

**CATCHING TWO FISH WITH TWO HANDS:
Preserving Vietnamese Heritage in
Virginia's Little Saigon**

*A Cultural Heritage Assessment for the Vietnamese Community
in the Clarendon Neighborhood of Arlington, Virginia
(1975-1980)*

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Introduction

In the wake of the Vietnam War, Vietnamese refugees immigrated to the United States by the thousands. Settling in California, Texas, Virginia, and elsewhere, Vietnamese immigrants struggled to preserve their traditions, even as they assimilated into American life. Often, conflicts arose, both between the Vietnamese and other residents, and within the Vietnamese community itself. In 1977, a Vietnamese Catholic priest, living in Alexandria, Virginia, used a Vietnamese proverb to describe the phenomenon: “You can’t catch two fish with two hands.”¹

Before 1975, only about 15,000 Vietnamese immigrants lived in the United States. By 1980, about 245,000 Vietnamese lived here, with about 91 percent of the population having arrived in the previous five years.² The vast majority of Vietnamese settled in California, with other large populations in Texas, Louisiana, and northern Virginia. The first waves of Vietnamese settlement in Washington, D.C.—and nearby Arlington County, Virginia, in particular—occurred between 1975 and 1980.³

Although the local Vietnamese population continued to grow in the decades since 1980, Vietnamese immigrants and their children were increasingly dispersed and assimilated into American society. The five years after the end of the Vietnam War represent the period of greatest change and challenge for Vietnamese Americans, which drove the creation of ethnic enclaves for familiarity and support.

The First and Second Waves of Immigration

When Vietnamese refugees first began arriving in April 1975, the U.S. government had organized refugee camps to offer temporary shelter to the new arrivals, including Camp Pendleton in California and Indiantown Gap in Pennsylvania. The camps met refugees’ basic needs for food and medical assistance, and they often offered educational services and religious programs as well. From there, Vietnamese refugees could enter U.S. society by either proving their financial independence or being sponsored by voluntary agencies, which represented religious, ethnic, or social-services organizations.⁴

According to one report, about 134,000 refugees came to the United States in the so-called first wave of Vietnamese immigration, which lasted from 1975 to 1978. The immigrants in this first wave were generally well educated and often had ties to the U.S. government, including lawyers and engineers, high-ranking Vietnamese officers, and war brides.⁵ Many Vietnamese settled in northern Virginia because of its proximity to the nation’s capital and the availability of U.S. sponsor services, financial aid, and logistical assistance. For some refugees from Saigon, the former capital of Vietnam, living near the capital of the United States seemed like a fitting choice.⁶ Religion was also a factor. Catholic churches in Virginia often sponsored Westernized Vietnamese who were practicing Catholics.⁷

¹ Kaiser, Robert G. “Some Who Fled War Find Assimilating Difficult in U.S.,” *The Washington Post* (1 May 1977), A1.

² Herbert Barringer, Robert W. Gardner, and Michael J. Levin, *Asian and Pacific Islanders in the United States* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1993), 46.

³ Barringer, 112.

⁴ Hien Duc Do, *The Vietnamese Americans* (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1999), 33-37.

⁵ America Appreciation Day Organizing Committee. *America Appreciation Day* report. July 1999, 35.

⁶ Thuy Dinh, interview by author, Oakton, Va. November 2, 2003.

⁷ Meyers, Jessica. “Pho and Apple Pie: Eden Center as a Representation of Vietnamese-American Ethnic Identity in the Washington, D.C., Metropolitan Area from 1975 to the Present,” *Goshen College Undergraduate Symposium Annual* (April 2003).

