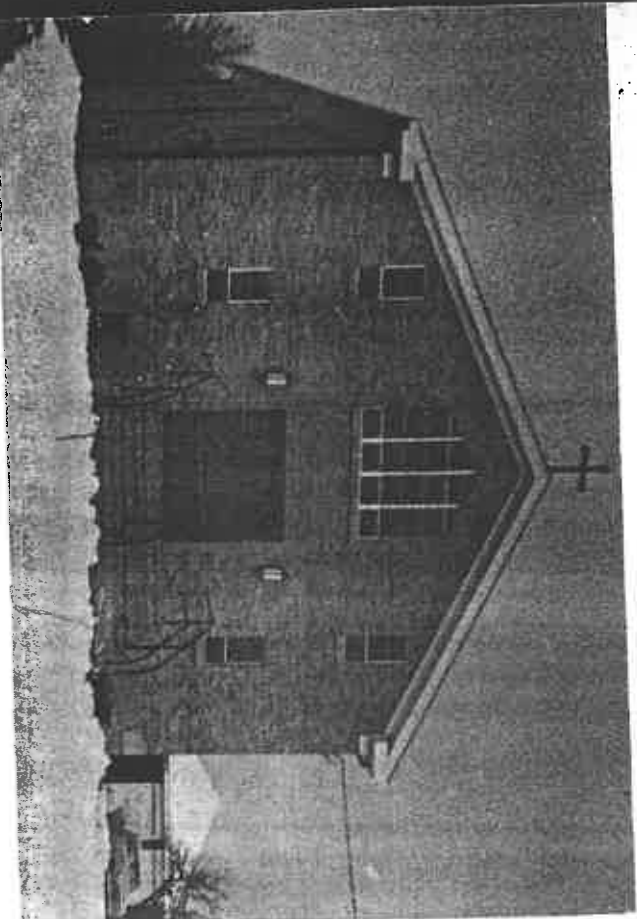


A SOCIOLOGICAL SURVEY



by

Pat Aarons  
Kenneth Beigelman  
Thomas P. Celestino  
John Coogan  
Joseph Dell'Olto  
Frank Forni  
Albert Gasser  
Charles Grady  
Helene D. Kruh

Robert Lazar  
Richard Moss  
Matthew Onuska  
Phillip Organ  
Rose Pacharz  
Myrna Pecker  
Ronald Pedone  
Vito Rallo  
Ed Winn

Edited by Eve Chevron

The Sociology Colloquium  
in Cooperation With the  
Department of Sociology  
UNIVERSITY of BRIDGEPORT -  
Bridgeport, Connecticut

1961

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THE SYRIAN AMERICANS  
OF THE GREATER BRIDGEPORT AREA  
A SOCIOLOGICAL SURVEY

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PREFACE

The immigrants who came to America during the past hundred years or so brought with them more than just the strength to build America's bridges, railroads, and cities.

They brought all the colorful fabric of their lives to weave together with the colors and fabrics already here into one of the richest tapestries the world has ever known. So too the Syrians have brought with them a rich tradition which through the process of acculturation has been modified and molded into something which is no longer Syrian but undeniably Syrian-American.

It is the purpose of this survey to acquaint the reader with the Syrian community in the Greater Bridgeport Area. In writing this report each of the collaborators has been responsible for collecting the data on a specific aspect of the Syrian community. The reports were then compiled under the supervision of Dr. J. S. Rouseck, Chairman of the Department of Sociology.

We are deeply indebted to the members of the St. Nicholas Syrian Orthodox Church for their time and patience in helping us seek out the necessary information for this survey.

We would like to thank the Student Council of the University of Bridgeport for their generous financial support of this project.

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WAYNE STATE UNIVERSITY

Our appreciation to Miss Helene Krush for her tireless efforts in typing this manuscript in preparation for printing. For encouragement and infinite patience with our "labor pains" we are grateful to Dr. J. S. Rouseck, without whose watchful concern we might have written and re-written long past our deadline.

