This chapter places Syrian immigration to the United States within a larger Ottoman framework and traces both continuities and discontinuities in patterns of migration into and out of the Arab provinces of the empire. In doing so, I counter the romanticized theory that Syrians immigrated to the Americas because they had a predisposition, or a migratory “trait,” to pursue opportunities beyond Mediterranean shores.\textsuperscript{1} For example, in his 1999 open letter from the Lebanese Ministry of Emigrants, El Emir Talal Majid Arslan linked Lebanese emigration to a heroic Phoenician precedent: “Our ancestors the Phoenicians were the first pioneers to venture the seas. They exchanged science with nations, spread the alphabet from Byblos with Cadmus, geometry from Tyre with Pythagoras, not to mention but two. As good merchants they introduced the market system of bargain trade. A few millennia later, Lebanese reinitiated the same process of migration.”\textsuperscript{2}

For proponents of this theory, the Phoenicians of the first millennium BC were the pioneering emigrants from the land of Syria, the transmitters of a great tradition of movement, migration, and commerce.\textsuperscript{3} They bequeathed their love of adventure, commercial skills, and mercantile “mind” to their nineteenth-century descendants. Georges Moanack, writing in French about the Lebanese emigration to Colombia, South America, made the connection more explicit: “This call [to emigrate,] is it not the voice of the past, a residue of the Phoenician soul that continues to inhabit our souls?”\textsuperscript{4} The promotion of an ancient point of origin is common
in narratives of migration. Spanish Galician immigrants to Buenos Aires, for example, asserted that their impulse to migrate lay in their Celtic warrior roots, and Italians in New York City cast their arrival there as a legacy of the voyages of Christopher Columbus. Linking Lebanese emigration to the ancient Phoenicians also served nationalist purposes, and like much nationalist mythology—Egyptian orientations around the Pharaohs, for example—“Phoenicianism” had its roots in the field of archeology. A series of French archeological digs in the mid-nineteenth century unearthed remnants of old Phoenicia, whose seafaring communities, according to Greek texts, had stretched along the Syrian coast of the Mediterranean from Latakia in the north to Acre in the south. Phoenicia was thus added to the list of interests held by the roving band of Orientalists in Syria who were already busy digging up, categorizing, and collecting other pieces of Syria’s past. Debates on the significance of the French finds were at first limited and mostly antiquarian. Increasingly, however, archeological evidence was put at the service of politics, and in the heady days of World War I a group of Lebanese intellectuals began to conceive of a modern Lebanon independent of Syria and of Arabism. This Lebanon, they argued, was none other than Phoenicia resurrected. By the interwar period, “Phoenicianism” had become an important ideological tool in the construction of a specifically “Lebanese” (as opposed to Syrian) nationality. Its most avid proponents were found in a pro-French Christian milieu, and the Phoenicians represented to them the ancient mold for the westward-looking Lebanese. The symbols of Phoenicianism, “the first boat and the first oar,” for example (employed by Michel Chiha), were especially useful to the financial-mercantile bourgeoisie, who were intent on implementing a political and economic program for a modern merchant republic.  

While still popular among some segments of Lebanese society, the idea that a distinct Lebanese history and nationality is rooted in an ancient Phoenician past has been criticized by many writers as ahistorical and exclusivist. Historian Kamal Salibi argues that “not a single institution or tradition of medieval or modern Lebanon can be legitimately traced back to ancient Phoenicia” and that “Phoenicianism in Christian Lebanese circles developed more as a cult than as a reasoned political theory.” What mattered for Phoenicians, however, was the power of symbols, not evidence, and the westward migration of Syrians to the Americas fit nicely into their vision of a Lebanon that was a natural bridge between East and West. It was the Phoenicians, they argued, who had first harnessed the desire for adventure and set sail from the rocky Mediterranean coast; centuries later, Syrians embarked on a similar journey across the ocean in search of eco-
nomic opportunity. According to this interpretation, the legendary success of the Phoenician trader foreshadowed the story of the Syrian immigrant who became a comfortable store owner in the mahjar. Writing on Syrian business in New York, Salloum Mokarzel noted that “it thrives today in the age of steel and steam and under the shadows of towering Manhattan skyscrapers as it ever did when the first Phoenician ventured across the bilowy main in his wind-driven galleon. . . . Curiously enough, the men supplying this element of romance in American business are the direct descendents of the Phoenicians.”

In short, the Syrian linen and dry goods traders of New York City were the modern incarnation of the Phoenician soap and olive oil merchants of Carthage. The history of Syrian migration to the United States began to be written as a classic “rags to riches” story, and Phoenicianism became a kind of “Mayflowerism”—a mythology of noble and ancient immigrant origins and exaggeration of the successes and contributions to the host societies.

Some Syrian writers of the early twentieth century argued that the Phoenicians were in fact the first to “discover” America. Significantly, and presaging an argument that would be crucial to the construction of Syrian ethnicity in the United States, Mulhim Halim 'Abduh wrote to the Cairo-based Arabic journal al-Hilal from Greenfield, North Carolina, in 1901 claiming that the Phoenicians were the “first Caucasians to land in America.” These arguments would later be used by Lebanese immigrants to claim a non-Arab, non-Turkish identity during periods of heightened twentieth-century nativism, when government officials in Latin America and the United States debated their suitability for assimilation. And they would continue to be used in the twenty-first century to bolster Lebanese pride. In 2006, the Southern Federation of Syrian Lebanese American Clubs held its annual convention in San Antonio, Texas. The most popular presentation was entitled “The Phoenician Discovery of America.” Here audience members learned that Phoenician sailors had landed in present-day Mexico, taught the ancient Maya how to build pyramids, and then returned to their Mediterranean homes. A thrilled listener thanked the presenters and urged them to disseminate the findings widely so that other Americans could learn of the historic achievements of the Lebanese.

As a theory of migration, however, Phoenicianism minimizes the historically specific and changing realities of late-Ottoman Syria. It also obscures the fact that the end-of-the-century transatlantic migration broke with what had been the dominant pattern of migration in the nineteenth century, indeed for most of the Ottoman period: that is, internal migration within and between provinces of the empire. These internal migrations
included seasonal laborers, itinerant merchants, religious pilgrims, and, especially in the Syrian interior, nomadic camel and sheep herders. The wars of the mid-nineteenth century produced another class of persons on the move: refugees. Thus one of the interesting, but often overlooked, developments in the history of nineteenth-century Syrian migration is the transition from internal to international migration. Like European migratory patterns of the nineteenth century, Syrian internal migration is important for the study of transatlantic migration, for it helped establish a grid onto which the latter migration was placed. Immigrants making their way to the Americas, for example, traveled on sea routes that originally linked commercial hubs within the Ottoman Empire, such as Beirut and Alexandria. These routes then expanded to include ports within a wider Atlantic world, notably Marseilles and New York City. In addition, emigrants often had family members who had left the village to find work in the port of Beirut, bringing back with them stories that demystified the city and boasted of the opportunities that it offered. For other workers, moving to Beirut to work in the silk industry allowed them to make enough money to then purchase a ticket for steamship travel overseas. In what follows, I examine internal migration trends in late-Ottoman Syria and assess their impact on the political and economic context out of which migration to the Americas sprang.