A second wave of immigration began around 1978 and included thousands more refugees, who often arrived on boats—thus the term “boat people”—and were generally less educated. This group included both ethnic Chinese from Vietnam and native Vietnamese who sought to escape persecution by the Communist regime. Although the actual number of refugees that escaped during this period is disputed, between 10 and 50 percent of second-wave refugees likely perished during their voyage, from drowning, starvation, and other causes.⁸ Refugees that made it to the United States faced a difficult economy, which had worsened since the first wave arrived a couple years earlier. Finding increased competition and experiencing a greater learning curve than earlier arrivals, this new wave of Vietnamese began to assimilate and disperse with greater frequency.⁹ As one report stated, many second-wave immigrants were “young, orphaned, and virtually pre-programmed to go wrong regardless of where they settled in America.”¹⁰

Vietnamese refugees faced a double crisis, according to sociologist Ruben Rumbaut. First, they had to deal with the issues of survival faced by all immigrants. But because they were also refugees, who were forced to flee instead of coming on their own free will, they faced a greater sense of loss—having left community, home, family, friends, social status, work, and material possessions back in Vietnam.¹¹ Unlike other Asian immigrants, the Vietnamese had relatively little time to prepare for their migration. “Thus Vietnamese have had a greater need to live in enclaves than other Asians who have entered the U.S. for family reunification or occupational reasons,” according to *Asians and Pacific Islanders in the United States*.¹² Furthermore, Vietnamese often faced an unreceptive environment once they arrived here. In 1975, a Gallup Poll showed that 54 percent of all Americans opposed Vietnamese settlement in the United States.¹³

A Vietnamese Village in Virginia

Most Vietnamese entered the United States as part of an extended family network, which was often broken up by the sponsoring and resettlement process. Even the social networks developed during the immigration process or while in the refugee camps were disrupted once groups were sponsored and relocated. This led Vietnamese to create communities wherever they settled. “The cradle of the traditional Vietnamese society was the village,” writes Hien Duc Do in *The Vietnamese Americans*, “the place that provided the individual with a sense of community and security in a potentially hostile environment.”¹⁴

Before the end of the Vietnam War, most Vietnamese who lived in the United States were war brides, students, military officers in training, or related to Vietnamese diplomats, according to Nguyen Ngoc Bich, an author and former director of the Vietnamese Service at Radio Free Asia, who came to the United States as a student in the 1950s. In early 1975, he recalls, “in the Washington area, there had to be no more than 3,000 Vietnamese. But 3,000 out of only 20,000 [nationwide] was a large drawing force. A lot of people came here because they had family here.

⁸ Hien Duc Do, 28.

⁹ Meyers.

¹⁰ Phillips, Ward. “The Many Sides of Eden,” *New Dominion* (Summer 1992), 32.

¹¹ Freeman, James M. *Hearts of Sorrow: Vietnamese-American Lives* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1989), 11.

¹² Barringer, 130.

¹³ Hien Duc Do, 29-30.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 10, 39-41.

They had to keep themselves afloat so they opened businesses in Arlington, and at that time it was *the* bedroom community of Washington, D.C.”¹⁵

The Clarendon neighborhood was Arlington County’s “downtown.” Since the 1920s, Clarendon had been the premier shopping district in northern Virginia, spurred by the rise of the automobile and, later, the influx of national stores such as Sears and J.C. Penney. By the early 1970s, however, Clarendon had fallen into a period of decline, suffering competition from regional shopping centers that often were near major highways and offered ample parking.¹⁶

By early 1975, two Vietnamese grocery stores had been established in the neighborhood: Saigon Market, which was run by a secretary from the Vietnamese embassy, and Vietnam Center, run by the Vietnamese wife of a CIA employee.¹⁷ As Vietnamese began to settle in the area, Clarendon was a natural focal point, and embassy officials often pointed new refugees in the direction of Arlington. By that time, construction of a station on the Metro subway line had torn up Clarendon streets, and more companies had moved out of the area. As a result, landlords were willing to lease storefronts to Vietnamese at affordable prices, often for short-term monthly or half-yearly contracts.¹⁸ Clarendon quickly became a haven of Vietnamese restaurants and shops that was known informally as “Little Saigon.”¹⁹

Fostering Community in Little Saigon

The notion of family, in Vietnam, is more extensive than the tight nuclear family common in American life. A typical Vietnamese family could include several generations living in the same house, and it could even be expanded to include members of the local village. In Vietnam, the husband is the head of the family, working and taking care of the finances, while the wife runs the home and takes care of the children.²⁰ In the United States, however, both Vietnamese men and women found themselves running shops and working to pay the bills. Both Saigon Market and Vietnam Center, for instance, were opened and operated by women. Yet the growing Clarendon village also fostered the traditional extended-family atmosphere with which Vietnamese were comfortable.

