

# ForumJournal

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## Intangible Heritage



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# Vestiges of Vietnam: Uncovering the Hidden Heritage of Virginia's Little Saigon

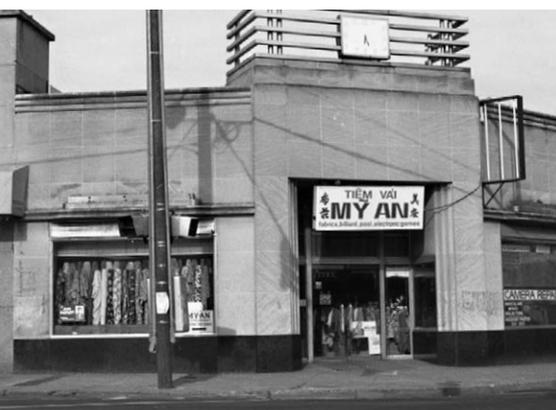
KIM O'CONNELL

**T**hroughout most of the 20th century, Arlington, Virginia, experienced what seemed like unstoppable growth. A small self-governing county of only 26 square miles, Arlington has been a bustling bedroom community of Washington, D.C., ever since around the time of the Second World War, when the construction of the Pentagon drew thousands of federal workers to the nation's capital and the county began to rapidly urbanize. For most of the 20th century, Arlington's central commercial district—its “downtown”—centered in its Clarendon neighborhood, which once boasted major department stores such as Sears and J.C. Penney.

By the 1970s, however, the Clarendon commercial district was in a period of decline caused largely by growing competition from regional malls and ongoing construction of the D.C. Metro subway system, which tore up Arlington streets and kept away shoppers. This coincided with a wave of Vietnamese immigration to Arlington, precipitated by the availability of sponsor families that helped immigrants get settled and the affordability of abandoned storefront

**My-An (left) started as fabrics store and then expanded as a cafe. It, as with Vietnam Alterations, was established by Vietnamese entrepreneurs in Arlington, Virginia's Little Saigon.**

PHOTOS COURTESY MICHAEL HORSLEY



retail spaces in Clarendon. There, Vietnamese entrepreneurs established a thriving commercial enclave that included grocery stores, gift shops, and restaurants—an area that became known informally as Little Saigon.

But it didn't last. About a decade after the fall of Saigon, the Vietnamese community in Arlington largely moved on to establish a commercial center in Falls Church, Virginia, in neighboring Fairfax County, leaving almost no trace in Arlington. This has posed a challenge to historic resource managers and preservationists who want to commemorate the important imprint that the Vietnamese community made in Arlington in the immediate years after the Vietnam War.

### **ARRIVAL IN ARLINGTON**

After a protracted military conflict that would see more than [3.4 million U.S. soldiers](#) deployed to Southeast Asia, the South Vietnamese capital of Saigon capitulated to the North Vietnamese army on April 30, 1975. This event led to the first major exodus from Vietnam, in which hundreds of thousands of Vietnamese refugees sought safe havens in the United States and elsewhere. This first group of refugees tended to be better educated than the later arrivals, and had connections to government and military personnel. About 125,000 refugees came to the United States [in this first wave of Vietnamese immigration](#).

The U.S. military quickly set up refugee relocation centers in Guam, the Philippines, Thailand, Wake Island, and Hawaii. Once processed through those ports, refugees were sent to one of four resettlement centers in the United States: Camp Pendleton in California, Eglin Air Force Base in Florida, Fort Chaffee in Arkansas, or Fort Indiantown Gap in Pennsylvania. From there, unless they were financially independent, refugees were matched with sponsors—often families, church groups, or social-services organizations—which helped the new arrivals to get settled, enroll children in school, and find work.

The second wave of Vietnamese immigration included thousands more refugees, who came via camps all over Southeast Asia. They often arrived by boat, thus earning the common description

of refugees from Vietnam and neighboring countries as “boat people.” More than 800,000 people left Vietnam by boat between 1975 and 1997.<sup>1</sup>

Large Vietnamese populations settled in southern California (primarily in Orange County, which is still home to [the largest concentration of Vietnamese](#) in the United States), as well as in and around other cities such as Houston; Portland, Oregon; and New Orleans. In the Washington, D.C., area, most Vietnamese refugees settled in Northern Virginia, predominantly in Arlington, Alexandria, and Falls Church, because of their proximity to the nation’s capital and the availability of U.S. sponsor services, financial aid, and other assistance.

### CREATING A COMMUNITY

The first Vietnamese immigrants to arrive in Arlington quickly realized that Clarendon’s vacant and low-rent buildings offered business opportunities. By early 1975, two Vietnamese grocery stores had been established in Clarendon: Saigon Market, operated by a secretary from the Vietnamese embassy, and Vietnam Center, managed by the Vietnamese wife of a CIA employee. “Many of us wanted to stay together—to form something like a Chinatown,” Dung Luong, who helped to develop Saigon Market, told the *Washington Post* in 1981.<sup>2</sup> Several of these businesses were established in local buildings that date to the 1920s and 1930s, adding another layer of significance to these historic structures.