OTTOMAN SUBJECTS ON THE MOVE

Prior to the great wave of transatlantic migration in the late nineteenth century, migratory movements in Syria were connected either to Ottoman imperial policies to boost economic output through demographic means or to the dislocation of war. While the central government in Istanbul experimented with forced migration (sürgün) to the Syrian interior, a much more common Ottoman policy was to encourage migration by offering incentives, such as free land or exemption from taxation and military conscription to prospective migrants. The latter was a strategy used for the settlement of frontier areas in Syria situated near the eastern desert line. The groups targeted for these incentives were often embroiled in local disputes, and the Ottoman government viewed relocation as both a strategy for settlement and a means to avoid further conflict. In 1849, for example, a small band of Ismailis, under the leadership of a dissident tribal chief, were enticed to settle in the abandoned fort town of Salamiyya, situated approximately nineteen miles east of the Syrian town of Hama.
Throughout the nineteenth century, the Ottoman central government linked the policy of relocating Ottoman subjects to areas that were underpopulated and in need of cultivation to its goal of increasing the empire’s agricultural output. The revitalization of agriculture was part of a much larger project of military, administrative, and economic reform known as the Tanzimat, or “reorganization.” The problem, however, was one of manpower, and government officials deemed migration (both forced and voluntary) necessary to populate and cultivate unsettled or thinly settled land. In 1857, a new policy on migration and settlement was given imperial sanction, and the high council of the Tanzimat issued a decree that circulated throughout the empire and abroad. The decree promised settlers excellent land, exemption from taxation and military service for six years, and protection under the law.\(^{19}\) According to historian Kemal Karpat’s analysis of the records of the Turkish Foreign Ministry, foreign interest in the Ottoman government’s offer was significant. Italian, Irish, and American families queried Ottoman consuls about the settlement policies,\(^{20}\) and representatives of two thousand families of German origin living in Bessarabia on the Black Sea (then under Russian control) expressed their interest in moving to Ottoman lands and promised that if their demands were received favorably many thousand German families would follow. From New York, the Ottoman consul, J. Oxford Smith, relayed questions asked by Americans who expressed interest in immigration to the empire. He wrote that “there are many industrious, steady men who would like to take up residence in that land, especially Syria and Palestine, if they can obtain land and be protected in the cultivation of it.” He inquired further “whether persons of color who are natives to this country or others are included in these conditions [put forth in the decree].” The foreign minister in Istanbul, Fuat Pasha, replied “yes,” because “the imperial government does not establish any difference of color or other [sic] in this respect.”\(^{21}\)

Despite the favorable terms of the decree, the empire did not receive a deluge of European or American immigrants, and settlement of agricultural lands was accomplished largely through internal migration of Ottoman subjects. What turned out to be rather small movements of people were soon overshadowed by larger internal migrations connected in 1860 to the civil war in Lebanon and in 1878 to expulsion policies implemented by European governments in the wake of “recapturing” Ottoman-controlled territory. Most importantly, the civil war in Lebanon shaped the social, economic, and political context in which Syrian transatlantic migration began.
This war is remembered chiefly as a sectarian conflict that pitted Christian against Druze. Beginning in Mount Lebanon in May 1860, the conflict left thousands dead or exiled from their burned and looted villages. A few weeks later, riots broke out in Damascus, and Muslims ransacked the Christian quarters of a city hitherto accustomed to a high degree of religious cooperation between these two communities. Estimates of the casualties in Damascus vary widely (from five hundred to ten thousand), but it is likely that the devastation matched what had occurred in the battles in Mount Lebanon.  

While early scholarship on Syrian migration argued that the civil war created a climate of insecurity among Christians that precipitated transatlantic migration, more recent scholarship has revised this thesis. The violence did indeed produce a migration that was hugely uprooting and disorienting for the families involved, but the connection to the transatlantic migration of thirty and forty years later was based, not on sectarian violence and fear, but on economic and political developments in the wake of the conflict.

Those who fled the Mountain and Damascus in 1860 were first and foremost refugees, not migrants. They flocked to Beirut, where they hoped to receive shelter and assistance from one of the many relief organizations authorized to help victims of the conflict. The speed at which towns like Zahle and Dayr al-Qamar were rebuilt, however, suggests that refugees returned to their villages in large numbers not only to rebuild but also to collect indemnities promised by the Ottoman central government. Others, less connected to the land, did resettle permanently in Beirut and became part of the town’s growing commercial and educational sectors in the second half of the nineteenth century. Another principal area of resettlement for refugees was the hilly area east of the Hauran plain in the south of present-day Syria. By some accounts, seven thousand Druze families originally from the Shuf immigrated into this area, which, not surprisingly, came to be known as Jabal al-Duruz (Mountain of the Druze).

The migration to Beirut, and its connection to other transformations in the Syrian economy, would prove to be an especially important development. In the second half of the nineteenth century, this once sleepy Ottoman town was fast becoming a bustling commercial port city and a nexus of foreign missionary and consular activity. The new educational institutions in Beirut, for example, were a symbol of the city’s growth, which was fueled by foreign investment, local entrepreneurship, and migration from the Mountain. Every year, thousands of people from the
surrounding areas poured into Beirut, rapidly changing the physical and demographic character of the town. Between 1830 and 1850, Beirut’s population quadrupled, and it doubled again immediately after 1860. Many of the migrants had relocated to the city in the wake of civil strife in the 1850s and 1860, but the size and scope of this migration could not be attributed solely to the episodic outbreaks of factional violence. The composition and pace of this migration were rooted in processes that ran deeper than sectarian differences, and population growth was among the most important. Ottoman Lebanon had one of the highest rates of increase, especially in the two decades after 1860, when peace and security were restored in the area. Charles Issawi estimates a growth rate of between 0.7 and 0.8 percent between 1878 and 1895, meaning that by the close of the nineteenth century the population of Mount Lebanon had reached nearly a quarter-million.

For the Ottoman government population growth was a sign of a healthy subject population, but for the Syrian peasantry it meant increased pressures on the land and an uncertain future. Migration to urban areas was one solution to looming indebtedness and possible displacement due to creditors calling in loans. Like so many other large towns in the Middle East in the second half of the nineteenth century, Beirut began to attract migrants from the countryside. Louis Charles Lortet traveled throughout greater Syria between 1875 and 1880 and published his impressions in a book *Syria of Today: Voyages in Phoenicia, Lebanon and Judea*. Lortet’s account (written in French) is replete with Orientalist tropes and racist epithets. When describing the women in the port city of Latakia, for example, he wrote that “they carefully cover the face with awful cotton scarves....The effect is horrible!” On other matters he was more measured. He noticed the transformations under way in Beirut and remarked that “a constant emigration from the neighboring areas has continually increased the importance of the city.”