Eve Chevron

February 28, 1961  
University of Bridgeport

For his continuous encouragement to the aims of the Sociology Colloquium, we humbly dedicate this Pamphlet to

Clarence D. L. Ropp, Ph.D.  
Dean of the College of Arts and Science  
University of Bridgeport  
Bridgeport, Connecticut

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HISTORICAL BACKGROUND TO THE SYRIAN EMIGRATION TO THE UNITED STATES

Who are the Syrian people? There has always been much confusion and obscurity in regard to this question. They are not Turks, as the United States Census would make them. They are not Arabs as some of them would take themselves to be. The Syrians having lived under Turkish domination for the past four centuries are mistaken for Turks by just about all those among whom they settle in their land of immigration. The appellation Arab for the Syrians is also an error because this represents a linguistic classification of a definite ethnic group. Who then are these people who have made their presence felt so strongly all through history? The Syrians are a combination of the Semitic races; the modern Syrians being an offspring of the ancient Phoenician Canaanite tribes who entered Syria about 2500 B.C., the Aramean Israelite hordes who entered Syria about 1500 B.C., and the Arabs [redacted].

Syria was one of the first schools of the whole human species for there is no minority in the United States that can fall back on so ancient and eventful a history. <sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> For the best systematic study of the history of the Syrians see: Hitti, Philip K. The Syrians in America, George H. Doran Company, 1924, p. 5.

The homeland of the Syrians is a narrow strip of land of about four hundred miles by one-hundred and fifty miles stretching out from the Taurus Range and the Euphrates in the north to the Sinaitic peninsula in the south, and engulfed by the Mediterranean Sea on the west and the desert on the east.

Syrian immigration to the United States began during the latter part of the 19th century. "The first Syrian family to enter the United States was that of Joseph Arbeley of Damascus which arrived in 1878".<sup>2</sup>

The enticement of the Chicago Exposition and the Columbian Centennial Exposition of 1892<sup>3</sup> resulted in the first substantial tide of immigration from Syria. Although there is always the danger of oversimplification one may say that there were three main factors accounting for the emigration from Syria.

A. Economic:  
Scarcity of mineral wealth and lack of industrial development.

B. Political:  
Domination by the Turks with many restrictions upon the Syrians. Before World War I, many Syrians came to the United States to escape compulsory military training in the Turkish army.

C. Religious Issues:  
Many Syrians became Christians and were persecuted for their beliefs.

2. Ibid., p. 48.
3. Bryant, William C., Gay, S.H., and Brooks, N., Syrians Popular History of the United States, New York: Charles Scribners Sons, 1896, p. 635.
4. Personal Interview, Mr. Francis Showah, 816 Riverton Terrace, Stratford, Connecticut.

The cloud of obscurity covering the exact nationality of many immigrants in this country makes it difficult to approximate the exact number of Syrians in the United States. They have at various times been classified as Arabs, Armenians, Greeks and Turks. In a report by the Commissioner General of Immigration it was stated that 105,763 Syrian immigrants entered the United States between 1899 and 1930.

According to the Federal census of 1940 there were 151,349 Syrians (which includes the Palestinians and the Lebanese) in this country. Of these approximately 55,000 were classified as foreign born while the balance were native born of foreign or mixed parentage. From 1911 to 1920 a total of 36,109 Syrians emigrated to this country with the great bulk of this number (85%) arriving before the outbreak of World War I. The peak years of emigration were 1913 and 1914 with 9,210 and 9,033 entrants respectively.<sup>5</sup>

In regard to the occupational status of these new immigrants, some were farmers, but the majority were merchants, peddlers, and clerks from the small villages and towns. Upon reaching the United States nearly all of the Syrians turned to commercial pursuits. In the past few years we have witnessed the Syrians complete entrance into the diversified economic

5. Statistical Abstract of the United States, 1920, p. 93, U.S. Dept. of Commerce - Daniel C. Roper, Sec. Bureau of Foreign and Domestic Commerce, Alex V. Dye-Director

roles characteristic of our complex society. There is hardly an industry or profession in which the Syrian people have not been represented.

