

*Jerusalem's American Colony*  
*and Its*  
*Photographic Legacy*

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# Jerusalem's American Colony and Its Photographic Legacy

Piecing together the story of the American Colony Photographers, and arriving at a proper appreciation of their work—the corpus of images that has come to be known as the Matson Collection—are almost impossible without weaving its threads into the larger tapestry of the American Colony community itself. The group of American Colony Photographers, not surprisingly perhaps, was a reflection of their larger community in certain ways, coming as they did from diverse backgrounds—including American, Swedish, Middle Eastern and others—and originally brought together and trained by an eccentric Indian-Jewish convert to Christianity who once fashioned himself as a new Elijah! Another echo of the larger community was the collective, collaborative nature of the Colony's photographic work, an ethos of group rather than individual credit which in most cases makes firm attribution of particular images to individual photographers quite difficult. Besides reflecting the American Colony community and serving as their chief money-making enterprise for many years, the photographic unit became, in a strange way, a sort of corrective to the narrow Spaffordite sect—and for some of the photographers, in a very personal way, an escape from it.

Thus we begin with the phenomenon of the American Colony itself. It is a particular challenge to weave together a coherent, balanced narrative from the many, often contradictory, versions that have been offered of the Colony's strange history. It is fascinating that the various people involved with the Colony, those who lived and worked within it and those who visited or observed it from outside, all seem to have had a slightly different—sometimes *radically* different—perspective on the community, its leaders and its activities. Indeed, it is a complex story spanning many decades, and not only were aspects of it intentionally kept hidden from outsiders, but the American Colony did in fact change along the way, so it is not surprising that these various viewpoints and agendas emerged. In trying to balance them, special weight has been given here to the work of modern researchers, who have attempted to critically weigh the various sources and arrive at a reasonable synthesis of the American Colony saga. Still, it will perhaps always be (as one observer put it) a story much told and yet little known.

## **PART ONE:**

### **THE AMERICAN COLONY: A BRIEF, CRITICAL HISTORY**

Many Protestant Christians in the West know the story of how Horatio Spafford, spurred by a profound personal tragedy, penned the words of a much-loved, inspirational hymn. But they usually do not know “the rest of the story,” unaware that out of his and his wife Anna's searching grew an unusual community in the Holy Land. Likewise, many Jerusalemites are acquainted with the unique American Colony Hotel, but often do not know the story of the people behind it, and how and why they came to Palestine so many years ago. Here, then, as the backdrop to the work of the American Colony Photographers, we will attempt to weave these

and other disparate strands together and recount what the American Colony itself *was*, how it came to be, and how it operated over the course of some five decades.

## The Spaffords in America

There is no other place to start than with Horatio Gates Spafford. Spafford was born in New York State in 1828 and, after studying law and being admitted to the bar, settled in Chicago in 1856 at the age of 28. There he started practicing law and within a few years also became a Professor of Jurisprudence. A devout Presbyterian, he taught a Sunday School class and met, among his students, his future wife, Anna Larssen (or Lawson, by some accounts. Interestingly, the name Larssen, in a number of variant spellings, crops up throughout the American Colony story.)



Horatio Spafford

Anna was an immigrant girl, born in Norway, who had come to America with her parents as a young child. By Anna's teenage years, both of her parents had died. She found herself living with a half-sister in Chicago, where she received music and voice training at a seminary. It was also in Chicago that she met Spafford, in the Sunday School class she agreed to attend "just once." After Horatio's proposal—and his discovery that she was only 16—Anna attended an institute for three years, and then in 1861 they were finally married.

Possessing family, social position, and money, Horatio Spafford became a prominent civic leader in every respect: heavily engaged in philanthropic and Christian work, an activist in the abolitionist, temperance, and other reform movements of the time, and a friend and early financial backer of the evangelist Dwight L. Moody—all activities which often swirled about the Spafford home in the comfortable North Chicago suburb of Lake View. Spafford, who had always possessed a love of literature and music, became an avid writer of poetry and hymn-texts. Over the years the Spafford family grew with the birth of four children, all girls. By 1871, when Spafford had become head of a prominent law firm, he was also engaging, along with partners, in speculative land investments in and around the rapidly growing Chicago. (Spafford may have been making such investments all along, from as early as 1856.)



Anna Spafford



Spafford Law Firm

In October of that same year, 1871, a tragedy struck the city, a conflagration that has come to be known as the Great Chicago Fire. The Spaffords' suburban home was briefly threatened but spared, and in the wake of the fire, Horatio and Anna took into their home both friends and unknown

refugees, many of whom had lost everything. They also worked on the relief and aid committees set up to distribute money, food, and clothing to the fire's victims. Spafford himself suffered considerable loss from the fire, with his downtown law office and legal library left in ashes. Worse, perhaps, he and his investment partners faced a calamity, and Spafford wound up deeply in debt.



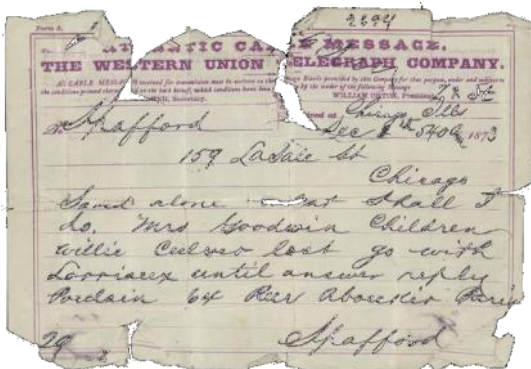
Spafford home

Despite Horatio's financial straits, in 1873 the Spaffords planned an extended vacation trip to Europe, and reservations were made on the luxurious French liner *SS Ville du Havre*. When Spafford was detained by business at the last minute, it was decided that the rest of the family would sail ahead as planned, and he would join them later in France. Then, on November 22nd, 1873, on a clear, calm night on the open sea, the *Ville du Havre* was inexplicably rammied by another vessel and, in just 12 minutes, broke apart and sank beneath the waves. After an hour Anna was pulled unconscious from the floating debris, but her four little daughters, the oldest 11 years old, perished in the disaster along with 222 other souls. Once ashore in Wales, Anna's brief, poignant telegram to Horatio conveyed the profound tragedy they had suffered: "Saved alone. What shall I do?"

Hastening to join his wife, Spafford embarked on the trans-Atlantic crossing, and in mid-ocean, passing near the site of the shipwreck, he penned the words he is most remembered for:

*When peace like a river attendeth my way,  
When sorrows like sea billows roll,  
Whatever my lot, Thou hast taught me to say:  
"It is well, it is well with my soul."*

So inspired were these words, and the three stanzas which followed, that Spafford set them down in a single, unaltered draft, exactly as they have appeared in countless Christian hymnals down through the years. It seems that Horatio Spafford—faced with such great loss and wrestling with the question of "Why?"—began to emerge, even then, with a faith in the ultimate goodness of God. Set to music a few years later by another Moody associate, Philip P. Bliss (he named the tune *Ville du Havre*), the hymn, as an expression of a sublime confidence in God that transcends all circumstances, has had an incalculable impact over the years.

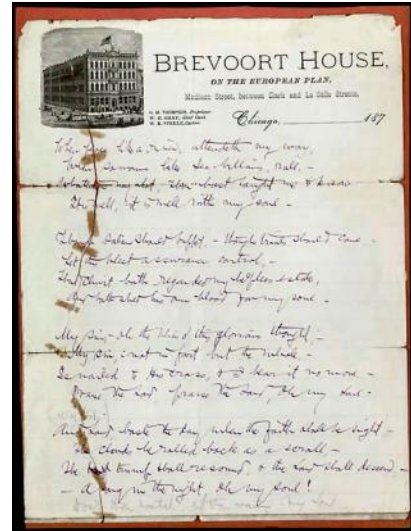


Telegram sent by Anna Spafford

Horatio and Anna were reunited in Europe and then made their way back home to America by way of England. In London they were met and consoled by their old friend, the evangelist D. L. Moody, who urged Anna, as an antidote to her grief, to involve herself in his relief work back in Chicago. On

returning, she did just that, taking charge of all of Moody's women's activities for the city. This involvement, just like the Spaffords' relief efforts in the wake of the fire, foreshadowed their later life in Jerusalem.

The years following the shipwreck were full of both anxiety and spiritual upheaval for the Spaffords. Horatio gained a new awareness of the transience and fragility of life, and possessions and money lost much of their previous importance. His religious thinking was undergoing a transformation as well. The context for this spiritual journey, it is worth remembering, was on the one hand the traumatic loss the Spaffords had endured and, on the other, the severe Calvinist doctrine within which they operated. The way it was popularly espoused at the time, this belief system held, for example, that all human suffering was punishment for sin and that children who died unbaptised would not go to heaven. In any event, Spafford emerged from his search embracing some "universalist" notions: the final, universal triumph of God's love and the corollary belief in the eventual restoration of all persons. Throughout this period of spiritual searching, Spafford continued to compose poems and hymns.



The hymn, *It is Well*

Another ingredient of the Spaffords' emerging doctrinal mix was a focus on biblical prophecy and End Times speculations, which largely explains how their eventual need for a new start "somewhere else" translated into the notion of taking up life in Jerusalem. The End Times expectancy which they embraced not only looked for the imminent Second Coming of Jesus



Sinking of *Ville du Havre*

Christ but was coupled with the "Restorationist" notion that the return of the Jewish people to their ancient homeland and to Jerusalem was a sign of, or at least a necessary precondition for, the unfolding of these events. It is worth noting perhaps that the Spaffords' idea of coming to Jerusalem as an expression of eschatological yearnings and speculations was not unlike that of many others who have been drawn to the Holy City in every age.

As Horatio Spafford's beliefs evolved, they included yet other departures from Protestant orthodoxy: he ceased to believe in a tangible hell, a personal devil, and eternal punishment, for example. And Spafford, a highly visible churchman and civic leader, was used to expressing his ideas freely, perhaps too freely, thus opening the door to significant opposition. In time, a public controversy began to swirl about the Spaffords, one that was actually played out—in a way that might strike us as curious today—in the pages of Chicago's newspapers. As the Spaffords departed further and further from the norms of respectable society, there was a general agreement that they had been "so crazed by grief that they had lost touch with reality." Whatever the cause, the Spaffords "found compelling reasons to see heaven and hell through a rather special light of their own" (Geniesse 2008: 32).

In his rejection of Calvinist predestination, Horatio unfortunately targeted the very traditional pastor of his own church, Chicago's Fullerton Avenue Presbyterian. In a church business meeting, Spafford raised charges of financial mismanagement against the young minister in an attempt to oust him. However, the accusations were so groundless, and Spafford's political maneuvering so blatant and transparent, it is no surprise that he and Anna were forced to leave the church. Nevertheless, their stature and network of relationships were such that their leaving caused a rift in the congregation.

As an expression of his theological independence, Spafford went so far as to start his own church—a sect, really, called variously “The Saints” or “The Overcomers.” He built a chapel behind their Lake View home, and as the congregation grew it spun off a satellite group in nearby Valparaiso, Indiana, together totaling some 200 members. Their actual teachings were a vague pastiche of personal piety—“overcoming” iniquity and apostasy on earth—universalism, and pre-Millennial dispensationalism, based on seemingly random Bible passages. They viewed the established, institutional church as illegitimate and even satanic. Of course they viewed themselves, “The Saints,” as the true church that had been “buried away” but was now revealed in the last dispensation before Christ's return. Figuring prominently in their meetings were “messages” from God, accompanied by “signs,” sometimes violent or bizarre physical manifestations. Chief among the “messengers” was Spafford's own sister, and Anna became quite adept at this as well (Anna's trademark “sign” was sticking out her tongue!).

In 1876, a little boy, Horatio, was born into the childless Spafford home, and two years later a girl, Bertha. Then in 1880, yet another tragedy befell the family when little Horatio, not yet four years old, contracted scarlet fever and died. For Anna, this loss in particular seemed to be a blow that time never softened, for she never spoke of it. It was about this time that the Spaffords began to have a growing conviction that they should leave Chicago, and when a Christian friend, no doubt well-meaning, offered to adopt and raise the couple's one remaining child, they were pushed to the brink. Now, a previously vague notion came to the surface: that someday they would go to Jerusalem to experience first-hand the fulfillment of biblical prophecy and perhaps there find “refreshment of the body, soul and spirit,” as their daughter Bertha puts it in her memoir.

However, an underlying and recurring theme in the life of the Spafford family, and later of the American Colony, was the financial straits in which they operated. The truth is, Horatio Spafford never recovered financially from the combined effects that the Great Chicago Fire of 1871 and the Panic of 1873 had upon his real estate speculations. Borrowing ever more money, and for many years keeping his dealings hidden from Anna, he was in the end unable to repay even the interest due on his debts. Sadly, he even abused funds he held in trust for clients and also for a relative. From 1877 on, he seems not to have practiced law at all, focused instead on his theological speculations and shepherding the Spaffordite sect. It is said that by 1881 he was some \$100,000 in debt. It was after he revealed to Anna their dire situation—“I am a ruined man”—that she announced to their Chicago group, through one of her “messages” from God, that the time had come to go await the Second Coming in Jerusalem.

In 1881, as the Spaffords completed their plans to go to Jerusalem, another child was born into their home, a girl they named Grace. In the end, Anna arranged with William Rudy, a businessman and member of their group, to pay the passage for 17 persons to Palestine. They

entrusted their Lake View house to their personal physician and boarder, a Dr. Hedges, who was to apply his rent payments toward the plundered trust funds. (Hedges later, under threat of foreclosure, purchased the house outright.) With Horatio in real danger of legal prosecution, the exact date of their departure was kept a secret from all but their inner circle. When they left Chicago, the Spaffords took only what belongings could be packed in one large trunk and they seemingly departed with no grandiose plans or focused expectations—except, perhaps, to escape.

## **The American Colony in Jerusalem, 1881-1895**

In August 1881 the group of pilgrims left Chicago, bound for the Holy Land. The group included: the Spaffords and their two young girls; an orphaned cousin of theirs, Rob Lawrence; Maggie Lee, Horatio's sister; businessman William Rudy, whom illness had forced into early retirement at age 36; Rudy's elderly foster mother, Caroline Merriman; Amelia Gould, 42, a Chicago socialite and recent widow who had already helped the Spaffords financially out of the interest on her family wealth held in trust; Otis and Lizzie Page and their daughter Flora; and John and Mary Whiting and their infant daughter Ruth, a family of means who had left the Fullerton Church with the Spaffords. Traveling by way of England, the group was joined in London by Captain William Sylvester, a crippled Civil War veteran and lay evangelist, along with his English wife, Mary.