The choice of Beirut over other Syrian towns was made on the basis of proximity and ease of travel. Workers could descend from the Mountain fairly easily, and those from the Damascus area could make the journey in one day, thanks to the newly opened Beirut-Damascus road in 1863. The building of the road “guaranteed Beirut’s place as the leading trading and economic center of the region,” and thousands of travelers and tons of goods moved along it each year. Thus the move to Beirut was about opportunity, not only for peasants who found work in the port or in construction, but for skilled artisans and traders who were attracted to the cosmopolitan character and growing prosperity of
Beirut. In terms of internal migration trends, then, the decades follow-
ing the events of 1860, a period described by historian Engin Akarli as
“the long peace,” witnessed a new pattern of migration consisting pri-
marily of Christians, linking the Lebanese hinterland to the growing port
of Beirut.

Less studied is the overwhelmingly Muslim migration connected to
another nineteenth-century war between the Ottoman Empire and its
formidable enemy Russia. The latter resulted in the migration of tens of
thousands of refugees from the Caucasus into the northern and south-
ern portions of Syria. While Christian and Druze families were relo-
cating within a hundred-mile radius of their villages after the events of
1860, for example, a much larger number of people were immigrating
into Syria as part of the chaotic resettlement efforts established in the
wake of the Russian-Ottoman wars of 1853–56 and 1877–78. This mi-
gregation consisted of Muslims from the Crimea, Caucasus, and Balkans—
the casualties of Ottoman defeat and a Russian-styled *reconquista*.

Having refused the Russian offer of immigration into the Russian in-
terior (and conversion to Orthodox Christianity), over one million Mus-
lims left the Caucasus between 1856 and 1864, most of them en route
to Black Sea ports, where they began the journey of resettlement into the
Ottoman Empire. Thousands were dumped at the first Ottoman port
of call, Trabzon (on the Eastern Black Sea, in modern-day Turkey),
where the authorities were ill prepared to deal with a deluge of people in
need of food, lodging, and water. Sickness ran rampant through the
makeshift camps, claiming the lives of migrants at an astonishing rate,
five hundred a day by some estimates. Nearly thirty thousand Circassians
died in Trabzon alone. Those who lived were resettled in Anatolia, Bul-
garia, and Syria, straining slim village resources and inspiring fear among
local inhabitants, who were swayed by stories of Circassian banditry.
In 1878, the cycle of migration began again as tens of thousands of re-
settled Circassians were forced to leave Bulgaria during the province’s
bid for independence. Twenty-five thousand reached southern Syria,
where they revived agriculture in areas like Qunaytra and the Jaulan. Oth-
ers moved further east to occupy and cultivate land along Syria’s desert
fringe, effectively becoming a buffer against the marauding Bedouin.
There was also considerable Circassian settlement in the north in the
province of Aleppo and along the desert line stretching from the northern
frontier all the way to Amman, where Circassians had first found shelter
in the ruins of the deserted Roman theater.
In terms of large-scale Ottoman population movements, the Circassian immigration into different provinces of the Ottoman Empire in the 1860s and 1870s preceded Syrian transatlantic emigration. Moreover, the movement of peoples associated with the Lebanese civil war of 1860 and the Russian Ottoman wars of the next two decades established the mechanisms of travel that facilitated the Syrian migration to the Americas at the end of the century.

Both the Circassian and Mount Lebanon migrations were initially instigated by violence and warfare, and while it is tempting to focus on these events because they generated a disproportionate amount of documentation we should remember that thousands of Syrians migrated for more prosaic reasons. Damascus, for example, received periodic waves of seasonal laborers who moved back and forth between their villages and the city regularly. Syrian émigré writer Abraham Rihbany recalled in his memoirs how the majority of male inhabitants from his village of al-Shwayr left each year between spring and late autumn to ply their trade as stonemasons. Internal migration also represented an opportunity for upward mobility within the empire, which, despite a Byzantine complexity, was unified, particularly in the urban areas, by a shared Ottoman culture. The Syrian migration to Egypt, for example, represented a “career migration” in which educated Syrians relocated to pursue work opportunities in the more dynamic and open environments of Cairo and Alexandria. Underlying the migration from the countryside to the city was a deeper transformation in the economy of Lebanon that would ultimately link what had been an internal migration system to an international one: the incorporation of Lebanon into a capitalist world economy. This precipitated changes in village life and ultimately shaped a new pattern of migration at the end of the nineteenth century consisting of peasant cultivators and small-scale traders. Nowhere was this incorporation more clear, and nowhere were the effects on migration more stark, than in the silk industry.

SILK AND THE REORIENTATION OF THE ECONOMY IN SYRIA

Changes in the methods and rates of production of silk in Syria were directly related to the growth of the industry in France. By the 1830s, demand for silk in Europe was extraordinarily high and the French silk industry was booming. French sericulturalists were eager to expand their
base of operation, yet they were not so eager to pay the wages their workers were demanding. A few enterprising investors, making use of their connections to Levantine merchants, began to build filatures (the factories where cocoons are rendered into silk thread) in Syria in areas where a local culture of silk production existed. The intervention was tentative at first, but within a decade new filatures with basins heated by steam instead of wood were springing up on the Mountain. A decisive shift in levels of Syrian silk production occurred in the 1850s, when disease devastated the silkworms in France. Foreign cocoons were urgently needed, and investment in Syrian-produced cocoons doubled, then quickly tripled. Syrian peasants turned increasingly to the cultivation of mulberry trees, the staple of the silkworm diet. By the 1890s, 90 percent of the cultivable land in Mount Lebanon was taken over for the planting of this hardy, broad-leafed tree, and cocoons became a cash crop in an industry oriented toward the demand of France.

In fact, at every level—from production to distribution—the Syrian silk industry depended on France. In 1911, Gaston Ducousso, attaché of the French consulate general in Beirut, conveyed the extent of this reorientation in his detailed study of Syrian sericulture. He described the industry as one that, “by the multiplicity of its connections to ours, has become French [naturalisée], to the extent that we can now rank Syria right after our own silk-producing areas.”

The dramatic expansion of the Syrian silk industry would have been hard for a traveler arriving in Beirut in the last quarter of the nineteenth century to miss. Sacks of raw silk were weighed and then shuttled out to ships waiting to make the journey to Marseilles or Lyons. In and around the port itself, merchants bought and sold cocoons as well as silk thread, which was twisted into huge glistening braids called shilal. Making her way out of Beirut toward the Mountain, the traveler would have seen one of the largest silk-reeling factories in Syria, owned by Doumani Habib. If she got close enough, she might have smelled the foul odor that emanated from the site, a particularly potent combination of discarded and decaying chrysalides and the gluelike substance embedded in the cocoons by the silkworms. Smaller factories dotted the Mountain, and inside them young girls worked in oppressive steam and heat for thirteen hours a day. The ugliness of the work environment paradoxically matched the intense beauty of the Mountain’s fertile terraces, which overflowed with mulberry trees. And all of this was linked to a less obvious but nonetheless ubiquitous web of exchanges between Beirut, the hinterland of the city, and Europe.
European investors had pioneered the mechanization of silk reeling in Mount Lebanon, but local entrepreneurs quickly invested in different phases of production and distribution. Beiruti merchants, for example, became the owners of silk-reeling factories financed by creditors in Lyons. Some of them, like the Bassouls (Bassul) and Pharaons (Far’un), also owned local banks that enabled them to build factories, finance the export of silk, and extend credit to local cultivators.49 These merchants were the backbone of an emerging bourgeoisie in Beirut. They were men whose everyday world involved the interplay of local premodern custom and cosmopolitan modernity. It was a world forged out of a specific conjuncture of population growth, migration, and foreign investment; but it was also a world made possible by an Ottoman government committed to an ambitious, but ultimately misguided, program of reform.

