

The Roman Catholic missions to the Ottoman Empire in the seventeenth century and those of the Protestants in the nineteenth century initially targeted the Jewish subjects of the sultan for evangelization, while each fervently hoped that the Muslims of the region would ultimately accept Christ as their savior. Both missions, however, succeeded in attracting only the attention of local Christians, “schismatics” in the Latin Catholic discourse, “nominal Christians” in that of the Protestants. Any superficial similarity in the two enterprises ended there, however, as each was conceived with very different ambitions.

The Catholics’ strategy, born out of the “counter-reformation”, was to woo the higher clergy of the Eastern rite churches into communion with Rome, thereby securing them from the possibility of contagion by the Protestant “heresy”. In the process, the Latin Catholics were content to paper over any existing doctrinal differences and allow the outward symbols of the faith—icons, clerical vestments, and titles—to remain as they had always been. Indeed, the Roman Catholic clergy usually donned the cassocks and turbans of their Eastern counterparts. Their self-proclaimed spiritual mission had decidedly political undertones as it was ultimately designed to extend the authority of the Pope by convincing the higher clergy of the Churches of the East to accept the Bishop of Rome as *primus inter pares*, the first among equals. But local Christians had political goals of their own and the process that led to the emergence of the Uniate churches in the Ottoman realms was often driven as much by those ambitions as by dreams of a “universal church” with the Bishop of Rome at its head.

The Protestant missionaries were products of the second “great awakening” in the English-speaking Atlantic world, born in part out of a reaction to an emerging secularism in their societies as elites in both Britain and the US embraced the ideas of Enlightenment writers. In contrast to the strategy of the Catholics, this movement stressed individual salvation and the necessity for evangelization of those not yet “saved” whether they were “pagans” or “nominal Christians”. Accordingly, the Protestants placed a high premium on Bible literacy and sought the spiritual conversion of the local Christians on an individual basis through Christian education. Despite the attention to the salvation of the souls of those to whom they ministered, the Protestant mission had unintended political results in that the missionaries made the conscious choice to emphasize their students’ vernacular languages rather than teaching them in either their missionaries’ own native English or in the state’s official Ottoman Turkish.<sup>1</sup>

Western historians have typically concentrated on the missionaries them-

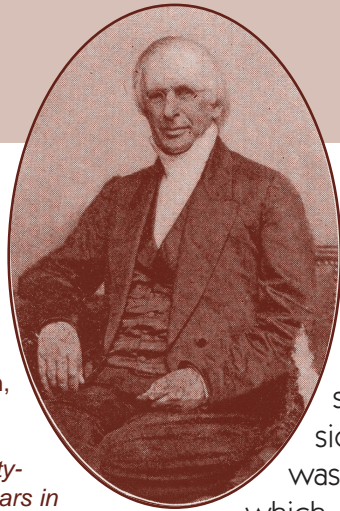


selves rather than those who would ultimately decide whether to convert or not, due to the rich archives both sets of missionaries have left to posterity and the paucity of “conversion narratives” written by the converts themselves<sup>2</sup>. The motivations for conversion that may have existed have thus been generally reduced in the historical narrative to simple desires for the “truth” on the part of the converts in an escape from what both sets of missionaries described as the ossified traditions of Eastern Christianity. Ironically, these included for the Protestants the very clergy who were the products of the Catholic reform movement. While I do not mean to suggest that issues of spirituality were absent in the conversion process for many individuals, this paper will take a second look at both the Catholic and Protestant missions in the city of Aleppo to examine whether the reasons for their successes and failures might be ascribed to factors beyond those of spiritual needs alone.

Aleppo provides an excellent backdrop for a comparative study of the two missions. Although the city’s population had declined in the nineteenth century from the robust numbers it had known in the seventeenth century<sup>3</sup>, the city remained home to the largest concentration of Christians in the Ottoman Arab provinces in the 1840s when Protestant missionaries first considered establishing a “field” there<sup>4</sup>. Secondly due to its commercial importance, Aleppo continually served as host to resident European merchants and their consuls. Commercial opportunities undoubtedly widened the range of what was possible for the city’s Christians who were the most likely of the city’s diverse population to enter into economic partnership with European merchants; the Western diplomatic presence often provided a shield for the missionary enterprise from the intervention of local authorities, both Muslim and Christian.

