ECHOES OF LITTLE SAIGON

VIETNAMESE IMMIGRATION AND THE CHANGING FACE OF ARLINGTON
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VIETNAMESE IMMIGRATION AND
THE CHANGING FACE OF ARLINGTON

By Kim A. O’Connell

Dedicated to the memory of

Nguyen Ngoc Bich
Author, educator, and friend

Rebirth
Spring goes, and the hundred flowers.
Spring comes, and the hundred flowers.
My eyes watch things passing,
My head fills with years.
But when spring has gone not all the flowers follow.
Last night a plum branch blossomed beside my door.

By Man Giac
Translated from the original Vietnamese by
Nguyen Ngoc Bich, with W. S. Merwin,
Reprinted from
A Thousand Years of Vietnamese Poetry
(Alfred A. Knopf, 1975)
Forty years seems like a long time but, in one's life, it's the blink of an eye. It's more than enough time to transform a community, both culturally and economically.

Within our first six months in the United States, my parents travelled to the major cities but, ultimately, they decided to settle in Northern Virginia. I still remember when my parents opened our grocery store, Mekong Center, situated across from where Clarendon Metro is today on Wilson Boulevard in Arlington. Mekong Center opened on January 2, 1976, and was the fourth Vietnamese store opened on this strip. It was on that day that I took on the responsibility of caring for my three younger siblings at the ages of one, three, and seven, while my parents and older siblings were working at the store. I was ten.

Arlington was then dotted with dull warehouses and old buildings and was a predominantly white area. The rent to lease commercial properties was cheap — in the lower teens or less per square foot. As more Vietnamese businesses opened, the Clarendon corridor soon became known as “Little Saigon.” While adopting the American culture, our parents emphasized preserving Vietnamese traditions. Arlington County eased this transition by acknowledging both cultures and traditions as equal.

While reflecting upon my journey to the U.S., I count my blessings for many achievements, my own and those of my family, friends, and fellow Vietnamese. I am proud of the fact that my family, along with other Vietnamese families, took part in building the legacy and bringing diversity to Arlington County. Most importantly, as Vietnamese immigrants, we contributed to the academic and economic development of Arlington as well as the United States of America.

I thank the Arlingtonians and the American people who welcomed the Vietnamese immigrants. Because of their openness to diversity, transformation was possible. The blend of cultures and traditions is what makes the United States a unique nation. I can’t thank my parents and others of their generation enough for creating a vibrant Vietnamese community in the 1970s, 80s, and 90s, paving the way for the future generations to follow.

Echoes of Little Saigon, written by Kim O’Connell, provides a snapshot of these moments in time, while preserving the history of Arlington County.

Lieu Nguyen
Mekong Center Family
June 2016
Throughout its history, Arlington, Virginia, has always been a place of growth and opportunity. But to the Vietnamese fleeing their country after the end of the Vietnam War, Arlington was even more than that: It felt like salvation, a place for refugees to once again call home.

The history of Vietnamese immigration to Arlington is, like the history of the county itself, closely tied to that of Washington, D.C. Once a part of the capital city (the area of the original “diamond” south and west of the Potomac River), Arlington County was retroceded to the Commonwealth of Virginia in 1847. For decades following, the county (known as Alexandria County until 1920) was mostly just a sleepy province of farms and some modest homes. This all began to change between World War I and the New Deal era, when Arlington became a “streetcar suburb” of the nation’s capital, and leafy new neighborhoods of bungalows, colonials, and Cape Cods sprang up all over the county. Once the Pentagon was completed in Arlington in 1943, the door swung wide open for a postwar influx of federal workers, setting in motion the rapid urbanization that characterized Arlington in the latter half of the 20th century.

Today, this small county of 26 square miles has a unique and important story all its own. Widely recognized as a thriving urban center, a leader in transportation and commerce, and a welcoming environment for immigrants, Arlington is frequently ranked among the most diverse cities in the nation (although technically it’s a county, not a city). Within the Commonwealth of Virginia, Arlington is ranked second only to its neighbor Fairfax County in terms of the number of native languages spoken in its public schools.