It was, after all, the reformist zeal of Tanzimat administrators that facilitated the massive European intervention into the affairs of the Ottoman economy. With grand plans to modernize the military, the Ottoman government had quickly turned to foreign advisors, and military and political support came (as is so often the case) with strings attached. In the case of British assistance, this was made abundantly clear in the 1838 Anglo-Turkish Commercial Convention, which reduced internal duties and outlawed the use of monopolies. Other European governments demanded similar arrangements, and between 1838 and 1841 the Ottomans signed free-trade treaties with France and Russia. The Ottoman government then introduced a new commercial code based on French practice, which was designed to ensure that commercial transactions in the empire, and especially those involving foreign interests, would be conducted according to French law. The enactment of the code was accompanied by the establishment of commercial courts for the settlement of business-related disputes between Ottoman and European subjects.50 Finally, the Ottoman government’s stupendous debt gave British and French entrepreneurs a field of opportunity that made earlier favorable trading agreements granted by the Ottomans (known as the Capitulations) look positively protectionist. European merchants would have thought twice about investing in Syria had their governments not secured important commercial concessions from the Ottomans, although, as the landing of a French military force in Beirut in August 1860 (ostensibly to help, as Napoleon III instructed the troops, “the Sultan bring back to obedience subjects blinded by a fanaticism from another century”) would clearly show, the use of military might did much to boost their confidence.51

From Internal to International Migration

---

Copyrighted Material
The administrative reorganization of Mount Lebanon in the wake of the 1860 civil war was a clear example of the interplay of Ottoman reformist principles, foreign intervention, and local interests. The central government agreed to the implementation of a new political framework that effectively granted the Mountain a semiautonomous status. Called the mutasarrifiyya, this new Ottoman governorate was to be headed by a Christian, appointed by and responsible to the central government in Istanbul. The details of the Mountain’s physical and political remapping were enshrined in a constitutional document called the “Règlement et protocole relatifs à la reorganization du Mont-Liban,” signed in 1861 and guaranteed by five European powers. The basic aim of the document, which was issued in the form of an imperial decree expressing the sultan’s sadness “over the recurrence of troubles in Mount Lebanon,” was to outline a set of changes that would guarantee peace and prosperity to the people of the mutasarrifiyya. Chief among these changes was the attack on “feudal” privileges, which were blamed for the unrest of 1860. In this regard, the Règlement was quite effective, as Mount Lebanon became the only place within the empire where tax farming was abolished.

The success of the Ottoman reform policy was mixed. The judicial and political reorganization of the Mountain, for example, facilitated the rapid expansion of the silk industry, but in ways that were ultimately precarious for peasant cultivators. The 1860s had seemed like good years for the people who planted the mulberry trees, fed the silkworms, harvested eggs, and cared for the cocoons. International silk prices were high, as was the demand for Syrian silk. During this phase of expansion peasants used the extensive financial network associated with the silk industry and borrowed heavily to expand their areas of cultivation. The boom was short-lived, however. In the 1870s, disease ravaged the silkworms and the mulberry trees, and the Syrian silk industry faced the first of many crises since its incorporation into the world economy. The industry around Beirut was dealt a devastating blow, and observers wondered whether it could ever recover. Prices paid for Syrian cocoons dropped from 42 piasters per oka in 1865 to 15.5 in 1876, and despite fluctuations over the next two decades prices never again reached the highs of the 1860s. The importation of cocoons from abroad briefly remedied the situation, but the Syrian industry had a harder time competing with silks from the Far East, which became, after the opening of the Suez Canal in 1869, more readily available on the international market.
The Syrian silk industry was turning out to be far more fragile than its enthusiastic supporters had envisioned at its beginning. The hardest hit by the falling international prices were the cultivators who had borrowed money to purchase silkworm eggs at exorbitant interest rates, only to sell the developed cocoons six months later at a loss, still owing the original creditor. Others, like the inhabitants of Zahle, who were not directly involved in silk production but whose market town depended on the surplus generated by the industry, were also affected. They were among the first to pursue a new opportunity to make money: overseas migration.

CROSSING THE WATERS: THE BEGINNINGS OF A DIASPORA

The changing character of the port of Beirut played a major role in the dramatic increase in Syrian transatlantic migration. Newly rebuilt in 1894, it was made more accessible to steamships and the operations associated with steamship travel, such as ticket agents and telegraph services. The use of advertising in a flourishing local press was also an important tool for those engaged in the immigrant trade. Syrian, Egyptian, and mahjar papers carried ads announcing fares, travel times, and cargo services. The Pharaon brothers, Mikhail and Taufail, representatives of the French company Frasinet, took out huge ads announcing the advantages of traveling on their steamboats, including the fact that those steamboats took only six days to reach Marseilles. The Pharaon family was, as noted above, a banking family that had prospered during the height of the silk industry. By the end of the nineteenth century, members of the family had redirected their activities into the business of overseas migration and were fast becoming representatives of a transnational bourgeoisie.

Histories of migration typically begin with the story of pioneers, the first persons to chart a path that others would follow. Narratives of Syrian immigration to the United States are no different. They describe the World’s Fairs in Philadelphia (1876), Chicago (1893), and St. Louis (1904) as the magnet that drew the first wave of immigrants across the waters to a new life in the mahjar. At the fairs, these pioneers sold wares from the “Holy Land” (such as small crosses, rosaries, and holy water) to thousands of fair-goers intrigued by the “people from the East.” They then began to peddle these wares, and other household goods, beyond the fairgrounds. In this way, peddlers acquired savings that they channeled into the purchase of small stores, the economic pillars of the first...
Syrian communities in the United States. The success of these early pioneers initiated an “emigration fever” in Syria, and thousands of young men and women left their villages to pursue their dream of making money in Amirkā.61

