lebanese Christians. Based on these facts, it is quite apparent that the Lebanese of this region satisfy this requirement of a shared history.

The other essential requirement as outlined by Lord Fraser is "a cultural tradition of its own, including family and social customs and manners, often but not necessarily associated with religious observance."[16] This requirement is perhaps the one most easily met, and one in which in-depth analysis will soon follow in the coming chapters concerning cultural and spiritual traditions. This group maintains traditional celebrations, dances, music, and foodways to name a few, and the Mount Lebanon region, because of its insularity, allowed for these practices to be cemented as staples of the community with little to no alteration over the course of decades if not centuries.

The remaining series of characteristics are considered important but not essential to the fundamental nature of an ethnoreligious group. However, we will find that they contain elements which we must consider if we are to accurately judge the status of the

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[16] Ibid.

group in question. The next element is the sharing of "a common geographical origin, or descent from a small number of common ancestors," and this is a marker which is also easily satisfied.[17] As has already been mentioned, this study is concerned with the residents of Mount Lebanon and those whom emigrated to the United States from this area. The region we are discussing is not at all a large one; in fact, the area of the governorate (similar to a county) of Mount Lebanon is only 1,905 miles, roughly a third the size of Connecticut. It is from this area that the vast majority of both Lebanese Christians reside as well as where the pioneers of the Utica community originated.

Figure 1: "Map of Lebanon, its districts and major cities." The governorate of Mount Lebanon (central) and the Akkar region (north) are where the majority of Utica Lebanese originate from. Courtesy of Johan van der Heyden, http://www.geohive.com/.

[17] Ibid.

Concerning the next two characteristics, a common language and a common literature peculiar to the group, this community satisfies these requirements on a couple levels. Firstly, their shared language is Arabic, but that is not remarkable for this area. Their Levantine dialect of Arabic, however, is quite rooted to Lebanon and this region in particular. Contributing to that linguistic difference is the unique literary output of the region. Lebanon is known for the creation of a particular style of poetry, sung or spoken in the Levantine dialect, known as "zajal." "In the Lebanese tradition [zajal] means primarily oral vernacular poetry in general, a discourse in many forms, composed in or for performance, declaimed or sung to the accompaniment of music."[18] This genre of poetry is usually an expository "duel" between poets/singers on topics ranging from politics, religious discourse, and morals. When not dueling, these poets are also renowned for their grandiloquent love poems. This is a genre, which is still practiced today in Lebanon and in its diaspora, and which we can define as uniquely Lebanese—with its origins in the Mount Lebanon region. This region is the locus point of Christianity in Lebanon, and "there seems to be a general consensus that the early zajal prototypes first appeared in the writings of the Maronite church fathers;" therefore, we can conclude that the Mount Lebanon region, the birthplace of the Maronite faith, originated this type of literary output.[19]

As to the next characteristic, "a common religion different from that of neighbouring groups or from the general community surrounding it," we will definitively

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[18] Adnan Haydar. "The Development of Lebanese Zajal: Genre, Meter, and Verbal Duel," *Oral Tradition*, 4/1-2 (1989): 190.

[19] Ibid, 201.

ascertain that the group in question qualifies for this characteristic in the section immediately following this one. Suffice it to say, the people of Mount Lebanon largely profess one of three Eastern Christian faiths which are inextricably bound to each other through their formation and shared history. These sects date back to the earliest days of Christianity, and their cultural practices have been traditionally linked and are often observed and/or celebrated together, despite sectarian differences. Indeed, as we shall soon discover, these different sects are far more interconnected and interdependent than most neighboring faith communities, and this qualifies them as a distinctly connected religious group that differs from the majority of faiths that surround it.

Finally, our last characteristic is "being a minority or being an oppressed or a dominant group within a larger community."[20] Without even getting into the subject of oppression from neighboring groups, the Christians of Mount Lebanon meet this requirement as they have been for many decades, the statistical minority in the country. While the Mount Lebanon region (along with small locations in the northern and southern parts of the country) has traditionally been composed of Christians, the majority of the country is currently comprised of either Shi'ite and Sunni Muslims.[21] This was not always so as there seemed to be a much more even split in earlier decades with a Christian majority. A census "conducted in 1932 indicated that the population was 875,252 with around 53% as Christians."[22] While the proportions have shifted (today it

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[20] *Mandla v Dowell-Lee*, para. 10.

[21] "The Lebanese Demographic Reality," *Lebanese Information Center* (Lebanon: Paper 2013), accessed January 7, 2016, http://www.lstatic.org/PDF/demographenglish.pdf, 1.

[22] Ibid.

is roughly 60% Muslim to 40% Christian), the location of Christian and Muslim enclaves has not. Although it had the statistical advantage across the country, the Christians of Mount Lebanon represent a group that has experienced being both a dominant and oppressed minority as we shall soon discover.

In the end, my illustration of these markers means nothing if the group itself does not share this self-realization. Common ancestry, language, cultural output—these are attributes that can be argued both for or against a unique ethnoreligious group. The bottom line is this: the group itself must actively claim that it is a certain way, and those who surround it are different from it. As we explore more deeply the nuances of their historical and cultural situation, we will confirm the ethnoreligious nature of this group through their cultural output.

The Religious Side of the Ethnoreligious

There are a diverse variety of Christian faiths present across modern Lebanon, including the Copts, Evangelicals (including Baptists and Seventh-Day Adventists), and Armenian Christians to name a few. But there are predominately three major Christian ethnoreligious groups in the country and particularly in the area in question: Mount Lebanon. These three groups are the Maronites, the Melkites, and the Greek Orthodox, and, while found across both Lebanon and Syria, these groups comprise nearly all of the major waves of Lebanese immigration to the Utica, New York area. Each is a distinct sect of Christianity, but they all share a common lineage traced back to the city of Antioch.[23] Antioch was a Greek city known as a crossroads for trade in the ancient world as well as home to many of the earliest Christian communities in the religion's infancy. Indeed many Christians had claimed that Antioch was the cradle of their religion and asserted its primacy in its foundation.[24] The city once stood little more than a hundred miles north of Lebanon's borders in the current city of Antakya in Turkey. As home to many of the earliest Christian faiths, this city housed its own Christian patriarchy. The city of Bkerké is the current location of the See of the Maronite Catholic Patriarchy (basically the central location of the religion like Rome is for Roman Catholics). According to the See's history, Antioch was once this central location. However, it would not remain a united Christian community for long; the Council of Chalcedon in 451, a

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[23] Sally Bishai, *Mid-East Meets West: On Being and Becoming a Modern Arab American* (New York: iUniverse, Inc., 2009), 13.

[24] Libanius, *Antioch as a Centre of Hellenic Culture as Observed by Libanius*, tr. A. F. Norman (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2000), 32.

widely attended ecumenical council which debated the nature of Jesus Christ as both God and man, would cause an irreversible split in the faith, leading to the modern iterations of these early faiths:

> In the year 518, the Patriarch of Antioch, Severius, was deposed from his see for having denied the two distinct natures in Christ and for rejecting the decrees of the Council of Chalcedon…in consequence the Church split into two groups, the Chalcedonians and the anti-Chalcedonians. Every since that time, there has always been a Catholic Patriarch holding to the faith as defined at Chalcedon and a non-Catholic Patriarch rejecting it. A century later, another division affected the Church of Antioch, leaving three groups of Christians, the Syriacs, the Maronites, and the Melkites, and this division has continued down to the present day…The Church of Antioch had originally been one church encompassing the whole of Asia and the East, but finally became several churches.[25]

The Greek (Eastern or Antiochian) Orthodox church had freed itself of any hierarchy above its head bishops in 431, but regardless, their faith and cultural practices still remained closely tied to their Eastern Catholic brethren. This schism, dating all the way back from the Council of Chalcedon, led to the formation of the modern Maronite and Melkite churches, and, together with the Greek Orthodox, these churches have managed to preserve much of the original language and traditions from these earliest days of Christianity. But this unique history and cultural connection, which had been inculcated for centuries in Lebanon and Syria, would be tested in ways unknown through the years, especially when their followers took root in countries abroad. For our purposes, we shall observe how these three groups have interacted with each other in the United States by

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[25] "Antioch," *Bkerké: The Maronite Patriarchate*, accessed March 25, 2015, http://www.bkerkelb.org/english/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=97:-antioch&catid=59:the-beginning&Itemid=93, August 10, 2012.

first gaining a deeper understanding of their basic characteristics in order to understand that essential heritage which they all share.

The Maronites are the largest of the three groups in Lebanon, and their religious identity is based upon the Eastern Christians which first settled in Syria in the fourth century. By the fifth century, this sect had established itself permanently in Mount Lebanon after fleeing persecution in Syria. The consensus for most Maronites is that their order was founded and modeled on the life of a spiritual leader and hermit priest, Maron (sometimes spelled Marun).[26] The only historical source referring to Maron's ascetic life outside of the region's oral tradition is found in Theodoret of Cyrus's work, the *Religious Historia*. That work, according to Matti Moosa, "contains an account of about thirty ascetics and anchorites, with some of whom he was personally acquainted."[27] It is only Theodoret who mentions this particular hermit priest. Moosa explains that Theodoret's account of Maron is essential to Maronite identity as it not only validates his existence but also sets forth the framework by which the Maronite church would function for years to come. For example, Moosa continues,

> Theodoret tells us that when Marun decided to live a life of austerity, he climbed to the top of a mountain in the district of Cyrus where there was an abandoned pagan temple. He dedicated this temple to the worship of God and visited it frequently…Within a short time he became know for his austerity, piety, and healing power, which later attracted people from all over Syria.[28]

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[26] Lucas Van Rompay, "Excursus: The Maronites," The Oxford History of Christian Worship, ed. Geoffrey Wainwright and Karen Westerfield Tucker (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 170.

[27] Matti Moosa, *The Maronites in History* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1986), 17.

[28] Ibid, 18.

Whether or not Maron is the single founder of this faith is inconsequential to the modern adherent. Instead, the austerity and piety that Theodoret characterizes in Maron is central to how Maronites define themselves within Catholicism itself. The Maronites identify as Catholics; indeed, they are one of the few sects of Christianity to have not broken their communion with the Vatican, staying loyal to the pope since its beginning. Being the largest of the Eastern Christian sects in the country, the Maronites have long held strong political and cultural influence throughout Lebanon. Much of the country's political landscape is still defined by its confessionally-based government which, regardless of population statistics, positions Maronites as its permanent majority.

The Greek Orthodox Church in Lebanon represents the second largest Christian community. As discussed earlier, what distinguishes the Greek Orthodox from Maronites or Melkites lies primarily in their history. They were predominately made up of several different groups: Romans, Greeks, and generally those of the cosmopolitan city of Byzantium. Greek Orthodox scholars consider their sect among the first groups to formally be identified as Christians, tracing their lineage to the ministry of the apostles Peter and Paul in Antioch. Even though the Greek Orthodox, like other Orthodox sects, had split from the papacy and answers to no one higher than their head bishop, they are still closely connected with their Christian compatriots in Lebanon. In fact, many of the liturgical practices, hymns, and rites of the Greek Orthodox are actually shared across these faiths. This has obviously had a cultural effect on the growth of these religious communities in Lebanon with many adherents finding it easy to blend and mingle

between these three sects. Those very same cultural connections would be reforged and strengthened abroad as Lebanese communities coalesced and proliferated in the U.S.

The Melkites are also a sect of Christianity which has its roots in Eastern, specifically Greek, Orthodoxy. The Melkite faith, like the Maronites and Greek Orthodox, spread from Antioch into northern Lebanon and Syria. While currently in communion with the Vatican, this was not always the case, and this shows in certain liturgical and cultural practices which more closely resemble the Greek Orthodox rather than their fellow Catholic Maronites. Like the Greek Orthodox, they too trace their church history back to the first Christian followers in Antioch, and similarly they view themselves as having descended from the original community of Christians. The similarities between these two faiths end when it comes to the topic of hierarchy, specifically the idea of loyalty to the "Patriarch of the West" (the Pope in Rome). Latin missionaries traveling to Syria and Lebanon in the early 1600's precipitated the reincorporation of some Eastern Orthodox churches, including the Melkites.[29] The contention over loyalty to the "Patriarch of the West" (the Pope in Rome) led to the split between Greek Orthodox and Melkite churches. Otherwise, the liturgy and calendar of all three of these sects are comparable between each other and, in many ways, traditional Roman Catholicism. As Roman Catholics once sang their mass and consecration in

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[29] Mgr. Abdallah Raheb, "Conception of the Union in the Orthodox Patriarchate of Antioch (1622-1672)," tr. Nicholas J. Samra, Chapter II, Section 4 (doctoral thesis, Beirut, 1981), accessed March 31, 2015, http://phoenicia.org/orthodox_antioch_union.html.

Latin, all three can celebrate their respective masses in Arabic and Aramaic (the language of biblical Hebrew).

Sharing a political, historical, and geographic connection with each other, these are the major faiths that comprise this ethnoreligious group of the Mount Lebanon region. Sects of Muslim (Shi'ite, Sunni, and Druze) Lebanese living in the same communities, then as now, have lived side by side with their Christian countrymen. But this study focuses solely on those who would leave the region to start an immigrant community in Utica, NY. These particular individuals were predominately from the district of Mount Lebanon, especially the towns of Aaqoura and Baskinta.

There is a fundamental sentiment that underlies much of Lebanese history and culture, whether it be experienced natively or abroad. Because of its ties to ancient Phoenicia and because of its role in perpetuating some of the earliest practices of the Christian church, the act of preservation and encapsulation is the natural modus operandi of this ethnoreligious group. It stands to reason that this group, which has often been lauded for its preservation of long forgotten or previously discarded cultural practices, would embrace this characteristic. Those that emigrated away from Lebanon, regardless of reason, have also naturally carried this mindset and the values it engenders to their new homes. This realization will help to both contextualize and rationalize the cultural manifestations of this group and allow us to accurately interpret the cultural production of its immigrant communities with a much clearer vision.

Why Did They Leave?

The story of Betrus Saad which introduced this work is not an atypical story among the Lebanese community in Utica. In fact, it may be prototypical of any immigrant's journey from a land which one loves but is forced to leave. But how did the mass exodus of Lebanese (particularly of Lebanese Christians) that would later constitute the pioneer community in Utica begin and why? To answer this, we must first understand the political and social realities experienced in the Mount Lebanon region during the 1860s. To accomplish this with any accuracy, statistics of each successive wave of immigration are vital, and much credit is due to the efforts of the Lebanese Information Center which published its invaluable report on the country's emigration history in 2013: *The Lebanese Demographic Reality* (henceforth referred to as the LDR). The goal of the LDR was to accurately and scientifically calculate the amount of people by religious affiliation who emigrated from Lebanon since the late nineteenth century. This may seem a simple enough task for a country so small, but it is nothing short of a heroic feat in a place where the last official census was conducted in 1932.[30] The LDR characterizes each successive wave of emigration and the various factors contributing to those fluctuating numbers. The first hundred years covered by this report are the hardest to pin down as official population statistics, in many instances, were not reliable. From 1870 to 1970, estimated numbers are used, but they do indeed reflect a reality that coincides with much of the immigration research done by those within the countries who would receive these immigrants. It is through the experiences of those who fled that we can gain a

[30] "The Lebanese Demographic Reality," 1.

deeper understanding of these statistics and align historical events with the waves of emigration they subsequently fueled.

Before we delve into those aforementioned historical events, the social and political layout of the country in the mid to late nineteenth century must first be examined. Much of the history of this country, and thereby its emigration statistics, is characterized by a few major facets. While certainly not exclusive to Lebanon, these facets have been and continue to be important social realities within Lebanese society. Firstly, the tensions between traditional country life and a growing cosmopolitan city life have been present in the region since the voyages of the ancient Phoenicians beginning in 1200 BCE. Secondly, the religious divisions between Christians and Muslims have provided for both periods of calm respite and bitter violence. And lastly, foreign influence has done much to alleviate and/or exacerbate these already present tensions within the country. As stated, these three characteristics are not unique to Lebanon nor do they distinguish the country from other small, desirable lands for trade or colonization, but they remain the factors that continue to influence Lebanon's political and cultural history.

The first facet is almost a given as the country's position on the Mediterranean and its history of maritime trade meant contact with North Africa, the Aegean Sea, and, later, Southern Europe. These contacts brought wealth, offered new goods, imported ideas, and also gained the interest of the larger powers in the region, among them: the Romans, the Mamluks, and eventually the Ottomans in 1516.[31] The coastal cities of

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[31] Philip K. Hitti, *History of the Arabs* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002), 671.

Beirut, Sidon, and Tripoli became (and, in many ways, still are) the most vibrant and culturally diverse cities in the country because of their maritime history. However, there remains always a tension between those areas which benefitted from this type of trade and those further away from these cities that were marginalized or excluded.

The clash between a cosmopolitan city and a rural hamlet can be divisive enough to precipitate unrest. Add into this mix religious tensions with the common friction between new and traditional ideas, and one has the makings of a powder keg. It is through these characteristics that foreign powers, be they Ottoman, Egyptian, or European, have waged battles against each other at the expense of this region's inhabitants. These factors are still relevantly applied today, but, for the purpose of this study, we can better comprehend why so many Lebanese began to leave their homes. While the greatest waves of emigration started in the late nineteenth century, we must understand the years under Ottoman domination that led to this point.

The Ottomans first expanded their empire out of Turkey into the Balkans and then across the Middle East beginning in the late thirteenth century. However, "the conquest in 1453 of Constantinople by Muhammad II the Conquerer (1451-81) formally ushered in a new era, that of the empire."[32] Sultan Muhammad II continued his campaign, defeating the Mamluks (military rulers in Egypt, the Levant, and Iraq) in 1516, and the Ottomans were, in fact, aided by some of the native Syrian and Lebanese populations to end harsh

[32] Ibid, 710.

Mamluk rule.[33] In recognition for this aid, instead of becoming a purely vassal state to the growing Ottoman Empire, a degree of autonomous rule was granted the region.

> During the conflict between the Mamluks and the Ottomans, the amirs of Lebanon linked their fate to that of Ghazali, governor (pasha) of Damascus. He won the confidence of the Ottomans by fighting on their side at Marj Dabaq [location of the decisive battle] and, apparently pleased with the behavior of the Lebanese amirs, introduced them to Salim I [Sultan of the Ottoman Empire] when he entered Damascus. Salim I, moved by the eloquence of the Lebanese ruler Amir Fakhr ad Din I (1516-44), decided to grant the Lebanese amirs a semiautonomous status. The Ottomans, through two great Druze feudal families, the Maans and the Shihabs, ruled Lebanon until the middle of the nineteenth century. It was during Ottoman rule that the term Greater Syria was coined to designate the approximate area included in present-day Lebanon, Syria, Jordan, and Israel.[34]

This was a special arrangement especially considering the fate of other Ottoman territories. Aside from Egypt, the peoples of Syria and Lebanon were afforded a measure of self-governance.

The Eyalet (province) of Syria was declared upon Ottoman conquest. This arrangement lasted until the invasion of the Levant by Muhammad Ali of Egypt. As payment for previously quelling a Greek revolt, Muhammad Ali captured a sizable chunk of the Levant between 1831-1840; soon, a treaty was signed that gave Egypt dominance over Greater Syria (Syria and Lebanon).[35] But, for the most part, the average resident of Lebanon, particularly the Mount Lebanon region, was fairly insulated from the events of

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[33] Ibid, 705.

[34] Library of Congress, "Country Studies: Lebanon under Ottoman Rule, 1516-1916" (Library of Congress: Federal Research Division: 1987) http://lcweb2.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/r?frd/cstdy:@field(DOCID+lb0023), accessed March 29, 2015.

[35] William L. Cleveland, *A History of the Modern Middle East*, fifth edition (Boulder: Westview Press, 2013), 66.

these larger powers. In fact, the religiously divided Druze and Maronites had managed to work together in a "subtle symbiosis" which afforded the peoples of both faiths a relatively stable social environment in this period.[36]

The Eyalet of Syria would last until roughly 1860 when the eyalets would be transformed into vilayets, which were another name for an organized province. These changes came from the Ottoman Tanzimat or restructuring of the Ottoman Empire. The Ottoman province of Lebanon, which was part of the Vilayet of Beirut, became the emirate of Mount Lebanon by 1831, but it was still fundamentally a tax farm for the Ottomans ruled by Muhammed Ali's son, Ibrahim.[37] Since the Ottoman conquest, a tenuous peace between the various religious groups in the region prevailed for the better part of 300 years, even through Egypt's occupation. However, by the late 1830s, tensions between the Maronites and the Druze, who consequently represent the two largest religious populations in the Mount Lebanon region, would spill over because of Ibrahim's governance. While he did much to secure equal treatment for all faiths in Mount Lebanon, his handling of opposition ultimately led to his downfall and Egypt's withdrawal from the region. When Ibrahim introduced conscription and attempted to disarm the local population, "certain Druze communities refused to surrender their weapons in 1837."[38] This led to his arming of "several thousand Christians…against the Druze. The Christian force took advantage of this opportunity to enlarge the territory

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[36] Kamal S. Salibi, *A House of Many Mansions: The History of Lebanon Reconsidered* (London: I. B. Tauris & Co. Ltd, 2005), 127.

[37] Cleveland, 83.

[38] Ibid.

under their control. In 1839 Ibrahim had a change of heart and ordered the Christians to return their arms."[39] The Christians refusal to relinquish their arms led to a general uprising across the region that ultimately resulted in Egypt's full withdrawal from the Levant.

While Mount Lebanon fell once more under the direct control of the Ottomans, the Maronites and other Christians of this region were not so ready give up their increased power and social freedoms. This posed a serious threat to Ottoman rule in the region, so beginning in 1841, the Sublime Porte sought to bring Lebanon back under its sway for good. "The Ottoman authorities were now convinced that the only way to bring Lebanon back under their direct control was to stir up strife between Maronites and Druzes."[40] Maronites and other Christians had become more economically successful, and their maritime connections were extended to trade with the European powers. This growing prominence was seen as unworthy in the eyes of the Sunni and Druze of the region who viewed this as "overstepping the bounds of what was permitted to minority subjects in a Muslim state."[41] Using these already present tensions, a state of unrest was fueled by Ottoman authorities over the next twenty years. By 1858, Lebanese peasants in the north, urged by their Maronite clergy, rose against their local lords and planned to divide up their large estates among themselves.[42] What followed two years after is

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[39] Ibid, 84.

[40] Hitti, 734.

[41] Cleveland, 84.

[42] Hitti, 735.

considered by those who study this region to be a tipping point in the history of Lebanon. "Civil disturbances between Druze and Maronites, which under Turkish stimulation began in 1841, culminated in the massacre of 1860, a year which will remain infamous for all time in the annals of the land." The Druze sieged about 150 Christian villages across much of Mount Lebanon, killing roughly 11,000 (about half of the deceased were killed in this violence, while the other half died of resulting destitution and famine).[43] This massacre was only halted by the intervention of France on behalf of the Christians, a point which Maronites remember until this day.

The Ottomans finally relented under international pressure from the Concert of Europe and allowed the creation of a semi-independent region, called a *Mutasarrifate*, in Mount Lebanon. The organization of a *Mutasarrifate* allowed for Mount Lebanon to directly govern itself under a council of twelve representatives selected from each of the religious communities in the region.[44] But to the average Lebanese Chrisian peasant living in Mount Lebanon, too much damage had already been done. The resulting famine from this conflict spurred many young people to leave Mount Lebanon in search of any work that would provide for themselves and their families. While the various freedoms offered in countries abroad would be welcome, above all, survival was the primary motivation behind those initial waves of Lebanese immigration. As the popularization of the American Dream spread throughout the world, the pursuit of this dream, to the

[43] Ibid.

[44] Cleveland, 84.

majority of Lebanese youth was based, first and foremost, on immediately bettering their economic status.

The initial wave of immigration to the U.S. from Mount Lebanon was majorly influenced by the massacre of 1860 and the subsequent famine which became endemic across the region. Young people like Betrus Saad and his companions were leaving Lebanon in order to either earn money to send home or to pay for their family's passage, sometimes even both. According to the LDR, "Before 1870, hundreds emigrated from Mount Lebanon (keeping in mind that the population back then was around 200,000). From 1870 until 1900, almost 3000 persons emigrated from Lebanon per year."[45] While not all those leaving chose the U.S. as their final destination, this trend in emigration reflects the economic and social realities of the region. Because their hardships in Lebanon had been so terrible, many of these émigrés would venerate their newly adopted country, whether it was the U.S., Canada, Egypt, France, Mexico, or a number of South American countries, just to name a few. As a result, a fervent dual patriotism would be typical within these Lebanese immigrant communities. But to understand the decision to move to America, we must understand the U.S.'s role in Lebanon prior to those first waves of immigration.

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[45] "The Lebanese Demographic Reality," 2.

Choosing to Settle in the United States

An interest in the U.S. was largely brought first-hand by American missionaries arriving in Lebanon in the early nineteenth century. Starting in the 1820s, both Catholic and Protestant missions set about creating schools and spreading American ideas throughout the country. "By the middle of the 19th Century these American missionaries, particularly through their educational and medical efforts, had earned a considerable influence throughout Lebanon and Syria."[46] These schools taught English in addition to Arabic and other basic subjects. A modern example of this is in the American University of Beirut which was first named the Syrian Protestant College when it opened its doors in December of 1866. These institutions certainly promoted learning, but they also inculcated many American ideas and introduced many to the way of life in the West, both socially and culturally.

Another factor contributing to Lebanese émigrés choosing the U.S. comes in the form of the two world expositions hosted in Philadelphia and Chicago. Arab-American historian Adele Younis has done much in her research to outline the reasons surrounding Arab, and particularly Syrian, emigration. Concerning the allure of the expositions, she writes that, "The Arabic-speaking people under their respective governments…responded to the call, either for trade, pride, or just the adventurous spirit of their restless young men and women."[47] While representing the Ottoman Empire, many Lebanese took advantage of the opportunity to showcase their wares and, in turn, were exposed to American

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[46] Moses, 3.

[47] Adele Younis, *The Coming of the Arabic Speaking People to the United States*, NY: Center for Migration Studies, 1995, 182.

society. Beginning with the centennial exposition of Philadelphia in 1876 and the Columbian exposition of Chicago in 1893 (and even the St. Louis exposition in 1904), many people of Syrian and Lebanese descent were given their first glimpse of what the U.S. and Western culture could offer. According to Alixa Naff, "The vanguard of Arabic-speaking immigrants to the exposition may indeed have been from Palestine, but Syrians were among them and traded in Palestinian merchandise."[48] However, those that went were predominately merchants and do not accurately represent all of the émigrés who would follow. But Naff explains that these first contacts are what laid the foundation for future Lebanese communities: "the pioneers who established the first Arabic-speaking colony in New York were overwhelmingly from trading centers in Syria. Curiously, a significant number of the founders and pioneers were from Zahle, a prosperous and active Christian market center and Mount Lebanon's only semi urban community in the last decades of the nineteenth century."[49] Therefore, what is most important to note about the experiences these merchants had at the expositions is the part they played in transmitting those experiences back to Lebanon. Through these select few, the expositions aided in the transmission of a more concrete picture of life in the U.S. in the late nineteenth century. Between the American missionaries and their schools and the experiences of Lebanese merchants in Philadelphia and Chicago, these factors illustrate an intricate transmission of ideas across the Atlantic. Both directly and indirectly, a concept of American society had been planted into the Lebanese imagination through these

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[48] Alixa Naff, *Becoming American: The Early Arab Immigrant Experience* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois State University, 1985), 77.

[49] Ibid.

transmissions. Whether through stories told by visitors or relatives, missionaries, correspondence, or even here-say, an idea of what could be found or accomplished in America began to substantially pervade Lebanese society, and it would influence its sons and daughters to seek their fortunes there when they chose to leave.

After the two world expositions, we would assume that, along with New York City, these cities would be the primary destinations for Lebanese immigrants. However, the establishment of a Lebanese community in Utica would be directly related to what those merchants at the expositions were doing: peddling. The only reason why someone like Betrus Saad even stepped foot in Utica was because of the peddling network that stretched from New York City all the way to the West Coast. The first wave of immigrants to the U.S., like so many others, entered via Ellis Island. A large percentage of them settled in the Washington Street area of Lower Manhattan, which would be referred to as "Little Syria," and in the Brooklyn Heights neighborhood. To understand how they left these communities for a place like Utica, we must explore the nature of the peddling business.

A significant contributor to Lebanese immigration history, particularly concerning Lebanese labor history in the Utica area, was the late John G. Moses. In his research on the occupations early Lebanese Americans held, Moses illustrates that they were predominately merchants of dry goods including cloth, thread, needles, buttons, laces, and shoestrings.[50] These businessmen started out by peddling across the country with stops in almost every major city between the Atlantic and the Pacific. Their roundtrip

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[50] John G. Moses, *The Lebanese in America*, Utica, NY: Beacon Press, 1987, 29.

journey would begin and end in New York City until an enterprising few decided to create receiving stations and stores of their own along that route. Saving enough money from their cross-country treks, these Lebanese peddlers opened their own shipping/ receiving stations along the peddling route. Utica, because of its access to the Erie Canal, became an important way-station for goods coming into New York City and sent off as far as California.

> By the turn of the century, emboldened Syrians had covered the nation in a network of peddling settlements. Not surprisingly, most were located in the populous eastern and middle western states but were also well sprinkled around the South and along the West Coast…Many were located in metropolitan areas; the majority, however, seem to have been clustered around small cities and towns on the fringes of agricultural areas, especially along railroad lines.[51]

Utica satisfies these parameters as it was along a railroad line which first connected New York City with the capital district in Albany, then stretched out westward all the way to Buffalo. The city was also surrounded by farmland, places where, as a youth, Mrs. Helen Abdoo would spend her summers picking beans for canning distributors like Del Monte.[52] It is important to note that those original settlers most likely made their home in Utica because of this strategic proximity to both their suppliers in New York City, the railroad line, and the Erie canal shipping network. Staking a claim in Utica and eventually opening their own dry goods stores, these immigrant businessmen would lay the foundation for what the Lebanese community in Utica would become.

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[51] Naff, 139.

[52] Helen Abdoo, Interview by Paul Charbel, Audio recording, Utica, NY, August 30, 2014.

Utica's industry was predominately fueled by two particular businesses: textiles and farming. The textile manufacturing in the city was an integral part of the local economy, and the mills provided much in the way of jobs and drawing potential workers from across the country. Similarly, the farming industry, which predominately planted beans for national brands such as Del Monte and Dole, also required many hands to work, especially come harvest time. This is the economic scenario which many immigrants, not just the Lebanese, found in Utica. While many of the first Lebanese immigrants to settle in Utica would do so with peddling and, eventually, the opening of a dry goods store, the mills and the farms are what provided for and sustained the successive waves of immigration.

Utica was already host to a variety of European immigrants, including Irish, German, Polish, and Italian settlers, each carving out their own enclave within the city. Notably, however, the Lebanese first settled amidst the already established Italian neighborhoods of East Utica. We shall examine more thoroughly how quickly Lebanese immigrants were able to establish themselves and offer opportunities for their succeeding generations later in this work, but it is worth noting here that their initial proximity to a fellow Mediterranean culture could have had a significant impact. Despite the many differences that Italian or Lebanese people no doubt have, they share several key things: most importantly, the centrality of food culture and Catholicism in their lives. Celebrations and festivals, often Feast days or church-sponsored, would serve to unify these two peoples despite perceived differences. Additionally, Alixa Naff explains:

> The relatively high degree of Americanization among first generation Syrians [and Lebanese] and the relatively low degree of ethnic consciousness in the second generation are two of the indications that the assimilation process penetrated sectors of the Syrian community more deeply than might have been expected.[53]

We could posit that the Lebanese's relatively quick success in Utica could be due, in part, to their finding a welcome home amidst a similar culture's enclave. This is a significant factor as it illustrates the importance of a Mediterranean connection within growing immigrant communities.

[53] Naff, 13.

Figure 2: "Index Map of Utica, 1883." This map illustrates the then city limits of Utica which mostly surround the Erie Canal. The areas labeled G, F, H, and J represent the parts of East Utica where Lebanese immigrants initially settled. Courtesy of Lionel Pincus and Princess Firyal Map Division, The New York Public Library.

