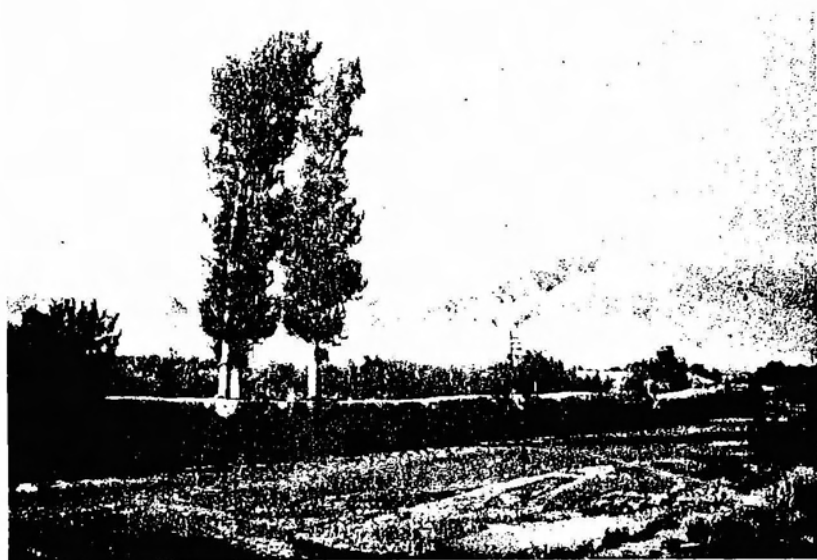


THE ARMENIANS
IN
RHODE ISLAND

Ancient Roots to Present Experiences

BY

ARA ARTHUR GELENIAN



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Rhode Island Ethnic Heritage Pamphlet Series

Published Jointly
by
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EDITOR'S FOREWORD

In 1975 and 1976, on the eve of the bicentennial observance, in my capacity as chairman of Rhode Island's celebration (ri76), I established eighteen ethnic heritage committees, consisting of recognized leaders of this state's major ethnocultural groups. One purpose of this move was to involve in bicentennial activities those ethnic communities whose contact with this country did not extend as far back as the Revolutionary era. I urged such groups to observe and commemorate the contributions they had made to the American and Rhode Island experience from the time of their arrival down to the bicentennial year. A much more important reason for establishing the ethnic heritage program, however, was to allow each group to present its unique contributions, customs, and folkways to its neighbors from other cultural backgrounds. Formulated under the premise that knowledge promotes understanding and understanding begets brotherhood, the program was designed to break down the ethnocentric barriers and antagonisms that hindered us from achieving that lofty motto and goal—*E pluribus unum*, one out of many.

The one task assigned to each group upon its formation was to write a brief interpretive account of its Rhode Island experience—its motives for migration, areas of settlement, cultural survivals, and economic, political, and social activities—together with an assessment of its contribution to the development of our state. Though some efforts are more sociological, subjective, anecdotal, or selective than the neat, precise historical narrative that I envisioned, each of these pamphlets in its own way makes a valuable statement to all Rhode Islanders and provides a useful self-evaluation for the group that is the subject of analysis.

After the bicentennial's expiration, the concept of an ethnic heritage pamphlet series was kept alive by the Rhode Island Heritage Commission and its tireless chairman, Robert J. McKenna. Albert T. Klyberg of the Rhode Island Historical Society, Dr. Hilliard Beller of the Rhode Island Publications Society, and, especially, the authors of the various essays have also labored to bring this project to fruition as their contribution to the 350th anniversary of the founding of the state. No historical enterprise could be more appropriate for this 1986 celebration than a recounting of the toil and the triumph of our diverse peoples: From American Indians to Southeast Asians, we are Rhode Islanders all!

Patrick T. Conley

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Rhode Island Ethnic Heritage Pamphlet Series
Dr. Patrick T. Conley, *General Editor*

PREFACE

The following essay on the Armenian-American community of Rhode Island surveys the ancient roots of the Armenian people, their immigration to the United States—the state of Rhode Island in particular—and some aspects of their ethnic community life. There has been no attempt to be exhaustive, since a comprehensive study of the Armenian-American community in Rhode Island would require some years of extensive research and a lengthy volume for publication of such material. Some research, however, was undertaken in order to gain a general but accurate picture of the Armenian-American ethnic experience. The *Providence Journal* was scanned for articles relating to Armenians, especially articles written forty or more years ago. A number of interviews were conducted both with Armenian-Americans active in Rhode Island life and with Armenians now retired who were of the immigrant generation. A questionnaire eliciting information in family history, occupations, and community service was sent to every known family of Armenian ancestry in Rhode Island and nearby Massachusetts. Although only a very few questionnaires were returned, some valuable information was nonetheless culled from the responses. Statistical information from the early twentieth century was made available through translation. Other statistics were available in English from church records and other sources. Some additional statistics and materials exist in the Armenian language but could not be utilized in this essay.

For the writer of this essay, a few persons in particular were of great help in his attempt to understand something of the flavor of the Armenian-American community of Rhode Island. Mr. Henry Derderian and his wife Bargeshd were extremely helpful, arranging interviews and sharing their knowledge and perspective of the Armenian-American community with the writer. Also, Ann Kimatian, who worked for the state of Rhode Island for some forty years beginning in 1935, was very helpful in the writer's efforts to understand the attitudes and participation of the Armenian-American in the larger community of Rhode Island; it was interesting to hear of those few Armenians who desired to become involved in public and even political life three or four decades ago. Other Armenian-Americans also graciously communicated their knowledge and shared their opinions of Armenian ethnic life in Rhode Island.

This essay is dedicated to the Armenian immigrant who had the courage and stamina to live in a new environment, and to strive for a better life in the face of the disasters of the immediate and distant past.

A. A. Gelenian

Ancient Times to World War I

A well-known contemporary Armenian poet, Kevork Emin, wrote a very pertinent poem entitled "Small," which succinctly describes the Armenian people:

Yes, we are small . . .
like the bullet in the bore
of the rifle; . . .
as the pinch of salt
that seasons the table.
Small, yes,
you have compressed us, world,
into a diamond.
Small,
you have dispersed us,
scattered us like stars.

The images of the insightful Emin aptly tell us of the age-old burdens experienced and the countless blessings received by the Armenian people. Today the numbers of Armenians throughout the world have been estimated in the range from five million to about seven million persons. In the ancient world the Armenian people, who lived in the eastern part of Asia Minor (present-day Turkey) and the Transcaucasian area (present-day Soviet Armenia and part of Soviet Georgia, Soviet Azerbaijan, and Iranian Azerbaijan), were well known and referred to in the documents of Assyria, Greece, Persia, Hellenistic Greece, Rome, Byzantium, the Islamic world, Russia, and Italy. What motivated this people, constantly threatened and nearly annihilated, to survive and flourish to this day?

The suggested answers to this broad question will help us to understand the Armenians as a people, and especially as an ethnic group in America and in Rhode Island. We will take two routes toward understanding something of the origins and history of the Armenian people: first, the geographical route, which will communicate something of a physical picture of the Armenian motherland; second, the historical route, which will reflect, on the basis of modern studies, some of the latest conclusions concerning the Armenian people, their origins, and their development.

Armenia is a highly mountainous area, able, without exaggeration, to make our Vermont look merely hilly in comparison. It is located between the Black and Caspian seas. At its geographical and political height in the first century B.C., Armenia covered an area estimated at about 100,000 square miles, touching the shores of the Black and Caspian seas as well as the eastern Mediterranean Sea. But only 11,175 square miles of that territory are included today in the Soviet Armenian state, which is approximately twice the size of Connecticut, a viable but small reminder of the glories of the past.