They arrived in Jaffa by ship in September, some having money and others having none. They soon made their way up to Jerusalem, the city which—though none of them had ever laid eyes upon it—was to be their new home.

Within several weeks of arriving in Jerusalem, the Spafford group was ensconced in a rented house with thick stone walls and large rooms set atop the highest spot within the Old City, just east of Damascus Gate. This building, and adjacent ones into which they later expanded, were built right up against the city wall, and became known collectively, and quite aptly, as “The House on the Wall.” There they lived together as a large family, and others gradually joined them over the years, a curious mix of the original pioneers, those drawn to their emerging ministry, and those under its care.



**“The House on the Wall”**

A daily routine of work, prayer, worship and study evolved. As the group held their daily Christian meetings, which included much singing, the house became a gathering place. Local Jews and Arabs came to listen, sometimes inquiring about the Westerners' religion. Because of the lack of liturgical rites or overt Christian symbols, Muslims were not offended, and, unlike with the established Protestant missionaries, there was no attempt to proselytize.

Over the years, however—at what point is not clear—the meetings began to operate on two levels: Only the community members were exposed to the “signs” and “messages” (and,



especially later, the intense confessions and recriminations), while the open public meetings took on a much more traditional and benign face, with scripture readings, songs, etc. In the closed meetings, Anna came to the fore as a leader, insisting on primacy in interpreting the “signs” of all. There were claims of supernatural power, visions and revelations, and constant talk of the “great event,” the focus of almost daily visits to the Mount of Olives. They espoused faith-healing through prayer and anointing, and eschewed professional medical care.

Horatio Spafford taught Bible classes and occasionally baptized new converts. He also taught English. Early on, a school was started that quickly came to include local Jewish and Arab children. A Miss Brooke, who had been headmistress of the London Jews Society mission school, took up with the Colony and stayed for decades as their main teacher. (At a time when Anna had banned literature as a vain and worldly pursuit, Miss Brooke is said to have spirited books into the hands of eager young readers from her cramped quarters beneath a stairwell!)

It is interesting that the Spaffordite establishment in the Holy Land in 1881 coincided *exactly* with the first organized Jewish migrations and settlement in Palestine in modern times, what is referred to in Zionist history as the “First Aliyah.” Moreover, in those early years the Colony began a relationship with a group of impoverished Yemenite Jews, newly-arrived from their homeland, a community the Spaffords called the “Gadites,” after their claimed descent from the ancient Israelite tribe. On arriving in Jerusalem, the “Gadites” were at first shunned by the established Jewish community and thus it was the Colony which supplied them with food and other necessities for many months. This involvement, along with the concurrent Zionist migrations, no doubt resonated strongly with the Spaffords’ sense of witnessing—indeed, participating in—the fulfillment of biblical prophecy, supplying further proof that the End Times they awaited were near.

(The Yemenites enthralled the Colony members with tales of their sojourn, and of a sacred scroll which a visiting foreigner, through subterfuge, had spirited out of their community. It was the pursuit of the stolen scroll, in fact, which spurred their sudden migration. As it turned out, the theft was the work of Moses William Shapira, based in Jerusalem and already known as a forger of antiquities. Shapira proceeded to cannibalize the scroll and managed to sell part of it to the British Museum as an ancient manuscript. After the fraud was exposed by the Frenchman Clermont-Gannaue and others in 1885, Shapira committed suicide. The scroll was never restored to the Yemenites.)

The Colony members apparently did not come with the idea of missionizing or converting anyone, or even with any preconceived notion of a ministry at all. They seemingly had no agenda other than to await the Second Coming in the Holy Land, while living among the people and modeling a Christian community. One observer characterized the effort as “a form of religious therapy for an enormous personal tragedy,” referring to the Spaffords. They claimed no denominational ties or any label other than Christian, (even though they had departed from any semblance of orthodox Christian doctrine). Although the Spaffords and their group never devised a special name for themselves, they were first known in Jerusalem simply as “The Americans.” Somewhat later, they came to be called “The American Colony,” the name by which they are remembered today.

The actual “work” of the American Colony in those early years was often free-wheeling and is hard to define, but seems to have always evolved organically, in direct response to the real human needs they encountered. When they arrived, there were no trained nurses in Jerusalem, so they took up nursing the sick and instructing mothers how to better care for their children. They taught nursing, and also English. And to those in need, they always provided tangible help, such as food and shelter. Whatever else one might say, the Spaffordites seemed to exhibit a genuine devotion to meeting such physical needs. They made no specific charge for their services, but people were encouraged to give what they could, sometimes paying in kind, with food or produce. Colony income included their own modest money-making enterprises, along with freewill gifts from appreciative locals, foreign visitors, or supporters in the USA.

It is not surprising, however—and it perhaps puts the Colony’s charitable activities in a different light—that the Spaffords largely transplanted their former financial woes to Palestine. In Jerusalem, Horatio once again established a pattern of borrowing more and more, with no ability to repay the loans, and as their funds repeatedly dwindled the community lived for months and years at a time on the goodwill of their mostly Arab local creditors. As they took food, services and other necessities on credit and rent went unpaid, a notion that “God will provide” seemingly held sway.

Spafford himself took great joy in the rambling trips of discovery and meditation he made around Jerusalem and the country, spurred in part by his interest in biblical history and archaeology. He also had a special interest in botany and, long before there was such a thing as the “Jewish National Fund,” he actively promoted the planting of trees in Palestine. Spafford produced written accounts of these explorations, and his travels inspired yet more hymns, now about the Holy Land. At the same time, he no doubt also sought escape from the legal problems haunting him from America, of which he was kept apprised by letter. As Spafford apparently absented himself more and more, Anna increasingly took up the reigns of leadership. Then in 1888, Horatio Gates Spafford, after seven years in the Holy Land, died of malaria at age 60 and was buried in his beloved Jerusalem, whereupon Anna assumed full control of the American Colony venture.

Under Anna Spafford’s strong direction, the American Colony, by most accounts, took on a narrower, more somber and tightly-controlled character. It would not be incorrect to describe it as a sect—perhaps a personality cult—centered upon Anna herself, whose undeniably charismatic mien included the “messages” she claimed to receive from God. In one assessment, Mrs. Spafford is characterized as a “superb despot” who “did her best to crush individual spirit and enhance submission through fear and awe” (Geniesse 2008: 214). In exploring these aspects of the saga, our aim is not to paint an overly dark picture of American Colony life and



**Grace and Bertha Spafford**

leadership, but rather to achieve balance and perspective, to tell a story that has not always been told, and it is partly an interior view: the impact of Colony existence on its own members.

### **The Swedish Migration, 1896**

The influx of scores of Swedes—from both America and Sweden—into the American Colony in the year 1896 was a pivotal development, for several reasons: First, by quadrupling the Colony membership practically overnight, it necessitated a move into new, larger quarters, to the property which has been identified with the American Colony ever since.

Secondly, this infusion of manpower and skills lent the community a new economic vitality through a number of new or expanded enterprises, and in fact placed the Spafford family and the American Colony on a firm financial footing for the first time since well before the original migration to Jerusalem. At the same time it represented the beginning of a transition of sorts, from a purely inward-looking, closed, esoteric community to one having goals—charitable and money-making activities—in the outside world. Of particular interest in this connection is the founding of the American Colony Photographic Department (which will be explored fully in Parts II and III). Not only was it chief among the Colony's money-making ventures for many years, but the Swedish presence was strongly reflected in its staffing and leadership as long as it was in operation.

Third, in the Swedish migration lay the seeds of the Colony's demise 30 years hence, for it established—unfortunately but perhaps inevitably—a definite and immediate social stratification within the community: the American founders were mostly from business and professional backgrounds and understandably accustomed to exercising control over the Colony's assets and operations. By contrast, the Swedes who now joined in great numbers were almost exclusively domestic servants or rural peasants, and they quickly discovered that the American Colony community was neither egalitarian nor democratic. Thus, issues related to the status and rights of the Swedish members, which formed an undercurrent almost from the moment they arrived, would become central to the later rift in the community in the 1920s. In short, the coming of the Swedes in 1896 had a profound impact on all that followed. Since this is one of many features glossed over in Bertha Spafford Vester's own memoir, we recount it here in some detail.

The American Colony's Swedish connection began in 1894, when the 55-year-old Anna Spafford, her two daughters, and several other Colony members made an extended trip to America, the Spaffords' first such visit since arriving in the Holy Land in 1881. They spent most of their time in Chicago and, as a homecoming of sorts for Anna, this visit stirred up a certain amount of public attention. This was all the more true since the main focus of the visit was their participation in legal proceedings regarding one of the original American Colony families from Chicago, the Whitings, a trial involving issues of child custody and inheritance. While the details of the trial are unimportant for our purposes (the Whiting family remained in the Spaffordite fold, but the inheritance was held in trust in America), it was to no small degree the American Colony itself which was held up to public scrutiny—and in the end was exonerated.

The American Colony won in another way: As a result of the considerable media attention—that surrounding the trial, the return of the charismatic Anna Spafford herself, and the whole American Colony phenomenon—the sect gained a raft of new followers. One individual drawn to the American Colony aura, apparently purely through the impact of newspaper stories, was Joseph Meyers, leader of a religious community in Salem, Kansas. After hearing of the American Colony—and eager to join them in Jerusalem in time for the Messiah's arrival—



**Jacob Spafford**

Meyers invited them to send a representative to Kansas. In response, Mrs. Spafford's adopted son Jacob Eliyahu (a converted Jew whom the Spaffords had "adopted" as a youth) spent several weeks with them "casting his spell" and finally oversaw the sale of their properties, the proceeds of which were turned over to the Colony, and organized their transit to Chicago. Meyers, his family and followers, 25 to 30 persons in all, in fact took up residence in the Spafford party's rented Chicago quarters on West Monroe Street, as did a number of other like-minded inductees. Whether such developments were actively elicited by Anna Spafford or merely a happy by-product of the hoopla she stirred up, they were evidently eagerly embraced, not only as a way of injecting new life into the Colony but also as a source of much-needed cash.

During the 1894-96 Chicago visit, "Jerusalem fever" was likewise stirred up among a group of fundamentalist Swedes, the flock of a self-styled preacher named Olof Henrik Larson. (Herein lies a slightly convoluted "back-story" which is worth

telling, especially since Bertha Spafford Vester's memoir never touches upon it and in fact does not even mention Larson by name, but only as "their former leader.") Olof Larson arrived in Boston from Sweden in 1869, worked as a sailor, and rose to the rank of captain and half owner of an American merchant ship. He later gave up seafaring to begin a new career as a charismatic preacher and eventually founded a communal sect among the simple, Swedish peasant immigrants of Chicago, only some of whom were American citizens. The group's property on Madison Street, which Larson first rented and then bought, eventually included a large house with several dormitory rooms and a separate church building, and the congregation came to be known variously as the Swedish Evangelical Church or the "Larsonites." The majority were women, many of whom worked as domestics and lived on the church property on their days off, pooling their earnings and living as one large family. Larson was the leader of this small community, spiritually and otherwise, and spent his own money keeping it going.

Another chapter of Larson's story unfolded in 1889 when he and his wife—he had married one of the immigrant girls 20 years his junior—made a visit to Sweden and stayed almost two years in Mrs. Larson's native region, the rural province of Dalarna. During the course of this extended visit, Larson preached prophecies of doom to the villagers and soon founded yet another church, in the village of Nås. When the Larsons returned to America in 1891, Olof Larson left the immediate care of the new congregation in the hands of two elders, while continuing to exercise control through a series of epistles, "doomsday" letters that appeared in Nås almost weekly. This state of affairs—active leadership of his Chicago sect plus long-

distance control of the Nås congregation—went on for four or five years, until Anna Spafford entered the picture.

During the course of Mrs. Spafford's Chicago visit, the Larsonites heard of her story, and that of the American Colony, and sent a delegation to visit her Jerusalem group. Impressed with Anna's grace and authority, they in turn invited her to come to their assembly as guest preacher. On that fateful occasion, besides describing her own life story and the Colony's communal life awaiting the Second Coming in the Holy City, Anna declared that she had received a "message" concerning the Larsonite "brethren." It was not long before she had ignited the passions of the parishioners and in short order most of the group expressed a desire to follow Anna back to the Holy Land. She had, even at this early stage, seemingly taken effective control of the group, and the sect's leader, Larson, had little choice but to succumb to their wishes. Indeed, in November 1895 he invited the entire Jerusalem group to move in with his Swedes for the balance of their time in Chicago, thus Anna, her daughters and the rest of their entourage quit their now-crowded quarters to lodge with the Larsonites. The picture which emerges is that the Spaffordites were essentially stranded in Chicago and once again totally dependent on charity.

In the end the Larsonites sold their church properties, and the stage was set for the entire group's migration to Palestine, which required chartering a small freight steamer. In all, close to 80 souls, roughly a third of them children (the numbers vary depending on the source), set out for Palestine: the visiting Spaffordites who had come from Jerusalem, the Meyers group from Kansas, Olof Henrik Larson and most of his flock, and assorted others. The group's passage was financed out of the proceeds from the new converts' properties and possessions, resources all now under the firm control of Anna Spafford. That was in the spring of 1896.

In Jerusalem, where the Colony was still occupying their original Old City quarters, the influx of newcomers created an immediate need for greatly expanded living space. This is when the American Colony acquired the large Arab villa north of the Old City, part of a larger estate owned by



**The "Big House"**

Jerusalem's formidable Husseini family. (Under the prevailing legal and family protocols, the acquisition actually involved a complex series of transactions spanning many years.) This new property, which they referred to as the "Big House," today forms the historic core of the American Colony Hotel. The old "House on the Wall" was retained, however, and would later become the center of the Colony's charitable activities.

Yet another chapter of the Swedish saga now began to unfold. By the summer of that same year, 1896, the Nås group—Olof Henrik Larson's other congregation—was likewise clamoring to come to Jerusalem! It seems that before ever leaving Chicago Larson had sent his Nås

followers, of whom he was still uncontested leader, a letter inducing them to likewise leave all and transplant themselves in the Holy City. It may be that Larson was engaged in a sort of power struggle with Mrs. Spafford and supposed that in Jerusalem he could re-establish leadership over his combined flock. If so, he greatly underestimated Anna Spafford.

