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1889 Consular Dispatch from Baghdad

Lee Ann Potter

In the late summer of 1888, officials at the U.S. Department of State appointed John Henry Haynes of Rowe, Massachusetts, to become the first U.S. consul in Baghdad. At that time, Baghdad—along with all of present day Iraq—was part of the Ottoman Empire, as it had been for more than three centuries. As the twentieth century approached, U.S. diplomatic and commercial interests in the region were well established and growing. There were already American consulates in the Ottoman capital of Constantinople, as well as in Beirut, Cairo, Jerusalem, Sivas, and Smyrna. In addition, American consular agents worked in 23 other cities within the empire.

Establishing a consulate at Baghdad had been discussed as early as 1885, when members of the American Oriental Society formed a committee to raise funds to send the first American archaeological expedition to Mesopotamia. Committee members, affiliated with the University of Pennsylvania, formed the Babylonian Exploration Fund and corresponded with authorities in Washington, including President Grover Cleveland, urging them to consider the interests of science as well as commerce as they established and filled consulates in places of archaeological importance. They also combined their efforts with those of American merchants interested in doing business in Baghdad. Although their attempts took three years, they were ultimately successful.

Haynes was an archaeologist who had lived in Turkey since 1881. He was employed by the Fund and would serve as the photographer and business manager for the expedition that would excavate the ruins at the ancient city of Nippur (Niffer) in southeastern Iraq. While working for the Fund, under the leadership of its director, John Punnett Peters, Haynes would also serve as the American consul, fostering trade relations among companies in the United States and Baghdad. As consul, he received no pay from the government. The other U.S. consuls appointed to work in the Ottoman Empire received annual salaries that ranged from $1,000 to $5,000.

Haynes sent his first three dispatches to Washington while he was still in Constantinople. His first and second messages, both dated September 14, 1888, acknowledged that he had received his instructions and transmitted his oath of office. His third message, sent 13 days later, announced that he would be leaving Constantinople for Baghdad that day and stated that he expected to arrive in Baghdad in early November.

He sent his fourth dispatch, featured in this article, on January 9, 1889, to George L. Rives, the assistant secretary of state. In his single-page, handwritten message, he announced that he had safely arrived in Baghdad after having been "unavoidably delayed on the overland journey by caravan from Alexandretta." The message was sent via Constantinople and reached Washington in late February.

For the next three years, Haynes wrote nearly two dozen additional dispatches to officials in Washington. His successor, John C. Sundberg, a Norwegian-born doctor who became a naturalized American citizen and the second U.S. consul in Baghdad, wrote more than 20 dispatches during his period of service between 1892 and 1895. Some were a single sentence, others went on for 8 to 10 pages and more. Many of their letters and telegrams contained simple acknowledgements of instructions, regulations, or supplies received. Others included routine requests for stationary or forms, complaints about not getting paid, and (particularly in Haynes's case) requests for leave. But many included details and observations that revealed much about Baghdad in the first few years of America's consular presence in the city.

Both consuls wrote about commerce and economic concerns. They included detailed descriptions about the exportation of products such as wool, cotton,

No. 4

United States Consulate
Baghdad Jan 9. 1889

To Hon. Geo. L. Rives
Assistant Secretary of State
Washington D. C.

Sir:

I beg leave to inform you of my safe arrival at post of duty in Baghdad on the 8th inst. having been unavoidably delayed on the overland journey by caravan from Alexandrette to Baghdad

I have the honor to be, Sir,
Your obedient servant
John Henry Haynes
Consul

TEACHING SUGGESTIONS

1. Assign students to define the terms *consul, consulate, embassy, ambassador, diplomacy,* and *diplomatic relations*. In pairs, invite the students to hold a brief conversation in which they use each of the terms, confirming that they understand their meaning.

2. Ask students what year they think the United States first established a consular post in Baghdad; write their answers on the board. Next, encourage students to explain what economic or political circumstances they believe led to the establishment of the consulate, and write these responses on the board, as well.

3. Provide students with a copy of the featured document. Invite one student to read it aloud while the others follow along. Lead a class discussion about the document using the following questions: What type of document is it? Who created the document and for what purpose? Who was the intended audience? When was it created? Next ask them how the information contained in the letter supports or refutes their suggestions in activity #2.

4. Provide students with a copy of the background essay. Ask them to look at a modern-day map of the Middle East and locate the cities mentioned by Haynes and Sundberg in their dispatches.

5. Share information with students from the background essay. Remind them that Haynes, Sundberg, and other U.S. consuls abroad exchanged information with officials at the State Department through dispatches. Details from the dispatches were periodically shared with other agencies, members of Congress, and the press; but much of it had no public audience. Ask students to consider how consuls and ambassadors are able to share information today. Lead a class discussion comparing the late 1880s with the present, in terms of modes of transportation and forms of communication. Ask students to consider how advances in both enable consuls and diplomats to represent national interests differently today than in the past. Invite them to consider both the advantages and disadvantages.

6. Direct students to the section of the U.S. Department of State's website that serves as a portal to all of the websites for the current U.S. embassies, consulates, and diplomatic missions at **usembassy.state.gov.** Invite students to explore three or four sites and write a brief description of the information available.