**In the mid 1970s, two Vietnamese businesses, the Saigon Market and the Pacific department store, helped anchor and establish Little Saigon.**

PHOTOS COURTESY MICHAEL HORSLEY



In 1977 the Pacific department store opened in Clarendon in a two-story building, selling imported food, antiques, fabric, and wedding items. The upper floor featured a billiard hall. Other shops soon opened, places with names like Lotus Imports, Dat Hung Jewelry, Saigon Souvenir, My-An Fabrics, and Mekong Center. Family sponsors, refugee assistance groups, and the Catholic Charities regularly organized trips that brought immigrants to Clarendon to shop, and word quickly spread about the area's offerings. Once Little Saigon was established, more Vietnamese restaurants opened in Clarendon, lasting into the 1990s, including popular establishments called Queen Bee, Little Viet Garden, Café Saigon, and Nam Viet. There, customers—both Vietnamese and non-Vietnamese—could sample Vietnam's signature dishes, including *cha gio* (spring rolls ), *pho* (soup ), and *banh mi* (sandwiches).

Former refugee Toa Do talked about Arlington's Little Saigon in an oral history interview: "There's a coffee shop that is selling [traditional Vietnamese] coffee with the condensed milk, and then if you sit there and you listen to the Vietnamese music and bring your coffee, you feel like you're back in Saigon again if you close your eyes. So I think that was the magnet, because my family, my wife and the two boys, they were in Vietnam at the time...You could still see the display of the yellow flag of the former South Vietnam, and then you could also hear all the music, and from time to time you would see people in the long traditional dress...so you could feel very much at home."<sup>3</sup>

In 1986, after opening one of the first restaurants in Little Saigon, My-An, Richard Nguyen's parents then established [Nam-Viet](#) restaurant, now the only restaurant from the Little Saigon era that remains in Arlington. Nguyen is now the general manager. "Growing up, some of the [business] owners had kids my age, and... you would literally sit at a table or a corner spot in where the restaurant was or your business was, and you would just do your homework," Nguyen recalled in an oral history interview. "It was very close knit. You knew everybody down the street. You knew everybody across the street. You knew their family. You knew their extended family."<sup>4</sup>

In addition to providing Vietnamese immigrants with self-sufficiency and comfort in their new land, the presence of the growing Vietnamese community paved the way for changes in government programs that have created a generally immigrant-friendly environment in Arlington ever since. One significant early program was the Vietnamese Community Center established at Arlington’s Page Elementary School. Vietnamese resources were also included in the public schools’ English as a Second Language program. (Now, the current iteration of that program serves students representing about [90 background languages](#).)

After the Vietnamese community became established, Arlington County also set up the Indochinese Refugee Cooperative Education Program in the Arlington Career Center, which was designed to help refugees find jobs as well as deal with depression and other problems associated with the trauma of leaving home. This program then became the [Refugee Education and Employment Program](#) (REEP) and is now called the Arlington Education and Employment Program (although it still goes by acronym REEP), which teaches life and workplace skills to immigrant communities.

**FINDING EDEN**

After years of planning and construction, the first section of the D.C. Metro rail system [opened in 1976](#), with new stations added in succession and radiating outward from the urban core over the following years (a process that continues with below- and above-ground rail lines to this day).

On December 1, 1979, the long-awaited Clarendon Metro Station opened, ending the construction-related upheaval that facilitated the Vietnamese shops locating there in the first place. Once the Metro opened in Arlington, county government and local developers quickly worked to revitalize the neighbor-



**During construction of the Clarendon Metro Station, the upheaval resulted in low-rent opportunities for Vietnamese immigrants and entrepreneurs.**

PHOTO COURTESY ARLINGTON PUBLIC LIBRARY

hood, which they viewed as an essential hub in a long-term plan for transit-oriented development. Landlords, in due course, began raising the rents on Vietnamese shopkeepers. In 1975, for example, a Clarendon storefront could be rented for as little as \$5 a square foot. By 1989 that same retail space would go for \$25 per square foot.<sup>5</sup>

Eventually, like a house of cards, the Vietnamese establishments bowed to this pressure and folded. By 1995, two decades after the fall of Saigon, only a few restaurants remained. By 2015 only one holdout from the Little Saigon era still stood—Nam Viet restaurant. All around it, Clarendon had transformed from a low-rise, mid-century shopping district to today’s high-rise mecca of apartment and commercial buildings, upscale restaurants, and chic stores, all centered on the Metro station.

The transformation was keenly felt by the Vietnamese community. “They felt sad,” said former refugee Kim Cook in an oral history interview. “The ones who helped set it up felt like we were losing the country the second time. The first location that we had as a community in America [was] gone.”<sup>6</sup>

Around 1982 several Vietnamese investors pooled their resources and purchased a fading supermarket in Falls Church, about five miles west of Clarendon, to open a new “Little Saigon”—which they would call Eden Center. The center was named after the Eden Arcade, a once-prominent retail area in Saigon (which has now been demolished). The location was convenient to many Vietnamese in the area, who had generally moved deeper into the western suburbs of Washington. By 1984, 60 percent of local Vietnamese lived within three miles of Eden Center, according to geography professor Dr. Joseph Wood.<sup>7</sup>

Since then [Eden Center](#) has become the primary community gathering place for Vietnamese in Northern Virginia and the mid-Atlantic region, now including more than 120 Vietnamese shops and restaurants (and a few related to Korean or Chinese goods) in a strip mall that is still growing. In addition to an elaborate lion’s gate at its entryway, two flagpoles stand in the parking lot—one with the American flag, the other with the yellow-and-red banner of the pre-Communist Republic of Vietnam.