Syrians did indeed participate in the Philadelphia, Chicago, and St. Louis fairs, but the significance of the fairs as a major “pull” factor in their immigration to the United States has been exaggerated. It is not clear, for example, that the Syrian participants at the Chicago fair became immigrants or worked beyond the venue of the fair. They were employed by Ottoman entrepreneurs who organized the Ottoman exhibit on the Midway Plaisance—the section of the fair reserved for reproductions of the “habitations, manners and customs of remote peoples.”62 The Ottoman exhibit contained numerous reproductions of “Turkish” daily life, from the mosque of the Hagia Sofia to the embroideries, carpets, and silverware of the grand bazaar.63 A New York Times article announced the arrival of “247 Syrians, Arabs, and Turks” as a “Living Oriental Exhibit.” “One of the features of the Oriental exhibit,” the article continued, “will be a realistic representation of an attack on Bedouins upon a caravan. The Syrian women who accompany the hippodrome will allow themselves to be daily abducted by Bedouins and daily rescued by their dusky friends.”64 The manager of the popular “Turkish Village and Theatre” was R. J. Levi, a well-known caterer from Istanbul who recruited Syrian actors for the daily shows in the theater.65 The billing for the shows was carefully worded to appeal to a Christian audience, promising to represent “all the features of social and domestic life among the inhabitants of the . . . places and sections famous in sacred and profane history.”66

We know of several individual Syrians who took part in the exhibits of the Midway Plaisance. Milhim Ouardy from the Lebanese town of Dayr al-Qamar, and a dragoman by profession, participated as a swordsman, not in the Turkish Theatre, but in the adjacent Moorish Palace. This display was immensely popular among fair-goers because of its “dancing girls” (two of whom were Ottoman Jews from Jerusalem and Beirut respectively). Another Syrian from Mount Lebanon, Prince Mere Hemcy (probably Mir Homsi), was admired as “a fearless rider” for “his feats of daring horsemanship at the Wild East Show,” qualities, the observer noted, “for which his race is noted.”67 Still another was Mere Alli Harfush, whose photo is in a published collection of portraits of participants in the exhibits of the Midway Plaisance. The caption under the

Copyrighted Material
photo reads: “He comes from a spot which is one of the most mysterious places on the globe, where the ruins of the great City of Baalbec still stand and where the columns of the Temple of the Sun challenge the curiosity and wonder of the world, for they were built at a period which antedates history.”

Given the journalistic interest in the Syrian participants at the fair, it is possible that their presence had a greater impact on the development of American Orientalism than on patterns of migration. Moreover, viewing these participants as pioneers in the history of Syrian immigration to the United States misses the more complex transnational
dimensions of their lives. As Mae Ngai argues for the Chinese participants at the Chicago fair, the businessmen and migrant artists involved in presenting aspects of their culture did so with the goal of boosting international trade and cross-country exchanges. They were not merely quaint curiosities and objects of a “one-way white gaze” but active subjects in an entrepreneurial undertaking that drew on their extensive experience in other contact zones: homeland port cities (like Beirut) and international fairs (such as the Paris Exposition of 1889). These nuances account for the fact that the “Oriental” exhibits were not always viewed through the lens of American imperial arrogance. An article in the Nation on the “Turkish Restaurant” at the Philadelphia Exposition, for ex-

Figure 3. Mere Alli Harfush, participant in the Chicago World’s Fair, 1893.
ample, noted that “perhaps the most singular feeling the place gives you, after contrasting the urbanity and affability of those in charge with the general rudeness and brutality of the crowd[,] is that they are really the civilized people and we the barbarians.”

The success of the Chicago fair in particular was certainly one of the many pieces of information that Syrians used to shape their ideas about America, but it was not necessarily the most important. Syrians had already established an enclave on Washington Street in New York City before the Chicago fair began, and new arrivals made greater use of the networks there than in Chicago. There was a Chicago community, but it was sizable enough before 1893 to suggest that the Syrians had been drawn to Chicago for reasons other than the fair. Moreover, by 1891, there were sizable Syrian communities in Boston, Wooster, Cleveland, Detroit, Toledo, Saint Paul, and Minneapolis, to name a few, all cities chosen by Syrians for their economic potential and not because of the fairs.

An overemphasis on the role of the fairs and the depiction of the United States as a beacon to which migrants headed also obscures the fact that there were substantial migrant flows to other parts of the Americas, particularly to Argentina and Brazil. In 1889, for example, Argentina received three times as many emigrants from “Turkey in Asia” (the majority of whom were Syrians) than the United States, and while Syrian immigration to the United States surpassed that of Argentina during the late 1890s and early 1900s, the trend was soon reversed. Indeed, during the peak years of Syrian immigration to the United States, beginning in 1905, arrivals in Argentina were consistently higher, sometimes as much as double—a trend that was due in part to the fact that immigrants to Latin America did not have to undergo the stringent health tests that forced many of them away from the United States. In addition, Syrian immigrants took advantage of incentives offered by the Argentinean government, such as free lodging upon arrival in the port of Buenos Aires.

While official figures for Brazil are spotty for the late nineteenth century, Ottoman sources point to the early and sustained migration of Syrians to this republic. A widely publicized religious pilgrimage to Christian holy places in Syria by Brazilian emperor Dom Pedro II in 1876–77 helped pique initial interest, especially after he touted the work opportunities in his country. Within the next ten years, thousands of Syrians had left to pursue the emperor’s promise of employment. Ottoman diplomatic sources estimated that there were twenty thousand Syrians in
Brazil by the end of the nineteenth century. Typical of Syrian migrants throughout the Americas, they sent money home to their families, often remigrated back to Syria, and opened up their villages to a new world of goods, language, and customs. Philip Hitti, for example, described the turn-of-the-century town of Zahle as full of Portuguese speakers whose connection to Brazil would later be inscribed in the town’s principal road, “Rua Brasil.” Syrians returning from South America introduced the ritual of drinking mate (the tealike drink common in Brazil) into the daily life of friends and family. Emigrants also brought with them less tangible items, as was the case in 1896 when scarlet fever appeared for the first time in Mount Lebanon, brought by returnees from America.

The decision to emigrate from Syria could not have been easy for these early migrants. Although intense competition between steamship lines lowered ticket prices over time, purchasing a ticket and other expenses related to travel still made the cost of the voyage prohibitive for prospective emigrants. They were vulnerable at every stage of the journey, especially in the ports, where the services of middlemen were needed to evade the Ottoman authorities, since emigration from the empire was technically illegal. Emigrants routinely circumvented the official ban on emigration by relying on smugglers to get them onto ships bound for western Europe. Elizabeth Beshara remembered hiding out for over a week along the northern Lebanese coast at Batroun, waiting for smugglers to take her family and over fifty others out to a ship. Her exasperated father finally decided to attempt the departure from the port of Beirut, which involved yet another series of expenditures and payoffs. She arrived with her father, stepmother, and sister in Toledo, Ohio, in 1893.

Most emigrants saved for years and borrowed or sold their possessions to pay for the journey. While some surely left knowing that they would not return, the vast majority believed that their sojourn abroad would be brief but rewarding. In the hope of ensuring this, emigrants leaving the village of Rashayya tied a strip of their clothing to a tree that was on the footpath leading out of the village as an omen for good fortune abroad and safe return. The tree became so laden with small pieces of cloth that it came to be known as the “Tree of Rags.”