But the county’s celebrated diversity owes much to a short-lived period in the relatively recent past, when successive waves of Vietnamese immigrants established a thriving commercial enclave in Arlington — including grocery stores, gift shops, and restaurants — that was known informally as Little Saigon. In addition to providing Vietnamese immigrants with a means for self-sufficiency in a new land, Arlington’s Little Saigon paved the way for other immigrant groups to settle here, transforming the face of the county and the Commonwealth.

This booklet tells that story. Viewed one way, it is a story with a beginning, middle, and end: Within a finite period, the Vietnamese arrived, they worked and lived in or near Arlington, and they largely moved on, as the new Metrorail system, rising rents, and development projects gradually displaced Little Saigon. And yet Little Saigon is more than just a bygone business district; it encompasses the story of the plight of refugees, as well as their determination and resourcefulness, and their need to hold onto traditions.
As time has passed, and as immigration remains front-page news, there has been increasing recognition of the significance of Arlington’s Little Saigon as an important part not just of Virginia’s immigration history, but of the nation’s as a whole. This booklet is part of a multifaceted effort to preserve Vietnamese heritage in Arlington, including a new collection of oral histories from local Vietnamese immigrants, which are now available at the Arlington Central Library’s Center for Local History. (Unless otherwise noted, quotes from Vietnamese immigrants are taken from these oral histories, albeit in edited form.) It is hoped that these efforts will not only commemorate an important part of the past, but create context for the ever-unfolding present and future.

POISED FOR GROWTH: IMMIGRATION AND ARLINGTON BEFORE 1975

As it evolved from being a rural community, Arlington developed along several primary transit corridors. In the early part of the 20th century, interurban trolley lines ferried commuters in and out of Washington, replacing the late 19th-century streetcar system. Two main trolley lines converged in the Clarendon neighborhood, which had been named and dedicated in 1900 (“Clarendon” and “Arlington” are both classic names harking back to the old sod of England; “Arlington” was the name of the stately home of Robert E. Lee and his family, located at the county’s center). As a transportation hub, Clarendon quickly became the unofficial “downtown” for the burgeoning county, called “one of the most attractive spots within easy reach of the business section of Washington” by one early 20th-century publication. Major department stores, including Sears and J.C. Penney, opened there, drawing shoppers from miles around. It was (and still is) the crossroads for three important county roads: Wilson, Clarendon, and Washington boulevards.

This same route would later form the path for the new Metro subway system, which came into being in the 1970s and sent trains running east-west through the North Arlington hubs of Rosslyn, Court House, Clarendon, and Ballston (as well as
along the north-south route from Rosslyn down to Ronald Reagan National Airport). With roots in early 20th century planning and transportation, the Metro, Wilson Boulevard, and the Clarendon business district would unexpectedly come together in the development of Little Saigon.

So would changing national attitudes and policies about immigration.

A NATION OF IMMIGRANTS

To a certain extent, the United States has always been a nation of immigrants — welcoming “the huddled masses yearning to breathe free,” as the Statue of Liberty proclaims. But for most of American history, those immigrants have been almost uniformly white and European, with the exception of African Americans brought here as slaves before the Civil War. Late 19th-century exclusion laws, which put a quota on the number of immigrants from certain countries, were largely a response to the first major wave of Asian immigration — the influx of Chinese to California to seek their fortunes in the Gold Rush or to find work with farms, mills, and the growing railroad system. Some version of these laws would bar people from Asia and certain other parts of the world from immigrating to the U.S. well into the 20th century.

As the nation went, so did Virginia. According to the 1960 Census, more than 94% of Arlingtonians were white, 5.26% were African American, and only 0.26% of the local population was Asian (only about 425 people out of the total population of 163,401 in 1960 Arlington).

However, this would all change — and change rapidly, for both the nation at large and Virginia in particular — with the passage of the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965. One of many groundbreaking pieces of legislation enacted in the Civil Rights era,
the act eliminated country-of-origin quotas and opened the U.S. to immigrants from far beyond Western Europe. In his first State of the Union address, President Lyndon Johnson put forth the case for ending quotas: “A nation that was built by the immigrants of all lands can ask those who now seek admission: ‘What can you do for our country?’ But we should not be asking, ‘In what country were you born?’”

