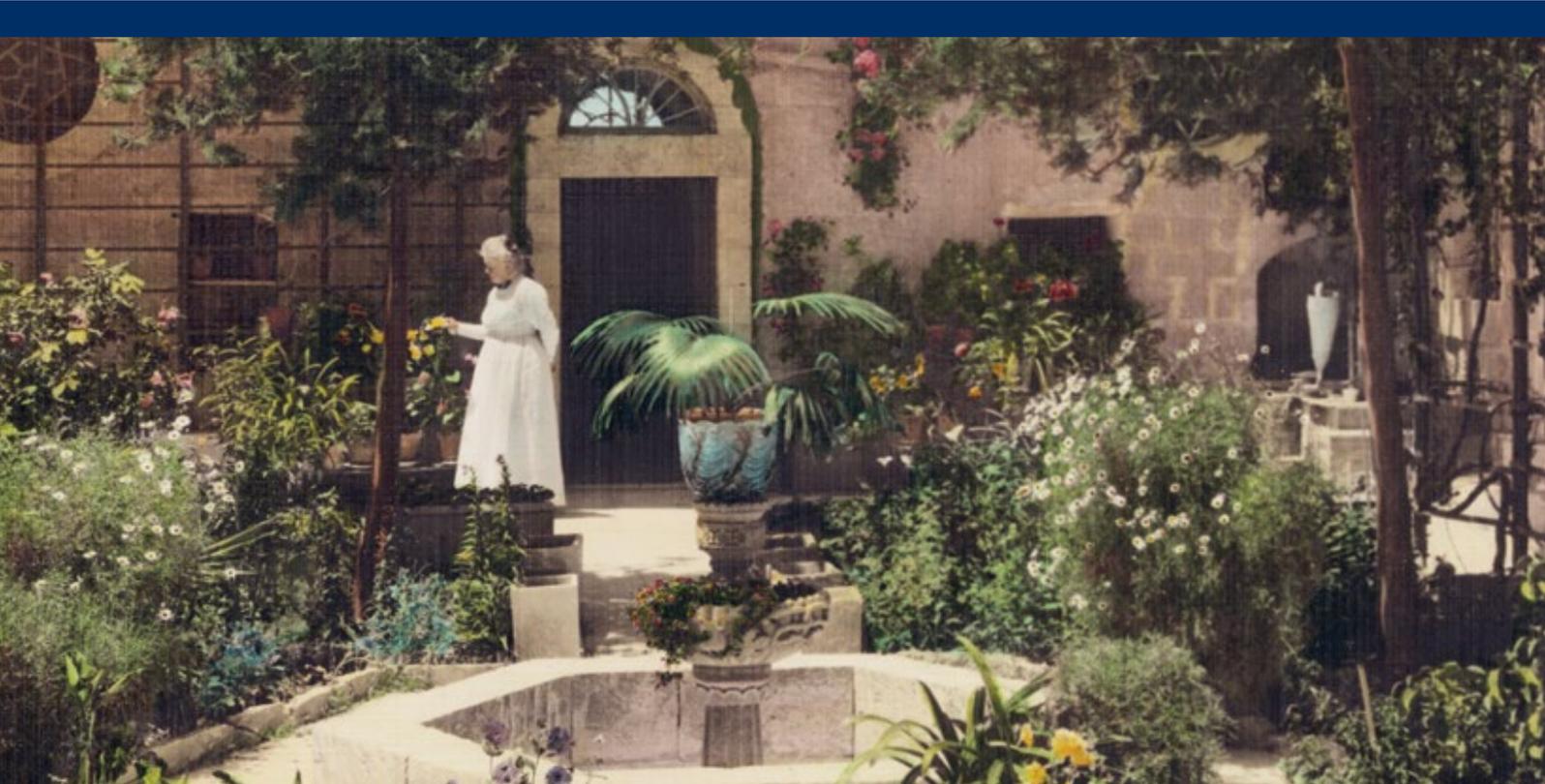


THE HISTORY OF  
THE AMERICAN COLONY  
JERUSALEM



## THE AMERICAN COLONY HOTEL JERUSALEM

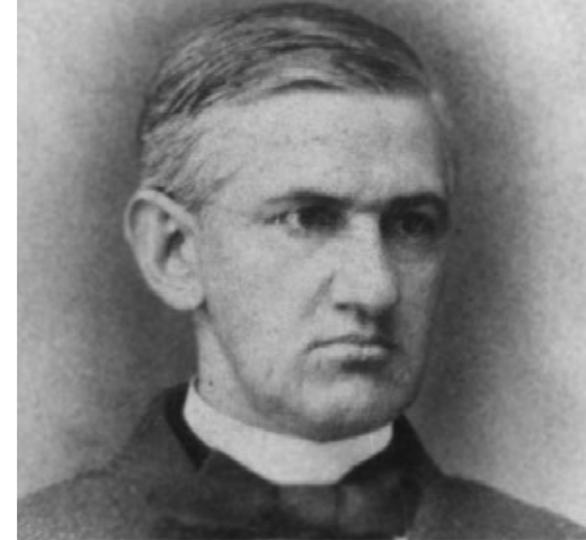
This booklet is based on a text written by Valentine Vester, and also draws heavily on Odd Karsten Tveit's excellent 'Anna's House'. Details of that work, as well as other recommended books about the American Colony, are listed in the selected bibliography.

## *Beginnings*

The fire which consumed Chicago in 1871 started a series of events that would lead Horatio Spafford and his young Norwegian wife Anna to Jerusalem, and eventually to the establishment of the American Colony Hotel.

Horatio, Anna, and their four little girls were living in Lake View, a suburb of Chicago, when the great fire hit. They threw themselves into the task of helping the many families in distress, inspired in part by their strong religious faith.

In 1873, physically and emotionally exhausted by their work, they decided to take the family for a holiday in Europe. Horatio was detained on business at the last moment, but Anna and the four little girls went on ahead aboard the luxury liner S.S. Ville du Havre.



2694

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O. H. PALMER, Secretary. WILLIAM ORTON, President

To *Mafford* Received at *Chicago Ills*  
*Dec 2<sup>nd</sup> 540am 1873*  
*159 LaSalle St*

*Chicago*  
*Saved: alone what shall I*  
*do. Mrs Goodwin Children*  
*willie Ceevet lost go with*  
*Lorriarez until answer reply*  