In any event, most of Olaf Larson's Nås congregation responded to the call. Thus, that summer Larson and the trusted "Brother" Jacob were dispatched to Nås to see to the details and logistics of bringing the group. There are varying accounts of the nature of the two men's actual role, whether to *convince* the Dalarna folk to join their fellow Swedes in Jerusalem or rather to *dissuade* them, or at least to urge caution. Nevertheless they came, in July 1896, approximately 40 people in all (again, various numbers are given), over half of whom seem to have been children. Carried along on a wave of eschatological excitement, they sold their ancestral farms and woodlands in haste and placed the proceeds in the hands *not* of Olof Larson but rather of "Brother" Jacob Eliyahu, Anna Spafford's personal envoy and chief assistant. A dozen wooden carts laden with hand looms, knitting machines and farm implements bore these simple peasant-pilgrims toward their sea passage, toward the Holy Land.



**Bertha, Anna, and Grace Spafford**

### **The "Swedish-American" Colony, 1896-1930**

The community now numbered 130 persons (including 40 children) of whom few could speak a word of English. Thus the American Colony became in effect bi-lingual. The vastly increased manpower made possible new and expanded industries, and the American Colony venture now slowly emerged from poverty. On the large tract of land they raised pigs, chickens, and cattle. Some cows were bought and a small dairy established. They grew olives, barley, wheat and potatoes, their labor often accompanied by the singing of hymns. A threshing machine was set up and some of the wheat produced was sold to religious Jews, who were forbidden to eat wheat trodden by cattle. They grew grapes and made wine. There were workshops for carpentry and cabinetmaking, for weaving, knitting, dressmaking, tailoring, and shoemaking. Many hard-to-find tools and implements were imported from Sweden. From the kitchen and bakery came jams and preserves, pies and cakes, all for sale. There was a forge where the Colony blacksmith shod, among others, the horses of the Turkish cavalry. And, from about the turn of the century, the Big House during part of the year doubled as a tourist hostel.

Among the newcomers from Nås were a teenager named Hol Lars (later "Lewis") Larsson, four brothers by the name of Lind, and an eight-year-old boy called Eric Matson—all of whom would figure, some quite prominently, in yet another venture, a photo studio which began

operations in 1897-98. (The American Colony Photographers and their work are the focus of Parts II and III below.)

In this same time period, about 1896, the young German Frederick Vester joined the American Colony and was soon engaged to the eldest Spafford daughter, Bertha (despite the Colony's ban on marriage). On joining the community, Vester had brought with him a family business, a tourist shop which, though failing, was nevertheless strategically located inside Jaffa Gate, on the ground floor of the Grand New Hotel (later named the Imperial Hotel). It is not clear whether the Colony purchased the store, or if ownership passed to the Colony by virtue of Vester joining the community. Now with an infusion of new products—which came to include souvenirs, antiques, antiquities, glassware, carpets, silks, inlaid brassware, Bedouin jewelry and costumes, and many Colony-made handicrafts, baked goods, confections, and other food products—the shop began to thrive. By 1900 it was operating as “Vester & Co. American Colony Stores.” By 1910, the store had seven employees and was already several times larger than under Vester ownership. Over the years the store also played a major role in the growth and visibility of the Photographic Department, as a major outlet for their various offerings.

Amid all this—indeed, made possible by such enterprise—the Colony never neglected their charitable works. For many years, every day at noon a queue of needy people would form in the Colony garden for soup or stew or whatever else the sisters had prepared for them. The school continued as always and now there were many special activities for the youth: literary and art clubs, a brass band, an orchestra, and a choir, all serving both the Colony children and those from the wider community. When not at school, the Colony children helped with the many chores.



**Inside Jaffa Gate with F. Vester & Co. store on left**

As already mentioned, issues arose early on about the status and entitlements of the Swedes. As one Swedish member of the Colony would muse years later: “Why did they give their souls and their goods to Anna? . . . The answer could only be found in her mystical power.” Among some of the immigrants, and especially their children, the question became how and when to “escape.” Yet leaving the American Colony community was, in practice, impossible, since anyone choosing to depart relinquished any claim on community holdings, including anything they might have contributed to it. Without the community, they would be left without resources and, except for the especially ambitious and industrious, without prospects. At the same time, Mrs. Spafford discouraged expressions of Swedish culture and nationalism, and even everyday use of the Swedish language. Indeed, Swedish visitors to the Colony were shocked to find that the younger Swedes had little command of their mother tongue! Such issues, which were always present under the surface, were the seeds of much discontent and of the coming rift.

Olof Henrik Larson himself did not fare well in Jerusalem. Effectively deposed by Anna Spafford as leader of his two communities of Swedes, the elder Larson spent his last days living in an out-building, a tin shack on the Colony grounds. Moreover, he was not allowed to draw from the Colony's joint funds and was separated by decree from his wife and children. He died in 1919.

The image of the American Colony usually projected to the outside world was that of a harmonious community bound together by simple Christian piety and the inherent joy of productive labor and helping those in need. This is not necessarily a false picture, but neither is it the whole story. It is curious that the American Colony sect was alternately vilified and praised, a disconnect which probably reflects, more than anything else, the tight control Anna exerted over what outsiders experienced. For example, the informal religious services attended by visitors featured largely traditional worship forms: Bible readings and lessons, songs and hymns, prayers, and so forth. Anna herself was always undeniably gracious and impressive. However, the closed meetings—wrenching confessions, denunciations, and Anna's charismatic "messages"—along with other aspects of life inside the Colony, represent *another reality*, one which deserves to be explored.

For one thing, any criticism or dissent was for the most part effectively suppressed. Not only was contact with outsiders severely restricted, but even letters sent out to family or friends had to pass the censorship of "Mother Spafford." Moreover, by some accounts, the ill or injured could not call a doctor but instead were subjected to anointing and the laying-on-of-hands (all the more strange since the Colony was later known and highly regarded for providing nursing services and even operating hospitals).

Another facet of life inside the Colony was the way some of the members served as watchdogs in Mrs. Spafford's regime of moral oversight. When lapses were reported, the offender was likely to be singled out in a community meeting as a "child of the devil" or a "person of the flesh" and then subjected to "shunning," that is, eternal exile *within* the sect. This ethos of guilt, rebukes, and recriminations, played out through endless meetings and assemblies, with heavy doses of wrenching self-examination, self-criticism, and confession of sins—real or induced—was perhaps the darkest aspect of Colony life under Anna's reign. Sadly, it is this atmosphere of fear and control that constitutes a recurring theme in the memoirs of several Colony members. So intent was Anna on all members "overcoming" every conceivable human desire—the danger of any worldly "attachment"—that the members might be denounced for indulging in even the most innocent of pleasures: the delight they found in literature, in gardening, or in devotion to their families.



**Anna Spafford**

Another stricture of Colony life was the requirement of marital celibacy that was apparently imposed for a number of years under Mrs. Spafford's reign. She seems to have believed that sexual feelings were a remnant of man's fallen state—a sin of the flesh to be "overcome," one more worldly "attachment" to resist. In her memoir, Bertha Spafford glosses over this aspect of



Colony life, saying that her parents and a few others embraced celibacy as a matter of personal discipline, but that it was never required of others. It seems, however, that this regimen was in fact imposed on all as early as the 1880s. The members' very living arrangements were evidently organized with this in mind, with even family members—spouses, parents and children (all except the youngest)—living apart. Faced with such unanticipated constraints, several of the Swedish families, especially those with small children, quickly left the community.

There likewise existed for a number of years a concomitant ban on marriages within the community. Later, Mrs. Spafford permitted “going together”—having received a “message” thus from the Almighty—but she reserved the exclusive right to dictate who was to be engaged to whom. Quite clearly, this change served to recognize and legitimize her own daughter Bertha's longtime romance with Frederick Vester. Later Anna would also make sure that her younger daughter Grace chose John Whiting, who happened to be due a sizable inheritance. The marriage ban was lifted only in 1904—via yet another “message”—after Bertha had forced the issue of marriage with her mother via an ultimatum. A wedding soon ensued, the first ever at the American Colony and the most lavish ever seen in Jerusalem.



**Winston Churchill greeting Frederick and Bertha Vester, March 1921**

Bertha and Frederick's wedding in fact seems to have marked a watershed in several ways. For one thing, many marriages soon followed within the Colony community, including all of the young photographers. Likewise, when Bertha Spafford Vester gave birth to her first child, the ban on professional medical care was rescinded—again, a divine “message” given to Anna—and a doctor duly summoned. In the ensuing years, the rigid, puritanical atmosphere that had long reigned was gradually relaxed, and some of the more bizarre aspects of Colony life simply fell away. A tennis court on the grounds, the riding of bicycles, and elaborate Fourth of July celebrations all symbolized this change. The Big House's grand salon sometimes even resonated with the sounds of dancing and parties. (Alas, when dour old Olof Larson protested the new tone of things, he was banished from the morning assemblies.) More and more, the Vesters seemed determined to put behind the old ways and inject a new openness to the outside, and thus the Colony slowly gained a new respectability at the center of Jerusalem society.

It is useful here to summarize the rest of the Colony's colorful history, focusing especially on the great good they accomplished over the course of many decades, and the positive impact they had on their adopted city of Jerusalem.

The Americans were always on friendly terms with the Ottoman-Turkish governors of Jerusalem, as well as with the British Consul. For many years, however, their own American consuls would have nothing to do with them and reportedly denounced and opposed them at every opportunity. These attitudes were no doubt fed both by the group's initial financial

irresponsibility and by reports that circulated about the darker and more bizarre aspects of Colony life under Anna's rule. To the established and traditional missionary ventures in Jerusalem, the unconventional American Colony group was often considered a nuisance and a threat. In short, the group continued to be the subject of much controversy in Jerusalem, deserved or not, just as they had been in Chicago.

Over the years the local Turkish functionaries frequently consulted the American Colony on matters of civic improvement, and sometimes gave them outright charge of various projects. When the city's Director of Public Instruction, a former pupil of Horatio Spafford's, asked the Colony to take charge of Jerusalem's only Moslem girls' school, the Spaffords' daughter, Bertha Vester, took up the challenge and served as principal for seven years. The Colony members were instrumental in establishing telephone service in the city. They were the first to use window screens in Jerusalem, and as a result experienced a marked absence of malaria among their members. They helped bring the first steamroller to Jerusalem for upgrading the city's roads—the machine, not surprisingly, came from Chicago!



**Nurses of American Colony**

The "American Colony," in one form or another, has remained a Jerusalem fixture under four regimes: Turkish, British, Jordanian, and Israeli. And through the heat of numerous wars and other conflicts, they always refused to take part in or facilitate any hostile acts, nor were they ever interned, evacuated or forced to close. To the contrary, with their reputation for civic-mindedness and an ability to respond creatively to changing needs and circumstances, they were well-positioned to be of help in dire times.



**Relief work**

In response to the privations of World War I, the American Colony operated a soup kitchen which fed over 2,000 people a day, kept going with money sent by friends in America. Seeing the success of this outreach, the Turkish authorities asked the Colony to take charge of another, established soup kitchen that ultimately fed up to 6,000 daily. As the British advanced relentlessly northward from Egypt and the wounded of both sides flowed into Jerusalem, the infamous Turkish governor Djemal Pasha asked the Colony to reopen and operate some of the foreign mission hospitals that had ceased operating due to the war. They were eventually given charge of four hospitals, offering their nursing services and organizational skills—this, despite America's entry into the war and the severing of U.S. diplomatic relations with Turkey, not to mention the Colony members' lack of any professional medical training. Many of the Colony members, including several from the photo unit, worked cleaning and bandaging wounds. The American Colony

volunteered to operate the main casualty clearing station as well, and to oversee burial of the dead.

In 1918 Bertha Spafford Vester, already at the forefront of the American Colony's charitable work, was asked to organize the initial post-war relief work in Jerusalem. She organized a sewing establishment that employed 800 women making garments for relief distribution. From 1918 to 1922 the Colony ran an orphanage, under the auspices of the American *Christian Herald* newspaper, to provide material aid and spiritual support to local children orphaned by the war. Bertha helped start the Jerusalem Social Service Association, assisted with the American Red Cross operation, and was instrumental in bringing the first x-ray machine to Jerusalem. After studying Islamic *sharia* law, she fought the custom of child marriage and, under the British, helped revise the laws concerning women and children.

Following the war, with the advent of the British, tourism once again thrived and along with it both the Colony's guesthouse, fully-booked during the tourist season, and their store inside Jaffa Gate. The store, with Frederick Vester in charge, would remain a Jerusalem fixture right up until 1948. Now, however, in addition to its vast array of tourist items, the store offered the likes of typewriters, home appliances—and auto parts and accessories! In an adjacent space the American Colony operated an automobile dealership and garage, holding the franchise for selling and servicing Dodge cars and trucks (later they sold Buicks as well, from a showroom in West Jerusalem). As an additional side-line, the American Colony offered the services of their tourist guides, who were said to be among the best. (The American Colony would open a branch store in New York City in the early 1920s, with John Whiting as director and Nils Lind as manager. It closed in 1926, however, after running up huge debts.)

With the gradual eclipse of Anna Spafford, the American Colony ceased to be an overtly religious community. Her daughter Bertha, picking up the reins, instead devoted her life to social work and to achieving a prominent role at the center of Jerusalem society.



Automobile dealership next to American Colony Store

## The Reorganization and Break-Up of the Original American Colony Community

When Anna Spafford died on July 19, 1923 after a long illness—she was around 80 and had made Jerusalem her home for 42 years—it came as a shock especially for the old people, those who had waited with her in vain for the coming of the Millennium. In a sense the American

Colony—at least in its original manifestation as an intentional, communal venture, one steeped in dreams of the Coming of the Kingdom—was buried with her.

The break-up of the American Colony was a complex, protracted and often unpleasant affair which, because of its impact, deserves to be recounted here, at least in broad strokes. For one thing, it was a devolution which not only brought to an end the heyday of the American Colony Photographers but without a doubt shaped the way some of the early photographers, who created the great bulk of the images, would be represented—or *misrepresented*, or ignored—in later years.

The rift was essentially a conflict between the descendants of the American-born founders, who ran the Colony, and the younger Swedish-born members. Bertha Spafford Vester, who was the focus of much of the strife, understandably glosses over these events in her memoir. Forty-year-old Bertha, the Spaffords' eldest daughter who now took up the mantle of leadership, closed the circle in a way. The former charismatic piety and End Times expectancy now gave way fully to a pragmatic business sense, and, from this time on, the Colony would be viewed more as a business and charitable enterprise than as a religious gathering. Where Anna had held the community together through the sheer force of her charismatic personality, Bertha saw fit to maintain control through legal and financial means. As one observer remarked, under Anna's leadership, although often frightening, at least the spiritual took precedence over the material.

