

# Mississippi *Mahjar*: Lebanese Immigration to the Mississippi Delta

by James G. Thomas Jr.



*In 1892, Commour Ellis immigrated to New London, Connecticut, from Mount Lebanon, Syria, with sons George and Michael. In 1901, she and her five sons moved to Meridian, Mississippi, where they joined her brother. Seven years later, the family moved to Port Gibson, Mississippi, where they opened a mercantile business on Main Street. Commour Ellis and sons (left to right) James, George, Michael, and Sam. (Commour's son John is not pictured.) Courtesy of the author.*



s anyone who has studied the history of the South knows, racial hostility was ubiquitous across the Mississippi Delta throughout the hundred years following the Civil War. But contrary to the dominant narrative, conflict there was not purely limited to the relationships between blacks and whites. As Haseeb George Abraham, a Lebanese peddler who immigrated to the Mississippi Delta in 1885, discovered, those who came to the Delta from elsewhere had to learn the customs of the region before they were accepted into the social culture there. Gregory Thomas of Vicksburg describes how his great-grandfather traveled across the region peddling his wares, once unintentionally asking a lady on a Delta plantation to “sleep with him,” instead of asking if she could provide shelter for the night. Knowing little English, he soon found himself upon the back of a horse with a noose around his neck, prepared for his hanging. Only when another Lebanese man came along and inquired as to what had happened was the mistake made clear and Abraham’s life spared.<sup>1</sup>

Haseeb Abraham’s experience provided him a crash course in the ways of the Delta. Generally, itinerant peddling gave immigrants the opportunity to gradually learn and adapt to the prevailing social customs of the South, including its stringent social codes and harsh judicial practices. Interactions with rural farmers and, occasionally, townsfolk gave peddlers the chance to view the culture as somewhat passive observers in the sense that they were perpetually “passing through.”

#### MOVING TO THE MISSISSIPPI DELTA

Between the 1880s and the end of World War I, a combination of famines, epidemics, extreme poverty, and religious and political genocide led to more than 100,000 deaths in the Mount Lebanon region of Ottoman Empire-controlled Syria. During that same period, over 100,000 Lebanese residents of the predominantly Christian region participated in a mass migration that scattered them across the globe to places such as Australia, Brazil, Mexico, and the United States. While most of these Lebanese citizens intended to emigrate only until conditions at home had improved, many eventually realized that the life of an emigrant in the United States was preferable to that on what was commonly known as “the Mountain.” Ironically, many Lebanese fleeing hardship and oppression found themselves in Mississippi, settling in the caste-based, Jim Crow Delta, where they were considered neither black nor white. These Lebanese immigrants—mostly male—found work peddling wares to blacks and whites across the Delta, forming close economic bonds in and with black communities and hoping one day to assimilate into the economically and socially dominant white community—all while retaining vital elements of their own cultural heritage.<sup>2</sup>

For decades, observers from within and beyond the mostly rural Mississippi



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Delta have chiefly defined the region as a black/white dichotomy that consisted primarily of planter-class and poor whites, and slaves-turned-sharecroppers-turned-impoverished blacks. William Alexander Percy furthered that notion in his 1941 autobiography *Lanterns on the Levee*:

[T]he cloth of the Delta population—as of the whole South—is built of three dissimilar threads and only three. First were the old slave holders, the landed gentry, the governing class; though they have gone, they were not sterile; they have their descendants, whose evaluation of life approximates theirs. Second were the poor whites, who owned no slaves, whose manual labor lost its dignity from being in competition with slave labor, who worked their small unproductive holding ignored by the gentry, despised by the slaves. Third were the Negroes.<sup>3</sup>

The reality, however, is that the region has long been peopled with inhabitants as diverse and distinctive as its soil is fertile.

During Reconstruction, various ethnic groups began to filter into the Delta, as

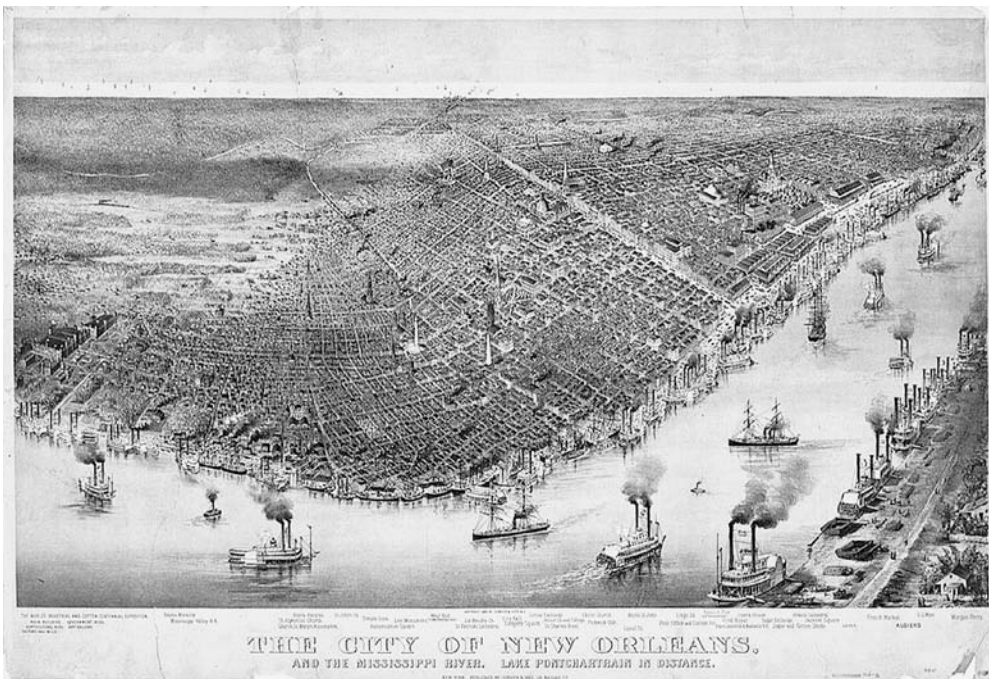
well as into the outlying areas adjacent to the region. The need for labor to clear land, dig ditches, build levees, and work fields provided economic opportunities not only for black southerners, but also for Chinese and Italian workers. White Mississippi plantation owners brought in Chinese laborers directly from Hong Kong through the port city of New Orleans, as is reflected in the 1880 census, which lists fifty Chinese immigrants living in Mississippi, mostly in Washington County. Italian immigrants also traveled to the Delta from central Italy in the 1880s, becoming laborers on plantations and farms across the region. But both groups grew disillusioned with the Delta's debt-and-peonage farming system and abandoned fieldwork to become storekeepers and merchants, with only a handful of Italians carrying on the farming tradition.<sup>4</sup>