*Porclain 64 Rue Aboukir Paris*

*Mafford*

### Shipwreck

When most of the passengers and crew were peacefully in bed, disaster struck. A sailing ship collided with the steamer, which sank in minutes. Anna was picked up unconscious on a floating spar.

Anna knew immediately when she was revived that her four little girls had been killed and cried out in anguish. At that moment she thought she heard a voice speak to her: "There is a reason why you have been saved. You have work to do." The idea that a path had been chosen for her became a life-long conviction for Anna.





## *To Jerusalem*

They rented a house in the Old City of Jerusalem, near the Damascus Gate, where they re-established their religious community. In the next few years the group, known then simply as “The Americans”, grew considerably and established good relations with the diverse local communities.

Although devout Christians they were never missionaries and did not attend any church. They lived as a commune, devoting their time to prayer and charitable work.

They forged ties with local residents across cultural and religious boundaries, from Eliezer Ben-Yehuda (a driving force behind the revival of Hebrew as a living language) to Sheik Ali al-Dhiyab of the Bedouin Adwan tribe.

*Panoramic view of Jerusalem, 1900-1920, Boaz Collection.*





## *The House of Temptation*

It was Horatio who decided that he and Anna should no longer have a physical relationship, and it was not long before celibacy became the official policy of the group.