## The Catholic Mission

In 1627, Catholic missionaries took up permanent residence in Aleppo. Initially, they found their warmest response from the Armenians who granted them permission to offer the mass and other sacraments in the church of Surp Karsunk, which had only recently been constructed to serve as the see of the Catholicos of Sis.<sup>5</sup> The ranking Greek Orthodox clergyman in the city, the Metropolitan Malatyus Karma, also welcomed the Latins and allowed the Jesuit, Jérôme Queyrot, to open a school in his residence in 1629. The school soon had approximately thirty pupils who were instructed in Greek, Arabic, and Italian.<sup>6</sup> Education, along with medicine, would remain a central pillar of the missionary program.



Dr. Rufus Anderson, H. H. Jessup, 1910, *Fifty-Three Years in Syria*, London & Edinburgh.

Despite inroads in securing support from clergy representing all the Christian sects present in Aleppo, the greatest initial success for the Catholic missionaries with individual conversions came among the Jacobites, known locally as *Suryanis*. This was the smallest of the Christian religious communities in the city, which besides the Jacobites included Maronites, Armenians, and Greek Orthodox, and the poorest. By the end of the seventeenth century, one missionary source estimated that three-quarters of the *Suryani* community in Aleppo were Catholic.<sup>7</sup> The lists kept by the missionaries of their “converts” show Jacobites accepting Catholicism in numbers disproportionate to their share of the total Christian population in the city. In part, the Catholic success among this community was due to the fact that most of its members were recent migrants to the city who may have felt disoriented and disconnected from their traditional leadership in the monasteries around the town of Mardin.

A Catholic party emerged among Aleppo’s Greek Orthodox community, known locally as the *Rum*, as well, but it is tempting to see it as coming initially as an expression of a strong localist sentiment among the *Rum*, rather than an ideological shift to the Latins. The Aleppo community was wealthier than their Damascene counterparts, and they must have resented the preponderant voice that the laity and clergy of Damascus had in choosing who would sit in the Patriarchal see of Antioch, housed in Damascus in the Ottoman period. On the death of Patriarch Makarios III, a native of Aleppo, in 1672, the Orthodox of Damascus elected his grandson Qustantin, who took the patriarchal name of Kyrillos, to replace him even though he was according to some Orthodox writers still a minor.<sup>8</sup> Although they had not been consulted on his elevation, a large delegation of the *Rum* appeared before the chief *qadi* of Aleppo and declared their loyalty to Kyrillos as their Patriarch. They added almost gratuitously that he was a son of their city and had good morals and excellent Arabic.<sup>9</sup>

The Patriarch of Constantinople eventually nullified the election of Kyrillos and elevated his own candidate to the see of Antioch as he feared the young Kyrillos was under the influence of the pro-Catholic party in Syria. The French and the merchants of Aleppo countered this interference and they both freely expended their silver to have Kyrillos reinstated by the sultan in 1681 and he reigned as Patriarch until his death in 1720. This signaled the start of intense political lobbying by the Catholic and traditionalist parties, with each seeking to bribe the Ottoman authorities to appoint the men of their choice to high clerical office. The willingness of

the sultan’s servants to play one side against the other for ready cash came to an abrupt end in 1695 with the attempted Venetian occupation of the island of Chios. In the aftermath of failure, most of the local Catholic clergy withdrew with the Venetian forces, providing the Orthodox party in Istanbul with a new weapon to use against their Catholic opponents.<sup>10</sup>

In their polemic, the Orthodox pointed to the intrinsic “foreignness” of Catholicism—it was usually referred to in Ottoman documents as *Frenk Dini*, “the religion of the Franks”—while they emphasized their own loyalty to the sultan. Perhaps more significantly, the Orthodox clergy stressed that they were the rightful heirs to the Christian tradition in the East, while the Catholics represented the dreaded sin of innovation. Whichever argument was the more compelling, the sultan agreed. While he could not expel the Latin priests from his realm, as the treaties with the Europeans provided for their presence, he would make sure their contact with the local population was limited. There followed periodic orders forbidding Latin priests to educate, treat the sick, or offer sacraments to Ottoman Christians.<sup>11</sup>

These actions did little to halt the spread of the Catholic practices, however, as by the beginning of the eighteenth century, a cadre of Syrian seminarians had been sent to Rome, trained and ordained there, and were now back in their homeland, ready to offer the sacraments to any who would take them. These included about fifty Aleppines who over the course of the second half of the seventeenth century had studied in Rome and returned to minister in their native city.<sup>12</sup> These Latin-trained priests physically occupied some of the churches associated with the community of the *Rum*, as well as those of the Apostolic Armenian and Jacobite rites. As most of the communicants seemingly approved of their tilt toward Rome, the traditionalist clergy could only fume from afar. The Catholics were subverting the Christians of Aleppo by winning over their best and brightest.