Bertha and the inner circle around her felt the need to define mechanisms of legal and financial control, partly as a way of consolidating the economic future of the Spafford clan and its descendants. Bertha had already in 1922, before her mother's death, registered the group's charitable activities as the "American Colony Aid Association." Then in October 1923, all the assets of the American Colony, including the Photographic Department and the store, were legally registered as a business firm, a partnership between Bertha's husband, Frederick Vester, and her American brother-in-law, John D. Whiting, husband of the younger Spafford daughter, Grace. When this new structure was announced to the community, the move was met with great dismay, especially among the Swedish contingent. As Edith Larsson (daughter of Olof, and wife of photographer Lewis Larsson) later recounted: "Most of us were shocked, as we realized that we had all been left out."

The action favoring the Spafford-Whiting interests of course had huge—and mostly negative—implications for the scores of other community members, in terms of both present access to and control of revenues and any future inheritance. The long-time members could of course still count on a place to live and having their basic needs met, but purely as a matter of faith in the goodwill of the leadership. This new arrangement, however, legally excluded all but the Spafford descendants and their spouses and children from *control* of the assets. The others had no legal stake, no recourse, and, if they left, no resources and no prospects.

Slowly the dissatisfaction and tensions which had long simmered beneath the surface came to the forefront, and the ensuing power struggle was characterized by gossip, slander, and highly personal rifts, even within families. Most of the older members were totally dependent on the American Colony community as their home of 30 years or more, and, whatever their private views, many were cowed into silence and acquiescence.

One way to view the strife within the community is as a struggle between the “haves” and the “have nots.” The fundamental unfairness of the new arrangement, at least in the eyes of the dissidents, is encapsulated in an observation: Whereas the Americans traveled back and forth to the United States first-class, and their children studied in private schools there, the Swedes had to ask Frederick Vester for money to buy every new pair of shoes. Indeed, such inequalities were longstanding: The Swedish children would always remember that it was the two Spafford girls who received piano lessons, French and German tutoring—and rode to their lessons on the big black donkey. As one observer noted, “the line between the masters and the servants was drawn early” (Grønbaek 1990).

From this initial reorganization in 1923, the growing fissure stemming from it took some seven years to reach its climax and final resolution in the courts. The details of this convoluted chain of events are largely unimportant. (Moreover the actual events, and their chronological sequence, are hard to pin down.) The process was punctuated by a series of community meetings, various legal maneuverings, and “expulsions.” The heavy-handedness of the Colony’s leadership, i.e. the inner circle around Bertha Vester, is evident in their “expulsion policy” (the term used by the young Swedish dissidents). Those who objected to the new arrangements were likely to be told to leave, *in which case* the Vesters would provide them money for a final trip home to America or Sweden, “and that would be that.”

Things came to a head in 1929, when Bertha returned from a trip to America bearing legal papers and insisted that all Colony members sign them. The documents would legally incorporate the Colony as a U.S.-based business corporation, with headquarters in New York (a plan which, in the end, came to nothing) and the Vesters and Whittings as chief trustees. Moreover, it specified that anyone could be expelled from the community without cause by majority vote—a thin veneer of democracy for the “expulsions,” considering the sway Bertha held over the majority group. Anyone expelled forfeited all rights and privileges of any kind, including any claim of monetary compensation. In short, just as before, most members not only had no say in Colony operations but could be cut off from the community, financially and otherwise, without notice and without recourse.

The “minority” dissidents, essentially the younger generation of Swedes, saw the fundamental unfairness of this latest proposal and resisted, many refusing to sign and some proposing alternate organizational schemes along more equitable lines. As this resistance coalesced around the photographer Lewis Larsson, the Colony’s 60 adult members were basically split into two camps: 42 adults, most of them older and unmarried, stood behind Bertha Spafford Vester and the other leaders, while the significant “minority” camp consisted essentially of the younger generation, 11 adults and their 12 children.

Lewis and Edith Larsson, who regarded the incorporation plan as “cruel, unjust, and entirely contrary to the principles of the Colony,” were among those who refused to sign away their legal rights, and it was not long before they were voted out of the community. The expulsion action—product of a community meeting for which neither of the Larssons was present—granted the family \$1200 plus tickets to Sweden, after their 34 years of hard work contributing to the Colony. Lars Lind, a fellow photographer who was present, decided pointedly not to be a party to this act.

Larsson and others in fact sought to leave the community but insisted on some equitable distribution of American Colony assets, and to this end Larsson was finally persuaded to join a lawsuit already brought by the previously-expelled photographer Olaf Lind. As Larsson sought outside legal advice, the issues swirling about the American Colony now came to the attention of both the American consul general and British officials. In the end, the Mandatory Attorney General called in a Crown prosecutor from Cairo, a Mr. Perrot, to arbitrate the dispute and manage the separation, a convoluted process of dividing the Colony's various assets among its members. He also appointed one of the Lind brothers, Lars, who was not a direct party to the dispute, as liquidator of the American Colony properties. An audit of the Colony business enterprises showed them in debt and overdrawn.

In the final settlement, which included several families previously expelled on "moral grounds," the share awarded to each member, regardless of age, was set at \$5,386. In the absence of cash some of the disbursements were made in the form of real estate or goods. The Larsson family received a house—the Vester house, in fact—and Lars Lind wound up with the makings of an auto tire dealership! The Vester and Whiting families and the rest of the "majority group" retained the "Big House," the "American Colony Stores," and the other tourist-related properties. The photography business likewise remained the possession of the Colony, and responsibility for it was handed over to Eric Matson, the only one of the younger Swedes who did not leave at that time.

The community was thus dissolved in 1930, with the American Colony financially broke, largely due to huge legal fees and the leaders' repeated trans-Atlantic travel. In the ensuing years they struggled out of bankruptcy through the success of their tourism-related enterprises, especially the hotel business and the store.

The remaining American Colony group still living together as a community consisted mostly of old people, housed in one building and continuing the simple life they had followed for years. Two interesting and poignant photographs by Eric Matson of the remaining Dalarna Swedes provide graphic documentation of the community's decline: 25 persons can be counted in a photograph from 1938, while by 1946 only ten remain.

With the hostilities of 1947-48, the Colony property north of the Old City found itself in the heat of battle, and the building took many direct hits, wounding several Colony members. Nevertheless, at a time when electrical and telephone service and municipal water to the area were all cut off, the Colony lent aid to those in need as it had always done. They set up a casualty clearing station under the flag of the Red Cross in their main dining room. Here many thousands of cases were treated.

Bertha Vester continued to reign over this dwindling community and by the time she died in 1960 at age 90, she was the only one left.

## **Two Remnants of the American Colony**

Two direct outgrowths of the American Colony remain as Jerusalem institutions to this day. Appropriately perhaps, one is a commercial enterprise and the other a ministry to the people of

Jerusalem and the region. The first is the world-class American Colony Hotel housed partly in the historic “Big House” north of the Old City. The hotel began as a seasonal tourist hostel established by the Colony around the turn of the century, when the Colony members actually doubled up to make room for guests! It was later upgraded to year-round lodgings and, in the 1950s, to hotel status. In the 1960s and 1970s, the Vesters’ son Horatio managed the hotel, along with his wife Valentine. (Valentine Vester, who survived her husband by many years, continued living at the hotel, the last member of the extended family to do so, until her death in 2007.) Perhaps because of its American ownership—neither Jewish nor Arab—and its location near the “seam” between East and West Jerusalem, the American Colony Hotel has long stood as a neutral haven amidst the treacherous crosscurrents of Middle Eastern politics. Today it is an award-winning boutique hotel, under professional Swiss management, but still owned by Spafford descendants.



**Spafford Children’s  
Center**

The other remnant of the American Colony, perhaps less familiar but no less important, is a ministry known as the Spafford Children’s Center. It originated as the Anna Spafford Baby Home, founded by Bertha Spafford Vester in 1925. In its later manifestations, in response to changing needs and circumstances, it was both an orphanage and a children’s hospital. The Center took on its present character in the 1980s and today offers an impressive array of medical, developmental and other services to families and children, mostly from the Arab-Palestinian sector. It operates from the Colony’s original “House on the Wall” in the Old City.

**PART TWO:  
THE AMERICAN COLONY PHOTOGRAPHERS AND THE ERIC MATSON  
COLLECTION**

**Profiles of the Major Personnel**

The background of the chief contributors to the Colony's photographic enterprise has been pieced together admirably by a handful of modern researchers. As for the images themselves, however, in most cases they simply carry no attribution as to the actual photographer, in keeping with the unit's prevailing ethos of group rather than individual credit. To the extent that these connections have been reconstructed for certain images (or for groups of related images), it has mostly been from clues found in diaries, letters, memoirs, personal archives and the like, or from the pictures' appearance in published works. In any event, the personnel are presented here in roughly chronological order, according to their first association with the photographic operation.

***Elijah Meyers (b. 1855)***

Elijah Meyers seems to have been the one to plant the idea of an organized photographic unit as part of the American Colony enterprises, thus he can rightly be said to have founded the American Colony Photographers. He trained all of the young photographers who created the bulk of the unit's output in the first decades of the 20th century.

Meyers' is an unusual story indeed. Born in Bombay, India in 1855, he was the son of the rabbi of that city's main synagogue. At age 12 he was sent to London against his will for rabbinical training, but after a short stay in England the rebellious Elijah made his way back to Bombay where he worked in the family's stationery store and book bindery. (He may have learned photography in Bombay, since a "Meyers" studio is known to have operated there in the early 20th century.) Studying the New Testament on his own, he became convinced that Jesus was the Messiah, and when he finally converted to Christianity he was estranged from his family and the Bombay Jewish community. At 19 he once again boarded a steamer for England and there followed fifteen years of various adventures as a missionary, a student at Oxford, and miscellaneous employments, courtships, and intrigues.

Meyers' conspicuous arrival at Jerusalem's American Colony in the early 1890s was marked by his striking Indian-style dress—a flowing silk cloak and long hair wound into an enormous green silk turban. Presenting himself as a reincarnation of the Prophet Elijah—"Elijah who must come first"—he no doubt resonated to the Colony's End Times expectancy. However eccentric at first, Meyers found his niche as "Brother Elijah" of the American Colony for many years and proved to be a timid, gentle, and imaginative person. Multi-lingual and with a knack for machinery, he turned out to be a skilled teacher, watchmaker, spinner, and weaver.

However, it was his previous knowledge of photography—he is even said to have built his own cameras, and his own electric batteries!—which soon proved a boon to the Colony community, as he created the earliest photos and personally trained the initial group of young photographers



and technicians. It is not clear how long Meyers continued making photographs, but he apparently yielded leadership of the department to others early on.

Meyers was also among Anna Spafford's most dedicated followers, dutifully recording her "messages" in a book and poring over them. After Mrs. Spafford's death in 1923, Meyers became alarmed at Bertha Vester's drift from her mother's teachings and overt spirituality, and was known to reprove her frequently. In the end, the two had a heated argument, in the course of which Bertha ripped Meyers' precious book of "messages" to shreds, whereupon he packed his few belongings and left the Colony forever. Perhaps reflecting this falling-out, in her memoir Bertha Spafford Vester seems to downplay Meyers' role, describing him as having "a partial knowledge of photography."

### ***Fareed Naseef***

Fareed Naseef was the son of a Lebanese Christian woman who joined the "Spaffordites" in 1886. He was active as an assistant in the early days—he went with others on a 1903 expedition to Syria—but whether he ever achieved the status of an independent photographer is unclear. He is still seen in photographs made in the 1920s.

### ***The Lind Brothers: Erik, Olaf, Lars and Nils***

These four brothers were part of the 1896 Swedish influx from Nås, coming with their family to Jerusalem as children. Erik, the oldest, was about 12 at the time. Tragically, it was not long before they were left orphaned as, within the span of five years (1896-1901), both of their parents, their grandmother, and three siblings all succumbed to various maladies, the sort of dreadful toll that was all too common among the arrivals from Sweden. As Olaf reflected years later, the American Colony was "the only family he knew," which no doubt reflected the experience of the other Lind boys as well. All four of the brothers became associated in some fashion with the American Colony Photographers.

**Erik Lind** (b. ca. 1884) was the younger protégé and companion of Lewis Larsson in the earliest days of the photo unit. After working for several years, Lind became dissatisfied with the confines of American Colony life and left the community around 1905. (One account says he was expelled from the Colony and given \$10.) He wrote in a letter to a friend: "I have still not seen anything godly here. And if I haven't found it now, I will never find it." He left behind his three younger brothers, with whom he was never reunited.

**Olaf Lind** (1889-1968?) likewise worked as an assistant photographer. In the early 1920s, Olaf was allowed by Anna Spafford to also take an outside job as manager of Jerusalem's American Express office, but he was soon accused, rightly or wrongly, of withholding part of his salary from the community. A few years later, after Mrs. Spafford's death, he was summarily expelled from the Colony by Bertha Vester—it is said her husband Frederick gave him four days to gather his things and "disappear." Before his expulsion (the sequence of events is not totally clear) he may have emerged as the first to protest the new legal and financial structure imposed by Bertha Spafford Vester after her mother's death, a change whereby most of the members lost any legal stake in the community's assets. In any event, Lind apparently brought a legal suit against the Colony as early as 1923 (later joined by Lewis Larsson and others), and in the

process went public with his complaints, both in Jerusalem and in Sweden. Part of his action was a proposal that the American Colony be declared a “charitable foundation” with shares equally allocated among the members.

After leaving the Colony, Olaf Lind is known to have worked as the official photographer of the University of Chicago archaeological excavations at Megiddo, from 1926 to 1936. In that role he apparently established a relationship with the American scholar Herbert G. May and his wife, who visited Megiddo in connection with the dig. (Lind appears in correspondence and photos held in the Herbert May Collection of Oberlin College.) In the 1930s Lind was married, but the marriage ended in divorce. He apparently resided in Deir Yassin on the western outskirts of Jerusalem, the Arab village which became the scene of a 1948 massacre carried out by Zionist underground forces. After the depopulated village was razed, it seems Lind sued the young State of Israel for the destruction of his property and, not surprisingly, was deported.

**Lars Lind** (b. ca. 1891) was a five-year-old child when his family came to Jerusalem from Nås. Following in the footsteps of his brothers, he became an assistant to Lewis Larsson, especially in the years 1915-1917, and he is thought to have made at least some photographs on his own. Lars apparently remained with the Photo Department until 1930 when he left as part of the rift in the community. He remained in Jerusalem for many years, however, and is said to have learned Arabic. His arbitrated shares of the Colony's assets Lind took in the form of tires and rubber goods, allowing him to open his own automobile tire dealership. He later acquired the Jerusalem franchise of the Goodyear Company and apparently sold cars as well. In the fighting of 1948 the Lind home and business properties were looted, and soon thereafter Lars and his family left Jerusalem forever and settled in California. As did so many of the Swedes, Lars wrote a memoir in later years (*Jerusalem Before Zionism*, published in 1981) recounting his 50-plus-year sojourn in the Holy Land.

