First Greek/Syrian Orthodox Wedding Antiochian Orthodox Origins

Prior to the establishment of the national borders in the Middle East, the pioneer emigrants that left the country of Lebanon were referred to as Syrians, Turkish, Assyrians, Asiatics, illegal aliens and even other incorrectly defined names.

The marriage ceremony described was that of a Christian Syrian Orthodox couple, Khaleel Saleeba and Nazeera Keamy both born in the City of Zahlé, Bekaa Valley of Mount-Lebanon. The bridegroom at that time was a resident of Moora in Western Australia and the bride a resident of Melbourne, Victoria.

Source: Nazeera Saleeba (bride) with her youngest son Edward, c1915. Photo: Ancestry.com

The bride, Nazeera Keamy, came from Lebanon in 1882 and arrived at Melbourne in 1893. Her father was the well-known Syrian Tanus Peter Keamy, a draper through profession, who lived on Little Lonsdale St, Melbourne. Her mother was Susan Keamy (née Abozayan).

The groom was Khaleel Saleeba, also born in Zahlé, Mount-Lebanon in 1870, where Khaleel Saleeba was a prominent business person in Western Australia and a well-known and respected citizen of the town of Moora and the city of Perth, both in Western Australia.

In history, this is the first Greek Orthodox mixed marriage of cultures from the early Colony, with the groom residing in Western Australia and the bride in Victoria. This was likely an arranged marriage, it represented a union of two of the most prominent Syrian families at that time.

After the wedding celebrations the newlyweds returned to Moora, West Australia where Khaleel Saleeba had multiple business interests. They had six (6) children, of which two died, while four survived and many of the descendants of Khaleel and Nazeera Saleeba still reside in Western Australia until this day.

Throughout their lives, the Saleeba couple kept a close association with members of the Western Australian Greek Community and in particular with one of the most prominent Greeks in Perth, Mr. Peter Michelides, baptising their child, Alexander.

On 20 November, 1948, in the newspaper “Western Australian” an insert appeared announcing the couple’s 50th wedding anniversary. Both Khaleel & Nazeera lived a long and celebrated life amongst family and friends, leaving a legacy to the Christian Orthodox community of Australia.

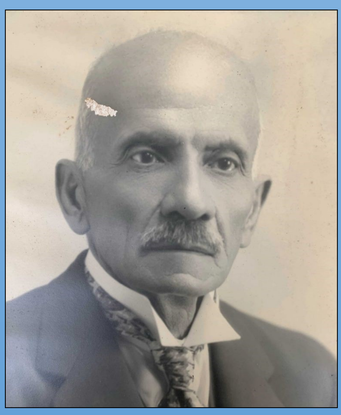
Syrian Picnic in Western Australia: Third from the left, the groom Khaleel Saleeba. Standing next to him, the bride Nazeera Saleeba, née Keamy. c1904. Photo: Ghassan Naim Moghabghab

The marriage certificate issued by the Victorian Government authorities reveals details of the status of the newly formed Greek Orthodox Church in Australia. The father of the bride was Tanus Peter Keamy leader of the Syrian Orthodox Community in Melbourne, who set the relationship and bond between the Syrian and Greek communities of the early years.

Tanus Peter Keamy in fact is acknowledged as the person who recommended to the Greek Orthodox faithful of Melbourne to seek the appointment of the Arabic and Greek speaking priest Rev. Fr. Athanasios Kantopoulos. Together with Alexander Maniachi, these two prominent individuals, made every possible effort for the establishment of an Orthodox Church in Melbourne to become a reality.

The marriage certificate produced, additionally manifests an unwritten binding agreement between the Syrian and the Greek Orthodox faithful of Victoria; endorsed and sealed with the signatures of both the families of the Maniachi’s and Keamy as witnesses to the ceremony.

The first Greek Orthodox marriage certificate issued was the commencement of a collaboration of all the Orthodox faithful of Melbourne, irrespective of their ethnicity or race. In effect, the marriage of Khaleel and Nazeera signified a collaboration of the Greek Orthodox and the Antiochian Orthodox faithful of Melbourne at that time.



Khaleel Saleeba (groom) at a later age, c1940. Photo: Ancestry.com

Reference: The first wedding took place at St John’s Greek Orthodox Church at St Andrew’s Place, East Melbourne, on Sunday, 20 November, 1898: www.neoskosmos.com