

The Milwaukee Egyptians

History in Milwaukee

The Copts

Egyptian Americans are not your archetypal Egyptians. In Egypt, approximately 9 of 10 citizens are Muslims. But in America, the majority of people of Egyptian descent are Coptic Christians. The Copts are a separate ethnic group in Egypt, some claiming Arab descent and some not. Most claim descent from the ancient Egyptians before the Arab conquest in 642. The term “Copt” is derived from *Aigyptos*—a Greek word which is in turn derived from the Egyptian word *Ha-ka-Ptah*, which means the house of the spirit of Ptah, a deity in Egyptian mythology. By the time of the Arab conquest, virtually all indigenous Egyptians were Christian.

Other Egyptian Christians

Other Egyptian Christians that immigrated to America included Coptic Catholics and Protestants. An example of an early Egyptian Catholic in Milwaukee appears below.

Meet one of your past Egyptian neighbors

Dennis Kharitou

Born in Cairo, Egypt in 1910, Dennis Kharitou immigrated to the United States and Milwaukee in 1930, apparently alone. There is no record that his parents, Spiro Kharitou and Sophie Cojoy, accompanied him.

Despite his four years of high school (uncommon for the times) and skills as a mechanic, Dennis Kharitou probably had difficulty getting work during the 1930s when the Great Depression was at its height. He did not start a family until 17 years after his arrival. In 1937, however, he did become a naturalized US citizen.

Dennis Kharitou was in service during World War Two in the Branch Immaterial—Warrant Officers, USA for the duration of the war and beyond. He worked as a skilled mechanic. Shortly after his return in 1947, he married a woman 12 years his junior—Camille Agneta, the daughter of Italian immigrants from New York City. The same year that he married, he began work for the Chicago and Northwestern Railroad. He and Camille had children Dennis A. and Michelle Kharitou.



“It’s very important that people understand us. People tend to group together everyone from the Middle East. They are all—you know—terrorists or women-abusers. We try and have a big presence to get people to know about us. We have a booth at the Holiday Folk Fair. We invite people to our bake sales and other events. It’s very important that we are understood.”

Quotes of Middle Eastern informants from the 12-year Milwaukee ethnic study conducted by Urban Anthropology Inc.

The family lived on Milwaukee's South Side and attended St. Matthias Catholic Parish on 93rd and Beloit Road.

Dennis lived to age 81 and was survived by his wife and two children. He is buried at Mt. Olivet Cemetery (see photo of his headstoneⁱ). Camille died in 2012.

While some Egyptians, such as the example above, immigrated to the United States early in the 20th century, most of today's Egyptian Americans came much later, many for education and others for economic opportunities. Some of these were Muslims. A wave of Egyptians arrived following the Egyptian Revolution of 1952 and thousands arrived after Egypt's defeat in the Six-Day War of 1967. Most of the latter group were Copts. The first Coptic Egyptian family to come to Milwaukee was in 1968. The majority of the arrivals were better educated than Americans generally.

In Milwaukee, most Egyptian immigrants settled in the Garden District, most particularly in the neighborhoods of Wilson Park, Holler Park, Gra-Ram, and Castle Manor on the city's South Side. The reason for the settlement pattern may be strategic. Two local faith communities that border these neighborhoods were later founded. The first to be established was the Islamic Society of Milwaukee in the mid-1980s. Located on 13th and Layton Avenue, the Islamic Society serves the Milwaukee Muslim population. It is a center of worship, training, social services, schooling, and youth programs. The second, St. Mary and St. Antonious Coptic Orthodox Church, is located on Drexel Avenue in Oak Creek and serves the Coptic Christian population. For decades, Coptic Egyptian priests came to Wisconsin from surrounding cities with larger Coptic communities to serve the Divine Liturgy. Eventually a lot was purchased in Oak Creek and the local church was consecrated in 2008 by Pope Shenouda III, worldwide leader of the Coptic Orthodox Church.

Recent history

Recently, two organizations were founded to help connect Egyptians living in the diaspora. In 2001 the Universal Union of Egyptian Expatriates was created that attempts to link some of the 6 million+ Egyptians living, working, and studying abroad. Approximately three-quarters of the Union's membership is Muslim and the remainder Copts. A second organization, the American Egyptian Strategic Alliance, was founded in 2012. It is a

"The Muslim immigrants are more recent. The Christians were able to assimilate more because there were more common things in what was acceptable. The Muslim faith forbids drinking alcohol. A big part of socializing and networking involves going out and having a drink. You won't find that as much with the Muslim community. They'll go out and socialize, but they won't drink. Whether you're accepted for not drinking or not, there's still that. A little bit of a divide there. The more recent Muslim community travelled here because of political conflicts overseas, and some of them traveled here for opportunities. I think that the political conflicts and economy overseas are the main reason though. Some people came here for school."

"Middle Eastern doctors, lab technicians, educators, athletes, and other professionals made many contributions to Milwaukee and America as a whole. We built our mosques and churches for all of Milwaukee to worship and enjoy. Not just Arabs."

Quotes of Middle Eastern informants from the 12-year Milwaukee ethnic study conducted by Urban Anthropology Inc.

the Islamic Society of Milwaukee



coalition of Egyptian Americans designed to influence American decision makers to enact favorable policies toward Egypt and encourage freedoms in Egypt.

In Milwaukee, the two major faith communities, the Islamic Society of Milwaukee and St. Antonious Coptic Orthodox Church continue to unite Egyptian Americans of Muslim and Christian backgrounds. See below.

Meet one of your current neighbors

Jennifer Sedrak

Along with her husband Medhat and five children, Jennifer Sedrak is a committed member of St. Antonious Coptic Orthodox Church (see photoⁱⁱ). “Our church is a very tight-knit Coptic community,” she states, “like one big family.”

Holding a bachelor’s degree in biology and a doctorate degree in pharmacy, Jennifer Sedrak works as a part-time pharmacist. But she likes to call herself a full-time mother. She and her family enjoy Egyptian food and desserts, listen to Coptic Egyptian music, and celebrate all the Coptic holidays. They eat vegan food during religious fasts, which occur about 200 days a year.

In addition to her religious and family activities, Jennifer Sedrak enjoys “making things,” which include baking and crafts. Her family also travels.



ⁱ Photo attribution: Public records at Ancestry.com.

ⁱⁱ Photo attribution: <https://www.flickr.com/photos/kayakman/14979886866>

“I always tell people- if you go to a Middle Eastern restaurant, you’re not even seeing a fraction of our food. But the nice thing is that there really is something for everyone. And people enjoy the food. Sometimes--this might sound weird-- but sometimes someone enjoying your cuisine opens their mind to your culture and the people as a whole. And they are not as quick to label or stereotype you. If they see something in the media, they are more likely to question. The whole hookah craze has become, well . . . I think that America is a melting pot. I think we borrow stuff from many different cultures, so I don’t think it’s out of the ordinary.”

“There’s a lot of interaction amongst all the different countries. Not to say that there aren’t the little cliques; there definitely are. There’s a Syrian community. There’s a clique of Syrian individuals that socialize a lot with one another. But once again, when they have a social gathering, you’ll see people from all different ethnic backgrounds.”

“I think family is so important. I think the importance of family is defining, whether it’s large or small, [it] doesn’t make a difference. Just the importance of staying close to the family. I think that as children, the importance of family was always instilled in us, of staying close with one another. You see in a lot of communities where the family kind of separates, they don’t see each other, there’s not much of a connection, there’s not much contact. Sometimes they live in the same city and don’t see each other that often. Family really is a foundation for a lot of different things. And support for different things.”

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