The Earliest Records of the Lebanese in Utica

While the peddling network would have Lebanese immigrants passing through Utica, we must focus now on what factors precipitated their permanent settlement in the area. The answer to this is found in the *Utica City Directory* from 1895 as it offers the first residential listings of Lebanese people in the region. Before we examine this evidence and subsequent city listings, we must take into account the analysis of John G. Moses who had uncovered much of this early history of the community. He explained that while there are several names identifiable as Lebanese in the directories, many more must have been omitted, or misspelled.[54] Still this initial listing provides a basis, both economically and socially, for understanding the Utica community's origins. This particular directory lists three Lebanese men: B. Ganim, who is listed as owning a dry goods shop which is also his residence; Asa Moses (actually Acee Moses Acee) who is a peddler, and Jacob Andary, who is also a peddler.[55] One year later, the only listing found is for Moses Acee and his dry goods and notions business/residence. By 1897, the number again would grow to three, and the 1898 directory would list six. 1899's listings would drop to two, but by 1900 and 1901 they would rise again to five. The inconsistencies over this six year period may be confusing, and we must take this variation with a grain of salt. These listings do, however, illustrate a growing permanence of Lebanese people in Utica; Acee Moses Acee, for example, is listed in each of the directories since the beginning in 1895. However, a more accurate number of

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[54] Moses, 6.

[55] *Utica City Directory, 1895*, Utica, NY: J. E. Williams, 1895.

Lebanese residents in Utica would be revealed in an interesting way. When a priest from Mount Lebanon visited Utica in 1900, not only would it garner the Lebanese residents their first bit of notoriety in a local newspaper, but he would also conduct a more accurate census of the Lebanese living in Utica and its surrounding areas.

On April 7, 1900, the *Utica Saturday Globe* published a short article with accompanying picture concerning the recent visit of a priest, Father Michael Khoury, to Utica from the diocese of Zahle in Mount Lebanon. This article entitled "The Syrians of Utica" explains, somewhat confusedly, that a unique service—a Syro-Chaldaic mass—will be delivered on the following evening at St. John's Roman Catholic Church in Utica. According to the article, Father Khoury, who was a Greek Orthodox priest, visited the Utica area to both perform the mass and take a census of the community.[56] According to Fr. Khoury, the Lebanese in the area numbered about one hundred—a sizable enough group to have their request for a mass granted. We can surmise that, since these Lebanese were living in the vicinity of St. John's Church in East Utica, they had been attending services there for some time. The *Utica Saturday Globe* published this first piece of evidence that fully substantiates a Lebanese population, one that is not even reflected in the Utica city directory of the time. Father Khoury's informal census concluded with a convenient, round number, but, as opposed to the five listings in the city directory, it more accurately portrays the actual size of the community. Not only that, this visit reflects the interest of other Utica residents as news pertaining to this Lebanese

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[56] "The Syrians of Utica," *Utica Saturday Globe*, microfilm, Utica Public Library (Utica, NY), Apr. 7, 1900.

community had become somewhat interesting to the average Utican to be worth publishing in the local newspaper.

The other important public record that first illustrates the existence of a Lebanese population in the area is found in the Twelfth Census of the United States. Dated as June 11, 1900, only two months after Father Khoury's counting, the U.S. census shows 48 Lebanese residents listed as living in apartments between three residences on Bleecker Street in East Utica. Those 48 residents are all listed as from either "Arabia" or "Syria," and, out of that number, there are 42 who are all listed as "peddlers" under occupation.[57] The vast majority of these residents are listed as boarders under their category of household member. While some are listed as head, wife, son, daughter, nephew, cousin, etc., these boarders appear to be staying with these families, regardless of whether they are related to them or not. As Utica was a major stop along the peddling route, many already-established Lebanese families would allow boarders (usually newly arrived immigrants like Betrus Saad and company) to stay with them so they could save their money to send home. Interviews with both Mr. Louis Raya and Dr. Eugene P. Nassar confirm that this practice was common, and boarders, as befits a guest, were treated to the utmost hospitality their hosts could offer. In fact, when the Maronites built their first church in 1910, the second floor of the building was constructed as a dormitory to help house temporarily such visitors from the old country. In exchange, many of these boarders would share news and stories, whether it be about the communities along their

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[57] U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Twelfth Census of the United States*: June 11, 1900.

route or, most importantly, of Lebanon itself.[58] While the numbers in this census do not match up with Father Khoury's own account, which itself has no further evidence to corroborate its accuracy, they both do offer us a glimpse into the inner workings of this community and how it managed to establish itself as part of this peddling network as well as a conduit for information concerning Lebanon. Without either of these resources, foundational parts of this community would be lost to memory.

Before we move on into an era that would see these Lebanese pioneers firmly taking root in the local community, let us detail as much as possible the characteristics of the average Lebanese immigrant to the U.S. and, specifically, Utica. Before 1900, the majority of these immigrants were young, unmarried men who came from impoverished towns in the Mount Lebanon region. As we have observed, they came to earn enough money to either send home to support their family or save enough to bring them to the U.S. Oftentimes, these young men would return "to find brides in Lebanon and returned to America in a second wave of immigration comprised of many married men and their young families."[59] Once able to establish themselves in the U.S., the growing desire to relocate permanently was inculcated in many young Lebanese people who had witnessed what the country had to offer first-hand.

This trend of immigration would continue generally unabated until the outbreak of the First World War. There was, however, one significant roadblock along the way in

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[58] Nassar, Eugene P. and Louis Raya, Interviews by Paul Charbel, Audio recording, Utica, NY, July 23, 2014.

[59] John G. Moses, *From Mt. Lebanon to the Mohawk Valley: A Short History of Lebanon* (Utica, NY: Beacon Press, 1981), 86.

this era. The authors of *Al-Hoda*'s hundred year commemorative book relate that, for a short period, the U.S. had refused to grant citizenship to Syrian and Lebanese immigrants because they were, "non-white Asians unworthy of becoming Americans."[60] This point of view was one consistently shared over much of the country but was experienced less in the regions where Lebanese and Syrian populations had already become a normal part of their city's culture. To combat this, a massive effort was coordinated to negotiate with Washington over this classification. It was through the efforts of community leaders, like the editor of *Al-Hoda*, that an assembly of Lebanese and Syrian representatives finally persuaded U.S. officials to reclassify Syrian and Lebanese immigrants. They made the case that Syrians and Lebanese were technically Caucasians, and, therefore, they should be eligible for citizenship. Accenting their deep Francophile tendencies and the opinion, of the Lebanese in particular, they put forward the case that their country was the most Westernized of all Arab nations, embracing the thoughts and values of democratic societies. The U.S. finally relented and accepted this reclassification after intense lobbying from Lebanese and Syrian leaders and organizations across the country. This reclassification is still seen to this day in much of the U.S. government's official documentation, and it was, ironically, the work of these Lebanese and Syrian immigrants that have prevented Arabs from being classified as distinct from "whites." In an article from the ethnic news organization, *New America Media*, Suzanne Manneh writes, "These immigrants, primarily Syrian and Lebanese Christians, 'were facing exclusionary

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[60] *Al-Hoda 1898-1968: The Story of Lebanon and Its Emigrants taken from the Newspaper Al-Hoda* (New York: Al-Hoda Press, 1968), 7.

policy,' (Helen) Samhan said. 'It was basically a survival issue.'"[61] And this survival depended upon allowing Lebanese and Syrian immigrants the ability to apply for and gain U.S. citizenship. While still an issue being debated today, this request for reclassification led to the continued wave of immigration from Lebanon and particularly into Utica.

Looking back, these initial waves of immigration are a result of a combination of factors: firstly, American missionaries present in the region since the early nineteenth century had already acted as an information gateway to American culture; secondly, the first two American world expositions in 1876 and 1893 drew a large number of Lebanese people and introduced them first-hand to this society; thirdly, and most importantly, Lebanese life under Ottoman rule and the discontent fomented between religious groups (Druze and Maronites) led to tragedy and, therefore, the search for refuge in foreign lands. Observing these factors, it is no surprise that such a large number of them fled Lebanon for American shores. By 1900, five thousand would emigrate to the U.S. from the Mount Lebanon region alone.[62] Many and more of these émigrés, over the next couple decades, would make their permanent home in Utica. The next largest wave of immigration, however, would be defined not by economic opportunity. Instead, those that would flee Lebanon starting in the early 1970s did so to escape civil war.

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[61] Suzanne Manneh, "Census to Count Arabs as White, Despite Write-In Campaign," *Arab American Institute,* Mar 25, 2010, http://www.aaiusa.org/census-to-count-arabs-as-white-despite-write-in-campaign, Accessed October 7, 2014.

[62] Ibid, 87.

Fleeing From Conflict

The Lebanese civil war would tear the country apart and displace numerous Lebanese into the diaspora. To understand why civil war broke out, we must understand the fate of Lebanese politics since the fall of the Ottoman empire. When the Ottomans relinquished their control over most of their empire at the end of the First World War, France and Britain stepped in to assert mandates over much of the Middle East. While Britain focused on Iraq and Iran, France took charge of Syrian and Lebanese affairs. For Lebanon, this was a double-edged sword. On one hand, the French were affording them more autonomy, and they politically recognized the area of Lebanon as a separate entity, placing a portion of historically Syrian land on its western border under Lebanese control. This distinction, long felt by many Lebanese, was a point that would sour relations with neighboring Syria for years to come.

Fortunately, the French allowed for the writing of a Lebanese constitution, but they designed it to ensure that the Maronites would always retain definitive power. The constitution, written in 1920, created a parliamentary democracy but one whose political offices were voted upon based on religion. For example, the constitution reads that the president must be a Maronite, the prime minister must be a Sunni Muslim, and the Speaker of the Parliament must be a Shi'ite Muslim. This confessionally based constitution, while accepted at the time, became more of a hindrance to unity when the government would become destabilized.

It would be a ridiculous effort to try and encapsulate the entirety of the Lebanese civil war in these few pages. But we can glean essential data relevant to this narrative

from the causes and results of this conflict. Firstly, the influx of Palestinian refugees from Jordan into southern Lebanon vastly changed the demographics of the country. While all Arab nations rallied around the injustice being served upon the Palestinians and their expulsion from Israel, few would volunteer their own country to accept refugees. Jordan initially took a significant amount of Palestinians, but when the PLO set its sights upon overthrowing the Hashemite dynasty, Jordan's military cracked down. Not only were many Palestinians killed, but the PLO leadership and its military forces were expelled from the country. Those civilians that remained were often brutalized and forced to the fringes of habitable land along the Jordanian border. Saudi Arabia, often seen as a leader among Arab nations, denied these Palestinians from entering its borders and, more or less, pressured Lebanon to settle them. Lebanon agreed and gave them land in the south, on the border with Israel, for resettlement. In the past, there had been a growing majority of Muslims in Lebanon—this influx of Palestinians were overwhelmingly Shi'ite—and this further swelled that majority of Muslims over Christians.

Once there, the PLO attempted to continue fighting Israel from within Lebanon's borders starting in about 1968. Basically, the land in the south which was given for the settlement of refugees by the Lebanese government became a hotbed of paramilitary action aimed at Israel from a technically neutral country. This would cause significant collateral damage to much of the country as Israel would retaliate and target places like the international airport in Beirut and/or other major cities, disrupting the lives of the average Lebanese citizen regardless of their professed religion. These tactics escalated

and further dragged Lebanese society into a downward spiral, particularly after Israel's first invasion and occupation of the PLO's power base in southern Lebanon in 1978. However, PLO strongholds would rebuild in southern Lebanon, and they would continue to launch offensives at Israel which often caused the rest of the country to suffer as a result.

With a clear Muslim majority in the country, the PLO also began to seek inroads into the government mostly through subversive means. Capitalizing on the sorely contested issue of electing officials, the PLO attempted to appeal to more moderate/ mainstream Muslims as there were certainly present in the country those who wanted governmental reform and more secularized election proceedings. In the eyes of many, the country was now overwhelmingly Muslim, and the constitution should be amended so as not to benefit any particular religious group. This would mean, for example, a Sunni Muslim could run for president, and parliamentary seats would be determined not on one's professed faith but purely on population statistics. On one side, this was viewed as rabble-rousing and the fomenting of dissent within the country from foreign influence. On the other hand, this was also viewed as a potential step to altering the constitution to reflect the realities of the country's demographics. There are compelling cases on both sides of this complex issue, but what we do know for sure is that this sentiment further fueled religious division.

By the early 1970s, the PLO's actions in Lebanon and against Israel were the most significant contributing factors to the outbreak of civil war. Where the PLO failed in assuming control of Jordan, it would succeed in cementing a foothold in southern

Lebanon. One way that the PLO would attempt to destabilize the country was with the use of mercenaries. They would begin bringing foreign Islamic mercenaries who were answering the call to fight Israel on behalf of the Palestinian people. Many of these young men would come from places like Turkey, Iran, or Libya and would be responsible for urban warfare aimed primarily against Christian denominations. In my interviews with Mr. and Mrs. Assad and Jeanette Charbel, they described the stationing of a foreign sniper in their hometown of Zahlé.[63] According to them, this sniper was given orders to basically terrorize a neighborhood by shooting any and all that came across his scope. The residents of this neighborhood, who were overwhelmingly Christian, would live under this shadow for about a month. When the sniper was finally apprehended, the authorities discovered that not only was the man not Lebanese, but that he was not even informed about who he was shooting upon.[64] Incidents like this were not uncommon in the late 1960's and early 1970's, and, as they became more regular, many Lebanese Christians began searching for a way out.

The defining moment for many Lebanese Christians would come after news of the Damour massacre had spread throughout the country. Samuel M. Katz relates what many considered the beginning of open brutality between the PLO and Lebanese Christians.

> In January 1976 PLO units attacked the Christian city of Damour on the main highway south of Beirut. A quarter of its population of 40,000 were killed in the battle or massacred afterwards, and the remainder forced to flee. In revenge, in October 1976 the Christian militias laid siege to the Tel Zaatar refugee camp north of Beirut for 50 days. When the camp fell, no quarter was given to the survivors, and the slaughter rivaled that of Damour. By then the Christians, initially

[63] Interview, Mr. Assad Charbel and Mrs. Jeanette Charbel, February 1, 2015.

[64] Ibid.

> confident, were in trouble: the Palestinians had formed an alliance with other Muslim factions, and obtained the support of the Druze, the stubborn mountain people who had given the French repeated problems in the days of the Mandate.[65]

The religious divide between Muslims and Christians, whether by well-intentioned and progressive reformers or by hard-line radicals led to the opening shots being fired. Additionally, old tensions between urban and rural, religious and secular would be reignited and spread like wildfire throughout the countryside.

The Lebanese government's ability to handle the situation would weaken. The military had been split into Muslim and Christian factions or militias, each trying to protect their own while asserting dominance over individual neighborhoods. Without a handle on its armed forces, the situation deteriorated further. Open confrontation between Muslims and Christians, as seen in events like the Damour massacre and the resultant revenge acts, would escalate in addition to kidnappings, torture, and executions. To gain some measure of control, the government asked for Syrian intervention in the country as its own military was basically evaporating. Syria complied and began occupying areas of north and western Lebanon, but this sent a strong signal throughout the country. Many saw the incursion of Syrian troops as the beginning of the end for Lebanon's sovereignty and would take this as a cue to leave the country immediately.

Divisiveness bred by external involvement had returned, and Lebanon found itself once again a battlefield between foreign competitors. This war would literally rip the country apart, and Beirut, once considered the Paris of the Middle East, would be known for its destruction just as much as its long and storied history. The war officially lasted

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[65] Samuel M. Katz, *Armies in Lebanon 1982-1984* (Oxford: Osprey Publishing, 2005), 5.

for fifteen years (between 1975 and 1990), but it had truly begun years earlier and its effects linger to this day. In that time, many chose to flee its wrath, escaping into the diaspora. According to the military and intelligence research group, GlobalSecurity.org, "Up to one-fifth of the pre-war resident population, or about 900,000 people, were displaced from their homes, of whom perhaps a quarter of a million emigrated permanently."[66] Among these thousands of refugees, many of them were Christians escaping further persecution. Their emigration is a story not often told, but many who make up the second largest wave of immigration to the Utica community fled because of these reasons.

Unlike the romantic image of an immigrant's trek from the old country to the new, the voyage of this wave of Lebanese people was more akin to an escape. The initial problem for anyone attempting to leave the country was the issue of transportation. Within the first year of the war's escalation, the sole international airport in Beirut would have infrequent, if not downright nonexistent, service. After its bombing, people would have no choice but to turn elsewhere to escape. The avenues in which to leave became limited to those who could travel to another Arab country, predominately Syria, and take flight from there. The first obstacle to this choice came from an unlikely source: the Maronite Patriarchy. The Patriarchy, through its influence, attempted to keep Maronites from leaving the country. Stating that the religious affiliations in this country had coexisted before, and that no one (Muslim or Christian) truly desired a civil war. Indeed,

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[66] "Lebanon (Civil War 1975-1991)," *Global Security*, 2015, http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/world/war/lebanon.htm.

local imams showed their support for their fellow countrymen as well. Many Maronites and other Christians would indeed stay, but in places where the war had taken its toll, many chose to lead their families to safer lives abroad. While this attempt to stem the tide had limited success, it still highlighted the devotion which many Muslims and Christians had to working together.

Through dangerous territory and encounters with Syrian troops, independent militias, or, simply, groups of armed men, many would make their way into Syria to flee. A good deal of these Lebanese immigrants would come to the U.S. with little more than the shirts on their backs. Not only were they leaving their war-stricken homes, but, in the process, many would-be immigrants were taken advantage of in their time of need. For example, Lebanese people entering Syria would bring U.S. dollars to purchase airline tickets. But Syrian officials would not allow the use of U.S. dollars until they were first exchanged for Syrian currency. Only then could you exchange Syrian dollars for U.S. dollars to purchase airline tickets. In many cases, people would lose two-thirds of their cash to just this particular forced, and obviously exploitative, currency exchange. To many Lebanese fleeing the country, their opinions of Syria were inalterably soured. It is no wonder that many Lebanese living in the U.S. who fled from this strife remember all too well their treatment at the hands of "neighboring" Syria. In similar ways, this next major wave of Christians from Mount Lebanon and other surrounding areas arrived on America's shores, making their way to places like Utica with an already established community and a religious and cultural infrastructure.

Having determined that the Christians of Mount Lebanon do constitute an ethnoreligious group we now have a solid foundation with which to explore its diaspora communities. Also, having learned about their history and what caused many and more of them to leave their homeland, we have gained an understanding of why the preservation of Lebanese cultural practices was the utmost concern for that pioneering community. This community in Utica represents a case subject which will provide us with a better understanding of the ways in which these cultural practices were encapsulated and perpetuated. As we will soon learn, this group would naturally assimilate into American society, but they would still sustain the practices of their pioneering forebears. By cementing those practices into a unique form of Lebanese identity, one which adheres to traditions dating back to the late nineteenth century, they would no longer rely on Lebanon itself to continue their perpetuation.

Chapter 2:
The Religious, the Secular, and the Spaces They Share

The religious and cultural practices of the Lebanese community in Utica are among the principal reasons why this population has sustained itself for as long as it has. Its encapsulation of these practices are so inextricably linked that it would be impossible to focus on one without the other. We can categorize this community as an ethnoreligious group because of its cultural signifiers as established in the preceding chapter. Identification with these signifiers in the diaspora illustrates a "recognition of some common origin and shared characteristics with another person or group, or with an ideal, and with the natural closure of solidarity and allegiance established on this foundation."[67] As we will soon determine, the efforts of the early pioneers in the community would provide for a religious and cultural haven for future immigrants, and the characteristics and habits of this first wave of immigration set the standard of Lebanese identity in Utica for generations to come. An ethnoreligious identification is then a process which unites people to simultaneously develop an in-group mentality and a rejection of outside influence—what may be called an ethnocentrism and/or "religio-centrism."[68] In this case, the rejection of outside influence is meant to prevent a certain degree of Americanization, but, perhaps most notably, it inadvertently insulates the community from shifts in Lebanese cultural evolution. This is not unique to Lebanese immigrants;

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[67] Stuart Hall, "Chapter 1: Introduction: Who Needs 'Identity'?" *Questions of Cultural Identity*, eds. Stuart Hall & Paul du Gay (London, Sage,1996), 2.

[68] Abares, Menandro Sarion, *Ethno-religious Identification and Intergroup Contact Avoidance: An Empirical Study on Christian-Muslim Relations in the Philippines* (Netherlands: Netherlands Organization for Scientific Research, 2014), 7.

the existence of a diaspora tends to both alienate those from their country of origin as well as their current home.

> Today the use of diaspora refers to a sense of exile, the feeling of wanting to return home but being unable to because of exclusion by politics or history. One is made an outcast because of present need or fear, or because generational distance makes it impossible to find one's way back home. But diaspora is not merely understood as banishment or being made an outcast from one's home society but from all society. Its usage moves between the specificity of an historical experience to an existential condition. It is even used as a metaphor for the existential condition of post modernity to refer to uncertainty, displacement and fragmented identity.[69]

Not wholly Lebanese and not wholly American, this community's practices represent a third option: a hybridity born of necessity. And this hybridity represents a cultural encapsulation which has allowed this community to pick and choose its cultural signifiers over the last one hundred years. To summarize, this ethnoreligious group in the diaspora is able to adhere to a set of religio-cultural practices in spite of influence from both its adopted home and its originating culture.

As noted earlier, this community's cultural identity is intertwined with its spiritual identity, and we would be doing a disservice to both if we emphasized one over the other. The intrinsic connection between spiritual and secular life—even for hardline Lebanese-American atheists—is impossible to sever without misrepresenting the nature of this community. The individual facets that compose the church's function in Utica can be broken down into the following trends. Firstly, the church acts as a historical focal point, and the importance of its founding and continued sustainment in the community cannot

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[69] Michael Humphrey, "Lebanese Identities: Between Cities, Nations and Trans-Nations," *Arab Studies Quarterly* 26, no. 1 (Winter, 2004): 32, http://www.jstor.org/stable/41858471.

be understated. Secondly, this community's social groups, whether connected to the church or not, have played a pivotal role in encapsulating and preserving particular traditions—even their more unsavory associations have worked to sustain certain cultural signifiers of the community as we shall observe. Lastly, we must examine this community's perception of itself in the media and its own Arabic language journalism found primarily in its earlier years. For decades, both Arabic-language and local news outlets touted Utica as a significant Lebanese enclave which helped to gain itself notoriety amongst the incoming Lebanese immigrants as well as in the eyes of other residents in the city. These factors, representing important parts of Lebanese cultural and religious tradition, are vital to understanding how an ethnoreligious group has managed to sustain itself and its practices for so long. It will also reveal the key to why a certain way of "being Lebanese" has been encapsulated in this community.

The Church: Finding the Rock to Build Upon

The church in Lebanese immigrant culture is more than the sum of its parts. It is not only a spiritual home but a cultural one as well. For example, Nelia Hyndman-Rizk describes the church in the Lebanese community of St. Louis, MO, as the center of its immigrant community, and one that was a hub for all Lebanese immigrants of a particular village.[70] After speaking with elders in the Utica community as well as corroborating their experiences with archival material, one can quickly realize that the church was often the first and, oftentimes, exclusive haven for Lebanese immigrants in a foreign land. Children who may have been ostracized in school by their American peers (or more Americanized children of immigrants) could find solace with their Lebanese friends and family both in their neighborhoods or at church. Therefore, it is the church which stands as a central factor in how this community preserved and sustained itself through cultural and religious practice. As it is in Christian Lebanon, the church acts as the center of much of Lebanese life and remains so because of the cooperation between its three distinct Christian denominations: the Maronite, Melkite, and Greek Orthodox. This cooperation is evident even abroad as one may occasionally see clergy members of these churches as guests in the others and through the cross-faith interaction in Lebanese celebrations. These three denominations have an unspoken understanding in terms of sharing particular cultural habits whether they be religious or purely social. This is a reflection of how events and holidays were usually shared between them in Lebanon,

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[70] Nelia Hyndman-Rizk, *My Mother's Table: At Home in the Maronite Diaspora, A Study of Emigration from Hadchit, North Lebanon to Australia and North America* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2011) 55.

and, having a large population of these denominations in Utica, it is only natural that these same "kinsmen" would intermingle through interfaith celebrations when the community in Utica grew. But we must discern how these seeds were planted, for it is no easy task to start a faith community in a foreign land at the turn of the twentieth century. To understand just how significant the church is, we must first turn to this Lebanese community's very origins in Utica.

Besides the visit of Betrus Saad detailed in the introductory chapter, there are only a few, slightly veiled references to a Lebanese population in Utica before 1895. These can be found over several records discovered by John G. Moses in the archive of St. John's Roman Catholic Church on Bleecker Street in East Utica. The earliest notation, written by then pastor, Rev. J. S. M. Lynch, outlines that on May 2, 1882, a Syrian [read Lebanese] priest visiting from abroad would speak about Syrian missions to the congregation, and he would also celebrate a Syrian mass at St. John's Church on the following day, May 3.[71] The Syrian mass performed was most likely a Maronite Catholic rite, and there are two reasons why this could have occurred: first, the Maronite rite is a Catholic rite, and, therefore, this would allow the mass to be performed here, and second, there had to be a substantial enough Lebanese population attending this church to warrant such a request. It also reflects this community's growth and its yearning for a Lebanese mass, which represents a particular piece of the home they left behind. From this date on, the notations describe almost yearly visits from Lebanese (then-called Syrian) priests.

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[71] John G. Moses, *From Mt. Lebanon to the Mohawk Valley: The Story of Syro-Lebanese Americans of the Utica Area*, Utica, NY: Beacon Press, 1981, 7.

These priests came to administer to the Lebanese/Syrian community as well as celebrate a mass with them. In addition to records of these visitations to Utica, St. John's early records also included the names of Syrians who had taken their marriage vows or baptized their children there prior to the building of St. Louis of Gonzaga Church—the Maronite church in Utica.[72] Alongside Betrus Saad's visit, these are the earliest and only records of a Lebanese community in Utica before 1895. The reasons why this invaluable information is even available to us is because of how significant spiritual life is to this community as well as the veneration of its ancestors reflected in the efforts of writers and local historians like John G. Moses Dr. Eugene Nassar. This community's religious practices would take centerstage in Utica by 1900 when these visits from Lebanese Maronite priests became more frequent and, therefore, more widely known to the Utica community at large. After the first visit of Father Khoury in 1900, as discussed earlier, this trend of local coverage and notoriety would only grow.

The *Utica Saturday Globe* was a rather progressive, if not downright liberal, newspaper for its time, and it printed many pieces concerning Utica's growing immigrant populations including the Lebanese. In 1903, we encounter the first thorough examination of the growing Lebanese community by one of its local newspapers. The article, entitled "Our Syrian Colonists," embarks on an educational journey to introduce the average Utica reader to who these immigrants or "colonists" are and where they come from. With a penchant for the dramatic (its subtitle claims they "have come from a land

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[72] John G. Moses, *From Mt. Lebanon to the Mohawk Valley: The Story of Syro-Lebanese Americans of the Utica Area*, Utica, NY: Beacon Press, 1981, 7.

hoary with the flight of ages"), the reader is given first a history of the Mount Lebanon region, its connection to ancient history, and, above all, its clear distinction from the loathed Ottoman Turk who currently governs over them.[73] Stylistically, the article's repeated use of the term "colonists" is interesting as it seems to inspire a romantic vision of an enterprising band, not unlike the American variety, seeking their fortunes in new lands as opposed to the imagery of starving, huddled masses fleeing backwards, war-torn countries often popularly associated with terms like immigrant and refugee. While this may appear to be a superficial point, there seems to be a concerted effort within this piece to convince readers of the difference between these people and the "Mohammedan fanaticism" associated with the Arab world at this time.[74] In fact, the article goes out of its way to reassure the reader. Consider the passage which reads: "The Utica Syrians belong to the (Roman) Catholic Church, although not all Syrians recognize the pope's primacy. Some belong to the orthodox church of the Greek rite. Whatever their religion at home, however, the Turk draws no distinction when his fanatical hate is aroused. He murders indiscriminately and plunders methodically."[75] The article both details the three major Lebanese Christian denominations and paints a picture of these brave Christians as a religiously oppressed people seeking the American dream of freedom, first and foremost, as well as that of opportunity. Above all, it seeks to illustrate the similarities between Americans and these "Syrians," referring to ancient Phoenicians as the "Yankees

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[73] "Our Syrians Colonists," *Utica Saturday Globe*, microfilm, Utica Public Library (Utica, NY), 1903.

[74] Ibid.

[75] Ibid.

of antiquity." Pictured alongside the article is a photo of the storefronts of Joseph Tady and Moses Acee who are named, "leaders in the colony of Syrians settled here."[76] This piece attempts, albeit in a very grandiose fashion, to educate the average Utican about who these immigrants are and how similar in faith they are to the average, white, Christian American. Drawing these parallels, the work attempts to acclimate the average reader to these foreign "colonists" in their city. By hearkening back to Lebanon's roots in ancient civilizations, biblical history, as well as crusader tales, this work portrays the community as part of a great cultural and spiritual lineage—one worthy of respect and welcome by Uticans. In a similar vein, a 1917 article again from the *Utica Saturday Globe*, details just who these Lebanese are and where they come from. As before, dramatic flair goes hand-in-hand with cultural education in this periodical. The article states, "Who's Who in Utica, where the blue-eyed Saxon is finding himself in the minority. Races from the Orient, with ancestries that lead back to Solomon and the Siege of Troy, have taken Utica, bringing their aspirations for freedom with them."[77] The tone of this piece is much more aggressive than the previous; in it, the writer lambasts the average American in Utica for not appreciating the cultural addition these Lebanese bring to the city and the country.

> Ancient? Some of them can trace a history back to the days of Solomon, when Hiram of Tyre undertook the contract of furnishing lumber for the temple at Jerusalem. Proud? What have you to be proud of, whose race story is lost in darkness at the beginning of Christianity, compared with they who dwelt on

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[76] Ibid.

[77] "Who's Who in Utica," *Utica Saturday Globe*, microfilm, Utica Public Library (Utica, NY), 1917.

> Mount Lebanon and whose history stretches back 4,000 or 5,000 years? These are Americans.[78]

This welcoming attitude is certainly preferred to the experience of other immigrant groups upon their first arrival in the United States, but local acceptance is only a partial victory. The only thing better than the acceptance of Lebanese people and their Maronite religious practices in Utica is the building of a church of their own.

The road to building their first church would be tough as there were myriad obstacles along their path—many of which boiled down to administrative roadblocks for which their had yet to be any precedent. For one, there were no Maronite dioceses before 1966; if a Maronite congregation wanted to build a church anywhere, they would be organized under the local Roman Catholic diocese and leadership. For example, if a church was to be built in Utica, it would have to be organized under and answerable to the Roman Catholic diocese of Syracuse, NY—not a circumstance either party was initially excited about. Secondly, the community in Utica was still relatively small. Up until this point in the early 1900s, Lebanese priests would just occasionally visit communities like Utica to administer for a week or two. The sheer will to build their own church which this community possessed would help in the overcoming of these roadblocks. Through community-driven action along with the help of a supportive and strong-willed clergy, the Lebanese would establish congregations that endure to this day.

In a letter dated March 13th, 1908, the Chor-Bishop, Superior of the Syro-Maronite Missions in the United States, Joseph Yazbeck details his recommendation of a

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[78] Ibid.

pastor, Fr. Louis Lotaif, to service the Syrian (Lebanese) community in Utica. Written to Rev. Msgr. J. S. M. Lynch of St. John's Church, whose church had housed the Lebanese congregation since its arrival, Chor-Bishop Yazbek highly recommends Fr. Lotaif for the position. "For the last eighteen years that our missionaries came to this country he is the first one who succeeded so well in a short while."[79] This letter would

Figure 3: Fr. Louis Lotaif, circa 1910. Courtesy of the St. Louis Gonzaga Church Archive.

lead to the appointment of Fr. Lotaif as pastor, and by the 1908 publication of the *Utica City Directory*, he would already be listed as a "Syrian Priest" living at 764 Bleecker Street in the heart of the current Lebanese community. Fr. Lotaif had already been servicing the community since his arrival from Lebanon, performing the Maronite mass at St. John's Church. This recommendation for pastorship would eventually lead to the formation of an independent Maronite congregation in Utica.