For those who had borrowed heavily, especially if they had mortgaged their land, the primary objective in the first few months of their migration was to pay the lender back. Mikha’il Nu’ayma, for example, remembered that in his village of Biskinta relatives of emigrants would routinely answer the question “How is your son/husband doing?” with
either “Praise God! He sent the passage money [al-nawalun]” or simply “He still hasn’t sent it.” After this debt was paid, emigrants hoped they would soon return to the homeland with more cash in hand. Yusuf Zakham, a resident of Lincoln, Nebraska, and a frequent contributor to the Arabic-language press in the United States, argued in 1910 that for this reason Syrians abroad should be called, not immigrants, but “travelers” (musafirun). “If you ask a Syrian in North or South America whether he has emigrated from Syria, he will reply, ‘Absolutely not. I am away from her for a while. I left [nazahtu] in search of wealth, and when I succeed I will return to my homeland.’” The expectation that earnings would be put to use in communities of origin helped emigrants endure the difficulties associated with the journey to the Americas. No adequate figures for return migration exist for this period, but it is clear from oral histories and written memoirs that many emigrants did make return trips to Syria, often many times over. They certainly bought land, and so rapidly that prices in the mutasarrifiyya (governorate of Mount Lebanon) rose exponentially.

Ottoman government officials were aware of this new emigration wave and tried in various ways to control it. In the late 1880s, letters from the governors of Mount Lebanon and Beirut to Istanbul revealed a growing unease at the tide of “Lebanese” emigration. Ottoman officials were not only alarmed by the size of the emigration from Mount Lebanon but also troubled by the clandestine methods of travel. In collaboration with the governors of Mount Lebanon and Beirut, they attempted to deal with the problem of illegal emigration in a variety of ways. They handed down stricter punishments for smugglers and travel agents in the hope of curtailing the illicit traffic of emigrants. The coast was, for a short time, patrolled with greater frequency, and Ottoman government officials appealed to foreign governments to assist in the regulation of travel abroad. None of these measures proved effective, however, because of the ambiguity of the existing laws. While emigration was technically forbidden for political and moral reasons (the government was concerned about opposition movements organizing in the diaspora but also worried over the hardships that Ottoman subjects faced at different stages of their migration), emigrants could acquire an internal travel permit without much difficulty. This permit allowed them to travel to a port of departure within the empire—such as Alexandria, Egypt—from which they would embark for a European port. Ottoman officials realized that the tide of emigration would be stopped only by
one of two measures: draconian enforcement of stricter travel laws or a radical improvement of the economic situation in Mount Lebanon. The second was the most attractive but also the most elusive. Emigration actually benefited the Mountain economically through substantial remittances from abroad. By 1900, Noël Verney and George Dambmann estimated that Lebanese emigrants sent between 2.5 and 3.5 million francs home each year.\textsuperscript{89} Emigrant earnings often went into the purchase of land, although by the end of the nineteenth century they were more obviously displayed in houses with red-tile roofs and in the consumer goods associated with a burgeoning middle class.\textsuperscript{90} In what would become a pattern throughout Lebanon, emigrants from Zahle contributed to the building of a new hospital in their hometown in 1908.\textsuperscript{91}

Lifting restrictions altogether, however, presented another set of concerns. This could encourage Muslim peasants to leave, a strategy that many had already contemplated since the extension of military conscription into areas of Syria previously unaccustomed to service. The large-scale departure of Muslims at a time when the central government in Istanbul needed recruits for the army and was consciously trying to enhance its image as the supreme Islamic power would compromise its legitimacy. Despite these reservations, the government made the decision in 1898 to allow the “Lebanese” to travel freely, provided they pledged to retain Ottoman citizenship. The liberalization of emigration policy, however, did not radically change the methods of travel. The network of middlemen was entrenched in the economy of Beirut, and they continued to dominate the migration trade. Abuse and exploitation of emigrants continued. Ten years after the reform in Ottoman policy, a group of Syrians formally petitioned the Ottoman consul in Washington, D.C., to help protect emigrants from unscrupulous officials and rapacious middlemen in Beirut, as well as in the main ports of call in the journey to the United States.\textsuperscript{92}

\section*{Gender and Religion of First-Wave Immigrants}

The authors of the petition were especially concerned about the abuse of female travelers and the elderly. By 1908, when the petition was drafted, women had become a significant portion of the Syrian migration flow into the United States. Between 1899 and 1914—corresponding to the peak years of Syrian migration to the United States—women made up 32 percent of the total, a high figure especially in relation to other Mediterranean immigrant groups. Southern Italian women, for example, made
up 21 percent of the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century migration from Italy. Even in the two years preceding the outbreak of World War I, when Syrian men left in greater numbers than in previous years to avoid conscription into the Ottoman army, women were still a significant portion (5,665 out of 18,233) of the total number of arrivals to the United States.

Many of these women arrived as the wives or fiancées of men who had preceded them. Oral histories of Syrian immigrant men and women relate how elder female relatives orchestrated matches and sent daughters, nieces, and cousins of marriageable age off to the United States to meet up with marriage partners. Essa Samara, for example, was preparing to marry an American woman he had met in Manchester, New Hampshire, when his mother intervened and sent him a bride from his village. The young woman arrived in New York in the company of Essa’s sister, and although the voyage and the medical inspection at Ellis Island had terrified her, the idea of marrying a man she had seldom, if ever, set eyes on may not have troubled her. Essa was doing well. He had a house, knew a fair amount of English, and could promise a degree of comfort that was above what the young woman had known in Syria. For Sultana Alkazin, however, the reunion with her husband was a bitter one. She arrived in Philadelphia in 1901 with her three children, only to find that he had a mistress and expected them all to live together with him. Sultana refused, left her husband, and eventually moved to Atlantic City, where she sold linens on the boardwalk.

While the literature on Syrian migration views marriage to a male emigrant as the most logical explanation for the arrival of Syrian women in the United States in the three decades before World War I, there is considerable evidence to support other explanations and to suggest that the chain migration thesis, in which the first link is a young, unmarried male, needs significant revision. The 1930 U.S. Census, for example, shows that 16.1 percent of the Syrian female population over fifteen years old were widowed and 9.9 percent were single. These widows could have been the wives of men who came during the peak years of Syrian immigration to the United States, but this would assume an abnormally high mortality rate among their husbands. The relatively large number of widows in the census might more accurately reflect the lives of women like Martha Cammel, who arrived in the United States as a widow operating outside the traditional chain migration paradigm. Martha, a widow from Beirut, was preceded not by a husband or son but by several daughters whom she had sent ahead of her to the mahjar. When she had saved
Figure 4. Sultana Alkazin, her unnamed husband, and her son Fred in Beirut, ca. 1887. Photo courtesy of Faris and Yamna Naff Arab-American Collection, Archives Center, National Museum of American History, Behring Center, Smithsonian Institution.
Figure 5. Sultana Alkazin, Atlantic City, early to mid-1900s. Photo courtesy of Faris and Yamna Naff Arab-American Collection.
enough money, she too made the journey. On the way over, she met twenty-year-old Amen Soffa from Douma, Syria, who had left his five-acre vineyard in the care of his sister. The travelers must have kept in touch because in 1902 Amen married Martha’s oldest daughter Nazera, and they settled on a ten-acre parcel of land bought with Amen’s earnings from ten years of peddling between Lacrosse, Wisconsin, and Greenleaf, Minnesota.