7. Invite students to randomly choose an international city and a year in the past. Encourage them to take on the role of U.S. consul in their selected city, conduct research, and write a 3–5 page dispatch to officials at the Department of State in Washington, D.C., describing conditions in their city. Encourage volunteers to share their dispatches with the class, omitting the name of the city and the year, and challenge their classmates to identify both, based on the details provided. Students may also wish to compare their writings with actual information reprinted in the Foreign Relations of the United States (FRUS) volumes produced by the State Department's Office of the Historian and available online from the University of Wisconsin. See **digicoll.library.wisc.edu/FRUS**.

8. Divide students into smaller groups and direct them to conduct research on one of the following topics:
   - **a.** The formation of diplomatic relations between the United States and Iraq
   - **b.** The activities of the Babylonian Exploration Fund
   - **c.** The history of the U.S. Consular Service
   - **d.** Careers with the U.S. Department of State
   - **e.** Cholera and other diseases prevalent in the late nineteenth century
   - **f.** The Ottoman Empire in the late nineteenth century

Encourage students to share their findings with the class through the creation of a 20-slide Power Point presentation.

Note about the document:
The dispatch from John Henry Haynes is preserved by the National Archives among the consular dispatches in Records of the U.S. Department of State, Record Group 59. All of the dispatches referred to in this article have been reproduced on National Archives Microfilm Publication T509, *Dispatches from U.S. Consuls in Baghdad, Iraq, 1888-1906.* For more information, see **www.archives.gov/research/order/renting-microfilm.html.**

and dates to firms in American cities, primarily New York and Philadelphia. In some cases, they mentioned companies by name, and they commented on the impact of tariffs. Their descriptions suggested growing markets. In one specific communication, sent in December 1889, Haynes responded to a request from the U.S. Department of Agriculture for date plants. In another, dated May 1893, Sundberg suggested that because such large quantities of dates were exported annually to the United States from Basra, perhaps a consulate should be established there.

Both men provided insights into the population of the city and the region. In August 1889, Haynes reported that "The population of Baghdad is variously estimated from a minimum of 60,000 to a maximum of 200,000 people." He went on to say that a census had not been taken in many years, but that he believed there to be about 180,000 inhabitants, "of whom about one half are Mohammedans, five-sixteenths Jews, and three sixteenths Christians of all denominations." In May 1893, Sundberg reported on the other American subjects in his area of commission. From above Mosul to Bahrain, he was aware of three American missionaries in Basra, and the team of American archaeologists making excavations at Niffer. Sundberg also described the many languages spoken in Baghdad and explained that the other foreign consulates employed Dragomens, interpreters who spoke Arabic, Turkish, French, and English. Periodically, Sundberg's dispatches included segments written in Arabic with English translations. (He was fluent in Spanish, French, German, Norwegian, and Arabic.)

Writing from the consulate (also his residence) along the east bank of the Tigris River, Sundberg described customs in the city and in the diplomatic community. He explained, "Custom makes it obligatory in this land to serve cigarettes, sherbet, and coffee to all visitors." He further stated to his superiors back in Washington that he knew no appropriation existed for entertaining purposes. In one dispatch, he claimed that it was absolutely necessary for a foreign consul in Baghdad, when going out on official visits, to be accompanied by an armed bodyguard, "not perhaps on account of any real danger to life … but because it is required by custom." He said that the British consul had 12 bodyguards and that the French, Russian, and Persian consuls each had 4.

Haynes's requests for leave mentioned the status of his archaeological work, and Sundberg's reports reflected his interest in science. For example, in late spring, Sundberg claimed he was treating "60-80 poor sick" daily, mostly with eye diseases. In another dispatch, he wrote extensively about the water quality of the Tigris—that it was excellent above the city, but contaminated within the city. He found the desert air to be pure, but that "in the streets of Baghdad it is laden with fine dust." He also included descriptions of the intense summer heat. On August 17, 1893, he said the temperature was 120 degrees and that, because of the heat, he was "scarcely able to hold the pen" he was using to write his dispatch.

Both Haynes and Sundberg exposed the city's sanitary conditions and described the spread of disease. The former reported outbreaks of cholera in Baghdad in August 1889 and in Erbil in July 1890. The latter reported that the same disease existed in Basra and Amarah. He included, as part of his dispatch, a map showing where cases had occurred in the month of June 1893. Sundberg reported another outbreak in Basra and Baghdad in August 1894. On these occasions, he wrote extensively about his efforts to make sure that wool shipments to America were fumigated and disease-free. He also wrote about the illness of his wife, which eventually led to his resignation in March 1895.

Both men stressed the need for recordkeeping with regard to public health. In an August 1889 dispatch, Haynes mentioned that the mortality rate of children under two in Baghdad was very high and vented some frustration that he was unable to gather accurate statistics because "there is no official source of information." Sundberg shared a similar frustration four years later that official records on death rates and illness were not being kept by city officials.

Interestingly, in his resignation letter, Haynes asked for instructions concerning the disposal of the consulate's archives. Though not the specific materials he referred to, he might be pleased to know that today, nearly 120 years later, his dispatches and those of his successor, reside in a leather-bound volume on a shelf in the stacks of the National Archives, surrounded by similar volumes of dispatches from consulates around the world.

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