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[79] Yazbek, Joseph, *Chor-Bishop Joseph Yazbek to Rev. Msgr. J.S.M. Lynch*, March 13, 1908, Letter, From Historic St. John's Church Archive.

In fact, just four days later on March 17, 1908, a petition was sent to the Bishop of the Catholic Archdiocese of Syracuse, Rt. Rev. P. J. Ludden, from the Lebanese Maronites of Utica. In it, they state that a congregation has been organized, and they request to have a priest sent to them. One "who understands our language, to be our permanent pastor and to take charge of our spiritual and temporal affairs."[80] The letter continues to explain that this congregation has made the arrangements to compensate this priest and have furnished a house for his disposal. Most importantly, the petition outlines its plan to build a Maronite church in the near future. The letter itself is signed by six men who act as trustees: Daher Hobaica, Joseph Tady, Joseph Sharkey, Louis Sharkey, Masi Kiami, and Amin George. The following two pages list out the signatures of the petitioners (all signed in a single hand) which number 110 with the addition of "and their families" at the end.[81] It appears, however, that this request was either denied or ignored, but this was not the only petition Bishop Ludden would get from the Lebanese of Utica. Not one year later, in another letter dated as January 6, 1909, the community again requested a priest and, this time, the permission to build a its own church. In this instance, the letter is written by Fr. Louis Lotaif himself, and, in it, he writes with a committee "representing more than six hundred Syro-Maronites population in Utica and New York Mills, New York."[82] Coming nine months after the initial petition, this letter

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[80] *Petitioners of Utica to Rt. Rev. P. J. Ludden*, March 17, 1908, Letter, From St. Louis Gonzaga Church Archive.

[81] Ibid.

[82] Lotaif, Fr. Louis, *Fr. Louis Lotaif to Rt. Rev. P. J. Ludden*, March 17, 1908, Letter, From St. Louis Gonzaga Church Archive.

seeks the same permission from Bishop Ludden, and it appears that this second attempt was successful. In 1910, the dream of building a Maronite church in Utica would become a reality. What is also worth noting here is the significant increase in population from about 50-100 Lebanese in 1900 to "more than six hundred" in the Utica area by 1910. While both numbers can be relied upon as estimates at best, they do reflect a significant increase in Lebanese immigration to the Utica area.

The period between 1908-1910 represents a true watershed in the spiritual history of this community as we witness its organization and mobilization in building its own Maronite church. By the end of this period, the population had been roughly estimated at six hundred within Utica and its surrounding areas, and the demand for its own house of worship with, in their own words, a priest that understands their own language and their own customs, reflects just how vibrant and active this community was becoming. Evidence of the plans to build a Maronite church can be mostly found within the St. Louis Gonzaga Church archive. Dated as April 3, 1910, there is a list of the pledges collected from the community for the building of such a church written by Fr. Lotaif. The list details the donors and the amount of their donation, and, aside from one organization (the Syrian Young Men's Society), they are all single names and/or families. In total, this group would raise $39,500 for the building fund. By May 9th of the same year, the location would be secured and building of the church would begin.

In an article from the *Utica Daily Press* on May 10, 1910, the article outlines the plans for the church building which was to be located at the southeast corner of Albany and Elizabeth Streets in East Utica. The article, entitled "To Build the Syrian Church,"

details how the contract was signed at a local Lebanese business, Anthony Deep's Oriental Restaurant on Bleecker Street, and present for this signing were Fr. Lotaif and Salvatore Rizzo, the contractor who would be doing the work.[83] The building was set to be finished within four months at this signing and would cost between $10,000-12,000 to complete. What's even more interesting about this piece is that it confirms Fr. Lotaif's estimate of six hundred Syrians living in Utica and its surrounding areas. It also reveals that the community is in the process of rapid expansion, stating, "Joseph Ferris, steamship agent, who is one of their number, says that about 100 [more] will come here this year."[84] It goes on to detail the voyage itself from Lebanon to the U.S. which takes about eighteen days and travels, by ship, through the Mediterranean to France, and then by rail to the western ports of Havre or Cherbourg where they take ship to the U.S.[85] Not only is this valuable information on the growing size of the community, but here is also outlined what a typical voyage to the U.S. would constitute. Again, as we have seen in the past, this article remarks upon the good qualities of the Lebanese population in Utica, calling them enterprising and remarkably temperate—the subtext being that Arabs and/or Ottomans are often quite the opposite in American eyes. Starting on May 17, 1910, Fr. Lotaif and the trustees would begin the process of officially incorporating St. Louis Gonzaga Church. And by June 4th, the incorporation would be completed and recorded

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[83] "To Build the Syrian Church," *Utica Daily Press*, microfilm, Utica Public Library (Utica, NY), May 10, 1910.

[84] Ibid.

[85] Ibid.

in the Oneida County Clerk's Office.[86] The construction of the church would go relatively smoothly, and despite some delays it was completed in time for a Christmas dedication. Instead of finishing by September, it would be completed in December and cost a total of $16,000 ($4,000 more than initially anticipated). Though clearly over in both its time to completion and cost, the church's construction within a year was heralded as an accomplishment.

Let us take a moment to briefly reflect on what this church would mean to all Lebanese immigrants in the Utica area. This church would stand as much more than a house of worship—it would stand as a cultural center for all Lebanese settling in the area. Many clubs, societies, and even businesses had sprung up to facilitate a continued interconnectivity among the Lebanese of the area. But in this church, there stood a fixed place for all Lebanese regardless of hometown or economic means. Some of the internal issues, mostly having to do with Lebanese regional politics, would still plague the development of the community, but all could at least agree upon the church as neutral territory. Again, we must remember that these immigrants are most accurately categorized as an ethnoreligious group; much if not all of their ethnic identity is determined by their religious practices and traditions. The church is ultimately both a house of worship and a cultural institution, and it is this connection between the two that would be cemented in this immigrant community for years to come.

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[86] "Certificate of Incorporation of St. Louis Gonzaga, May 17. 1910," Recorded in Oneida County Clerk's Office, June 4, 1910, Book 1, Religious Corporations, 442.

One may consider disparate religious sects as more akin to rivals than compatriots, but a unique social agreement exists between these three Eastern Christian faiths. Historically, this has not always been the case as these are three similar but fundamentally different sects, and the best example of tensions still present between them can be found in their claim upon a major church for all Christendom in Jerusalem—the Church of the Holy Sepulchre. According to Catholic history, this location encompasses both the site of Jesus' crucifixion as well as the empty tomb he was claimed to have been resurrected from. It is now a place, "where six different Christian denominations jealously protect their historical rights."[87] Included in these six are the Maronites, Melkites, and Greek Orthodox, all of which have asserted ownership over parts of the church—sometimes violently. "At least three times in the past decade, police had to separate monks and lay faithful of the various confessions involved in brawls over perceived slights or acts of aggression at the church."[88] This divisiveness over a crucial facet of Christian identity is coupled along with a strong adherence to regionalism and political difference between laity and clergy alike.[89] Again, these divisions exist, but they tend to cause more joking than violence in present-day Lebanon and its diaspora. Relating an anecdote from his mother's childhood, Dr. Nassar explains a popular joke which affectedly pits the three founding saints of each of these sects against each other in a fist fight. This is meant to humorously explain the reason behind the divisiveness

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[87] John L. Allen, Jr., "On Trip About Unity, Catholic Division a Striking Omission," *National Catholic Reporter* (Kansas City, MO), Sep 16, 2012.

[88] Ibid.

[89] Ibid.

between them, and to poke fun at the overly serious nature of this division. "So it is that we children of the Saints, and weaker than they, fight now over nothing of importance."[90] This same rivalry can be likened to the animosity between Northerners and Southerners in the U.S.—it can be quite heated, but these differences are easily put aside when the situation is warranted. While this particular rivalry is still evident in Lebanon itself, its diaspora communities, far removed from those same fervent allegiances by both distance and time, have kept the traditions of shared celebrations between these sects without the physical violence.

The three major Lebanese Christian sects have maintained an environment of cooperation in spite of their differences in the diaspora. The Melkites and Orthodox Lebanese are and have always been fewer in number in the Utica area with the vast majority being Maronites. However, these three sects have amicably lived and celebrated together for decades even before their arrival in the U.S. It is not uncommon for these three groups to attend each others' feast days and festivals; that was how close these communities were back in Lebanon, and, since 1910, that tradition has continued in Utica and the rest of the U.S. To illuminate this further, in his essay on Chinese immigrants and the creation of their own houses of Christian worship in the U.S., Fenggang Yang details how these immigrant groups managed to put aside generations of intercultural enmity when it came time to erect their own church. Yang states, "even though the heterogenous groups within the church were often contentious, the church itself maintained a tenacious

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[90] Eugene P. Nassar, *Wind of the Land* (Michigan: Association of Arab-American University Graduates, Inc., 1979) 104.

unity…the forces that promoted this unity were the ideal of unity in Christianity and Chinese culture, a respect for diversity, and an emphasis on harmonious relationships."[91] Although it was specifically a Maronite church, this was not a deterrent to the continued cultural and spiritual connection these faith groups shared. Although they were not Maronites, Melkites and Greek Orthodox followers were among the builders and first members of the Maronite church in Utica. It is an example of the kind of selfless cooperation these early communities exhibited. The ethnic, regional, and even spiritual differences that plague many immigrant communities were set aside for the attainment of this major goal: a church of their own in America.

Figure 4: "Utica's New Syrian Temple of Worship," *Utica Saturday Globe*, 1910. Courtesy of St. Louis Gonzaga Church Archive.

In the Monday December 19, 1910, issue of the *Utica Daily Press*, the formal dedication of St. Louis Gonzaga Church is detailed, taking place on the previous Sunday. Unlike prior articles in this publication and others in Utica, this article does not go about

[91] Fenggang Yang, "Tenacious Unity in a Contentious Community: Cultural and Religious Dynamics in a Chinese Christian Church," *Gatherings in Diaspora: Religious Communities and the New Immigration*, Ed. R. Stephen Warner, Judith G. Wittner (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1998), 334.

the business of trying to educate Uticans as to who the Lebanese or the Maronites are. I believe we can take this article at face value: Uticans are now, for the most part, well aware of their Lebanese population and who they are. What is remarkable about this article, however, is its choice to quote the speech Msgr. J. M. S. Lynch gave to the congregation in its entirety. Msgr. Lynch's connection to the local Lebanese population has already been established as he allowed the performance of Maronite rite masses in the grotto of his own church, St. John's. Reading his speech, one can see how important it was to him to have helped this community find its path to attaining a church of their own. He praises the Maronites like other Eastern churches for, "keeping the faith," and never straying from Roman leadership.[92] While a moving dedication speech, there is more than just praise in the matter of faith to be found here. Additionally, Msgr. Lynch praises the organization of this community to achieve so much in so little time. "We are glad to have in this city," he writes, "the first Maronite church between the Hudson and the Great Lakes. It will be the headquarters for all Maronites between Albany and Buffalo."[93] The article continues in like measure to illustrate the importance of this new addition to the religious centers of the Utica area, stating that it was a true cosmopolitan gathering represented by Syria, America, Ireland, Italy, Germany, Poland, and others.

However, the Maronites would not represent the only Lebanese community in Utica for long. After the success of St. Louis Gonzaga, a small but growing population of Melkites and Greek Orthodox would strive forward to erect their own churches. St.

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[92] "The First Maronite Church," *Utica Daily Press*, microfilm, Utica Public Library (Utica, NY), December 19, 1910.

[93] Ibid.

Basil's Melkite Catholic Church would open on Blandina Street in East Utica in 1917, and St. George's Antiochian Orthodox Church would be opened shortly after also on Blandina Street in 1922. Besides their differences and desires for their own places of worship, all in all, they each broke ground and opened their doors less than a mile from each other. This reflects on their continued interconnectivity even unto the present day. In the beginning, it was these three denominations that first shared makeshift services in the grotto of a Roman Catholic church when there were no places of their own to worship in. Today, this connection has not been forgotten, and it remains a strong reason why these three congregations still actively engage each other in both faith and cultural traditions. The service these three churches provided to the Lebanese community in Utica goes beyond that of religious worship—it provided a neutral territory free of regional politics, a place of cultural understanding, and a haven for those unfamiliar with their new homes. Indeed, these churches' role in cementing a Lebanese community in Utica was paramount.

The establishment of the Maronite Catholic church in Utica would set in motion the eventual founding of the other Lebanese-based churches. Each played an important role in identity formation for their immigrant congregations as has been alluded to throughout this section, but let us delve deeper into why the church, historically, has been such an integral part of Lebanese identity particularly for those who emigrated to the U.S. A truly Lebanese identity—one distinct from Syria and the Ottoman Empire—has been a part of the country's cultural fabric long before it was recognized as a sovereign nation. As mentioned in the introduction, with the Mediterranean on one side and a formidable

mountain chain on the other, Lebanon, even when conquered, remained a largely insular area. This insularity bred a defiant attitude towards foreign rule, especially in the inhabitants of the Mount Lebanon region. In the early nineteenth century, these inhabitants sought economic independence from their Druze overseers, and the Maronite church itself helped forge better economic ties with France in spite of Druze, Ottoman, and British resistance.[94] Most importantly, the church helped in the development of a distinctly Maronite identity that would position itself in opposition or at least outside the realm of both other religions and other socio-economic structures. Ghassan Hage explains: "The confessional delineation of the process of socio-economic domination and the fact that it was accompanied by equally confessional religious conflicts facilitated a general experience of this social change…It is this experience that is reflected in the changing mode of Maronite identification."[95] The Maronite church, already the religious anchor to the inhabitants of Mount Lebanon, strove to also anchor the region's socio-economic future. Doing so helped create an identity beyond that of just the spiritual life —it is from this time that the religious, cultural, and economic identity of Lebanese Maronites were forged into the ethnoreligious group we now recognize. We see this type of socio-economic identification with the church manifested in Lebanese diaspora communities. As much as the church acts as an intersection between religious and cultural practices in a social manner, it also engenders a system of economic connections

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[94] Ghassan Hage, "White Self-racialization as Identity Fetishism: Capitalism and the Experience of Colonial Whiteness," *Racialization: Studies in Theory and Practice* ed. Karim Murji and John Solomos (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005) 190.

[95] Ibid, 191.

built on traditional notions of trust for a "fellow countryman." While it has its beginnings as an opposition to its Druze overseers, the Maronite church in particular has cultivated an image of itself as repository for the religious, cultural, and economic practices of Lebanese communities.

But what about the present day? Over the last few decades, one of the first things you learn about growing up in a Lebanese community like Utica's is the existence of others like it. Whether it be Boston and its suburbs, New York City, Albany, Montreal, Paterson, Miami, Houston, or Detroit, there are other major enclaves that have built a reputation of welcoming Lebanese immigrants traveling to the United States. How did Utica build this reputation as a a welcome home for Lebanese people? In the beginning, it was surely the availability of opportunities in the form of jobs. After that, it has to be the correspondence of family, friends, and acquaintances—any Lebanese person who could advise you on your traveling and settlement. But after all the opportunities of the past dry up and Utica is no longer a haven for job-seeking immigrants, it is the community built around the church which endures. Plenty of new people would come to establish themselves in Utica because there was an already existing base of support and potential clientele for businesses. Many would benefit from a nationalistic style of nepotism as many still adhere to a natural trust between people of the old country meeting in the new. In this case, the church acts as not only the spiritual and cultural center, but as a potential economic center. The church becomes a place where you can not only advertise your business in its weekly bulletin, but, just by being there, you also have access to this network of doctors, dentists, lawyers, tutors, etc. This often becomes

a network which you could trust in much the same way you could trust a family member. I posit that, as Clifford Geertz has described a system of symbols with religion itself as a cultural system, that the church for Eastern Lebanese Christians acts as a "concrete embodiment of ideas, attitudes, judgments, longings, or beliefs."[96]

It is only natural that the Lebanese communities in the diaspora would seek to establish and preserve their spiritual and cultural traditions as they are experienced through the church. After learning briefly about its history in Utica, we can easily understand how such an institution would influence the ideas, attitudes, beliefs, and desires of a burgeoning immigrant community. The Lebanese residents of Utica gravitated around its churches as spiritual, cultural, and even social centers not just because they were established places with a sense of permanence or even neutral territory despite regional differences, but because the church acting as a locus for the community is fundamentally how it was experienced in Lebanon. This practice of centering both private and public life—religious and secular—is encapsulated in the Lebanese community of Utica. Times have certainly changed in Lebanon, and the dominance of those once proud and powerful families has waned in recent decades especially when considering the amount of influence they once wielded. The Eastern Christian churches still hold significant sway but really only in terms of their followers and not the larger political sphere. However, the Utica community illustrates an interesting take on these changes. In Utica, the church bound people together more so than familial or regional rivalries for the simple reason that those loyalties were by nature rooted in the physical

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[96] Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: BasicBooks, 1973), 91.

terrain of Lebanon itself; once a generation of American born Lebanese grew in number, this type of loyalty would all but disappear. While in Lebanon the church was one of the major factors in creating and maintaining a spiritual and social fabric, in Utica and other diaspora communities, the church has become the epicenter for this intersection between religious and secular life. It would eventually replace the loyalties to Lebanese hometown as well as fill the void of those traditionally powerful and influential families in the old country.

What we find encapsulated in the Utica community is that ethnoreligious tendency to meld secular life with religious life through the Eastern Christian churches. This community, faced with building a new life in a new land which could care less about its regional rivalries and familial loyalties, chose to concentrate their traditional cultural practices solely in the church. This act, while not necessarily a conscious one, eventually allowed for a greater interaction between a variety of Lebanese who would normally not be intermingling. In terms of the Utica community, the church prescribes a particular set of symbols as reference points for Eastern Christians of Lebanese descent in the following ways: the church is the religious epicenter, it actively fosters a social life within and beyond the church grounds, it provides a space for dialogue between people with a variety of professions and economic situations, and it works to impart a specific an historical and cultural image of what it means to be Lebanese—of which we will soon explore in deeper detail. In the present, almost no vestige of those once deep-seated and divisive allegiances remain, but what has remained is an investment in the church as an influential agent of both secular and religious cultural traditions.

Social Groups: Forging Ties that Bind

An important aspect of Lebanese society which the church helped facilitate in the diaspora was the organization of social groups that would actively involve the majority of the community. These sodalities ranged from co-ed, men's, and women's organizations of various age groups, clubs based on hometown loyalties, and philanthropic and/or volunteer societies devoted to various saints or religious figures. The churches in Utica currently act as the meeting ground for many of these groups and, for the most part, they remain religiously-concerned or devoted in some way to helping raise money to sustain their churches. As Arjun Appadurai describes them:

> They are communities in themselves but always potentially communities for themselves capable, of moving from shared imagination to collective action… [they] have the additional complexity that, in them, diverse local experiences of taste, pleasure, and politics can crisscross with one another, thus creating the possibility of convergences in translocal social action that would otherwise be hard to imagine.[97]

All of them would have their roots in a growing interconnectivity of this immigrant community from its very humble beginnings. However, while these associations made it possible to accomplish much and more when they worked translocally, they also provided space for a continued differentiation or divisive behavior to the detriment of the early community. Regardless, as more and more Lebanese flowed into the country and took up residence in Utica, they found themselves seemingly at home surrounded by a support structure of familial or regional ties, a common church, and multiple social groups which underpinned them all.

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[97] Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity At Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 8.

Alixa Naff discusses the rise of Lebanese and Syrian social groups in North America at length in her seminal work: *Becoming American: The Early Arab American Experience*. Much of her analysis, while focusing on the larger immigrant communities of Detroit and New York City, rings true for the experience of the early Utica community. One key similarity they share is the sheer number of various clubs and societies organized early in the community's history. Naff writes, "Syrians [Lebanese included] developed such a propensity for organizing that at any given time the number of organizations was out of all proportion to the number of Syrians in America, albeit most of them short-lived."[98] These first groups tended to be based upon traditional loyalties to

Figure 5: Society of Syrian-Lebanese Americans, circa 1940. St. Louis Gonzaga Church, Utica, NY. Many societies such as this formed in the early days of the community. Courtesy of St. Louis Gonzaga Church Archive.

regional leaders combined with the practice of consulting with the elders of prominent families.[99] This tendency developed early in the Utica community primarily with the formation of regionally-based clubs representing the two largest sources of Lebanese

[98] Naff, 305.

[99] Ibid.

immigration to Utica: the village of Baskinta and the Akkar region. In some cases, these clubs were the early antecedents of future congregations in the greater Utica area. For example, the St. George Society which was organized in Utica in the early 1930's would eventually form the congregation and building committee that would found St. George's Antiochian Orthodox Church—a Greek Orthodox parish.[100] Similarly, a men's (United Syrian Lebanese-American Society) and women's (St. Theresa Society) club is found to have existed as well in the early 1930's and would later constitute the founders of St. Basil's Melkite Catholic Church in Utica.[101] Nearly all of these social organizations in the community had a philanthropic element to them. But before they focused on sustaining an inclusive Lebanese community or vigorously fundraising for their respective churches, they were primarily concerned with devoting themselves to the plight of their own towns of origin in Lebanon itself.

The importance of the hometown rivalry between those Uticans who originated from Baskinta or the Akkar region is discussed in detail in the next chapter. Suffice it to say, there was little love lost between these two distinct groups which pervaded the early days of the community up until the latter part of the twentieth century. While these groups did occasionally work together (some eventual fundraising for the church or cooperation in the planning of large celebrations), they were quite stringent about their membership. The St. Moura's Society in Utica, for example, was a women's society that drew its membership only from those who were originally from the Akkar region, and the

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[100] "Church of St. George Formally Dedicated," *Utica Daily Press*, Dec 18, 1922.

[101] Jeanette Charbel, Interview by Paul Charbel, Audio recording, Utica, NY, February 1, 2015.

St. Elias Society was a men's version of St. Moura's drew its membership in a similar fashion. Those from Baskinta would organize primarily secularly and their groups were large, but fewer in number compared to those from Akkar. There largest group was the United Baskinta Society, and, in 1919, they would found Lebanon Hall, which was located two blocks north of St. Louis Gonzaga Church on Third Street.[102]


PILGRIMAGE PLANNERS—Twenty-nine members of Children of Mary of St. Louis of Gonzaga Church will make three-day bus tour of shrines and churches in Canada starting tomorrow morning. Committee members planning pilgrimage are, seated, Miss Mary Ameen, chairman; standing, from left, Miss Patricia Dorp, vicepresident of organization; Miss Bernadette Mubarek, president; Miss Sarah Ferris, treasurer, and Miss Marion Mahana, secretary.

Figure 6: "Pilgrimage Planners," *Observer Dispatch*, circa 1950s. The Children of Mary Society, a women's group of St. Louis Gonzaga Church, is still a prevalent social organization within the Utica community. Courtesy of St. Louis Gonzaga Church Archive.

Time would heal these regional rifts and eventually membership would be broadened to all those of Lebanese descent—not by choice, but by necessity in order to keep their organizations going with new members. However, many of these clubs and societies have folded over the years because of various reasons. For one, the same

[102] Ibid.

loyalty to Lebanese hometown, as we have discussed, would lose its fervor with every succeeding generation. What was once pride in coming from Baskinta morphed into a more general pride in simply being Lebanese or devotion to being Maronite, Melkite, etc. This would lead to the end of those very specific regional groups like the United Baskinta Society or to the evolution of their nature like the St. Elias club and St. Moura's Society taking on members who were not Akkar residents. Similarly, the discovery of what was happening with a large portion of those donations raised for their hometowns would turn these club's initiatives towards the sustaining of their own church and community in Utica. For example, the majority of residents originally from the Akkar region were those who had resided in the small village of Bekarzala (often referred to as B'erzla). Even from the earliest days of the immigrant community in Utica, former Bekarzala residents would raise money to send back to their hometown; often times these were sums in the thousands—no small feat in the early 1970s.[103] Besides Utica, there was a sizable congregation of Akkar Maronites from Bekarzala in Melbourne, Australia who also consistently donated to either their hometown or other Akkar immigrant communities. The St. Moura society in Utica is based on devotion to a martyred Egyptian saint who is said to have performed a miracle in Bekarzala.[104] Using the donations from both the Melbourne and Utica communities, a project to build a church in her honor in Bekarzala was endeavored upon. These two communities sent sizable donations as early as 1976, and it was not until 2007 that the church was actually

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[103] Ibid.

[104] Bentinck, "Mar Moura," Kobayat.org (2007), http://www.kobayat.org/data/churches/moura/mar_moura.htm, accessed January 25, 2016.

complete—a strangely long amount of time for the construction of any building. Similarly, St. Moura's would send donations to help the poor of their home village until they were informed of how their money was being spent. A concerned relative living in Bekarzala contacted his niece, a member of St. Moura's, and explained to her that their donations were being used instead to line the pockets of those in charge of accepting the donations.[105] An anecdote of the situation took this form: those receiving the donations would purchase a nice fattened lamb for slaughter, take for themselves the choicest cuts of meat, and, with the scraps and bones, make soup with which to feed the poor. This realization would convince the St. Moura's Society, like other clubs similarly sending money to their hometowns, that their money was better spent on more tangible results in the helping of their local community and church.

What is important about these social groups is their function in bringing Lebanese people in the community together and by doing so they increase the exchange of information, create a social space where like-minded people with similar backgrounds and/or of similar age groups can interact, and aid in the observance and/or preservation of customs and practices. As Dr. Naff makes abundantly clear, regionally based clubs would initially organize quickly and have widespread appeal, but these would be the first clubs to disband as time wore on. As in Utica, clubs or societies based solely on regional background would play a prominent role in the early years of this community, but their relevance would soon wane in favor of more universally Lebanese or religious groups. First generation Lebanese Americans, while still attesting to similar beliefs and practices

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[105] Jeanette Charbel, Interview, January 23, 2016.

as their parents, would seek out and join social groups that were not anchored to the soil of Lebanon.

This variety of social groups, like those previously mentioned, began initially as extensions of serious hometown devotion in Lebanon.[106] Many of them were first anchored in regionalism, and, as each succeeding generation passed, they grew to be broader and more generalized versions of their former selves. These various groups whose membership consists of children, young adults, and their elders, whether they be co-ed or delineated by gender, have their roots primarily in social organizations that were meant to retain hometown loyalty—particularly in terms of Baskinta and Akkar.[107] Observing the modern iterations of these groups today may seem innocuous to the casual observer; indeed, they appear to be straightforward analogues of organizations found under any religious denomination. But I posit that this innocuous circumstance is the effect time has had on the once proud practice of hometown devotion. This evolution of the social group in the Utica community illustrates an encapsulation of this centuries old practice. This practice has changed over time most likely since the first generation of Lebanese Americans were born and grew up in the community, but the need to organize societies and clubs and continue their traditions is a practice which has been preserved in the diaspora. In Lebanon itself, hometown devotion is still a prominent feature of one's cultural identity, but it has been since diminished due to the rise of information technology and global communications. A more cosmopolitan outlook shapes Lebanese

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[106] Ibid.

[107] Helen Abdoo, Interview by Paul Charbel, Audio recording, Utica, NY, August 30, 2014.

realities as now, more than ever, citizens are able to communicate much easier with their families and friends in the diaspora. The devotion to these early social organizations, while certainly much changed since their inception, laid the foundation for a more united social atmosphere in the Utica community. As we shall discuss further in the next chapter, this evolution was a necessary growth if the Lebanese of Utica were to remain united and not fall victim to divisiveness. To this end, we must really credit the church for preserving a cohesive Lebanese community because it acted as a neutral ground to put aside and eventually deemphasize regional loyalties. These changes were certainly gradual ones not consciously made, but they were vital ones that would allow for a more cohesive Lebanese community to exist and thrive.

Like much of Lebanese culture in the area, social groups have decreased in membership significantly since the arrival of the first waves of immigrants. Being absorbed under the umbrella of the church turned out to be a boon for maintaining that social and cohesive atmosphere that hometown devotion once engendered. Americanization and a disassociation with everyday Lebanese affairs have both contributed to the end of the independent or secular Lebanese clubs and organizations. While housed in a non-secular setting, groups for various ages, co-ed or gender-based, still function to perpetuate that same devotion once dedicated solely to Lebanese hometown with a focus shifted towards perpetuating their Eastern Christian faith.

Gambling Dens and Bootlegged Liquor: The Other Kind of Social Group

Like many immigrant communities, this one would import the same devotions to faith, family, and kinship into its new home. But there are other things that came along as well. Another type of gathering would occur in a little coffee shop or ah'weh (meaning either café or, simply, coffee) that was not considered a reputable establishment by many, clergy and laity alike. These ah'weh would certainly serve coffee (only Turkish coffee, however), and they offered a pastime that many young and old Lebanese men sought in the evenings or on weekends. Simply, they were minor gambling dens where men would gather to play pinochle or backgammon for small sums, smoke cigars or the hookah (water pipe), and, most importantly, hold discussions. Certainly not as high stakes or dangerous as some of the mafia-run speakeasies of Prohibition-era Utica, these were the unofficial Lebanese men's clubs in Utica. In my interviews with Dr. Eugene P. Nassar, we discussed in detail the nature of these establishments as he recalled them. His father was a regular patron to a particular business on Elizabeth Street and describes it as it appeared in 1944:

> The Ah'we was one big room with dark brown peeling paint on the lower half and dirty yellow peeling paint on the upper half. There were six old round wooden tables and twenty-nine wicker chairs around the room. There was a candy and cigar case in one corner, a little table with a turkish coffee maker on it nearby, and a door to a small washroom at the far end. And that was all. The bulbs from a central chandelier and two smaller ones at each side were naked. Bare wood slats on the floor.[108]

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[108] Eugene P. Nassar, *Wind of the Land* (Michigan: Association of Arab-American University Graduates, Inc., 1979), 15.

The average ah'weh was without the glitz or glamour we associate with Prohibition-era gambling or drinking establishments. In fact, by the time of Dr. Nassar's experience in the 1940's, their bare conveyance was functional, and their small scale seems to have helped avoid most legal trouble. "The police knew of all the gambling games, big and little, of whatever ethnic group, and allowed it all, unless someone called. The host would take a small cut from each hand—it was all very minimal."[109] Because of the minor stakes involved and the local police who looked the other way as they did for the Italians or Polish, it is not surprising that the ah'weh was a traditional practice that was allowed to continue in the United States.

The antecedent for this kind of establishment in Utica has a similar function, and indeed it is considered an indispensable part of Lebanese, particularly Beirut, culture. Much like the cafés that abounded in Paris during the Enlightenment, so too did the cafés of Lebanon serve as a place for vibrant debate between intellectuals, artists, and any one in between.

> They are where people make acquaintances, exchange, and mingle, a space for transient and spontaneous interactions. The ahweh is a space for winter and summer, sea and mountain, sidewalk and street, talking and silence. It is a space for the visual, the imagined, and the metaphysical, for the city and the surrounding countryside, growing ever more urbanized.[110]

Not to say that these establishments in Lebanon were free of gambling or inclusive of women in the slightest. In fact, the further you would venture inside one of these cafés in Lebanon, passing the al fresco tables of more innocuous patrons simply drinking or

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[109] Eugene P. Nassar, e-mail message to the author, August 12, 2015.

[110] Muhammad Abi Samra, "Maqha, Ahweh: An Etude in Café," *Portal 9* #1: The Imagined, Autumn 2012. http://portal9journal.org/articles.aspx?id=52.

conversing, the more gambling and below-the-board activities you would come across—depending on how far your vision could penetrate through the miasma of cigar and hookah smoke.[111] Even now, café culture is still quite prevalent in Lebanon, while it has fallen out of practice in many immigrant communities abroad.