"The main Armenian plateau lies at an average height of between 4,500 and 5,500 feet above sea level," writes David Marshall Lang. "Almost everywhere, Armenia is higher than the countries which immediately surround it. Cut off from them on virtually all sides by barriers of lofty hills and mountain peaks, Armenia seems like some massive rock-bound island rising out of the surrounding lowlands, steppes and plains." The Armenian people are descended from a sturdy mountain people who regarded their mountain peaks, comely hills, sparkling brooks and streams, and lakes and rivers as religious symbols of God's greatness and mystery. The physical environment of Armenia is a rugged wilderness, often totally hostile to human life. For thousands of years Armenians have used their skills to make this land inhabitable. The Armenian people have had to literally wrest their food from the stones of the Armenian mountains. The climate is varied and harsh, with the intensely freezing winds and snows of winter and the sometimes extreme dry heat of summer. Some areas have winter seven months of the year, whereas other areas, which have wooded mountains and hills, enjoy more moderate temperatures.



Mount Ararat in Armenia

The best-known geographic feature of Armenia, and one especially familiar to Christians throughout the world, is biblical Mount Ararat. About eighteen thousand feet above sea level, Mount Ararat is traditionally believed to be the landing place of Noah's Ark after the great flood as described in Genesis, the first book of the Bible. Mount Ararat has actually two peaks, and although it is in the territory occupied by Turkey today, it is still clearly and historically the ancient area of Armenian civilization (and was to 1915), and it is rightfully seen as an Armenian mountain.

Mount Ararat is an ideal context in which to begin our review of the origin of the Armenian people. According to Genesis 8:3-5, Noah and his family landed in "the mountains of Ararat" after the biblical flood. Tradition has expanded the Bible's account somewhat and placed the actual landing of Noah's Ark on the hillsides of Mount Ararat in the center of historic Armenia. Thus tradition asserts that the land of Armenia was the place of the second beginning of civilization after the great flood.

Historically speaking, Ararat is the name not only of a mountain but also of a land area and a people. In the Old

Testament book of Jeremiah, chapter 57, reference is made to a people called the Ararat (Urartu), a people and civilization that centered on Lake Van and branched into what is today Soviet Armenia. Current intense archaeological investigation is revealing much about the ancient people of Urartu. Their language is known and many of their inscriptions in a cuneiform script have been deciphered. The Urartian kingdom (the home of iron smelting, which began about 1400 B.C.) lasted in one form or another until the sixth century B.C., when it disintegrated and the people were subdued and absorbed by the Medes. Following this Urartian demise, the Armenians, and Indo-European-speaking people, are mentioned in the ancient Persian and Greek records of civilization as the inhabitants of the country of Ararat-Urartu.

The oldest historical and more traditional views concerning Armenian origins, which stem from the ancient Greek historians Herodotus and Strabo, are that the Indo-European-speaking Armenian tribes migrated from the Balkans, down through Thrace, and into Asia Minor, moving eastward and eventually migrating to the Armenian highlands prior to the sixth century B.C. There they absorbed or dominated the remnants of the Urartu people and established their Indo-European language in the region (related to Celtic, Germanic, and Greek, Armenian is one of the several distinct languages in the Indo-European group). Thus, historically speaking, Armenia came into existence at a time in the sixth century B.C. favorable to the settlement and growth of a new people.

The word *Armenian* came to be the identifying name to other nations of a people who now dominated and settled that area, while in their own language the Armenians called themselves and Armenia *Hayk*. The actual word *Armenia* may derive from the name of a tribal coalition called Arme. By the middle of the sixth century B.C., there was a distinct political Armenian state and an Armenian people. The Armenians have thus been known in the clear light of history for a minimum of twenty-five hundred years.

In the mid sixth century B.C., Armenia was annexed to the Achaemenid Persian Empire. Located on the ancient world's east-west trade crossroads, Armenia became known for excelling in the crafts, arts, mountain farming, horse raising, pottery making, metallurgy, wines, and trade. The people lived

in a village-and-clan structure ruled by local headmen and provincial governors. By and large the Armenians remained dominated by the Persians (Iranians) until c. 331, when Alexander the Great conquered the Persian Empire. Thereafter, Armenia was influenced by the Hellenistic (Greek-Mediterranean) culture of the period, which extended to the fourth century A.D. Later, and into Christian times, Armenia was also dominated by the Roman Empire, and at one period her soil became the Roman Empire's easternmost province.

The historical period which really defines all else in Armenian history began in the late third to the early fourth century A.D. In 301 A.D. King Tirdat III of Armenia was converted to Christianity by the great Christian evangelizer St. Gregory the Illuminator, and the king declared that henceforth Armenia was to be a Christian nation. According to tradition, Christianity had come to Armenia during the first century A.D. by way of St. Thaddeus and St. Bartholomew, two of Jesus' apostles, who had preached in Armenia, establishing Christian congregations; they were martyred and buried there. Armenians honor these two apostles to this day. Armenian Christians and their leaders were sporadically persecuted during this early period until the nation as a whole became Christian in 301 A.D. Armenia was perhaps the first state or people as a whole to declare Christianity their only religion. Thereafter, Armenian culture, tradition, and attitudes would completely reflect this Christian foundation.

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The Armenian alphabet

One of the most important events to occur after the year 301 A.D. was the invention of the Armenian alphabet. Under the leadership of two scholars, St. Sahag and St. Mesrob, this alphabet was created by 404 A.D. Perfectly designed for the Armenian language, it is a phonetic alphabet of thirty-eight letters. Soon after the invention of the alphabet St. Mesrob and other scholars worked on the translation of the Bible into Armenian which has been recognized as the "queen of all translations." This was followed by original works of literature, history, and theology, as well as by the translation of great literary works from other languages. And most importantly, the services of the Armenian Church were now rendered fully in the Armenian. Because of historical circumstances, the Armenian Church emerged as a national church, a distinct and unique institution expressing the characteristics and piety of the Armenian people while still retaining its connection to the other ancient eastern churches.

As time went on, Armenians not only intensified their Christian culture but expanded it. Their Christian zeal took their leading preachers to other lands. In the mid fifth century the Armenians began a long struggle with Persia to preserve their freedom of conscience and religion, to worship freely as Christians, and to preserve their culture against Persian encroachments. Beginning with the famous Battle of Avarair in 451, the Armenian lords and their knights struggled with the much larger Persian armies in order to remain a free Christian people. At great cost the Armenians succeeded in this goal. The conflict, which lasted a century and more, left an indelible mark on the Armenian people, a mark of sacrifice for the Christian faith and personal conscience. Even today in Rhode Island, as in other American communities, every February the whole Armenian community commemorates the Battle of Avarair.

From about the sixth century to the eleventh century, the western part of Armenia was part of the Byzantine (Greek-Christian) Empire, while the eastern part was dominated by the Persians and then by the Arabs. In the eleventh century the Seljuk Turkic hordes from Central Asia began to penetrate and overrun Asia Minor and the Middle East. During this period Armenia—the land and the people—was seriously devastated, but the people never lost their spirit to rebuild. Most Armenians continued to live, however desperately, in their homeland, but after this period many Armenians began to

move to a territory called Cilicia in what is today south central Turkey, north of the Syrian border. There an Armenian kingdom was established which continued for several hundred years, maintaining relations with Mongols from Central Asia who had penetrated the Near East, the Crusaders from the West, and other Christian states in the Near East. Armenians lived in Cilicia until World War I, even though that medieval Armenian kingdom had also been destroyed by the fourteenth century.

