



UNTOLD TALES OF FALMOUTH

From the Archives of Museums on the Green

From Armenia with Love

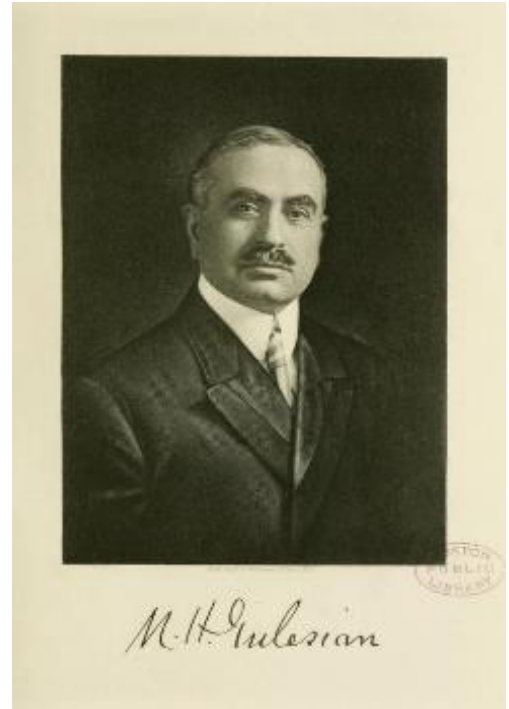
by Terry White and Meg Costello

Moses Hadji Gulesian reached the shores of America in May 1883, just six months before Emma Lazarus penned the famous words: “Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free...” One might have thought Gulesian was the inspiration for the poem. Leaving home with only a few Turkish coins in his pocket, he dreamed of new possibilities in America. Surely, he never expected that one day, he would be hailed as the savior of a beloved American icon—the *USS Constitution*.

At age seventeen, Moses left his hometown of Marash (today Kahramanmaraş) in Turkey, ostensibly on a caravan to sell copper goods he had made. This was not his first substantial journey. He had earlier made a pilgrimage to the Christian Holy Land, earning the title he used as a middle name, *hadji* or pilgrim. His true destination in 1883 was America, but first he had to reach the port city of Alexandretta and find passage on a ship headed across the Atlantic. When his father learned of Moses’s intention, he sent a pastor to bring him back. The young man insisted he would never return home, so his father finally relented. The Gulesians’ home in Turkish Armenia had long suffered persecution from the Ottoman rulers and would later be subject to massacres in the late 19th and early 20th century.

Though Moses came seeking freedom, the Statue of Liberty was not yet there to welcome him (it was dedicated in 1886), nor did he pass through the famous Ellis Island (opened in 1892). Rather, Moses landed at Castle Garden, in the Battery of New York City. He spoke no English and but a few words of Italian; his native tongue was Armenian. He spent his first night sleeping on a park bench in lower Manhattan, but soon located the brother of a friend from home, a carpet maker who offered Moses a job. After accumulating sufficient funds to begin his own business, he moved to Worcester, Massachusetts and began producing the copper objects he had learned how to make in Armenia. Knowing the importance of language, he studied English at the Worcester Academy.

With determination and talent, Moses became an American success story. By 1890 he had his own copper business, a six-story factory building on Waltham Street in Boston, and was living in Newton. In July 1891 he became a United States citizen and immediately began helping his family and other Armenian friends come to America. His success was clearly displayed when he moved to Commonwealth Avenue in



From *Biographical History of Mass.*, 1913.



U.S. Navy Photo by Journalist 2nd Class Todd Stevens

the Secretary of the Navy, Charles J. Bonaparte, was proposing that the old warship be towed out to sea for target practice and then allowed to sink. Moses immediately drafted a brief note to the Secretary that read simply: "Will give ten thousand dollars for the *Constitution* (Old Ironsides). Will you sell?" When Bonaparte did not accept the offer, Gulesian started a public protest that eventually led Congress to authorize \$100,000 to restore the ship. The popularity of this movement would later lead school children to raise pennies for the preservation of the *Constitution*. For his efforts, Gulesian was made president of the Old Ironsides Association, and the Sons of the American Revolution elected him as their first honorary member.ⁱ

