

## From Armenia to Los Angeles

Ancient Armenian culture flourished 2500 years ago in Asia Minor over an area that included parts of present-day Turkey, Iran, Iraq and the Soviet Union. Armenia was the first nation to officially adopt Christianity in 301 A.D. and its distinctive alphabet was developed in the fifth century. But due to its strategic position on the land bridge between Europe and Asia, Armenian civilization was often threatened by foreign invasions.

From 1514 until after World War I, most of Armenia was ruled by the Ottoman Empire. Armenians struggled to hold onto their culture in the midst of persecution by the Muslim majority, and the movement for independent nationhood began.

Hundreds of thousands of Armenians were killed in the massacres of the late 1800's and 1.5 million perished during the Genocide of 1915-22. Not long after, in 1918, there was a briefly lived independent Armenia. Armenia as it is known today is a republic of the Soviet Union, only a fraction of its historical territory.

It was the massacres of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century which brought the first wave of Armenian immigrants to America. Early important Armenian communities in the U.S. were New York, Boston, Worcester, Detroit, Chicago and of course Fresno. Armenians were attracted to the familiar climate and land of the San Joaquin Valley, and became prominent in agriculture and the fruit packing industry. Even in this Eden, Armenians were often the victims of ethnic prejudice.

Los Angeles also had early settlers, with its first Armenian church established in 1912. But it did not begin to surpass Fresno as an Armenian population center until the 1930s. The years after World War II saw the second major wave of Armenian immigrants, refugees who had become displaced persons as a result of the war. Other Armenians already in the U.S. migrated to Los Angeles for new opportunities at this time.

The third wave of immigration began about ten years ago and continues today at a slower rate. These newest immigrants have come here chiefly from war-torn Lebanon and Iran, as well as the Soviet Union. They have created large communities in areas such as Hollywood, Glendale and Pasadena.

With its influx of new immigrants, long established Armenian colonies, network of Armenian day schools and newspapers, Los Angeles has gained a reputation as the "Armenian metropolis" of the Western hemisphere. Of the estimated half million Armenians in the U.S. today, about 150-200,000 live in Los Angeles. Many of these people are active in the 300 Armenian community organizations in California. They speak a variety of languages (including Western and Eastern dialects of Armenian) and cover a wide spectrum in their political and religious beliefs and affiliations. They unite at events like Armenian Martyr's Day (April 24), which commemorates those massacred in the Genocide.

Once mostly small tradesmen and craftsmen, Armenians in America have increasingly entered white collar jobs and professions. They have distinguished themselves in the arts, business, entertainment and other fields.