Armstrong State College

The Elusive M.M.

History 500

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Craig Harney
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PART ONE
THE SEARCH

In poetry, in prose, in all human experience, it is the struggle that is revered. The emotion aroused in a bitter contest between age-old rivals is exalted above any result it could produce. It is not the victory, but the battle; and in history the battle is research. It follows, therefore, that no sterile illucidation of material gathered could match the passion generated by the thrust and parry of the researcher attempting to pin his ever-elusive fact to the wall.

I have skewed my fact. But I have done so only as the result of a long search characterized more by lunging at shadows than by penetrating substance. In recognition of that, and in consideration of the nature of this course, I have set down both the avenues I took in pursuit of Dr. M.M. Saliba and the results. For me, they were equally enlightening.

The initial clue I was given was written on a three-by-five index card: "M.M. Saliba, Physician made a Bey of the Turkish Empire in 1905. In addition to this
I was made aware that Dr. Saliba was at some point a resident of Savannah. The lines were drawn; the battle had begun.

In answer to my query as to where to begin, one of the ladies at the Georgia Historical Society recommended the city directories.\(^1\) Sure enough, looking in my clue year (1905) I found M.M. Saliba, a physician living at 415 West Broughton Street with sister Regina and brother Gabriel. Searching in other city directories in that chronological location I found more references to my man from 1898 to 1909.\(^2\) But a peculiarity arose; while all other information remained consistent in the directories (occupation, residence), Dr. Saliba's name changed from Michael M. (1898-1906) to Mishel M. (1907-09).\(^3\) No problem, I thought, Dr. Saliba had merely accepted the anglicization until he was sufficiently established to assert his foreign (Syrian) origins. Or, a mistake had been made at one point or the other and simply perpetuated (it was easy to understand how an underpaid, undereducated information gatherer could have mistaken Mishel for Michael).

Satisfied with my logic, I proceeded to the census records. The 1900 census confirmed the use of Michael and was consistent with regard to occupation and residence.\(^4\) My conclusion as to the name had been corroborated (per the anglicization) or the census taker, again understandably, had made the same error as the city directory. Still, I had no clue as to Dr. Saliba's whereabouts after 1909. I
proceeded to the Soundex.

The Soundex is, of course, merely an index, but the census itself is not yet available. Fortunately for me, virtually all the information I needed was right there on the Soundex card. Dr. Saliba had moved to Dawson in Terrell County. What's more, his name had undergone a further transformation to the hyper-anglicization, Mike. But M.M. had become a "good ole boy."

But he had not been unproductive. In the ten years since the 1900 census the good doctor had taken a wife and sired two offspring, one of whom was nine years old in the 1910 census. Quick work, I thought, but not improbable especially since his wife was also Syrian and the marriage could have been pre-arranged.

There were two problems with the Soundex, however. One was an age discrepancy between the 1900 census (age 24) and the 1910 Soundex (age 38). I attributed the difference to a flaw in the data gathering methods of that day. I was not going to eliminate material a century old based on the loss or gain of a mere four years. I felt the evidence was still valid.

The other problem with the Soundex was its incompleteness. It gave no occupation or other specifics. A trip to Dawson was indicated, but I decided to first exhaust local resources that were pertinent.

That led me to naturalization records. Here I found only one name bearing a general similarity in structure and
in date of arrival: N.E. Saleba. The misspelling seemed conceivable and the 1900 census and the naturalization records both showed an 1892 arrival. But at the place where the immigrant's signature is placed on the document there was only an X. This man, I opined, could not have been a doctor.

My next avenue was the courthouse, and I was confident that something would come out of either deeds, civil minutes or marriages. Much to my chagrin, there was not even confirmation that Saliba existed. So much for bureaucratic record-keeping.

Forsaking the courthouse records, I proceeded to the newspaper stockpiles. Unfortunately there exists no index for the years 1895 to 1929, years of primary concern to my study. Further, Dr. Saliba was not sufficiently prominent to make a general perusal productive.

I was rescued from this dilemma by Gordon Smith, a fellow Saliba enthusiast, who provided dates for four articles on M.M. These did much to add color to the good doctor and fill in background, but they were restricted to the period I already knew he was in Savannah. There was no indication as to where he went and thus no corroboration of my Dawson hypothesis.