The greatest concentration of Syrians is to be found in the large urban centers such as, New York City, Detroit, Boston, Chicago, and Cleveland. Such states as California, Connecticut, New York, Texas, Massachusetts, Pennsylvania, Ohio, Michigan, New Jersey and Illinois have large numbers of Syrians. There are few towns or villages in all Syria that are not represented somewhere in the United States by one or more emigrants from Syria.

Since the Immigration Laws of 1924 Immigration has been sharply restricted. Most recently, the McCarron-Walder Act of 1952 provides for an annual quota of 100 Syrians. 6

6. For additional general information see--  
Brown, P. J. and Rousek, J. S., One America; Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey, Prentice Hall, Inc., 1959.

Davis, Maurice R., World Immigration, New York, MacMillan Company, 1939.

Haddad, George Merl, Fifty Years of Modern Syria and Lebanon. New York, MacMillan Company, 1949.

#### INTRODUCTION

##### First Syrian-Americans in Bridgeport

John A. Shawah was the first Syrian immigrant to settle in the Bridgeport area. He came to the United States in 1907 because of religious persecution in Syria by the Mohammedans. 7

Mr. Shawah came alone, later sending for his fiancée whom he married in Bridgeport. Shortly after Shawah's arrival, other immigrants followed and eventually established a Syrian community. Among these pioneers of some 45 to 50 years ago were Mr. and Mrs. Midney, Daniel Shamis, John Gramasty, Michael Macol, Nicholas Macol and George Mike.

The Syrian group has inhabited the South end of Bridgeport since the first wave of immigrants arrived on these shores in the early nineteen hundreds. South Avenue and Broad Street has been the core of their community.

##### Waves of Immigration 8

The first Syrian immigrants to the Bridgeport area came from the town of Soueida (Samandag) which is today a part of Turkey. They arrived in small numbers, mostly men in their early years who knew each other and came as a result of a missionary from

7. Personal Interview with Mr. Francis Showah 816 Riverton Terrace, Stratford, Connecticut.

8. Personal Interview with Mr. Francis Showah and Mr. J. Bekar, 58 Roctan Avenue, Bridgeport, Connecticut.

Virginia who spent some time in Syria. As a result of this small wave of immigration and their glowing letters home, small groups of single men made their way from Soueldle to Bridgeport and Danbury. From 1906 to 1925 more than half of the Syrian immigrants from Soueldle migrated to Danbury, Connecticut, while the rest flocked to Bridgeport.

The reason for the immigration was originally the hope for economic advancement, the immigrants being farmers and silk worm raisers in their native lands. Once these young men were here they wrote home and subsequently had their wives, children and sweethearts enter the country. Although the earliest immigration stemmed from economic factors the greatest wave of immigration in the early 1920's was due to the Turkish persecution of the Syrians.

In 1925 there were about 50 Syrians residing in the Greater Bridgeport Area and today these Syrian immigrants and their descendants number over 300.

#### Economics

Most of the Syrian immigrants who came to Bridgeport before World War I were single men who worked in hat shops, buckle shops, and other factories of various types. Two of the first immigrants to obtain employment were Michael and John Deeb who worked at the Hewie Company on Washington Avenue. These men have worked so diligently through the years that they are still employed by this firm today.

During this same period of the first generation of Syrian immigrants, overcoming many hardships and difficulties, two brothers Michael and Nicholas Macol originated the first banana business in Bridgeport. In the 1930's Nicholas Macol's son, George Macol, and John Nassra, founded the American Banana Co. of Bridgeport. Others in the banana business were Joseph Habib, Daniel Shamiss, and John Gramasty.

