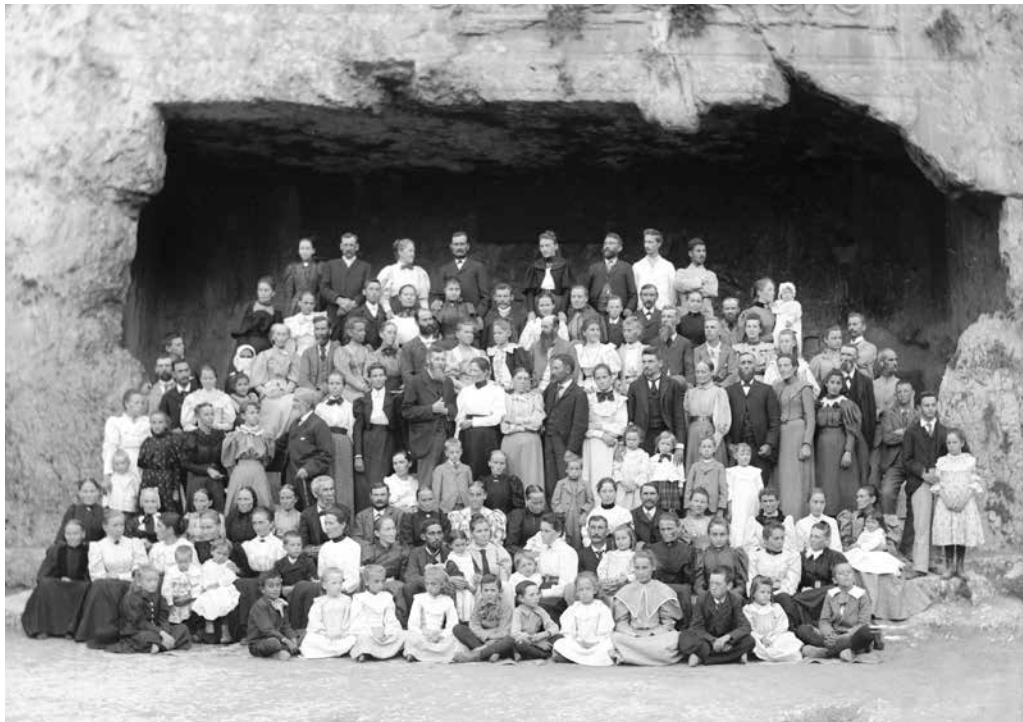


Waiting for the Second Coming: The New Photographic Collection of the American Colony Archives

Nada Awad

American Colony Archive Collections in Jerusalem collection contain photographs, manuscripts, arts and crafts created by the community, rare books, and studies on archeology and botany. Hosted in the original site that was home to the founders of the Colony, the archives found on the premises are currently being arranged and digitized in order to render them accessible to the public. A large part of the archives were donated to the Library of Congress. The collections kept in the American Colony complement other sources created by Colony members at the Library of Congress (including the Matson Collection,¹ the Whiting Collections,² and the American Colony in Jerusalem Collection), as well as numerous other sources preserved by families and institutions around the world. Many items from the Colony's collection overlap with the archives contained in the Library of Congress (over twenty-three thousand photographs). Rachel Lev, the curator at the American Colony, explains that the archive comprises seven thousand to ten thousand photographs, and that they have the largest known collection of albums produced by their photo department.

This archive is housed in what is today the American Colony Hotel and aims at telling the story of what used to be a small utopian community of American Christians who left their material life, sold everything they possessed, and immigrated from Chicago to Jerusalem in 1881. The first group consisted of eighteen members traveling to the Holy City to live the dreamed historical moment of the second coming of Christ. They thus founded a messianic sect in the Old City of Jerusalem, living according to religious principles derived from their own interpretations of Christianity, without



Community of Founders and New Members, 1896–1897, Tomb of the Kings, photographer unknown. From American Colony Members, Activities, and Aid Projects, 1890s–1930s, negative collection. American Colony Archive Collections, American Colony Hotel, Jerusalem.