Perpetuating the culture of these ah'weh was an integral part of male identity formation in the early years of the Utica community. Bringing over this piece of Lebanese life, however simple, becomes an element that sustains and teaches Lebanese culture to successive generations. As a boy along with many like him, Dr. Nassar experienced "instructional moments" when they accompanied or visited their fathers at these establishments. Among the myriad cultural practices brought over from Lebanon, this one remains notable as it was a place relatively free of regionality—all men were welcome at the ah'weh regardless of hometown. While the love of strong, rich coffee has not dissipated completely, the ah'weh in this form has all but disappeared. Nothing currently exists in Utica that compares to these charmingly seedy men's clubs, but there are analogues that still sutstain some of the core practices of the ah'weh and café culture. These are found in modern establishments like Lebanese bakeries, cafés, and restaurants. Karam's Middle Eastern Bakery, Massoud's Café, The Phoenician Restaurant, Toma's Minimart, or Zeina's Café are but a few examples of places where Lebanese Americans in this community meet to interact in much the same way the ah'weh of old had provided for. These businesses have encapsulated those once popular venues for conversation and

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[111] Jeanette Charbel, Interview by Paul Charbel. Audio recording, Utica, NY, January 23, 2016.

cultural interaction; however, these places will not stand for any kind of gambling or card playing in their establishments, nor will they allow smoking of any kind according to New York State law.

As important as the celebrations or even the ah'weh are to Lebanese identity in the early days of the community, the drink of choice in these settings is a topic deserving attention in and of itself. While immigrating to the U.S. provided many with freedom from tyranny and starvation, many things were obviously lost or sacrificed in the process. Particularly, the diet of Lebanese immigrants was radically changed in their new homes. Whether it be simply the availability of certain foods and ingredients, the price, or their willingness to assimilate into a new culture, a good deal of food culture would be temporarily cut off from them. One specific libation of Lebanese origin would not be sacrificed however; this is arak. Arak is a liquor distilled from grapes and flavored with anise, and it is a widely consumed beverage, not only in Lebanon, but across the Levant. The problem for early Lebanese émigrés was twofold: firstly, the cost to import this alcohol would be prohibitive enough to reserve it for more wealthy individuals in places like Europe, Canada, or South and Central America; secondly, Prohibition in the U.S. would prevent any such liquor legally reaching American shores. But for many of these poorer Mount Lebanon natives in Utica, buying arak was already an infrequent practice. Making your own, however, was an everyday affair.

Continuing from my conversations with Dr. Nassar, we discussed the practice of home distillation or the bootlegging of arak amongst these Lebanese immigrants. As stated earlier, Utica was known for a few things; among them was the corruption which

earned it the title of Sin City in the early twentieth century. This was mainly due to the presence of the Italian mafia in Utica and it dealing directly with the making and distribution of alcohol in the era of Prohibition. As we know, Italians and Lebanese mixed in the East Utica neighborhoods, and an unspoken understanding of sorts, in terms of the mafia's practices, was worked out very early on. As Dr. Nassar pointed out, the Italians had the run of bootlegging in the city, but they were not insensitive to the Lebanese's desire for their arak.[112] The understanding was this: the mafia controls the sale of alcohol in this city. The Lebanese were free to distill this arak and share it amongst themselves, but there would be dire consequences if they dared to sell it to the mafia's clientele. There is little in the way of primary sources that illustrate the Lebanese practice of distilling arak, but there are some clues littered throughout the newspapers of the time period.

For example, a common problem in illegal distillation is the interaction of alcohol vapors with the flame or heat source used in the process. The result of such interaction is a volatile fire and/or explosion. Liquor fires such as this can cause terrible damage to both life and property. And an incident as such would surely make the local newspapers. In an article from *Al-Shaab* on June 28, 1929, an enormous fire on Bleecker Street is described.[113] The fire, which was the result of an explosion in a residence, managed to incur between $400,000-$700,000 worth of damage. The implication in the article is that its source was from a basement and had nothing to do with a gas line, heating oil, or any

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[112] Eugene P. Nassar, Interview by Paul Charbel, Audio recording, Utica, NY, July 23, 2014.

[113] Yussef Elasmer, "Utica News," *Al-Shaab*, June 28, 1929.

other such potential accidents. While not stating the obvious, it is clear that this was a liquor explosion and fire—probably from the bootlegging of alcohol. As this was the section of Utica news in an Arabic language newspaper, it is fair to assume that this accident was the result of illegally distilling arak in a basement. While this is an untenable disaster for the East Utica community, an even worse example of the fate of bootleggers would be made just over a year from this incident.

On September 27, 1930, the editor at *Al-Shaab* published a letter from Yussef Elasmer and an accompanying article from a Utica newspaper. The article, written by Elasmer for the *Observer Dispatch*, is about the deaths of a Lebanese father and son.[114] Elias Melkhoun (al-Hadithee) and his son, Ruccos, had gone missing and were presumed dead. This father and son team were known bootleggers of arak, and, accordingly corroborated through the interviews with Dr. Eugene Nassar and Mrs. Helen Abdoo, they had apparently begun to sell that arak, cutting in on the mafia's territory. Ruccos Melkhoun is a notable name as we shall soon explore because he was elected the secretary's aide in the United Committee of Biskinta: the group which would later open a night school to teach Arabic and English after the collapse of a larger project to build a school. As stated earlier, an unspoken agreement with the mafia to keep this liquor amongst the Lebanese community was understood, and Melkhoun and his son were knowingly breaking this agreement. According to the article, the pair had received a phone call from a "potential client," and, from this meeting, neither would return. A couple weeks later, their bodies would be recovered from the Mohawk River near the

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[114] Yussef Elasmer, "Utica News," *Al-Shaab*,, September 27, 1930.

town of Frankfort, NY (about nine miles southeast of Utica). According to Dr. Nassar, who has done extensive work on the Italian community in Utica, this particular stretch of the Mohawk River was a popular dumping ground for the mob. The fate of Elias and Ruccos Melkhoun would stand as an example to all those in the practice of distilling their own arak: do not cut into the mob's market or else. While this incident did not cease the making of arak for one's own personal use, it was a grim reminder about the state of Utica's illicit trade at this time. Arak would still be bootlegged, but any thought of trying to sell it outside of the community died with Elias and Ruccos.

Arak is still produced for personal use in the Utica community but at a significantly smaller rate. In fact, many who lost their arak and wine producing businesses in Lebanon during the civil war would begin to set up new vineyards and distilleries in the U.S., fulfilling the demand in a more conventional way. A prominent example lies in the Lebanese Arak Corporation which started out as a family run operation until war would drive them to new shores. "Suffering immeasurable losses during the Lebanese Civil War in the mid-seventies, the Carlo Winery in the Bekaa Valley was completely destroyed. Recouping from these difficult set-backs, Carlo Winery found a new "home" in Los Angeles, California."[115] In fact, the growth of arak distilleries in the U.S. coupled with arak's demand would lead to major retailers stocking it alongside similar nationally based liquors like Greek Ouzo or Polish Nalewka. The waning of home distillation most likely coincided with these factors, but this does not mean the

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[115] "About Lebanese Arak Corporation," Lebanese Arak Corporation (Los Angeles: 2006), http://lacproducts.com/about.php, accessed October 3, 2015.

practice of drinking arak, especially at celebrations, has gone out of style in the Utica community. While the regularity in which it is consumed may not be as frequent as that of Lebanon, this drink represents an interesting signifier of Lebanese culture that has been preserved in the Utica community.

All the News fit to Print in Arabic

It is well and good that this community was able to establish itself enough to build its own church, start its own local societies, and become a beacon for other emigrating Lebanese on their way to foreign shores. But there is something more permeating which helped galvanize religious and cultural practice between the old country and immigrant enclaves across the Americas. Communications between families and friends certainly must have played an enormous part, especially for the first wave of immigration, but it was the proliferation of Arabic language newspapers that helped individual enclaves begin to identify themselves in terms of a broader national picture. These newspapers connected Lebanese immigrant communities by providing information about the current events in Lebanon as well as the goings-on of the larger communities across the country. Describing a similar circumstance with immigration to the Great Plains, Kathleen L. Fimple details the function and evolution of the immigrant newspaper:

> One of the primary roles played by immigrant newspapers was to educate the newly arrived. To accomplish this, the immigrant papers were initially printed in the native language of the target audience. Later, as immigrants learned to speak English, some papers abandoned the native language and converted to English. Others printed in both languages…The papers provided information about the local community, including the culture, economy, and government. News was reported on the national and international levels, especially targeting the immigrants' homeland.[116]

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[116] Kathleen L. Fimple, "Immigrant Newspapers," *Encyclopedia of the Great Plains*, ed. David J. Wishart (Lincoln: University of Nebraska: Lincoln: 2011) http://plainshumanities.unl.edu/encyclopedia/doc/egp.med.024.

Through this media, a network of interconnectivity was forged between Lebanese immigrants across the Western hemisphere, and it also put them in direct conversation with their native land. This conversational was beneficial for not just updates, but, since they were printed in Arabic, "one of their major purposes and functions was language retention. Virtually every major immigrant group to the United States in the late 19th and early 20th centuries published newspapers in its native language."[117] Starting in 1892 with *Kowkab America*, Arabic language newspapers became the definitive source in the exchange of news between Lebanese and Syrian people, especially in the U.S. As we shall observe, it greatly impacted how this particular community grew and indelibly positioned itself as a fixture in the greater Utica region. Additionally, these newspapers were a vital cornerstone in the perpetuation of Lebanese culture in the Utica community.

I have on numerous occasions already cited several Arabic language newspapers in this work from outlets such as *Al-Hoda* or *Al-Shaab*, and it is a very fortunate circumstance that I am able to do so. Their very existence in the St. Louis Gonzaga Church Archive is an unlikely but wholly welcome turn of good fortune. Many of these newspapers, besides being long out of print, have no archive whatsoever, meaning that years of early Arab immigration chronicled in those weekly papers are all but nonexistent except in the case of personal preservation by their former subscribers. There are a few English language newspapers that survived long enough to be properly archived, like *The Syrian World* whose repository is in the Utica College Library thanks to the efforts of

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[117] "Immigration to the United States, 1789-1930," *Harvard University Library Open Collections Program*, accessed Feb 29, 2016, http://ocp.hul.harvard.edu/immigration/press.html.

John G. Moses and Dr. Eugene Nassar. Others were not as fortunate. In the St. Louis Gonzaga archive, however, were article clippings of a hitherto unknown provenance, neatly arranged in a series of scrapbook albums. As these articles were all in Arabic, they were kept until someone who could read them might find some worth in their contents. But few since have taken an interest, and they remained stored away. After discerning the nature of these clippings, it was discovered that one man's lifetime of collecting his article contributions to Arabic language newspapers in the U.S., *having specifically to do with the Lebanese community of Utica*, were lying, untouched and unread, on a shelf in a coatroom for decades. With tireless translation assistance from my father, Mr. Assad Charbel, we learned that these scrapbooks held articles ranging from 1916 to 1968 and contained vital information about the Utica community including population statistics; local/neighborhood news; names of visitors from abroad; as well as marriages, births, and deaths. The articles are predominately from the two largest news outlets of their kind, *Al-Hoda* and *Al-Shaab*, but there are occasionally articles from smaller organizations as well.

A significant element which helped to construct and maintain Utica's image as a strong Lebanese enclave is found in the tireless work of the writer of the "Utica News" column—a local correspondent and zajal poet named Yussef Elasmer. Elasmer would most likely write a short letter of local news that was composed into an article by the editors of the newspapers. These entries are quite possibly the best resources concerning the history of this group of immigrants, including the regular monthly goings-on of the community—no matter how small or seemingly mundane. The article clippings provide

a glimpse into so much of the current events in the Utica community, and their coverage reflects what societal issues this population would consider important.

Elasmer is part of a chain of information that was both important in reporting news about Lebanon but also as a way to inform fellow Lebanese about other immigrant communities across the Americas. Publications like the ones Elasmer wrote for would examine issues of particular interest to these immigrants, and their writers attempted to fulfill that consistent desire for news from the old country. Publishing houses would set up correspondents in major Lebanese cities/areas, including Beirut, Tripoli, Jounieh, Baabdat, and Northern Lebanon, as well as in the more significant enclaves of the U.S., Canada, and South America. The most vital and widely circulated newspaper for Lebanese immigrants was *Al-Hoda* (*The Guidance)*, which was established in 1898 in New York City. Lead by its creator, publisher, and editor, Naoum Mokarzel, *Al-Hoda* would become a valuable source of news for all Lebanese immigrants. In addition to providing current events, newspapers like *Al-Hoda* would often champion causes they felt were vital for Lebanon itself and the fate of its diaspora in foreign lands. In many cases, their clarion call would mobilize enormous support from Lebanese communities on both sides of the Atlantic. The initial goals of the paper were expressed as "uniting the Lebanese immigrants, pooling their efforts, and guiding them toward the service of Lebanon and the defense of its rights which the Ottomans were violating."[118] These publications, particularly *Al-Hoda*, would rally American Lebanese men to enlist in the

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[118] *Al-Hoda, 1898-1968: The Story of Lebanon and its Emigrants taken from the Newspaper Al-Hoda,* New York: Al-Hoda Press, 1968, 3.

Armed Services, particularly during the lead up to the First World War, and they would also sound the call for Lebanese autonomy and independence from both the Ottoman Empire and the French mandate.[119] The opinions expressed within the pages of these periodicals were readily consumed by Lebanese immigrants abroad, and they informed a great deal of popular opinion in the enclaves of the West. Utica's own contribution to these prestigious publications came in the form of the monthly "Utica News" column found in both *Al-Hoda* and *Al-Shaab* contributed by Yussef Elasmer. This collection of articles is an immense benefaction to the history of the Lebanese community in Utica, even if we speak simply in terms of what these articles provided for the context of this study.

This contribution is made even more relevant in that Elasmer kept copies and catalogued nearly all of these articles. In his twilight years, he donated these collected works to St. Louis Gonzaga Church so that they may be archived. Every article he wrote that was published by one of these Arabic language newspapers, regardless of which, had been preserved chronologically by the author in a series of large scrapbooks. The task of translating these scrapbooks has provided this project an invaluable wealth of information concerning news within Utica's Lebanese community and, occasionally, of Lebanon itself.

To better characterize the importance of this collection, let us examine a couple of the first articles Elasmer had published. The earliest article that he included in his collected works is from December 27, 1916, and concerns the results of a fundraiser for

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[119] Ibid, 24.

warranted relief in Lebanon. The article details the auctioning of an argileh (water pipe) in the shape of a steam ship created by, brother to the writer, Salim Elasmer. The sum of $51.75 was fundraised, and this donation was then sent to the Maronite patriarch in Lebanon to distribute to those Lebanese effected by the outbreak of the First World War.[120] This humanitarian effort would certainly not be the last to come from Utica as another article from *Al-Shaab* relates. In fact by 1918, a committee with members who have recently immigrated from Lebanon was formed. Translating Elasmer's article, he writes on November 11, 1918: "In the city of Utica, NY there is a Lebanese committee… that knows about what is transpiring in the old country [people who have been displaced and/or are suffering from the war]. They have raised and sent $746.25 for the aid of these people [probably sent again to be distributed through the Maronite patriarch although this is not explicitly mentioned]."[121] These first two examples of Utica making the news in Arabic language newspapers illustrates the city's relative prevalence among the Lebanese enclaves, and it signifies the deep connection many of these immigrants had to their home country. A donation of $51.76 is a significant amount of money, but one of $746.25 is almost unheard of in this time period. What is more amazing is that this is the result of a collection taken from within an immigrant community still establishing its place within American society. This speaks to the growing size of that community, its relative growth in prosperity, and, most importantly, its loyalty and devotion to Lebanese issues—regardless of what side of the Atlantic they were on. Unfortunate circumstances,

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[120] Yussef Elasmer, "Utica News," *Al-Shaab*, December 27, 1916.

[121] Yussef Elasmer, "Utica News," *Al-Shaab*, November 21, 1918.

which have been detailed above, would cause the flow of that donation money to remain stateside, but the benevolence of this kind of fundraising cannot be argued. Elasmer's efforts to share the achievements and events of this community contributed to the enduring image of Utica as a relevant place for Lebanese immigrants.

In fact, many important facets of this community would be lost to history if not for the preservation of these articles. Elasmer, to his credit, attempted to achieve a level of clarity and brevity in his writing free of regional bias, which, as we have seen, plagued many facets of the early community. His works represent a vital characteristic of this community as a central part of the Lebanese diaspora, and he illustrates this through his reporting on the many occasions when important visitors/events were centered in the Lebanese community of Utica. While there are hundreds of articles preserved, some have an importance that transcend their medium and provide us with a glimpse into how Elasmer's writing both establishes Utica as a significant Lebanese enclave in his time as well as illustrates the importance of that journalistic link to Lebanon that would eventually be severed.

There are three indispensable examples that illustrate just how important Elasmer's writing is for the study of this community. In addition to the detailed population statistics, which were significantly more accurate than any U.S. census or local listing, Elasmer's most vital work was done in service to Utica's image as a significant home to Lebanese immigrants. The following three articles deal with three distinct visitors, and through them we not only learn more about the notability of this

community, but we can appreciate the value of having a correspondent like Elasmer to showcase Utica's importance to Lebanese immigration across the country and abroad.

In an article dated as December 9th, 1921, Elasmer details the visit to Utica by the owner of the newspaper, *Al-Shaab*. This owner, who was not named in the article, visited Utica to profile the development of this community for his readers. In his visit, he remarked that there were eighty businesses owned and operated by Syrian or Lebanese people, the community had completed the building of a Maronite church, St. Louis Gonzaga, on the corner of Albany and Elizabeth streets for a cost of $16,000 (of which two-thirds had already been paid for), and they have also purchased a large building with the intent of transforming it into a Lebanese school.[122] This school, under the directorship of Fr. Louis Lotaif, was to teach both English and Arabic language classes as well as provide lessons in Lebanese and Maronite culture. Elasmer mentions that this endeavor was to meet the criteria set out by New York State concerning the teaching of these language classes. We are already well aware of the first two observations the owner of *Al-Shaab* has made, but there exists no formal record concerning the creation of a Lebanese school in Utica. Indeed, the work of local historians makes no mention whatsoever of this intent, and this could very well be due to the fact that the articles of Elasmer are all written in Arabic. This is the first time in any of the Arabic language newspapers that the idea to build a Lebanese school was mentioned. We shall revisit this topic in terms of education later, but let us continue to mark what this owner is observing in the Utica community.

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[122] Yussef Elasmer, "Utica News," *Al-Shaab*,, December 9, 1921.

Additionally, the Melkites in the area have increased significantly to where they have just recently built and dedicated a church of their own, St. Basil's, under Fr. Bsharra Khiyata. The Greek Orthodox population had also recently bought two houses to convert into a church; this would become the future site of St. George's Antiochian Orthodox church. What this owner found remarkable about his trip is that all of this has been accomplished in a relatively short period of time with a population of just 1,500. Let us not forget that the majority of these immigrants are still struggling to make ends meet, but through their efforts, both physically and financially, they have succeeded in turning Utica into a home: one that would be welcoming future Lebanese immigrants. Also, this population statistic reveals that, between the three predominant religious groups in the area, the number of Lebanese in Utica had significantly increased. Our most reliable estimates of the population were in 1900 (~50) and 1910 (~600), but, by 1921, the number of Lebanese immigrants had increased by 150%. Within that eleven year span, the community would more than double in size as well as influence.

This article showcases the centrality of Utica to the Lebanese diaspora. It seems likely that the owner of *Al-Shaab* chose to visit and profile Utica because of just how many Lebanese immigrants were choosing to settle there. By no means could Utica be a competitor with the likes of New York City, Boston, or Detroit, but still a substantial community had been established which warranted a visit from this high-profile guest. This owner's visit would not be the only such sojourn of an influential Lebanese person as we shall soon observe.

In November of 1943, the Lebanese elected their first parliamentary government into power free from the control of the French mandate. This first government was immediately imprisoned by the French but was shortly reinstated due to political pressure placed upon France by other Western nations.[123] The road to independence was a difficult one, and the Lebanese of Utica, like many other similar immigrant communities, were vital contributors to this first free election. Several people were instrumental in the opposition to the French mandate, and one such person was George Bey Moussallem who worked alongside the future first president of independent Lebanon, Bechara El-Khoury. While the specific details of Moussallem's work are not mentioned, an article by Elasmer appearing in *Al-Hoda* on May 8, 1947, indicates that Moussallem was coming soon to visit the Lebanese community in Utica.[124] The article mentions that he was originally from Zahlé, a city where a number of the Utica Lebanese had originated. What is striking about this article is that a leading political and cultural figure in Lebanon—one who is intrinsically linked to the independence which the Lebanese had long sought—was coming to specifically visit this Utica community. This illustrates an important feature of Utica in that it was a community important enough to be visited by a foreign leader of this kind. Reflecting on this, one might ask when the last time some Lebanese politician, activist, or culturally relevant figure visited the city of Utica. Sadly, those days have gone, and part of the reason why is the current lack of political/cultural connection to Lebanon itself. The fact that Moussallem was coming to Utica signifies the importance

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[123] Sean Sheehan and Zawiah Abdul Latif, *Cultures of the World: Lebanon* (Tarrytown: Marshall Cavendish, 1997), 26.

[124] Yussef Elasmer, "Utica News," *Al-Hoda*, May 8, 1947.

of immigrant communities in the independence movement. Whether through financial or political support, these immigrants and their descendants, like other Lebanese communities across the U.S., actively fought for Lebanon's right to self-determination. A visit from such figure is striking when we contemplate the current state of the community, but it is an important factor to keep in mind when judging just how important an immigrant community like this could become to its home country.

For whatever reason, George Bey Moussallem came to visit Utica, and, within the next few months, the community would begin organizing significant contributions to be sent to Lebanon. We can reasonably infer that part of Moussallem's trip was to garner support for the new republic from the Lebanese in Utica and to perhaps solicit aid to help heal the wounds of the Second World War. For in the January 7, 1948, issue of *Al-Hoda*, Elasmer expounds on the subject of sending food aid to Lebanon.[125] The article describes the last six weeks of planning and organizing food stuffs to be sent there as soon as possible. According to the article, the conclusion of the war and the withdrawal of French forces saddled the new republic with a post-war scarcity of basic food supplies. The article details a significant lack of in-country supply to meet the growing demand and the resultant starvation. These circumstances resonated deeply with the Lebanese in Utica as most of them, who had come from the Mount Lebanon region, had either directly or indirectly experienced the effects of starvation under Ottoman rule and during the First World War. We will recall that this indeed was the primary motive for many young Lebanese to seek better lives in Europe and the Americas. This situation

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[125] Yussef Elasmer, "Utica News," *Al-Hoda*, January 7, 1948.

encouraged those who had benefited from their prosperity to freely donate and help their countrymen—many of which were their own familial relations who remained through the worse parts of occupation and starvation.

The community had put together a significant amount of flour, sugar, and rice to be sent, but the six week period was mostly spent waiting for an answer from the Lebanese government. Not willing to merely send the food stuffs to an address without some manner of confirmation on the other end, those making the donations wished to have some kind of concordance with the government before sending them. When the confirmation was made, they sent the food aid as detailed in the article. Again, it is worth noting that these donations and the organization that it took to send food aid in the post-war U.S. reflects the sacrifice and dedication these immigrants still had to their families and their newly independent county.

Fourteen years after the Lebanese Republic was declared, the trend of important cultural and political figures visiting the community continued at an even greater rate. While plans for a visit from the Patriarch of the Maronite Church (Patriarch Boulos) in October of 1962 were being made, actor and founder of the St. Jude Children's Research Hospital, Danny Thomas visited Utica in order to promote and gather donations for the hospital which had just recently opened its doors in 1962.[126] Thomas, born Amos Muzyad Yakhoob Kairouz, was the son of Lebanese immigrants and a world famous

[126] Yussef Elasmer, "Utica News," *Al-Hoda*, April 1962.

comedian and philanthropist.[127] According to Elasmer's article in *Al-Hoda* from August 27, 1962, Thomas specifically sought out the aid of fellow Lebanese and Syrian immigrants in the Utica area. Thomas, who had also helped found the American Lebanese Syrian Associated Charities (ALSAC) organization in 1957, relied on the generosity of fellow Lebanese and Syrian immigrants and, particularly, the children of these immigrants in American society. Thomas's views on their donation is outlined in the following from the history of St. Jude's:

> Although Danny Thomas and his friends raised the money to build the hospital, they now faced the daunting task of funding its annual operation. To solve this problem, Danny, of Lebanese descent, turned to his fellow Americans of Arabic-speaking heritage. Believing deeply that these Americans should, as a group, thank the United States for the gifts of freedom given their parents, Danny also felt the support of St. Jude would be a noble way of honoring his immigrant forefathers who had come to America.[128]

Thomas had already made multiple visits to Utica where he would donate his time and perform at local clubs.[129] The money raised from these events would benefit the charities of the early social groups—particularly those of Akkar origin. This particular occasion was met with enormous fanfare, and since that visit, many Lebanese families in Utica, to this day, donate regularly and actively fundraise for the St. Jude Children's Research

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[127]Mervyn Rothstein, "Danny Thomas, 79, the TV Star Of 'Make Room for Daddy,' Dies," *The New York Times,* February 7, 1991, http://www.nytimes.com/1991/02/07/obituaries/danny-thomas-79-the-tv-star-of-make-room-for-daddy-dies.html?pagewanted=2&src=pm

[128] "Danny's Promise," *History*, St. Jude Children's Research Hospital, http://www.stjude.org/stjude/v/index.jsp?vgnextoid=576bfa2454e70110VgnVCM1000001e0215acRCRD&vgnextchannel=d48478b27119a210VgnVCM1000001e0215acRCRD, accessed October 9, 2014.

[129] Helen Abdoo, Interview by Paul Charbel, Audio recording, Utica, NY, August 30, 2014.

Hospital. The significance of this visit lies not just in a Hollywood actor seeking donations, but the fact that Danny Thomas, a successful son of Lebanese immigrants, specifically sought out a fellow community in Utica. This illustrates again just how significant of an enclave the Lebanese community in Utica was. Garnering this kind of respect as representatives of the Lebanese in the U.S., many would look fondly back on Thomas's visits to Utica as watershed moments in the community's history.

These three examples taken from Yussef Elasmer's works convey Utica's former centrality as a Lebanese enclave as well as the importance of the Arabic language newspaper for heralding this community as such. From the reporting of these high profile visits, we can descry the influence Elasmer and these newspapers had on portraying Utica as a strong and established Lebanese community. Without the circulation of these newspapers to places like Utica, much of that interconnectivity between immigrants and homeland would be lost. But without the tireless efforts of an author like Yussef Elasmer, Utica would not be significantly recognized as a home for the Lebanese in the U.S. Like the other facets of religious and cultural life, the newspapers helped create a passage back to Lebanon as well as between fellow immigrant communities. By consistently exchanging information in this way, many of the already strong ethnoreligious practices of the Lebanese in Utica were able to be enshrined and preserved. As these publishing houses closed their doors in the late 1960's-1970's, so too would the door connecting modern Lebanese socio-cultural life to the Utica community. Without the guidance of newspapers like *Al-Hoda*, this community's views of what "being Lebanese" would become entrenched, and their cultural practices would

cease evolving and encapsulate a golden age: an age when Lebanese politicians personally visited Utica and Danny Thomas was a staple for entertainment.

A Sundered House United

Religious and cultural identity in the Lebanese community are unique in that their expression, whether through a liturgy, a regionally based club, or simply what they read, are facets which bind the community together and act to instruct future generations in cultural encapsulation via preservation. The differences between their practices and Lebanese practices have greatly shifted, but it is this encapsulation, however far from the current realities of Lebanon, that sustains the community and motivates it to continue. Despite the sundered nature of Lebanese culture in Utica, this reality should not be looked at as an inherent flaw. In fact, recent émigrés have commented upon how certain practices, which have been lost to the average Lebanese, are preserved in the Utica community.

> The Lebanese culture in Utica, for those who are trying to hold on to it, is a version of what the parents and grandparents brought over. It has not progressed, and in many cases it has slightly diverted due to lack of memory or convenience. The Lebanese culture in Utica is closer to the folklore that is now being lost in Lebanon itself. This last statement in my opinion should be a source of pride for Utica. Despite many shortcomings and inaccuracies, there are quite a bit of homes and families that retain very rare aspects of the Lebanese culture that would be otherwise lost if it were up to the Lebanese in Lebanon.[130]

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[130] Hisham Zoghby, e-mail message to the author, January 26, 2016.

This sentiment reflects a nostalgic element that has been hitherto unexplored; furthermore, it suggests that the very encapsulated nature of Lebanese culture in Utica is a boon to the cultural preservation of Lebanese folk practices that may have been long-since forgotten or discarded. While some may be caught up in whether or not the practices in Utica are "authentic" or not as compared to modern day Lebanese culture, there is a strong case to be made for the sheer historic importance of its practices and what they implicate for the study of Lebanese history itself.

The elements that make up the ethnoreligious practices of this community are, at heart, attempts to attach meaning to one's surroundings. If we can view the voyage of immigrants to a foreign land as a cultural, and often spiritual, reset of their lives, then we can understand their desire to meet, worship, exchange information, and celebrate together in their new home as a way to create or reassert a familiar type of order in those lives. For all immigrants, blending into your new home's characteristics and mores is seemingly inevitable, but a strong ethnoreligious foundation, as seen in the Lebanese community, is able to stem the tide long enough to hallow some key elements of its practices and ensure their continuation for future generations. Therefore, the activities of this Lebanese community speaks largely to the general condition of immigrants in that they are simply the acts of familial and kin groups providing "orientation for an organism which cannot live in a world it is unable to understand."[131] The ethnoreligious nature of the Lebanese community is what allowed it to sustain and encapsulate many of its practices. By traditionally having an interconnected cultural and religious life, the effects

[131] Geertz, 141.

of Americanization and cultural homogeneity have been slowed and, in some cases, have been halted completely. The Utica community, as much as it has encapsulated elements of Lebanese culture, has still evolved. The churches' role in giving cohesion, the deemphasis of regional loyalty, the prevalence of café culture, and even its interaction with Lebanese affairs—these have all had their elements boiled down to what will successfully sustain this community. Some of these elements have either fallen by the wayside or been discarded in light of the cultural realities from living in the U.S., but the rest still exist because of their inherent functionality in preserving this particular vision of Lebanese history and culture.

CHAPTER 3:
Regional Differences: How Hometown Devotion Impeded Immigrant Progress

When the average person discusses the regional conflicts in or around Lebanon, the conversation is usually meant in terms of the regional powers of Syria, Iran, or even Saudi Arabia, playing out proxy wars with Israel or with each other on Lebanese soil. For our purposes, however, we will instead learn about a very specific kind of regional conflict—one on a much smaller scale but with important ramifications for the concept of national unity, especially for the Lebanese in the diaspora. Regional conflict in Lebanon refers primarily to the historic rivalries between powerful families and neighboring villages. To the outsider, this may seem strange as Lebanon is a small sovereign nation in which its citizens all share a common stake in its society. But loyalty in Lebanon is prioritized along much different lines than the countries of the West. For example, we have made a solid case for the Eastern Christians of Mount Lebanon comprising an ethnoreligious group based on where their secular and religious practices intersect, but there are allegiances within this community that run deeper than just their religious devotion. Sandra Mackey, in her work *Lebanon: A House Divided*, explores in great detail the underlying rivalries that have historically shaped Lebanese politics and economics long before it was even considered a nation. She writes:

> Lebanese society, fatally divided along communal lines, seemed to pattern itself neatly according to religion. But in reality religious identification was further subdivided by family loyalties, regional differences, economic rivalries, or simple hatred generated from past disputes and ongoing vendettas. A Lebanese was first

> a member of his family, then his village, then his religious group, and finally he was a Lebanese.[132]

It is these regional differences that are important for our study especially since they manifested themselves in the diaspora, particularly in the Utica community.

The accomplishments of this immigrant community, especially in its early years, are nothing short of amazing. Reflected in its philanthropy for its home country and its endeavors to create a true haven for all Lebanese immigrants in a small upstate New York city, there was seemingly little these people could accomplish if they set their minds to it. However, there is one key reason why even more ambitious projects and initiatives were not accomplished. The fundamentally divisive nature of Lebanese regional rivalries is what stalled or prevented all together much of the community's early development. Rivalry can occasionally be a healthy thing—a motivation pushing individuals and groups to greater heights. The rivalry which colored much and more of the community's early history lies between two distinct places—the Akkar region and Baskinta.