In 1977, the Pacific department store opened in Clarendon, quickly becoming the centerpiece of Vietnamese society. The two-story structure sold imported food, antiques, fabric, and wedding/trousseau materials, with a café and billiard hall on the upper floor. At times, a Vietnamese rock band called the “Uptights” would often play upstairs.²¹ “The Chinese have something called ‘Chinatown,’” Pacific proprietor Nguyen Van Hoan said at the time. “We would like to have something similar to that. The Vietnamese people miss Vietnam....So we’re trying to create that ambience and give them a place where they can feel at home.”²²

¹⁵ Nguyen Ngoc Bich, interview by author, Springfield, Va., October 21, 2003.

¹⁶ Historic Affairs and Landmark Review Board. *Historic Resources in the Clarendon Commercial District*, Arlington County, Virginia (May 1985), 8-9.

¹⁷ Meyers.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Meyers.

²⁰ Hien Duc Do, 10.

²¹ Dinh interview.

²² “Vietnamese Department Store Opens on Wilson Boulevard,” *The Washington Post* (22 December 1977), page unknown.

“Vietnamese love their fresh food,” says Nguyen Ngoc Bich, who often represented the Vietnamese community in Arlington in the 1970s. “If we can afford it and are close enough, we try to go to the market every day. But there is a bigger reason for that too. Because when you go to market you run into a lot of friends. There is a lot of crying, people embracing each other, yelling, saying ‘What happened to you since the fall of Saigon?’ and ‘When is the last time I saw you in Vietnam?’ It’s all very emotional like that.”²³

Anhthu Lu came to northern Virginia from Vietnam in 1975, when she was 16 years old. To her, Clarendon was a welcoming place. “Being in the country for the first time, and it was such a comfort to see something I could read and relate to,” she says. “After a while we moved to Falls Church [a neighboring suburb], but Clarendon remained the place for us. We could only afford to go every weekend, not only to get groceries, but to seek comfort. It was like a meeting place for all Vietnamese in the area.” By 1978, Anhthu’s aunt had opened the Kim Long gift shop in the building that now houses the Café Dalat Vietnamese restaurant.²⁴

By 1979, other Clarendon stores included Lotus Imports, an Asian home-furnishings shop; Dat Hung Jewelry, which sold jewels quickly salvaged by the owner from his store in Vietnam; Saigon Souvenir, specializing in gold chains and necklaces; and Mekong Center, an all-purpose store that sold both Vietnamese and Chinese staples. After the Metro system was completed in Arlington, a *Washington Post* article highlighted the Vietnamese shops as a reason to stop in Clarendon.²⁵

Khuc Minh Tho, a 22-year employee of Arlington County Social Services and founder of the Families of Vietnamese Political Prisoners Association, remembers coming to the United States in 1977. Her two daughters remained in Vietnam until the 1980s. To ease her sadness, Tho found herself seeking family ties in Arlington and visiting the Clarendon shops often. “Places all around didn’t have the Vietnamese groceries [like Arlington did], so [Vietnamese] came to Clarendon from all around, especially to Mekong Center, which was the biggest,” she remembers.²⁶

Some refugee-sponsoring organizations took immigrants to Clarendon so that they could purchase food and other goods. One organization, the Church of the Blessed Sacrament in Alexandria, Virginia, assigned different people to attend to various needs for Vietnamese immigrants, whether religion, housing, education, or culture. Thuy Dinh, a lawyer who now lives in Oakton, Virginia, recalls a church official who escorted families to shop in Clarendon. “We didn’t know the area that well, and everywhere we went we were driven, so we thought Clarendon was really far away [from Alexandria],” Dinh recalls. “So we went there, and it was like paradise, with Saigon Market, Pacific, and Vietnam Center. And we got what we needed, including one bottle of fish sauce. When we got home, my grandfather said, ‘Be sure to use that one bottle of fish sauce only for feasts and special occasions.’ We survived on that one bottle of fish sauce. We did go back [to Clarendon], but the first time we went we thought we could never go back there, and we were very deferential, and didn’t want to be a burden on the church.”²⁷

²³ Bich interview.

