



Preserving the Past with an Eye to the Future

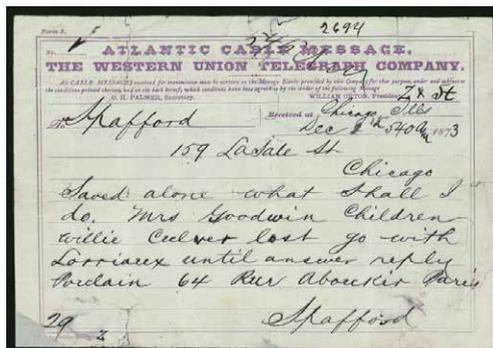
The Archive at the American Colony Hotel



By Wendy Whiting Blome

Through four regimes and multiple wars, the American Colony photographed, chronicled, and lived the history of Palestine. The Archive at the American Colony Hotel in Jerusalem captures the saga of Christian pilgrims who journeyed, beginning in 1881, to Jerusalem from the United States and Sweden to form a community devoted to pursuing their faith and serving others.

The story of this intrepid group begins in Chicago where Anna and Horatio Spafford lived a comfortable life with their four daughters. A trip to Europe was planned as a respite after two years of ministering to the survivors of the Great Chicago Fire of 1871. Anna and the children set off on the steamship Ville du Havre; a



Telegram to Horatio Spafford from his wife Anna, 1873. American Colony Collection, Library of Congress, Washington, DC.

collision mid-ocean caused the ship to sink in minutes and only Anna survived. The heartbreaking words, "Saved alone, what shall I do," were telegraphed to Horatio who immediately journeyed to join his wife in France and bring her back to Chicago. When his ship was over the spot where his beloved daughters were lost, Horatio began writing the poem that would become a hymn of comfort and faith, "It is Well with My Soul."

Following the birth of a daughter, Bertha, the birth and death of their only son Horatio Jr., and the arrival of their final child, Grace, the Spaffords and a group of devout friends, including John C. and Mary Whiting, left Chicago in 1881 for the holy city of Jerusalem. They settled in a small house in the Old City. They did not proselytize but believed that providing assistance to others, regardless of their faith, was part of being a Christian. The Colony members became part of the local community and many became fluent in Arabic.

Since 1881 the members of the American Colony have captured events in Palestine through photography, diaries, and papers. The Archive at the American Colony Hotel in East Jerusalem is a repository of the history of the members of the Colony and the area.

As the community grew with the addition of Swedes from Nas and Swedish-Americans, the group needed larger quarters and bought the former residence of Rabbah Effendi al-Husseini that would eventually become the American Colony Hotel. The original premises in the Old City

American Colony residents December 17, 1904, American Colony Collection, Library of Congress, Washington, DC.





The Anna Spafford Children's Hospital, American Colony Archive, Jerusalem.

were transformed into an orphanage, then a children's hospital, and now house the Spafford Children's Center.¹ The Swedish arrivals brought with them many skills, and the Colony members operated a forge and carpentry shop, pursued farming, and ran a dairy, a bakery, and a butchery.

Before the turn of the nineteenth century, Bertha Spafford (Vester) was asked to administer the Islamic School for Girls in the Old City. In addition, Colony members established cooperatives to encourage local Palestinian women to market their beautiful needlework creations. With the advent of World War I, food and medical services became scarce, so the Colonists started soup kitchens, worked as nurses, and photographed the events taking place in Palestine.

A hand-colored view of Jerusalem, c. 1919, John D. Whiting Collection, Library of Congress, Washington, DC.



The American Colony Photo Department, started in 1898, has been well-chronicled.² It was at the forefront of documenting historic events in Jerusalem and Palestine, but also catered to the Christian pilgrims who purchased hand-colored photographs of Biblical scenes.