**Nils Lind** arrived with his family in Jerusalem in 1896. His association with the American Colony photographers is presumed but not well-documented. He married the daughter of Bertha and Frederick Vester, Anna Grace, but they later divorced. In the 1920s Nils was sent to New York City to manage a branch of the American Colony Store that had been opened there, but the store closed in 1926. Exactly how and when he left the American Colony is not known, but Nils seems to have spent his latter years in England.

### ***Furman Baldwin (b. 1876) (and Norman Baldwin)***

An American, Furman Baldwin came to Jerusalem with his father in 1890, at age 14. The father, Edward Baldwin, who is described as a “failed missionary,” brought Furman and three younger siblings from Morocco to join the American Colony. Mrs. Baldwin, who saw the Colony as a “dangerous sect,” refused to join, and Furman was thus separated from his mother and his five older siblings. Another dramatic episode occurred in 1901, when Baldwin was 23. In love with the younger Spafford daughter, Grace, and serving as her approved escort for a period, Baldwin attempted suicide presumably after being rejected by her. Despite shooting himself in the right temple (where the bullet would remain permanently lodged), he survived, apparently without lasting effect. At the time of the incident, Anna Spafford, fearing negative publicity, demanded that Baldwin dictate a statement exonerating the American Colony.

Despite the various traumas of his early years, Baldwin became, along with Lewis Larsson, the most proficient photographer of the early American Colony group. Trained by Elijah Meyers, in 1903 Baldwin led the first major expedition of the American Colony Photographers when he, Fareed Naseef and Erik Lind sojourned in Syria for two months. Then in 1908 he made an unusual journey to India and Ceylon, the nature of which is not clear. After a year's stay, he returned with hundreds of stereo photographs which were subsequently issued by an American firm, not the Colony, nor did these images find their way into the Matson Collection.

By 1913 Furman Baldwin, now married (but not to Grace Spafford) and with two small children, had had enough of "sect rule" and decided to leave the American Colony. The way the Colony was structured, he was constrained to leave behind in community hands all of his photographic work, not to mention the proceeds it had generated over the years. Thus, at age 37, Baldwin made a new start, taking his family to the United States and eventually establishing himself as a photographer in Buffalo, New York.

Furman Baldwin had a brother, Norman, who also seems to have been involved with the photo operation, but almost nothing is known of him.

### ***Lewis Larsson (1881-1958)***

Lewis Larsson served as the *de facto* head of the American Colony Photographers during the group's heyday, from about 1910 until he left the Colony in 1930. He was the son of a well-to-do widow who was one of the preacher Larson's strongest supporters in Nås, although Lewis himself was never "converted." His father had died when Lewis was three, and he grew up as the "man of the family," helping with the farm and his four sisters. After coming to Jerusalem with his family in 1896 as part of the Swedish exodus (he was the oldest of all the Nås children), Larsson began learning photography from Elijah Meyers and was already working with the photo unit by 1897, when he was not yet 17. In his youth, Larsson changed his given name from "Hol Lars" to "Lewis"—"there are too many 'Lars Larssons,'" he explained in a letter to Sweden!

Probably due to the Colony's nature as a communal entity, its leaders seem never to have formally named a head of the Photo Department, however by about 1910 Elijah Meyers, then 55 years old, had turned over many duties to the younger members, and Lewis Larsson, at age 30, had emerged as *de facto* leader. As for his personal camera work, Larsson has been judged to be part of "a new style" in local photography, by which he was not concerned with subject alone, but made use of light and shadows to dramatize his views and provide his subjects with a sense of "plasticity" (Nir 1985: 258).

In the spring of 1912, Lewis Larsson married Edith Larson, the daughter of the original spiritual leader of the Nås people. The Larssons' honeymoon came two months later in the form of a photographic assignment documenting the Shuney Bedouin tribe in the Trans-Jordan region. Their two-week stay included, appropriately enough, a Bedouin wedding.

Larsson was always adept at balancing Colony life with life outside, and no doubt found in the photographic work a welcome escape from the dreary constraints of Mrs. Spafford's rule. Cultivating many contacts and traveling widely, his interests and pursuits were multi-faceted.

During what turned into a life-long sojourn in the Holy Land, Lewis Larsson became intimately familiar with the land and its people. He was a consummate tourist guide and knew much of the Bible by heart. He spoke Swedish, English, German, French, and fluent Arabic, which he learned as a youth. Besides mastering photography, he was also an amateur painter.

From May 1920, in addition to leading the Colony's photographic work, Larsson took on the role of Swedish vice-consul in Jerusalem, a move for which he received Anna Spafford's approval. (He was recommended by the then-consul Prof. Gustav Dalman, a German citizen forced to resign the post by the British. Dalman is also known as the founder of the German Archaeological Institute.) From 1923 on, he was also dealing with the interests of conquered Turks in Palestine. In 1925, still alongside his photographic duties, Larsson was elevated to permanent (honorary) Swedish Consul and required to fly the Swedish flag over his residence on the American Colony compound, to the consternation of the Colony's American-German leadership. Moreover, the Larssons now attended the same official social functions as Bertha and Frederick Vester, which no doubt rankled the American Colony leaders.

About the same time, in the wake of the problematic reorganization of the American Colony enterprise, Larsson seems to have increasingly withdrawn from the internal social life and attendant tensions of the Colony community. Seeking at first to remain neutral in the face of the growing rift, he was charged with disloyalty by the Colony leaders.

In 1929 Larsson made his first visit to Sweden since leaving Nås as a 15-year-old boy in 1896, and on his return to Jerusalem he heard from his friend and assistant Eric Matson that his presence was "no longer needed" in the photo studio. Sensing his imminent expulsion from the Colony, Lewis Larsson decided to bring the long-simmering split to a head (recounted in more detail in Part I). It is interesting that Larsson, son-in-law of the original deposed leader of the Swedes, now found himself heading the opposition to Bertha Vester and the rest of the ruling clan. Indeed, he was suspected by some of wanting to wrest control of the community from them, but there is little to substantiate this.

As already described, after Mrs. Vester put forth a patently unfair reorganization plan for the Colony, which the Larssons and others refused to sign, an attempt was made to expel the Larsson family with a paltry, token severance grant. It was then that Lewis joined an existing lawsuit in order to force a just settlement for himself and the other dissidents.

In the ensuing split in the community, the Larsson family—Lewis and Edith, their four children, and old Mrs. Larson—finally left the American Colony in 1930. They did not go far, though, since, as part of the settlement, the Larssons were granted a nearby Colony-owned property on Nablus Road as their residence. The house, which had in fact been the home of Bertha and Frederick Vester, henceforth served as the Swedish Consulate, flying the Swedish flag up until 1947. Larsson himself, by this time almost 50, became a businessman and an agent for Swedish companies, in addition to his consular role, and part of "Larsson House" they operated as a small boarding house. Larsson continued with his photography, but now as a leisure activity.

In parting ways with the Colony, Lewis left behind two half-sisters with whom he would not be reconciled for many years. Indeed, the Larssons had little or no contact with any of the

remaining American Colony Swedes, including Matson and other former friends (let alone the ruling Vester-Whiting clan).

Amid the growing Jewish-Arab conflict of the 1930s and 1940s, Lewis Larsson was “caught in the crossfire” in a number of ways. He lost two business associates, one Jewish and one Arab, in the infamous 1946 bombing of the King David Hotel by Zionist underground forces. As Swedish consul, Larsson officially maintained a neutral stance, however it is clear that his private sympathies lay with the Palestinian Arabs. This balancing act worked up to a point, but by 1947, Sweden, and Lewis Larsson as its representative, were coming under increasing attack from both sides. Then, after a U.N. committee, which was chaired by a Swede, issued its recommendation for partition, the consulate—the Larsson home—suffered a bomb blast on September 27, apparently set off by Arab interests. The front of the building sustained considerable damage, but no one was injured. Nevertheless, under continued threats, Larsson felt the time had come, after 27 years of consular service, to submit his resignation to the Foreign Office in Stockholm. This was in late October 1947, about a month before the U.N. partition vote and the outbreak of hostilities in earnest.

In the spring of 1948 the Larsson family fled Jerusalem during the battle for the city, and in their absence their house on Nablus Road—which turned out to be on the front lines—was thoroughly plundered of all its contents amid the fighting. This included Lewis Larsson’s large personal photo collection from the American Colony, images going all the way back to 1896, many of which he held only as single paper prints.

When the fighting over Jerusalem was over, “Larsson House” wound up in the Jordanian-controlled eastern sector and, despite the division of the city which they had known for so many years, in 1949 the Larssons chose to return there to live. Lewis Larsson remained in Jerusalem until his death in 1958 and was buried in the Lutheran cemetery in Bethlehem. (The Vester-Larsson house, known also as “Jerusalem House,” still stands on Nablus Road opposite St. George’s School. Around 1970 the building was sold to the Baptist Convention of Israel and since then has housed a variety of ministries.)

### ***John D. Whiting (1882-1951)***

Son of two of the community’s original founders, John and Mary Whiting, John D. Whiting was in fact the first baby born at the American Colony. His father died in Jerusalem only a few years later. Growing up speaking Arabic like a native, the younger Whiting became an astute and articulate observer of the Holy Land and with such qualities was well-equipped for his role as American deputy-consul and vice-consul in Jerusalem, from 1908 to 1910 and again from 1915 to 1917. He also made himself useful to Allied intelligence during the latter days of World War I.

Whiting married Grace Spafford in 1909, and in this way redoubled his status as part of the inner circle of American



**John D. Whiting**

Colony leadership. In 1923 he became a legal business partner with his brother-in-law Frederick Vester, as co-proprietor of the “American Colony Stores” (apparently encompassing *all* the Colony’s various enterprises), part of the legal maneuverings that led to an irreparable rift in the community several years later. Beginning around 1923, the Whitings resided for a few years in New York City where he managed a branch of the store that Bertha Vester had decided to open there. The branch ultimately failed and closed around 1926, whereupon the Whitings returned to Jerusalem.

John D. Whiting contributed periodically to the work of both the American Colony Photo Department and the later Matson Photo Service. However, while he is known to have done some camera work, Whiting is known mainly as a writer who over the years became the most widely-read spokesman for the American Colony. He provided the text for ten *National Geographic* articles between 1913 and 1940 (detailed below). During the fighting over Jerusalem in 1948 Whiting was shot in the leg by a stray bullet which entered the American Colony compound, one of a handful of Colony casualties. He died in 1951, having never completely recovered from this wound.

### ***Eric Matson (1888-1977)***

Eric Matson’s family was among the Nås Swedes who came to Jerusalem in 1896, when he was a boy of only eight. One source says that Matson “taught himself photography by trial and



**Wedding of G. Eric Matson and Edith Yantiss. Lewis and Edith Larsson are in the back row on the far left. From the right side is the Turkish kavass accompanying the American consul (second from right). Lars Lind is third from the right.**

error” (Vester, *Our Jerusalem*), but this seems highly unlikely given the Colony’s already active photo unit. His early work with the department was in the darkroom, from which he advanced to become an assistant to unit head Lewis Larsson; from the early 1920s he was taking an even more active role, as first assistant. In 1924, Matson married Edith Yantiss who had likewise come to the American Colony as a child in 1896, but from a farm in Kansas. They had met working together with photographs, especially on the highly skilled hand-tinting of prints and lantern slides.

When the American Colony split up in 1930, Eric and Edith Matson apparently decided to stay with the American Colony—Edith, after all, was American—and Matson was then placed in charge of the photo work. When they themselves left the Colony in 1934, Matson received the Colony’s photo archive and some equipment and established his own business, the Matson Photo Service (see below), thereafter publishing images under his own imprint.

In July 1946 the Matsons and their three children left Jerusalem amid the increasing Jewish-Arab strife. Indeed, the final images recorded in his Jerusalem catalogue were of the destruction



**Bombing of King David Hotel, July 22, 1946**

wrought by the Zionist underground bombing of the King David Hotel only a few weeks before. Exiting Palestine through Transjordan, Matson took what were presumably his last personal Holy Land photos, at Qumran, Jerash and Amman.

After the Matsons settled in America, his employees kept his Jerusalem enterprise operating into the 1950s, and Matson himself continued selling photographs for many years from his U.S. studio. In his later years, Matson donated the American Colony photo archive to the U.S. Library of Congress (detailed below). It is

interesting that when Israeli researcher Yeshayahu Nir visited him in America in 1976, Eric Matson was still hand-tinting large sepia prints of turn-of-the-century Jerusalem! The Matson Photo Service ceased to exist with Matson’s death the following year at age 89.

### ***Hanna Safieh (1910-1979)***

Born in 1910 to an Arab family from Jerusalem, Hanna Safieh was one of the few Palestinians at the time to take up photography as a profession. Early in his photographic career, probably in the late 1920s, Safieh started working at the American Colony photographic department as an apprentice to Eric Matson, with whom he collaborated until the end of Matson’s career in Palestine in 1946. Thereafter, Hanna Safieh emerged as a documentary photographer of note in his own right, recording mostly landscapes, ethnographic studies and contemporary events. During the last few years of British rule in Palestine, Safieh was employed by the Mandate government as a Public Information Officer, which provided him with ample opportunity to

capture the momentous events that were unfolding around him in the lead-up to the conflict of 1948. Only a handful of these pictures are known to us today, however, since most of his photographic collection from before 1948 was stolen from his Jerusalem studio in the aftermath of the 1967 Six-Day War. A few photographs from that period did manage to survive, however, because they had been published abroad in a number of newspapers and journals. *National Geographic* magazine, *Readers Digest*, the *London News* and the Associated Press Services were among his many customers. A collection of Safieh's work was published in 1999 as *Hanna Safieh: A Man and his Camera, Photographs of Palestine 1927-1967*.

## **The Work of the American Colony Photographers: A Brief History, 1897–1934**

(No contemporary set out to document in a comprehensive, organized fashion the decades-long saga of the American Colony's photographic operations. Rather, it has only been researchers of recent decades who began to piece together a reasonably full and accurate picture of the photographers and their work, drawn from personal letters and diaries, memoirs, catalogs, and the various publications where their work appeared. Chief among these researchers has been the Swedish journalist and photographer Mia Gröndahl who, in addition to much detective work carried out in both Sweden and the USA, moved to Jerusalem in 1995 in order to more fully reconstruct the story, and especially to lift the work of Lewis Larsson from obscurity.)