²⁴ Anhthu Lu, interview by author, Arlington, Virginia, 19 November 2003.

²⁵ Hemingway, Sandra. “Arlington’s Oriental Food, Trade Shops,” *The Washington Star* (18 October 1979), page unknown.

²⁶ Khuc Minh Tho, interview by author, Falls Church, Virginia, 10 November 2003.

²⁷ Dinh interview.

Traditions and Commemorations

Clarendon's development as an ethnic enclave can also be viewed in the larger context of Arlington County's institutionalized efforts to provide for the Vietnamese and protect their traditions. For example, the county established a Vietnamese Community Center at Page Elementary School in Arlington in 1976, which hosted cultural events and boasted a well-used Vietnamese reading room.²⁸ Arlington also hired a Vietnamese-speaking employee to serve in its Office of Consumer Affairs in 1978.²⁹

Clarendon and other Arlington neighborhoods often hosted Vietnamese celebrations and commemorations, including the annual Tet festival, which recognizes the Lunar New Year. At a 1979 Tet celebration, held at Arlington's Jefferson Intermediate School, elderly Vietnamese men came dressed in ceremonial blue caftans over white trousers. The ritual involved the burning of incense and a traditional drum-based chant. Money left over from the admission prices to the festival was sent to help other refugees.³⁰ Nguyen Ngoc Bich says that such festivals drew attendees from Maine to Miami. "The festivals were one of the few times when you felt steeped in your culture," he says. "You felt totally at ease, because at first, people said that speaking English was a sport because you had to practice your mouth muscles and it was so painful."³¹

Arlington County also hosted an annual Vietnamese "Women's Day" festival, which replicated the traditional "Trung sisters" ceremony. According to Vietnamese history, the Trung sisters organized the Vietnamese people into a rebellion that forced the Chinese out of the country in 40 A.D. The Women's Day celebration began in Vietnam in the 1950s and still continues there. During the Arlington celebration in 1978, for example, women in ceremonial dress made offerings to the Trung sisters, followed by Vietnamese youth performing Western music. The ceremony was organized by Thuy Long, who said she didn't mind that Vietnamese and American traditions were blending. "We should learn the beautiful culture of America and keep ours too," she said. "The U.S. is like a garden of flowers. Everyone should bring their own flower to it and enjoy the flowers brought by others."³²

Challenges for Vietnamese

Even as they reached out to Vietnamese, Arlington County officials were concerned that the influx of refugees was putting unexpected burdens on three primary areas of county government—the health department, the welfare department, and the school system.³³ Increasingly, local residents resented the impacts of the Vietnamese on county resources as well. For instance, Arlington's Buckingham Community, one of the county's oldest garden apartment complexes, became popular with local Vietnamese. As Vietnamese began moving into the development in greater numbers, members of the Ku Klux Klan picketed the community.

²⁸ Bich interview.

²⁹ Boodman, Sandra G. "Vietnamese Ask Board for Bilingual Learning Program in Arlington," *The Washington Post* (9 March 1978), page unknown.

³⁰ Chenoweth, Karin. "Vietnamese Ring in New Year." *Arlington Journal* (31 January 1979), page unknown.

³¹ Bich interview.

³² Swanson, Susan. "Vietnamese Celebrate 'Women's Day' in Old and New Ways," *The Washington Post* (March 16, 1978).

³³ Flinner, Susan. "Vietnamese a Burden on County Programs," *The Arlington News*, September 18, 1975 (Volume 28, Number 38).