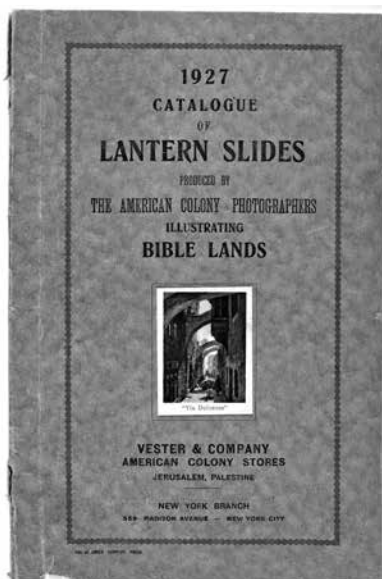
attempting, however, to convert the local population. Horatio Spafford would become the religious leader of the community until his death in 1888. His wife, Anna Spafford, then took control and developed a strict “religious dictatorship” over the growing community, including the rule of celibacy.³ Along the years, individual people joined the American Colony and in 1896 a large number of Swedes who immigrated from the United States and the Swedish village of Nås became members of the group. At this point, the American Colony decided to move to a bigger house to accommodate the 150 people who constituted it at its height. The house of Rabah Effendi al-Husayni, outside the walls of the Old City, became home to the community for the years that followed and is today the American Colony Hotel.

The second coming of the Christ did not take place. In disappointment the Colony was transformed in remarkably short time from a religious way-station to a booming business.⁴

In order to provide a steady income for sustaining a large group of people the community decided to engage in lucrative projects, among them farming, canning, and photography. Elijah Meyers,⁵ one of the individuals who joined the American Colony in 1889, founded the American Colony photo department in 1897.



American Colony Photo Department, Fishermen on the Sea of Galilee, 1920. Hand painted monochrome photographic print, American Colony Archive Collections, American Colony Hotel, Jerusalem.



American Colony Photo Department, *1927 Catalogue of Lantern Slides Illustrating Bible Lands* (Jerusalem and New York: Vester and Company, American Colony Stores, 1927). Boaz Collection, Jerusalem.

The Vester and Company, the American Colony store at Jaffa Gate, distributed the photographs alongside with other memorabilia to pilgrims and tourists visiting Palestine and to an established clientele worldwide. We can thus find in the collection many photographs and albums depicting “Biblical Palestine” themes. Since the beginnings of photography in the early nineteenth century in Palestine, many foreigners were eager to show biblical landscapes. These photographs, depicting Palestine as empty of people and “lacking in civilization,” were aimed at tourists who wanted to bring back pictures of Palestine from the time of the New Testament.

Like much of the photography at that time, the American Colony photo department took many pictures of



Lewis Larsson and the American Colony Photo Department, A Fig Tree before Its Leaves Are Consumed by Locusts. Hand painted monochrome photographic print, from “The Locust Plagues in Palestine, 1915 and 1930,” photographic album, American Colony Archive Collections, American Colony Hotel, Jerusalem.



Lewis Larsson and the American Colony Photo Department, A Fig Tree after Its Leaves Are Consumed by Locusts. Hand painted monochrome photographic print, from “The Locust Plagues in Palestine, 1915 and 1930,” photographic album, American Colony Archive Collections, American Colony Hotel, Jerusalem.

landscapes. One can note that, as foreigners in Palestine and the region, the photographers captured “exotic” shots of the local population and their culture and traditions: Bedouins, people in traditional local costumes, shepherds and flocks, and camels. Some pictures show members dressing like the local population and having their portrait taken. While constituting a very religious community, the American Colony archive shows that the community was interested in understanding and documenting the country they lived in. The archive shows a wide interest in the religious life, politics, archeology, nature, and people of Palestine, as well as the region. The archives document, for instance, the work of the botanist John Dinsmore, who studied the plants of the Levant in his herbarium.⁶ The photo department also immortalized the ravages of the locust plague of 1915 and 1930,⁷ and those of the earthquake in 1927.

Unlike foreign photographers who came for short periods of time, the American Colony photo department was established and run for more than thirty-seven years in Palestine by photographers who lived in the country, knew the culture; some of them were even born in Jerusalem and spoke Arabic.

It is also worth noting that the American Colony photo department was joined by five Palestinian photographers. One of the discoveries from the collection was a rare photography of Khalil Raad, one of the first Arab photographers in Palestine. There is no evidence that Khalil Raad was a member; however, it is possible that he cooperated with the American Colony photo department. There are some pictures signed by Khalil Raad in the collection. It is interesting that although the American Colony had its own photo department, some people from the Colony went to Raad’s studio to have their portrait taken. This is the case for instance of Bertha Vester, who in 1905 had her portrait taken after her daughter Anna-Grace was born.

Several factors contributed to the success of the photo department. First, the American Colony community was a closed universe ruled by a strong woman, Anna Spafford. The photo department was a way for members to go beyond the closed universe and enter the outside world. Also, when the American Colony photo department started operating, mass tourism was blooming in Palestine.

The department had several tasks. Many of the photographs in the American Colony archives document the life and work of its American-Swedish community. The collection features the humanitarian work conducted by the American Colony, which aimed to help the local population, starting in World War I, with the hardships that followed male conscription.