From the eleventh century through the nineteenth century, the Armenians were ruled or dominated by either Byzantines, Persians, Turks, or Russians. Although losing their political independence, they nevertheless persevered in their church, culture, and economic pursuits. The disasters which the Armenians constantly experienced might well have wiped them out as a nation, but they did not, though there was no end to such calamities. "The Armenian is one of nature's individualists, a leaven for the conformist mass of the human race," writes David Marshall Lang. "Logically he should have given up the struggle and lain down to die long ago. But he refused and still refuses to surrender, and here lies the key to understanding the nature of this dogged, invincible little people, whose contribution to human civilization is out of all proportion to its numerical strength." Even into modern times, and particularly during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, the Armenian lived as a near slave in his own land under the Ottoman Turkish Empire, which had conquered nearly all of Asia Minor, southern Europe, and the Near East since the fifteenth century. Christian groups such as Armenians and Greeks were continually persecuted and nearly annihilated, despite their nonthreatening feudal and slavelike status.

With the advent of modern times and the growth of the nineteenth-century European democratic, revolutionary, and nationalistic movements, all of which influenced young Armenian students studying in Europe, some segments of the Armenian people began to express hope for reform, freedom, and cultural revival. In the late nineteenth century, when the Ottoman Turkish Empire became "the sick man of Europe," subject minorities such as the Armenians cried out for their cultural independence. At this time America was booming, and the lure of this great country of the West was attracting a few Armenians to its shores to taste its ways of freedom and

opportunity, far from the periodic tribulations of the Armenian homeland. This was not the first time Armenians had migrated from their homeland. Ever since the eleventh century, Armenians had departed, sometimes in significant numbers, to settle elsewhere, concluding that it was hopeless to dream of a better existence and a more secure society in their oppressed native land. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, there was to be another dispersion of Armenians, probably the largest in Armenian history. This exodus would lay the foundation for the Rhode Island Armenian community, as well as other Armenian communities in America.

In the 1890s the Ottoman Turkish government began a systematic attempt to destroy the Armenian people, and this encouraged an unprecedented volume of immigration to the United States. Hundreds of thousands of Armenians were killed in this first attempt at mass murder in the late 1890s. But it was during the years 1915-1920, the period of World War I, that the Ottoman Turkish government planned and carried out what was the first genocide of the twentieth century: the nearly complete destruction of the Armenian people in their native land. It is now estimated that 1.5 million or more Armenians lost their lives in the massacres and from the diseases and starvation which followed, not to mention the millions of dollars in destroyed property and lost land.

Persecutions and massacres are not uncommon, but genocides—when an attempt is made to wipe out a whole people and their culture—are rare in the history of man. The reasons for this unspeakable action of the Ottoman Turkish government against the Armenian people lie in the context of extreme Turkish nationalism and the resultant Turkish fear of the Christian minorities within Turkey's declining empire.

World War I (1914-1918) was a crucible for much human suffering, and civilian populations like the Armenians suffered beyond all imagination. The miracle of the day was that some survived to rebuild the greatly reduced but still existing Armenia under Soviet rule, and that others survived to leave and find refuge in the free environment of the United States.

Immigration and Economic Mobility

Though relatively few in numbers, Armenians were among the millions of immigrants who migrated to the United States and who gave their labor to help make America a leading industrial power. Nearly all Armenians began life in the United States at the bottom of the socioeconomic ladder. They rose economically as conditions improved and as they became fluent in the English language, saved their money, bought property, and established businesses. Armenians were "ambitious and hardworking, shunned relief and were anxious to find work," as one American observer described them in the early twentieth century.

Coming in small numbers in the 1870s and 1880s, and then in larger waves in the 1890s, from the less economically prosperous areas of the Armenian provinces of eastern Turkey, Armenians worked in Rhode Island factories and mills. During the depression of 1893 the small population of Armenians shunned the public rolls and searched for or made work for themselves. Their ethic of hard work combined with the ambition for economic prosperity derived from the necessity of helping impoverished relatives living in the Ottoman Empire. Once settled, the Armenians in Rhode Island began to climb the hard road to greater economic security. Many, if not most, eventually moved out of the factory into specialized work or small family businesses. Armenians seemed intent on saving their hard-earned cash to become independent, self-employed merchants of one kind or another. Many became small shopkeepers, even if they owned no more than a cobbler shop. But Armenians also opened tailor shops, grocery and meat

markets, candy businesses, small department stores, and jewelry-manufacturing firms. The immigrant tailor or grocer worked twelve to fourteen hours a day, as hard as his brother in the factory. His only purpose was to make enough money to help his family in the homeland and ultimately to be reunited with his loved ones. The majority of the immigrants were men who left behind wives, children, and parents.

Since farming in industrial Rhode Island was not a viable economic prospect for the Armenian newcomer, who lacked money to buy land, he most quickly thought of entrepreneurial activity as being the most desirable occupation, even though his experience in this area might have been negligible. The life of the small independent businessman was more familiar to the Armenian immigrant than the industrial atmosphere of the factory, since the factory system was largely unknown in the Armenian homeland. In Armenia cottage industries were primary.

Among the businesses in which Armenians soon became prominent were the trade in oriental rugs and jewelry making. Although only a few Armenians in Rhode Island engaged in these activities, they were consistent occupations for Armenians in New England cities, New York City, and other metropolitan areas. The specialty of rug cleaning became a common business among Armenians. These occupations were benefited during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century by an American taste for things oriental or eastern, from rugs to ottomans.

While some Armenians rose economically from small shopkeepers to larger merchants, many spent their entire lives as factory laborers or in semiskilled pursuits, working hard and pursuing the goal of greater socioeconomic success for their American-born children, especially through the medium of education. The newly arrived Armenian immigrant was as eager for education as he was for social and economic mobility. There was as strong a desire for education in the factory worker as in the shopkeeper. Some members of the immigrant generation attended college full-time or as students in extension programs, and some early Armenians even graduated from prestigious Brown University. One source reported in 1921 that "in proportion to their total numbers they (the Armenians) have the largest number of students in our colleges."

The Armenian immigrants were particularly desirous of upward economic and social mobility, possible because of their small number. They probably felt a need to succeed in order to survive. But there must have been other factors as well. We suggest that a better answer lies in knowing about the kind of Armenian who came to Rhode Island.

At least one immigration report reveals that 40 percent of Armenians gainfully employed in Turkish Armenia and Turkey were of the nonagricultural classes—the artisan and, to a smaller degree, the merchant and professional classes. But this fact requires further explanation. This economic condition may have been the case only with Armenians from the provinces under Turkish rule rather than with all Armenians. Some writers assert that in the late nineteenth century at least 70 to 80 percent of Armenians were rural peasants. But there is a possibility that much of the rural peasantry, as much as 60 percent, was massacred during the period of persecution, 1895-1920. Thus the greater part of the nearly 50 percent of the remaining Armenian people could have been classified in the artisan, the mercantile, or, to a small degree, the professional classes. Many of these people immigrated to the United States. Consequently the Armenians who came here displayed a high degree of handcraft skills and trade and small business backgrounds in comparison with the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century immigrants from elsewhere in Europe. Some professionals, clergymen, and teachers were included in this group. This was, therefore, a fairly literate group of Armenian immigrants who came to these shores. The less literate farming class had in good part been destroyed.