Residents, some of whom had lived there since its construction in 1937, argued that the influx of foreign-born residents had led to overcrowding and decreased maintenance.³⁴

“There’s definitely resentment among some of the older Arlingtonians,” Ron Sidle, owner of the Quality Men’s Shop in Clarendon, told *The Washington Post* in 1981. “Some of my customers say things about the Vietnamese similar to what I heard them say 20 years ago about the Jews, things like, ‘They don’t belong in Arlington.’”³⁵ Nguyen Van Hoan, owner of the Pacific Oriental Store, said in 1978 that he had grossed \$1 million. “But the appearance of success is also a cause of envy and resentment,” he noted. “The Indochinese and other immigrants and refugees have not received a fond embrace by Arlingtonians. Instead they have been greeted with a cold shoulder.”³⁶

Vietnamese also experienced conflicts within their own community. Despite efforts to hold onto their heritage, Vietnamese often felt torn about assimilating into American life. While younger people increasingly separated from the enclave environment, older Vietnamese held on to traditions. “I don’t change my traditional ways; I still keep them,” an elderly Vietnamese refugee wrote. “My children have adapted to American customs in hair styles and dress. When I was on the island of Guam, I heard women say, ‘Now most Vietnamese women in the U.S.A. will [dress like men].’ And that is true; they dress according to what the people here do, except older women like me, who keep our old ways.”³⁷

A common symbol of this phenomenon was the fact that many Vietnamese chose to change their names so that they would be easier for Americans to pronounce. Suong Thomas, an Arlington County librarian, has long gone by the name of “Sunny.” And this author’s Vietnamese mother, named Huong, adopted the name of “Rose” upon arrival to the United States, a name she used until the early 1980s. Vietnamese often experienced a kind of “psychological tension,” as the *Washington Post* reported, upon settling in the United States—feeling uncomfortable in their new American surroundings but understanding that they were unable to return home.³⁸ In light of these internal and external tensions, Clarendon’s role as a central gathering place for Vietnamese becomes even more significant.

Assimilation and Dispersal

Just as Vietnamese Americans were creating a village atmosphere in Clarendon, the completed Metro line was spurring the fast-paced urban growth that would eventually lead the Vietnamese community to move out of Clarendon. Around 1982, as the Clarendon neighborhood began its ongoing transformation into an upscale residential and commercial district, many Vietnamese shop owners and residents moved farther west to Falls Church and other Virginia suburbs. Nguyen Ngoc Bich notes that, with rising rents, only a few businesses were successful enough to stay. “Those who stayed, like Queen Bee and Nam-Viet [restaurant] and so forth, are people who did very well in business,” he says. “The Pacific department store moved to Columbia Pike

³⁴ Boodman, Sandra G. “Newcomers Settle in Old Development,” *The Washington Post* (29 December 1977), page unknown.

³⁵ Boodman, Sandra G. “Refugees Crowd Arlington’s ‘Mekong Delta,’” *The Washington Post* (23 September 1978), A1.

³⁶ DeBaggio, Thomas. “Life After Death for Arlington?” *The Arlington News*, September 27, 1979.

³⁷ Freeman, 372.

³⁸ Kaiser, Robert G. “Some Who Fled War Find Assimilating Difficult in U.S.,” *The Washington Post* (1 May 1977), A1.

[a corridor in the southern part of the county] and become Global Market. It was purely economic factors at play.”

Since then, the chief gathering place for Vietnamese within driving distance of northern Virginia has been the Eden Center, a strip mall in Falls Church that includes more than 100 shops and restaurants. The Center is similar to a famous shopping center in Ho Chi Minh City—called Ben Thanh Market—and includes two flagpoles that wave the banners of both the United States and the pre-Communist Republic of Vietnam.³⁹

“When we moved out of Clarendon, we weren’t sure where to move to,” Bich recalls. “Then we discovered the Grand Union supermarket that, for some reason, didn’t succeed. We didn’t have too much money, but we [and other Vietnamese] pooled our resources and bought that supermarket and turned it into Eden Center. People came there who used to go to Saigon Market and Pacific Center, and that pretty soon drew a large crowd. You go there for all things related to the Vietnamese—groceries, snacks, coffee, CDs, gifts, jewelry done in Vietnamese fashions.”⁴⁰