The time had come, I decided, to overcome my stinginess and venture a call to Dawson. The librarian there recommended the History of Terrell County as a starting point. That book contained only one reference to a Saliba,
that a Nagela Saleba born 3 March 1889 in Syria and died
18 September 1917 in Hawkinsville, Georgia. There was no
Saliba listed under physicians. 9

Clinging hopelessly to my hypothesis, I called the
Terrell County Courthouse looking for any shred of information.
The lady there remembered some Salibas marrying Maloofs and
owning a department store, but no, there was no physician
named Saliba in her records. M.M. was not in Dawson.

I began sorting other approaches here in Savannah.
Cemetery records and death certificates need not be checked
because M.M. was not here to die. But perhaps there was a
later reference in an indexed newspaper. It was worth a
try.

Indeed, the Saliba name popped up in 1935. Recourse
was made to the article, which documented that Rev. Michael
Saliba, the "oldest Orthodox priest of the Greek church in
Savannah and Jacksonville" returned to Syria in 1903. 10

Had M.M. changed vocations, renouncing the physical
for the spiritual? If so, how could the city directory have
him here until 1909? 14 I was stumped. My only alternative was
to exhaust local records and be satisfied with an unproductive
project.

Cemetery records were first and I plodded perfunctorily
through the Catholic documents. They provided one individual
whose name was listed inconsistently within the same book
(both as N.S. Saliba and M.E. Saliba, though all other
information was the same). This fellow is listed as Greek, is buried in the Strangers' Lot, and died in 1900. Again, not M.M.

The Bonaventure records, however, provided the first ray of hope in the project. There, in volume one, is listed Dr. G.M. Saliba: Gabriel!\(^\text{12}\) Gabriel had appeared in the city directory\(^\text{13}\) and in the census with M.M.\(^\text{14}\) Also listed is John, another brother who appeared in the 1900 city directory with M.M. and Gabriel.\(^\text{15}\) This was the long-awaited breakthrough.

I quickly turned to Gabriel's obituary in the newspaper files. He had died in 1932, but Mishell is alive and well in Wilson, North Carolina.\(^\text{16}\)

John's obituary was next, and, with it in hand, I could narrow the search for M.M. It succeeded; John died in 1950 and Mishell is not a survivor.\(^\text{17}\) M.M., therefore, died between 1932 and 1950.

I hastened to the newspaper index to locate that most cherished of items sought: the obituary. When a prominent citizen dies those things are known to run for pages. Maybe, just maybe....

My hopes were dashed as one by one the indices failed to carry any reference to M.M. I was also struck by the short treatment of the years 1932-36 (one volume; many other volumes of similar length documented only single years). The librarian informed me that those years were indexed haphazardly by the W.P.A. in its waning hours. They were
totally unreliable.

M.M. was in there I was sure, but even narrowed to four years I had neither the time nor the energy to dig him out. I would need a date of death to find his obituary. I turned to Wilson, North Carolina.

The lady at the courthouse was very friendly, but no, she said, she could not give a death date over the phone or even confirm the fact of death. She would, however, mail the information to me. I pressed her to mail it that day and, though my impatience put her off a bit, she agreed to drop it off right away.

The envelope arrived three days later and squashed any hope I had of completing the project. M.M. had not died in Wilson and it was too late to gather additional material from out of town. I was back to having to document my failure. All was lost.

There was one resource that I had not tapped in my search because of its obvious futility: the death certificates at vital records. But now that I was writing a paper on research methods I knew that I had to exhaust all avenues just to compile a short survey.

The lady at the Health Department handed me the index with a smile. I jotted down all the footnote information and flipped to the S's. To my utter amazement, there, under Gabriel, was Michel Saliba. The misspelling didn't bother me, nothing definitive or consistent had been established
anyway. I quickly asked for a copy of the death certificate. It was M.M. all right, down to the date of birth and occupation. The death date, January 5, 1944, was also within the range supplied by his brothers' obituaries. But why had he not appeared in the newspaper indexes or cemetery records? I was mystified, but proceeded to pull the Savannah Morning News for 6 January 1944.

He was there, and with him all the information I needed to at least create an outline of the man's life. The shortcomings of the cemetery records and newspapers indices were forgiven in the magnanimity of victory. Besides, I wasn't exactly sure at whom I should gripe.
PART TWO

DR. SALIBA, I PRESUME

In 1831, Syria, a province of the Ottoman Empire was occupied by the forces of Muhammad Ali, the de facto leader of Egypt (which was also nominally a part of the Empire). To this fait accompli the Sultan acquiesced, granting autonomy to Syria under Ali's son, Ibrahimin Pasha.