Annie Midlige (née Tabsharani), also a widow from Beirut, emigrated two years after Martha in 1894. Annie had made her first big move at the age of eighteen when she left her village of Dhour al-Shwayr to work in Beirut’s largest silk factory. Twelve years later, a widow with four children, she sailed to New York City. She then pushed on to Ottawa, Canada, made contact with suppliers there, and moved northeast to establish herself as one of the most successful independent traders in the Quebec interior. She reached beyond existing outposts to trade with Indian populations and became a fierce competitor to the powerful Hudson’s Bay Company. Alarmed at her encroachment into the Hudson Bay Company’s fur-trading territory, one company inspector wrote in his report that “opposition has been creeping nearer and nearer every year by way of the Gatineau [River] in the shape of a woman, Mrs. Medlege [sic].”

The migration of Syrian women in the first decades of the twentieth century appears to have combined two patterns noticeable in the migration streams studied by Donna Gabaccia in her work on Italian immigrant women: first, a family strategy to preserve subsistence production as a way of life; and, second, a migration of young wage earners drawn simultaneously by the American side of an international market for their labor and by a “marriage market” that offered new prospects for family formation under changing circumstances. The second pattern characterized the migration of Selma Nimee, who worked in a Syrian-owned kimono factory in Chicago, and by Margaret Malooley, who emigrated at the age of twenty to join her father and with the aim of working to pay the passage from Syria for her mother, brother, and sister. Margaret peddled goods in Spring Valley, Illinois, until she married and then continued to supplement her husband’s income by selling her tatting, embroidery, and lace. Despite her husband’s early death, “with my work” and the money he left her, she noted, “we didn’t need anyone’s help—not the government’s.”

As in other migration systems—the Mexican, for example—the decision to emigrate was made in the interest of the family and was charac-
terized by a high degree of flexibility—a necessary quality in a rapidly changing homeland economy. Most often the husband was the first link in the chain, but it was not uncommon for single or widowed women to be pioneers who entered the U.S. labor market as seamstresses and peddlers. Many had been exposed to wage labor in Syria or had already maintained the household in the absence of a spouse or male relative.

Proportionately, Mount Lebanon sent the greatest number of emigrants from Syria, both female and male, abroad. The most reliable statistics estimate that over one-fourth the population left for the Americas and Africa between 1885 and 1914. There were also sizable emigrations from other Syrian areas, particularly the Qalamoun (Yabroud, Nebik, Dayr 'Atiya), Homs, Safita, and Suweida regions. Karpat estimated that 320,000 Syrians emigrated in the years between 1881 and 1901, a figure that would represent approximately one-sixth the total population of Syria.

The question of how many of these emigrants entered the United States is answered with widely diverging numbers. The U.S. Immigration Commission claimed that 56,909 Syrians had entered the country between 1899 and 1910, while the Thirteenth Census of 1910, under the category of “foreign stock” of Syrian origin, gave a figure of 46,727 persons. Syrian community estimates were much higher, sometimes three times that of the census. Part of the reason for the inaccuracy of U.S. government statistics lies in the fact that Syrians were not distinguished from other Ottoman subjects until 1899. Also, many Syrians, afraid of being turned away at Ellis Island as carriers of the infectious eye disease trachoma, entered the United States via Mexico or Canada, thereby avoiding registration as immigrants. Louise Houghton’s 1911 study of Syrian immigrants supplemented U.S. government figures with community estimates to reach a figure of over 100,000. The 1920 U.S. Census counted 51,900 Syrians as part of the “foreign-born white population.”

The other important government sources of information on the Syrian community in the United States (and forty-five other countries) are the French consular reports sent to the Ministère des affaires étrangères shortly after France assumed the Mandate over Syria and Lebanon in 1920. These reports consist of population surveys of the Syrian migrants in French consular districts, but like U.S. statistics their quality and accuracy vary. The French were interested primarily in emigrants who
registered for French protection. The number of those who did not was often a product of educated guesswork and information furnished by leaders of the community. Moreover, the reports were completed at different dates, making it difficult to “freeze” the number of migrants in one place and at one time. Adding the totals of the reports submitted between 1921 and 1931 yields a figure of 143,980 persons, significantly smaller than the number proposed by Philip Hitti, who argued that the number of Syrians in the United States had reached 200,000 in 1924.

Syrian immigrants of this first wave of migration were overwhelmingly Christian, and the areas of heaviest concentration were in the Northeast and Midwest. New York City was their “mother colony,” and the city served as a hub for the Syrian community for several decades. The earliest Syrian immigrants to New York forged an economic niche in the peddling trade, with the more prosperous among them setting up supply shops along Washington Street on the Lower West Side. For many Syrian immigrants, this busy avenue was their first stop after going through the arduous immigration processing at Castle Garden and later, when it was opened in 1892, Ellis Island. They found along Washington Street a network of co-ethnics who facilitated their transition to working life in the United States. Pack peddling drew a steady stream of Syrian immigrants to New York, and they busied themselves selling household items and curios from the “Holy Land” to buyers in the city and elsewhere. Syrian wholesale suppliers were central figures in the peddling circuits, becoming, in many cases, members of a trade diaspora with branches of their businesses in New York City and other points along the transatlantic route to the Americas. By the early twentieth century, the variety of businesses along Washington Street and Broadway Avenue was extensive. A survey of the advertising sections in the early Arabic-language press in New York indicates the presence of stores selling a range of goods including sewing machines, coffee, Arabic music, phonographs, and linens. Syrian silk merchants revived their trade in the city and tapped into a growing consumer interest in silk goods. Washington Street soon housed thirty-five Syrian manufactures of kimonos. Other textile manufacturers focused on the production of woolen knits. In the mid-1920s, one in three sweaters worn in New York was produced by the firm of N. P. and J. Trabulsi.

As the community grew and prospered, many members moved from the Lower West Side to Brooklyn to purchase homes and businesses and to establish religious institutions there. Lucius Miller’s comprehensive
1904 study of the Greater New York community found Melkites (Greek Catholics) in the majority, followed by the Maronites, Eastern Orthodox, and a much smaller number of Protestants. Out of a total population of 2,482 persons, there were only seven Muslims and approximately one hundred Syrian Jews. The U.S. Census of 1910 revealed that there were just over 6,000 persons born in “Turkey in Asia” living in New York City, the vast majority of whom would have been Syrian. As the names of some of the “Syrian”-owned businesses indicate (Parkyan and Narian, for example), there were also a good number of Arabic-speaking Armenians in the community, most probably from the cities of Aleppo and Damascus.

