

# CELEBRATING 100 YEARS OF CULTURE AND FAITH

One hundred years is a significant milestone in the life of a church, one that deserves recognition through celebration. In October, St. George Antiochian Orthodox Church, located in the Acre section of Lowell, Massachusetts, will celebrate its hundred-year anniversary with a weekend of events organized by some of the sons, daughters and grandchildren of the founding elders.

For more than a century, the Acre has been Lowell's gateway to America for many immigrant and refugee families. As each wave of immigrants settled in the Acre, they transformed their small section into a place of cultural familiarity for their families. Large extended families lived together in two- or three-decker tenement houses; they opened ethnic food markets and they gathered together to perpetuate the celebrations which were part of their religious and cultural traditions.

The Irish were the first to make the Acre their home in

1822. They came to build the canals, factories and boardinghouses that transformed Lowell into a great industrial city. Shortly after, the Greeks settled in a section of the Acre known as "Greek Town" or the "Acre Acropolis." The men gathered nightly in the Greek coffee shops to drink coffee and discuss the politics of their homeland.

The first Syrian families settled in the Acre in the mid-1880s, originating from Aita El-Foukhar and Saydnaya. They brought with them their culture, their Orthodox religion and an eager desire to learn the language. Some worked in the mills, while most became peddlers,

selling dry goods, clothing and household goods that they carried on their backs and offered to area farmers. Sunday services were held in the homes of the faithful or the local YMCA, when a priest was available.

Between 1879 and 1883, a wave of French Canadian immigrants settled in the Acre and began to build a Protestant French presence in the neighborhood. The French Huguenots purchased the land at the corner of Fletcher and Bowers Streets and erected the first French Protestant Church in Lowell. The church was eventually transformed by its pastor in 1885 into The French Protestant College for the purpose of educating young men and woman to become teachers, missionaries and pastors of the Protestant faith. The College struggled to survive on account of a lack of students and community support. Through a fundraising program and an offer to provide a building to house the college, it relocated to Springfield, Massachusetts, where it continues today as American International College.

In 1917, fewer than fifty Syrian men and women pooled their money and fulfilled their spiritual needs by purchasing the former home of the French Protestant College. For the next two years,

alterations were made to the little granite and red-brick building, transforming it into one of the first Syrian Orthodox Churches in America. An altar screen of oak, the Iconostasis, was erected, and next to it hung a large Bavarian cut-glass chandelier. Over the years, the church ran into financial challenges; therefore priests and groups of men would go from house to house on Saturdays to collect nickels and dimes to help keep the church open. In May 1920, the City of Lowell granted a certificate of organization and a char-





ter for “St. George Syrian Orthodox Church” was issued, and the church was recorded as a new corporation.

Over the years, the church has been remodeled and beautified through the installation of icons by the well-known iconographer, Constantine Youssis, whose work graces more than fifty-five Orthodox churches in America. The most prominent of these icons are the image of the Holy Virgin in the apse and the icon of Jesus directly overhead.

The historical and cultural transformation of the building now known as St. George Antiochian Orthodox Church reflects the same cultural transformations that have taken place within the Acre neighborhood, where the church is still located today.

Many of the descendants of the original founders and their families are parishioners who remain steadfast and loyal to the Ortho-

dox faith. The transformation of the church has continued more recently through the inclusion of people from other cultures within the membership of the church. Jordanians, Egyptians, Greeks and Eritreans, as well as some Armenians and Palestinians, have chosen St. George as their spiritual home, along with several individuals and families who converted from other religious faiths.

All who attend the church are

tied together by their Orthodox faith and under the spiritual leadership of Rt. Reverend Father Leonard Faris. Known as Father Lenny by the church’s faithful, he is a man of compassion and deep religious conviction, one who has a knack for extending a warm and welcoming invitation to Christians of all traditions to come to St. George. Here they can experience the age-old religious rites and rituals of the Orthodox faith. “The role of the clergy throughout the history of our church, which I take very seriously, is to be a spiritual Father who loves and embraces all his parishioners,” he said. “It is my role to guide them and teach them the holy Orthodox faith by my example. My wish is for all my spiritual sons and daughters to have a deep relationship with our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.”

In November, the parishioners of the church, which also included some of the children and grandchildren of the refugees that founded St. George, gathered household essentials in the basement for distribution to a new generation of Syrian refugees, as well as other refugees, looking for peace and a better qual-

ity of life. It was a true reflection of the commitment the founders of the church made to the Lowell community one hundred years ago.

The impetus for the hundred-year anniversary celebration of St. George lies within the faith and loyalty of the membership. Like the founders who have left the legacy of St. George to their descendants, the one hundred and thirty families who worship there today are hopeful that this celebration will inspire the next generation to perpetuate the rich culture and history and continue the spiritual journey of St. George for the next hundred years.

Additional information about the church’s hundred-year anniversary celebration can be found on Facebook (<https://www.facebook.com/saintgeorgelowell/>).

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