Possibly Armenian immigrant success in America also resulted from the kind of society from which the Armenians came. To live in the Ottoman Empire, even in the Armenian provinces, was to live in an area surrounded by many people of diverse backgrounds, life styles, and religious perspectives. The Armenian found similar diversity in the United States and readily adapted to it. The diversity of the people here was hardly a novelty to the Armenian, and he became comfortable quite quickly in America. Neither the dominant Protestant culture nor the large urban Catholic population posed anything unusual or threatening to him. He was happy that he now lived in a Christian country, a land of Christian churches, however different from his Eastern Orthodox form of Christianity, and

he felt secure knowing he would never again be persecuted for being Christian.

A final reason explaining the Armenians' economic success has already been alluded to: the eagerness of Armenians for education. In the nineteenth century, with the Armenian Church and its cultural institutions in a state of repression because of the long Islamic Turkish domination, there was nevertheless an educational revival in the Armenian provinces in Turkey and under Russia. This revival reflected the contemporary European and American growth in general education and the emerging belief in universal literacy as a key to higher culture. In good part this educational growth came through American and German Christian missionaries in Turkey, who were there primarily to convert Turks to Christianity (a formidable task). These missionaries also helped to revive the culture and educational life of the Armenian Christian people. In the central city of Harpoot, the Armenian schools became so advanced that periodically they were closed until the Turkish students in their schools caught up to their Armenian counterparts, a fact attested to by many Armenians who attended the precollege schools of Harpoot and later came to Rhode Island as immigrants.

Coming to America with this background, Armenians took advantage of new opportunities by becoming more literate and educated. In Armenia not only men but also women went to school, often covering what would be equivalent to our curriculum in a community college. Would Armenians not look for similar opportunities in America? It is said that between 1899 and 1924 in Armenia, 82 percent of all Armenians could read and write in Armenian, with many having fluency in Turkish, French, German, and English as well. This is a high rate of literacy for a nation where the majority of the people lived in a semirural environment. The educational experience in Armenia encouraged discipline, skills, self-respect, a sense of personal dignity, and cultural pride. The literacy of the Armenian immigrant in Rhode Island and elsewhere was probably far higher than that of other immigrant groups, especially among those who did not speak English initially. This level of literacy facilitated the rapid rise of the Armenian immigrant up the socioeconomic ladder.

Although Rhode Island was a new and strange place, Armenians quickly settled in and created a community life

centering on home, clan, church, political organizations, cultural and educational groups, philanthropic societies, and memories of the not-too-distant past. The earlier Armenian immigrants to Rhode Island of the 1890s could welcome—as Americans—their kin who were coming after 1915 as refugees of a terrible national disaster. By the 1930s Armenians had begun the slow process of becoming fully a part of the larger American community of Rhode Island. During the period 1898 to 1932, when U.S. immigration statistics reflected the ethnicity of the new arrivals, 6,375 Armenians came to this state. They settled mainly in Providence in Smith Hill, the North End, Federal Hill, and Olneyville, with smaller communities in Pawtucket and Woonsocket. By the 1940s Armenia's sons and daughters were giving service in the armed forces of the United States during World War II. The 1950s affected the Armenian community, as other immigrant communities were also affected, with the problems and tensions of the "melting pot" reality. The first of the American-born generation was coming of age, feeling the "foreignness" of their parents and experiencing a strong desire to be just American.

Those of this first American-born generation have by now long since become secure. They, as well as the second and third Armenian-American generations, are no longer concerned about "foreignness," but instead have a desire to cultivate their ethnic ancestry, renew their appreciation of their parents, grandparents, and great-grandparents, and express their identity as Armenian-Americans in a pluralistic American context.

Armenian-Americans: Two Examples

The lights of Providence shown in the dark as we disembarked on the soil of this beautiful country, and into the arms of my father and brother. When we arrived at their home on Wilmarth Avenue in East Providence, we met our wonderful stepmother, Mariam. We asked in amazement whether all the furniture and rooms belonged to them. My most wonderful parents just looked at us and smiled.

Henry Derderian (of Henry's Delicatessen, Cranston, Rhode Island) had expressed these thoughts in 1927, relating an experience common to the generation which came here to build a new life from the ravages of the massacres. Henry was a young man when he came to America, but his arrival here in 1927 was relatively late among Armenian immigrants. Henry's experience, however, was a mirror of the circumstances which brought most Armenians here, circumstances which have defined the Armenian character positively and negatively in the twentieth century and will do so for some generations to come.

Born in 1910, Henry Derderian can remember clearly at age five holding onto his mother's hand as the whole village of Proport, near Sepastia in Turkish Armenia, was apparently moving out. As young Henry (Armenian name Hampartzoom) watched, women, the elderly, and children—many men, young and old, had already been murdered—were packing their worldly possessions onto mules and wagons and preparing to depart.

Traveling with the group, Henry saw nothing but dead, massacred Armenians along the roadways, beside the brooks,

and in the valleys. "The stench of death was everywhere," he recalls. Although he was very much afraid, his mother was there to comfort him, and there was dried bread to eat. One day, the Turkish police accompanying the group took some Armenian young men to a valley out of sight of the others. Gunshots rang out. The Turks returned, but the young Armenian men did not return. Henry knew the youths had been murdered—but why? How could a five-year-old understand, even with the realities staring him in the face?

One evening, for no apparent reason, Henry and his mother were taken from the group and brought to a village named Oulash. Then they went on to Konak, to the home of a rich Turk. Another Armenian woman and her son were also snatched away and brought there by the man's brother. The Armenians were to serve this wealthy Turk and his family as virtual slaves. Henry's mother was to wash and clean. Henry was to tend sheep and keep the barn clean. To their Turkish master, Henry and the others were scum because they were Christians. The Turks were Moslems. Christians, if not killed, were made slaves and treated as scum, or *giaours*, as they were called by the Turks.

Henry slept in a trough in the barn. His mother and the others slept in the barn as well. Henry now was nearly totally uprooted from everything he once knew—family, friends, home, church, school. During this time two important incidents occurred which he never forgot. The first was the occasion of his being beaten with a whip by his Turkish master, who found him asleep in the pasture one day. Some of the sheep had gone astray. The second incident was the tragic death of his mother. The occasion was passed with no church service, no priest for last rites, just a white sheet to wrap around her and a wooden cross on her grave to symbolize her faith in Christ.

Soon people began to hear that an Armenian boy had been enslaved nearby, and plans were made by Armenians to rescue him. Eventually Henry was snatched away from the Turkish family and placed in an orphanage in Sivas. There in Sivas were thousands of orphans who had been left homeless and starving as a result of the massacre of their parents and grandparents by the Ottoman Turks. Henry did not even remember his last name at the orphanage, and so he gave his father's first name, Soukias, as his last name. A year later Henry's older brother

Arshag found him and corrected this situation by telling him that his last name was Derderian. Henry attended a school at the orphanage, and it was there that another memorable incident occurred. While workmen were digging for the purpose of additional construction, human bones were discovered everywhere. It seems that the Mongols had wreaked destruction on the Armenian people—Armenian children in particular—centuries ago. History had repeated itself in the twentieth century with greater intensity, and Henry was witness to it.

In 1922 the orphans were informed that they were to be moved to Greece, for once again life was insecure in Turkey. The group was taken to the port of Samson, and there they boarded a Turkish ship which carried them through the Black Sea and the Dardanelles toward Greece. Thousands of people were on the decks with no sanitation facilities and little food. It was a rough voyage and a trying time. When the ship finally reached Edipsos, Greece, the group of orphans was broken up, and Henry was taken to an orphanage in the city of Corinth.