Yet while Johnson was signing this measure into law in 1965 (in a ceremony at the Statue of Liberty), a brutal war was raging on the other side of the world in Vietnam, one that would eventually kill more than 58,000 American soldiers, more than 250,000 South Vietnamese troops, and many thousands of civilians. The president couldn’t yet know how these two events would converge ten years later, when the fall of Saigon, the former Vietnamese capital, precipitated a massive evacuation of Vietnamese, casting them out to distant shores like dandelion seeds.

THE FALL OF SAIGON AND ARRIVAL IN THE UNITED STATES

The end of the Vietnam War was heralded by bombs and explosions, by screams and cries, by frantic and furtive movements, by crowding and shoving, and by praying. It was the kind of cataclysmic experience that sears into one’s memory, forever the dividing line between “before” and “after” for the people who lived through it.

American troops had largely left Vietnam by 1973, with the only remaining American soldiers guarding U.S. installations. After a period of intense fighting and bombardment by the North Vietnamese Army, the South Vietnam capital of Saigon capitulated on April 30, 1975. This event precipitated the first major exodus from Vietnam, sending Vietnamese refugees board a U.S. aircraft carrier as part of Operation Frequent Wind, the final effort to evacuate people from Saigon before it fell to the North Vietnamese Army on April 30, 1975.
Refugees came to the United States in the so-called first wave of Vietnamese immigration, which began immediately after the fall of Saigon through about 1978. The immigrants in this first wave were generally well-educated and often had ties to the U.S. government; they included lawyers and engineers, high-ranking officers, and war brides. Many Vietnamese settled in Northern Virginia, predominantly in Arlington, Alexandria, and Falls Church, because of its proximity to the nation’s capital and the availability of U.S. sponsor services, financial aid, and other assistance. For those fleeing Saigon in particular, living near the capital of the United States — a longtime nirvana of political stability and economic opportunity — became a reality.

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**ORAL HISTORY: Lieu Nguyen**

“I came from Da Nang, Vietnam, which is in the central part, and because of the fall of Da Nang at the end of March 1975, my parents had to immigrate to Saigon. My mother was actually on the very last flight where, now, if you look back in history books, you’ll see that aircraft had people hanging on the wing of the aircraft — she was actually on that flight to go to Saigon. I was going to school in Saigon, so my family came, and we met up there, and we finally left Vietnam on April 30, 1975... We were a family of ten — my parents and eight kids, and the youngest was one.”

The family eventually found shelter at the Naval base, which was bombed. “We actually went from bomb shelter to bomb shelter in that Naval base that whole night. It was really scary because I still remember a lot of that. Sometimes looking back, I just thought, ‘Gosh, why were we so lucky that we survived that, versus the other people around us?’ Because you felt missiles and bullets, and you were just running right through that, and it was just amazing how we survived that.”

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

For Thuy Dinh and her family, the process of evacuating Saigon, getting processed through Guam, and then moving on to Camp Pendleton took just over a month — from April 20 to May 27, 1975. “It was probably one of the most eventful months of my whole life because I never traveled outside of Vietnam before that,” she says in an oral history. “Within that one month, so many things changed. I mean, I lost a country.”

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**FIRST AND SECOND WAVES OF REFUGEES**

Before 1975, only about 15,000 Vietnamese immigrants lived in the United States. After the fall of Saigon on April 30, 1975, that number would grow exponentially.

In the five-year period between 1975 and 1980, more than 235,000 Vietnamese immigrated to the United States, increasing the existing Vietnamese population by an incredible 1,600 percent. About 134,000

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**ANHTHU LU, Vietnamese immigrant and community activist**

“I went in for the final exam [at school], and that’s when an aircraft came right on top of the presidential palace and start dropping bombs. I can still remember it. We started hearing all kind of alarms. You know, panic and screaming and yelling and running out of class.... I did not want to go, because I feel like if I go, I’ll never see my country again.”