The reasons for the attraction of the Uniate communion for Aleppo’s Christians can only be speculated upon, however. Two twentieth century scholars have offered widely divergent explanations. Robert Haddad presents a material cause for the switch, while Bernard Heyberger prefers a spiritual one.<sup>13</sup> For Haddad, the French promise of protection for Catholics was a compelling incentive and he notes it was only in cities where there was a strong French diplomatic presence that the Catholics were triumphant. But more importantly, he sees the availability of fraternal

contacts with the Europeans, which association with Catholicism promised, as being the chief enticement for the Christian merchant class in Syria to embrace the Catholic option. Haddad also cites the laxer requirements in the Catholic faith both towards fasting and the definition of consanguinity for canonical marriage over Orthodox practice as being compelling to those who would apostatize.

Heyberger offers a more spiritually based explanation for the defection of the city's Christians to Rome. He argues that Orthodoxy in Syria had become a moribund tradition, which no longer satisfied the spiritual needs of the faithful. Catholicism, by contrast, engendered a spiritual rebirth among Syria's Christians by questioning the received tradition. In place of the nepotism and corruption prevalent among the Orthodox clergy, the Catholic church offered a fresh opportunity for reform by recruiting and training dedicated young people who were amenable to the spiritual needs of their community. Heyberger's explanation is supported by the periodic complaints of abuse of power by clergy registered in the Aleppo *qadi* courts by Orthodox Christian laymen in the seventeenth century.<sup>14</sup> These disappeared in the eighteenth century.

Open schism in the religious community of the *Rum* came in 1725 when the Sultan, at the urging of the Patriarch of Constantinople, invested Sylvestros of Cyprus as Patriarch of Antioch. Most of the community in Aleppo eventually threw their support to Kyrillos Tanas, a native son of the city. The Pope elevated him to the Patriarchate in 1729, creating a Catholic claimant to the ancient see, and the Greek/Melkite Catholic Church was born. Soon afterwards, Rome recognized separate Catholic Jacobite and Armenian patriarchs. These joined the Maronite Patriarch who also officially acknowledged Rome's supremacy in the eighteenth century and the Catholicos of the Chaldean Catholic Church that had seceded from its traditional patriarch in the seventeenth century in forming what are known today as the Uniate Churches. Although the Sultan did not officially recognize the autonomy of the Melkite Catholics of Aleppo until 1821<sup>15</sup> nor constitute any of the Uniates as a *millet* on their own until 1831, approximately three-quarters of Aleppo's Christian population in 1800 were loyal to one or the other of the five Catholic sects that were represented in the city. The missionaries had largely succeeded in winning their battle for the cause of the Counter-Reformation in Aleppo. Although the Christians of the city were not Roman, they were definitely Catholic.

In trying to explain the appeal of Catholicism to all three sects, geo-poli-

tical factors were also at work in Aleppo. The ecclesiastical centers for all three "traditional" churches: Greek Orthodox, Syrian Jacobite, and Apostolic Armenian, which by the eighteenth century was headed by their Patriarch in Istanbul, were physically distant from the city. The clergy in Aleppo were, therefore, less under the wing of orthodoxy than their brethren in places such as Damascus or Mardin and could explore dialogue with their Western counterparts in a more open fashion. The Christian merchants of Aleppo were prospering and wanted a church that would be attentive to their input. They had demanded in the early eighteenth century that the Orthodox metropolitan in the city always be one of their own, and this from a Patriarch who was himself one of their own and whom they supported.<sup>16</sup> In addition, the presence of activist Latin clergy in the city providing education and other services must have led the secular merchants working for and with the Europeans to question the efficacy of the traditional churches in their lives.<sup>17</sup> Simply put, Catholicism offered a vehicle for Aleppines to seize control of their church, the only political arena open to Christians in the pre-Tanzimat period.