Black laborers fared less well than their recently arrived counterparts. In a rush to fill the much-needed labor demand, the black population across the nine core Delta counties grew by 60 percent during the 1880s. By 1890, blacks outnumbered whites seven to one. Fearing a black political takeover, whites swiftly moved to disfranchise blacks. To do so, the 1890 Mississippi constitutional convention enacted statutes that imposed on black voters a two-dollar poll tax, a literacy test, secret ballot, a two-year residency clause, and an understanding clause. As a result, the percentage of non-voting black males rose from 71 percent in 1888 to nearly 100 percent in 1895. In 1898, the U.S. Supreme Court upheld the constitutionality of the 1890 disfranchisement statutes in *Williams v. Mississippi*.<sup>5</sup>

Between the 1880s and 1910, land prices rose from an average of \$13 per acre to more than \$40. Planters who had at one time rented land to black farmers for the primary purpose of having it cleared cheaply could suddenly afford to have the land cleared by timber companies who had access to railroad and levee networks. Sharecropping became the primary system under which blacks labored, and instances of peonage were widespread. As a result, opportunities for black advancement steadily diminished, and race relations between whites and blacks steadily declined, leading directly to Jim Crow segregation, white-on-black violence, and widespread black poverty.<sup>6</sup>

Clearly, the move to storekeeper and merchant among Chinese and Italian immigrant laborers was significant. By the turn of the century the majority of merchants in the river town of Greenville either had been born outside the United States or to at least one non-native parent. Jews who had lived, farmed, and traded in Mississippi since the beginning of the nineteenth century accounted for over two-thirds of Greenville's merchants as early as 1880. As purveyors of a large percentage of the consumer goods in the area, the Delta Jews prospered, and their example encouraged those who were just entering the profession.<sup>7</sup>

Like the Chinese and Italians, Lebanese from the Mount Lebanon region began immigrating en masse to Mississippi and the Delta in the final two decades of the



*Traveling alone to the Port of New Orleans in 1884, Elias Naseef Fattouh knew he needed to make contact with other Syrians, so he stood on the dock and repeatedly cried out, “Kibbee, kibbee, kibbee!” (Kibbee—a mixture of ground lamb, bulgur wheat, and spices—is commonly considered the national dish of Lebanon and anyone who had lived in Mount Lebanon or Syria would have undoubtedly understood the cry.) The city of New Orleans, and the Mississippi River and Lake Pontchartrain in distance, ca. 1895, Currier & Ives, courtesy of the Library of Congress.*

nineteenth century. The Lebanese, however, did not fall in line behind their fellow late-nineteenth-century immigrants. Unlike the Chinese and Italians, there is no evidence that the Lebanese ever worked as agricultural laborers, although they were familiar with farming and farming practices similar to those utilized in the Mississippi Delta. Following those who had come before them and seizing on an economic opportunity provided them by the agrarian society in which they now found themselves, the vast majority of Syrian-born immigrants began peddling wares door-to-door across Mississippi and the Delta.

The earliest report of a Lebanese immigrant entering the Mississippi *mahjar* (roughly translated from the Arabic as “the land of immigration”) is of young Elias Naseef Fattouh, from the coastal village of Al Munsif. Traveling alone to the Port of New Orleans in 1884, Fattouh knew he needed to make contact with other Syrians, so he stood on the dock and repeatedly cried out, “Kibbee, kibbee, kibbee!” (Kibbee—a mixture of ground lamb, bulgur wheat, and spices—is commonly considered the national dish of Lebanon; anyone who had lived in Mount Lebanon or Syria would have undoubtedly understood the cry.) A Syrian merchant soon ap-

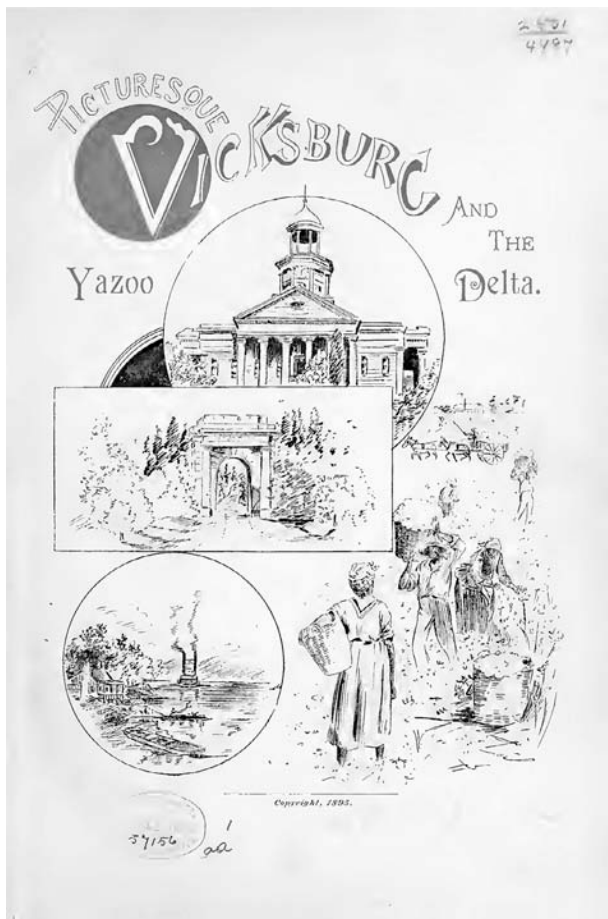
proached him and offered to help by supplying him with enough merchandise to begin peddling. Shortly thereafter, Fattouh found himself traveling the Louisiana and Mississippi landscape northward along the Mississippi River. Fattouh walked the rural roads peddling his wares for a few years, and after saving enough money and acquiring a bit of credit, he was able to open his own dry goods store in the small town of Hermanville, Mississippi, becoming the first-known Lebanese immigrant to settle in the state. Other Lebanese immigrants followed Fattouh to the area and set up shops and home bases out of which to peddle and, within a few short years, other families from Al Munsif immigrated to Mississippi. By the turn of the century, few families were returning to the Mountain for good, although many made occasional trips between the Delta and Syria.<sup>8</sup>