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hundreds of thousands of Vietnamese refugees to far corners of the world — to the Philippines, to France, and to the United States, among other places. Civilians left by boat, helicopter, and airplane — whatever means they could — and often under dire conditions, wrenched away from family members, unsure of both their destination and their destiny.

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political and military ally, and now a refuge—seemed like a fitting choice.

“In the Washington area, there had to be no more than 3,000 Vietnamese before the end of the war,” according to Nguyen Ngoc Bich, an author and educator who worked for Arlington Public Schools and later directed the Vietnamese service of Radio Free Asia. “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.”

The second wave of Vietnamese immigration began around 1978 and included thousands more refugees, who came via camps all over Southeast Asia. They often arrived by boat, thus earning the description “boat people.” Generally less educated and with fewer political connections than the first wave, this second group included both ethnic Chinese from Vietnam and native Vietnamese (along with Lao, Montagnard, and other regional ethnic groups) who sought to escape persecution by the Communist regime. An estimated 800,000 people fled Vietnam by boat between 1975 and 1995, and between 10 and 50 percent of these second-wave refugees are thought to have perished during their voyage from

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**ORAL HISTORY: Nguyen Ngoc Bich**

Nguyen Ngoc Bich first emigrated from Vietnam to the United States in the 1950s to attend university. After studying in a doctoral program in Japan, he returned to the United States and worked for the Vietnamese embassy in Washington, D.C. He and his wife, Dr. Dao Thi Hoi, had gone back to Vietnam in 1971 to found a small university in Saigon. He was there when the city fell in 1975.

“We made arrangements to go out to an island in the Gulf of Siam. It’s called Phu Quoc. We fled to Phu Quoc with our party of 26 people and then we went out to sea. We did not know where we’d be landing, but the sea was a way to salvation. We were picked up by American Challenger—a oil tanker. They said there was room for 1,080 people but they picked up 7,000 people, so it was just standing room only.…. We were on that boat for seven days and eight nights, and we went directly to Guam. We arrived in Guam in the middle of the night, about 3:30 in the morning, and I was going down the gangplank. I saw a friend of mine, an American friend of mine, who used to be at the embassy in Saigon. I said, ‘Hi, Bob.’ And he looked at me. He didn’t recognize me at all. I said, ‘Don’t you recognize me? I’m Bich!’ He broke into tears and sobbed loudly. He said, ‘How can you be here? We saw each other just a week ago, and you were a different person. Now you’re black and skinny and only one small shorts on you, not even a t-shirt, and I don’t recognize you.’

“The whole trip across the Pacific was something too, because there’s not much food. There’s no clean water to wash yourself. [We got] salt water from the sea. There’s no restroom facilities or anything like that.….A week later we were on planes that flew us into Eglin Air Force Base, and there we worked as volunteers at Eglin Air Force Base because of our knowledge of English and things like that to help other refugees. We were there only a couple of days, and then they flew us into Virginia where we had family.

“At first, our experience was rather disappointing because both my wife and I had American degrees. We didn’t have any trouble with English or our specialization. But at that time the American popular feeling was very negative. They didn’t want to hear anything about Vietnam. We thought we could go back to college teaching and things like that. An American friend of mine, very famous historian of Vietnam, Joseph Buttinger, he said, ‘Give me your CV, and I’ll try to send it around.’….He sent it around to dozens and dozens of American colleges and universities. Only about seven of them came back. They were all no. We had to adjust our expectations lower and lower and lower, and eventually I had to accept any kind of odd jobs just to survive.

“We did that for about six months before I could get the first appointment here in Arlington at the Arlington Career Center teaching English to refugees of Vietnam and other countries of Southeast Asia. I was paid by the hour, ten dollars an hour, for teaching adult refugees. It took us almost a year before we could get a full-time job, and my wife, she had her doctorate in linguistics from Columbia University. She was hired as an assistant to the ESL coordinator here in Arlington, and I got my first job in Key Elementary School here also in Arlington working in the teacher corps. That was how we rebuilt our lives.”