The sexual practices of 'The Americans' became a source of speculation in some sections of Jerusalem. The American consul, Selah Merrill, was particularly imaginative on this topic, asserting that free love reigned in the house in the Old City, and that it was the work of the devil. Merrill, who had trained as a Congregationalist minister, disliked the Colony's opposition to missionary work, as well as their other dissident religious views, and it is thought that this motivated his hostility.

It was alleged that Anna instructed members of the community to expose themselves to sexual temptation on a regular basis. In order to test their fortitude, married men should maintain close contact with young women, and vice versa, to the extent of sharing a bed. It was said that if the Colonists were not able to restrain their urges, and faltered, they were required to confess to the rest of the group.

Despite the support of much of Jerusalem society these stories, and the opposition of the American Consul, caused quite a few problems for the Colonists.

*Founders, newcomers and friends; The Old House, 1894.*

## *New Arrivals*

While the community spent much time in charitable work, they did very little that was income generating, believing that the Lord would provide. As a result, they racked up large debts with local merchants, who, aware of the Colony's work with the poor, were willing to provide extensive credit.

Nonetheless, money became an issue, and in 1894 Anna returned to Chicago with 8 other members of the colony (Horatio had died in 1888, only seven years after arriving in Jerusalem) to settle legal issues and free up some capital. While she was there, she came into contact with a Swedish Christian commune

Anna had been leading open prayer meetings in Chicago, which some of the Swedish group attended. Realising that they had much in common with Anna's teachings, and aware of the precarious financial situation she was in, they invited her and the new converts she had made to move into their church on Madison Avenue.

Gradually Anna began to supplant the Swedish Pastor – Olof Henrik Larsson – as head of the congregation. Inspired by her spiritual fire and her account of life in Jerusalem many members of the Swedish Evangelical Church resolved to join the Americans there. Anna suggested that the church, which Larsson owned, should be sold to provide funds for the move.

Larsson was in two minds about this, he believed passionately that Christ would soon return and in that respect the move to Jerusalem seemed a good idea, but he was reluctant to relinquish his work, property, and authority to Anna. He decided to agree to the sale, but, perhaps in order to widen his group of supporters, he wrote to the village of Nås in Sweden where he had a number of followers. He encouraged them to sell their belongings and emigrate to Palestine to join him.

Anna returned to Jerusalem in 1896 accompanied by 40 Swedes from Chicago and 19 new American converts. They were soon joined by 37 adults and children from Nås.

*Farmers in Dalecarlia, Sweden, 1890s.*





## *Moving House*

The house in the Old City was much too small to accommodate the newcomers, but funds from the sale of their goods and property enabled the enlarged Colony to think of new premises. In the open country outside the city, a large property was available. Rabbah Daoud Amin Effendi El Husseini had built it for himself and his four wives, but had died in 1895, leaving no heir. Today that house is the American Colony Hotel.

Husseini Effendi's bedroom is now room number 1. Rooms 3, 4, and 5 were his first three wives' winter rooms, with the cooler rooms downstairs (14, 15, and 16) as their summer rooms. The fourth wife, whom he married later in the hope of producing an heir, had room 6 as her winter room and 114 for the summer. In the present 'Pasha Room' he held audience, dispensed justice and received guests.