**Eden Center has become the primary community gathering place for Vietnamese in Northern Virginia.**

PHOTO BY KIM O'CONNELL

This is, by most accounts, a happy ending to the story of Vietnamese immigration to Arlington in the tumultuous years after the fall of Saigon. But a growing effort has sought to recognize the importance of Arlington's role in this success story.

### **REVIVING LITTLE SAIGON**

Over the last five years, there have been a variety of efforts, some tied to the 40th anniversary of the end of the Vietnam War in 2015, to commemorate the intangible heritage of Arlington's Vietnamese community. These have including storytelling, exhibits, and events, taking place, whenever possible, in Little Saigon's original location and places.

In 2014 Dr. Elizabeth Morton, director of Virginia Tech's Urban Planning program, led her graduate students in collecting more than a dozen oral history interviews with members of the Vietnamese community. Interviewees talked about leaving Vietnam, settling in northern Virginia, and their memories of Little Saigon, either as a business owner, patron, or employee. The collection of oral history interviews is now housed (in both audio and transcript form) at the Arlington Public Library's Center for Local History. It has also been widely used in outreach efforts, as described below.

Most of the Clarendon buildings that housed the Vietnamese shops pre-dated the Little Saigon era and remain in use today by other businesses. Although they are mostly not protected by local preservation designations, there is abundant local and government

interest in preserving and adaptively reusing them. But there has been little recognition of their historic significance to the Vietnamese community. In 2015 Virginia Tech student Judd Ullom, who had participated in the oral history project, created a “living museum” in which he edited the [oral histories into video and audio stories](#). Furthermore, to connect this history to the buildings where events took place, Ullom created a series of colorful stickers with QR codes that were placed in the front windows of current Clarendon businesses that once housed Vietnamese establishments (for which owners and managers were generally supportive). Patrons and passersby could scan the codes with their mobile phones and be taken to the Little Saigon Clarendon site to hear oral history snippets and view more about the Vietnamese experience.

In 2015, to recognize the 40th anniversary of the fall of Saigon, Arlington County staff worked with a local Vietnamese artist, Khanh Le, to create a [temporary public art installation](#) in the Clarendon Metro Station plaza, which was unveiled in a public program. Le used historic photographs of Little Saigon to create three-dimensional miniature buildings that recreated what Clarendon looked like after the Vietnam War. He also incorporated audio files from the oral histories into the artwork, allowing visitors to walk around a version of Little Saigon and be transported back to that time and place.

That same year, Arlington County’s Historic Preservation Program and Cultural Affairs Program jointly won a grant from the Virginia Foundation for the Humanities to produce a 28-page

illustrated booklet, *Echoes of Little Saigon*, based on the oral histories collected by the Virginia Tech students, additional interviews, and archival research.

**In 2015, local Vietnamese artist, Khanh Le created a temporary public art installation in the Clarendon Metro Station plaza, using historic photographs of Little Saigon to build three-dimensional miniature buildings recreating what Clarendon looked like after the Vietnam War.**

PHOTO COURTESY ALIZA SCHIFF



Drawing on my training in historic preservation and background as the daughter of a Vietnamese immigrant, I have been involved in many of these efforts, including serving as an advisor to the oral history project and author of the booklet. I have participated in several public programs about Little Saigon in general and the booklet in particular, including a lecture at Arlington Central Library, a panel discussion called “We Are All Arlington,” a table at Arlington’s annual Mid-Autumn Festival (a traditional Vietnamese children’s festival), an interview with a local public radio food program called “Melting Pot,” and a panel discussion and [video](#) produced by WETA, the D.C.-area PBS station.

Although decentralized and often temporary, these efforts are nevertheless building a coalition of shared understanding and interest among Arlington County government, members of the Vietnamese community, and the general public that will likely support future preservation efforts that are more lasting. Future projects that have been discussed in the county include the creation and installation of a permanent public artwork or historical marker acknowledging the Little Saigon period in Arlington, as well as the possible nomination of Nam Viet restaurant to the National Register of Historic Places. If these projects are successful, it would largely be due to the extensive groundwork that a determined group of preservationists and scholars has done already to preserve the intangible heritage of this indelible community. FJ

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The daughter of a Vietnamese immigrant, KIM O’CONNELL is a journalist based in Arlington, Virginia, who is writing a book about Vietnamese heritage. In spring 2019, she was a Virginia Humanities fellow researching Vietnamese immigration history at the Library of Virginia in Richmond. She holds a master’s degree in historic preservation from Goucher College. She can be reached at [kim@greenquill.com](mailto:kim@greenquill.com).

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