Lebanese in Kansas:
The Story of Wichita

The first Lebanese arrived in Wichita in 1895. At the time, Lebanon was not its own country. It was part of the Ottoman Empire and was controlled by the Turks. Today Lebanon is a country in the Middle East on the continent of Asia.

**Why did they leave Lebanon?**
Like other immigrants there were many reasons why the Lebanese left their homeland. Life in Lebanon was hard, because they were ruled by another nation. Many Lebanese felt they had very few political or personal freedoms.

Most of the Lebanese immigrants to the United States were Christians. As part of the Ottoman Empire they were living in a country dominated by Muslims. There were often religious conflicts.

Many of the Lebanese were poor. They made their living by exporting olives, tobacco, and silk to France and England. These goods were heavily taxed. Most of the crops grown by a farmer went to pay his taxes.

**Why did they come to Kansas?**
Lebanese immigrants came to Kansas to make a better life for themselves and their families. They were looking for religious freedom. They also wanted to escape the political situation in their homeland.

The biggest reason they came to Kansas was for better economic opportunities. They were looking for good jobs. Most often a young man or woman would travel to America alone. Their plan was to save enough money to bring over their families.
Like many other immigrants, the Lebanese were recruited to come to America. The steamships that traveled between the Middle East and the United States encouraged immigration. Lebanese traders who had been to this country told stories about America.

What did they find in Kansas?
Most Lebanese immigrants settled in cities. Wichita and other cities in southeast Kansas became their home. Few jobs were available to new immigrants. So many Lebanese became peddlers.

A peddler is a salesman who travels from door-to-door or town-to-town. It did not take a lot of money to become a peddler. You filled a suitcase with samples and used your feet to walk from house to house. Peddlers sold lace, fabric, threads, and pins. It was hard work with long hours. As a peddler became successful he or she would travel by horse and buggy. Many Lebanese peddlers did well enough to become storeowners.

What happened to Wichita?
Today, Wichita is the largest city in Kansas. It is home to many people of different backgrounds. Many of the descendents of the early Lebanese immigrants continue to run businesses in Wichita.