Among these projects were the American Colony Christian Herald Orphanage, established after World War I, and the American Colony Aid Association School of Handicrafts and Dressmaking, established in 1918. Sewing classes were opened for woman to help them produce items that were then sold to help sustain their families.

However, one cannot see this philanthropic work without feeling that these foreigners looked to civilize the local population. Bertha Spafford Vester, a daughter of Horatio and Anna Spafford, the founders of the American Colony in Jerusalem, decries “evil [local] customs” in her book *Our Jerusalem: An American Family in the Holy City, 1881–1949*.



Khalil Raad, Bertha Spafford Vester with Baby Anna-Grace, 1905. Photographic print, American Colony Archive Collections, American Colony Hotel, Jerusalem.



American Colony Photo Department, Cooking Lesson for Women of the City (left) and Village (right), Infant Welfare Center, 1930s. Gift of the Spafford Children's Center to the American Colony Archive Collections, American Colony Hotel, Jerusalem.

Ever since I had been in charge of the Moslem girls' school I had been fighting some of the worst elements in Moslem domestic life, and better to be able to advise the girls under my care I had studied the Moslem Sharia (religious) law. . . . In many countries the customs go ahead of the laws, but the Moslem customs in Palestine were infinitely worse than the law. . . . I was so incensed with the injustice of this evil custom that I made it my special duty to fight child marriage. I talked to mothers about it, and I studied the Sharia law to be able to enlighten the girls themselves and let them know that they had a right to object. They could not be married without their consent being given, and I tried to encourage them to protest and object to being taken out of school to be married.⁸

The industrial school for girls, for instance, was thus a project aimed at opposing early marriage. Another project, the playground for children, also illustrates this attitude. Bertha Spafford Vester explained the creation of the playground thus: "there was a crying need for such a place. Arab children had no other place to play except the narrow smelly streets."⁹ The projects conducted give the impression of bringing enlightenment to Jerusalemites in areas of hygiene, cooking, and child rearing, with pictures showing cooking lessons for urban and rural Palestinian women.

The American Colony community was also interested in documenting the situation of the country it lived in through different means. Some members of the Colony, such as Bertha Vester, kept diaries that span the period 1920–1968 and include thoughts



G. Eric Matson, Children Playing in the Community Playground and Shelter, 17 March 1937. Gift of the Spafford Children's Center to the American Colony Archive Collections, American Colony Hotel, Jerusalem.



American Colony Photo Department, Lace and Dress-Making Class, 1914–1928. From American Colony Members, Activities, and Aid Projects, 1890s–1930s, negative collection, American Colony Archive Collections, American Colony Hotel, Jerusalem.



Diary of Bertha Spafford Vester, 9 May 1930, with insert of original photo by Khalil Raad documenting the signing of the building contract of the YMCA. American Colony Archive Collections, American Colony Hotel, Jerusalem.



Scrapbook of 1937, from Scrapbook Series, 1881–1981, maintained by Anna T. Spafford, Bertha S. Vester, Horatio Vester, and Valentine R. Vester. American Colony Archive Collections, American Colony Hotel, Jerusalem.

and articles on the situation, as well as information on the life of the community. Eight volumes, also organized by the American Colony members, feature life in Palestine and contain clippings, articles, photographs, manuscripts, leaflets, and writings on everyday life.¹⁰

The Kaiser's visit changed conditions at the Colony, which made a great deal of money from the photographs. For the first time, there was an end to the passive waiting for the Messiah.¹¹

The visit of the Kaiser Wilhelm II to Jerusalem in 1898 was the occasion for the photo department's first major political photography mission. Later, during World War I, many assignments were given to the American Colony photo department to document the war. Many pictures depict the battles that were fought between the Ottoman and the British armies in the 1914–1917 period. The Library of Congress explains the important photographs taken during the Ottoman period by the permission granted to the American Colony to “photograph behind Turkish lines.”¹² Frederick Vester,¹³ Lewis Larsson,¹⁴ and some of their assistants had the privilege to work for the Ottoman Red Crescent, which allowed them to go



Page from "World War I and the British Mandate in Palestine," 1917–1926, Photograph Album Series, volume II. American Colony Archive Collections, American Colony Hotel, Jerusalem.