In the American Colony Archive are images of the 1937 Arab revolt, an album of pictures of the Sinai and the Dead Sea, plus multiple diary notations and images of visits to Petra by Colony members. The American Colony photographers captured natural events such as the locust invasion in 1915 and the destruction caused by the 1927 earthquake as well as historic occasions, including Emir Abdullah meeting with British, Arab, and Bedouin officials in Amman in 1921. Several pictures show T. E. Lawrence, known as Lawrence of Arabia.

American Colony photographers recognized the impact of images early in the development of photography. The state visit of Kaiser Wilhelm II of Germany in 1898 is documented in the Archive, as is the arrival in Jerusalem of the Emperor of Ethiopia in 1936. There are also photographs of the Mayor of Jerusalem, Hussein Effendi al Hussein, under the white flag of

surrender on December 9, 1917, and General Allenby reading the Proclamation of Martial Law in Jerusalem two days later.

The Colony photographers captured Jewish residents praying at the Wailing Wall in the early 1940s as well as Jews blowing the Sabbath horn. The Archive includes a translation from Hebrew to English of a prayer written in 1882 by Yemenite Jews as an expression of gratitude towards Horatio Gates Spafford who helped them soon after their arrival in Jerusalem.

The members of the Colony were collectors, diarists, photographers, and business people who saved their records, although not always with the care required for preservation. With each renovation of the buildings at the American Colony Hotel, new treasures were uncovered. Paul Vester, a great grandson of the Spaffords and the Chair of the American Colony Hotel Board of Directors, was the driving force in recognizing the cultural value of the historic materials staying in Jerusalem. He advocated for creating the Archive as part of the hotel, believing that the heritage of the American Colony, as a vital part of Jerusalem since 1881, needed to be preserved and made available to scholars as well as interested hotel guests.

In 2006 Rachel Lev, a museum curator, was hired to collect, organize, and catalogue the American Colony Collection that includes objects, manuscripts, archaeological artifacts, textiles, books, and furniture as well as multiple photo albums. Construction of the American Colony Archive was

completed with the renovation of the Palm House, one of four historic buildings that make up the hotel. The formal opening of the Archive in 2014 brought together Palestinian, Israeli, American, and Swedish scholars plus Vester, Whiting, and Matson descendants.

The American Colony gave a donation of over 16,600 items, including the most delicate ones, to the Library of Congress (LOC) in Washington, DC; these materials have been digitized and are available online.³ A LOC historian and curator, Dr. Barbara Bair, managed the donation and traveled to Jerusalem for the formal opening of the Archive. Two other collections of American Colony materials and photographs are at the LOC: the John D. Whiting Collection⁴ and the Eric and Edith Matson Collection.⁵ Digital copies of the materials in the LOC "American Colony in Jerusalem" collection are part of the Archive at the American Colony Hotel. The LOC has also digitally preserved important film footage depicting the history of the Colony.

To organize the massive number of items to be housed at the Colony, Ms. Lev prepared a Finding Aid that organizes the collection into ten series. Each grouping is further catalogued with a description of the item or group of items and a location and box number to allow retrieval. The collection has been expanded over the years, as more things have been found in the hotel and as members of the family have brought back to Jerusalem, for safe-keeping in the Archive, materials related to the activities of the Colony.

Ms. Lev partnered with local experts to preserve the collection. Rami Salameh, a conservationist

The Archive at the American Colony Hotel.





Preparing maps for conservation, American Colony Archive, Jerusalem.

and restorer, worked painstakingly to salvage documents and photographs that suffered from decades of storage in hot attics or damp cisterns. Over the years the Archive at the American Colony has hosted forums that brought together scholars, assisted film directors, and curated museum exhibitions.

The American Colony Archive houses a wide-ranging assemblage of items, including Horatio Gates Spafford's handwritten poems and drawings and early photographs of the daughters lost in the shipwreck. The Archive has images capturing the life of American Colony members, scenes in Jerusalem, and the travels of John D. Whiting,^{vi} Lewis Larsson, and Eric Matson in the Levant. The photos also document the lace making that was part of the American Colony Aid Association School of Handicrafts and Dressmaking and other charitable enterprises.