*Left: Swedish Members in the 'Salon', now the Pasha Room, 1897*

*Right: The 'Big House', 1924*



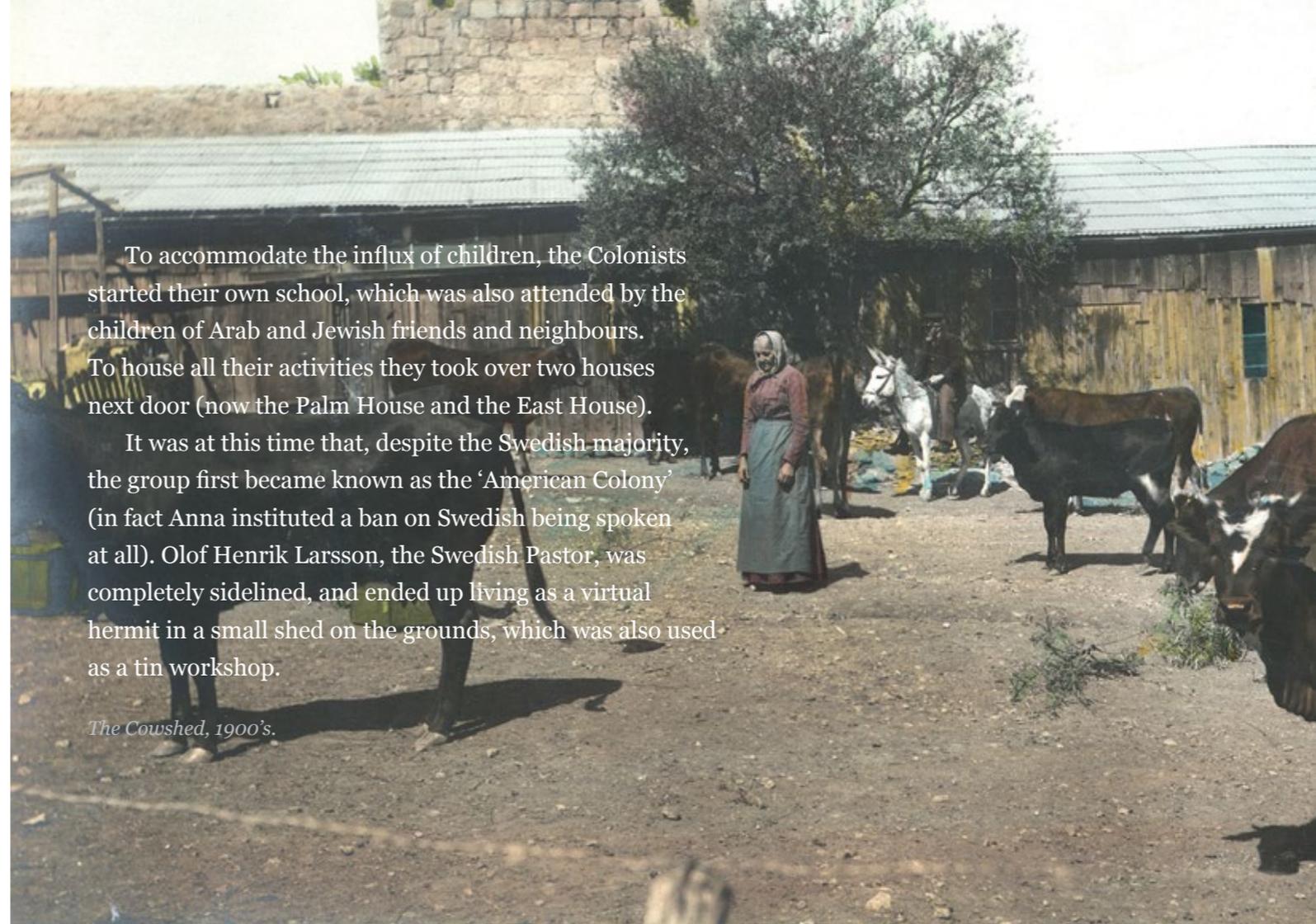


## *A change of lifestyle*

The Swedes, who were now a majority in the group of 150, made a huge contribution to the viability of the Colony. While the Americans were largely urbanites – lawyers, businessmen, and shopkeepers – the Swedish newcomers were mostly artisans and farmers and a number of new enterprises were started.

Cows, pigs, and chickens were raised. The women spun, wove, and sewed. There was a carpentry shop and a blacksmith who shod the horses of the Turkish cavalry. There was a dairy, a butchery, and a bakery. The children delivered bread around the local area.

*Weaving Room, 1900's.*



To accommodate the influx of children, the Colonists started their own school, which was also attended by the children of Arab and Jewish friends and neighbours. To house all their activities they took over two houses next door (now the Palm House and the East House).