Those years following the Civil War found the South in a state of racial turmoil. Reconstruction (1865–77) had failed the freedmen and had only served to inflame white odium toward anyone who was not of Anglo stock—a prejudice against others that was often put forward as merely deep pride in an Anglo-Saxon heritage. In the October 1893 issue of *Arena* magazine, Joshua Caldwell explained that “the Anglo-Saxon supremacy in the South has never been overcome . . . The white population has always been American and homogenous. I can never believe that the hybrid population of Russians, Poles, Italians, Hungarians, which fills so many Northern cities and states, has the same love of our country, the same love of liberty, as have the Anglo-Saxon southerners.” No doubt Caldwell would have also included the Syrian-Lebanese in Mississippi in his “hybrid population,” even though liberty was one of the chief reasons they left the Mountain for America.<sup>9</sup>

The authors of *In and about Vicksburg* (1890) took a somewhat more gracious and welcoming view of the immigrants that were settling in the Delta’s southern tip, indicating that if immigrants were hard working and honest, they were welcome to live there. This excerpt reads as if it could have been lifted from a chamber of commerce boosterism pamphlet:

We need population to develop in our State. We will give settlers a hearty welcome. We want people of kindred races, that we may be homogenous . . . To industrious and reliable immigrants we offer good and cheap homes. We invite them to locate and become good citizens and have with us equal privilege and responsibilities . . . We want men who are willing to rely on their own energy, exertions, and means, to make for themselves comfortable and beautiful homes. To such we say, come, and your reward will be sure.

Both Caldwell’s passage and the 1890 Vicksburg book emphasize racial homogeneity, but the passage from *In and about Vicksburg* differs in that it actually welcomes outsiders and invites other immigrants to town if they are “industrious and reliable.” *Picturesque Vicksburg and the Yazoo Delta 1895* takes that a step further, although not without a stern caveat:



Early travel guides, such as *Picturesque Vicksburg and the Yazoo Delta*, emphasized racial homogeneity: "There is no country under the sun where strangers are more hospitably received than in the South . . . After [the newcomer] becomes known, his position in the estimation of the community depends here as elsewhere, entirely upon himself. If he is a good man, he will be rated accordingly, if otherwise he will find his level."

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It is very true that letters of introduction count for something, as has been the case ever since writing was invented, and that men of similar view and tastes usually harmonize most rapidly, but neither religion nor politics is a bar to any man's good standing in the community.<sup>10</sup>

By the end of the nineteenth century, Warren County boasted more immigrants than any county in the state. Between 1822 and 1906, the Warren County Circuit Court processed 666 total immigrants. As we have seen, a great number of the Lebanese who moved to Mississippi had been peasants in their homeland. We cannot know if the authors of *In and about Vicksburg* had those peasants in mind when they welcomed immigrant men "willing to rely on their own energy, exertions, and means," but it is clear they epitomized that ethos.<sup>11</sup>

Like Elias Fattouh and his family, the vast majority of first-generation Mississippi Lebanese started out peddling goods door-to-door. No training was necessary, and advanced English-language skills were not essential. The products they sold—everything from pins and needles, buttons, lace, bolts of cloth, and kitchen utensils to jewelry, perfume, fancy mirrors, bric-a-brac, and holy items, such as rosaries and crucifixes—could sell themselves. Also, peddling suited the independent Lebanese inclination. Peddlers operated on their own terms, without having to answer to an overseer or submitting to the daily confinement and drudgery of factory work, as was often the case in the cities of the Upper Midwest and Northeast. Gregory Thomas recalled, “I remember my grandfather always telling me, ‘Son, I don’t care if you have to sell peanuts on the street, you work for yourself. Don’t make another man rich.’”<sup>12</sup>

But the peddling life was far from easy. Chafik Chamoun of Clarksdale, whose grandfather peddled around Brookhaven, Mississippi, in the late 1800s, said of his grandfather’s work: “Oh, they [walked] probably about twenty-five, thirty miles . . . and they spent the night in black people’s homes. They [had] no vehicle, no donkey, no horse, nothing. They were tough. They put something on their back, and they [went] house to house.” Thus, a peddler’s “store” encompassed the entire countryside, come rain or shine. If a peddler was unable to secure lodging for the night in a farmer’s home or barn, he or she slept under the stars. And since it was necessary to draw an income year-round, pack-peddlers preferred a temperate climate. In addition to the warm, accommodating weather in the Mississippi Delta, the region also provided a large rural market for pack-peddlers. During the busy farming seasons, farmer families who lived in isolated areas found it more convenient to buy goods from a peddler than to spend a day traveling into town.<sup>13</sup>

For black farmers, peddlers provided a great deal more than convenience. For one, pack-peddlers often traded for goods such as food, meals, and lodging. White shopkeepers, on the other hand, while welcoming black dollars, did little in the way of welcoming black customers. Credit in white-owned stores came with high rates of interest, and white storeowners provided blacks with little or no assistance. Furthermore, blacks were made to wait until all white customers had been helped before they were permitted to purchase their goods. Any chance for a black man or woman to do his or her shopping at home or from someplace other than the white-owned plantation or town store was welcomed. Hassan Mohamed, who immigrated to Clarksdale in 1911, provided this opportunity to black sharecropping families with aid from one female customer in particular. After she returned from working in the fields with her family, “[Hassan] would go up on the porch and she would have some of the neighbors come, and they’d buy everything out of his suitcase right there. [S]he would run her hand up under the rug and get the



money she had hid in the house . . . And so that was her bank . . . and that was his store.” Given a seven-to-one black/white ratio and blacks’ negative experience shopping at white-owned or plantation stores, it is likely that peddlers depended on black business as much as, or even more than, white business.<sup>14</sup>