### **The Protestant Mission:**

The Protestant missionary impulse arose out of the second evangelical "great awakening" which spread across the English-speaking Atlantic world starting in the last decades of the eighteenth century. The various missionary societies formed in this period of optimism and self-confidence reflected a growing literacy in the Anglo-Saxon world and an increased determination among the laity to spread their faith to foreign realms. The movement was at its heart populist in that ordinary men and women felt a higher calling to minister to the "heathen", or at the least, to support financially those who had received the "call". It was marked by an almost innocent enthusiasm to bear witness for the "light of Christ", as well as a casual arrogance that Anglo-Saxon culture was indeed superior to any the missionaries would encounter. In retrospect it was that confidence, shared by Americans and Britons alike, in a modernity defined in English rather than their religious message, that would have the greatest impact on the inhabitants of the Ottoman Empire<sup>18</sup>

Initially, the Americans established their mission stations in the towns and villages in what is today Lebanon but they were constantly on the look out for other "mission fields". Although Aleppo had fallen on economic hard times in the first half of the nineteenth century and its population had dropped precipitously from what it had enjoyed when the Catholic mis-





Dr. W. M. Thomson, H. H. Jessup, 1910, *Fifty-Three Years in Syria*, London & Edinburgh.

sionaries arrived, the city attracted the Protestant missionaries' attention for some of the same reasons that it had earlier drawn the Latins—its large Christian population and its proximity to the scattered Christian villages of northern Iraq and southeastern Turkey. In addition, their early reports signaled an interest in the 'Alawi population of coastal Syria whom the missionaries predicted would be easily won to Christ. But individual missionaries' assessment of the situation in Aleppo varied considerably with several finding the city drab, run-down and unpromising. Nevertheless, the Prudential Committee recommended in 1846 the establishment of a station in the city, once a suitable missionary might step forward to answer the call.<sup>19</sup>

William Benton and J. Edwards Ford arrived in Aleppo on 19 April 1848 with their wives, ready to establish a mission station.<sup>20</sup> In their annual report of 1849, they outlined their progress for the financial backers back in the US. They had found the local "papal Christians" to be affable, but stubborn in holding to their old dispensation with only a few willing to attend their weekly services.<sup>21</sup> The missionaries summarized their frustrations as follows:

*It is scarcely possible for us to converse with them half an hour with out falling into some religious dispute and without conversations, they pretend they are satisfied to believe as all their fathers have believed and to walk in their old paths. In conversations, they readily acknowledge the supreme authority of scriptures but without a hasty retreat to the strong holds of their traditions they soon find themselves unable to give us a reason for various articles in their faith and practice.*<sup>22</sup>

In the eighteenth century Aleppo's then newly minted Catholics had invoked the same claim that they were simply following the traditions of their forefathers when brought before the Muslim court by their traditionalist clergy on the charge of heresy.<sup>23</sup> But by the middle of the nineteenth century, it had become true.

Unlike the Catholic missionaries who expected that success would only come over time, the American Protestant missionaries seemed dumbfounded by their lack of immediate success. In his annual report for 1850, Ford reported that on average only twenty people were attending their services. But more significantly for the Protestant mission's future in the city, he reported that the number of Arabic-speakers in attendance was in decline while the mission seemed to be gaining strength among the city's

Armenians. For that reason, he added, the mission desperately required someone who could translate the sermons into Turkish, the language commonly spoken by potential Armenian converts who were recent migrants from Anatolia as their knowledge of Arabic was only slight.<sup>24</sup>

This request reflected a demographic trend of which the Ottoman authorities had also recently become aware that Armenians from Anatolia were starting to migrate to Aleppo in significant numbers. This created a linguistic divide between the older, established Armenian families in the city who were largely Catholic and culturally assimilated into the Arabic-speaking majority of the city and the newcomers who were loyal to the Apostolic Church and who were Turkish speakers. Specific evidence of this migration is found in the city's *jizya* register from 1260/1844, where 727 "strangers" are registered out of a total of 5,041 adult Christian and Jewish males. Most of these had Armenian names and over half came from only two locations, Sasun and Arapgir. Almost all the new migrants were recorded in the lowest tax-paying category and most had only modest trades.<sup>25</sup>