The second and third generation Syrians were more fortunate than the first owing to their better educational foundations. They acquired new skills, obtained higher paying positions, spoke better English and became leaders in Bridgeport affairs. Today, although most Syrians are still employed in factories and small businesses, we are witnessing the emergence of the Syrian professional man and woman. Among this group are John Midney and George Shamiss, prominent lawyers in the Bridgeport area; Joan Betar, Mary Anne Betar, Albert Chapar, Mary Shevah, Julia Wonneberger, Nicholas Macol and John Zamarly Jr. are successful teachers; John Mike, Spero Mike and Nicholas Mike are prosperous engineers in Fairfield County.

#### Education

Although the first generation Syrians did not have a strong educational background, they paved the way for the advance of their children by participating in community functions and by working to provide for their general welfare. The early

Immigrants in Bridgeport were unable to read or write in English, but many were proficient in Arabic which was their mother tongue. The succeeding generations progressed rapidly and many went on to higher studies in colleges and universities as is evident from the professional status reached by second and third generation Syrians.

#### Political

Although the Syrians take advantage of the voting privileges extended to them by the State and Federal Governments, they are not affiliated with any one political party, organization or group.

#### HISTORY OF THE SYRIAN ORTHODOX CHURCH?

The history of the Syrian Orthodox Church of the city of Bridgeport begins with the founding of the Syrian Soueidle Orthodox Society, in the year 1932. The purpose of the club was to unite all the 35 Syrian families in the community for the purpose of holding religious services and social gatherings. The original members of the Society consisted of six hard working individuals with a sense of ethnic pride. This group quickly expanded into approximately forty members.

At the outset, the Society purchased a four family building, with two basement apartments, located on Broad Street in the heart of the Syrian community. The two basement apartments were quickly converted into clubrooms which were later to serve a wide variety of purposes.

The first President of the Syrian Soueidle Brotherhood Society, Mr. Daniel Shamias, is today still active in church affairs.

The financial difficulties encountered by the members during the depression were partly taken care of by the collection of dues and the profits from various social events.

A short while later the ladies of the Syrian community formed their own society. The express purpose of this society

9. Interview, Miss Olga Macol and Mr. John G. Beter.



was to further plans for a closer knit group of Syrians in the surrounding communities and to advance the idea of a church for their own group.

At this time the only Syrian Orthodox Church in the whole state of Connecticut was located in Danbury.

The priest in charge of St. George's Parish in Danbury came to Bridgeport on occasion to hold services at the club-rooms on Broad Street. Soon many of the people of the Bridgeport area became members of the Danbury church, though the distance involved made it difficult to attend services in Danbury with any regularity. In spite of these difficulties the two areas held many combined social functions beneficial to both areas.

Since there was no Syrian Orthodox Church in the city of Bridgeport many Syrians attended Sunday services at the Greek Orthodox Church in the community. Due to the fact that the Greek Orthodox Church used Greek during the mass and at Sunday School the Syrians were not learning the background of their own Orthodox faith. Due to this desire for knowledge of their own Orthodox religion a few of the younger people in the community organized a religious education program with the help of the Archbishop in New York. Books and other religious items helpful in this religious education were sent to the community for use in the Sunday School. Prominent leaders in this religious education program were girls who

volunteered their services every week. Among the most active were Mary Mike, Karen Maccol, and Helon Zemary.

In 1952 news reached the community that the new state highway would go right through the city of Bridgeport and that the building which masqueraded as a church and clubroom for the Syrians would be demolished. A committee to locate a new site was quickly established. The committee consisted of John Beter, Asper Zariff, George N. Maccol, Henry Midney and John Nassra. A building fund raising committee was formed to raise funds to buy land and build a church. This committee consisted of Frank Showeh, John Beter, George N. Maccol, Michael Terak and John D. Zemary. They soon purchased a piece of land at 910-120 Norman Street for \$8,000. The total area was 175 feet by 150 feet. On the property was located a building which was to be converted into the first community church.