### ***Origins of the Photographic Unit (1897-99)***

The story begins with the colorful and somewhat eccentric Elijah Meyers, who seems to have been making photographs at the American Colony by about **1896**. These early images were of American Colony members, including large group pictures and documentation of community life, photos of biblical locations, and portraits of the diverse peoples of the Holy Land, including Jews, shepherds, desert Bedouin, and the like. What seems to have begun as a personal hobby and avocation of Elijah Meyers' evolved very quickly into an intentional, organized photographic venture of the American Colony.

Meyers' first known major project—now with two teenage apprentices, 17-year-old Lewis Larsson and 14-year-old Erik Lind—was in the winter of **1897-98**, a documentation of the Jewish settlement enterprise in Palestine. It was done, apparently without payment, for Yeshayahu Raffalovich, a client and friend with ties to the Zionist movement, and resulted in the book *Views of Palestine and its Jewish Colonies* published in 1899. Of the 86 uncredited photographs therein, at least 12 can be firmly attributed to Meyers, since they likewise appeared the following year in a travel book, now with the new collective signature: “American Colony.”

Early on, Elijah Meyers also began training other young photographers, Fareed Naseef and brothers Furman and Norman Baldwin, to serve as his assistants. A letter written by the young Lewis Larsson reveals that already at that stage, early **1898**, the studio was producing as many as 300 prints a day—some 15,000 over the course of the winter of 1897-98—and marketing many of them through the Ferdinand Vester store inside Jaffa Gate.



In **1898** Meyers and his colleagues decided to immortalize and document the impending Holy Land visit of the German Kaiser, Wilhelm II, and his wife. Frederick Vester, a German citizen, was involved in contacts with the Kaiser's entourage, obtaining official permissions, etc., but his role in any actual photographic work is unclear. In anticipation of the event, the Colony bought a 13 x 18 cm (negative size) "travel camera," with stereo capability. Colony carpenters built professional studio and darkroom facilities at the "Big House" north of the Old City. The Colony photographers were not alone in their endeavors, but had competition for the coverage from other studios active in Jerusalem at the time, most notably Khalil Ra'ad. (An Arab who had started as an apprentice of the Armenian Garabed Krikorian, Ra'ad by this time ran his own portrait studio near Jaffa Gate.)

The ostensible reason for the Kaiser's visit, which occupied a few weeks in the fall of **1898**, was the dedication of the German-Protestant Redeemer Church near the Holy Sepulcher. The visit was a huge event, in a way hard for us to understand today. (The closest modern analog is perhaps a papal visit.) For one thing, the Kaiser was the first reigning Christian monarch to enter Jerusalem since Frederick II, leader of the Sixth Crusade, had regained parts of the city via a treaty in 1229. Indeed the Kaiser cast himself as a sort of latter-day Crusader.

The underlying geo-politics are a story in themselves: At a time when other European powers were gaining in regional influence—Britain in Egypt and France in Lebanon—Germany sought to demonstrate support for her Ottoman-Turkish allies, and Sultan Abdul Hamid II, like the Kaiser an absolutist monarch and thus something of an anachronism, was only too happy to oblige. Thus, it was a full state visit with all the attendant pomp and fanfare.



**Kaiser Wilhelm approaching Jaffa Gate**

The American Colony team followed the Kaiser and his entourage on the entire Palestine trip. For the event, two photographic teams were organized, one in the field and the other for the studio/darkroom. As the American Colony photographic wagon, pulled by two horses, followed the Kaiser's horse and carriage, assistants ran the exposed plates back to the studio. There the glass plates were developed and prints made en masse, to be sent off to Berlin or London by the Austrian Post, Jerusalem's most reliable postal service at the time.

Their coverage of the Kaiser was not only a great leap forward for the young photo department but a tremendous boon for the American Colony community itself. It brought the Colony photographers world-wide attention almost overnight, and orders would soon pour in for their other images and products. It also made the Colony a great deal of money. But it was the exposure to and recognition from the outside world that had a special impact. It can be seen as the first crack in the confined world of the American Colony sect, as one observer put it, "a 'way out' from their tiny, closed universe," a sentiment expressed by more than one of the photographers themselves.

### ***Expeditions and Early Publications (1900-1917)***

In the ensuing years, American Colony photographs continued to appear in published works. As alluded to above, twelve Colony images were among the 40 which appeared in the travel book, *Days in Galilee and Scenes from Judea* (1900). The author, Alexander A. Boddy, who was himself an amateur photographer, had in fact visited the Colony during his travels, in 1899. In 1901, still other Colony images were published in *Aus meiner Reisetasche*, by Ludwig Schneller. A 1904 work, *Inner Jerusalem*, by A. Goodrich Freer, featured new and clearly superior American Colony photographs, images which perhaps reflect the influence of Lewis Larsson.

The early years of the 20th century, specifically the period 1903-1913, have been dubbed by one observer the “golden era” of the American Colony Photographers. For one thing, it saw some of the daring and ground-breaking expedition work beyond the borders of Palestine, deep into the neighboring Bible Lands and as far afield as India. During this time, their on-going documentation of rural life continued, capturing the everyday existence of farmers, villagers, shepherds and Bedouin. Elijah Meyers was gradually handing over the arduous travel and many of the day-to-day responsibilities of the unit to his younger protégés, especially Furman Baldwin and Lewis Larsson.

In 1903 Furman Baldwin led the first major expedition of the American Colony Photographers when he, Fared Naseef, and Erik Lind traveled in Syria for two months. (Syria in those days encompassed present-day Lebanon and Jordan as well).

In 1905 Colony photographers made their second major expedition, this time to Egypt. Sailing from Jaffa to Port Said, the 24-year-old Lewis Larsson, apparently accompanied by Furman Baldwin, spent six weeks traversing the Nile Valley, from the Mediterranean to Nubia (Sudan), amassing in the process some 1,000 glass-plate images. Also in 1905, Erik Lind left the photo unit and the Colony community.

In 1908 came yet another expedition, one in which the American Colony's actual role is not clear, since there is little documentation, and Larsson and the other Swedish members seemingly did not participate. The trip was to India and Ceylon, where Furman Baldwin spent nearly one year creating hundreds of stereo photographs, pictures subsequently published by an American firm, Stereo-Travel. It was likely commissioned or contract work, but the question remains whether Baldwin did it on a private basis or on behalf of the Colony. (One also wonders whether Elijah Meyers, who grew up in India, might have played a role, or even accompanied Baldwin.) In any event, the series of images was never issued by the American Colony and are not found in the Matson Collection. Indeed, these photos were completely unknown until some of them were published in an American journal, *Stereo World*, in 1992!



**The Quay of Port Said**

By about **1910**, when photography was becoming the American Colony's most lucrative business, Elijah Meyers seems to have given charge of the photographic enterprise over to Lewis Larsson. At that time there were between six and ten employees, a mix of Americans, Swedes and local Arabs. Furman Baldwin and Fareed Naseef continued to work, under Larsson's direction. Other assistants included the remaining Lind brothers Olaf, Lars and Nils. Najeb and Gamil Albina served as darkroom technicians. In the fall of **1910**, the American Colony photographic team made another expedition, this time by boat along the shores of the Dead Sea.



**Photo expedition to Sinai, 1910. Lewis Larsson, principal photographer for the American Colony at this time, is the leftmost of the three seated men.**

In the spring of **1912** Lewis Larsson took his new bride Edith (nee Larson)—for their honeymoon!— on a two-week photo assignment among the Bedouin of Transjordan. There Larsson captured many images of, among other things, a Bedouin wedding.

In the summer of 1912 came another journey into Syria, this time by Baldwin and Larsson, accompanied by another Colony member, John D. Whiting. Traveling by sea from Jaffa to Tripoli and then inland, they carried along 13 large cases of photographic equipment and supplies, including two boxes of the heavy glass plates. That fall their work was published, with accompanying text by Whiting, as an article in *National Geographic*, “From Jerusalem to

Aleppo” (January **1913**). This paved the way for a long-standing collaboration between the magazine and the American Colony team, a relationship which lasted until 1929 and ultimately produced six feature articles (plus four later ones by Matson and Whiting; see below), some of them even featuring color photographs.

The Syria adventure of 1912 was the last major joint assignment teaming Furman Baldwin and Lewis Larsson. After many years of collaboration, for personal reasons related to the larger American Colony community, Baldwin decided in the spring of 1913 to leave Jerusalem. On New Years Eve of **1913**, the American Colony Photographers captured on film another historic event: the landing of the first airplane ever to arrive in Jerusalem.



Women on the way to market

The photo department's work force at this time varied from six to ten. The goal had been to have an equal number of Americans and Swedes, but now, from about **1914**, the unit was dominated by the Swedish contingent, including Larsson as leader. Elijah Meyers seems to be no longer active by this stage, and Fareed Naseef was the only member left from the original group. Others working at this time were brothers Lars and Olaf Lind and, by now, Eric Matson.

**1914** saw publication of the second *National Geographic* offering, “Village Life in the Holy Land” (March 1914), a 60-page article written by the Colony's John D. Whiting. The 48 photos were the work, again, of Baldwin and Larsson, drawn mostly from the documentation project of rural Palestine which had begun around 1900. Of the published images, 22 were meticulously hand-colored, perhaps by Eric Matson and his wife-to-be, Edith Yantiss, who both specialized in this art form.

At Easter-time in **1914**, Lewis Larsson, John Whiting, and Lars Lind traveled to Nablus. There, after gaining the confidence of the local Samaritans, they became probably the first photographers ever to document the colorful Samaritan Passover ceremony atop Mount Gerizim, as well as other aspects of Samaritan life. Their work was published in book form in Sweden in 1917 and somewhat later would result in their third *National Geographic* article, “The Last Israelitish Blood Sacrifice” (January 1920). There is an interesting side-light to this Samaritan involvement, one which may help explain the access they gained to an otherwise closed community: In the wake of the visit to Nablus, John Whiting, with his diplomatic connections (he was at that time between stints as consul), seems to have helped establish contacts between the Samaritan community and the U.S. State Department and other American officials—and philanthropists, the upshot of which was a package of economic aid to the Samaritans!



Samaritan Passover

In **1915**, a disastrous plague of locusts swept across Palestine for four months, and the American Colony Photographers documented many aspects of the disaster: the invasion of the pests, the path of destruction they left as fields and orchards were stripped bare, and the feeble efforts of the local people to combat the disaster. Some of the photos, placed in the hands of the Turkish governor, spurred the Ottoman parliament in Constantinople to fund relief efforts. Also, Lewis Larsson chloroformed many locust specimens in order to produce an extraordinary series of 58 close-up photographs documenting the locust life-cycle, from egg to adult. A number of these images, beautifully hand-colored, are quite striking and, along with the other plague photos, were featured in a fourth *National Geographic* article, again with text by John D. Whiting, "Jerusalem's Locust Plague" (December **1915**).



Locust plague of 1915

The years of **World War I** were a time of both adversity and opportunity for the American Colony and its photographic unit. The Ottoman Turks, by allying themselves with the Central Powers, practically guaranteed the eventual British invasion of Palestine, yet the Colony operated freely and without interruption throughout the conflict, ingratiating themselves in numerous ways to the Turkish authorities (as noted in Part I). In **1916**, for example, Lewis Larsson was appointed official photographer for the Turkish Red Crescent, traveling in the company of the Chief of Staff and documenting their relief efforts in hospitals and even on the battlefields, especially in Sinai.

In August **1916** the Swedish explorer and writer Sven Hedin visited the Holy Land and in the process not only enjoyed an extended stay at the American Colony but was guided around the country by Lewis Larsson, the beginning of a lifetime friendship. He also purchased 242 Lewis Larsson photographs, 16 of them in color, for use in the resulting travel book, *To Jerusalem*, published in Sweden in **1917**. Apparently these images are not included among the "Matson Collection," for whatever reason, but were rediscovered only in the 1990s in the collections of the National Museum of Ethnography in Stockholm. Thus it appears that, at about this time, Larsson's work sometimes appeared in published works credited *to him*, rather than under the collective "American Colony" label.

As the British advanced northward from Egypt, the impact of the fighting was increasingly felt in Jerusalem. In response to the privations of war, the American Colony operated soup kitchens for the Jerusalem populace and helped operate four Turkish military hospitals handling the casualties, all of which was documented by the photo unit.

### ***The American Colony and the "Surrenders" of Jerusalem (1917)***

The final approach of the British forces to Jerusalem, in **December 1917**, and the subsequent surrender of the city, involved American Colony personnel in a number of curious and fascinating ways. For one, it gave rise to perhaps the most memorable of all American Colony photographs, that of the "first" surrender—by some counts there were as many as five!—of the

city of Jerusalem in World War I. By the morning of December 9th Turkish army units had completely withdrawn from Jerusalem and the Turkish governor, Izzat Pasha, fleeing shortly before dawn (in a horse-drawn carriage borrowed from the Colony!), left in the hands of the mayor a letter of formal surrender, including an order that not a shot was to be fired in the city's defense. Thus, that Sunday morning the city's Arab mayor, Hassain Effendi al-Husseini, armed with the Pasha's letter of capitulation, set out to turn the city over to the British. On his way he first stopped to inform his close neighbors at the American Colony, where he had once been a student and was still a frequent visitor. Stopping first at the Big House he encountered Lewis and Edith Larsson, then proceeded to the nearby Vester house where his good friend Anna Spafford was then in residence. In the meantime, Larsson grabbed his camera, his three-year-old son, and a young assistant and hurried to join the mayor's growing group in Jaffa Road. In the process, someone from the American Colony—accounts differ as to who—fashioned the requisite white flag of surrender: a bed-sheet from one of the Colony-run hospitals nailed to a broomstick.



The "First Surrender"

Near the village of Lifta on the western fringes of Jerusalem, the party encountered the British forward units, and the mayor tried to "surrender" to two sergeants on sentry duty. While they were waiting for higher-ranking officers to arrive, Larsson immortalized the moment with his camera, a scene showing the mayor, his entourage of municipal officers and Turkish policemen,



Sergeants Hurcomb and Sedgewick of the Londoners, and the white bed-sheet flag—the famous image of the "first" surrender of Jerusalem. In the ensuing few hours, al-Husseini also "surrendered" to two artillery officers; to their commander, a Lieutenant Colonel Bailey; and then to Brigadier General C. F. Watson. Some of the local leaders asked Watson, as the ranking officer on the scene, to show himself to the populace in order to help quell some looting that had already broken out. Thus it was that Watson appeared with the mayor at Jaffa Gate and there (according to at least one version) accepted the mayor's surrender document (Larsson 1995: 22). On this occasion, Larsson managed to take more photos, including an "official" shot of Watson opening the letter of surrender, with Mayor Husseini and others standing beside him. This all occurred by about 10 a.m.