It was at this time that, despite the Swedish majority, the group first became known as the 'American Colony' (in fact Anna instituted a ban on Swedish being spoken at all). Olof Henrik Larsson, the Swedish Pastor, was completely sidelined, and ended up living as a virtual hermit in a small shed on the grounds, which was also used as a tin workshop.

*The Cowshed, 1900's.*



## *The Photo Department*

Among the activities begun after the arrival of the Swedes was photography.

When the German Kaiser visited Jerusalem in 1898 it was the photographers of the Colony who documented the trip. These photographs captured public interest and from then on photography became a major activity for the community, and a major source of income.

*Left: Developing moving image film at the American Colony Photo Department, 1920's.*

*Right: Lewis (Hol Lars) Larson, Photo Expedition in Egypt, 1905.*



Photographs were provided for travel books and the press and sold to tourists in the new American Colony Stores by the Jaffa gate in the Old City.

The American Colony Photo department played an important role in documenting the history of the region, and in the history of photography itself. Their work is displayed throughout the hotel, and can also be seen in the hotel's archive (by appointment). Many of the originals are now held at the Library of Congress in the United States and can be viewed on their website: [www.loc.gov](http://www.loc.gov)

*Egyptian camel transport passing over Olivet, 1918.*



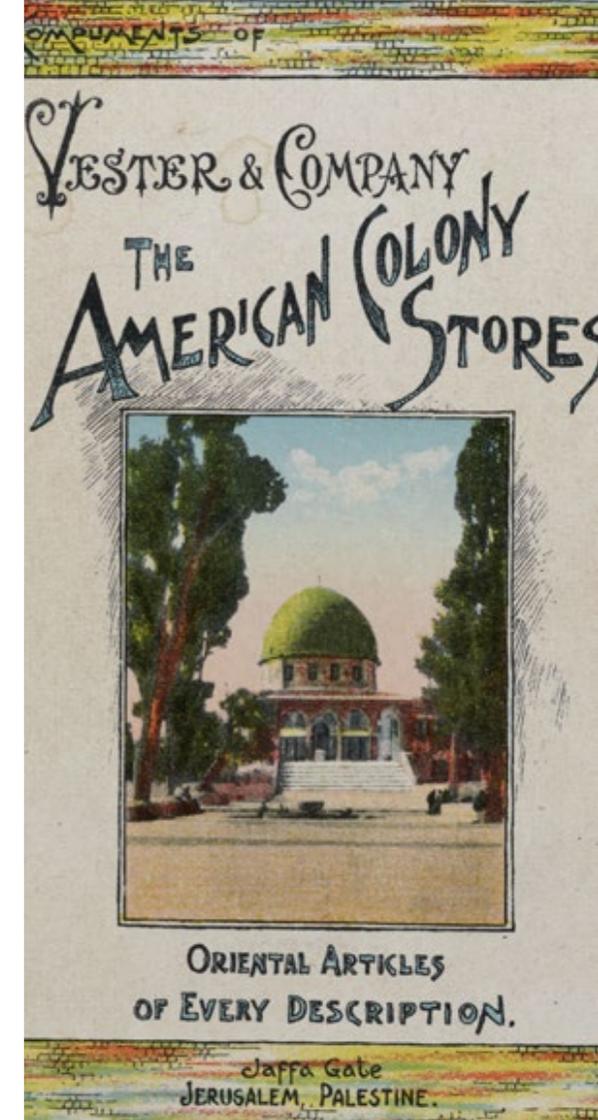


## *American Colony Hostel*

The American Colony first started taking in guests in 1902 when Baron Plato Von Ustinov – owner of the Park Hotel in Jaffa and grandfather of actor Peter Ustinov – needed somewhere in Jerusalem to house his visitors from Europe and America. In the winter months (then considered the only time cool enough for Western visitors) the Colony members temporarily doubled up to make room for the influx of guests from Jaffa.