As a means of retaining ties to their own culture, peddlers were part of an informal network of Lebanese immigrants who swapped stories and news from the Mountain. Some even traded subscription-available Arabic-language newspapers, such as *Al-Bayan*, *Al-Hoda*, and *Syrian World*, all of which were published in New York. Lebanese peddlers and their families formed small settlements in places like Hermanville, Brookhaven, Greenville, and Vicksburg. There, some features of Lebanese culture were easily preserved. Parents spoke Arabic in the home almost exclusively, and many of the spices and ingredients for Lebanese dishes, such as cinnamon, rice, onions, peppers, squashes, mint, chicken, and beef, were readily available and part of daily consumption. In addition, immigrants brought musical instruments to America. For peddlers on the road and within Lebanese settlements, music was a chief form of entertainment. Through music, language, and food, the Mississippi *mahjar* reflected the cultural elements that were most treasured on the Mountain. As the number of Lebanese immigrants flocking to the Mississippi Delta grew, it became less important for them to return to the Mountain in order to connect with their ethnic culture and identity. By 1910, many peddlers were sending for their entire families and setting down roots across the Mississippi Delta. Among peddlers whose families remained in Lebanon, fewer sent their money home, deciding that life in Mississippi was far and away better than a life in Lebanon.

Lebanese immigrants continued to flee Mount Lebanon for Mississippi, where friends and relatives were succeeding in self-owned businesses. But the occupation of peddling was in decline. One reason, perhaps, was that, over time, families grew larger, necessitating a less mobile, more stable homeplace. Another reason was that their clientele base was diminishing. The racial and economic climate for black sharecroppers in the Mississippi Delta was worsening as plantations consolidated and centralized business. The years between 1915 and 1920 saw a mass exodus of 100,000 blacks from the state, and with that shift, the stream of cash that had flowed into the pockets of peddlers began to dry up.<sup>15</sup>

#### SETTING UP SHOP

The pioneer peddlers had done well in saving money. Thus, as their rural customer base steadily dwindled, they were able to abandon the long and lonely life on the road and settle down in Delta towns, where they opened grocery and dry goods stores. For example, James Ellis and his brothers had peddled around central Mississippi for several years before opening a general merchandise store in

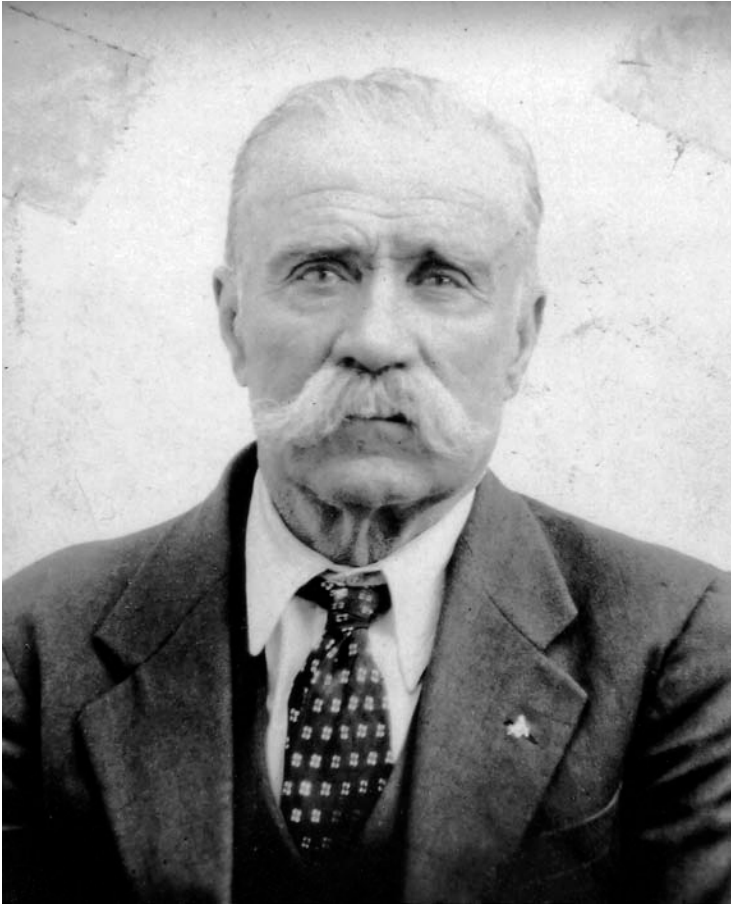


*James Ellis and his brothers had peddled around central Mississippi for several years before opening a general merchandise store in Port Gibson. Ellis in front of his storefront, which was originally the Washington Hotel in the early 1800s, courtesy of the author.*

Port Gibson. The brothers lived together above the store until each got married and moved into their own homes. They collected a sizable amount of real estate, and in 1927 James's brother Mike built and opened a dry goods store of his own, as did his brother George. Another brother, Sam, moved to Texas to open his own business. The Ellis brothers' sister, Nazera, married a Lebanese man named George Thomas, and together they opened a grocery store behind their house on College Street.<sup>16</sup>

The phenomenon of peddling in Mississippi had reached its peak. But some immigrants who had liquidated all of their assets in Mount Lebanon still made the trip and, like their predecessors, became peddlers. Frances Thomas recalls her family's story in the Delta:

Now, when his daddy first came, they went to Greenville. Uncle Brahim, and Grandpa [Haseeb George Abraham], and Uncle Tony went to Greenville. And they peddled. My grandfather was six-four. He carried a pack—by the way, my grandmother was four-ten. But he carried a pack. They said the pack was so



*Many of the descendants of George Thomas (here) still live in Greenville, Mississippi, with others making up a large portion of the Lebanese population in nearby Leland. George's grandson Sam, for example, became mayor of Leland in the late 1980s, and his son, Kenny, succeeded him. Courtesy of the author.*

tremendous on his back that the only thing you could see when he was walking on the highway was his feet. His head was covered, his back was covered, and that's the kind of load that he carried.