A few years later Henry was transferred to an orphanage called Zapion in Athens. Here he discovered his second brother, Moushegh, and also found out something that he had suspected—his two sisters had been murdered by the Turks in the massacres. It was in Athens that Henry was at last contacted by his father. Together with Henry's eldest brother Megurditch, his father had gone to America in 1900 with the intention of earning and saving money and then returning to Turkish Armenia to help his family, as other immigrants had done in the years prior to 1914. The First World War had intervened, however, and Henry's father and brother were unable to come back as they had planned.

Finally, in January 1927, at age 17, Henry boarded a ship with his brother Moushegh at Piraeus, Greece, to come to America. Brother Arshag, who had become separated from his brothers, had boarded the same ship a few days before in Constantinople, Turkey. After some twelve years of living in orphanages, the brothers were reunited and on their way to America, a land that would surely be a place of God's blessing. Their mother was buried back in ancestral soil, relatives and other family members were dead, but once in Rhode Island they would be a family again, and they would begin a new life!

Henry went to the Bliss School on Broadway in

Providence and graduated from junior high school in a couple of years. He was proud of being an American. In 1933 he married Bargeshd Stambolian in Providence. Her father, a doctor in Istanbul, Turkey, had been killed by the Turks when she was less than six months old. During the sad days of deportation, both she and her mother were saved by her uncle, Kegham Ayzazian, who also settled in Rhode Island for a while before moving west to Ohio.



The grand opening of Henry's Spa, March 6, 1947. Shown in the picture are Henry Derderian and his wife Bargeshd, Annette Klanian, Theodore Topakian, Albert Arabian, and a throng of opening-day customers.

Now retired, Henry is best known for his Henry's Deli, which he opened in 1945 in Edgewood. It was probably one of the first Armenian specialty food stores in Rhode Island. Although Henry is a distinct individual, he is also typical of the Armenian immigrant: bringing with him both fond memories of his native land and painful, nightmarish recollections of the massacres perpetrated against his people, he arrived ready to build a new life in America. Henry's story is only one amongst many, and there were immigrants from Armenia who had suffered even more than he did. But the story of Henry Derderian illustrates the common background which motivated Armenians to come to the United States as their permanent home.

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The first native-born generation of any immigrant community is one especially worthy of study. It is the generation which is most closely tied to the immigrant group. It is the generation which feels most keenly the tensions and strains of being somehow both of a particular ethnic background and American at the same time. It is the generation that is embarrassed by its parents' foreign accent, and yet, when mature, it is a generation that begins to prize its own connection to a past only a generation removed in history. It is a generation which is proud of its cultural transition, a transition that makes it possible for its children to feel completely at home in the new country. If there are traditions to pass on or be witness to, it is the first generation which has the opportunity to transmit the culture of its forefathers and mothers.



Harry Kizirian, U.S. Postmaster, Providence, Rhode Island

Harry Kizirian is a first-generation Armenian-American. He was born in Providence, Rhode Island, in July 1925, the son of Toros and Haropig Kizirian, both immigrants now deceased. Harry's mother had been widowed in Armenia and had experienced the loss of nine children in the massacres. Here in America she married Toros Kizirian, and Harry was their only child. Although Harry's parents were able to provide for him in only a modest way during his growing years, his academic work was excellent and he was offered a scholarship to LaSalle Academy, though he chose to attend Mount Pleasant High School. When Harry was fifteen his father died, and thus he had to grow up fast. He began work part-time bagging beef and unloading freight cars. In 1942 he went to work at the Providence Post Office at the suggestion of a high school football referee. He graduated from Mount Pleasant High School in January 1944, having been active in sports and captain of the football team in 1943.

On the day after his graduation Harry enlisted in the Marine Corps, and for the next two years he served his country with great distinction. With World War II at its height, he was quickly sent into combat. Wounded twice on Okinawa, he was awarded the Navy Cross, two Purple Hearts, the Bronze Star with Gold V, the Rhode Island Cross, and more. He is one of the most decorated Marines in Rhode Island. Honorably discharged in February 1946, he then came back to Rhode Island to resume his life in his native state.

In September 1947 he married Hazel Serabian of Messina, New York. During that same year he returned to work at the post office, and in 1954 he was named foreman there. Later Harry took on the responsibility of administering the new Turnkey Mechanized Post Office in Providence. It was a new and tough job, but he kept at it for two years until his task was completed. He seemed blessed with both the ability and the desire to work hard at tasks that would challenge him.

At the age of thirty-five Harry was nominated to become postmaster of Providence. Although no Armenian in Rhode Island had yet attained a position of this stature, in modest but definite ways Armenians had begun to enter public service, and thus the road that Harry was traveling was not unusual. In 1961 Harry Kizirian's appointment as postmaster was confirmed by the United States Senate. For this first-generation Armenian-American, in a world far removed from

the world his parents had left behind, the American dream of opportunity and success had indeed come true.

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We have looked briefly at Henry Derderian and Harry Kizirian, two Armenians separated by age but significantly representative of the manner in which Armenians became Americans in Rhode Island. Although not all Armenians prospered here, the successes of these two men show how for many the promise of America has been richly fulfilled.

In their differences and similarities, Henry Derderian and Harry Kizirian are representative of Rhode Island's Armenian-Americans. They reflect the general experience of both immigrant and native-born Americans, living in two cultures simultaneously, yet fulfilling simultaneously the need to be American and the desire never to forget what it means to be of Armenian ancestry. Looking at these two men and other persons like them in the Armenian-American community, we can discern something of the nature and growth of that community here in Rhode Island as it moved from newly arrived immigrant families to church congregations and buildings, to political organizations, to philanthropic and cultural societies, and finally to the full participation of the Armenian first, second, and third American-born generations in every aspect of Rhode Island life.

The Church: The Center of Armenian Community Life

For thirteen centuries the Armenians lived under the sway of Islam, which recognized them as a religious entity. Thus the church became for Armenians the symbol of their nationhood, language, spirit, and pride. It was the only channel through which they could culturally and politically assert their identity. It would appear that this was the case for the aristocracy as well as for the mountain peasant farmer and those in between. We would expect that wherever Armenians began to build or rebuild their lives, one of the first tasks they would undertake would be the construction of a church to serve as the center of the spiritual and cultural life of the community. The Rhode Island Armenian community was no exception.

The overwhelming majority of the Armenian people belong to the ancient Church of Armenia, or, as it is more commonly called, the Armenian Apostolic Church, which belongs to the Eastern churches of the Orient. From the fourth century A.D. on, the Armenian Church helped to create and sustain the Christian culture and national identity of the Armenian people. Not only did the church's teachers and preachers preach the Christian faith, but the very architecture of the church communicated its sense of having a distinct identity and a divine mission to the Armenian people as a nation. Thus the Armenian Church, in all ages and wherever Armenians settle and resettle, is the outward sign of an inner reality of the religious and national sentiment of the Armenian people. The ethnic community life of Armenians is centered in their church.