The Eden Center remains a popular gathering place and shopping area for increasingly far-flung Vietnamese. Today, Vietnamese Americans can be found throughout the greater Washington, D.C., area—with clusters found in such suburbs as Wheaton or Silver Spring, Maryland, in addition to Falls Church and Arlington. “We don’t have the needs we had in 1975, where we need to gather in one place like Saigon Market to get the latest news,” Bich says. “Now we have about 15 weekly newspapers, a 24-hour news service. That kind of media replaces the closeness we felt we needed in 1975.”⁴¹

Historic Buildings with Vietnamese Significance

In 1985, the Arlington County Historic Affairs and Landmark Review Board (HALRB) published the results of a comprehensive survey of historic buildings in the Clarendon neighborhood. The goal of the survey was to identify the most significant historic structures that contributed to Clarendon’s historic identity as a continually evolving retail district. The report noted that Clarendon has maintained its identity as a commercial center since the 1920s, a trend that was rejuvenated in the 1970s by the influx of Southeast Asian merchants. The board recommended that Clarendon be nominated as a historic district on the basis of its architectural integrity and its significance as an “indication of Arlington’s growing importance as a major suburban community.”⁴² Although the board was not able to convince county officials to designate Clarendon as a historic district, a couple buildings (including the Clarendon Post Office) were locally landmarked.

The HALRB report notes that Clarendon’s buildings are significant because they represent the architectural development of a suburban community. The historic commercial area featured both early 20th-century Colonial Revival structures and Art Deco and Streamline Moderne buildings from the 1930s and 1940s. Many of these structures retain integrity, although their storefronts have often been altered by additional signage.⁴³ The significance of some of these structures has

³⁹ Meyers.

⁴⁰ Bich interview.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Historic Affairs and Landmark Review Board, 1, 3-4.

⁴³ Ibid., 3.

been further enhanced by their association with the Vietnamese immigrant experience in northern Virginia.

For example, the Rucker Building, built in 1925, is a two-story brick building that is notable for its tripartite windows set in concrete arches (see Figure 1). The building is significant, according to HALRB, for its association with George Rucker, who, along with Ashton Jones and N.A. Rees, developed much of the Clarendon neighborhood. The building typifies the classic Clarendon commercial structure, with retail on the first floor and offices on the second level.⁴⁴ Both the Queen Bee restaurant and Kim Ngoc Jewelry were housed in this structure, and Queen Bee remains a mainstay among the revolving shops that have used this building's storefronts.

Odd Fellows Hall, also built in 1925, is significant for the embossed arches found in its second-story windows (see Figure 2). The building, HALRB noted, is "compatible in scale, proportion, and materials with the remainder of the block." Like the Rucker building, the building allowed first-level retail, which operated out of three separate bays, with meeting space for community groups on the upper level.⁴⁵ During the height of Little Saigon's heyday, Odd Fellows Hall housed Saigon Souvenir, which specialized in traditional and hand-carved Vietnamese jewelry.⁴⁶

The Rees Building is one of the most distinctive structures on the Clarendon commercial strip (see Figure 3). Built in 1929 in a Colonial Revival style, the building features notable detailing, including quoined corners, a swan's neck parapet, and a dentiled projecting cornice. According to HALRB, the building is significant for its architectural detailing and its association with N.A. Rees, who helped to develop Clarendon in its early years.⁴⁷ In the 1970s, the building housed Saigon Market, one of the first two Vietnamese stores to operate in Clarendon.⁴⁸

Another significant structure, according to HALRB, was the Underwood Building, built in 1939 (see Figure 4). This Streamline Moderne structure features alternating bands of color, texture, and materials and is a "substantial architectural landmark" in Clarendon.⁴⁹ The building now houses Café Saigon. Although this restaurant was built after the 1970s, it indicates the ongoing Vietnamese presence in the area.

Other, more recent Vietnamese establishments, such as Café Dalat (formerly the Kim Long store; see Figure 5) can still be found in structures that, if not architecturally significant, do not detract from the historic flavor of Clarendon, while offering more evidence of the Vietnamese association with the area. One store, Dat Hung Jewelry, has persisted since the 1970s, despite its diminutive size (see Figure 6), which is thrown into even greater relief by the high-rise office towers being built all around it.