Pasha moved quickly to consolidate his authority, centralizing the government and checking the power of separatist elements. But even more importantly, he opened Syria to both western thought and traffic. Notions such as public trial and equality before the law began to be incorporated into Syrian thought. The impact was to be profound.

Unimpressed, though, were the great powers, who forced the evacuation of Pasha in 1839. There succeeded a series of arrangements and disarrangements which culminated in the 1864 reinstitution of the "sick man of Europe" as head of Syria and Lebanon.

The Sultan's rule was predictably harsh and oppressive. His recalcitrant voice demanded a return to the Moslem environment. The response of his citizenry was a dramatic increase in emigration.
It was into this environment that Mishal Moses Saliba was born on 1 September 1875 to Moses John Saliba, governor of Beiruth, and Eugenia Tilshran Saliba.

The governor's influential position must have been used to great advantage as M.M. shortly began to accumulate academic credentials. At age fifteen Mishal graduated from the University of Syria. A scant four years later he was granted an M.D. by that same institution.

Having completed his education, Dr. Saliba became chief house physician at St. George's Hospital in Beiruth. But his career was soon interrupted by the allure of the west.

That attraction led M.M. first to Paris, then to Baltimore. In Paris, completion of a special course conferred another degree. That accomplished, it was on to Baltimore for still more medical training.

Dr. Saliba arrived at Baltimore Medical College in 1892 where he proceeded to obtain yet another M.D. degree before making his way to Savannah.

M.M.'s practice of medicine is first documented in Savannah in 1898. Frugal-minded, he works and lives in the same building, 415 West Broughton Street, which he rents with brother Gabriel, a shoe clerk at S.K. Lewin, and sister Regina.

In 1900, M.M. and Gabriel (sans Regina) are joined by another brother, John, a clerk at A.C. Regopolos. His stay is brief, however, lasting less than a year.
1901 presents a year of transition for Dr. Saliba. Gone are Gabriel and John, off to pursue other interests (both return to Savannah eventually, Gabriel as a dentist, John as a doctor). And the office/home has been moved to 10 East Liberty, undoubtedly a reflection of Dr. Saliba's growing prestige. 30

That prestige reached its apex in 1905 when Dr. Saliba was named a Bey of the Turkish Empire. The event was much heralded locally, witness this article from the Savannah Press which warmed to the task of displaying Savannah's cosmopolitan composition:

Dr. Saliba was commissioned a Bey in recognition of several of his papers on tuberculosis being read before medical societies in this country....So far as Saliba is concerned, the title is an honorary one...given to governors of minor provinces or as a title of respect to princely families. 31

Thus with "aw shucks" good-naturedness, M.M. had sluffed off the importance of this honor. A mere two years later, however, he was anxious to test its significance in an attempt to import Arabian horses into Savannah. 32

The difficulty of the scheme was made clear by the requirement that the Sultan himself approve any transfer of Arabian horses. Undaunted, Saliba hoped to employ "friends of influence in the Ottoman Empire" to obtain the animals. 33

Perhaps to expedite matters with regard to the horses, Dr. Saliba applied for a passport to visit his homeland. In so doing, he stirred quite a controversy:
Sec. of State Elihu Root in response to Dr. Saliba’s request for a passport tells Dr. Saliba that if he carries out his plan he runs a danger of being cast into Turkish prison or of losing his American citizenship.

The laws of Turkey forbid the naturalization of Turkish subjects without the consent of the Turkish government...and one who has secured such naturalization is forbidden to return.... If, on entering Turkey, a person declares themselves Turkish subjects, they are held to have abandoned American citizenship.34

The Sultan, however, had not counted on the ingenuity of Dr. Saliba who, within a year, did indeed return to Beirut without going to prison or renouncing his American citizenship. His method was a ruse which, it seems to me, was more fanciful than factual.

It seems that Dr. Saliba was on a steamship off the coast of his homeland. Before the ship landed, a party from a small boat had been allowed to come aboard. When Dr. Saliba was asked for his passport, he asserted that he had no need of one having boarded the ship with the people from the shore. The explanation was accepted and M.M. stayed in Syria for some months.