The Armenian Apostolic community in the Providence area established itself as an organized entity in 1888 with a population of just thirty-five persons. (The Providence Armenian community was an extension of that of Worcester, Massachusetts, which was the first city of significant Armenian settlement in the New England area.) Prior to 1895 the younger generation of Armenians brought pastors such as Bishop Saradjian of Worcester to celebrate the Divine Liturgy (Mass) for the Providence church, but by 1895 the need for a permanent pastor was evident. The Very Reverend Vaghinag Siragian, an able religious leader, was recommended to the pastorate of the church, and the Catholicos Khrimian Hairig was cabled to request approval of the choice (the catholicos is the supreme leader, or patriarch, of the Armenian Church). The choice was approved, and on May 30, 1897, Siragian was welcomed enthusiastically to Providence by the parishioners. The Armenian population of Providence and vicinity at that time numbered over five hundred.

Just two years later, on July 14, 1899, Siragian died. For a year and a half no pastor was available, and in 1900 the Reverend Khat Markarian served for four to five months. In 1901 the Very Reverend Arsen Behouni was elected pastor of the church and served for three years, after which he was promoted to work as Vicar-General under Bishop Saradjian. From 1904 until 1911 the church was able to have priests for only short terms.

In 1912 and 1913 the community's spiritual life declined, and the catholicos sent Archbishop Kevork Utudjian to revitalize the congregation and serve and enhance the spiritual and cultural needs of the people. A new parish council worked towards the establishment of a permanent church location. While there had been attempts made prior to 1913 to buy or build a church structure, it was not until 1913 that the crucial step was taken and the former Jefferson Street Baptist Church in Providence was acquired. Prior to the actual purchase, the church was incorporated under Rhode Island law as the Armenian Apostolic Church in Providence, but later—and to this day—it would be known as the St. Sahag and St. Mesrob Armenian Apostolic Church (Holy Translators Church). The charter was granted on September 26, 1913.

On January 26, 1914, the first Christmas Divine Liturgy was performed in the newly acquired church. The church was

consecrated on June 7, 1914, by Bishop Moushegh Seropian. From 1917 to 1932 six clergymen served for short periods of time. One of the longest pastorates was held by the Very Reverend Sion Manoogian, who served from 1936 to 1946. This was a period of spiritual reawakening.

In 1936 the church's mortgage was paid and an enthusiastic celebration was held in the church hall; in 1938 the twenty-fifth anniversary of the church's purchase was celebrated. Father Manoogian was elevated to the office of bishop and consecrated to that office in the spring of 1946 in Holy Etchmiadzin (in Soviet Armenia), the ancient and continuing primary seat of the Armenian Apostolic Church.

During the decades of the 1940s and 1950s, the American-born generation of Armenians began to take an active part in the church's life. In the 1950s another long pastorate was held by the Reverend Shahe Altounian, who was pastor of the church from 1950 to 1958. During this time the church grew in its spiritual outreach, as well as organizing a men's club and the envelope system of donations. The Reverend Haik Donikian followed Altounian in the pastorate, performing his first Divine Liturgy in the church on Sunday, June 8, 1958. He has been pastor of the St. Sahag and St. Mesrob Church since that time. It was during this period that the Egavian brothers donated a sum of money for the purpose of constructing a social hall, completed in 1960 and dedicated in 1961.

In June 1960 the supreme patriarch of the Armenian Church, Catholicos Vasken I, visited the Providence congregation. This was the first time the head of the Armenian Church, seated in Soviet Armenia, had come to America, and the St. Sahag and St. Mesrob Church was included as one of his points of visitation.

In that eventful year the church newspaper *Paros* was first published in both Armenian and English, and the church became a member of the Rhode Island State Council of Churches. A few years later the church's basement was renovated, and since the completion of this work in June 1963 the new rooms have been used for a church school and an Armenian language school.

In 1963 the new Interstate Highway 95 cut through several of the streets close to the church, depriving it of parking spaces but making the church structure more visible,



His Holiness Vasken I, Supreme Patriarch and Catholicos of all Armenians, blessing the cornerstone of the Egavian Auditorium, St. Sahag and St. Mesrob Armenian Apostolic Church. With the catholicos are (left to right) Archbishop Sion Manoogian, Primate of the Diocese of the Armenian Church of America; Deacon Kachadoor N. Kazarian; and Archbishop Gomidas Der Stepanian. Seen in the background is Judge John K. Najarian.

especially at night, when the church's main cross on top of the bell tower is lighted in a soft blue neon light.

Characteristically, St. Sahag and St. Mesrob has remained the center of Armenian ethnic life for her people. By the 1970s American-born Armenians had fully taken their place as leaders in the church Sunday school, the Armenian language school, and church committees, all of which are seeking to increase the church's service and outreach to the congregation. Athletic programs have been initiated for the church's youth. In the 1960s the church had become more involved in the activities of the Council of Churches and other ecumenical activities, as illustrated by gifts from the Providence Greek community and the Sacred Heart Catholic Church of West Warwick in 1969. In that same year costly reconstruction, internal and external, was undertaken in order to further utilize

the church plant for religious and ethnic activities. Land properties around the church have also been purchased to prepare for an eventual community center building.

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The Armenian Apostolic Church community does not dot the Rhode Island landscape with many small parish churches. A hundred years ago there were as many as three thousand churches in Armenia, literally one in every village and town, and more than a few in every larger town and city. The ideal parish was a small community of Armenians led by their priest. In Rhode Island smaller parishes never developed, since the majority of Armenians in the state settled in the Providence area very close to each other, at first many (if not most) living in the Douglas Avenue-Smith Hill section of Providence. Recovering from the shock of massacre and social destruction, Armenian immigrants naturally tended to settle together in large groups, rather than in such smaller separated groups as were common in Armenia. In addition, the genocide of 1915-1920 had decimated the clergy, and spiritually the church was bereft of its usual number of spiritual leaders. Thus in America, with fewer clergy, large parishes became the rule.

Despite its residential pattern, by the 1940s the Armenian community could have utilized one or more additional parish churches in the areas of Rhode Island where Armenians had settled or resettled. Nevertheless, it was for a complex set of reasons having to do with the internal political and religious life of the Armenian community in the United States, rather than for simple parish need, that an additional large parish church began to take shape.

Sts. Vartanantz Armenian Apostolic Church was established in 1940 as a result of a rift in the Armenian community in Providence. Almost all ethnic communities in the United States eventually experience some fracture or schism, and the Armenian ethnic community was no exception. For many years the Armenian Apostolic community had worshipped together in what is presently the St. Sahag and St. Mesrob Church. By the 1930s the Armenian community in the United States was increasingly beset by tensions and frustrations concerning the failure of the peace agreements of the post-World War I period to create an independent and secure Armenia (Armenia had been independent as a small state from 1918 to 1920, but it had

then been absorbed into the Soviet Union). By 1933 many Armenians in the United States had become estranged from the larger Armenian-American community, and these tensions carried over into religious life.

Some Providence Armenians who now felt estranged began to plan for a new parish church, and a nine-man board of trustees was formed to proceed with this church's organization. The immediate work of this committee was to rent a church at 197 Cranston Street in Providence. Prior to the time when there was a church building, the Reverend Mateos Manigian traveled from place to place performing religious services. In succession, the Very Reverend Chevont Martoogesian, the Reverend Hoosig Nakhnikian, and the Reverend Yegishe Kasparian were invited to pastor the congregation in the rented church.

It was with much difficulty that the church's work was carried out. Priests and congregation became tired and discouraged laboring from church to church, hall to hall, for services and other functions. This situation persisted for five years. In September 1938 the infamous hurricane destroyed the rented church on Cranston Street, and that sad event became an important turning point for the church. The congregation was forced, in that devastated condition, to purchase a church building to serve as its permanent center. A committee was formed, and it chose the present church building on Broadway, which formerly housed the Episcopal congregation of St. James. This structure was felt to satisfy all the requirements of the congregation's spiritual and community activities.