The Akkar region is the north-most district in the country, flanked by the Mediterranean in the west and mountains in the east. Historically associated with farming and pastoral life (the name Akkar is a derivative of the Arabic word for farmer), this district has been often associated with the typical tropes of an agriculturally based lifestyle such as a slower-pace, cultural insulation/backwardness, and generally a simpler,

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[132] Sandra Mackey, *Lebanon: A House Divided* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 2006), 12.

country life.[133] This negative connotation was referred to in multiple interviews, but particularly in the experience of Mrs. Helen Abdoo who distinctly remembered the condescension felt by her and others from Akkar.[134] Conversely, Baskinta is a village that actively boasts a more cosmopolitan heritage, citing among all its natural beauty which draws a good deal of seasonal tourism. It is an important place for archaeological study as there have been numerous findings of ruins and artifacts belonging to Ancient Greek, Roman, and even prehistoric societies. Baskinta is a small yet cosmopolitan city that hosts some of Lebanon's best and brightest if just through its tourism. It is these characteristics that, especially in the early days of the community, fueled an overweening pride that would pit them against those from Akkar in Utica.[135] To put these two places in perspective, the population of the Akkar region is 252,917 which is scattered across a whopping 283 villages and towns—an average of 893 people per village/town.[136] The village Bekarzala, for instance, most likely had a population under 1,000 when residents began seeking refuge in the West. As for Baskinta, the population of its district, Matn, is a total of 522,243 spread out over 51 villages and towns.[137] Certainly, this district is

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[133] "Dukhrana Analytical Lexicon of the Syriac New Testament," *Dukhrana Biblical Research*, accessed Feb 26, 2016, http://www.dukhrana.com/lexicon/lexeme.php?adr=1:125&font=Estrangelo+Edessa&size=150%.

[134] Mrs. Helen Abdoo, Interview by Paul Charbel, August 30, 2014.

[135] Dr. Eugene Nassar, Interview by Paul Charbel, Audio recording, Utica, NY, July 23, 2014.

[136] "Lebanon: Akkar Governorate Profile," *United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees* (August 11, 2014), https://data.unhcr.org/syrianrefugees/download.php?id=6813, accessed January 4, 2016.

[137] Thomas Brinkhoff, "Al-Matn District," *City Population* (September 21, 2015), http://www.citypopulation.de/php/lebanon-admin.php?adm2id=22, accessed January 4, 2016.

more densely populated than Akkar with an average of 10,240 per village/town. But that number is still relatively tiny when compared to even the smallest cities in the U.S. for example (a small city like Utica alone has a population of 62,235).[138] The context these statistics illustrate is that both of these locales have relatively small populations which have been traditionally delineated via those factors mentioned earlier: family loyalty and hometown pride. Under these circumstances, when peoples of these two very different parts of the country would meet in the U.S., the results could range anywhere between a solidarity in each other's experience in a new country to a spiteful exclusion and segregative nature.

The first waves of immigration to Utica came primarily from these two locations, and their regional differences were the cause of much bitter debate and divisiveness in the early days of the community. For example, as has been mentioned, the first local social groups were those which were organized to illustrate hometown pride and were regionally rooted to the physical places of Baskinta or Akkar. Regardless of their intrepid journey to a new continent, many of which would never return to Lebanon, there was little mixing between these hometowns. Aside from very few exceptions, it was both encouraged and practiced to put one's hometown loyalties first even in a foreign land. The very nature of this hometown fervor would cause this community's most ambitious project to founder and eventually fail. To illustrate this and making use of a previously

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[138] "Community," *City of Utica* (2015), http://www.cityofutica.com/community/index, accessed January 4, 2016.

undiscovered source, I present the following case study of this community's attempt to put aside its hometown rivalries and build a Lebanese school in Utica.

Building a Lebanese School: To Educate and not Assimilate

Among the many things unearthed in this project, one stands out for being absent from any local chronicle about the Lebanese community in Utica. As stated earlier with regard to the collected articles of Yussef Elasmar, a linguistic barrier and general disinterest has allowed many potential resources in the St. Louis Gonzaga Church archive to go unnoticed for many decades. Among the scrapbooks of articles and other miscellany, a series of old ledger books and binders written in Arabic had been kept with no apparent label or clue as to what they contained. With some indispensable help in the translation of these items, I was able to discover some accounting records from the earliest days of the church, dating back to the early 1930s and written in the hands of the successive priests that served as pastors.[139] Also included were ledgers of the Maronite mass and hymnals for various occasions written out in a few different hands. It appears that, before the parish had their own printed Arabic texts of the Maronite mass, the priest or a well-versed parishioner had painstakingly written out the entirety of the mass for different occasions (Palm Sunday, Easter, Christmas, etc.) in Arabic along with the appropriate songs for each. These alone are a testament to the hands-on nature of both the clergy and laity in the early days of this church's establishment. This do-it-yourself attitude can be observed in the early achievements of the community, especially if we recall the lauding comments of the owner of the *Al-Shaab* newspaper upon his visit to Utica. Indeed, this mentality would spur the first Lebanese settlers to even loftier goals.

The most important ledger discovered amongst the others in the archive is an

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[139] Mr. Assad Charbel.

aspect of this community that might well have been lost forever. Written in Arabic in several different hands, it is the record of this community's attempts to create a Lebanese school in Utica. This piece of history has been unknowingly omitted by church and local

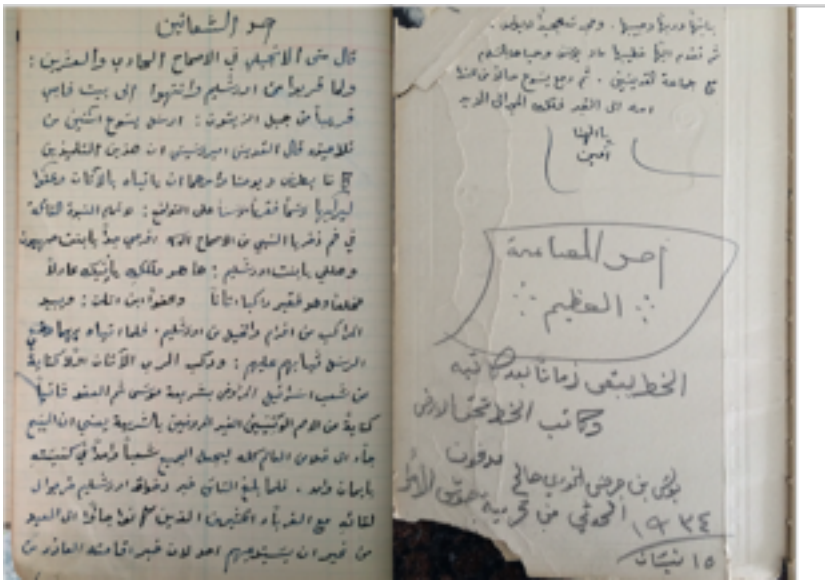

Figure 7: (Left) Hand-written gospel readings for Holy Week starting with Palm Sunday. (Right) Last page of this same ledger which reads: "This writing will endure long after the writer. The writer is buried under ground. His name was Boulos, son of Girgis al-Khoury Saleh al-Haddithee from Housch al-Umara, Zahle, Bekaa. April 15, 1934." Courtesy of St. Louis Gonzaga Church Archive.

historians up until now as it was both written in Arabic and shelved in a pile of other unassuming ledgers. In my interviews with Mrs. Helen Abdoo, Dr. Eugene Nassar, and Mr. George Sfeir, they all recalled a language school, or the rumor of one, from their youths that was established in order to teach Arabic to the American-born children of Lebanese parents in Utica. However, the language school each of them remembered was an iteration that would actually come much later in this community's life. The discovery and translation of this handwritten account uncovers evidence of the *first* immigrant settlers from Lebanon trying to build and administer a school. Not only is this an admirable goal to work for, it is impressive as it is one which they began in 1921. To

think of a small immigrant community establishing itself enough in a foreign city that early is amazing in its own right. But to think that this community had the wherewithal to turn its attention next to the educational future of its descendants is nothing short of remarkable. Their plans for this school, however, would have it doing much more than simply teaching Arabic to their sons and daughters.

This account reflects how significant the community itself had become as well as how seriously it took the education of its future generations. Through the trials and travails of this Lebanese school committee, we shall find evidence of the centrality of education in this immigrant community and how the Lebanese of Utica encouraged its first generation of children to embody the American dream by striving for education. All of the material in this chapter, unless otherwise cited, is taken directly from the translated meeting minutes and notes from this single ledger, and it represents a raw and unadulterated look at the day to day, week to week minutia that went into the fundraising and planning of such an endeavor. As we shall see, the first generation of American Lebanese in Utica would grow up to pursue careers as doctors, lawyers, teachers, or other such white-collar work. This kind of jump in occupations within one generation of an immigrant community is a feat in and of itself, and the painstaking efforts taken to encourage education are reflected in the quest to create this Lebanese school. Herein lies a summary and analysis of these meeting minutes as there is no other place this chronicle exists. It is important for this work to understand the centrality of education to this growing community. But it is equally important to observe this selection as a case study

for how and why regional differences plagued this community's early endeavors and how it ultimately prevented many like it from succeeding.

The First Attempt

The meeting minutes outline the plan for a school that, as stated in the *Al-Shaab* article from December 9th, 1921, would be in line with both the requirements of New York State as well as the church's Eparchy (which is the Roman Catholic diocese of Syracuse at this time).[140] After translating every part of this ledger, a wealth of information was discovered which included not only the meeting minutes themselves but also officer elections, donors, and the amount of donations collected over the time period of 1920-1928. While there is no formal record of it at the beginning of these meeting minutes, there appears to have been a fundraising event or general campaign started with the intent of creating this school. The first entry in this ledger is dated at October 17, 1920, and it outlines the donations gathered so far, and, especially considering the time period, they are quite impressive. The donations were initially totaled at $2,381, and they were later increased to an even $2,500 shortly after. The initial funding for this school were started with a fundraiser, which were most likely raised through a celebration, concert, or even a theatrical production. Evidence of these kinds of fundraising techniques is found later in both the meeting minutes and corroborated in periodical sources of their time period, but the nature of the earliest attempts are hitherto undocumented. However, we can reasonably infer that this money was raised in a few events that were co-sponsored by St. Louis Gonzaga church.

The first official meeting would be held on November 18, 1920, and its participants were there to accomplish a couple key tasks: first, they were to elect an

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[140] Yussef Elasmer, "Utica News," *Al-Shaab*, December 9, 1921.

executive committee (the standard officers: president, vice president, treasurer, and secretary); second, they were to outline the duty of its officers and set forth bylaws that would eventually comprise the constitution of this committee; and finally, they had the important task of electing Lebanese hometown representatives to this committee and determine how represented each group would be—as we shall observe, this would be a fateful practice. By the time of this meeting, the donation amount had increased to $2,600, and, through a secret ballot, those individuals present for this first meeting would elect and install both their hometown representative members and the executive committee.

All but one of the fourteen members on this committee were chosen to represent the various hometowns of Lebanese immigrants dependent upon their population ratio in Utica. This may seem like an overly political method for choosing committee members for what is basically a building committee in a small Central New York city, but this fact illustrates just how vital properly representing one's hometown was to these individuals. Therefore, the number of immigrants within the community from each of the various towns or villages across Lebanon would determine how they were represented on this committee. For example, immigrants from the Akkar region of Lebanon were in the proportional majority, so they were granted five seats out of the fourteen. Next in size were those from Baskinta, and they were granted three seats. One seat each was given to representatives from the towns/cities of Boqaataa, Bqaatouta, Kfartay, Beirut, and Aachach. The final seat was given to a "volunteer representative" who would act as a general liaison to the community and would not be explicitly attached to the wishes or

opinions of any particular hometown. We can consider this position as someone who is meant to keep the larger picture of things in mind and one who would try to make decisions free of regional bias. This method of awarding a certain number of seats to certain representative groups should not appear strange as it is modeled closely on the election of members within the Lebanese parliament. However, it is a fitting reminder that the pride these immigrants had for their country was not as important as the pride that they personally held for their hometowns. If the Lebanese parliament disagrees upon an issue, there is debate and perhaps compromise—a reality all legitimate governing bodies face. But when it comes to a committee of volunteers who have an equally vested interest in the creation of this school, that same politicking would be noticeably absent. While perhaps a slightly grandiose gesture, this election format nonetheless illustrated the committee's desire to create a school that would serve the entirety of the Lebanese community in Utica and not just certain parts of it. After all of this was settled, the committee agreed to meet on a monthly basis. The next meeting would come much sooner, three days later on November 21, where the results of the election were officially announced. The volunteer representative, Yussef Butros al-Zoghby was elected president, Hanna Butros al-Khoury of Baskinta was elected vice president, Yussef Faris al-Tanoury was elected treasurer, and Salim Meelan was elected secretary.

There would be no meeting in December or January, and the next entry is dated as February 21, 1921, but that certainly didn't mean the committee was inactive during this gap. The entry for this date begins with the statement that the committee has purchased a plot of land occupying the addresses of 738 and 742 Mary Street in East Utica. No

purchase date is given, but the cost was stated as $7,800, and it appears that there were two residential homes occupying these adjacent addresses. According to the meeting minutes, the committee is just short of the start-up capital needed for this property. While the committee had raised a total of $2,600, they stated their need to come up with a minimum of $3,100 to place as a down-payment at this meeting. The treasurer, Yussef Faris al-Tanoury, then volunteered to personally loan the committee the $500 necessary for this down-payment. To this offer, the committee accepted and agreed to pay him back within fifteen days. The meeting was concluded with the agreement to meet with the priest (Fr. Louis Lotaif) and explain to him the events of the past three months concerning the organization of the committee, its fundraising efforts, and its preparation to purchase land with which to build a school. A week later, on February 28, the constitution was voted on and adopted.

The residences at 738 and 742 Mary Street posed early problems for this committee. Firstly, the total cost of the property would be steep. The price of the two properties was $7,800, the cost of insurance for three years was $3,042, and the lawyer's fee was $1,000. While the down-payment of $3,100 was made, there was still a difference of $8,742. Although they were able to pay back the $500 borrowed from the treasurer for the down-payment, they would need to continue collecting donations in order to simply pay the mortgage on this property. The issue of money and donations would play a prominent part in the history of this committee and it would dominate the discussions of the next few meetings. Regardless of this possible foreboding, here is a

good moment to stop and reflect on what has transpired with this committee over the past few months.

This committee's members constituted some of the earliest immigrants to Utica as well as the new blood of recent arrivals from Lebanon. Having first really established themselves as a sizable population in the early 1900s, just twenty years later, they are trying to open a school of their own. Based on its meeting minutes, the school would be to this community a way to influence the future by preserving the past. Not only would it offer English classes to new arrivals and help them assimilate to a new home, but it would also teach the children and grandchildren of those original immigrants the Arabic language and lessons in their Lebanese and/or Maronite culture. This idea to offer Arabic and cultural lessons was included so that proceeding generations would never be cut off from the legacy their parents left behind. And here is, at its heart, one of the many ways preservation and encapsulation was considered central to this Lebanese community—if these proceeding generations were to possess both Arabic language skills and a Lebanese/ Maronite cultural literacy, then there would ideally be no danger of losing their heritage to assimilation in this new land. This is the inherent fear that is present in many immigrant communities; arguably, time and assimilation will gradually dilute one's heritage to the point that, in a few generations, any real trace of its former significance within the community will have vanished. This committee, wanting to rise to this challenge and take proactive steps, raised a significant amount of money from amongst themselves ($2,600 is roughly equal to $31,000 presently) and sought inclusion for this project from every kind of Lebanese immigrant. In these relatively simple actions is

present a desire to keep their heritage relevant for the foreseeable future. This school and its mission were to stand testament to the commitment these founders pledged to successive generations. They attempted to put aside regional bickering and traditional rivalries to produce a brighter future for all of their children. One could say that, having spent some time in the U.S., they became all too aware of the "dangers" of succumbing to a purely American lifestyle and the effects assimilation could have on their proud heritage. The Lebanese community in Utica through this committee chose to tackle this potential problem head on. It is a noble effort especially considering just how much segregation was already present between those regional groups and just how much momentum they could gain when they set those cultural signifiers aside. Their fundraising numbers alone were a feat that remained unparalleled for decades to come within this community.

It is also important to note that these plans for the school, the choice of property, and the initial fundraising involved were done almost entirely independent of the church. It was not until a plan was cemented and a committee elected that they felt it was necessary to share their news with the priest or the congregation. Considering how closely tied the community historically is to the Maronite church, whether in Lebanon or abroad, it is very interesting to see this kind of secular-driven autonomy with a focus on education. This illustrates the sheer will and vibrancy of this immigrant population by the 1920s: it is able to, firstly, accrue $2,600 in donations in 1920 (no small feat for any community, immigrant or otherwise) and, secondly, organize it based solely on the desire to further the linguistic and cultural education of their children. To accomplish this, they

laid out a plan that would attempt to satisfy both secular (New York State) standards and religious/cultural standards (the Eparchy and the community itself). The idea to have a school of their own in this form must have been so strong to warrant this kind of dedication from within. There is no evidence of a project or initiative as expansive as the school committee driven independently of the church before this time or since. It seems that this was the first real effort to collaborate across regional loyalty and, unfortunately, its last. As we shall soon observe, the church would act as the great equalizer in terms of devotion. Accounted in the previous chapter, the fate of this community's social groups would soon fall under the umbrella of the church. Partially due to time as well as the unstoppable tide of assimilation, regional loyalty would become a selected-against trait which the community would outgrow and therefore its larger initiatives and projects would from thereout fall within the scope of the church. While the factors are already present that indicate this effort might have been doomed from the start, it remains a true tragedy that this original vision, along with its fresh zeal and enthusiasm, would never fully come to fruition.

The committee would continue gathering donations, and they would also seek the advice of Fr. Mario Hanna, the pastor at St. John's Church, over whether to incorporate this school under St. Louis Gonzaga church or to keep it independent. By the May 22, 1921 meeting, the six month term of the committee's officers was at an end, so another election was held. What is most noticeably different about this entry is the recorder's allusion to a disagreement between the secretary, Salim Meelan, and treasurer, Yussef Faris al-Tanoury. According to the meeting minutes, the dispute was settled, and while a

new secretary would be elected, the incumbent treasurer would remain. This is perhaps the most frustrating aspect of translating and interpreting these meeting minutes. Clearly this disagreement was enough of an issue to warrant being mentioned in the minutes, but for whatever reason, the specifics of this disagreement are left ambiguous. Instead, we have a narrative that attempts to be decisive by showing solidarity within the committee, and the recorder simply states: there was an issue between these two, but they worked it out. Dismissing the importance of this problem by omitting its details illustrates an attempt to hold together what unity this committee has. Could this truly have been a misunderstanding that was resolved easily at this meeting? Perhaps, but we not only do we have the resignation of one of the parties involved, we also have evidence later on that implicates a problem that has long been stewing—one which would rear its head again in the not too distant future. Indeed, this disagreement would resurface later and a little more detail would be shed on its causes.

This committee would meet on a semi-monthly basis until November 1921. In this time, a few major developments would surface. By June 11,1921, they were ready to formally present their plan to the public and had decided to propose a fifty-cents per month collection from each parishioner in order to pay for the school. This would, at least, pay the interest on the loan for the properties. In the meantime, they also decided to repair the houses on the property—perhaps to use as a rental income until ready to move forward with the school. At the August 10 meeting, some, but not all, donations were collected, and the group decided to indeed incorporate the school under St. Louis

Gonzaga church. Fr. Lotaif was to present the plans for the school to the parish from the pulpit.

During the initial stages of the committee's meetings, in an undated article from 1921, Yussef Elasmar reported in the "Utica News" column of the *Al-Shaab* newspaper that a rather substantial donation was collected and given to the Bishop of Syracuse to "help the poor."[141] The St. Louis Gonzaga parish raised and sent $3,753.50, and this sizable donation is notable for perhaps illustrating Fr. Lotaif's desires to stay in the good graces of the bishop as they move forward with trying to organize a school. To do so would require the bishop's approval, and it stands to reason that their donation (both their fundraising effort and the sheer amount of the donation as well) may help smooth over any rough edges that may have existed between this community and the bishop in Syracuse. We will recall that it was this same bishop that refused the initial petition from the Lebanese in Utica to form their own congregation. It may have been just good politics to stay in the good graces of the same man who has the administrative power to block a Lebanese school from being formed. In the sea of news clippings written during this era, this particular article may be insignificant beyond its plain meaning, but if this case study teaches us anything, it is that no endeavor in this early community was ever wholly uncomplicated.

The last entry in these meeting minutes representing the first attempt to create this school was on November 6, 1921, and it begins with a dispute. It is difficult to glean exactly what the nature of this dispute was, but it is clear that it was over money. The

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[141] Yussef Elasmer, "Utica News," *Al-Shaab*, 1921.

recorder took great pains, it appears, to once again sugar-coat what must have been a very heated discussion. Basically, the secretary, Salim Meelan who does not seem to have resigned, asked for information on the money that was collected from the community. It appears that the treasurer, al-Tanoury, was holding onto the money and was "waiting for the right moment" to put it back into the committee's hands. There is debate as to whether this was proper or not, but no resolution is outlined in the meeting minutes. While there is definitely some mild sarcasm written between the lines of this entry, there is also the attempt to show solidarity in the committee as evidenced by both calling deliberate attention to this dispute but also expressing gratitude to the treasurer for his apparent diligence.

Based on the evidence before us, a couple things are made clear while others remain rather opaque. Firstly, there was a dispute as to the whereabouts of donation monies that were collected, and it may quite possibly be that this is a continuation of the previous secretary's dispute with the treasurer. It also appears that the treasurer was holding on to this money and waiting for a proper time to make it available to the committee. Whatever that proper time or situation might be, it is clear that the committee members were not exactly pleased with this decision nor able to reach a consensus about when that time might be. What we do know is this: Yussef Faris al-Tanoury was both treasurer and a representative of the town of Baskinta: that characteristically cosmopolitan town compared to that of the northern regions—Akkar especially. Salim Meelan, the secretary whom al-Tanoury previously disputed with, is himself originally from the town of Bekarzala in the north. Bekarzala is located right in the heart of the

Akkar district. The negative association of backwards, rural life with those who come from "up north by the mountains" is one prevalent in the minds of those originally from the central areas of Lebanon, including many of these committee members. Here between these two gentlemen is perhaps a dispute rooted in the regional biases of the present committee members.

In fact, when we closely examine the geography of the hometowns represented on the committee, we find that this seemingly proper attempt at maintaining a diverse group is a falsehood. The reality is that the membership on this committee has really been boiled down to a power struggle between two sides. The towns of Baskinta, Boqaataa, Kfartay, and Bqaatouta, as well as the capital city of Beirut, all represent the central and more cosmopolitan areas of Lebanon. All four of the towns are less than an hour's drive to the capital and as such have had much in the way of cultural diffusion just by the merits of their location. As mentioned earlier, Baskinta possessed three seats on this committee with the remaining four locations each possessing one. Realistically, the areas of the central, more urban part of Lebanon are represented with seven seats out of fourteen on this committee—this proves to be not as diverse a group as we once imagined.

On the other end, the Akkar region and the town of Aachach are both part of the North district and are within an hour's drive between each other as well as the port city of Tripoli. While Tripoli boasts an important and prevalent port city, the way of life in these northern regions remained agrarian when that first wave of immigrants left for the United States. While this lifestyle rooted in agriculture might have changed as the years have

gone by, the sentiment that those from the North district solely represent a rural disposition has remained in the minds of those from the central and more multicultural parts of the country. Similarly, those of the north looked down upon those from the capital regions as pretentious with overinflated egos and an exaggerated sense of self-worth because of that cosmopolitan nature. Indeed, this situation is likened to the age old battle between urban and rural lifestyles—this is playing out, however, across an ocean and nearly 6,000 miles away from these very settings. Again, the five seats allotted the Akkar region were the most of any hometown based on proportionality to the population in Utica. The town of Aachach in the north added another seat for this region on the committee, which brings the total representing the North District to six out of fourteen—one seat less than those of the central or capital regions. Here is perhaps the bad seed that would sabotage this first committee's attempts to cooperate on founding a Lebanese school. If the representatives of the central regions were to vote together in a bloc, then the best that the representatives of the northern regions could hope for would be a tie if they could secure the vote of the volunteer representative. This volunteer, as has been mentioned, represented the fourteenth seat and would potentially be a voice free of regional bias in theory. But setting this particular member aside, the northern representatives would always be in the voting minority: seven to six, and it becomes evident through the dispute between secretary, Salim Meelan and treasurer, Yussef Faris al-Tanoury, that the northern representatives were not happy with this present arrangement. Perhaps they fundamentally disagreed with the procedural details this

committee would entail as evidenced by Meelan's disagreement with how al-Tanoury was handling his role as treasurer.

There is not enough evidence from these meeting minutes alone to prescribe blame on either side of this dispute, and these questions would mostly go unanswered. We can understand the dispute in terms of a committee dominated by one group in which the minority, through whatever power it has, seeks to disrupt or halt the committee's actions until a fairer situation were established. The minutes for this committee would end abruptly with that November 1921 meeting. Whatever the nature of that dispute, it seems that it was strong enough to temporarily dissolve the committee. The ledger would not be written in again for the next six years, and when it would be taken up again, the original plans of the committee would be slightly altered. Over that period of time, much would happen in terms of both the ultimate fate of the school as well the church's involvement in it.

The only mention of the school between 1921 and 1927 comes in the form of a 1924 "Utica News" column in *Al-Shaab* written by Yussef Elasmer. He writes that to finish the school, the committee needs $20,000, and he attempts to persuade the reader to donate if they have not done so already. "Some people have donated," he relates, "and some have promised. The priest has personally donated, but it is not enough."[142] Channeling his poetic zajal skills and using the pseudonyms "Adam and Eve" to represent the parties involved, Elasmar details the nature of the dispute in the committee over these donations, which caused it to disband in late 1921. Elasmar lauds the

[142] Yussef Elasmer, "Utica News," *Al-Shaab*, 1924.

substantial donations collected in 1904 when the desire to build a church of their own was first proposed. Observing that the community now has around two thousand people in it, he implores the reader to aid this endeavor as they once had done for the church. Emphatically, he calls on the community to do this for their future—to leave their old rivalries and bickering behind them and band together to create a lasting testament to their heritage for generations to come. While a moving article, it would seemingly fall on deaf ears for at least a few years. Interestingly, Elasmar personally seems to have really wanted this to succeed, and this will become evident as he takes a committee seat himself to aid in the second attempt to build a Lebanese school in Utica.

The Second Attempt

After a significant amount of time had passed, on February 20, 1927, an open meeting was called for those who wished to discuss the idea of founding a Lebanese school. Taking up the ledger himself to record the minutes of this meeting, Fr. Louis Lotaif would reorganize this committee by gathering a large group of *Maronites* interested in creating a *Lebanese Catholic school*. This is a noticeable shift from the goals of the original committee; for one, there is no mention whatsoever of regional affiliation and/or the "proper representation" of the various hometowns on this committee. Indeed, this is concerted effort to mend and avoid the mistakes of the past. This iteration clearly sets itself up as a Maronite Catholic initiative—not a secular or culturally-based one, and the goal no longer seems to be the opening of simply a language school that also happens to teach about Lebanese history and culture. Instead, this initiative would drive at founding an actual parochial school that would service elementary and/or high school students.

This first meeting was well attended and, additionally, all the previous committee members were invited. The elected officers of the original committee were all present, but the previous treasurer, Yussef Faris al-Tanoury, was noticeably absent. This unfortunately does not bode well for a fresh new start. Al-Tanoury was called on the telephone during the meeting, but he would not come. In fact, the committee purports to not understand why he had chosen to stay out of this meeting. Those parishioners in attendance wished to immediately elect new officers, but, since the previous treasurer refused to attend, the consensus felt it only proper to settle that matter first and gain his

resignation. The committee then decided to write al-Tanoury a letter first, which would both thank him for his service and relieve him of duty—also, this would mean that the treasurer would be forced to turn over the accounting information and committee donations collected. The letter was written out at the end of the minutes, and this first meeting concluded with the signature of Fr. Lotaif.

The minutes from the second meeting, a week later on February 27, 1927, would detail the new members of this new committee. As such, we are introduced to some new names and reacquainted with some familiar ones. One new member had already showed his vehement support for this project in his writings; Yussef Elasmar and an additional twelve new members would comprise the majority of the committee. Returning from the previous iteration are Daher Hobaica (representing Baskinta), Salim Meelan (representing Akkar and the first secretary whose quarrel with Yussef Faris al-Tanoury caused him to temporarily, or at least threaten to, resign from the initial committee), and, interestingly enough, al-Tanoury himself (the previous treasurer) who appears to have not been relieved of duty. At this meeting, the committee members reviewed an apparent change in Eparchial law and decided to elect new officers at their next meeting in a week. Sadly, we are already presented with similar problems experienced in the first iteration of this committee. What seemed initially a break with the traditional regional identification on the committee, focusing instead on Maronite Catholics banding together under the church to create a Maronite Catholic school, has reverted back to ensuring proper hometown representation on this new committee. It seems that as well-intentioned this attempt appears, this committee will be facing a similar set of problems to the first attempt.

While a seemingly innocuous statement about representation, our experience with this subject has unfortunately tainted any optimism for success in this second attempt.

The nature of this second attempt was distinct from the first committee in a few ways. Firstly, the committee had agreed to weekly rather than monthly meetings, conveying a sense of urgency and momentum to this group's goals. It is most likely the Lebanese community itself that pressured this committee's formation and action. It stands to reason that the community would naturally question as to the whereabouts of monies already donated and if they were indeed being used for the founding of a Lebanese school. Secondly, there was a clear shift in the final result of this project. No longer is this simply to be a language school but instead the more ambitious creation of a Catholic school is the final goal of this committee. However, some aspects about the first attempt have not changed: the representation of each individual's Lebanese hometown remains, and this would become a sore point of contention—again leading to much inner strife. In the month of March 1927, the group would, in short order, elect new officers with Fr. Lotaif as president (additionally, vice president: Mitre Zogby, treasurer: Nassir Flihan, secretary: Bsharra Hobaica, and recorder: Salim Meelan), report on the new fundraising pledges gathered (as well provide for a full accounting of the older donations), attempt to settle some initial committee representation issues (based, of course, on regional background), and update the committee's bylaws and include an English translation. This English translation of the constitution and bylaws were to be specifically done, according to the minutes, for the purposes of sending a copy to the Roman Catholic bishop in Syracuse to gain his approval for the project. Another reason

for this translation could be the growing number of Lebanese in the community whom identified as being English speakers or who were American born. This meeting, while only its third, actually proves to be its most promising as actions are taken that seemingly set aside former quarrels and set the committee's sights on the future. There is clearly a progressive atmosphere here, including the potential translation of key documents to English as well as following through with the decision to come under the umbrella of the church to properly represent the whole Lebanese and Maronite community. But the old rivalry between regional factions would not be so easily put to rest.

In the April 17, 1927, meeting, a subcommittee was formed to stage a play with the proceeds benefitting the school fund. The subcommittee volunteered to print the tickets and programs, rent the costumes, as well as provide for a singer and pianist for the intermission. Photographs were also to be arranged of the cast and the scenery. The play to be performed was referred to in the minutes only as "Thisbe," but this most likely is shorthand for the adaptation of "Pyramus and Thisbe" by Ovid. The staging of classic theatricals and morality tales has a long history in Lebanese culture, particularly in its diaspora. As mentioned in the introduction, a pageant to honor Utica was staged in 1914 as well as a production of "Romeo and Juliet."[143] Indeed, this early community staged everything from Lebanese histories, Shakespeare, and even minstrel shows.[144] "Hamlet" would be staged in 1916 and 1922, and the production of "Pyramus and Thisbe"

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[143] Theatrical Cast Photographs," *Theatricals*, St. Louis Gonzaga Church Archive, 1914.

[144] Ibid.

mentioned in the meeting minutes would be staged in 1928.[145] This seems to have been a tried and true fundraising technique in the community, and this knowledge certainly helps contextualize why this subcommittee was formed and a play chosen as a way gather donations.