Plans were soon organized for the building of a new church somewhere in the area. On November 21, 1953 the Syrian Orthodox Youth Organization sponsored the first Building Fund Social. The Drive started with a Haftil (festival) which was held in the Greek Church Social Hall. The affair was a financial and social success. Pledge payments by families brought in a large amount of the money needed. These encouraging beginnings gave the drive momentum.

To insure the smooth continuance of this operation the first St. Nicholas Board of Trustees was created. Elected to this board were John Beter, who served as chairman, George N.

Maccol, Albert Lewis, John Nassre, Louis Shamass, John D. Zemary, Asper Sariff, Francis Showah, Louis Gramestay, also Michael Terek, and George Mossessian. The decision was reached to abandon the Norman Street site and just in time, as vandals took it upon themselves to burn the building to the ground. Fortunately, damages caused by the fire were almost completely covered by insurance.

On May 10, 1955, after two years of soliciting money, five acres of land on Park Avenue were purchased, for a total of \$42,000. On the property was an eight room brick house with a garage.

A famed Russian architect, Peter Petrofsky, was called upon to prepare the plans for the church. The contractors were to be Tomlison and Hawley from the city of Bridgeport. The construction price for St. Nicholas Syrian Orthodox Church was quoted at \$175,000.

Most of the families in the parish pledged a minimum of \$300.00 to be donated to the building fund. All the societies affiliated with the Church donated the full amount of their treasuries, and wherever possible the parishioners purchased church bonds.

On September 18, 1955 His Eminence Metropolitan Archbishop Anthony Bashir, assisted by Father George George of the Danbury parish, held an outdoor service under a huge canvas tent donated to the church by Mrs. Katherine Bitar in memory of her

husband, Mr. Thomas Bitar. After the services a buffet luncheon was prepared and hundreds of church members in the surrounding communities took part in the festivities.

Reverend Nicholas Salkley, the first priest assigned to this parish, arrived on December 9, 1956 and held Sunday services in the parish house. Until the church was completed the parish house served as a church.

The laying of the cornerstone of the church took place on February 21, 1957, at which time the Divine Liturgy again was given by His Eminence Archbishop Bashir. He was assisted by Rev. Salkley, Rev. George George, Rev. Joseph Simko of St. John the Baptist Carpatho-Russian Orthodox Church in Bridgeport, and Deacon Fred Shanssen of St. Vladimir's Seminary. These ceremonies were held in Richner's Restaurant, located on Madison Avenue in Bridgeport, Connecticut. A banquet followed and many important city and state dignitaries were in attendance. Money and various church items were donated for the new church.

By Easter, 1957, the basement of the church had been completed and the first St. Nicholas Syrian Orthodox Church Divine Liturgy was held there on this memorable holiday. From this time on, services were held every Sunday in the basement of the church until the final completion of the Church was accomplished.

After years of hard work by all of the parishioners the completion of the church was finally attained. On July 28, 1957 the new and beautiful St. Nicholas Syrian Orthodox Church was dedicated. His Eminence Metropolitan Archbishop Anthony Bashir celebrated the Pontifical Divine Liturgy assisted by Father Saikley and Father George. John Beter, chairman of the Board of Trustees, cut the ribbon across the new doorway and Jacob, and Gabriel Hawie, owners of the Hawie Manufacturing Co., officially opened the doors of the building. Jacob and Gabriel were given this honor in appreciation of their leadership in the Syrian community and for their willingness to provide work for many Syrian immigrants upon arrival. Among the 550 persons in attendance were Mayor Jasper McLevy and U.S. Senator Prescott Bush, and numerous Orthodox clergy from the surrounding communities.

Following the services there was a dinner at Eichner's Restaurant, at which Francis Showah served as master of ceremonies. The parishioners presented to Father Saikley and Father George portable communion sets in remembrance of this occasion. St. Nicholas Icons were distributed to all attending as a memento of this glorious occasion in the history of the St. Nicholas Syrian Orthodox Church of Bridgeport, Connecticut.