Since it was not certain what to name the new church, it was unanimously agreed to call it All Saints Church, and this name still stands on the original records. It was the desire of Mrs. Mary Markarian to become godmother of the church (an Armenian custom), and with the agreement of the congregation, on June 23, 1940, the church was consecrated and named Sts. Vartanantz Armenian Apostolic Church.

Just three years later, on June 27, 1943, the church's mortgage was completely paid, as were all its debts. This accomplishment reflected the wholehearted moral and financial support of the church's parishioners. Through the years the priests have labored to see the congregation progress, and without their devotion and prayers the church could not have accomplished so much in so little time.

The Reverend Dr. Mesrob Tashjian has been the pastor of Sts. Vartanantz Church for nearly a quarter of a century, serving the church with great dedication and writing a church school curriculum for the Armenian Prelacy. He has concluded that Armenian ethnicity will be furthered by an intelligent awareness of the unique Armenian Church and its Christian witness and the history of the Armenian people. He has taught classes in religion, history, and language to his parishioners for the purpose of heightening their awareness of their ethnic and Christian heritage.

Sts. Vartanantz Church, like other churches, is seeking to become relevant to young people while communicating to them a spiritual and historical consciousness as well. To that end a new school building, attached to the main church, was constructed and dedicated to Christian learning and the teaching of the Armenian language.

The Sts. Vartanantz Church looks to the catholicate seat of the Armenian Church in Antelias, Lebanon, the see of Cilicia, for spiritual and administrative guidance, as do other Armenian churches that are affiliated with the Armenian Prelacy. Thus the Armenian Church has two administrative seats, the primary one in Soviet Armenia and another in Antelias, Lebanon, the latter being an extension of the Cilician see in south central Turkey prior to World War I. In the United States the two representative units are in continuous dialogue in order to heal the breach that developed during the turmoil within the Armenian-American community a half century ago.

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The third and oldest parish in the community is the Armenian Euphrates Evangelical Church. In 1889 a group of Armenian Evangelical immigrants first convened to hold prayer meetings in various American Protestant churches. The group grew, and in 1891 it became organized and began holding regular services of worship in the Beneficent Congregational Church of Providence, the congregation's home for the next twenty-one years. In 1892 membership consisted of thirty-eight parishioners. Various preachers and ministers served the church for periods ranging from six months to three years until 1905, when Arpiar Vartabian became minister. He was ordained in the church in 1906 and served until 1910.

For a time the congregation undertook to serve the

Armenian Protestants in nearby Rehoboth, Massachusetts. The Reverend Stephen Yaghoubian (1910-1915) organized a group of families in 1910 as a branch of the Providence church. Services of worship were conducted in private homes one Sunday every month, with laymen performing the services on the other Sundays. These services lasted until 1918, when some of the families moved to Providence and there was no further need for church services in Rehoboth. Prayer meetings, however, continued to be held in Rehoboth until 1929.

In 1912 Yaghoubian led the effort which saw the purchase of a church building and the home behind it at 42 Hammond Street in Providence. The land upon which the church building stood was rented. In 1915 the Reverend Jacob Depoyan began a fifteen-year ministry at the church, during which time a number of significant events took place. In 1917 the word *Euphrates* was incorporated into the church's name. In 1921 the Evangelical Union was held in the Euphrates Church. In 1922 the Reverend Mr. Depoyan and his wife were honored with a wedding anniversary celebration, where the sum of twenty-four thousand dollars was given as a gift to the couple; the Depoyans asked that the sum be given to the church, and with this money the land was purchased. In 1927 the congregation raised funds to remodel the church and build a social hall.

In 1931 the Reverend Nishan Hachian began his pastorate on the occasion of the fortieth anniversary of the church. By 1944 the mortgage on the church hall was fully paid. That year marks the financial independence of the church, attained through the efforts of the Reverend Y. Rushdoony, its pastor. In 1946 the church gave a reception to welcome back forty-seven young men who had served during World War II, a large number of men in service for such a small congregation. The purchase of the church parsonage in 1948 was another important financial step for the congregation.

The Reverend Arsen Goergizian was elected pastor in 1954, and the following year he began to publish a monthly newsletter. In 1961 he completed fifty years of service in the Armenian Protestant ministry. Also in 1961 the church joined the newly formed national denomination of the United Church of Christ.

In 1966 the Covenant Congregational Church building at 13 Franklin Street was purchased and became the permanent

home of the congregation and the center of its collective activities. Since 1966 the church has called a new pastor to its pulpit, the Reverend Leon Tavitian, who has emphasized a ministry to the youth and the teaching of the social implications of the Christian faith. While never growing beyond a small congregation, the Armenian Protestant community is a significant element in local Armenian-American life. Its oldest members were among the earliest Rhode Island Armenian arrivals, while its current parishioners include many who are in successful business and professional pursuits.

Armenian Political Organizations

As Armenians were settling in Rhode Island, they were naturally interested in organizing themselves socially. This was done not only through the churches and educational and cultural associations, but also through the transplanted Armenian political organizations of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. These organizations represented a kind of politics more characteristic of continental Europe than of America. The Armenian political clubs have in their own way encouraged the continuity of Armenian consciousness and the enhancement of ethnic life.

Although it is difficult to draw a direct connection between Armenian political organizations and Armenian participation in American politics, a few things are clear. Probably Armenian political organizations acted as an intermediary political experience for the immigrant who was getting adjusted and beginning to find security in his new American environment. If we use Armenian political activities as an indicator, then Armenians would be rated highly political. But since Armenians did not come from northern Europe, where politics are more like those of America, and since they did not initially speak English and were few in numbers, it is understandable that they were preoccupied with ethnic concerns. Armenian participation in the American political process had to wait until the first and second Armenian-American generations became comfortable enough to be genuinely interested in American politics.

Some knowledge of political parties in Armenia is important to an understanding of the initial political activity of

Armenians who had settled in Rhode Island. The crucial fact about these Armenian political parties is that they were formed in the 1880s as a result of persecutions suffered at the hands of Russia and Turkey. Aspirations for freedom and independence grew among young Armenians who had been educated in Europe, and some concluded that the separation of Armenia into an independent state was the only guarantee of future political security and cultural regeneration. Other Armenians—probably the majority—wanted to work for political reform within the Ottoman Empire. Thus the origins of twentieth-century Armenian politics, like those of the politics of most European states, lay in the nineteenth century, when nationalism and ethnic consciousness were growing once again among southern Europeans as well as Armenians in eastern Turkey.

There were three principal Armenian political organizations: the Armenian Revolutionary Federation, or Dashnaktsuthiun; the Armenian Democratic Liberal organization, or Ramgavar; and the Hunchag, or Social Democratic party. One of the earliest parties formed was the Armenakan party, founded in 1885 by students, intellectuals, and clergy. This party later merged with the Ramgavar party. A less than revolutionary organization, the Ramgavar party was perhaps roughly equivalent to the liberal wing of the Republican party in America. The Ramgavar party reorganized itself in 1920, after the massacres, and played an important role in the political life of the Armenian communities in the United States and the Middle East. In 1887 a new party was formed called the Social Democratic, or Hunchagian party. *Huntchag* means "ringing bell." This party was formed to call all Armenian people to revolution and freedom from the domination of the oppressive Ottoman Turkish Empire. Both the Ramgavar and the Social Democratic parties had been active prior to the massacres, and sometimes their activities led to reprisals.