The actors and director are listed in the minutes as well so it appears that this idea was clearly agreed upon before it even made its way to the main committee. While this idea to benefit the school project is promising if simply based on the community's experience with fundraising of this nature, there is a very interesting and foreboding statement made towards the end of this particular entry. The recorder outlines the group's sentiment about the future of this project, and that, regardless of their good intentions, they should still plan for a worst case scenario in case the school project does not succeed. They agreed that exactly two years from this meeting if, for whatever reason, the school project had failed to be either completed or have made any noticeable progress, the committee would return the donations they collected from the community (all except the proceeds from the play, "Pyramus and Thisbe," which shall instead go directly as a donation to the church). This being said, we are at the least made party to the committee's seriousness in accomplishing something, for the alternative will be to admit defeat, abandon the idea, and return its donations.

Over the next several months, few new issues are discussed in the meeting minutes. While we are aware of the year in which the play took place, the exact date is never recorded, but we can make an educated guess that it took place between the May 8

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[145] Ibid.

and June 5, 1928, committee meetings based on the content of the minutes. The various expenses and the clear profits from "Pyramus and Thisbe" are recorded, including a party thrown in the cast and crew's honor. The clear profit after expenses was recorded as $781.91. Some of the committee's other activities included finally translating their bylaws into English to present to the bishop of Syracuse. New elections were postponed from July to September 1927, due to not having enough people present to vote. The September election would yield the following results: Fr. Lotaif would remain as president, Toufik Abouhanna would be vice president, Assad Georges Shahoud would be treasurer, Habib el-Zoghby would be secretary, and Abdullah Daou would be the minutes recorder. These are relatively innocuous activities for the most part, but a new idea would be put forth in the September 25 meeting that would leave us with some new questions. Discussing the school project, a committee member proposed that instead of building a school near the church, they should consider hosting the school in the basement of the church itself as this would be much cheaper than the building and maintenance of a separate location. The committee agreed to have Fr. Lotaif present this idea to the congregation and find out if parishioners had a preference or an opinion on the matter. While this represents a new line of thinking in terms of both canvasing the community itself for approval and the actual location for this school, we still have some loose ends without answers: for example, what about the two adjacent properties on Mary Street with their houses? Was that property ever purchased by the church or was the plan never followed through upon? We do not find the answers to these questions in the meeting minutes, but one thing is for sure: fiscal viability is the main concern of this

committee by this point. It is possible that, whether or not we factor in the residences on Mary Street, the money with which to complete this project is much more limited than the initial attempt. Regardless of these questions, it remains evident that the line of thinking about the school has changed significantly, and the scope of this project has begun to shrink from its once ambitious plan. Building a Lebanese Maronite school, or even just founding one in the church basement, is becoming more and more of an unreachable goal.

The first indication that this project has begun to unravel would come on October 5, 1927. Fr. Lotaif would preside over this meeting, presenting a list of grievances from some of the parishioners. The recorder remarks that this list has no bearing on what the committee was elected to do, and, therefore, they dismissed it. This list of grievances seems to have come about as a direct result of Fr. Lotaif's promise to ascertain some consensus in the community concerning whether or not to build a school or host one within the church. Given this circumstance, it seems rather callous to dismiss these grievances out of hand, but again, the recorder of these minutes has gone to great lengths to simplify and edit out any perceived difficulty within the committee. In the same meeting, they discussed how the translation of the bylaws was never completed by those who volunteered to do so, and the meeting was abruptly adjourned and postponed to October 16. At this next meeting, Fr. Lotaif offered to inform the congregation from the pulpit just what the committee was elected to accomplish. It seems that some misinformation had been floating around, perhaps even as long ago as the first attempt in 1921. To quell this, the majority of the committee agreed to let Fr. Lotaif present its

goals and bylaws to the community. What is interesting is the caveat at the end of these minutes which reads, "If the president (Fr. Lotaif) cannot do this, then the committee will approve the bylaws on their own and present it the bishop for his approval."[146] This reveals somewhat of a rift forming between the priest/president and some of the committee members. Basically, we can understand this as something akin to a threat of action if the president does not follow through with the agreed upon plans. Whatever the case may have been, it is clear that tensions are mounting from both internal and external pressures. Frustrations are evident at the following meeting on October 23 insomuch as the committee members open the meeting by immediately asking Fr. Lotaif why he did not tell the parishioners about the committee and its bylaws as promised. To this, Fr. Lotaif responded that he had met with some people who were objecting to the legitimacy of the committee and sent along with him another list of grievances. The list was apparently signed by many parishioners who felt that the committee was misrepresenting the community and, in fact, straying from the goals that it had been elected to accomplish from the beginning. While this meeting ended without any further discussion of this matter, we can easily observe that the rift between community and committee is definitely there. As we shall soon see, the reason behind this rift would be an all too familiar one.

Subsequent meetings would see some progress made as to how the school should be set up, but more problems were being heaped onto the committee as time went by.

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[146] "Meeting Minutes," Nineteenth Meeting, *Committee to Found a Lebanese School,* October 16, 1927.

While the majority of the committee agreed that, to save money, the school should be in the same building as the church, Fr. Lotaif believed that to properly gather consensus, they should go to each house and ask each adult within the Lebanese/Maronite community their opinion on the matter. This method, according to him, should also be used to gain approval of the bylaws, and, once this was accomplished, then the project idea would be ready to present to the bishop for his final approval. While this method certainly seems arduous, especially since it boils down to literally trying to please everyone, there is still a glimmer of hope that this group can continue its momentum and accomplish its long sought after goal. This would not be the case. The death of Daher Hobaica, a representative of Baskinta and a true force within the community as well as one of the school committee's first members, would delay their plans to reach the community. Additionally, the former treasurer, Nassir Flihan, would prove to be an equally exhausting damper on the project making any sort of progress.

In the November 6, 1927, meeting, the current treasurer, Assad Georges Shahoud, complained that the checkbook and whatever monies belonging to the committee had yet to be turned over from the previous treasurer, Nassir Flihan. The agreed upon amount was $924.81 in Flihan's possession, and the group agreed to send him a notice immediately. This task would prove harder than one would imagine: Flihan refused to return the money because, according to him, he did not understand the purpose of the committee's notice. Fr. Lotaif said he would hand-deliver an official notice to return the money immediately by cash or check, and that would clarify any problems Mr. Flihan had. However, Flihan would again refuse to return the money with the following letter

read at the November 16 meeting: "I received the first request about the money and the second request from Father Lotaif. I cannot surrender the money or the checkbook because neither request were signed and stamped by the committee members."[147] Obviously the committee was rankled by a response like this, but Abdullah Daou, the minutes recorder, volunteered to meet and speak with Flihan immediately in order to convince him to return the money. Claiming all was a misunderstanding, Flihan would surrender the cash and checkbook after seeing a notice signed by all committee members. What does this act of keeping the money signify however? Just by reading Flihan's response, there is the sense that he wants the entire committee's consensus to surrender the money, but it also signifies his potential mistrust of some within the group. This is a sentiment that may indicate what many in the community are airing grievances over; it is quite possible that, again, one particular region was being overrepresented on the committee, and it would frustrate those parties underrepresented on the committee.

By the December 4, 1927, meeting, this division within the community would rear its head in the midst of the committee's discussions. Fr. Lotaif explained that people were fed up, and, to combat this, the committee should allow one or two more representatives to join in order to satisfy those who felt underrepresented. The majority of the committee objected to this idea as they believe they had been officially elected onto it and simply adding seats would not make things more or less fair. After much arguing, they decided to open a poll to gain a consensus from the entire community.

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[147] "Meeting Minutes," Twenty Fifth Meeting, *Committee to Found a Lebanese School*, November 16, 1927.

Three days later on December 7, they met and it appeared that the majority of parishioners voted to have the school be a part of the church building. The bulk of the minutes of this meeting are unlike any we have read so far. In these minutes, the recorder appears to have tried to capture the dialogue of the meeting as it happened. The results are quite interesting, and they give us poignant insight into just how heated this debate had become. Fr. Lotaif, as president, first addressed the recent community-wide poll saying while it is a good consensus, they need to convince all parishioners to agree to it before they could move on. In what seems like a bizarre production for the stage, here is a line-by-line translation of the climax of this meeting.

Abdullah Daou asked, "Your excellency, in what way could we actually accomplish this wish?"

To which Fr. Lotaif responded, "I don't know. How about we gather everyone again to ask?"

Salim Meelan responded, "What do we care about each individual parishioner? What about your thoughts? Is this committee not elected by the majority?"

"No," said Fr. Lotaif, "but from some. And I do not think it is lawfully representing the community."[148] This open condemnation of the committee and its members by its president may come as a shock, but there have been small clues along the way indicating its legitimacy was in question within the greater Lebanese community. The repeated lists of grievances, the priest's attitude about the committee's actions,

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[148] "Meeting Minutes," Twenty Ninth Meeting, *Committee to Found a Lebanese School*, December 7, 1927.

numerous problems with the funding and handling of money, uncertainty as to how much of the committee's actions were actually to be made public—all these factors taken together speak to growing frustrations on all sides—and a rift of mistrust deeply formed between committee and community. Indeed, this bleak meeting in December would mark the beginning of the end for this iteration of the committee.

Over the remaining meetings in December 1927 through February 1928, the cohesiveness of the committee would quickly evaporate as disagreements mounted and the rift between committee and community deepened. The president, Fr. Lotaif, would cease to sign off on the meeting minutes and eventually stop attending altogether. This is not a surprising turn considering his role as pastor to the whole community, and, regardless of whether he agrees or disagrees with the committee, his greater responsibility is to all the people he serves. In their last full meeting, a returning Fr. Lotaif proposed a significantly different plan for what to do with their fundraising. He puts forward the idea to first address the church's own debt with their proceeds, and, once the church is financially in the clear, then consider opening some manner of school. When asked by those attending about the fate of the committee, Fr. Lotaif explained vigorously that its work was indeed important, and he did not want to see it dissolved. Regardless of this last salvo, one by one, the committee members began stating that, when their appointed terms were up at the end of February, they would be resigning. While there were a few holdouts staunchly willing to keep it together, this would be the last entry in what had been a long, but ultimately fruitless struggle. The final nail in the coffin for this project comes, as promised from the beginning, in the very last entry of

this ledger. It is simply titled: "The names of those who donated to build a school, asking for their money back." From the church treasury, a total of thirteen dollars was returned to six parties in June and November of 1929. These were people who had been promised, as Fr. Lotaif and the committee assured at the beginning of this second attempt, that, if no progress was made in the school project, they would be given their money back. As the last entry, it is a potent reminder that not every endeavor in this community would come to fruition—no matter how seemingly well-organized they may have been.

When we seek to understand the nature of hometown pride in Lebanese culture, we must recognize that those seemingly minute distinctions that were so meticulously paid attention to in the formation of this committee were the very ones that would lead to its ultimate impotence and dissolution. Let us recall the member list from the first meeting where the hometowns of the Lebanese immigrants in Utica were represented proportionally on the committee. There often existed a deep rift between the peoples of these different villages in Lebanon. Much like the rivalries of neighboring towns, villages, or cities, this rift perpetuated stereotypes that were held concerning the people from these various locations. We will not find a better example of this rift and the stereotyping that accompanies it than in the relationship between those from the towns of Akkar and Baskinta. The Akkar natives claimed that those from Baskinta desired to only be in charge and leave the "grunt work" for them, and the Baskinta natives believed those from Akkar to be incapable of leadership or the handling of important decisions and, therefore, suited for that "grunt work." These tensions, made abundantly evident in my interviews (particularly with Helen Abdoo and Dr. Eugene P. Nassar), have their root in

years of competition and posturing in the old country. Unfortunately, this kind of divisiveness would make its way to their new homes in the U.S. and handcuff the implementation of this school-building project.

There is evidence to believe that the Baskinta immigrants once again became over-represented on this second committee, fueling the already present distrust and a vocal outcry from the rest of the community (particularly those from Akkar). Once again, the rift between North and Central Lebanese hometowns has prevented this dream from being fulfilled. Even though the committee was dissolved, the hope for a Lebanese school was carried on. Soon after the committee's dissolution, an independent language school was opened by the United Community of Baskinta in Utica. The U.C. Baskinta, obviously one of those organizations exclusive to Baskinta natives in Utica, would pick up the pieces of the former committee and create its own free night school—a much smaller scale operation than was originally planned by the committee. According to a November 4, 1928, article in *Al-Alam*, this school would be opened to teach the Lebanese youth of the community the Arabic language as well as Lebanese culture.[149] While scaled back, this resembles most closely the original idea for opening a school—an idea that was brought forward by the same Baskinta natives. Here, it appears, they had the chance to move ahead with their original idea, but this time they would do so without making it a larger community effort. As this was done within the same year of the committee's dissolution, we can infer that still-interested parties from that dissolved second committee worked to open this school. In an *Al-Shaab* article from June 12, 1929, the results from

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[149] Yussef Elasmar, "Utica News," *Al-Alam*, November 4, 1929.

the half-year election of officers for the Baskinta Community are detailed.[150] Bsharra Hobaica was elected president, Toufik Abounader for vice president, Nassir Flihan for treasurer, Yussef Elasmar for secretary, and Ibrahim Mandour for secretary's aide. These are familiar names and, in most cases, each of these officers have already held executive positions on the committee in the past. These results reflect that original fear of a Baskinta-controlled committee and school those earlier critics harbored ever since the first attempt.

It seems likely that the majority of the second school committee was comprised of Baskinta natives, and, as such, natives from different hometowns took issue with this. The Baskinta Committee's election results illustrates this as three of its five new officers were integral members of the second school committee (Bsharra Hobaica, Nassir Flihan, and Yussef Elasmar). While we are not in a position to assign blame to any side in terms of who was or was not overrepresented on the school project, the Baskinta Committee made it their prerogative to follow through with the original plans. This action further illustrates the disconnect within the Lebanese community over hometown prejudice. Here is evidenced in the Baskinta natives perhaps a rash but defiant action to finish the work that was started—with or without the support of the entire community. The *Al-Shaab* article continues, stating that several people have volunteered to teach Arabic reading and writing courses already (those included in the article: Mrs. Hawa Zogby. Ms. Mary and Rusha Mandoor, Habib Hobaica, Girios Harb, Nametallah Hobaica, Yussef

[150] Yussef Elasmar, "Utica News," *Al-Shaab*, June 12, 1929.

Elasmar, Yussef Hobaica, and Jameel Elasmar).[151] And later, in a February 2, 1930, article in *Al-Shaab*, the Baskinta Committee was apparently organizing a lottery to benefit the new night school.[152] This night school, however, would not last very long after this latest article, but it is worth mentioning that the idea, though truncated and watered down from its original scope, was followed through upon.

Complicating matters further, it appears that perhaps undue community pressure was either taken on or placed upon the pastor, Fr. Louis Lotaif. Desiring to come to universally accepted decisions that would satisfy all parties and hometowns, Fr. Lotaif was ultimately unable to please everyone. His efforts to get the consensus of everyone within the community, which did include personally going door-to-door to discuss these matters, put an enormous strain on him and his relationship with both the committee and the community. Finally, he felt that he could no longer support the committee's actions as it appears he was being pulled in too many directions over the issue of the school. When confronted about this at the January 25, 1928, meeting and asked his personal opinion of the matter, Fr. Lotaif simply stated that he could no longer go against the majority of the community's wishes. Unfortunately, Fr. Lotaif would die unexpectedly in May 1929, and his vision of a school that would serve the sons and daughters of all Lebanese immigrants in Utica was sadly never accomplished.

While there are still some unanswered questions and missing pieces of evidence to fully detail the travails of this project, it is sufficient to say that the regional rivalries

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[151] Yussef Elasmar, "Utica News," *Al-Shaab*, December 3, 1929.

[152] Yussef Elasmar, "Utica News," *Al-Shaab*, February 26, 1930.

originally engendered in their native country were brought over with these immigrants to their detriment. Versions of this original idea would be returned to a few times in the following decades. In my interviews with Mr. George Sfeir and Mrs. Helen Abdoo, both had recalled an Arabic language school sponsored through UC Baskinta. In fact, Mrs. Abdoo recalls being made, along with her siblings, to attend by their parents in order to help preserve not only their Arabic but their connection to Lebanese culture.[153] But the ambitious project to create a lasting monument for future generations through a Lebanese or Maronite school was marred by the community's own regionalism. Taking these events as an example, it is no wonder that this kind of zeal for hometown pride had such a divisive effect on the early community particularly at a time when its cohesiveness and unity are being lauded in other ways. This devotion to one's hometown would not be as strongly encapsulated as other cultural traits to this community's benefit. The vestiges of its former fervor could be found in a couple of the clubs or societies that survived to the present, but their original mission and exclusivity would have greatly waned. Years would pass and each successive generation would become more and more distanced from the same mores of their parents and grandparents. With this came the natural deemphasis of hometown devotion over time, and this truly was a boon to the cohesiveness of immigrant group. While the preservation of Lebanese culture has been the prerogative, this community would evolve beyond the hometown devotion that hindered its early days in Utica.

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[153] Helen Abdoo, Interview by Paul Charbel, Audio recording, Utica, NY, August 30, 2014.

All internal and external bickering aside, the attempt to found this school was indeed a noble effort. One cannot deny how significant this project was to those involved, and how it was, at heart, meant to be a gift to their future generations. These attempts should stand as an inspiring example for the current community. Their forebears, whom they honor and remember, had high hopes for their futures, but, in the end, they were flawed human beings subject to their own traditional ways of thinking. Not only did the value they put upon their children's education in Lebanese culture travel with these immigrants to the U.S., but, unfortunately, so did the rifts and prejudices they held for each other. We can only wonder at what the state of this community might presently be if an effective and organized Lebanese school had existed since the late 1920s. Regardless, no other effort of this nature has been pursued in the community since. Perhaps simply acknowledging the existence of this ambitious project will once again propel an interest in the learning of Arabic, and, through this vehicle, foster the importance of preserving the Lebanese cultural heritage already present in the Utica community.

From an unassuming ledger, one that was designed for simple bookkeeping, we are made privy to the underlying hopes and fears of a generation of Lebanese immigrants in Utica. This collection of meeting minutes, which has been the basis of this case study, serves as an example of why certain characteristics of Lebanese culture easily cemented themselves in American society and why others had to die if this community was to continue. The centrality of the church, the importance of cultural gatherings and performances—these characteristics would find firm footing in Utica. But the divisive

nature of bitter hometown rivalry would necessarily have to perish. Conversely, if I were to ask what the state of this community would be if this particular rivalry was still as heated as it was for those first waves of immigration, I believe we would be observing a very different phenomenon. Instead of discussing the ways in which this community encapsulated its cultural practices to stand the test of time, we would most likely be discussing why this community foundered and its population scattered. Perhaps this is simply conjecture, but there is no telling how much damage could have been continually served upon this community's cohesiveness if this mentality had survived. Today, we are an era where preservation of memory and experience is much easier to accomplish. Let us be thankful that this particular characteristic of the early Lebanese community died out when it did.

Chapter 4:
Frozen Signifiers: Dialects and Celebrations

The ways in which an ethnoreligious community expresses itself culturally are of the utmost importance to this study. We have identified the Eastern Christians of Lebanon as ethnoreligious, and we have seen how the combination of their religious and secular practices perpetuate a specific version of Lebanese identity in the diaspora—particularly in Utica, New York. We have also determined that in order for those core communal practices to survive, certain characteristics, like regional or hometown devotion for example, were necessarily abandoned in order for this community to remain cohesive. Many of these elements have evolved, been watered down, or have simply been appropriated under different classifications, but we must now determine what particular elements have resisted change over time in the Utica community. These are the signifiers, frozen in time, that this community has encapsulated which distinguishes them from many of the larger enclaves or even from Lebanon itself. In fact, what we must identify are the cultural characteristics that have been preserved in spite of growing change across Lebanon and its diaspora, and why they have remained frozen, so to speak. To accomplish this, we shall analyze three crucial characteristics of the community that make up the largest part of Lebanese identity in the context of Utica, New York.

Firstly, we shall explore the Arabic language itself and specifically the Levantine dialect (that which is spoken mainly across Lebanon and Syria). We shall understand how the formal Arabic language has historically both embraced and resisted change,

how it has been adapted in the diaspora particularly with the onset of advancing technologies, and finally how successive waves of immigrants experienced this dialect as it was/is spoken in the Utica community. Secondly, we shall focus in on the Lebanese foodways that are present in the Utica community and the extent to which they were necessarily altered to then be encapsulated. Like many Middle Eastern cultures, the preparation, serving, and consuming of meals is considered a vital characteristic in Lebanese identity formation, and we shall observe how these hallowed traditions linked, to family life and kinship, express themselves in the Utica community. Lastly, and in many aspects a culmination of the previous two elements, we shall analyze how this community celebrates in traditionally Lebanese ways. By focusing in on a particular kind of celebration in the community, one which encompasses elements of both broader Middle Eastern practices with that of specifically Lebanese traditions, we can descry how and why this community stages celebrations which themselves act as cultural passageways back to a mythologized or legendary Lebanon. This celebration serves as a representation of a particular kind of Lebanese culture, and this representation has been perpetuated in spite of cultural change in Lebanon itself.

Levantine Arabic: Linguistic Fluidity and Recalcitrance in the Diaspora

The average person of Lebanese descent in the Utica area has what may be termed a "kitchen knowledge" of the Levantine dialect of Arabic. This includes a rudimentary knowledge of popular or frequently used Arabic terms such as foods and cultural particulars, i.e. hummus, kibbie, hafli (a celebration), or dabke (a traditional dance). In rarer cases, basic sentence structure and a degree of conversational Arabic is known, and those that are fluent in the language are rarer still. But before we can fully delve into what linguistic elements have survived in the Utica community and why, we must first venture to understand the nature of Arabic and its dialects as well as place the linguistic history of this community in some context using the evidence available.

Generally speaking, there is a divide between what we would term the classical and the vernacular forms of Arabic; these vernaculars or dialects are most often regional in nature, i.e. Egyptian, Syrian, Kuwaiti, etc. According to Niloofar Haeri, the classical is "the language of writing, education, and administration, while the latter (vernacular) are the media of oral exchanges, non-print media, poetry, and plays. In certain respects, the differences between classical Arabic and any of the national vernaculars parallel those between standard, written varieties and their counterparts."[154] But Haeri is quick to note that the distance between classical Arabic and its respective vernacular is much further linguistically in its syntactic and morphological characteristics.[155] If that is not

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[154] Niloofar Haeri, "Form and Ideology: Arabic Sociolinguistics and Beyond," *Annual Review of Anthropology* 29 (2004): 63, accessed February 15, 2016, http://www.jstor.org/stable/223415.

[155] Ibid.

enough of a division, there also exists an element of controversy over the use of a vernacular in some more traditionalist circles. Some take the use of regional dialects to symbolize a progressive blending of tradition and geographic idiosyncrasy, allowing for the language to necessarily evolve with an ever-changing world. On the other hand, traditionalists will view dialects as perversions of the classical culture, and to mix in, so-called, inferior dialects would water down the language's historic and cultural importance. As polarizing as that seems, this divide runs deeper still. Haeri remarks that the issue of language, being a long-standing debate, has become inextricably linked to the social and intellectual movements around the Arab world. He states, "As anxieties about modernization, decolonization, independence, and political pluralism mounted in the course of this century, classical Arabic came to stand, often simultaneously, as a language incapable of responding to the modern world" and "as the supreme vehicle for an indigenous and authentic modernity."[156] Vernaculars would be considered "impediments to 'progress' that needed to be overcome 'exactly like poverty and disease" or even reflections of an unwelcome "outside influence."[157] But these dialects would also be considered a representation of national and tribal identity, and immigrant speakers would associate their hometown or regional dialect with the preservation of their authentic self—one which they felt compelled to impart on future generations regardless of its relationship or effect on classical Arabic. Moving forward, we shall see that within these characterizations are elements that echo the impetus behind the use of

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[156] Ibid.

[157] Ibid.

vernacular or dialects in immigrant populations as well as the creation of a phonetic, Latinized Arabic for cellular and, eventually, internet exchanges. Issues of both self identification and adherence to tradition are recurrent themes that mold the vernaculars and their use. Both classical and the various vernaculars have legitimacy in terms of their particular uses, and understanding this split in language identification provides us with a basis for exploring yet another aspect of Lebanese immigrant culture. By recognizing the ongoing debates concerning the language, we can better realize the impact a dialect like Levantine Arabic has on the linguistic history of the Lebanese community of Utica and how it embodies both of sides of this debate—at once, it is both a derivative of classical Arabic, but one that is itself, like the classical, firmly rooted in a particular context.

The Arabic Chat Alphabet and Dialect Preservation

One important aspect of this debate between dialect and classical is the use of electronics (cellular devices, computers, etc.) to communicate in Arabic. Currently, the typed exchanges between internet capable devices, in any language, have developed their own set of rules, abbreviations, and annotations. Indeed, they reflect principles of a unique language unto themselves, but they are still bound to some of the basic rules and forms of their original language. For our purposes in understanding the use of the Levantine dialect in a diaspora community like Utica, we will first explore the phenomenon of using the Latin alphabet, found on the most common QWERTY keyboards, to converse phonetically in an Arabic dialect. This writing system, commonly referred to as the Arabic Chat Alphabet (ACA), was developed to allow Arabic words to be transmitted through a Latinate medium. Just like a vernacular, this type of writing is known for its constant change, and it presents an interesting angle on the development of both computer mediated communication as well as dialect preservation in diaspora communities. Arabic itself possesses no completely clear visual or phonetic analogue to the Latin keyboard, yet with some creativity and a desire stemming from the urge to communicate familiarly, Arabic speakers melded two forms to create an accessible hybrid, unique to exchanges over the internet.

In the early years of the Utica community, we observed in Elasmer's articles the difficulty and time-consuming nature of communication between the U.S. and Lebanon. Often, letters would not find their destinations, and connections between family, friends, and the affairs of Lebanon would be severed by sheer distance alone. However, in

recent decades via the internet, correspondence which once took many weeks in ideal circumstances could be accomplished with near instantaneous results. The effects of telecommunications breakthroughs on immigrant communities in this way is nothing short of monumental, and globalization through these kinds of technological advances creates diaspora communities that never have to be fully sundered from their former homes. Michael Humphrey relates:

> Globalization is an important dimension of contemporary diaspora identity. The very possibility of diaspora identification has been enhanced by the technologies associated with space-time compression. For contemporary migrants this allows the possibility of close participation in social relations and nationalist politics at home. Middle East diasporas have involved themselves in nationalist politics since the Ottoman period but today diaspora politics takes place in a world where distance and time no longer attenuate communication and social identification.[158]

Not only do Lebanese in the diaspora have the ability to stay active in the political life of their country, this also signifies the possibility for consistent communication with one's family and hometown as well as remaining connected to the cultural life they left behind. But as mentioned earlier, the general knowledge of Arabic in the Utica community remains largely a spoken dialect—the reading and writing of Arabic are much rarer. But, in terms of electronic communications, the ACA and the internet have made it possible to communicate with Arabic speakers in Lebanon even if one has no experience whatsoever with the conventions of classical Arabic.

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[158] Michael Humphrey, "Lebanese Identities: Between Cities, Nations and Trans-nations," *Arab Studies Quarterly* 26 (1). Pluto Journals: 31–50. http://www.jstor.org/stable/41858471.

It can certainly be a challenge to trace any vernacular back to its particular area of origin and dissect the etymological shifts it has made over time, and, by this same logic, it is just as difficult to pinpoint exactly when and where the Arabic chat alphabet was first developed and used. Through the proliferation of personal computers, cell phones, and internet capable devices over the last twenty years, we can safely conclude that the language must have arisen during the gradual expansion of the internet itself. But there is no way, unless we had access to every public and private electronic communique in the Arab world, to accurately assign ownership of this method of communication. Long before Arabic encoding or an actual Arabic keyboard, the use of a computer abroad signified at least an understanding of the Latin alphabet through the most common QWERTY keyboard. As English was taught alongside French in the public schools of many Arab countries, particularly Lebanon, the use of a computer then denoted a working knowledge of the language or, at the least, its phonetic characteristics. When internet use increased in the Arab world, so too did the use of the Latin keyboard because of its prevalent nature which had already been established in these countries. Eventually, this knowledge would be used to communicate in Arabic, but in a much different way. To better picture this type of writing, the following serves as a brief description of some key attributes the ACA possesses. While most words are conveyed in a phonetic manner, there are several sounds in Arabic that lack clear English analogues. As a result, when examining a line written in this form, "don't be surprised to see numerals such as 3, 5, 6, 7, 8, or 9 being used online—these numbers represent distinct sounds in the Arabic language. For instance تحكي عربي؟, or 'do you speak

Arabic?' becomes 'ta7ki 3arabi?'"[159] The use of numbers to symbolize certain sounds, however, are not arbitrarily chosen. For example, the letter "ح" (pronounced "Haa") is similar in shape to that of the number "7."[160] In this way, numbers are appropriated to compensate for the lack of certain analogous sounds in the Latin alphabet. This may not make the language any more accessible to the non-Arabic writer/speaker. But, with a little practice, those who possess only a spoken comprehension of the language, like many in the Utica community, may now communicate Arabic in a textual medium where they could not before. Among other things, this remains an important characteristic of the ACA: the ability to allow an Arab speaker, not necessarily a writer, access to a written form of Arabic.

To communicate in Arabic through a Latin alphabet keyboard could represent an underlying wish to communicate in a familiar manner. An Arabic speaker living abroad may not have the regular opportunity to speak or write in Arabic for any viable reason other than a personal desire to remain in touch with this aspect of his/her identity. We can best imagine this as the familiar sentiment of writing to one's family or friends while away from home whether it be for work, school, etc. Discussing the ideological representations of language, Kathryn A. Woolard and Bambi Schieffelin detail that, "Ideologies of language are significant for social as well as linguistic analysis because they are not only about language. Rather, such ideologies envision and enact links of language to group and personal identity, to aesthetics, to morality, and to

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[159] "Do You Speak Arabic Chat? ta7ki 3arabi?" *Arabic Genie*, accessed December 14, 2015, http://www.arabicgenie.com/2009/09/do-you-speak-arabic-chat-ta7ki-3arabi.

[160] Ibid.

epistemology."[161] Perhaps expressed in an ideology of tradition, these links between language and identity are reflected in the desire to still communicate in Arabic, even if one lacks the ability to use its contemporary or classical characters. In a study on these online tendencies, those who were asked where they learned this method of communication responded with almost an air of uncertainty, but nonetheless linked its use to Arab speakers abroad:

> Seventy percent of those who mentioned when they learned to use (the Arabic chat alphabet) said that they had encountered this variety before entering the university. All of those who mentioned how they learned AA said that they had learned it from other people with whom they interacted online—these included relatives (especially relatives studying abroad), and online acquaintances. None of them mentioned learning it from sources such as websites or print materials.[162]

This reflects a unique dialect, in and of itself, born out of technological compromise because it appears that these users have no other experience with it outside of the internet. As these users are able to stay connected cross-culturally, we can descry the factors that allowed for this type of writing to take hold. In this light, we can assume that if Arab speakers abroad did not necessarily create this type of communication, then they certainly encouraged its proliferation.

Currently, there have been developments in both the use of an Arabic keyboard and code scripts that allow for Arabic characters to be used in nearly all operating systems and programs. The question we must now ask is why this Latinized Arabic is

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[161] Kathryn A. Woolard and Bambi Schieffelin, "Language Ideology," *Annual Review of Anthropology* 23 (1994): 55-56, http://www.jstor.org/stable/2156006.

[162] David Palfreyman and Muhamed al-Khalil, "'A Funky Language for Teenzz to Use': Representing Gulf Arabic in Instant Messaging," *Journal of Computer Mediated Communication* 9, No. 1 (2003), http://jcmc.indiana.edu/vol9/issue1/palfreyman.html.

still being used over and instead of these new accommodations. As has already been mentioned, one obvious reason lies in the widespread use of the traditional QWERTY keyboard not just in North America or Europe, but all over the world. Familiarity plays a key role as learning a new keyboard may be cumbersome and may actually cause more problems than it could possibly solve. Returning to the study of the chat alphabet's users, when asked why they choose to write with the Latin alphabet instead of the available Arabic keyboards and scripts, the majority of respondents replied that "they use [ACA] because they find it easier to type in English than in Arabic...it was implied that this was a matter of greater familiarity with the English keyboard layout, 'because we type most of our projects, homework, etc. in English.'"[163] While the options to use an Arabic keyboard or script are widely available now, these users are more accustomed to the mix of Latin characters and numbers to convey an Arabic message. By developing stronger skills in this manner, users also remarked that the Latin keyboard allowed the use of vernacular sounds not present on the Arabic keyboard or in the scripts.[164] Not only does it create the space for Arabic exchanges through a Latin medium, but it also allows for wordplay and the use of slang or non-standard terms and expressions. By preserving idiosyncratic vernacular sounds and methods, this language retains its relevancy over the rigidity of a fixed keyboard or code script.