Bich earned a certification to teach social studies in Virginia, and got a job as a bilingual teacher for social studies and history at Wakefield High School. He also taught at George Mason University. In 1986, he became a multicultural coordinator for Arlington County. “The reason why they needed somebody like that was because Arlington at the time was flooded with refugees not just from Vietnam, but also Laos, Cambodia, Ethiopia, Latin America, and what-not. They gave me that job basically to serve as a main link between these ethnic minorities and the county. I acted as like an assistant to the county chairman, and so that’s why for a while they called me the deputy mayor of Arlington.”

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In a frequent scene after the Vietnam War, refugees crowd a boat in the South China Sea in 1984 and await rescue by the USS Blue Ridge. For their assistance to refugees, Blue Ridge personnel received the Humanitarian Service Medal.

In Arlington, that village atmosphere — those family ties, that sense of community — would be created in Clarendon. It would be the first major step toward recovering from the traumas of leaving home.
When Vietnamese refugees began immigrating to Virginia in the late 1970s, several socioeconomic and political dynamics were at play. On one hand, Virginia was still, culturally, very much part of the South — conservative politically, and not that many years removed from the era of segregation. Arlington County, in fact, had desegregated its schools just 16 short years before the fall of Saigon, and those opposed to desegregation included an active local chapter of the American Nazi Party. As the 20th century wore on, however, the county continued to evolve rapidly, becoming more progressive and urban and something of a political anomaly in the Old Dominion. Yet old tensions and distrust of newcomers persisted.

At the same time, Northern Virginia as a whole was becoming more suburbanized, with large auto-oriented shopping malls (and their ample parking lots) luring consumers away from the old and faded commercial district in Clarendon. The neighborhood had entered a period of decline that The Washington Post described as “long” and “painful” in a 1979 news story, with an estimated 90 out of 200 stores in Clarendon shuttered by the 1970s. Meanwhile, voters in Arlington had approved the route of the new Metro subway line, which would cut right beneath the neighborhood. The Metrorail system had officially opened in downtown D.C. in March 1976, with new tunnels, tracks, and stations planned out from the city center in all directions. Metro construction further drove away retailers already downcast about Clarendon’s prospects. As a result, landlords were willing to lease these commercial storefronts at affordable (and sometimes rock-bottom) prices, often for short-term monthly or half-yearly contracts.

Those Vietnamese who had gotten out of South Vietnam before the fall of Saigon, and who had political ties to the
U.S. government, were the first to recognize that an opportunity presented itself in Clarendon's vacant buildings. It was also helpful that Catholic Charities of the Diocese of Arlington was a major sponsor of Vietnamese refugee families, having begun this outreach work in 1974 serving Cuban and Chinese immigrants. (In 1979, diocesan leaders founded the Holy Martyr of Vietnam Parish, still serving the Vietnamese community on S. Wakefield Street.)

Arlington boasted several affordable garden apartment complexes, including Buckingham Village on North Glebe Road, that were attractive to the new immigrants. According to a 1977 Washington Post article, the monthly rent in Buckingham ranged from $198 for a one-bedroom unit to $310 for three bedrooms. That year, an estimated 700 Vietnamese lived in Buckingham. However, Vietnamese were fairly dispersed throughout the region, largely dependent on the location of their sponsors. “A traditional model of ethnic residential concentration does not work for Vietnamese Americans — or other Asian Americans in Washington,” writes Dr. Joseph Wood of George Mason University in a 1997 scholarly study of Vietnamese settlement patterns. “Location of houses is less important than location of shopping.”

Once word of mouth began, it wasn’t long before Arlington and Alexandria were the primary entry points for Vietnamese refugees in the Washington, D.C., area, although Vietnamese also settled in D.C. proper, as well as the Maryland suburbs (primarily Montgomery and Prince George’s counties). Other areas of Virginia that developed sizable Vietnamese populations over time were the Henrico County/Richmond area and the Hampton Roads region. In 1981, Virginia ranked 8th in the nation in terms of refugee population (including refugees from Vietnam and elsewhere), with three-quarters of the state’s refugees residing in Northern Virginia.

