

Diving Deeper: Little Syria

In 1895, Harper's Weekly published this illustration, "The Syrian Colony, Washington Street," by Canadian political cartoonist W. Bengough as part of the series "The Foreign Element in New York," which illustrates and describes different ethnic enclaves in New York City.

With your students, take a few minutes to look at the image, letting your eyes wander from corner to corner, and then to the center. What do you see?

List the first 10 things that you notice in the image, then repeat this step two more times so that you have a total of 30 details. Below are examples of what students may identify in the image, there is no wrong or right answer.

Note details such as the clothing, posture, and surroundings of the figures. Are they holding objects? What activities are they engaged in? What 'Syrian' details has the artist chosen to include?

1. Bricks

2. People

3. Hookah

4. Signs in Arabic

5.

6.

7.

8.

9.

10.

1. Lace

2. Children

3. Horse

4. Corn

5.

6.

7.

8.

9.

10.

1. Steps

2. Hats

3. Fez

4. Basket

5.

6.

7.

8.

9.

10.

After looking at the image, students will read the accompanying article "The Foreign Element in New York- The Syrian Colony" from Harper's Weekly in 1895 and answer the following questions. We have provided some guiding questions and suggestions in the writing blocks below to help students as they construct their answers.

1. How is Little Syria described in the article? Were you able to make connections between the text and your list of 30 details?

Consider some of the words the writer used to describe
the "Syrian Colony" as students synthesize the message of
this article.

2. Are the writer and illustrator showing bias? What evidence in the article and the image supports your answer?

Students will make some connections with details they
identified in the text, for example, the use of corn. How does the
writer describe the use of corn, and does the image reflect a
similar or different depiction?

After reading the article, students will think about the Little Syria described by Omar Offendum in his Q&A and the 30 details identified above. *Compare the two sources and consider the following questions.*

3. How does the Harper's Weekly description of Little Syria differ from Omar's?

Omar describes Little Syria as a community of writers and
entrepreneurs. What if we looked at the Harper's Weekly image
and re-wrote our 30 details to show writers, poets, businessmen,
entrepreneurs, translators, etc.?

4. Throughout this activity, how can our investigation into stale notions of Arab American communities from the past inform our understandings of what it means to be American today?

How can this exercise be applied to modern-day images and
news stories about Syrian and Syrian American communities?