When the children came and my grandmother came in 1920, that's when he and Uncle Brahim — they had a nice plantation in Glen Allen that they sold and some other land that they had — they divided what they had made together. He left and came to Vicksburg with his family. The reason they came to Vicksburg, there was a grocery store [where] a man had gotten shot. A peddler, I guess a hobo, came in and tried to rob him, but he shot the man. He was a Lebanese man, too. That's the store on Pearl Street. Anyway, my granddaddy told him — and Uncle Najid was the younger brother that came with him — and he told him, "This is all I've got to give you." He says, "You either make it or break it." And, of course, his mother and daddy also lived with him. That's why the store is named Abraham Brothers. They had the grocery store, and in 1927 my daddy got married, and I think Uncle Najid got married right after that. I think he realized that the grocery store wasn't enough for all of them, so he bought this location . . . in 1927, and he opened it in 1928. This is the original store here.<sup>17</sup>

Like the Abraham and Ellis brothers, Abu Anees Mafrij—who changed his name to George B. Thomas once he decided to make the United States his family’s new home in 1911—came to the Delta from Bishmezzine to begin peddling before opening a grocery store in Greenville. When his oldest son, Ernest, was old enough, he and his wife, Emma Ellis Thomas, established a grocery store of their own on Nelson Street. By 1927, their grocery store had grown into a successful business, but when the levees broke on the Mississippi River, causing the Great Mississippi Flood of 1927, it was flooded to its roof. The bulk shipment of foodstuffs they had recently received was ruined, and his business was wiped out. Ernest packed what belongings he could salvage and moved with Emma to Vicksburg, her hometown. The rest of the Thomas family remained in Greenville and reopened grocery stores and dry goods stores. Many of the descendants of George Thomas still live in Greenville, with others making up a large portion of the Lebanese population in nearby Leland. George’s grandson Sam, for example, became mayor of Leland in the late 1980s, and his son, Kenny, succeeded him.<sup>18</sup>

#### RACIAL EQUALITY AND ACCEPTANCE

It would seem that in a relatively short amount of time the Lebanese people had accomplished the American dream, and in a large sense, they had. But part of that dream was yet to be realized—the same part that blacks and other Eastern European and Asian immigrant groups had yet to fully obtain: racial equality and acceptance by the dominant culture. When Lebanese immigrants first moved to the Delta, and as they moved out of peddler settlements and into towns, they often moved into African American neighborhoods, where rents were cheaper. Also, for the most part, the Lebanese had yet to receive a social welcome by the white population. “My mother used to tell us that we were not accepted fully as citizens really,” said Pat Davis Sr. “The Lebanese were called names and, you know, looked down upon, but not like the African American people. We were able to go to the white schools. We were able to drink out of white fountains and go to the white restrooms.” In Clarksdale, where Davis still resides, the early Lebanese immigrants lived in the black neighborhood of Riverton. “My grandmother and a lot of the Abrahams and Gattises all lived in Riverton in the beginning,” he said. “African American, Italian American, and Lebanese American living together in Riverton, side by side. We grew up side by side with all them.”<sup>19</sup>

Billy Rossie Tonos, born in the Delta town of Shaw in 1924, remembers her multi-ethnic childhood neighborhood similarly:

There were other grocery stores [besides my father’s]. In fact, on the street where we lived, on the street where the store was, next door to us was a drug-store. It was owned by the Deans. Next to that a very nice family of Chinese

people opened another grocery store, which was fine because competition is whatever it is. It's supposed to be something. And then next to that was a Jewish family. The family name: Chiz. And they had a dry goods store. Mercantile, I guess, is what you would call it. Next door to that was a bakery owned by a German family.<sup>20</sup>

In the 1920s, the prevailing white attitude toward blacks was hostile, and the moderate racial tolerance that immigrants had experienced in the South before World War I was slowly fading. After World War I, the South began embracing a religious and ethnic nativism that fast turned into xenophobia. Urban centers in other parts of the country would have given the newcomers more cover from white racism, but immigrants still followed each other to the Mississippi *mahjar*, where many already had a support system of family and friends. It was a place where ugly racial epithets were thrown around freely, often aimed directly at the Lebanese, whose dark skin and dark hair made them stand out. Despite the racism they did encounter, it was minor compared to what they had experienced back home and to what other groups were suffering.<sup>21</sup>

“WE KNOW WHAT A HARD TIME IS”

After Lebanese immigrants settled with their families in Mississippi, they faced a more pressing dilemma than their peddling forbears had. Since they intended to make the United States their permanent home, they had to consider how they would assimilate into American society. In the early decades of the twentieth century, whites and the Lebanese people in the Mississippi Delta rarely mixed socially. Other ethnic groups, including the Chinese, Italians, and Jews, fared just as poorly in terms of social assimilation, in part explaining why immigrants congregated in mixed-ethnicity neighborhoods. Assimilation into the dominant culture would be difficult for the newcomers, especially if they derived their main source of revenue through a fast association with the groups against which whites were most prejudiced. But the Lebanese were not ready to throw over the blacks in order to advance their social status. They did not come from a culture where one was taught from birth to revile black people, and because of their aforementioned experiences with oppression back home, the Lebanese possessed a first-hand knowledge of discrimination, producing sympathetic understanding for the plight of blacks in the Delta. For years, the Lebanese had maintained an amicable relationship with the black community, and a successful business relationship formed between the two cultures. Chafik Chamoun of Clarksdale, who peddled like his grandfather, explained the situation unambiguously:

I tell you, I made my living from the black people. It was [a] special relationship between Lebanese and black community. It was better than any other place,



*Former peddler Chafik Chamoun (pictured here at Chamoun's Rest Haven in Clarksdale, Mississippi): "It was a special relationship between Lebanese and black community . . . They were poor, they didn't have any money, but they never beat me. If they had a dollar or two, they spent it, but I was honest with them too. We were raised with no prejudice." Courtesy of Amy C. Evans for the Southern Foodways Alliance.*

because it was—I don't know how to put it. The Lebanese, they are honest people, and if you've done me a favor, I appreciate it, and I'll never forget it. And these black people, they bought from the Lebanese people, the peddlers, they give them a place to live, so no need for Lebanese people to resent them, really. They were grateful to them. The people I was dealing with, doing business with, they were my friends. When I left the trade, I missed them. They were poor, they didn't have any money, but they never beat me. If they had a dollar or two, they spent it, but I was honest with them too.