The group became heavily involved in tourism, selling mementos and photographs from the American Colony Stores, housing foreign visitors in the Colony, and guiding them around the many historical and religious sites in the region. Traditions that continue to this day.

*Left: Colony Members at Hotel du Parc, Jaffa, 1902.*





## War!

In the summer of 1914 a group of German students was staying at the Colony to learn English. On August 2nd they all appeared at supper, but the next morning they had vanished. A ship had been secretly waiting at Jaffa to carry them back to the Fatherland and the army. Later that day Germany invaded Belgium and on August 4th the Allies declared war.

For the next three years, Jerusalem was completely cut off from the outside world. All mail delivery stopped. All able-bodied men of Ottoman nationality were conscripted into the army and there was no one to till the fields. There was a severe outbreak of typhus and in 1915 a plague of locusts “fell from the sky as thick as snowflakes in a Scandinavian storm” and stripped the country bare, bringing the population to starvation point.

The American Colony played an important humanitarian role during the war. They organised soup kitchens which fed over 2,000 people daily, and took over the running of four major hospitals – nursing the wounded from both sides who were pouring into the city.

On December 9th the Turkish governor of Jerusalem, with whom friendly relations had lasted throughout the hostilities, came to Anna and presented her with a bunch of flowers. “I am on my way to surrender the city”, he said, “and I wanted you to be the first to know”. A sheet was snatched from a bed in one of the Colony hospitals and hurriedly affixed to a pole to serve as a white flag with which to meet the advancing British army. This ‘flag’ is now in the Imperial War Museum in London.

*Left: Turkish Soldiers Passing the American Colony, 1914-1917.*

*Right: Mayor of Jerusalem surrenders to the British, December 1917.*





## *An uneasy peace*

The British mandate period opened Jerusalem to the West. The city was filled with British soldiers and administrators, and more foreigners than ever before.

The American Colony, always a favourite meeting place, became a hub for much social activity and consolidated its position at the centre of Jerusalem society.

General Allenby was a frequent visitor and it was here that T.E. Lawrence (Lawrence of Arabia) met Lowell Thomas, the New York Times correspondent who wrote the first book about his war-time activities.

*Left: T.E. Lawrence, Sir Herbert Samuel & Amir Abdullah, 1921.*

*Right: Field Marshal Edmund Allenby at the American Colony, 1920's.*





## *Cracks begin to show*

Anna died in 1923 and subsequently the American Colony Stores, one of the most profitable businesses in Jerusalem, was registered in the names of her daughters' (Bertha and Grace) husbands Frederick Vester and John D. Whiting, as was most of the rest of the property.

Other members of the Colony, particularly the Swedes, felt excluded when they discovered this. Frederick and John insisted that the registration had only been done for administrative purposes and everything was still held in common, but not everyone was convinced. It seemed to some that the Spafford daughters and their families could spend as they pleased while the other Colonists had to ask for handouts when they needed something. Anna's daughter Bertha Vester,

who had taken over administration of the Colony, began expelling the main malcontents.

Eventually in 1930, after much in-fighting, the assets of the Colony were split, with dissenters being effectively bought out with cash and external property while the remaining Colonists kept the main houses which now form the Hotel.

All was not peace outside the Colony either. The Arab-Israeli conflict had begun and intensified in violence, finally erupting into open war in 1947. The Red Cross flag flew over the American Colony, which was a casualty clearing station for the wounded. The building received 21 direct hits and one member of the Colony was killed in crossfire.

*Frederick Vester at the American Colony Store, 1910-1920.*

## *The American Colony in Jordan*

When the Armistice was signed in 1949 and the city divided, the American Colony fell on the Jordan side. The only crossing point between the two halves was the Mandelbaum Gate, situated a few hundred yards from the hotel. In spite of continuous sporadic fighting on the border tourism increased and the hotel business prospered.