Preserving Vietnamese Heritage

The Vietnamese community is well versed in the preservation of its cultural heritage through art, music, and festivals. Yet a growing historic preservation movement has also accounted for the restoration and interpretation of several important structures and historic districts in Vietnam—

⁴⁴ Ibid., appendix.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Hemingway.

⁴⁷ HALRB, appendix.

⁴⁸ Hemingway.

⁴⁹ HALRB, appendix.

such as the coastal village of Hoi An, which was restored and declared a national historic site in 1985.⁵⁰ Working with the international community, Hanoi has also begun to determine long-term preservation options for the capital's Ancient Quarter and historic districts in other cities, such as Hue.⁵¹

It stands to reason that, given the growing Vietnamese awareness of historic preservation, the local community would embrace a preservation effort related to the refugee experience in northern Virginia. Nguyen Ngoc Bich believes that a commemoration would be appreciated by the Vietnamese community, but he believes the opportunity may be disappearing. "We are nearly past that stage with Clarendon, because some of the same buildings are there, but I don't think the buildings will last very long," he says. "There's a little park there [near the Clarendon Metro plaza], where you could have some kind of monument that showed the face of the old Clarendon, so that at least there is something that marks that the Vietnamese had come there and flourished. It's part of Arlington history, not just Vietnamese community history."⁵²

Anhthu Lu believes that even a small gesture would be important to the Vietnamese. "The flagpole [at the Eden Center] reminds us constantly of our heritage and where we come from," she says. "If they ever change Clarendon, I would love to see a plaque to say this was the first settlement for Vietnamese in this area. Those two blocks meant a lot to us at a time when we had nothing."⁵³

The Vietnamese refugee experience has been commemorated in other locations around the world. For example, Ottawa, Canada, features a monument of a Vietnamese refugee holding a child. In a Malaysian refugee camp, a monument is shaped like a refugee boat. Nguyen Ngoc Bich believes that a monument like one of these could be suitable for Clarendon. Another option would be to build a museum or even a display for a local school or library, using artifacts to document the Vietnamese immigrant/refugee experience in Arlington. Bich himself has a collection of more than 200 items related to Vietnamese history and the war, which he is hoping to one day donate to a Vietnamese history museum in the United States.⁵⁴

Recommendations

The Clarendon neighborhood has long been recognized for the architectural integrity of its historic buildings, as well as its central role in the ongoing urbanization of Arlington County. Yet the Vietnamese refugee experience in Clarendon has largely been ignored—despite its association with a critical period in Vietnamese and American history. It is essential that the Vietnamese refugee experience in Clarendon be properly documented, with an eye toward future preservation, commemoration, or interpretation efforts.

The research and oral history interviews conducted for this project pointed to several recommendations or alternatives for the preservation of Vietnamese heritage in Clarendon. These

⁵⁰ Bailey, Steven K. "A New Guide to an Old Treasure: Ancient Town of Hoi An," *Things Asian* (October 1, 1996). Available from <www.thingsasian.com/goto_article/article.705.html>; accessed on November 18, 2003.

⁵¹ World Heritage Center, UNESCO. "Protection of the architectural heritage of Viet Nam," *The World Heritage Newsletter*, No. 6 (December 1994). Available from <<http://whc.unesco.org/news/6newseng.htm#story5>>; accessed on November 18, 2003.

⁵² Bich interview.

⁵³ Lu interview.

⁵⁴ Bich interview.

recommendations could be taken as a list of stand-alone alternatives, but ideally they would be viewed as a series of steps toward a thorough understanding and preservation of Clarendon's important role in the Vietnamese refugee experience in America.

1) Establish a comprehensive oral history program to collect, transcribe, preserve, and interpret the memories of Vietnamese immigrants who settled in or visited Clarendon in the period between 1975 and 1980.