The Syrian colony in New York generated the earliest American representations of a Middle Eastern immigrant community. Indeed, despite its relatively small size, the Syrian enclave on the Lower West Side drew a number of journalists, scholars, and tourists to its midst. Given the American fascination with the Orient, this curiosity is hardly surprising. Observers of the Syrian colony appeared to graph their encounters with the Syrian population there onto already formed ideas of Eastern mystery and religiosity. E. Lyell Earle noted in his lengthy article entitled “Foreign Types of New York Life” that the Syrian colony, “while fairly clean,” supported a number of “Turkish restaurants,” at which a meal would be “an ordeal few Americans can undergo.” While Earle suggested that his digestive system rebelled against the seasoning of Syrian food, we are left wondering whether he indulged in what he called the “mysterious hubble-bubble,” which produced, at least among the Syrians, a “supremely soothing effect.”

One also finds in the early descriptions of the Syrians in New York the idea that they exist along a color continuum. A New York Times article on the Syrian enclave around Washington Street noted that “a good many of them are easily distinguishable by a rather dark complexion, and might by some be taken for Italians or Frenchmen from the South of France, but not a few are of quite light complexion, with light-colored hair.”

These representations objectified the Syrian community and generally marked it as foreign and Other, but they did not go unchallenged. Cromwell Childe, for example, noted in his 1899 article that these “same colonies are by no means haunts of Asiatic mystery and seductions.” He chastised another writer for fabricating a “theatric Syrian quarter [with] red-fezzed heads, and languorous eyes.” “It is foreign, quaint, interest-
ing,” Childe continued, “but not in the manner the tale-tellers scribble about it.” Childe objected to some of the more fanciful depictions of the Syrian quarter, but he did not restrain himself from exaggeration when describing poor immigrants of the colony: “The lower class, men and women alike, have little that is attractive about them. They have been called the dirtiest people in all New York [and] the women here have no beauty of either face or form.” In contrast, the “well-off Orientals” impressed Childe greatly. He noted that Michael Kaydouh, owner of Sahadi’s wholesale shop, “save for his olive skin and his cast of features, scarcely seems a Syrian at all. His English is pure and he has little foreign accent.” Childe had difficulty recognizing Kaydouh’s cosmopolitanism as Syrian, but this merchant typified an emerging transnational bourgeoisie who cleverly exploited American’s desire to “shop the Orient” by rapidly producing carpets, fine silks, and lace. The purchase of these goods, combined with attendance at wildly popular Oriental-themed plays and films such as The Arab (1915) and The Sheik (1921), starring Rudolph Valentino, allowed Americans to access feelings of reverie, release, and sensual pleasure that they associated with the East and to break with the constraints of nineteenth-century Protestant piety.

A 1924 article on the Syrian colony in New York, for example, began in this way: “To one just come from the Occident, a descent upon the Syrian quarters in New York is like a dream travel.... Take the Sixth Ave. Elevated at Forty-second Street... and in a few minutes you are in Rector Street, walk a block westward to Washington Street, and you are in Syria.”

By the turn of the second decade of the twentieth century, Syrians had settled far beyond the New York colony and could be found in every state of the United States. While the prototypical experience of early Syrians was peddling, other niches attracted them as well and help explain their geographical concentrations. Mill owners in Massachusetts, for example, hired Syrian laborers, many of whom participated in the “Bread and Roses” strike in Lawrence in 1912. A Boston Globe article reporting on the strike noted that “people of 51 nationalities, speaking 45 languages could be found.... The Irish came first, then the Germans, English and French-Canadians, then the real flood—Italians, Greeks, Syrians, Poles, Lithuanians, Eastern Europeans... after almost seventy-five years of submissions—23,000 of those workers stuck against unfair wage cuts and oppressive conditions.” Like other working-class immigrants, some Syrians were drawn to Henry Ford’s promise of five dollars a day. By 1916, 555 Syrian men were working at the Ford car plants...
Figure 6. Pie chart of Syrian communities in the United States, based on 1920 census.
in Dearborn, Michigan. Over time, the Syrian community in metropolitan Detroit surpassed that of Greater New York in terms of diversity, concentration, and institutional complexity. In 1920, according to the U.S. Census, the top five areas of Syrian settlement were New York, Detroit, Boston, Chicago, and Cleveland. While the first wave of Syrian immigrants was predominantly Christian, more research needs to be done on the sectarian breakdown of this population. In New York Maronites formed the largest religious sect, but in other communities the situation was different. In Worcester, Massachusetts, for example, the Antiochian Orthodox constituted the majority, and in Ross, North Dakota, the Syrian immigrant population was primarily Muslim. Communities in the South tended to be Greek Catholic and Maronite, although there were sizable numbers of Russian and Antiochian Orthodox as well.

The Syrian emigration to the Americas was one of several large-scale migrations changing the demographic makeup of greater Syria in the last quarter of the nineteenth century. As this chapter has argued, transatlantic migration began, not as a flight from the oppression of the Ottoman regime, nor as the expression of an intrinsic migratory trait bequeathed to the Syrians by the Phoenicians, but as a response to the changing economic organization of the Syrian coast and its immediate hinterland. Transatlantic migration became a possibility because of the way that Syria (and especially Mount Lebanon) had become integrated into a capitalist world economy. Once started, emigration from Syria produced a dynamic of its own, or, as Elie Safa succinctly summarized the phenomenon, “L’émigration sollicite l’émigration.” But this dynamic must be disentangled from larger transformations in the Syrian economy, which both encouraged transatlantic emigration and made it possible.

Situating the beginnings of the Syrian migration to the Americas within a world economy perspective does not mean that individual migrants lacked agency and were caught in a system over which they had no control. It took courage to embark on a journey to a place that was a mysterious, mispronounced place in one’s mind, and it required persistence to tolerate the sickening journey in steerage class. And while it is easy to imagine the excitement of a family receiving its first remittance from abroad, it is harder to conceive of the anguish upon learning that others never made it to Amirk. Twenty-two Syrian emigrants drowned on their way to Venezuela in 1898, for example, and many more per-
ished among the over 1,500 persons lost in the Titanic’s inaugural voyage. Might not these losses have caused fellow villagers to reconsider their own plans to emigrate? Did they also believe—as an obituary in the New York Arabic newspaper al-Hoda claimed—that “there was nothing worse than dying in a strange land”? These are questions that cannot be readily answered by relying on the workings of large economic structures.

For the early migrants to the United States the mahjar was “strange” on a number of levels. They were confronted with a new language and unfamiliar food, smells, and faces. Tanyus Tadrus, for example, recalled wandering the streets of Philadelphia after his arrival in 1885, not knowing where to turn or what to do until he heard a voice in Arabic ask, “Where are you from?” The voice belonged to an Ottoman Jew from Jerusalem. “You can’t imagine how happy we were when we saw someone speaking to us in our language,” Tanyus explained. “We embraced him and said to him, ‘We are not leaving you until you show us a place to stay, or take us to others like us [ibna’ jildatina].’” Speakers of Arabic could console newly arrived immigrants and provide them with information about where to eat, sleep, and find work.

Other, less practical considerations made the United States especially different for Syrians: the emphasis on race as a marker of social difference. Where exactly Syrians fit into America’s complicated racial taxonomy soon became a question whose answer was far from obvious.