Besides the sounds, the sheer speed that comes from a familiarity with the Latin keyboard is an important factor to note. The respondents to Palfreyman and al-Khalil's

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[163] Ibid.

[164] Ibid.

study characterized their knowledge of the QWERTY layout of their keyboards as a means to speedier transmissions. They rely more on the ability to convey the idea quicker than to convert their speech through the Arabic keyboard or script coding. There is a key attribute of computer mediated communication embedded in this line of thought; speed, in online conversation, tends to be prized above all rules or forms of grammar, spelling, etc. Dr. Neil Randall, reporting on online interaction, stated that:

> Instead of drawing on their ability to write – to compose fully formed, grammatically correct, rhetorically effective sentences and paragraphs complete with transitions, flow, and carefully considered style and tone – writers began drawing on the experience of speaking. They started using the written word to capture the patterns and techniques of speech, in order to make the electronic discussion seem more like a telephone conversation than an exchange of written letters or memos.[165]

This value placed on speed should not be taken lightly. While the development of this method of communication is not generally policed by the same rules as the language it is based off, it reflects the widening technological proficiency in the realm of Arab linguistics. Additionally, it provides a fast and easily accessible way to stay in touch with friends, family, etc.

Concerning the age of its users, teenagers and young adults seem to be the driving force behind the ACA's continued use. Besides speed and ease of use as compared to the Arabic-specific methods, there is another interesting reason why this method pervades. We have discussed the presence and effects of codes pertaining to computer language, but one aspect of coding that is actively sought out by using this style of

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[165] Neil Randall, "Lingo Online: A Report on the Language of the Keyboard Generation," University of Waterloo (2002): 16, http://arts.uwaterloo.ca/~nrandall/LingoOnline-finalreport.pdf.

writing is the hiding of a message in plain sight. According to Palfreyman and al-Khalil, privacy, after ease of use, was highlighted in their interviews as one of the dominating factors in the initial and continued use of this communication. "Privacy (particularly from parents) and the intrinsic interest of writing in an unusual script were the other motivations cited."[166] Indeed, one of the participants noted, in a colloquial manner, that using this method was like using, "kind of a code, we feel that only ppl of our age could understand such symbols and such way of typing [...] i guess its kind of a funky language for teenzz to use."[167] By this statement, we can understand both a desire for privacy, from parents, siblings, etc. and the sort of cultural capital that comes with being part of an exclusive, tech-savvy group. Much like the vernaculars that stemmed from classical Arabic, this alphabet continues to be used for its development of a differentiated cultural identity and as a space for linguistic play.

Visually, the Arabic language plays a key part in its effective transmission and its cultural value. The calligraphy involved in its written form plays a distinct role both artistically and religiously. In the Muslim community, the Qur'an is considered God's word transmitted in script, and calligraphy is venerated as the most important art form in all of Islam. While the representation of figures is considered idolatrous, the use of calligraphy in Islamic culture reflects an artistic passion to play with the form of words. Not exclusive to Islam, the written script is culturally significant to the majority of the Arab world. It remains so not simply because of its hallowed nature in Islam, but also

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[166] Palfreyman and al-Khalil

[167] Ibid.

because it is one of the Arab world's oldest forms of artistic expression. This expression is based on the manipulation of word form and style. In an uncanny way, the nature of calligraphy in Arabic script is reflected in the widespread use of the Arabic chat alphabet. What better way to describe the fluidity allowed in expressing oneself than by communicating one's language by using a phonetic paintbrush? While still prized for its speed and ease of use, the Arabic chat alphabet creates the opportunity for stylistic choice and play. Palfreyman and Khalil shared in their findings that, "typographical conventions are used to represent stylized verbal or attitudinal effects: vowels are reduplicated for emphasis or expressiveness (e.g., when greeting someone by name), as are punctuation marks such as <!> and <?>."[168] It may not have an absolutely identical analogue in calligraphy, but it is worth mentioning the similarity both mediums possess in the way of word play. Both systems encourage the use of words to express meaning other than their sole, intended use.

Now that we have discussed the positive attributes to this form of computer mediated communication, we can delve into an analysis of possible negative cultural effects on the Arabic language itself. But before we discuss this, let us first explore the implications behind technology's push for an overarching uniformity. To do this effectively, we can look to postcolonial studies for a framework that may enlighten this issue. In his seminal work, *Book History Through Postcolonial Eyes*, Robert Fraser addresses numerous issues of print technology as they intersect with the cultural value a language inherently possesses. As a basis for his argument, he likens the exporting of

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[168] Ibid.

movable type to the "exporting of the European Enlightenment, the commodification of a language, the introduction...of a transforming technology of textual reproduction, even arguably the onset of 'Modernity' itself."[169] By continuing with English as the standard computing language by which many computer tools are to be manufactured, the spread of a computing language can become almost synonymous with the spread of a colonial power's language. To not stretch the boundaries of postcolonial investigation in this study too far or too quickly, we may find an immediate comparison between the idea of modernity or technology and its attempt to encapsulate a foreign language. In Fraser's study, the compacting of a language to fit the standards of movable type was difficult, to say the least. His characterizations of the attempts to accomplish this in Arabic reflect a Herculean effort that produced crude and awkward appearing texts.[170] To temper or alter any language to fit print technology's limitations requires the necessary removal of the less common characters and symbols. This type of encapsulation is reflected in the development of the Arabic keyboard and its code scripts. Spreading the use of the keyboard or the code scripts reveals a motive to communicate in a solid, unified Arabic language. However, Arabic is a language renowned for the beauty and subtlety expressed in its written form; the keyboard and code script can only provide limited, truncated versions of written sentiments. Doing this limits the freedom that the Arabic chat alphabet engenders and restricts the user's capability to play with the language in order to express themselves. To illustrate this point fully, we can mark another point of

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[169] Robert Fraser, *Book History Through Postcolonial Eyes: Rewriting the Script*. New York: Routledge (2008) 6.

[170] Ibid, 112.

convergence between this scenario and Fraser's argument. Like the various dialects of Arabic, Fraser details the enormous number of possible dialects on the African continent. He writes, "Any honest account of communication in Africa must begin with a frank recognition of the extreme linguistic and expressive balkanization of the continent."[171] By this recognition, we can claim that to express Arabic in a unified keyboard or code sequence could be likened to the compacting and, essentially, devaluing of its existing vernaculars.

While the notion of a truncated language seems undesirable to many within the Arab world, the development of more vernaculars represents a further fragmentation. To illustrate this, Edward P. Lazear describes the effects of assimilation on small minority groups: "When a society has a very large majority of individuals from one culture, individuals from minority groups will be assimilated more quickly. Assimilation is less likely when an immigrant's native culture and language are broadly represented in his or her new country."[172] If we understand the minority groups to represent the various vernaculars, we can see the problem that some might take issue with. By further allowing Arabic to be reinterpreted and integrated into other cultural modes, the root language is seen to possibly lose its relevance and, therefore, its cultural significance. Some within the Arab world feel that a unification is necessary to preserve Arab culture; they see the vernacular languages as creating fragmentation between them and consider

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[171] Ibid, 79.

[172] Edward P. Lazear, "Culture and Language," *The Journal of Political Economy* 107, No. 6 (1999): 95, accessed December 12, 2015, http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1086/250105.

it a challenge to a more harmonious Arab language. Haeri writes that, "The study of the spoken languages (Arabic vernaculars) remains largely confined to foreign researchers. Systematic attention to them has been often considered suspect because unlike classical Arabic, they threaten to divide rather than unite the Arabs."[173] Not only do these preservationists consider it a matter of language, some within the Arab community link this issue with that of identity or nationalism. But a problem already lies within classical Arabic. Even ignoring its possible "perversion" via technology—no Arab writer speaks in classical Arabic. It is as Haeri mentioned: "the language of writing, education, and administration," and nothing more.[174] All oral exchanges are in some manner of vernacular, so the fear that this computer mediated communication will somehow "destroy" the language may be an overestimation of its ability to negatively effect it.

The perpetuation of dialects through computer mediated communications would become a boon to those children and grandchildren of Lebanese immigrants seeking to connect or reconnect with family abroad. In the case of the Utica community, many of the interviewees, regardless of age, expressed this firmly established connection with friends and family via email, Facebook, and/or Twitter. It would seem that the prevalence of the ACA in electronic communication has indeed reconnected the community to its Lebanese origins, but this reconnection does not produce the kind of results we would expect. In fact, as we shall observe, this linguistic connection between immigrant community and home country, which is now potentially stronger than ever

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[173] Haeri, 64.

[174] Ibid, 63.

through the use of electronic mediums has had seemingly little to no effect on the level of dialect spoken among the majority of Lebanese in Utica. While an accessible hybrid language is available to anyone with a computer, Levantine Arabic has not been encapsulated in the Utica community. Instead, a particular version of it has been preserved and perpetuated at the expense of linguistic fluidity.

Giving Linguistic Evolution the Cold Shoulder

Initially, the use of Levantine Arabic in the early Utica community had to have been prevalent especially between the pioneers and the first generation born in the U.S. As we have already established, the first waves of immigrants came from generally similar regions of Lebanon, and they tended to concentrate residentially in East Utica, creating an enclave. We have evidence of the wide use of Arabic within the community as seen in the proliferation of Arabic language newspapers from 1920-1968 (particularly the monthly "Utica News" column), the centrality of Arabic in the celebration of masses in all three Eastern churches, and the rise of Arabic/English language schools and programs. But with any immigrant group amidst a new dominant language, the use of their language tends to fade with succeeding generations. Indeed, this preservation of the language through these aforementioned means can be counted remarkable as the tendency to assimilate was much stronger in many Arab immigrant communities. Aleya Rouchdy relates, "The earliest groups of Arab Americans, those who immigrated after World War II, tried to dissociate themselves from their ethnic heritage, especially its language, because of how they were viewed by others."[175] This fear of Arabic's use in American society runs deep, and, "If used it would isolate and alienate its speakers who would never be accepted in American society at large…"[176] Perhaps the presence of Utica's already established immigrant populations or the relative size of the community

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[175] Aleya Rouchdy, "Language Conflict and Identity: Arabic in the American Diaspora," *Language Contact and Language Conflict in Arabic: Variations on a Sociolinguistic Theme* ed. Aleya Rouchdy (New York: Routledge, 2002), 141.

[176] Ibid, 142.

in what is a smaller city allowed for a more relaxed attitude towards these newcomers. Either way, the Utica Lebanese seem to have openly worked to preserve their language and heritage in spite of this assimilative trend during this period.

An ethnic language like Levantine Arabic can be affected in a few ways amidst another, more dominant, language. Rouchdy continues:

> It might be affected linguistically by English to the point where it ceases to be used among some Arab Americans, but it will never die. Hence, the difference between these two cases of language contact and conflict is that, in the first case the ethnic language might be totally eroded, but in the second case the language merely suffers attrition and can be retrieved and learned at any time.[177]

This second case applies directly to the situation in the Utica community; its dialect has frozen into a preserved form that is perpetuated regardless of entomological changes that the originating language may have undergone. Time has slowly deemphasized the centrality of Arabic to the community, but the structural apparatus to repair and rebuild this knowledge is still present. Intrinsically, the Arabic language is linked to the heritage this community identifies with, and its existence and continued use in the community is a unifying symbol—something in which the Lebanese associate cultural importance. We can find a ready example of this in the preservation of Native American languages, particularly in Mesoamerica where the Spanish language has dominated for decades.

> …a native language may come to be spoken by a minority of members of the once-associated cultural and ethnic groups, with Spanish now the dominant language. Even so, those who have grown up in the community as monolingual speakers of Spanish may have a strong sense of community identity, and the indigenous language of the community may still serve as a shared, unifying *symbol* of group identity…when a community's native language is in the process of disappearing, this condition is always a source of distress for a

[177] Ibid, 143.

> significant proportion of the population: There is a feeling that something important in their lives is being lost.[178]

It is this danger of losing the language—this key symbol or signifier of being Lebanese—that galvanizes the community in its endeavors to open and operate language schools. It would unify, albeit temporarily, those bitter rivals originally from Akkar and Baskinta, and it continued to rally the community to action periodically through its history. Despite these efforts, however, the linguistic tendencies of the Utica community have remained stagnant for decades. On one hand, this can be seen as an unfortunate circumstance, but, simultaneously, its current use also reflects a linguistic time capsule the likes of which is no longer found in Lebanon itself. Through the use of evidence present within the community and the experience of successive waves of Lebanese immigrants, we can determine the state of Levantine Arabic most commonly spoken in Utica and how its use acts as another apparatus to encapsulate a characteristic of this culture. This last facet reflects a particularly interesting trend as the type of Arabic spoken within the community, on the whole, has managed to resist much of the linguistic evolution of Levantine Arabic since the mid-twentieth century.

To properly understand the linguistic differences between modern Levantine Arabic and the type spoken most widely in the Utica community, we must look to the experience of those successive waves of immigrants who arrived long after the original waves that founded the community in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century.

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[178] Robert M. Carmack, Janine Gasco, and Gary H. Gossen, *The Legacy of Mesoamerica: History and Culture of a Native American Civilization* (London: Routledge, 2016), 423.

My interviews with Mrs. Jeanette Charbel and Mr. Hisham Zoghby reflect the opinions and observations of two distinct waves of immigration. Mrs. Charbel and her family arrived in the Utica community in 1976, while Mr. Zoghby first settled 55 miles west in the city of Syracuse for three years before finally moving to Utica in 2004. Each left Lebanon for different reasons and under different circumstances, but each has been in a unique position to compare their respective "current" knowledge of Levantine Arabic with the kind they experienced upon arriving in Utica.

Mrs. Charbel detailed how the level of dialect spoken when her family arrived was considered "old fashioned" in 1976.[179] By old fashioned, she meant that the pronunciations and word choice she experienced in Utica were reminiscent of the way her grandparents spoke. Likening it to watching a movie from the 1950s in the present, Mrs. Charbel noted that, while they could mostly comprehend each other, there were some clear lexical gaps. She described an anecdote wherein she attempted to correct a friend of hers in the pronunciation of a few words; this amending was met with stubborn refusal as this woman was certain that, "this was how her mother and grandmother had pronounced" these terms.[180] While those like Mrs. Charbel arriving in the wake of Lebanese civil war may recall a pronounced sense of nostalgia widespread in this Utica enclave, the linguistic nature of the community was more properly reflected as a conscious refusal to change because of their hallowing of the "old ways."[181] One would

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[179] Jeanette Charbel, Interview by Paul Charbel, Audio recording, Utica, NY, February 1, 2015.

[180] Ibid.

[181] Ibid.

assume that these old ways would be slowly ebbed away with the passage of time and influx of new immigrants to the community. However, the reality is that fewer and fewer Lebanese families would settle in Utica after the second World War. Between the years 1975-1977, there were 272,510 known emigrants to have left Lebanon—the majority of which would settle in larger metropolitan areas across Europe and the Americas.[182] This is an understandable reality—while familiar customs and language may be a draw to settle in an already established enclave, the overwhelming majority of Lebanese immigrants naturally sought places that provided opportunities for either education or employment. It is difficult to mark exactly how many Lebanese were settling in Utica after 1915; as noted in the first chapter, they were from then on being classified as Caucasian due to the efforts of George S. Dow and the editors of Al-Hoda.[183] We have some population figures from the clippings of Yussef Elasmer, but they peter out by the 1960s—precisely the time period in question. But we can reasonably infer that, as Utica became more and more an aging, Rust Belt city, and its once plentiful jobs in textiles and manufacturing soon withered, immigrants would look to settle in cities with more to offer. This comparatively low number of new Lebanese immigrants (especially considering the early decades of the community) combined with the fervent veneration of their ancestors' ways led to the encapsulation of a version of the Levantine dialect which has been little effected by the passage of time.

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[182] Lebanese Demographic Reality, 3.

[183] Suzanne Manneh, "Census to Count Arabs as White, Despite Write-In Campaign," *Arab American Institute,* Mar 25, 2010, http://www.aaiusa.org/census-to-count-arabs-as-white-despite-write-in-campaign, Accessed October 7, 2014.

To gain a more modern context concerning the Levantine dialect as it is currently spoken in Utica, we can find some interesting insight in the observations of Mr. Hisham Zoghby. In our interview, he pointed out several issues concerning the difference between the Utica community and, for example, the community of Lebanese immigrants settled in the larger city of Syracuse, New York.

> I had quite a bit of interaction with the Lebanese in Syracuse. Although there are many Lebanese immigrants in Syracuse, my impression was that the majority of the Lebanese were medical students at upstate hospital. The Lebanese do not stand out as a significantly notable community. The Lebanese in Syracuse seem to have melted and assimilated into the community and shed the Lebanese culture much faster and more efficiently than the Utica Lebanese. Maybe due to the fact that the Syracuse-Lebanese immigrated mainly for educational reasons. They came with a pre-existing knowledge of the language and some of the culture and going through colleges and universities helped the younger minds to assimilate faster than the older generation Lebanese in Utica.[184]

This is important to note as a significant population of Lebanese are prevalent in Syracuse, but it appears, as Mr. Zoghby states, that their adherence to or preservation of Lebanese culture is less important in their case. Perhaps, as he mentions, the draw for Lebanese immigration to Syracuse is focused mostly on education at the University Hospital for SUNY Upstate Medical Center. Having a clear goal such as this, not fleeing from war, starvation, or persecution, it is no wonder that the Syracuse community has largely assimilated—in many cases, before they have even arrived in the city. Contrasting this reality with the experience in Utica, Mr. Zoghby commented:

> The Utica-Lebanese are mostly second, third and even fourth generation Lebanese. In the case of the second and third Generation Lebanese, they still hold on to some nostalgic notion to being Lebanese which is reinforced by the

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[184] Hisham Zoghby, e-mail message to the author, January 26, 2016.

> presence of the church. As for the Lebanese that branch out further on the generation tree, being Lebanese is of little value.[185]

These insights are especially useful when we consider the amount of information we have about the early days of the community. Mr. Zoghby represents a small but significant number of Lebanese that find their way to settling in the Utica area. His and others like him can clearly descry the cultural differences between their former and current homes. On the subject of the Arabic language itself, interestingly, Mr. Zoghby's account of the Utica Lebanese and the dialect spoken in the community is nearly identical to the observations of Mrs. Charbel and her experience nearly thirty years prior.

When asked about the current state of Arabic (spoken or written fluency), Mr. Zoghby remarks that without, "the lack of proper "formal" Arabic teaching, the language is being lost and the future for it is bleak and without the language and new immigrants the culture has less hope."[186] He notes that, while there is some semblance of Arabic knowledge in the community, it needs the leavening influence of a new and fluent generation. This can happen in a couple ways: offering Arabic lessons for children and adults in the community or an influx of new immigrants to reinvigorate the linguistic scene. Of the two options, the first seems the more likely to happen. As Mr. Zoghby is well aware, few if any new Lebanese immigrants have settled in the Utica area—in fact, he may not only be among the latest but among perhaps the last. Therefore, it is in his opinion that cultural preservation can be accomplished more fully with a community that is somewhat fluent in the language. He remarks, "The language holds a lot of the

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[185] Ibid.

[186] Ibid.

cultural nuances that will be lost once the language is abandoned. The handful of Lebanese that speak the language have the responsibility to pass it on, but it is a difficult task."[187]

The current state of Levantine Arabic in Utica is an interesting amalgamation of dialect from distinct time periods with little intermingling between them. For example, we have first the hallowed tradition of "old fashioned Arabic" that survives because of the grandchildren and great grandchildren of the original settlers in Utica. Next, we have the variety of dialect that came with the influx of immigrants during the early days of the Lebanese civil war (late 1960s-1970s). And finally, we have the most modern version of the language landing in Utica in the late 1990s to the early 2000s. There may be even more strata within these broader timelines, but the fact remains that the linguistic nature of this community is far from unified. However, each variety exists and acts to encapsulate its own particular version of the language. Mrs. Charbel admittedly realized long ago that her version of Arabic has long since gone out of style, and she too represents adherence to a linguistic tradition that is in fact considered "old fashioned." Furthermore, if their is no resurgence in Arabic knowledge in the community, the dialect that Mr. Zoghby is most familiar with will founder or become "old fashioned" as well.

Let us take this moment to analyze the importance of this language as a unifying symbol or signifier established through an understanding of the inherent qualities it has been endowed with by this community. Whether or not it is actively spoken, read, or understood, the concept of Arabic in this community is, as Victor Turner puts it, a

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[187] Ibid.

dominant symbol. Dominant symbols have three key properties: condensation, which is simply that, "Many things and actions are represented in a single formation;" unification of disparate significata, which indicates the interconnection of various meanings or significations, "by virtue of their common possession of analogous qualities or by association in fact or thought;" and polarization of meaning, which is that the symbol typically possesses two distinct poles of meaning—one "idealogical" pertaining to the moral rules of society with the other, "sensory," denoting natural and physiological processes.[188] Through these characteristics, we can truly appreciate the overt and underlying significance of the Arabic language in Utica.

Much is condensed into the concept of the language; for example, its use is central to ritual in the three Eastern Christian churches of the Utica area. Masses held wholly or partially in Arabic have long been a staple in this community. Moreover, it is the language connected to outward cultural identification made manifest in not only those religious rituals but also its foodways and celebrations (as will be discussed later in this chapter). The language also serves to unify this cultural output as well as disparate identifiers, which tend to be more abstract qualities, like heritage, Lebanese pride, or a general sense of Lebanese-ness in an American context. Under the misnomer of "speaking Lebanese," we see unified in this community a veneration of ancestors through the preservation of their dialectical nuances. The desire for linguistic permanence in the community as manifested in its attempts to organize language schools

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[188] Victor Turner, *The Forest of Symbols: Aspects of Ndembu Ritual* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1967), 28.

is another facet unified with Lebanese heritage and culture which exemplifies the nature of Arabic as a dominant symbol.

Through these various cultural indicators, linked through their shared connection to Arabic, we can finally understand how the language is polarized in terms of its meaning. On the ideological side of the spectrum, the language as dominant symbol signifies, "the unity and continuity of social groups, primary and associational, domestic, and political."[189] We can take this to mean that Arabic is accepted as a central part of Lebanese culture and Lebanese-ness, and this is reiterated most importantly through its social climate. The church, the cafés, and all the other meeting places and occasions for social gathering are all predicated on this essential quality: Arabic or "Lebanese" is an indispensable part of this community's social norms and values. This, its idealogical form, represents how, as a normative device, the language acts as a guide to understanding one's role in Lebanese American culture. Those who are familiar with the language, whether through having lived in Lebanon or simply having been taught a version of it by their grandparents, all can partake of a shared experience whether it be through spiritual or purely celebratory means. In this sense, the language acts as a societal organizer, ignoring levels of knowledge to determine social strata—here the structure of communal experience prevails.

On the other end of the spectrum, its sensory representation is much more visceral. "At the sensory pole are concentrated those significata that may be expected to arouse desires and feelings…taking no account of detail or the precise qualities of

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[189] Ibid, 29.

emotion."[190] These identifiers represent sentiments of a universal Lebanese experience in an American and Utican context; for example, the linking of this language with Lebanese pride and a stake in its continued heritage is a sensory representation. It takes no history of Arabic as a language spoken widely across the Middle East, Asia, and Africa into account and instead imbues it with a specific nationalist quality. The idea of Arabic being used and promoted in the community is also an outward behavior—an illustration of how Lebanese someone is. For example, one's knowledge of Arabic within the community denotes their level of Lebanese-ness: someone who has recently arrived from Lebanon and has marked fluency in the language tends to not be considered in the same category as a third generation language dabbler. The more one is able to speak the language, the more their Lebanese-ness is secured. While the ideological and the sensory represent polarizing features of the concept of Arabic, they do indicate its dominant nature as a symbol for the community.

In essence, Arabic can be seen as a living thing, and its life in the community is secured, "in so far as it is 'pregnant with meaning' for men and women, who interact by observing, transgressing, and manipulating for private ends the norms and values that the symbol expresses."[191] Regardless of how it is acted upon, the fact that the language is still acted upon indicates it is a dominant symbol. While there have been instances where newly arrived immigrants have tried to reinvigorate the language, Levantine Arabic in Utica has remained mired in a war of attrition against both time and a fading

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[190] Ibid, 28.

[191] Ibid, 44.

memory. It still is a reflection of the first couple generations of Lebanese immigrants and has resisted the changes of its "newer" residents. What is fascinating is that this freezing of the language mirrors the recalcitrant nature of those who favor a classical Arabic over the use of dialects. In a sense, it is a language that resists outside influence including the language of its origin. Like classical Arabic, the Arabic spoken in the Utica community attempts to be resistant to change, but unlike the classical its days may be numbered unless the community can mobilize an encompassing effort to renew and sustain its presence.

Celebration as Simulacrum: The Hafli

The ways in which this community celebrates together is indicative of how it continues to sustain itself in Utica. There are, of course, the traditional Catholic-based holidays which draw celebrants to the Maronite, Melkite, or Greek Orthodox churches like Palm Sunday, Easter, or Christmas, but it is the uniquely Lebanese celebrations that are the focus of this section. Just like many of the spiritual and secular traditions and practices that made the cross-Atlantic voyage, celebrations too are an integral part of understanding this community's continued existence.

There is a type of celebration which defines the Lebanese and even the, broadly speaking, Arab experience in the diaspora; it is a specific kind of gathering that can transcend religious boundaries and is often attended widely by all of the three major faiths of Lebanese or Syrian origin (Maronites, Melkites, and Greek Orthodox). This particular gathering is referred to as a hafli, which simply means "celebration." Basically, the hafli is a celebration where multiple cultural practices intersect. It is a space where the performance of traditional music, the preparation and eating of authentic foods, and the dancing of traditional dances are found, usually under the umbrella of a church. It is an interesting mix of decadence, spirituality, heritage, and community building. By drawing on first-hand information, we can understand the hafli through its components and elucidate what function it plays in perpetuating cultural significance. Through careful examination of this cultural practice in the Utica community, we will observe how its elements elucidate a celebration where a solidarity in Lebanese heritage is encapsulated and reinforced.

The first, and perhaps most critical, issue to address is when and where the hafli actually takes place. The answer to this question is bound up with the celebration's inherent connection to Lebanese and Syrian churches. The feast days of saints represent the primary choice for hafli dates; a prime example is the feast of St. Maron, of whom the Maronite name is derived. Not only is the feast day important to Maronite Catholic followers, but Saint Maron is often considered the Catholic patron saint of Lebanon itself. As he is considered one of the key figures in the foundation of a Lebanese/Syrian Catholicism, his feast day is synonymous with the largest organized hafli of the year and is celebrated as a national holiday.[192] This connection to the church is interesting as it signifies a faith-based gathering being embodied by the hafli, and we have the church, again, acting as both religious and cultural institution in the community.

To better understand the role of the church in the staging of these celebrations, I turned to Michael J. Naber, the Executive Director of the National Apostolate of Maronites (NAM). According to their mission statement, NAM "serves as a unifying force among the laity of the Maronite Church in the U.S.A. and as a common link between the clergy and the laity. NAM helps preserve the Syriac-Maronite traditions by making people aware of the rich heritage of the Maronite faith and by fostering pride in the Maronite Church."[193] Mr. Naber explained some key connections between the church and the celebration. He related that "all of the haflis or parties or banquets are sponsored

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[192] Guita G. Hourani, "Saint Maron's Relic: Ornament of the Divine Choir of Saints," *The Maronite Research Institute* 1, no. 1 (1997): accessed December 5, 2015, http://www.maronite-institute.org/MARI/JMS/january97/Saint_Marons_Relic.htm.

[193] "Mission Statement," *The National Apostolate of Maronites*, accessed November 11, 2015, www.namnews.org.

by the churches or organizations associated with the church."[194] Simply put, there is no staging of the hafli without the involvement of the church; if the church is absent from the equation, then it would not be termed such. When asking about the link between Lebanese culture (a specific, nationality-based grouping) and the Maronite church (a Catholic organization that, like all Christian churches, accepts new members regardless of nationality), I sought insight into that space between national identity and religious devotion. Mr. Naber responded stating:

> Lebanon is the Holy seat of all Maronites in the world, so the concern of Lebanon is important to all the Maronite churches. Although we no longer identify ourselves as an immigrant church, we still have the clerical connection to Lebanon, same as all Latin churches have a connection to Rome. Added to this, the fact that most of the parishioners in any of our parishes are either from Lebanon or have ancestry tracing back to Lebanon, the presence of Lebanese culture and customs is very apparent in our parishes.[195]

While there is no explicit regulation that binds these two together, the Maronite church in the U.S. and Lebanese culture are connected through their shared history and development. As we have previously established, the church is by its nature a nexus for culture and religion, serving its parishioners as a vital community center just as much as a spiritual one.

My own experience speaks to as much of what Mr. Naber relates: haflis are celebrated in conjunction with the church. But, to the outside observer, the question still remains: how does a celebration that, by its nature, indulges, sometimes overly, in food, drink, and dance become connected with any church? While haflis are associated with

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[194] Michael J. Naber, Executive Director of the National Apostolate of Maronites, in discussion with the author, November 2011.

[195] Ibid.

the feast days of saints, is there something unique about the feast of St. Maron and the hafli that accompanies it? We have already outlined Maron's importance to this faith, but what about the date? While the observed day itself does not shift from February 9th, the Catholic observance of Lent, which changes year to year as it is dependent on the movable feast of Easter, most often begins immediately after this feast day.[196] To express the importance of this ordering of dates, we can take this opportunity to compare and contrast Eastern Catholic practice with Western (Roman) Catholicism. Lent, in all Catholic sects, is known for asceticism and fasting for forty days before the celebration of Easter or Resurrection Sunday. Celebrations like Mardi Gras in New Orleans or Carnival in Brazil allow for, among other things, the indulgence of food, drink, and dance immediately before this period of earthly denial and self-sacrifice, at least in theory. One key difference between these Catholic sects, however, is that the Eastern churches start Lent not on Ash Wednesday, as Western Catholics do, but two days earlier on Clean or Ash Monday. By this, there is no direct equivalent to the dates of Mardi Gras and Carnival, but the St. Maron's Day hafli usually takes place on the weekend before the beginning of Lent.

As it is the largest celebration for the Maronite church and that it is always celebrated immediately before the start of Lent, regardless of where the feast day itself falls, we may draw the conclusion that this hafli celebration has evolved into a type of pre-Lenten festivity similar to Mardi Gras or Carnival—if not at the same caliber of

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[196] Lynda M. Howell, "Tables and Rules for the Feasts and Fasts Through the Whole Year," *The Book of Common Prayer Online*, accessed December 14, 2011, http://www.eskimo.com/~lhowell/bcp1662/info/tables/tables.html.

revelry. While not as extravagant as either of these examples, the St. Maron's hafli shares a similar time frame as a pre-Lenten celebration. Other Eastern churches, like the Greek Orthodox, observe Clean Monday with kite flying and dancing similar to other pre-Lenten celebrations, but Maronites most often begin the fasting and self-sacrifice on the preceding Sunday evening. There is even a Maronite tradition of removing all leftover non-fasting foods from the home in preparation for Lent. A St. Maron's Day hafli, as celebrated in Utica allows for a revelry similar to Mardi Gras or Carnival and allows time to prepare (or recover) for the beginning of Lent the following Monday.

This tradition, distinctly Lebanese in style, may reflect a growing commonality with Western Catholicism not yet explored. The church's connection to the hafli, as we can imagine, is a complicated one, but one that certainly exists. Most often, depending on the number of attendees and the size of the church, the church hall acts as the staging ground for these celebrations. There are those that, due to their size, greatly exceed the capacity of an actual church hall, but that does not remove the church's role from the event. Since their arrival, the Lebanese in Utica have hosted many such celebrations in the church halls of the three Eastern churches: St. Louis Gonzaga, St. Basil, and St. George. There have been notable examples of staging areas for these types of celebrations outside of the church, like the banquet and meeting facility founded by Baskinta immigrants, "Lebanon Hall," which existed on Taylor Avenue in East Utica until the 1980's. Since the mid-1990s, however, many parishes have opted to organize their celebrations at outside locations to accommodate the number of attendees and/or because of their handicap accessible facilities. Sometimes these are done at Lebanese/Syrian

owned businesses, and sometimes they are catered by local Lebanese restaurants, but this trend could signify Lebanese cultural practices having more mainstream appeal in Utica's society.