We were raised with no prejudice. I'm the same, everyone like that, but the majority of the Lebanese people, we know what a hard time is. When you know what [a] hard time is, you feel for somebody having [a] hard working time. These poor people used to work the country chopping cotton. I have a feeling for them. I think we need the black people and the black people need us. It was a business relation, and we look at them as a human being, not as a slave or as second-class citizen. We didn't look at them like that.<sup>22</sup>

For the same reasons that blacks enjoyed the opportunity to make purchases from peddlers at home, they enjoyed the opportunity to shop at Lebanese-owned (and Chinese-, Jewish-, and Italian-owned) stores. As Grace Elizabeth Hale writes in her book *Making Whiteness*, “[African American sociologist Charles S. Johnson] found that African Americans in the town of Cleveland, Mississippi, preferred to shop at stores owned and operated by Chinese instead of the [white-owned] grocery chains, enjoying there greater ‘freedom’ and escape from ‘the traditional observances.’” Immigrant grocers and dry goods merchants filled a void in southern society created by white aversion to social parity with blacks. While whites did sell to blacks, they often did so making sure that black customers knew their “place” within society. In her 1930s study of “Cottonville,” anthropologist Hortense Powdermaker found that this attitude was prevalent and nearly absolute: “The one thing no white man will overtly give a Negro is respect.” She goes on to observe that “this denial is of prime importance. Nothing the White offers to the Negro is more significant, in shaping the relations of the two races, than the respect he withholds.” Whites were neither particularly attracted to nor particularly successful at the mercantile business, an occupation that required the patronage of blacks to succeed.<sup>23</sup>

As immigrant merchants opened dry goods or grocery stores that either catered to blacks or were located in black neighborhoods, black shoppers found that they had a choice of places to shop where they might find respect. “In the older white stores,” writes John Dollard in his 1937 sociological study, *Caste and Class in a Southern Town*, “when a Negro went in, the owner would say to him, ‘Well, boy, what do you want?’ even if the Negro in question were eighty years old. The Jews [and other immigrants], on the contrary, let the Negro know that his dollar was as good as anyone else’s.” Subsequently, white merchants received less and less black business and were often crowded out of town by immigrant stores whose owners treated blacks with courtesy, or, at least, without discourtesy. Of course, white stores were not completely wiped out. Like most other social arrangements in Jim Crow Mississippi, stores became subject to those segregated conditions, spoken or unspoken. Whites may have needed black dollars, but they certainly did not encourage them.<sup>24</sup>

Although whites were apathetic toward Lebanese trade with blacks, the Lebanese knew that a stringent social code in the Delta did exist. Still, they treated their customers with dignity. Mildred Ellis Nasif of Port Gibson recalled these exchanges decades later, perhaps romanticizing her family’s benevolence:

Oh, Papa was wonderful to a black person. I had a maid that told me that her father would say, “You children get dressed this morning. We’re going into town, and whoever wants to go in with me can ride in on the wagon.” Well, he’d take them and pull the wagon up to the back of Papa’s store, and go in and Papa would say, “How many you got with you?” And he’d tell him how many

children he had with him, five, six, whatever. And Papa would say, “Well, bring them in.” And he’d take a meat block and cut it up and put it in wrapping paper, and he’d put drinks and baloney and cheese and crackers and stuff on there and serve those children. That was a treat to them.”<sup>25</sup>

Blacks provided more than patronage to Lebanese merchants new to the Delta, also sharing their knowledge of the culture, mores, and even the language. Gregory Thomas said of his grandfather’s experience in his first grocery store, which faced the railroad tracks in Vicksburg: “It was a black man who helped him in the store who helped to teach them English. He told me somebody would come in and ask for one thing — and I forgot what the examples were — and he’d show them a plug of tobacco, and the black fellow would take his hand and say, ‘No, this is what they were asking for.’” They extended blacks fair lines of credit and made trades for goods when cash was simply unavailable. Gregory recalled his grandfather, many years later, trading goods for clothes at Abraham Bros. Department Store: “I remember once seeing a catfish hanging in the back of the store. A man had brought that in trade for clothes. Boxes and boxes of vegetables and things.”<sup>26</sup>

#### THE PROCESS OF AMERICANIZATION

As Pat Davis Sr. of Clarksdale has suggested, the Lebanese had advantages that blacks did not (and the Chinese, who, as late as the 1940s, were also prohibited from attending most white schools in the Delta). The Lebanese were allowed to attend white schools and use white public facilities. They patronized white-owned restaurants and sat in designated white sections of movie theaters. During the middle decades of the twentieth century, the Lebanese had achieved success in business in places like Greenville, Port Gibson, Clarksdale, and especially Vicksburg, and the economic bond between the Lebanese and the black community began to loosen. Many Lebanese businessmen had done well enough to acquire the capital needed to move their families into affluent neighborhoods and their businesses into prosperous business districts.