In 1890 a third important Armenian political party was formed, the Federation of Armenian Revolutionaries (Tashnags). As its name indicates, it was intended to unite all the other political groups, but it became a separate political party itself. This was the most determinedly revolutionary of all the parties. Its members were daring enough to strike against Turkish and Kurdish chieftains who had for so long persecuted Armenians, even though these acts brought murderous revenge

upon the Armenian people at the hands of the Kurds and Turks.

When the Armenians came to Rhode Island, they brought with them their political organizations and interests. Douglas Avenue in Providence became the center of Armenian political clubs, which exist there to this day. These organizations have served more as an expression of hope and idealism than as a means of bringing about political change in Armenia. While the Armenian political organizations in America have undertaken such cultural activities as the publication of newspapers, they have been more actively involved in moaning over the frustrations of the World War I period. Their criticism of each other has at times reached the pitch of destructive antagonism. As a result, many Armenians separated themselves from the animosities and infighting of the Armenian political organizations and became apolitical, and this too may have slowed the participation of Armenians in American politics. Armenian political life thus has had a long chilling effect on Armenian-American involvement in the American political process. That a thaw in the freeze is coming now is a positive development.

In general, the life of the Armenian community is almost fully centered in the church rather than in Armenian political groups. The original goals of the political organizations are all but irrelevant now, with the exception of their efforts—pursued with other Armenian-American associations—to correct the great injustices of the 1915-1920 period against the Armenian people. Armenians hope someday to see the return of traditional Armenian territories and the fulfillment of the age-old dream of an independent Armenia. In Rhode Island, as elsewhere, the Armenian political organizations are wondering if they can survive, since they must resolve the question of how relevant Armenian old-world politics are in America sixty years after the major immigration period. Yet the interest in such organizations remains, at least to some degree. Now, however, Armenian-Americans are beginning to participate successfully in American political life as well.

Conclusion

Patriotism

America enjoys a special kind of patriotism, and Armenians share in it fully. As the United States is a fresh start in history, the Armenians who came to these shores wished too to make a fresh start, to live as free people in a nation dedicated to freedom. The notion of freedom is a concept especially dear to Armenians. For centuries the Armenians suffered under the yoke of various dominant powers, oppressors for whom a belief in fate provided a rationale for political subjection and slavery. But America, which has never been dominated by another power, showed that man can exercise control over his own life. This is what Armenians craved in their homeland, a rejection of fate and a chance for self-determination. It was the spirit of Christianity, as Armenians first understood it, that made the notion of freedom a true possibility, and it was in America that that notion was socially and politically realized.

Materialism is a part of America's coloring. But money in America, the promise of a better material blessing, is not just materialism. Armenians worked especially hard to succeed materially because they realized that money can be a great liberalizing force, a great equalizer. It destroys the old oppressive class structure of feudalism and enables anyone to rise. Money makes it possible, however little else one has, to climb the socioeconomic ladder.

But even money is not enough. Basically it is freedom and the love of it that defines America. Armenians are perhaps especially sensitive to signs of political regimentation which can endanger freedom. One immigrant Armenian clergyman, the Reverend Abraham Hartunian, has offered a profound

warning to a free society: "When governments forget that they are dealing with human beings, not abstract problems, the results can be horribly inhuman." Armenians lived until 1915 under an empire governed by the Turks, and even now Armenia is a Soviet Republic under yet another empire.

It was a quest for freedom that brought the Armenians to this country, and they found here the freedom they were seeking. But Armenian-Americans are aware that freedom cannot be taken for granted, that it is a responsibility as well as a privilege. Mindful of their history, they are prepared to join with other Americans in the continuing task of preserving and enhancing the freedom they value so dearly. In doing so, they will be true not only to their own Armenian culture but to the best traditions of America as well.

The Ethnic Future

Rhode Island's Armenian-Americans have expressed their sense of community through a number of committees, including the Armenian Bicentennial Subcommittee. Not only did this group organize the Armenian Heritage Day celebrated at the Warwick Mall in 1976, but the spirit of community that it fostered led to the full activation of another important committee, the Armenian Martyrs' Memorial Committee.

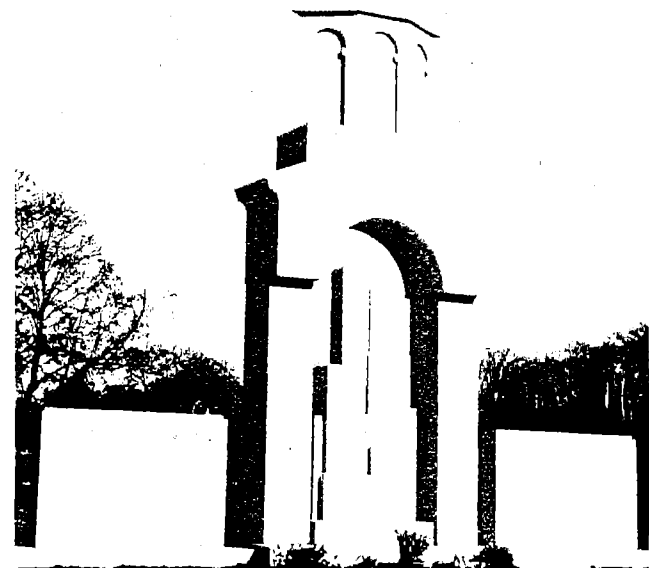
This latter group, formed several years ago, consists of men and women from throughout the Armenian ethnic community of Rhode Island. Members of the local Armenian clergy serve on the committee as honorary members. The goal of the committee, now realized, was to erect a granite monument dedicated by Rhode Island Armenians to the memory of friends and relatives, and the memory of all Armenians, who died in the 1915-1920 massacres conducted by the Ottoman Turkish government. The monument was erected in 1977 on twenty-five thousand square feet of land situated at the entrance of the North Burial Ground in Providence.

The leaders of the Memorial Committee saw their endeavor not only as an ethnic community project but as a task which could have begun only now, after years of settlement and growth of the state's Armenian community. Even a generation ago the community would have been too divided and too distressed by memories of the Genocide of 1915 to have made the Martyrs' Memorial a reality. That the project could be undertaken is a testimony to how far Armenians have come in

their ability to deal with those terrible memories. The project was an expression of an energetic people proud of their ancestry and able to look objectively at the tragedy of the past, a tragedy that to some degree involved them all.

The Armenian-American author Michael Arlen, in his award-winning book *Passage to Ararat*, portrayed a kind of coming-of-age of an Armenian-American, with a realistic recognition of the hurts of the past, a need to write of them, and a determination to work to correct these injustices—but also to live beyond them. The Armenians have been too creative a people, and have struggled too long to survive against the most terrible odds, to have been crushed permanently under the tragic events of their history. In a sense the memorial monument has at last given rest to the one and a half million Armenian martyrs, who could not be buried with the last rites of the church in Christian dignity. The Martyrs' Memorial is a deeply felt psychological venture, an affirmation by the community that its hurts, while not completely forgotten, can now be faced with candor and courage.

The Armenian
Martyrs' Memorial
of Providence
Rhode Island



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NOTE:

A statistical analysis of the 1910-1915 period, a summary of interviews, responses to questionnaires, and footnote references were prepared to support the conclusions reached in this survey. The format of this series does not permit their inclusion in this pamphlet. Copies of this documentation have been deposited at the Rhode Island Historical Society Library to assist the researcher of local Armenian-American life.