By 1920 Moses had become a Falmouth summer resident. He purchased "Waterside," the red mansion first built for J.M. Beebe's daughter Frances at the end of Shore Street. He added his own touches to the property, including the addition of arms to the "Old Mill," giving the water tower the look of a traditional windmill. In 1923 he spoke at a hearing of the County Board of Commissioners in favor of widening Falmouth's Main Street, a sentiment shared by the Reverend H.H. Smythe and others. The plan called for 8-foot wide sidewalks paralleling a 48-foot wide street. Though some objected to the cost of the project and the loss of trees, the Commissioners voted "that public necessity and convenience required the widening, straightening and relocating of Main street."ⁱⁱ

Another concern of Gulesian was relief work in the Near East, particularly for Armenians. In September 1921, Moses helped organize a concert at the Elizabeth Theater in Falmouth to raise funds for the cause. His second wife, Grace Warner, a talented musician, was among the entertainers. In 1923, Rev. Smythe got involved in the relief effort, calling a meeting at St. Barnabas. Moses chaired a committee to consider ways to further the cause. Orphanages, hospitals, and clinics in several Near Eastern countries were the beneficiaries.

Chestnut Hill and began investing in real estate. His holdings eventually included the St. James Theater on Huntington Avenue. He also managed the Castle Square Theater on Tremont Street.

In 1900, the Commonwealth of Massachusetts began restoration on the Old State House, including replacement of the deteriorating wooden figures of a lion and a unicorn. The new figures were to be of copper, and Gulesian was commissioned to make them. (He would later mount the old wooden figures on his own house.) His work on the Old State House foreshadowed the event that brought him national attention--his crusade to preserve the *USS Constitution*.

In December 1905, Gulesian learned that



In 1936, Gulesian made an unsuccessful run for the U.S. Senate on a platform to support the Townsend plan to provide benefits for the elderly. Unfortunately, the Great Depression caused him great financial loss, forcing him to give up “Waterside.” He died on December 30, 1951.ⁱⁱⁱ

Long after his death, Moses reappeared in the news. In 2014, the Bostonian Society began another restoration project on the Old State House. The lion and unicorn installed by Gulesian 113 years before needed some repair. Workers were surprised to discover a time capsule inside the lion’s head. It contained what you might expect: newspapers, photos, and letters from politicians. There was also a mysterious red book—a federal government study on U.S.-foreign relations in the year 1896. Why was this item considered worthy of preserving? No one could say. Some suggested it was thrown in as a space filler.

Don Tellalian, a member of the local Armenian-American community, knew better. Aware that Gulesian was one of the last people to handle the time capsule, and knowing the significance of the 1890s in Armenian history, he asked to examine the book. Close inspection revealed that one page corner had been turned down, marking a section written about Turkey and the Hamidian massacres of Armenians in 1895-6. The violence inflicted on Moses’s hometown, Marash, was mentioned.^{iv} The book also contained letters written by Secretary of State Richard Olney regarding the protection of American citizens during the upheaval.



Photos from thefreedomtrail.org.



Richard Olney was, like Gulesian, a seasonal resident of Falmouth. He owned a summer home near the end of Mill Road. It’s highly likely that the two men knew each other through their Falmouth connection. Did Olney supply the copy of the government book that Gulesian placed in the time capsule?

Moses had a heart big enough to hold two countries, and the perennial faith of a pilgrim. When he sealed that time capsule, he trusted that a hundred years after he was gone, citizens of many hyphenations would still love America and its symbols, just as he had done. There would always be a stream of new Americans, adding their own stories to those that had come before.

ⁱ See “Moses Gulesian” by Arnold Dyer, at <https://museumsongreen.org/archives/>.

ⁱⁱ *Falmouth Enterprise*, February 24, 1923, p. 3.

ⁱⁱⁱ See Moses’s [obituary](#) in the *Falmouth Enterprise*, continued [here](#).

^{iv} See <https://www.bostonmagazine.com/news/2014/10/15/contents-inside-old-state-house-time-capsule-revealed/>. Also, <https://mirrorspectator.com/2015/12/23/armenian-connection-to-boston-time-capsule-mystery-investigated/> and <https://mirrorspectator.com/2016/04/21/old-state-house-hosts-program-on-moses-gulesian/>.