In an attempt to woo converts, the Congregationalists established a school for girls in 1852, but it was soon closed down for lack of interest. In part, they blamed their failure on the Catholic women who would stand outside the school and verbally harass parents trying to bring their daughters to class. But they also conceded that the Catholics had built a new school for girls which daily attracted a hundred students while the enrollments in the missionaries' school ranged between six and sixteen.<sup>26</sup> With nothing really new to offer Aleppo's Catholics, the missionaries encountered a blank wall of indifference from the "papal Greeks" in their attempts at proselytism in the city. As W. Eddy explained in a letter to *The Missionary Herald*, dated December 5, 1855, the "heretical catholics" were "immersed in business and fond of pleasure. They had no wants of mind or soul to be met by the Gospel."<sup>27</sup>

In frustration, Eddy asked to be transferred from Aleppo to start an "Armenian mission" in the city of Aintab, today's Gaziantep, seventy miles to the north. His partner, Joshua Ford, a fluent Arabic-speaker, was reassigned to Beirut and the station in Aleppo closed. The Americans had been singularly unsuccessful in winning the hearts and minds of Aleppo's Christians. The British consul in the city estimated that there were only 40 Protestants in Aleppo in 1860, and this after a decade of missionary effort.<sup>28</sup> The Americans did return to Aleppo in 1861 but as a part of the

# THE PEARL OF THE EAST.

By  
J. Edith Hutcheon.

With a Preface by the late  
H. C. G. MOULE, D.D., Bishop of Durham.



Book Cover, J. Edith  
Hutcheon, ca.1930,  
*The Pearl of the East*,  
British Syrian Mission.

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Central Turkey mission and not as a sub-station of the Syrian mission, headquartered in Beirut, as had been the case previously. That shift in jurisdiction reflected that the Protestants' message was largely falling on deaf ears in the city when delivered in Arabic. Although they continued to offer sermons in Arabic, it was their services in Turkish and Armenian that attracted their congregation. In the annual report of 1868, marking the twentieth anniversary of the Aleppo station, David Nutting offered the following reason for the failure with

the Arabic-speakers, echoing Eddy's reasons for abandoning the station a decade before:

*It has been regarded as a hard field on account of the great worldliness of the people. Being the great commercial center for all the region, most of the people are so actively engaged in trade that they seem seldom to think of the world to come.*<sup>29</sup>

In contrast, the mission in Aintab that had been established initially as only a sub-station for the one in Aleppo flourished. The Ottoman yearbook for the Aleppo province in 1914 listed 89,769 Muslims in Aintab, 67 Greek Orthodox, 14,466 Apostolic Armenians, 860 Jews, 7 Greek Catholics, 393 Armenian Catholics and 4,635 Protestants.<sup>30</sup> The Armenians of Aintab in the late nineteenth century offer many parallels with the Christians of Aleppo two centuries earlier. Before the nineteenth century, Aintab had a relatively small Armenian population. But by the middle of that century, the city experienced an upsurge in trade that accompanied the growth in production of export commodities such as cotton and tobacco in the town's surrounding villages. This induced hundreds of Armenians to leave their villages further to the north and east to seek a new life in the town. There was also a "push factor" in the form of rising levels of inter-communal violence as Kurdish tribesmen moved their flocks into valleys the Armenians had traditionally farmed. In Aintab, many of these migrants established themselves as craftsmen and petty merchants and it was the latter who had gone to Aleppo to ask the American missionaries to come to their town and build a school. This eventually took the shape of the Central Turkey College founded in 1872.

Both sets of missionaries, Roman Catholic and Protestant, saw education as the primary route to gain converts. Both were equally confident that it was only ignorance that kept the "schismatics", or "nominal Christians",

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from accepting their "truth". In both cases, Aleppo of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries and Aintab in the second half of the nineteenth century, there was an emerging mercantile middle class among the Christians for whom Western education offered the possibility of economic advancement and, not inconsequentially, potential contacts with Western powers. In both cases, the city's Christian population had been augmented by a recent wave of migration of formerly rural people who were probably psychologically ready to seek new social networks and perhaps a new faith.