**C. F. Watson and Lt. Col. Bailey at Jaffa Gate**

Larsson then took advantage of a lull in the activities to rush home and develop the pictures he had already taken, and even delivered some to the American Colony Store where they were immediately put on sale.

He assumed that he had captured the official surrender of Jerusalem, in addition to the slightly comic "first" surrender to the sergeants. Returning to Jaffa Gate, Larsson was surprised to find General Watson and the mayor still waiting for the arrival of the commander-in-chief, General John Shea. After waiting an hour or more, Watson retired to the officers' quarters being prepared at the Austrian Hospice.

General Shea turns out to be a pivotal figure in this small drama. He seemingly intended to accept the surrender himself and may have been authorized to do so by a superior—the evidence is not clear. In any event, on December 9th General Shea was long delayed in his arrival when his car became stuck in deep mud 12 miles west of Jerusalem, and it was late afternoon by the time he finally entered in the city. Bertha Vester, in fact, states that she, in dire need of food for her hospital sites, flagged down Shea's convoy as it came down Jaffa Road. She then observed the mayor and his entourage likewise approach the car, she introduced the two men, and—still standing on the running-board of Shea's car—witnessed the general accept from the mayor the letter of surrender (the same document, by another account, already in the possession of Watson!) (B. Vester 1950: 257).



**General Shea at English Hospital headquarters**

It was two days later, on December 11th, that the supreme commander Allenby made his well-known formal entry into the city and uttered his proclamation of martial law and the safety of holy places from the steps of the Citadel. These official proceedings were likewise captured by the American Colony Photographers, now joined by other local studios. It is also well-known that



**General Allenby exiting Jaffa Gate**

on that occasion Allenby made a point of entering and leaving through Jaffa Gate *on foot*, as a mark of Christian humility, given the special character of Jerusalem (and no doubt in pointed contrast to the ostentatious arrival of the German Kaiser in 1898). Thus when Colony photographs emerged showing the general in front of Jaffa Gate *on horseback*, they had difficulty passing the military censor. They were finally released, however, because the rampart wall at Allenby's back proved he was outside and riding *away* from the city, not entering (B. Vester 1950: 261).

The issue of censorship arose again, and much more pointedly, in the ensuing days, for there was still the matter of Lewis Larsson's photos of the December 9th "surrender" to General Watson, prints of which were already in circulation via the Colony store. At the center of this conflict was General Shea. Actually it was Larsson himself, blissfully unaware of sensitivities involved, who approached Shea, thinking

the general might want prints of the "surrender" to Watson to include in his next dispatch to London! Shea was dumfounded. Whether he was unhappy at being personally upstaged or simply felt obligated on behalf of Allenby to suppress publicity of an earlier, unauthorized "surrender," he pointedly ordered Larsson to immediately destroy all the existing negatives and

prints. After stalling for several days, Larsson was finally forced to comply, under the watchful eye of Shea's adjutant.

Happily for us, General Shea's edict seemingly applied only to the few images depicting the actual "surrender" to General Watson, since several other American Colony images from that



**Albina brothers and Lewis Larsson  
developing motion picture film**

momentous day clearly survived, including the slightly comical "first" surrender to the two sergeants and a picture showing Mayor al-Husseini standing next to a mounted General Watson. Apparently deemed innocuous enough to escape Shea's ban, they nonetheless constitute unique snippets of "real" history. Larsson also managed to save the makeshift truce flag, which eventually found its way to the Imperial War Museum in London.

There is yet an epilogue to this story. Many years later, Theo Larsson—Lewis Larsson's son who witnessed these very events as a three-year-old child—was surprised to learn of two surviving original prints of the surrender to General

Watson. As recounted in his memoir, in 1977 Larsson received from a friend a copy of an *Observer Magazine* article in which a former British soldier related his own memories of the 1917 surrender of Jerusalem. The article made mention of two photographs he possessed of the December 9th surrender to Watson at Jaffa Gate! Larsson got in touch with the man, who then came for a visit and in fact presented Larsson on the spot with the two photos from off his mantelpiece. The old World War I veteran died only a few weeks later. The two images were published, presumably for the first time, in 1995, in Theo Larsson's memoir *Seven Passports for Palestine* (following p. 64).

### ***The First Decade under the British Mandate (1918-29)***

During the final days of World War I, under a special permit from the British, Lewis Larsson went on to photograph the final battles of the war fought in Palestine.

Around 1920 the American Colony Photographers, and Lewis Larsson in particular, made a little-known foray into the new medium of motion pictures, an interest that arose through Larsson's contact with a Swedish filmmaker. The Colony acquired their own camera, and cinematography, at least for awhile, apparently became an important aspect of their work. A few still photographs document Lewis Larsson and the Albina brothers, Najeb and Gamil, processing lengths of motion picture film using specially-built wooden tanks and racks, and drying it on giant spools. The finished films, however, have never been located and unfortunately remain completely unknown today.



**One of the Albina brothers  
drying motion picture film**



From the early 1920s Eric Matson was taking a more active role, now as first assistant to unit head Lewis Larsson. The two Albina brothers continued in their role as assistants and darkroom technicians. At the same time, from 1920, Lewis Larsson assumed outside duties with the Swedish consulate, and by the **mid-1920s** the Colony's internal tensions, already detailed above, were no doubt starting to become a distraction.

In any event, the work of the photo unit went on, but the days of the ambitious photo expeditions were over. One specific project in **1926-27** was photographing parts of an archaeological dig in Jerusalem's Tyropoeon Valley, carried out by J.W. Crowfoot on behalf of the Palestine Exploration Fund. The 1929 dig report acknowledged the contribution of "Messrs. Beaumont and Matson, of the American Colony, for excellent photographs." (The former is probably Ernest F. Beaumont, a Colony member credited elsewhere with creating detailed relief maps of Jerusalem, photos of which appear in the Matson Collection, e.g. image 07346.) Finally, these years saw the publication of the last two *National Geographic* articles produced by the American Colony Photographers as a group. They were teamed, as before, with John D. Whiting as writer:

"Among the Bethlehem Shepherds" (December **1926**)

"Bethlehem and the Christmas Story" and "Along the Way of the Magi" (both December **1929**).

### ***The End of the "American Colony Photographers" (1929-34)***

In the atmosphere of internal strife which swirled about the Colony community in the mid-to-late 1920s, the group of American Colony Photographers could not help but be impacted. Lewis Larsson was seemingly standing increasingly aloof from Colony activities during this period, a stance facilitated by both the photographic work and his Swedish consular duties, however toward the end it was around Larsson that the faction of dissident Swedes coalesced. Another member of the photo unit, Lars Lind, seemingly took a more conciliatory stance during the turmoil, seeking to remain neutral and on good terms with both camps. Elijah Meyers, founder of the photographic activities and a fervent follower of Anna Spafford's religious teachings, was alone among the older members in defying the new regime. As noted, after a heated argument with Bertha Vester he left the Colony forever.

When the community's protracted dispute came to a head in **1929-30** (see Part I), the impact on the American Colony Photographers was profound. Lewis Larsson and his family now formally parted from the Colony, and Olaf and Lars Lind likewise left and started life anew.

At the time of the split, Eric and Edith Matson apparently decided to stay with the American Colony—Edith, after all, was American—and Matson was then placed in charge of photo work. While the transition from "American Colony Photographers" to "Matson Photo Service" is not especially well-documented by researchers, it seems that Matson continued as *de facto* head of the American Colony Photo Department from **1930 to 1934**, when the Matson family themselves were, at least by one account, "expelled" from the Colony community (Gröndahl 2005: 259). At that time, presumably as part of their severance settlement, Matson brought out

some of the Colony's photographic equipment and also apparently became the exclusive, legal owner of the entire American Colony archive of negatives dating back to ca. 1897.

### **The Matson Photo Service, 1934-1946**

Matson soon established his own photo studio, located in the lower end of Jaffa Street next to the Fast Hotel. The prints which Matson continued making from the Colony archives, along with his own new output, were all now stamped with the trademark "Matson Photo Service." Again, a number of details are not readily apparent, particularly whether Matson operated a purely independent commercial studio or was somehow still tied, financially or otherwise, to the American Colony, and whether Matson continued to market photographs through the nearby American Colony Store.

One known employee and photographer was Hanna Safieh (1910-1979) who had worked previously in the Colony photo unit and to whom two photographs are specifically attributed in the Matson Collection database. Another name which crops up is that of Joseph H. Giries, apparently another associate in Matson's work. The Matson Photo Service, besides reproducing the classic American Colony scenes, offered important new documentation, especially of the changing face of Jerusalem under the British Mandate and also the rising tide of Jewish-Arab tensions during those days.

The collaboration with *National Geographic* continued under the Matson Photo Service, with John D. Whiting, who had established a certain reputation as a writer, continuing to provide the text for yet more articles. Some of the photography was certainly new work produced by Matson himself, but to what degree he continued to use older American Colony images, for this or other purposes, is unknown. The final *Geographic* offerings were:

"Petra, Ancient Caravan Stronghold" (Feb. 1935)

"Bedouin Life in Bible Lands" (Jan. 1937)

"Where Early Christians Lived..." (Dec. 1939), about ancient monasteries in Cappadocia, Turkey

"Canoeing Down the Jordan" (Dec. 1940)

### **The "G. Eric and Edith Matson Collection" of the U.S. Library of Congress**

On leaving Palestine in 1946, never to return, Edith and Eric Matson apparently took with them to the United States about two-thirds of the archive they had amassed, a mix of the American Colony images and Matson's own work from his final dozen years in the country. The balance of the negatives was left in Jerusalem, stored at the Jerusalem YMCA.

Twenty years later, in 1966, a 78-year-old Eric Matson contacted the U.S. Library of Congress with an offer to donate the entire archive. His one condition was that the photographic rights go to the retirement home in Alhambra, California where the Matsons would spend their final years, the Home for the Aged of the Protestant Episcopal Church of the Diocese of Los

Angeles. (Shortly after Matson's death in 1977, the institution, then known as the Kensington Episcopal Home, relinquished their rights to the collection.) Matson actually had in hand at that time some 12,000 negatives, and in 1970 the Library of Congress arranged to have the final group of about 7,000 negatives shipped from Jerusalem. In the intervening 24 years, however, many had unfortunately suffered water damage in the YMCA basement.

With the entire archive of approximately 20,000, mostly glass, negatives back together after a quarter century, it was registered as the "G. Eric and Edith Matson Collection," and in 1971 Eric Matson, then 83, worked for two months—12 hours a day, six days a week, it is said—helping the Library staff sort out and identify the images. Some 12,000 of the negatives are marked with the collective "American Colony" attribution and, as we have seen, the bulk of these can be attributed with some confidence to Furman Baldwin and Lewis Larsson. It is worth noting that the donated archive encompassed other materials as well: some 5,200 prints in 13 albums, 1,100 loose prints, and 900 positive transparencies in various media and formats (all numbers approximate). In addition, on cross-checking, some images were found to exist *only* as a print or transparency, with no matching negative. Also transferred to the Library was a supplementary archive of published catalogs, logbooks, caption lists, etc. which proved invaluable in making sense of the collection.

In the course of processing the formidable collection, the Library requested that Matson, a photographer previously unknown to them, provide some background information. The result was a meager five-page typed document entitled "Half a Century of Photography in the Bible Lands." For whatever reason, it proved to be a decidedly self-serving account, characterized by egregious omissions and misrepresentations. In Matson's version, for example, he himself was the sole or leading photographer, assisted by his wife Edith. There is no mention of the founder of the photographic work, Elijah Meyers, nor of Furman Baldwin. Likewise absent from his narrative—glaringly so—was Matson's long-time protégé and boss and unquestionably the most important of the American Colony Photographers, Lewis Larsson. When a curator later asked about Larsson's role, Matson characterized him as one of *his*, i.e. Matson's, assistants. Matson was also hesitant at the time to date many of the early photographs (indeed, he was only ten when the unit was formed in 1898). We will never know Eric Matson's motivation for offering this skewed account, however it is worth noting that Bertha Vester had already, by omission, effectively written Lewis Larsson out of American Colony history in her own 1950 memoir.

One cannot help but think that the collection's original Library of Congress curators and archivists abetted Matson's deception by failing, for whatever reason, to verify and flesh out the information he gave them. In any event, in 1976, one year before his death, Matson was more forthcoming when asked by researchers from Israel for information on the early photos, specifically those appearing in the American Colony Photographers' 1914 sales catalog—a period when Matson was not yet taking pictures. In a letter, Matson now acknowledged the role of Lewis Larsson and others. Though this letter was added to the Library's archival materials, Matson's original misinformation nevertheless seems to have held sway.

The most ambitious publication project of the Matson Collection images (until now, perhaps) was the 1980 four-volume set *The Middle East in Pictures* which the Library of Congress was instrumental in bringing into being. The goal was to reproduce the 5,000 images that had been sold commercially through the American Colony Store in Jerusalem.

## **PART THREE:**

### **THE AMERICAN COLONY AND MATSON PHOTOGRAPHS IN PERSPECTIVE**

Apart from the inherent interest of the images themselves, how can we judge the true importance and lasting value of the American Colony photographic enterprise? We can begin our assessment by acknowledging that the Colony photographers were not actually “pioneers” as such, for the simple reasons that many others had come before them, and that the photographic processes they employed were already relatively advanced.

#### **Early Photography in Jerusalem**

Looking at the wider context of early photography in the Holy Land, we note that the documentation of Palestine had begun decades before, as early as the 1850s. At first this was exclusively through the eyes of short-term Western visitors—travelers, explorers, adventurers, missionaries and the like, however the local people were quick to embrace the young medium of photography as well. In the end, there is perhaps no point in drawing a stark line between the two influences since, indeed, many “outsiders” (like the Colony members) came and stayed for many years. Even though the early photographic work carried out in the Holy Land is a study in its own right, a few salient names bear mentioning.

Some trace the beginning of local photography in Jerusalem to Yessayi Garabedian who served as the Armenian Patriarch and was making images as early as the 1850s. In the same general time period, the Englishman Francis Frith, active in the Holy Land from about 1857 to 1860, made and published a number of memorable images. Also in the 1850s, Peter E. Bergheim, a member of a prominent Jerusalem banking family, was making photographs, as was the Italian Eremette Pierotti who served for several years as Jerusalem’s municipal engineer.