The Colonists were great writers, also, keeping diaries of the mundane and important personal and historic events in their lives. Bertha Spafford Vester's notes for her book *Our Jerusalem*^{vii} are archived as well as maps collected and drawn by John D. Whiting. Of particular interest to botanists are watercolors of native plants and flowers by Bertha, Grace Spafford Whiting, and Clara Johana Brooke as well as books that were part of the library of botanist John E. Dinsmore. Music was an important part of the lives of the early Colony members. In the beautiful Pasha Room, early photos show a piano, and the

Archive includes sheet music used in celebrations.

The Archive is not restricted to the two rooms of the Palm House that have been designated for the storage and display of the materials. All around the hotel are the archeological discoveries made by Colony members. For example, exhibited in protected cabinets in the Main House is an alabaster bottle from 2000–1500 BC, Persian jars from 600–400 BC, and multiple Roman bowls. In the courtyard of the Colony is a limestone ring from the ancient Bethlehem–Jerusalem aqueduct as well as the base of a Byzantine column and a Roman cornice. Within the Archive is a beautiful olive wood desk made by a Colony member and glass showcases from Vester & Co., a store originally located just inside Jaffa Gate. Also, prints of hand-colored photos are displayed in the Archive, many in original frames handcrafted by Colony members.

A tour of the Colony shows that it was not spared the ravages of war. In 1948,

Pasha Room, American Colony, c. 1920s, American Colony Archive, Jerusalem.



Display cabinets, American Colony Archive, Jerusalem.



American Colony interior, c. 1926, American Colony Archive, Jerusalem.

the columns at the entrance were destroyed by a mortar that landed in the courtyard. After 1948, the American Colony was in Jordan and “no man’s land” was just across Nablus Road. In the 1967 war, the Armenian tiles in the lobby were marred by bullets and shrapnel.

Prior to the pandemic the Archive was open by appointment and tours were available to guests and scholars. Unfortunately, the Archive is now closed until economic conditions in the tourism industry improve, but a limited number of tours can be arranged in advance. The Archive at the American Colony has been instrumental in preserving Palestinian cultural heritage before 1948.

Wendy Whiting Blome is a great granddaughter of Anna and Horatio Spafford and John C. and Mary Whiting. She serves on the Board of Directors of the American Colony Hotel and is the Chair of the Board of Directors of the Spafford Children's Center.

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ⁱ Learn more about the services provided through the Spafford Children's Center at <https://spaffordcenter.org/>.

ⁱⁱ Barbara Bair, “The American Colony Photography Department: Western Consumption and ‘Insider’ Commercial Photography,” *Jerusalem Quarterly*, 44, 2010, 28–38.

ⁱⁱⁱ The American Colony Collection at the LOC: Part 1 of the American Colony in Jerusalem collection, <https://www.loc.gov/collections/american-colony-in-jerusalem/about-this-collection/>, finding aid for the full Manuscript Division collection: <https://hdl.loc.gov/loc.mss/eadmss.ms010123> and virtual exhibition: <https://www.loc.gov/exhibits/americancolony/>. See also many thousands of materials available through the Prints and Photographs Division.

^{iv} The John D. Whiting Collection at the LOC; visual materials: <https://www.loc.gov/pictures/item/2008676355/> and Manuscript Division collection: <https://hdl.loc.gov/loc.mss/eadmss.ms008123>.

^v The G. Eric and Edith Matson Collection at the LOC; visual materials: <https://www.loc.gov/pictures/collection/matpc/colony.html> and Manuscript Division collection: <https://hdl.loc.gov/loc.mss/eadmss.ms010210>.

^{vi} Rachel Lev, “Open Roads: John D. Whiting, Diary in Photos,” in Karene Sanchez Summerer and Sary Zananiri, eds., *Imaging and Imagining Palestine: Photography, Modernity and the Biblical Lens, 1918–1948*, pp. 227–265, Koninklijke Brill, Leiden, The Netherlands, 2021.

^{vii} Available from the American Colony Bookshop through Mahmoud Muna, Manager.