G. Eric Matson and John D. Whiting, Page from "Arab Revolt in Palestine," 1929, 1937–1938, 1948, Photograph Album Series. American Colony Archive Collections, American Colony Hotel, Jerusalem.

behind the scenes to photograph the mobilization and movement of [allied] armies – German, Austrian, Turkish soldiers – and the campaigners in Palestine and the Sinai. Larsson captured what would prove to be the most pivotal photograph of the war for the citizens of Jerusalem: the moment of surrender of the city to the occupying forces, using a hastily borrowed white sheet from the American Colony for a makeshift flag.¹⁵

The position of the American Colony as a “neutral” zone, and its connections, seem to have given the photo department access to important events. John Whiting,¹⁶ for instance, spoke Arabic and knew the region well, and for these reasons he was recruited to spy for Britain during World War I. Some pictures show him in important meetings held in 1921 in Amman at the celebration of the ceremonial proclamation of Amir Abdallah as the ruler of Transjordan by the British high commission, Herbert Samuel.

The archives also show interesting photographs depicting early mobilization and the changes occurring with the arrival of the British rule in Palestine. These cover post-war Palestine, the British Mandate, and the transformations in the region, most importantly the Arab mobilizations: the Nabi Musa protests of 1920, the 1929 uprising, the events of the Arab Revolt in 1936–1939, and the war of 1948.

The American Colony archive has documented around seventy years of the life of a utopian community from the United States and Sweden, but also, and interestingly, a pivotal period in the Middle East. The Colony lived under the Ottoman Empire, the British Mandate, as well as the Israeli occupation. Following the death of its leader, Anna Spafford, in 1923, however, the community started disintegrating. After a dispute over the common property, members of the Colony started leaving Jerusalem, taking with them parts of the archives. The legacy of the American Colony is therefore scattered all over the world today. Yet whether we are talking about photographs, memorabilia, or the John Dinsmore Herbarium, to name only a few examples, these objects have survived a very turbulent period and remain of great interest to botanists, historians, and researchers of various kinds.

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Endnotes

- 1 Eric Matson (1888–1977) arrived in Jerusalem as a child in 1896. He became one of the main photographers of the American Colony Photo Department.
- 2 John D. Whiting (1882–1951) was born in 1882, a year after the arrival of the American group to Palestine. He wrote in the National Geographic and provided photographs from the American Colony Department. He also worked as a tour guide and therefore knew well the region.
- 3 Mia Gröndahl, *The Dream of Jerusalem: Lewis Larsson and the American Colony Photographers* (Stockholm: Journal, 2005), 42.
- 4 Gröndahl, *The Dream of Jerusalem*, 76.
- 5 Elijah Meyers was born to a Jewish family in Bombay (India) in 1855. He then converted to Christianity and became a missionary. In the early 1890s, he arrived in Jerusalem and joined the American Colony soon after. He also participated in a photography mission (before the creation of the American Colony Department)

- with Yesha'ayahu Raffalovich, who produced "Views of Palestine and its Jewish Colonies, 1899," a work commissioned by a Zionist leader (some argue Theodor Herzl) to show the progress of colonization in Palestine.
- 6 John E. Dinsmore (1862–1951) was an American Colony member and the principal of the American Colony school. He was also a renowned botanist who studied flowers and plants of the Levant in his herbarium.
 - 7 See Stefanie Wichhart, "The 1915 Locust Plague in Palestine," *Jerusalem Quarterly* 56–57 (Winter 2013–Spring 2014): 29–39.
 - 8 Bertha Spafford Vester, *Our Jerusalem: An American Family in the Holy City, 1881–1949* (New York: Doubleday, 1950), 313.
 - 9 Documentation from the curator, Rachel Lev, on the collection (31 July 2014).
 - 10 These volumes were organized by Anna T. Spafford, Bertha Spafford Vester, Horatio Vester, and Valentine Richmond Vester. They constitute scrapbooks covering the 1881–1981 period, documenting the life of the community and the situation in Palestine.
 - 11 Helga Dudman and Ruth Kark, *The American Colony: Scenes from a Jerusalem Saga* (Jerusalem: Carta Jerusalem, 1998), 151–52.
 - 12 "The American Colony in Jerusalem," *Library of Congress*, accessed 28 January 2015, online at www.loc.gov/exhibits/americancolony/amcolony-overview.html.
 - 13 Friedrich Vester (1869–1942) came from the German Colony in Jerusalem. He married Bertha Spafford, the daughter of Horatio and Anna Spafford, in 1904, thus overturning the ban on marriages imposed by Anna Spafford.
 - 14 Lewis Larsson (1881–1958) arrived in Jerusalem from Nås in 1896 and was rapidly taken by photography. He became an apprentice of Elijah Meyers and one of the main photographers of the American Colony in Palestine and the region.
 - 15 Valentine Vester, ed., *The American Colony Family Album* (Jerusalem: American Colony, 2008), 175.
 - 16 See footnote 2 for more information.