As early as the 1940s, the process of Americanization had begun to gain a stronghold on the American-born children of immigrant parents, and because of the relative prosperity that the group had begun to enjoy, Lebanese children and adults were becoming increasingly accepted into white society. The peasant and peddler pasts of Lebanese children’s parents became a source of embarrassment for them and a stumbling block on the path to white social acceptance, and as a result, fewer children learned to speak Arabic. Fewer still learned to read it. Lebanese youth and adults alike adopted American dress and participated in American cultural activities, such as organized sports and school dances. Although most Lebanese immigrants wanted to instill within their children a Lebanese identity,



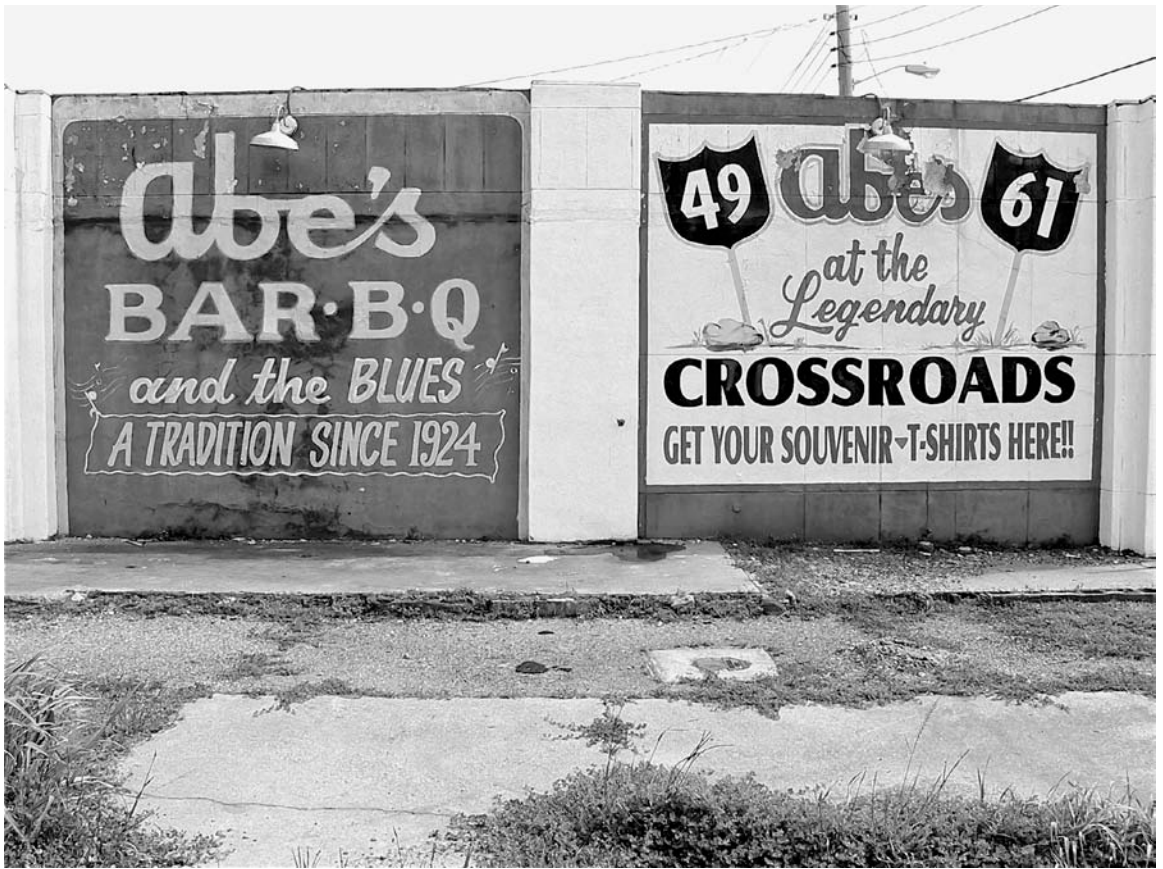


*Despite their children's desire to be accepted into Anglo-American culture, Lebanese immigrant parents did succeed in preserving some sense of Lebanese identity. At the dinner table, Lebanese children gained a love and appreciation of Lebanese food, and in the kitchen they learned to make tabouleh, roll grape leaves, and bake kibbee. Cabbage rolls, stuffed grape leaves, kibbee, and bread (clockwise) from Chamoun's Rest Haven, Clarksdale, Mississippi. Courtesy of Amy C. Evans for the Southern Foodways Alliance.*

they also knew that any overt difference between their children and the children of whites would only slow the process of assimilation. Slowly, with each successive generation, the Lebanese, along with the Jews and Italians, became untethered from the “marginalized middle” and drifted into whiteness, leaving behind both their “otherness” and the marginalized African Americans, whose journey to social equality was far more arduous.

Despite their children's desire to be accepted into Anglo-American culture, Lebanese immigrant parents did succeed in preserving some sense of Lebanese identity. At the dinner table, Lebanese children gained a love and appreciation of Lebanese food, and in the kitchen they learned to make tabouleh, roll grape leaves, and bake kibbee. Naming patterns continued: the first-born son was often named after his father and the second son took the first names of his grandfathers. At special events, such as weddings and baptisms, guests played traditional music with traditional instruments and danced traditional dances, such as the *dabke*. As well, Lebanese families maintained a vigorous religious life that reflected their Christian religious practices on the Mountain.

Unfortunately, the retention of Lebanese cultural traditions also had a downside. The protracted pace of assimilation into white society, which was partially



*By the late decades of the twentieth century, the “whitening” process of the Lebanese in the Mississippi Delta was complete, although the distinctly Lebanese economic, social, and cultural contributions of the group are still apparent in countless towns and cities across the region today. Exterior wall of Abe’s Bar-B-Q in Clarksdale, Mississippi, operated by Pat Davis Sr., whose father emigrated from Lebanon in the early 1900s, courtesy of the author.*

due to a retention of identity markers, slowed the process of acceptance, despite otherwise enthusiastic efforts to Americanize. During the years of peddling in the countryside and those years spent working and living in immigrant neighborhoods, the Lebanese were moderately successful at avoiding the racism that blacks in the Delta experienced. Once they began to gain the accoutrements of prosperity, including automobiles, property, and homes in white neighborhoods, whites began to permit the Lebanese to climb the social ladder — although only so high. When the Lebanese community attempted to join traditionally white clubs or organizations, they quickly learned just how far they had — or had not — come. Although Lebanese were welcome at most churches and public events, many exclusive organizations that had always been strictly “for whites only” remained so, and although the color line was blurred, it remained drawn. For example, in colleges and universities across the state in the early 1960s, young Lebanese students found themselves barred from joining fraternities and sororities because of their

Lebanese heritage. Fraternal organizations like the Rotary, Kiwanis, and Lion's clubs were no different, and until around 1960, most country clubs in the Delta still explicitly stipulated that Syrians and Lebanese be excluded from joining.