In terms of the percentage of Christians who responded to the Catholic and Protestant missions, those living in the province of Aleppo, which included the town of Aintab, were the most amenable of any in the Ottoman Empire to both new dispensations. A prosperous middle class was just emerging in each city in the centuries the respective missions were launched. By the end of the seventeenth century, individual Christians from all the traditional communities in Aleppo were becoming wealthy and sought to translate that wealth into political power. Their rise coincided with moves to centralize church authority in Istanbul with the Ecumenical Orthodox Patriarch and the increasingly empowered See of the Apostolic Armenian Patriarch of Constantinople. Both sought to install in the Syrian Sees candidates of their own choosing and these were rarely locals. By contrast, the Holy Father in Rome was more than willing to recognize locals as long as they acknowledged him as their spiritual leader. It was a simple trade-off the Christian merchants were willing to accept.

By the nineteenth century, the Catholic Christians in Aleppo had become comfortable with their clergy and saw no reason to abandon them for a new dispensation. Additionally, the links their churches provided with the Catholic West mitigated the need to establish connections to the Protestant Anglo-Saxon world. For the Armenians of late nineteenth century Aintab, the American missionaries provided the same opportunities for reform, spiritual renewal, and links to Western brothers and sisters in Christ and they responded positively for many of the same reasons that Christians in Aleppo had chosen the Catholic option two centuries before.



## NOTES

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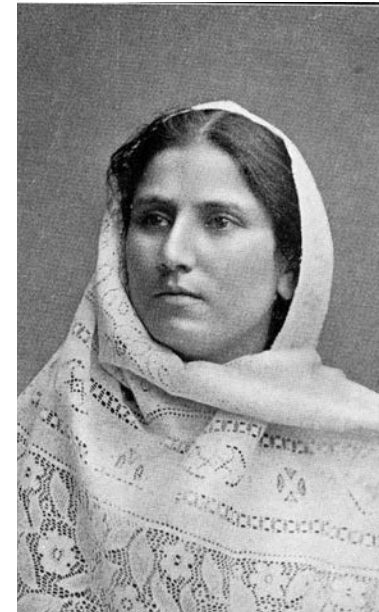
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Mrs Barakat as a young woman, L. A. Barakat, A Message from Mount Lebanon, Philadelphia, 1912.



Mrs L. Barakat, June 20, 1919, Public Ledger.

JUNE 20, 1919
PUBLIC LEDGER

## PHILADELPHIA WOMAN TAKES AID TO STRICKEN SYRIANS

**Mrs. Layyah Barakat, as Relief Missionary, Sails Tuesday With Food, Clothing and Money Collected in This City**

STARVING Syrians of Mount Lebanon will bless Philadelphia when Mrs. Layyah Barakat, who for thirty-six years has been a resident of this city, arrives in her native country as a missionary of relief. She is taking with her a cargo of food and clothing weighing fifty tons and \$7000 in money, which the Philadelphia committee for the relief of Mount Lebanon Syrians has collected in the last few years from the churches, Sunday schools, public schools and individuals of Philadelphia and vicinity.

"My prayer is about to be answered, and I ask the blessing of God upon the kind people of Philadelphia," said Madame Barakat yesterday afternoon as she made preparations for her long voyage, which will begin Tuesday, when the steamship Madonna leaves New York. "For nothing have I prayed more than that I might be permitted to carry a message of comfort and joy and bring relief to my stricken country's people. Little seems to be realized here of the terrible suffering that has been Syria's lot during the war. In a letter I received yesterday I read that conditions in my country are as pitiable now as they were some years ago." Madame Barakat will make the trip to her native country accompanied by Miss Julia Carpenter, of Salem, N. J., who offered to be of assistance when she was arranging for her passports in Washington.

One thing that perturbs the missionary to Syria. In the letters she receives from Syria she learns that it is a country virtually without means of transportation. An instance told how one American woman was compelled to

**MRS. LAYYAH BARAKAT**

walk twenty-five miles and return in order to secure certain medicines. For her devastated country's sake she makes a plea for a conveyance of some kind, which she may take with her or have sent to her. Any one wishing to grant her request is asked to communicate with Samuel Boggs, of the Model Mills, Kensington avenue and Ontario street. The food and clothing which she is carrying to Syria is being sent in government ammunition boxes and will be distributed in the smaller villages of the country.