While it is a unique and very specific type of party, the hafli remains part of a greater ritual in which a spiritual community enjoys itself. Sometimes this is done before a time of fasting and atonement or just simply to bring the community together. There are other kinds of celebrations that mimic the hafli's style; this is most notably found in the mahrahjan which means an outdoor festival usually held in the summer. The mahrahjan has all the trappings of a hafli, including a church presence often in the form of a regular mass which is performed outdoors at the venue. Regardless of the name or the time of year it is celebrated, the hafli and its kin are unique points where the secular and non-secular intersect in Lebanese culture in Utica.

As in all ritual celebrations, there are a prescribed set of expectations and actions which are adhered to. While not considered sacred or religious, the performance of traditional dances is another key pillar in what distinguishes a hafli from simply being a party. The dabke (or dabki) is a circle dance involving both men and women holding hands and performing an intricate step which progresses the circle in a counterclockwise motion. There are a wide variety of prescribed steps, but this framework allows for a certain amount of creativity and invention. The circle, however, is never complete nor joined; the leader is on the extreme right end of the line from the perspective of the dancer. In practice, the shape of the dance resembles more of a spiral than a circle as it gets larger—the more participants, the more rings in that spiral. The leader of this circle,

who is predominantly male, usually waves a handkerchief and is able to either change the dance as he/she sees fit or perform his/her own improvisation on the steps. However, these views simply reflect the perspective of the average participant. There is more to the dancing of the dabke than may meet the untrained eye, and to learn more about the importance of this dance, I was privileged to speak with Mr. Ziad Wehbe, President of Les Chevaliers du Liban-Troupe Folklorique.

Les Chevaliers du Liban (The Knights of Lebanon) is a dance troupe specializing in the performance and instruction of Lebanese dabke dancing. Based in Montreal, Quebec, which contains one of the larger enclaves of Lebanese immigrants, the group was first established with an executive committee in 1991. Firstly, Mr. Wehbe characterized the variety of dabkes available to the dancer: not only is there a regional difference in each Lebanese city, town, and village, but there is a difference in the dabke that is danced by the general public and that which is danced more professionally for festivals and shows.[197] While the structure and methods are fundamentally the same, there is a certain local flavor that permeates some styles and a pronounced difference in how it is used in celebration or in show.

Seeking to understand what performing a traditional dance means in current Lebanese culture, I asked Mr. Wehbe why dancing this particular dance is important to the hafli in particular. He responded that:

> Dance, in general, is a method of expressing oneself. In our culture, 'Dabke,' the traditional dance, is a way to express oneself and to pass on our culture from one

[197] Ziad Wehbe, President of Les Chevaliers du Liban-Troupe Folklorique, in discussion with the author, December 2011.

> generation to another. Since it's a joyful moment, people come together to dance and share their feelings. In any 'hafli,' people will come together, hand in hand, to dance together and share that particular feeling with one another. For example, in weddings, whether traditional or modern, what makes the climate friendly or cozy is the fact that everyone is so happy that they forget their personal problems and dance the night out.[198]

This response is revealing in several ways: first, the attention to individuality and the expression of oneself appears to be an essential part of the dance; secondly, it is believed that by dancing in this traditional manner, the dancers are imparting some manner of cultural education on all participants; and thirdly, the dabke is a social dance meant not for one partner, but with a whole group. As stated earlier, the dance allows for creativity in its practice by the variation of steps within the framework. This creativity involved is important as the dance can be simple and easily accessible to anyone trying it for the first time, but still has the ability to offer new and unique challenges. Attention to

Figure 8: Youth Dabke Dancing Troupe, circa 1986. Groups such as this were instructed both in the dance and its cultural importance. Courtesy of St. Louis Gonzaga Church Archive.

[198] Ibid.

individuality through stylistic signatures expressed in dance seems central to the teaching of the dabke. Indeed, Mr. Wehbe affirmed that the creation of new, personalized "moves" is an important step in the learning and practice of the dabke.[199]

The dance as a moment of cultural education is intriguing as it is both a visual and hands-on experience. It is hard to imagine such dances without having seen one in full swing, and I believe this is what Mr. Wehbe is alluding to when he mentions the joyful feelings or friendly climate associated with it. Judith Lynne Hanna provides an important analysis concerning this: "Dance is *cultural* behavior: a people's values, attitudes, and beliefs partially determine the conceptualization of dance as well as its physical production, style, structure, content, and performance. Dance comments reflexively on systems of thought, sustaining them or undermining them through criticism of institutions, policies, or personages. Thus action and awareness merge."[200] There is much here that Mr. Wehbe would agree with, especially the notion of a person being able to communicate themselves and what their culture is through the dance, or, in the case of the Utica community, the performance of the dance to communicate a perception or hallowed piece of Lebanese culture. Hanna affirms that while nonverbal communication in the form of movements can supplement a message, "dance movements alone have the capability to communicate affectively and cognitively," and that through this communication, "individuals learn a culture—the values, beliefs, attitudes, and behavior

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[199] Ibid.

[200] Judith Lynne Hanna, *To Dance is Human: A Theory of Nonverbal Communication* (Chicago, University of Chicago Press: 1987), 3.

a group shares.[201] Here we can see that dancing the dabke, which is a unique style, communicates a unique message about Lebanese culture. Also, the idea that dance can be a way to merge action with awareness dovetails with what Mr. Wehbe related. Consider the result of dancing the dabke according to his previous statement. It is to be a cultural education, but also a joyful experience and one which allows the participant to focus solely on the dance and the celebration, thereby enhancing what is in truth a learning experience.

What truly ties these things together is the importance of the dance being a social action. One cannot dance the dabke with two or a few—a group is necessary for it to be successful. Hanna, remarking on how humans are social animals, relates that the dance is a way to reflect and cope with life's problems. She states that, "Dance is one of the resources they may draw upon. Just as humans reflect upon themselves through different forms of creativity—oral tales, written documents, sculpted forms, constructed edifices—they also reflect upon themselves through dance."[202] Through the dabke, a sense of what it is to be Lebanese is communicated; Mr. Wehbe alludes to as much and added that, "the only way we found to keep in touch with our roots was through community: the church, the dance, social groups, etc."[203] By teaching the dance, Mr. Wehbe's group is preserving a Lebanese cultural practice, and, every time it is danced at a social function in a community like Utica, that same cultural education is being transmitted to its participants.

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[201] Ibid, 4.

[202] Ibid, 5.

[203] Wehbe, in discussion with the author.

Whether you are a seasoned veteran or a complete neophyte, the dabke serves as a cultural welcoming which is both complex enough to offer challenges and space for individuality as well as being simple enough to invite all skill levels to actively participate.

The dancing of a traditional dance is important, but what is dance without music? The music that accompanies a dabke dance and what really defines what a hafli represents is, not surprisingly, traditional in nature. Here, like the dance, do we find a space for creativity within a structured paradigm. However, unlike the dance, the structure of hafli music is usually much more rigid in terms of variation and style. The dabke is a particular kind of dance, and the music that accompanies it, specifically termed "dabke music," has to adhere to the structure of the dance. There must be an easily discernible beat and rhythmic structure, which may be repetitive in nature, but allows for the dancing of a variety of dabke styles. If there is one casualty in the halfi, one facet that is restricted the most, it would have to be the music. Songs for the dabke are performed with a limited variety of instruments, and the compositions, as mentioned earlier, must follow a prescribed pattern. The lyrics are usually romantic in nature either dealing with love or the loss of love. We must keep in mind that we are dealing with aspects of folk heritage: while there are certain points in this celebration where creativity and individuality are honored and encouraged, they still must fall within the structure of recreating this folk experience.

Traditional Arabic instruments used for dabke music include the oud which is similar to a lyre or lute in its design, the riq which is like a large tambourine, and the

derbekkeh which is an elongated drum played either under one's arm or between one's legs.[204] The use of these instruments, however, has waned in favor of modern devices capable of emulating their sounds. While the drum and tambourine may remain, the keyboard or synthesizer has come to replace string instruments and woodwinds like the oud, the violin, or the ney (a type of flute). This does represent a step in favor of technology's progress as a dabke ensemble can now be pared down to a handful of musicians instead of a small orchestra. Damon Krukowski, writing about a performance of dabke music, stated that the musician, Omar Souleyman, "will be backed not by an orchestra of Near Eastern instruments, but rather a sole keyboardist, Rizan Sa'id, playing a sample-filled synth designed by one of the same multinational brands sold at Guitar Center, and manufactured in China."[205] While this represents an extreme iteration of this simplification, it does characterize the nature of the current dabke ensemble. Naturally, playing mostly at weddings or cultural celebrations, the style in which most groups play has to reflect the desire of the audience. The performance of dabke music is rarely staged in the form of concerts or recitals. Instead, the hafli serves as a place for musicians to exhibit their talent in traditional forms. This is one aspect of Lebanese music that seeks to preserve folk traditions by primarily creating arrangements under the same structure. Utica is no exception; the haflis celebrated in this community are the showcase for this kind of music, and, while other music can certainly be played, a hafli is not a hafli

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[204] David Parfitt, "History," *The Oud*, Last updated August 3, 2011, http://www.oud.eclipse.co.uk/history.html.

[205] Damon Krukowski, "Souleyman: Dabke 2.0," *The Boston Globe*, October 31, 2010, http://www.boston.com/ae/music/articles/2010/10/31/omar_souleyman_to_bring_dabke_20_to_paramount_theatre/.

without the dabke. While Lebanese pop, fusion, and even rap has gained ground in its own right in recent decades, the hafli remains a place where traditional music techniques, by sound and style, are observed.

Dancing and music are important to any hafli, but the most rigorous preparation is centered around the food. For example, one would be hard pressed to find a hafli in which some sort of mezza is not served. Mezza is the most recognizably Lebanese style of eating, although it is found in one form or another across the Arab world. It is a series of small hot or cold dishes that serve as either an appetizer or the meal itself, depending on the size or number of dishes. There are certain foods that are regularly considered mezza staples. These would include a prepared hummus (a dip made from ground garbanzo beans), baba ghanoush (a roasted eggplant dip), tabbuli (a parsley, tomato, and bulgar wheat salad), zaatar (a spice mix including sumac, thyme, and sesame which is mixed with a good quality olive oil, making a spread), and labneh (a yogurt in which the moisture has been strained out and is served with a good quality olive oil as well) in addition to various cheeses, olives, and pickled vegetables. What is vital to almost every mezza dish is the bread; the pita, as it is referred to in English, is just as important as each of the prepared dishes it complements. In many cases, the bread is central, and the overall food can be judged based solely on the quality of the meal's bread. As one may gather, it is just as vital to these kinds of celebrations as the music or the dancing. The dishes are most often prepared, like many Mediterranean cultures, by a familial group of parishioners or a local Lebanese restaurant/caterer. If it can be helped, again like many Mediterranean cultures, the authenticity of a Lebanese grandmother is often favored over

a restaurant. Oftentimes, the preparation for an upcoming hafli or celebration will be done in the church hall, as has been done at any of the three local Utica congregations through the years. The preparing and serving of these specific foods at the hafli serves as both a culinary and cultural lesson for attendees. Often, the manner in which it is presented is as close to the genuine article in Lebanon as those who prepare it remember themselves or, more frequently, through the memory passed down from parents and grandparents. What is at play here are conscious and specific actions to preserve and perpetuate particular cultural aspects of Lebanese foodways.

To better understand the importance of food in the hafli setting, I turned to Michael Karam, former head chef/manager of The Phoenician Lebanese Restaurant in Utica. The Phoenician has catered to the Lebanese community in Utica since 1982. Mr. Karam is American born, but was sent to Lebanon to develop his culinary technique. In our conversation, I asked in what ways he felt that authentic Lebanese food is important to a hafli. He responded, "Authenticity plays a key role in the hafli. It must feel as if the guests have been magically transported to the home country, giving it that nostalgic feeling. Especially for the elder members who remember their haflis very detailed. They can spot authenticity a mile away."[206] It may seem, superficially, a secondary concern compared to the presence of the church, the dance, and the music, but the food is integral in creating a truly Lebanese experience as many participants within the community have attested. Continuing in this vein, Mr. Karam added, "What's a birthday without a

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[206] Michael Karam, Former Head Chef/Manager of The Phoenician, in discussion with the author, November 2011.

birthday cake? What's the 4th of July without fireworks? Lebanese food is *essential* to the hafli. Also, Arabic music and dabke are second only to the food."[207] We may initially take this statement at face value as, indeed, this is the opinion of a chef on the importance of food. But the underlying sentiment expressed here is not just the feeding of party-goers. Instead, it is meant to, as Mr. Karam noted, transport the participant back to Lebanon, and this Lebanon where they are being transported to is often a mythologized version which has been preserved unaltered for decades. The notion of authenticity and the role of elders in determining it is not one easily dismissed. While the authentic article to which these elders are attesting to is the perpetuation of the early community's food practices, it remains the only "authentic" version of these dishes and presentations encapsulated in Utica. As observed in this community, there is a certain sense of cultural responsibility entwined with the preparation of Lebanese food especially when it is offered at a celebration like the hafli even if it is a distant memory in Lebanese culinary history.

As noted, while it may appear to be part of the backdrop, the food is an equal part in celebrating a hafli. There is a clear sense of cultural preservation involved with the preparing and serving of authentic Lebanese food. Madelain Farah, author of many works on Lebanese food, notes that "Middle Eastern cooking has become increasingly popular…Pita bread, tabbuli, and hummus have become so popular that they have lost their association with their originating culture."[208] There is an underlying fear expressed

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[207] Ibid.

[208] Madelain Farah, *Lebanese Cuisine* (New York: Four Walls Eight Windows, 2001), 9.

in this quote; the fear that one's culture will lose its value or significance if such practices, like the preparation of distinct foods, are not practiced properly, forgotten, or worse, co-opted by the mainstream American cuisine. The hafli represents an adherence and celebration of folk tradition. Here, there is little room for diversity or a global outlook when it comes to the food being presented. All are welcome to partake and enjoy, but, at the hafli, one will not find raw lamb kibbie or tabbuli sharing the plate with a slice of pizza.

The preceding have been the basic structural elements when staging a hafli, and, aside from the people that participate, they represent the pillars on which this celebration is celebrated. And while we have focused predominantly on experiences in Utica itself, we have to know if there is a difference between haflis celebrated in Lebanon and those celebrated by Lebanese populations abroad. As we delve deeper we shall certainly find similarities but also some very telling differences.

This chapter engages how a particular cultural signifier can be frozen in time through its perpetuation in an enclave such as Utica. However, as much as the community attempts to imitate the original, haflis celebrated outside of Lebanon are distinctly different, and referring to them as recreations is not an inaccurate observation. Take for example the remarks of Mr. Wehbe on the traditional dabke dance. When I asked how important the dabke was to Lebanese identity, whether in Lebanon or abroad, he replied:

> Unfortunately, in Lebanon the dabke is valued, but not practiced. People know what the dance is, they probably know how to dance it (or at least how it works), but people prefer other dances. However, abroad, we tend to give so much

> importance to our culture: dance, language, food, traditions etc. I can speak for here in Montreal: we are so attached to our culture because some were forced to leave Lebanon because of financial reasons or because of the war. The only way we found to keep in touch with our roots was through our community and its activities: church, dance groups, social groups, etc. I believe that in both cases, the dabke is important, however, the Lebanese people abroad tend to preserve it as much as they can.[209]

Mr. Wehbe brings out an important facet of this study that we must address, and that is the issue of imitation. David D. Gilmore echoes a similar sentiment, which appears in many Mediterranean cultures, but it seems to ring especially true in regards to the migration of the hafli overseas. Gilmore writes: "Everywhere there is a contradiction of 'appearance and reality' in Mediterranean culture which suggests that what anthropologists impressionistically have felt to be Mediterranean parallels reflect rather a sensitivity to some underlying dialectic or subsurface interplay of opposites."[210] This notion of appearance and reality is one in which Lebanese communities abroad face as well; a sense of contradiction does not vanish, but it takes on different forms. In a way, the hafli allows for the playing out of this duality as participants and organizers outside of Lebanon are basing their assumptions on prescriptions that may be decades old. The dabke is still danced at haflis in Utica, as well as across the United States or Canada, but they are based on traditions that have changed significantly since the first waves of immigrants made their homes in the West. But in order to successfully stage a celebration like the hafli outside of Lebanon, one must adhere to this seemingly canonical

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[209] Wehbe, in discussion with the author.

[210] David D. Gilmore, "Anthropology of the Mediterranean Area," *Annual Review of Anthropology* 11, (1982): 180, accessed February 22, 2016, http://www.annualreviews.org/doi/abs/10.1146/annurev.an.11.100182.001135..

array of elements which prescribe certain, rigid facets. Those whom I have interviewed were quick to point out the authenticity of their methods or technique, but simultaneously admit that either things have changed in Lebanon or the method has changed because of its geographical shift.

As we know, many were displaced by economic downturn and the outbreak of civil war, and this is evidenced by the fact that the current diaspora far exceeds the actual occupants of Lebanon (in Brazil alone, there are more people of Lebanese descent than in Lebanon itself).[211] What is considered tradition to those living outside of Lebanon has remained fixed, while Lebanon continues to change and grow. This is, in effect, a molding of history to create an identity; by recognizing and thereby hallowing a particular past, those in the diaspora reflect ethnic identity as something that can be molded to suit their needs. In her work on the diaspora, Dalia Abdelhady remarks that, "ethnic identity can take different forms depending on which culturally shared items are utilized by individuals in their quest for meaningful self-definitions. Ethnic identity, then, becomes a flexible structure that can be modified depending on the context in which actors socially interact."[212] While what Abdelhady details is certainly true in many cases, it may not be as sinister in motive as it is made out to be. For example, the first few generations to settle in Utica preserved the customs that they knew, and their subsequent descendants honored those customs as traditions and perpetuated them, as free from

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[211] "Lebanon," *The Central Intelligence Agency*, last updated December 20, 2011, https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/le.html#People.

[212] Dalia Abdelhady, *The Lebanese Diaspora: The Arab Immigrant Experience in Montreal, New York, and Paris* (New York: New York University Press, 2011) 83.

alteration as possible. As Abdelhady affirms, ethnic identity can be molded depending on culturally shared items; one of these items is, indeed, the hafli. The hafli abroad, therefore, becomes a space for identifying one's Lebanese-ness, regardless of the actual customs of modern day Lebanon.

Describing the building of a Lebanese mythology, Elise Salem Manganaro writes that, in Lebanon, there are those devoted to preserving a particular national memory which also translates to a distorted conception of the modern day. We can extend her argument further and see how it is intrinsically linked to a Lebanese myth abroad, as well. She writes, "there seem to be entire cultural industries in Lebanon intent on preserving a distorted national memory. It is the Lebanon of Gibran, the dabke dance, and the glorious singer Fayruz; the Lebanon of snow-capped mountains, red-roofed village homes, the 'holy' cedars, and Phoenician coast."[213] This venerated past colors conceptions of the present; understanding this, we can perceive how traditionalists within Lebanon and emigrés to the U.S. share a focus on this glorious past which is then perpetuated through subsequent generations. The hafli is an example of a cultural celebration that, while seemingly old-fashioned in Lebanon, becomes an expression of all that it means to be Lebanese for those living abroad. The conflation of myth with a genuine history ignores important facets like the Ottoman or French occupation not to mention politics, religious tensions, or civil war. As Manganaro writes, "It is the Lebanon of so many of our songs,

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[213] Elise Salem Manganaro, "Lebanon Mythologized or Lebanon Deconstructed: Two Narratives of National Consciousness," *Women and War in Lebanon*, ed. Lammia Rustum Shehadeh (Florida: University Press of Florida, 1999) 120.

our stories, our myths."[214] These songs, stories, and myths, especially when separated from their originating source, can eventually become frozen in place and established as fact and history.

However, what is central to understanding the practice of any Lebanese celebration in Utica and essentially anywhere outside of Lebanon is the idea of imitation. Surely, the haflis and mahrahjans celebrated in Utica attempt to mimic and preserve these traditional celebrations, but the fact of the matter is that they cannot fully duplicate those experiences. This failure to produce an identical experience based on that which was practiced in Lebanon, so many years ago, is not something to be ashamed of. In fact, I take it to signify a greater uniqueness for the Lebanese community in Utica. Every time one attempts to imitate and "fails," one becomes more uniquely themselves. The more one strives for authenticity, the more one will actually produce a new experience. In this case, imitating Lebanese cultural practices ends up making those practices and those celebrants more authentically Utican. and it produces culturally literate generations who are aware of this difference. This difference, as seen in Utica, is not one that stands as a taboo subject hovering over its festivities, but instead it is an affirmation and acceptance of change. To many, just being able to gather together and celebrate in a way like their elders and ancestors is enough to satisfy the pursuit of authenticity. While the hafli remains a widely practiced celebration across the diaspora, it is nonetheless an important reflection on Lebanese custom and history within the context of the Utica community.

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[214] Ibid.

No matter how simplified or old-fashioned a practice like the hafli may be, it is still an expression of this community's desire to stay true to its roots—regardless of whether it is celebrated in Lebanon anymore. The same logic applies to the type of Levantine Arabic spoken in Utica, and it remains an inextricable part of this community's collective memory—no matter how outdated it may sound. These cultural signifiers of multifaceted language and complex celebration apparatuses are by their very nature fluid, but the relative size and composition of the Utica community has allowed for a unique encapsulation and preservation that opens a passage back to a particular kind of mythologized Lebanon.

CONCLUSION:
The Self-Replicating Nature of Lebanese Culture in Utica

This work began with an immigrant's story. It was not one of fanfare and righteous triumph over insurmountable odds; instead, it emphasized the importance of relationships between displaced peoples. The story of Betrus Saad gave us our first glimpse into the then minuscule community of Lebanese living in Utica, NY. But we have learned a great deal more from that first encounter than perhaps even they understood. Saad and his companions showed us how strong regional and hometown loyalty was in that pioneering community. Surely at the urging of their hosts, their efforts to expand their knowledge of English when they stayed for the winter highlighted the emphasis this community placed on education to excel in this new country. Finally, this sojourn exemplifies the ages old tradition of hospitality across the Arab world. A tradition, like so many other cultural and religious traditions, that would be encapsulated and perpetuated in this community. It is a fitting frame for the narrative of this work as it exemplifies this community's cultural characteristics—some that have survived even unto this day.

Along the way, we have traced the planting of this community's seed in American soil, and the fruit it bore was much more complex than it may seem on the surface. While the old allures of employment and opportunity are long gone, this community's adherence to its ancestor's practices have created a time capsule of sorts that have maintained a particular image of Lebanese culture—long sundered from its source material. This is not to say that since the mills closed this community has been culturally

split from Lebanon; instead, we now recognize the realities of a slow fade in cultural exchange taking place over many decades. The important thing to note is how much has been preserved—in spite of time and assimilation. By adhering to the practices of those pioneering ancestors who first arrived in Utica, this community has been able to perpetuate a particular image of Lebanese identity and has encapsulated certain religious and cultural practices as a result.

While there has been a noticeable lack in personal accounts of many early Lebanese communities in the U.S., the research for this project has unearthed much and more about the earliest days of the Utica community. The sheer amount of material uncovered, in addition to its inherent importance, positions Utica as a microcosm with which to understand small to mid-size Levantine immigrant communities. I began this project with the intention of shedding light on a facet of shared American and Lebanese cultural history. But this soon evolved, as many of these seemingly straightforward endeavors do, into an ethnographic study—not one of assimilated American Lebanese or one of Lebanese who possess a vibrant exchange with their country of origin—but of those who are somewhere in the middle. Not wholly Lebanese, but not wholly American, they represented to me a quandary in terms of ethnicity and cultural perpetuation. By determining that this group is indeed ethnoreligious in nature, I was able to negotiate those particular religious and cultural traditions that have survived and gain a better understanding of why some did not. Contributing to both diaspora studies as well as cultural history, I believe this work sets the stage for future immigration studies in that it

finds an exemplar locus for analyzing small to mid-size communities as microcosms of cultural encapsulation.

I have put forth the argument that the region these immigrants came from was socially, culturally, religiously, and linguistically distinct—distinct from much of Syria and the Middle East. Evident in the scholarship of Lebanese identity is a duality that paints itself as mutually exclusive: on one hand, you have the Lebanese myth-making which lauds its ancient ties to Phoenicia while denying its connection to the greater Arab world, and, on the other, the argument that Lebanon has and always will be an indelible part of that Arab world it denies. What I sought to accomplish in the scholarship for this project is a more realistic blending of both of these facets. I do identify this community of Lebanese in Utica and their place of origin as distinct from most of the Arab world, but this does not preclude a connection to that world. Instead, it reinforces the heterogeneous nature of the Middle East and stands as a reminder that, while ethnically and religiously diverse, this region still maintains an important connection.

The perpetuation of immigrant culture in this city has engendered the encapsulation of practices and traditions that may have otherwise been lost. In fact, this cultural perpetuation can be summarized more succinctly from another vantage point. Lebanese culture in the Utica community, and perhaps other smaller diaspora communities, has become a meme. I mean that in the way Richard Dawkins originally detailed when he coined the term—in the sense that this immigrant culture has become self-replicating. To summarize Dawkins, memes are like genes. They are replicators,

and, in terms of culture, they replicate based on imitation.[215] This is the key to understanding which cultural mores and practices brought over by these immigrants survive until this day and which eventually died out.

An example of a successful meme can be found in the celebrations which have survived in Western Lebanese enclaves. Children in Lebanese communities are exposed to parties like the hafli where dances like the dabke are performed. Observing this behavior indelibly links the dabke, the hafli, and all the other elements expressed at such an event, with Lebanese culture. So in turn, these children grow up revering the hafli and the dabke as a meaningful expression of Lebanese culture. Most importantly, the reverence of this particular memory leads to preservation and propagation—the cycle continues with these children growing up and bringing their own children to the hafli to experience "authentic" Lebanese culture.

An unsuccessful meme that has fallen out of practice and, for all intents and purposes, died out is the importance placed on regional loyalties. As has been discussed at length, the notoriously divisive nature of regional bias caused multiple initiatives to founder in the early years of the Utica community. This behavior as viewed by succeeding generations did not replicate as the loyalties associated with those places would be meaningless to second and third generation Lebanese Americans. Instead, the community itself becomes a successful meme in spite of its regional pluralism, and eventually the attention to regional differences would be swallowed up by a simple cultural difference between Lebanese and American. In short, while also not having

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[215] Richard Dawkins, *The Selfish Gene* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), 192.

those same strong associations with a particular region, this cultural difference or meme would cease to have value to succeeding generations, cease to be replicated, and finally cease to exist.

Diaspora communities are not molded by any one determinant factor, and, realistically, the Lebanese communities in the West can be said to be quite culturally distinct from each other. Therefore, we cannot expect each community to understand itself in the context of its so-called modernity or its connection to a modern or past Lebanon. Michael Humphrey relates that Lebanese diaspora communities do not, "conceive of the 'imagined present' or 'past' in the same way. The Lebanese emigrants who constitute the present diaspora are the product of quite different migrations with their own very distinct relationships to societies and to contemporary Lebanon. Some have been constituted through labor migration, others through trading activities, and others through flight as refugees from war and economic crisis in Lebanon.[216] Additionally, the places into which these Lebanese inserted themselves are widely different—even as a part of the same state or region as evidenced in the differences between the New York State communities present in Troy, Syracuse, Buffalo, and Utica. Each community is nuanced in its, at least partial, assimilation into American society. They themselves represent very different versions of Lebanon and Lebanese culture and practice.

Based upon the arguments this work poses, we have enough evidence to believe that a small immigrant community like that of Utica has the potential to consistently

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[216] Michael Humphrey, "Lebanese Identities: Between Cities, Nations and Trans-Nations," *Arab Studies Quarterly* 26, no. 1 (Winter, 2004): 32, http://www.jstor.org/stable/41858471.

perpetuate their version of Lebanese identity indefinitely. The apparatus of a faith-linked, culturally rich social organization within American society is already in place, and the ultimate fate of such a community is actively in its own hands. If its residents made a sudden concerted effort to import as many cultural mores presently expressed in modern Lebanon, we would seriously doubt that such an endeavor could succeed. But this community has the potential to preserve its specific version of Lebanese history and culture. One of Mr. Hisham Zoghby's observations of the community, being someone who has only joined it in the last twelve years, is quite prevalent to this line of thinking.

> The Lebanese culture in Utica is closer to the folklore that is now being lost in Lebanon itself. This last statement, in my opinion, should be a source of pride for Utica. Despite many shortcomings and inaccuracies, there are quite a bit of homes and families that retain very rare aspects of the Lebanese culture that would be otherwise lost if it were up to the Lebanese in Lebanon.[217]

Coming from a person who has seen the ways Lebanon has changed from his birth to adulthood, this observation of the Utica community's preservative role is vital for understanding the future of such a community. From this viewpoint, the "old fashioned" nature of many of its practices may actually be viewed as a boon—not a shortcoming. In fact, the encapsulation is not just a self-serving fallacy about a distinct Lebanese identity in a homogenized American society, but instead it is a vital cultural exercise that preserves historical characteristics that would otherwise be lost in larger immigrant communities or even in their country of origin.

Utica was and is a unique place for immigrants to lay down roots, and the city continues to be a beacon for immigrants ranging from Bosnia/Herzegovina, Vietnam, and

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[217] Hisham Zoghby, e-mail message to the author, January 26, 2016.

the Sudan. The size and composition of Utica were factors that allowed for a community of Lebanese immigrants to successfully grow. Currently, a Lebanese community in Utica is one of many ethnically diverse groups that reside in the city, and, being a long standing one, both the city and this community have acclimated to the other. I would not go so far as to say that there has been complete assimilation, but there is a chance that this community can remain relevant and maintain its cultural practices. The future for this particular community, as stated, is in its own hands. It has the potential to reinvigorate its connection to its cultural antecedent in Lebanon, and there has been evidence of this in recent decades. As late as 2010, there was a small effort to begin Arabic instruction through St. Louis Gonzaga Church, but this ultimately ended without much result. Perhaps to reclaim more of their own forgotten history, this community should thoroughly examine the goals of its sires and begin anew the project to create a Lebanese school in Utica. Evidenced in its ability to mobilize for cultural and religious events, the time might have come to mobilize those same efforts for education.

The future of Lebanese and Arab immigration to the U.S. as a whole is in question. The current rhetoric of politicians and their xenophobic constituents has created a significantly more hostile environment especially for those wishing to come from the Arab world. Lebanese and Syrian Christians will likely still find homes near the larger enclaves in the U.S., but Lebanese and Syrian Muslims may begin choosing to settle in other enclaves throughout the Americas. If the continued vitriol for all Muslims in the U.S. proceeds unchecked, these immigrants will likely find refuge in places like Venezuela, Brazil, or Canada. Considering the longstanding contributions of Arab

immigrants to American society, the U.S. will be a poorer nation indeed if it alienates those situationally similar refugees that have both helped in the building of this country and who have served in defense of it. This is why Utica remains an important microcosm to study—there are few places where Lebanese Christians, Bosnian Muslims, and Burmese Buddhists can share an appreciation for their welcoming city.

Utica is a living, breathing archive to understand that first wave of Lebanese immigration to the West. While perhaps not exactly how they envisioned it, the hopes and dreams of those first settlers to build something lasting for future generations has been accomplished. It has been accomplished through the encapsulation and perpetuation of their distinct versions of Lebanese spiritual, cultural, and social life. Let us harken back to that pageant this community staged over 100 years ago to celebrate and honor its new home as detailed in the opening of this work. As these pioneering settlers celebrated their joy in this new home and illustrated this by bestowing the glorious mantle of Ancient Utica on the shoulders of their New Utica, so now does it fall to the children of those pioneers to ensure that mantle never falls from her shoulders again.

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