He was not, however, able to bring the Arabian horses with him on his return. The Young Turks then agitating for a new constitution had created too much turmoil to attempt such an undertaking.35

Dr. Saliba’s return to Savannah in 1908 coincided with the departure of Gabriel who had spent the previous year practicing dentistry at M.M.'s 302 Park Ave. address.36

Perhaps Gabriel’s departure spurred the restlessness of Mishell, as 1909 was his last recorded year in Savannah for
some time. He packed up his belongings and headed out, alone, for Wilson, North Carolina.\textsuperscript{37} The attraction of North Carolina may have been the result of proximity to brother John, who established Albermarle Hospital in Elizabeth City North Carolina. Or it may have been simply a better climate or a better clientele than that of Savannah. Whatever the reason, Mishell M. Saliba spent the better part of his life in Wilson.

And Wilson obviously took M.M. to its heart. He became a vestryman of the Episcopal church, a president of the Wilson Rotary Club and a commander of the American Legion. He was a past master of Mount Solomon Lodge and the Mount Lebanon Council and a grand master of the Grand Lodge of Masons of North Carolina.

When World War One intervened, Dr. Saliba became a major in the United States Army medical corps. And at the outbreak of World War Two he served as a medical examiner for recruits entering the service in North Carolina. His career and his contribution to Wilson, North Carolina were exemplary.\textsuperscript{39} But when it came time to die, Dr. Saliba made it back to the city where he first practiced medicine in America: Savannah. Perhaps he yearned for the shady avenues or the easy pace or the warmth of family.\textsuperscript{40} Whatever the reason, M.M. died at the U.S. Marine Hospital here in Savannah on 5 January 1944 of circulatory and kidney problems. He lies now under the somber moss of Bonaventure Cemetery,\textsuperscript{41} perhaps
not immortalized, but certainly not unremembered.
ENDNOTES

1Sholes' Directory of the City of Savannah, 21 vols., (Savannah: Georgia Directory Company, 1879-1900)
Goette's Savannah City Directory, 8 vols., (n.p.: H.A. Goette, 1901-08)

2Goette 5:659

3Sholes' 19:499, 20:538, 21:721,
Savannah 1:701

4U.S., Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, Twelfth Census of the United States; 1900: Population


6Ibid.

7Savannah, Georgia: Georgia Historical Society
"Chatham County Aliens Declarations" 1853-1903, Book F, p. 797

8"Created a Bey by His Majesty, Sultan of Turkey;" The Savannah Press, 3 October 1905, p. 10
"Dr. Saliba May Bring Horses Here," The Savannah Press, 23 November 1907, p. 9
"The Dilemma That Now Confronts Dr. M.M. Saliba;" The Savannah Press, 20 April 1908, p. 10
"Got Back to Turkey by a Ruse," The Savannah Press, 3 December 1908, p. 1


   Goette, 7:674

14 Census 1900

15 Sholes', 21:721

16 "Dr. G.M. Saliba Called By Death," Savannah Morning News, 22 March 1932, p. 12

17 "Dr. John Saliba, 81, Claimed by Death," Savannah Morning News, 17 November 1950, p. 2

18 Georgia, Department of Human Resources, Vital Records Service, "Death Certificate"

19 Morning News, 22 March 1932
   Savannah News, 17 November 1950

20 "Services Friday for Dr. M. Saliba," Savannah Morning News, 6 January 1944, p. 4


22 Death Certificate

23 Savannah Press, 3 October 1905

24 Morning News, 17 November 1950

25 The arithmetic of Dr. Saliba's education is not workable. He could not have been born in 1875, graduated the university at age 15 (1890), continued for four more years to get his M.D. (1894) and been in the U.S. in 1892. But, alas, I have no alternate solution.

26 Savannah Press, 3 October 1905

27 Ibid.

28 Sholes', 19:499

29 Idem., 21:721

30 Goette's, 1:554

31 Savannah Press, 3 October 1905
32 Savannah Press, 23 November 1907
33 Ibid.
34 Savannah Press, 20 April 1908
35 Savannah Press, 3 December 1908
36 Goette, 8:617
37 Morning News, 6 January 1944
38 Morning News, 17 November 1950
39 Morning News, 6 January 1944
40 There is no indication that Dr. Saliba ever married or had children.
41 Death Certificate
SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY

For ease of reading, this bibliography has been arranged according to the following format: (1) books—alphabetically (2) periodicals—chronologically (3) newspapers—chronologically (4) government documents—chronologically (5) unpublished material—alphabetically.

BOOKS


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