Thousands of Vietnamese lived in or near Clarendon in the 1970s, and untold numbers of Vietnamese visited "Little Saigon" during its heyday. With such a large pool of participants to choose from, a comprehensive oral history collection program would offer the most far-reaching understanding of how Vietnamese feel toward Clarendon, in the larger context of their feelings about and memories of the immigrant experience in general. Arlington County has already collected and taped some oral history interviews from a spectrum of Arlington residents, which are stored in the library system, but so far no coordinated effort has taken place targeting Vietnamese or other Southeast Asian groups.

2) Establish a working group, comprising members of the Vietnamese community and preservation officials, to gauge interest in and disseminate plans for preserving or commemorating the Vietnamese refugee experience in Clarendon.

Based on the research conducted for this project, it may be necessary to educate the Vietnamese community about the historic preservation process in general—and specific preservation options in particular—before gauging the community's interest in how the Vietnamese refugee experience in Clarendon could be preserved. At the same time, it is essential that representatives of the Vietnamese community act as leaders in this process and convey how they and other Vietnamese would like their history protected and interpreted.

3) Formally recognize and interpret the Vietnamese refugee experience in Clarendon with a county historical marker.

Currently, Arlington County offers no public interpretation of the Vietnamese experience in Clarendon, aside from some newspaper clippings and other archival materials stored in the public library system. The Clarendon Metro Station park, located in the center of the historic commercial district, would be an ideal location for a historical marker summarizing the Vietnamese experience in Clarendon. In addition to highlighting one aspect of the area's historic significance for residents and visitors, a historical marker would place Clarendon's remaining Vietnamese establishments into context, fostering a greater sense of place.

4) Preserve one of Clarendon's identified historic buildings, with the goal of rehabilitating the structure for use as a Vietnamese heritage museum and interpretive center.

As mentioned earlier, the Arlington County Historic Affairs and Landmark Review Board has identified several buildings in the Clarendon commercial district that have architectural integrity and historic significance. However, most of these buildings remain vulnerable in the face of ongoing high-rise development in the area. At the same time, Arlington suffers from a lack of diversity among its tourist attractions, with the most popular sites dealing with military history, including the Iwo Jima Marine Memorial and Arlington National Cemetery. Preserving and rehabilitating one of Clarendon's historic structures as a Vietnamese heritage museum and interpretive center could provide several benefits to the county, including:

- a) Protection of a historically and architecturally significant landmark, as well as cultural artifacts specific to the Vietnamese refugee experience;

- b) Interpretation of an important and lesser-known aspect of Arlington’s history; and
- c) An opportunity to enhance and diversify tourism to the area, especially among Vietnamese and other underrepresented groups.

Conclusion

In the late 1970s, Nguyen Ngoc Bich performed translation for an elderly Vietnamese man who was addressing the Arlington school board. The man talked about how important Arlington had become to the Vietnamese community, referring to a Vietnamese proverb. “When the place is good, and the soil is good, you always find the birds are flocking there,” Bich recalls translating. “If you want to know whether Arlington is a good place to live, just look at where the Vietnamese birds are flocking.”⁵⁵

Now the “Vietnamese birds” have largely flown away, and Clarendon continues its rapid urbanization, with high-rise office buildings towering over the former “Saigon strip.” *Washington Post* architecture critic Benjamin Forgey has reported on the rapid change of Clarendon and the impact on the preservation of its history. “As in other similar districts, the small-scale present is precarious,” Forgey has written. “A large-scale future is always lurking.”⁵⁶

If Clarendon’s small-scale present is threatened, then its past as an ethnic enclave may be at the greatest risk of being forgotten. The local Vietnamese community understands that Clarendon played an important role in its journey through northern Virginia. Several Vietnamese interviewed for this project believed that the refugee experience in Clarendon should be preserved or commemorated. This finding signals a larger need for documentation of how this community feels about Clarendon and the Vietnamese immigrant experience in general. Such documentation would be the necessary first step in a larger effort to preserve this significant period in Vietnamese and American history, before it is completely lost.

⁵⁵ Bich interview.

⁵⁶ Forgey, Benjamin. “Clarendon Creeping Along Toward Convulsive Change,” *The Washington Post* (June 27, 1998).