But, the “City of Peace” has never known peace for long and the uneasy truce came to an abrupt end. Gunfire broke the stillness of the morning of June 5<sup>th</sup>, 1967. The Six-Day War had begun. Situated as it was on the direct route to the Mount of Olives, the American Colony was again caught in the crossfire.

The building suffered two direct hits and a great deal of damage from mortars and small arms. The walls were pitted with holes (some are still visible) and hardly a piece of glass survived. The elegant courtyard was a tangled mess of broken bushes and flowers. Tourists disappeared and Red Cross volunteers took their place.

*Entrance to the American Colony after 1926.*





## *Today*

The American Colony is still owned by descendants of the original members. The Spaffords' grandson, Horatio Vester, managed it assisted by his wife, Valentine, until his retirement in 1980, when active management was handed over to a Swiss firm. Valentine Vester continued as Chairman of the hotel until her death in 2008.

The Board of Directors is composed of family members who remain closely involved. Some were born here or have spent some of their lives here. It is a part of their family history, just as it is part of the history of Jerusalem.

The Colony has a unique place in the events of today – tomorrow's history. Owned as it is by Americans, British, and Swedes, and now managed

by Swiss, it has always had friends in all sections of Jerusalem's mixed society. It is an integral part of Jerusalem, and a neutral island, remaining outside the turbulent politics of the land. Here Israelis and Palestinians can and do meet and feel at home.

Because of its neutral status and beautiful surroundings, the hotel is a favourite haunt of journalists, diplomats, and aid workers.

Many famous names are listed among our guests, to name a few: Graham Greene, Sir Winston Churchill, Laurence of Arabia, Saul Bellow, Joan Baez, Lord Allenby, John Le Carre, Leon Uris, Marc Chagall, Peter O'Toole, Robert De Niro, Bob Dylan, Giorgio Armani, Carl Bernstein, and Mikhail Gorbachev.

## *A Charitable Organisation*

When the Americans moved to the present hotel building they retained possession of their old home in the Old City and used it for charitable purposes. A lace and dress-making school for women was established there and during World War I relief work was carried out in the house.

On Christmas Eve 1925 Bertha Vester, Anna Spafford's daughter, was hurrying out from the house to join her husband and children carol singing in Bethlehem. A desperately ill woman being supported by her husband and carrying a newborn baby in her arms met her. The husband explained that she had not been admitted to the hospital because it was closed for the Christmas Feast.

Bertha later wrote, "Here before me stood a rustic Madonna and, similar to Mary's plight, there

was no place for them to stay." Greatly moved she immediately had the mother and baby admitted to hospital, but the woman did not last the night. Next morning the woman's husband brought the baby round and begged Bertha to keep it, saying that otherwise the child would die in the family's primitive cave home. Bertha took the baby in and named him Noel.

In less than a week more orphaned and homeless children were brought to be cared for. A room was made into a nursery and a trained nurse engaged. It soon became apparent how much such a home was needed and the school for handicrafts was moved to other premises to make room for the Spafford Baby Home.

*The Infant Welfare Center and Day Clinic, 1930's.*





Today the Baby Home is the Spafford Children's Center, which provides physical and mental healthcare to some of the most vulnerable and disadvantaged children in East Jerusalem and the West Bank.

Descendants of the Spafford family are still involved in the operation of the Center, as an ongoing commitment to the local community. We would be very grateful if you were able to visit the Center to meet the children and see the work that is done there. Please contact the hotel front desk if you would like to visit, or to provide a much-needed donation.

Spafford Children's Center  
P.O.Box 19991  
97500 Jerusalem  
Tel. 972-2-6284875

*Left: The Anna Spafford Baby Home, 1930-1940 & the Center today.  
Right: Bertha Spafford Vester as a Nurse, 1914-1918.*





## *American Colony Archive Collections*

The American Colony has a large collection of photographs, horticultural paintings, records, books and artifacts, all housed in its own Archive, situated in the hotel.

The Archive is open to visitors by appointment.  
[collection@amcol.co.il](mailto:collection@amcol.co.il)



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