On August 15, 1958 Father Saikley was transferred from the Bridgeport parish to Lawrence, Mass. On the same day

Father Victor George, the present pastor, arrived to assume his duties at the Bridgeport parish.

Since the official opening of the Church on July 28, 1957 the parish and the working societies within it have sponsored many functions in order to raise money for the express purpose of liquidating the mortgage on the church property. These functions include bazaars, car raffles, bingo and the ever popular Haril (festival). The working societies within the church organize monthly dinners and the money goes to the treasuries of the organizations. All the money donated to the church by these organizations is carefully funneled through the Board of Trustees whose President is the well known John G. Beter.

In 1932 the Syrian community consisted of only 32 families. By 1957 the parish consisted of 62 families comprising some 250 people.

The rise of the parish is pointedly shown by the fact that in one year, 1960, the Church had 20 conversions to the Syrian Orthodox faith.

Today the parish numbers 88 families with approximately 288 people. The parish members come from Bridgeport, Ansonia, Derby, New Haven, Fairfield, Trumbull, and Stratford.

St. George's Syrian Orthodox Church in Danbury 10

The Turkish Empire's preparation for the First World War at the turn of the century demanded that many young Syrian Christians serve in the Turkish Army against their religious teachings. The manifestations of religious freedom appealed to these young men, and many of them migrated to the United States; Danbury, Connecticut received a substantial number of the new immigrants.

The history of St. George's Syrian Orthodox Church in Danbury is indicative of the determination, strength, and cooperation that exists among the Syrian people.

During the early 1920's the Danbury Syrians did not have an established church; services were held in private homes. Missionary priests from the New York area would make periodic visits to Danbury, and the Syrian people would attempt to coordinate their religious festivals, such as weddings, and baptisms, with the visits of the missionaries.

In 1922 the first Syrian Orthodox Society was organized. It was composed of elderly men from the Danbury and Bridgeport areas. Services were still held in private homes until the latter part of 1922, when the Society rented a hall on Ives Street in Danbury. Although the city still did not have a resident priest, the Syrian people had their first place of worship.

10. Interview, Father George George of Danbury, Connecticut.

1924 was a memorable year for the Syrian people of Danbury and Bridgeport. In that year the Syrians purchased a two family house which is the site of their present church; also in 1924 the first resident priest of the Syrian Orthodox Church arrived in Danbury.

Father John Hakim was the first resident priest in the Danbury area. He served in this capacity from 1924 until 1954. Through contributions and dues of the Danbury and Bridgeport church members the erection of the church was finally made possible. In the summer of 1924 the corner stone for St. George's Church was laid. Following the Second World War, the church corporation purchased the home adjoining the church property for use as a rectory.

The determination of the Syrian people was a gain exemplified in 1949. In that year the church was completely destroyed, but the members of the church initiated a community drive which allowed a complete remodeling and repainting of the edifice.

The present resident priest is Father George R. George. He attended Notre Dame and King's College. He became resident priest in Danbury in 1954.

St. George's Church is the largest of three Orthodox churches in Danbury. 325 people from 96 families, the majority of which are Syrians, are members of the church.

The organizations of the church are:

Men's Association, Leopold Palanzo, President.  
Ladies Society, Mrs. Helen Sam, President  
S.O.Y.O., Sam L. Showah, President  
Choir, Mrs. Peknik, Director  
Sunday School, Miss Alice Sager, Director  
P.T.A. of St. George's, George Farris, Jr., President  
Knights of St. George, Michael Nimer, President.

On April 23rd of each year the congregation from St.

Nicholas Syrian Church in Bridgeport visits the Syrian people in Danbury and celebrates the festival of St. George with the Divine Liturgy in St. George's Church. On December 6 of each year the visit is reciprocated by the members of the Danbury church when the two church congregations celebrate together, the festival of St. Nicholas Day in the Syrian Orthodox Church of Bridgeport, St. Nicholas. This exchange of visits demonstrates the close relationship that exists between the members of St. George's Church of Danbury and St. Nicholas Church of Bridgeport.

