

“Indianapolis’ Syrian Colony, Buried under Lucas Oil Stadium,” Arab Indianapolis, March 18, 2020, ArabIndianapolis.Com.

By Edward E. Curtis IV

“Joy supreme has reigned in the Syrian colony on Willard Street since 3 o’clock on Wednesday morning when David Freije hugged to his breast for the first time in eight years his wife Martha and their seven year old daughter Salomey, whom he had never seen before.” --*Indianapolis Morning Star* (1905)

It took all of grocer David Freije’s hard-earned \$400 in savings, the equivalent of over \$10,000 in today’s dollars, to bring his wife and child from Ottoman Syria.

They made their first home in America on Willard Street on the south side of Indianapolis. Joining several other Arabic-speaking families, they settled on a road about a hundred yards long that ran over Pogue’s Run creek between better-known Senate and Capitol streets. The Indianapolis Journal described Willard Street as a “short thoroughfare divided into two parts by a dirty little stream whose banks in this particular vicinity were laden with tin cans, old shoes and other rubbish.”

Today, this place, the cradle of Arab Indianapolis, is buried underneath Lucas Oil Stadium, home of the Indianapolis Colts.

According to the U.S. Census, in 1910 David S. Freije (1874-1955), his spouse Martha (1876-1958), and Salomey were living at 524 Willard, and their family had grown. There was now two year-old Eddie and a baby, Mary. Joseph Freije, 26, boarded with them and was part owner of the store.

They were not the only people named Freije who lived on Willard Street. David T. Freije (1846-1931) and Sadie Freije (1857-1944) lived at 502 Willard. Charles Freije, and Mary Freije, widow of Abraham, had households there, as well.

Even though a 1902 Indianapolis Journal article labeled Willard Street the city’s “Syrian Colony,” Arab Americans were actually a minority of its total residents. According to a Dec. 26, 1903, *Indianapolis Star* article, the street’s narrow wood-framed houses were also inhabited by African Americans, whites, Italians, Poles, Greeks, and Hungarians. This was a racially-integrated neighborhood. Of the 179 people counted as residents of Willard Street in the 1900 U.S. Census, fifty-five of the residents were Black.

The *Indianapolis Journal* estimated that the number of Syrians on the street was 100, but the 1900 U.S. Census only counted twenty-seven. It is difficult to know which number is correct. The majority of Syrian men on Willard Street made their living as peddlers, which means that that they were gone for long stretches at a time. Some temporary residents stayed for only a short while in other people’s houses—perhaps up to ten people would lodge in these small abodes—

before moving on or finding a place of their own. Other Syrians preferred not to reveal their identities to others, including census employees, because they feared it would only stoke the racial and ethnic discrimination that they faced. Though the U.S. Census listed Syrians as “white,” the *Indianapolis Journal* called them “Orientals.” It would take some years before the city’s opinion makers would think of most Syrians and Lebanese people as white.

Some families either translated their names to English or simply took different names; this was a typical practice among many Arabic-speaking immigrants at the time. Among those listed as having been born in Syria were George and Mary Forest, Jacob and Annie Joseph, and David and Sadie Rogers.

The *Indianapolis Journal* said that the Syrian colony began in the 1890s, when Arabic speakers immigrated to Indianapolis from Rablah, a town then part of the Ottoman Empire but today located in central Syria just across the northeast border of Lebanon.

Syrian women were vital to the success of the neighborhood. In 1900 there were at least three female heads of households: Sadie Haider, mother of three young children, Alli, Tom, and John; Mary Abraham, mother of Mary and Abraham; Sadie Moses, a widow and mother of Freddie, James, Frank, and Fred. If you visited during the week, said the *Indianapolis Journal*, you would find women rising early and working late. Since most of the men were out peddling, often far away from Indianapolis, it was the women who gathered scraps from a nearby lumber yard to fuel their stoves. “Their daily work is quite enough to dispel all preconceived ideas regarding the indolence and helplessness of Oriental women,” wrote the *Journal*. The writer couldn’t believe that such small women could carry such large loads of lumber.

On Sunday the men of the colony, back from their peddling, would sit in front of their houses. The residents would dress in their finest clothes. Mutton would be cooked and shared with all. The *Journal* thought that the residents were participating in “some kind of joyous Mohammedan celebration,” but most of the people on the street likely belonged to Orthodox or other Arab Christian communities. Many of them celebrated Christmas and Easter at different times than Western Christians, and their Arab feasting traditions were likely mistaken as Muslim by the reporter.

Willard Street remained an important Arab community for a couple decades. In 1915 some of the families were gone—some returned to Syria, others simply moved to other places in Indianapolis. Some Freijes were still living there. And new families had arrived—the Kafoures and the Bashhours. Seven of the thirty households on Willard Street remained occupied by Arab Americans.

By 1920, however, there were no more Arab families on Willard. The number of housing units available dwindled as the area was repurposed over the next several years. The east side of the street was cleared away to build a railroad line, and a basket factory was added to the west side of the street. But Arab Americans continued to live on the south side and moved to other parts of Indianapolis, too. After World War I, they would build many of the civic institutions that would come to define Arab American life in Indianapolis.

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