In the mid-1960s, the white community began allowing certain Lebanese families and citizens to join their exclusive clubs and organizations. Lebanese/Anglo-American marriages had become more and more common and, in some places, accepted. After having lived in the Mississippi Delta for eighty years, the Lebanese were now assimilating more fully into the socially and economically dominant culture. This general acceptance as a distinct ethnic group ultimately came down to simple economics. Lebanese dollars grew along with businesses. As a result, over the next twenty years, the Lebanese were able to use their economic power to advance their social position in what was still a racially and economically divided Delta. For example, when Pete Nosser, a Lebanese businessman in Vicksburg, complained to Lebanese state senator Ellis Bodron about his sons-in-law not being able to join social clubs because they were married to his daughters, Bodron suggested that Nosser exert that economic power, saying, "You buy a lot of things from a lot of different people—you're putting money in banks and you buy insurance. So don't do it. Determine who you buy from—a lot of them are influential in town. You're in a position to correct the situation if you're not happy about it." Soon after that conversation, things began to change for Pete Nosser's family, and other families used the same leverage to open doors that had been previously closed.<sup>27</sup>

By the late decades of the twentieth century, the "whitening" process of the Lebanese in the Mississippi Delta was complete, although the distinctly Lebanese economic, social, and cultural contributions of the group are still apparent in countless towns and cities across the region today.

#### NOTES

Although most Mississippi Lebanese can determine how they are related within a matter of minutes, James G. Thomas Jr. is only closely related to George B. Thomas, James Ellis, and their descendants. George B. Thomas and James Ellis are the author's great-grandfathers on his father's side. A longer version of this essay was published in *Ethnic Heritage in Mississippi: The Twentieth Century* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2012).

1. Gregory Thomas interview, Vicksburg, MS, April 14, 2007.

2. Samir Khalaf, "The Background and Causes of Lebanese/Syrian Immigration to the United States before World War I," in *Crossing the Waters: Arabic-Speaking Immigrants to the United States before 1940*, ed. Eric Hooglund (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1987), 19; Philip K. Hitti, *A Short History of Lebanon* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1965), 207; Charles Issawi, "The Historical Background of Lebanese Emigration, 1800–1914," in *The Lebanese in the World: A Century of Emigration*, ed. Albert Hourani and Nadim Shehadi (London: The Centre for Lebanese Studies I. B. Tauris & Co. Ltd., 1992), 31.

3. William Alexander Percy, *Lanterns on the Levee: Reflections of a Planter's Son* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1941), 19.

4. James W. Loewen, *The Mississippi Chinese: Between Black and White* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1971), 24; John M. Berry, *Rising Tide: The Great Mississippi Flood of 1927 and How It Changed America* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1997), 109–113.
5. Those nine core counties included Coahoma, Quitman, Bolivar, Sunflower, Leflore, Washington, Humphreys, Issaquena, and Sharkey; Berry, 83; John Dittmer, *Local People: The Struggle for Civil Rights in Mississippi* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 1994), 6–7; James C. Cobb, *The Most Southern Place on Earth: The Mississippi Delta and the Roots of Regional Identity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 87.
6. *Ibid.*, 91.
7. John C. Willis, *Forgotten Time: The Yazoo-Mississippi Delta after the Civil War* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 2000), 86.
8. Joseph Schechla, “Dabkeh in the Delta,” in *Taking Root: Arab-American Community Studies*, ed. Eric Hooglund (Washington, D.C.: The American-Arab Anti-Discrimination Committee, ADC Research Institute, 1985), 31, 34.
9. Joshua W. Caldwell, “The South Is American,” in *Arena* 8 (October 1893): 607–17, quoted in Nina Silber, *The Romance of Reunion: Northerners and the South, 1885–1900* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1993), 142.
10. *In and about Vicksburg* (Vicksburg, MS: The Gibraltar Publishing Co., 1890), 250; H. P. Chapman and J. F. Battaile, *Picturesque Vicksburg and the Yazoo Delta 1895* (Vicksburg, MS: Vicksburg Printing and Publishing Co., 1895), 65.
11. *Index to Naturalization Records of Mississippi Courts 1798–1906* (prepared by the Old Law Naturalization Project, Service Division, Work Projects Administration, Jackson, MS, 1942), 163.
12. Thomas, April 14, 2007.
13. Chafik Chamoun interview, Clarksdale, MS, April 6, 2007.
14. Lu Ann Jones, *Mama Learned Us to Work: Farm Women in the New South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002), 32; Cobb, *The Most Southern Place on Earth*, 83.
15. *Ibid.*, 112, 115; Nan Elizabeth Woodruff, *The African American Freedom Struggle in the Delta* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003).
16. Mary H. Ellis, *Cannonballs and Courage: The Story of Port Gibson* (Virginia Beach, VA: Donning Co., 2003), 92.
17. Frances Thomas interview, Vicksburg, MS, April 14, 2007.
18. Hooglund, *Taking Root*, 41.
19. Pat Davis Sr. interview, Clarksdale, MS, April 6, 2007.
20. Brenda Outlaw interview for the Mississippi Oral History Program of the University of Southern Mississippi (F341.5.M57, vol. 748, pt. 2).
21. Alixa Naff, *Becoming American: The Early Arab Immigrant Experience* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1985), 250–51.
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23. Grace Elizabeth Hale, *Making Whiteness: The Culture of Segregation in the South, 1890–1940* (New York: Vintage Books, 1999), 189; Hortense Powdermaker, *After Freedom: A Cultural Study in the Deep South* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1939, 1993), 42; Hooglund, *Taking Root*, 43.
24. John Dollard, *Caste and Class in a Southern Town* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1937), 128, 130; Hale, *Making Whiteness*, 191.
25. Mildred Ellis Nasif interview, Vicksburg, MS, April 14, 2007.
26. Thomas, April 14, 2007.
27. Gregory Orfalea, *Before the Flames: A Quest for the History of Arab Americans* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1988), 252.