The distinction of first local, resident photographer in Jerusalem—and there came to be many: Armenian, Jewish, Arab, Greek, and others— may belong to Mendel Diness (1827-1900), the bulk of whose work came to light only in 1989 at a garage sale in Minnesota! A Ukrainian Jew, Diness came to Jerusalem in 1848, a year later converted to Christianity, was taught photography by Scottish missionary James Graham (who was already making his own photographs), and was active in his own right from 1856 to 1860 before emigrating to America.

Also of major importance was the documentary record compiled by the Palestine Exploration Fund, particularly in the 1864-65 *Ordnance Survey of Jerusalem*, published by Captain Charles Wilson. Most of the 83 photographs that appeared in this volume are attributable to Sergeant James McDonald of the Royal Engineers.

One of the first true photographic *studios* to operate in Palestine was that of the Armenian Garabed Krikorian, which opened in 1885. One of his assistants, Khalil Ra’ad, later went on to open his own business, the first Arab-owned studio in Jerusalem. By the early 20th century the two establishments faced each other across lower Jaffa Street, while nearby, just inside Jaffa Gate, the American Colony Store occupied the space next to the Jerusalem branch of the Beirut-based French Bonfils family, already long-established purveyors of images of the Middle East.

In short, by the time the American Colony group came along, Jerusalem already had an active and richly-textured photographic scene, on which they proceeded to leave their mark.

## **The American Colony and Photographic Technology**

By any objective measure, photographic processes were relatively advanced by the late 1890s when the Colony group began working. The techniques had developed steadily. The first successful photographic process, the daguerreotype in 1839, yielded a unique, non-reproducible image on a coated metal plate. The Calotype (or Talbot-type) of the 1840s and 1850s employed a paper negative from which contact prints were made, and for the first time original photographs could be published in books—but only by pasting them in individually by hand! From the 1850s the wet collodion process produced images of greater clarity and permanence, but the procedures were daunting: a glass-plate negative whose emulsion of silver salts had to be prepared on the spot and both exposed and developed while still wet. This dictated that any work done “on location,” that is, away from a fully-equipped studio/darkroom, required *portable* darkrooms, usually in a closed wagon or a sweltering, airless tent. Happily, by the time the American Colony group began working, such rigors were already a thing of the past.

The prevailing negative technology from the 1880s on, and the one employed most by the American Colony Photographers, was a dry-gelatin emulsion on glass, a manufactured item purchased in bulk. Nevertheless, heavy boxes of these prepared glass negatives still had to be carried on location. In addition they required careful handling both before and after exposure, with the use of light-proof, wooden cassettes. Although acetate negative film appeared about 1890, it not only proved dangerously flammable but could not deliver the desired quality and durability of image. Thus glass remained the negative medium of choice for professionals for decades to come.

As for the camera equipment itself, in the early days the American Colony Photographers were often working with bulky view cameras lugged to remote vantage points in order to capture the images they sought. The still relatively “slow” negative emulsions, besides requiring sunlight, called for large lenses, long exposure times, and the indispensable but cumbersome tripod. The camera’s bellows were often hand-made from leather, and focusing was done on a ground-glass plate, under a heavy cloth.

Back in the darkroom, the glass negatives had to be developed and then printed in various formats, depending on the final product. The printing, much more than a purely technical procedure, actually lent the image its final composition, tones, and so on, and thus was part of an artistic, interpretive process. Same-size contact prints were made by exposure to sunlight. In the early days, both the silvered print paper and the developing chemicals were formulated by hand in the Colony darkrooms. Prints were dried on a clothesline, in the dark. Prints of an especially artistic nature were then often hand-tinted with oil colors, a technique the American Colony workers raised to a high level. Finally, the output had to be captioned, catalogued, and assembled or packaged as commercial products.

Compared to the relative ease of both modern photography and modern travel, the rigors endured by the American Colony group were considerable, even if they were fortunate enough

to avoid the worst hardships of an even earlier time. If we remember that the Colony photographers, especially on their several expeditions, traversed great distances on horseback (or camel-back!), were gone for sometimes weeks or months at a time, and often sought out the most remote and inhospitable locations (even in Jerusalem they often lugged their cumbersome equipment atop the highest towers and pinnacles in order to gain the optimum vantage points), we can appreciate the determination and effort that went into capturing the images they did.

## The American Colony's Photographic Legacy

In trying to arrive at some assessment of the photo unit's many achievements, we can trace several factors that serve to distinguish their work and establish its place in the larger corpus of historic photography in the Middle East. Looking first at the *output* of the American Colony Photo Department over the years, we can see that it was remarkable on a number of levels: the wide distribution of their work to varied audiences and through a multiplicity of formats; the sheer volume—some 20,000 surviving images (including Matson's later work), of which 5,000 were marketed and thus reproduced in quantity; and the amazingly wide range of themes, styles and subject matter captured and interpreted by their lenses.

The output of the American Colony Photographers proved popular and profitable with a broad spectrum of clients: religious pilgrims, armchair travelers, explorers and archaeologists (a large number of American Colony photos wound up in the possession of the Palestine Exploration Fund in London), news agencies and newspapers, religious organizations, publishers, universities, and the tourist and travel industry. The American Colony Store was always the mainstay of the direct, tourist-oriented distribution, and to this some creative marketing angles were added along the way. Examples of this include promotional photo exhibitions held in the store, and Colony photographers who accompanied tourist groups and recorded their travel experiences. The stature of the Colony photo enterprise is reflected in the Baedeker guide book, which touted the American Colony as a source of fine pictures, "the best available in the Orient."

The work of the American Colony Photographers was marketed in a number of different forms: paper prints (both black and white and hand-colored), 3-D stereo-opticon cards, glass lantern slides, postcards, greeting cards, and others.

The stereoscopic views, from the time they first appeared as a medium in the 1860s, brought the Middle East (and a host of other subjects) into both the family parlor and the Sunday School classroom in 3-D reality. Dubbed by one modern observer "the television of its age," the stereo images constituted the general public's first wide exposure to documentary photography,



Stereoscopic view of Zion Gate, with water damage along the right side

considering that the printing of photos in books and newspapers became possible only in the 1880s. In the medium's heyday there were scores of companies creating or licensing the images and manufacturing the stereograph cards and the requisite viewers. (The special camera for recording the images had twin lenses set a few inches apart, like human eyes. The 3-D effect was achieved through a simple optical viewer, something like binoculars but with an attached card-holder.) Even though the American Colony entered this field late in the game—by the turn of the century the format was well past its zenith—their stereographs were still widely popular. Indeed, browsing the archive of *original negatives* (as full-frame scans) reveals that several thousand of the American Colony images were shot as stereo views (for this “Historic Views” series, however, they have been cropped and presented as single images).

Likewise popular were the lantern slides, though generally used more in the classroom or lecture hall than in private homes. The slide was a glass positive (sometimes hand-tinted), sealed with a glass cover-plate and protective edging, while the “lantern,” which contained a simple light source, carrier, and lens, was the forerunner of the later and once ubiquitous home slide projector.

American Colony catalogues of the slides were published in 1911, 1914, 1923-24, and 1927 editions, and these have proven a boon to curators and cataloguers as important documentation of the archive. Such catalogs also convey a sense of the prodigious output of the Colony studio generally. In 1914, for example, during the heyday of the photographic activity, the catalog of the American Colony Store listed over 1,100 different images available as prints, and more than 1,500 different lantern slides. By the 1920s these numbers more than doubled!

It can be argued that many of the earliest photographic views of the Holy Land were not so much objective as an illusion: exotic, romantic, and picturesque in a way that mirrored the West's perceptions of the region. Shaped by literature and art, these images depicted the traces of the fallen civilizations of the past, biblical antiquities, and only those human subjects which possessed a certain quaintness or were evocative of biblical characters. In short, the images perhaps arguably reflected the photographers and their audience more than they did the subjects themselves.



**Reenactment of scene from  
Psalm 23**

Some of the early American Colony images certainly fall into this category of Near Eastern “Orientalism” for which the West had a seemingly insatiable appetite: images of Bedouin, Druze, Arabs, Yemenite Jews and Samaritans, pastoral and agricultural scenes, peasant and village life, fishermen, rabbis and scribes. Some of the American Colony photographs were quite beautiful. Some were idyllic, highly romanticized images. Some were intended to be inspirational, including a number of posed, costumed tableaux of biblical scenes.

Beyond these ethnographic and biblical scenes, the photographer's interests embraced history, architecture, landscapes, biblical sites, and archaeology. Of yet another sort was their documentation of events shaping life in contemporary Palestine, images which constitute an important record of the social and political history of the day. Such processes and events



**Turkish soldiers marching past the American Colony property**

interpreted by the Colony photographers (and Matson) include the Turkish mobilization for World War I, the transition to British rule under the Mandate, the construction and inauguration of public and private institutions, the emerging conflict over the status of Palestine, and much more.

Particularly fascinating are the images illustrating the changing face of the land under the impact of modernization, restoration, rebuilding or, sometimes, war. In some cases the pictures show the active construction of major buildings, or whole neighborhoods, roads, and other infrastructure. In most

cases, however, they simply—and inadvertently—document things that, from our perspective, have since been “lost”: structures, sites and landscapes, both rural and urban, that have now been obscured, intentionally or otherwise, or forever altered or destroyed. The examples are many and varied. There are a number of sweeping vistas—a northward view from Nazareth, with distant Mt. Hermon standing out in perfect clarity!—which remind us what has been lost in terms of air quality and visibility, just in the span of several decades. A shot of the upper (traditional) Siloam Pool from around the turn of the century shows a striking Roman-period wall of fine ashlar masonry, a feature long since covered up and now nearly lost to memory. An early interior view of the basilica at Gethsemane records a long-forgotten piece of art which fell victim to political-



**Gethsemane basilica altar with original mural**

ecclesiastical intrigues. (It seems that the original mural of the church's central apse, the work of a Hungarian artist, was replaced by an Italian creation after a campaign of several years by the architect, Antonio Barluzzi, an ardent Italian nationalist!) Then there is the early 20th century image of Jerusalem's Old City which shows not only two large Jewish synagogues, both of which were later blown up by Jordanian forces during the fighting in 1948, but, in the same shot, a sprawling Arab neighborhood, the Mughrabi Quarter, which would be razed by Israeli bulldozers within days of the 1967 Six Day War. (In an interesting epilogue to the lost synagogues of 1948, the Jewish Quarter's ruined “Hurva”

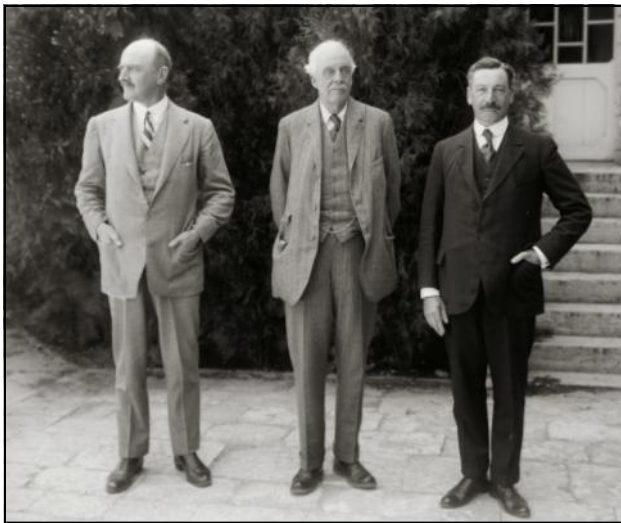


**Jerusalem's Old City. On the horizon are two large Jewish synagogues. In the foreground is the Mughrabi Quarter**



synagogue, long marked by a simple memorial arch, is now being rebuilt to its exact previous appearance. For help with the architectural and decorative details, especially the interior, planners and designers have recently been visiting Old City photo studios to consult Eric Matson photos from the 1930s!)

The famous people who found themselves in front of American Colony lenses over the years included of course Kaiser Wilhelm and his wife, in 1898; Djemal Pasha, the World War I-era Ottoman-Turkish ruler over Palestine; Herbert Samuel, the first British High Commissioner of Palestine under the Mandate; Winston Churchill, in his role as Colonial Secretary; Emir (Prince) Abdullah, architect of the Great Arab Revolt against the Turks who became regent (and later the first king) of Transjordan; Abdullah's brother, King Faisal I of Iraq; Lord Balfour; General Allenby; T .E. Lawrence; the American clergyman Harry Emerson Fosdick; and many, many others.



**General Allenby, Lord Balfour, and Herbert Samuel**

Having acknowledged their inspired camera work, remarkable volume of production and clever marketing, what other factors allowed the American Colony Photo Department to succeed and indeed flourish the way it did and to become, in its day, the Colony community's prime source of income? For one thing, they were operating at a time when tourism to the Holy Land, especially from America and Europe, was on the rise, and the phenomenon of *mass*-tourism in particular was beginning to flourish. Also, it was a time when images for publication were in growing demand. With the advent of halftone printing in the 1880s, images were now becoming more accessible to the public via printed matter—books, magazines and newspapers—where they were now reproduced alongside

text. (Before that, photographs could only be *pasted* into books by hand, as individual prints.) And, there is one historical twist that should not be overlooked. It is interesting that at the very beginning, for their first sizeable documentary project, the photo unit chose to cover a world-class event, one which conveniently came, literally, to their doorstep: the 1898 visit of the German Kaiser and his wife. One could argue that the Colony's sale of these images to the mass media of their day represented direct, targeted marketing at its best, and that the resultant exposure was crucial in putting them "on the map."

Finally, the American Colony Photographers seem to have combined in a unique way what appear at first glance to be two disparate elements, already alluded to: an "outsider" (i.e., Western) perspective on the one hand, coupled with "local" sensibilities, centered in an intimate knowledge of the Land and its peoples. The "Western" ingredients which they brought to this mix included the so-called Protestant work ethic, a modern marketing sense, and a healthy curiosity about the landscapes and people on which they trained their cameras, subjects which

they no doubt perceived, at least at first, as quite exotic. And the “local” aspect of their identity was a function not only of their long-term presence, active as they were (including Matson’s later work) for almost half a century, but also of their mastery of native languages (especially Arabic), and, to no small extent, the way in which their larger community, the American Colony, came to weave *itself* into the fabric of authentic Jerusalem and Palestinian life.

There is surely other analysis, more incisive and profound, that might be applied to the phenomenon of the American Colony Photographers, and no doubt will be in the future. In the meantime, we are privileged to be allowed to delve into the photographic treasure trove they have left us, in all its amazing richness and variety, this window into a special corner of the world and another time. Truly, both the images themselves and the people who created them deserve the unique place they have come to hold in the visual history of the Holy Land.

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#### **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

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