The Relationship Between the Danbury and Bridgeport Churches. 11

At present, there are two Syrian Orthodox Churches in Connecticut, a fact the members point to with pride as Connecticut is one of the few states in the Union which can boast of having two Churches of this denomination, consisting almost entirely of emigrants from the same town in Syria. Both Churches operate in completely independent spheres,

11. Interview, Father Victor F. George, Bridgeport, Connecticut.

each run by their own respective Parish. They both conduct the same religious service which was handed down to them by their ancestors, but the modern service has been modified to meet the changing needs of Syrian-Americans. The religious ceremony, for example, which at one time was conducted entirely in Arabic, is now conducted in English, the principal language of its members.

Both Churches were established to answer the common needs of Syrian-Americans to maintain the cultural and religious ties that bind them to their rich heritage.

Although they operate independently, they are in constant contact and on numerous occasions they sponsor joint affairs.

FRATERNAL AND RELIGIOUS ORGANIZATIONS

As we have learned, many of the Syrians in the Bridgeport area were originally from the town of Soueidie. Due to this common bond the early immigrants banded together to worship and to play. They organized the Soueidie Society in 1932 with Daniel Shamiss as the first President, John Nassra as Secretary and John A. Showah, Michael Mehegal, Asper Zariff, George Chaparr, Louis Barber, and John Beik as fellow members. The first meetings of the Society took place in the homes of the members until 1936, when a four family house at 737 Broad Street was purchased, in which to hold both religious and social functions.

In 1953 the Soueldie Societies' property on Broad Street was sold to the State of Connecticut in order to make way for the construction of the New England Thruway. In 1955 the Society turned their entire treasury of \$50,000 over to the Church Building Fund and on this site they made plans to construct the first Syrian Orthodox Church in Bridgeport.

The dream of a Syrian Church became a reality in 1957, with Father Nicholas Saikley as the first pastor. In 1958 Father Victor George replaced Father Saikley as pastor and still remains the spiritual head of that church today.

The construction of St. Nicholas Church marked the beginning of the Women's Society and the Men's Society, each a local organization of 50 or 60 members. On the national level there is the local branch of the Syrian Orthodox Youth Organization with 30 or 40 members and the Brotherhood of Soueldie Syrian Society.

#### Youth Groups

In understanding the youth movement among the Syrians it should be noted that it is relatively young and as such, has had little time to grow to any great number.

The Syrian youth movement in this country is about 20 years old. It was in 1939 that the Syrian Orthodox Youth Organization

was established in Boston, Massachusetts. In 1950, the country was divided into six regional areas of S.O.Y.O. and it was in 1954 that the Bridgeport chapter was organized. The Bridgeport and Danbury chapters are the only two chapters of S.O.Y.O. in Connecticut. In all of the six regions, there are 65 chapters distributed as follows: Eastern-twenty-one, New England-nine, Midwestern-nineteen, Southwestern-nine, Western-three, and Canadian-four.

Both the Bridgeport and the Danbury chapters are very prominent in the Eastern Region of S.O.Y.O. The 1954 Eastern Regional Convention was held in Bridgeport with St. George's church in Danbury acting as host. The president of the Eastern region in 1959 was Mr. Simon Saba, of Danbury. The spiritual advisor to the Eastern Region is the Reverend Father George E. George, of the Danbury chapter.

In the hierarchy of the youth organizations, the North American Council is a representative body of the six regions in the United States and Canada. This in turn is part of the council of Eastern Orthodox Youth Leaders of America which is now represented in the World Orthodox Youth Organizations.

The purpose of S.O.Y.O. as stated by the president of the North American Council, Mr. George A. Debs, is to assist the clergy in the Sunday School work and to give financial support for the training of young priests in the Seminary. The Bridge-