The word “Arlington” became known to Vietnamese in refugee camps in Asia or those still in Vietnam. “The refugee camps in Malaysia, in Thailand, in the Philippines — those people talk about Arlington,” Do Nang An, who worked with refugees in the...
YMCA Indochinese Outreach Program, told an Arlington newspaper in 1978. “They know Arlington; they have relatives here. They talk about coming to Texas, California, Washington, and Arlington.”

**SETTING UP SHOP**

By early 1975, two Vietnamese grocery stores had been established in Clarendon: Saigon Market, which was run by a secretary from the Vietnamese embassy, and Vietnam Center, run 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.

In 1977, the Pacific department store opened in Clarendon, a two-story building that sold imported food, antiques, fabric, and wedding items, with a café and billiard hall on the upper floor. “The Vietnamese like to stay together, because living in America they feel isolated,” Nguyen Van Hoan, owner of Pacific, told the *Washington Post*. “Coming to Clarendon makes them feel less lonely.” Sometimes a Vietnamese rock band called the “Uptights” would play upstairs.

By 1979, other Vietnamese shops in Clarendon included: Lotus Imports, an Asian home-furnishings shop; Dat Hung Jewelry, a tiny shop that sold jewelry including jade and gold; Saigon Souvenir, which sold gold chains and necklaces; My An Fabrics, which had goods in the front and billiards in the back; and Mekong Center, which offered both specialty items and grocery staples. Others included Kim Ngoc Jewelry, in which one could buy customizable rings and other jewelry, and Kim Long, which sold clothing and home décor.

The store shelves were often crowded and stacked high with goods that ranged from luxurious imported silks for making the ao dai (the traditional Vietnamese long dress) to favorite Vietnamese ingredients including pickled vegetables, tree-ear mushrooms, and fish sauce. Shopkeepers often kept expenses

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**ORAL HISTORY:**

**Richard Nguyen**

I n 1984, after opening one of the first restaurants in Little Saigon, My An, Richard Nguyen’s parents also opened the original Nam-Viet restaurant, which still stands in Clarendon. He is now the general manager.

“We used to live in the Buckingham area. I believe that what drew us to Clarendon was just the small Vietnamese merchants’ area. The original restaurant that we had was probably about maybe ten or twelve seats, right next to a fabric shop….Growing up, some of the owners had kids my age, and we grew up in a sense where, pretty much after school... you would literally sit at a table or a corner spot in where the restaurant was or your business was, and you would have to just do your homework and mind your things.

“It was almost your utopia...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. It was more homey.”
down by employing family members. “It’s all in the family, so everybody works hard,” Yen Nguyen, who owned Pacific with her husband, said in a 1984 article in Indochina Issues, a foreign policy newsletter. “We don’t have to pay benefits, and nobody minds working 16 hours a day.”

GOING TO MARKET

As Clarendon’s new Vietnamese enclave became known, people came from as far away as North Carolina and Tennessee to shop there, make connections, and begin the process of recovering from the effects of war, escape, and resettlement. Refugee assistance groups and the Catholic Charities also organized trips that brought immigrants to Clarendon to shop. As former refugee Thuy Dinh said in an oral history interview, the goods seemed so precious that she and her family would buy a single bottle of fish sauce, which they would use sparingly until they could return.

“Vietnamese love their fresh food,” said Nguyen Ngoc Bich in an interview in 2003. “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.”

After escaping from Vietnam, Anhthu Lu came to Northern Virginia in 1975, when she was 16 years old. “Being in the country for the first time, it was such a comfort to see something I could read and relate to,” she said in an interview with the author. “After a while we moved to Falls Church, 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 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 would later house the Café Dalat Vietnamese restaurant.

Even after most of the Vietnamese shops had shut their doors or moved to places like the Eden Center (discussed in a subsequent chapter), several Vietnamese restaurants had opened doors in Clarendon and would persist for the better part of two decades (or more), including Café Dalat, Queen Bee, Little Viet Garden, Café Saigon, and Nam Viet. There, customers — both Vietnamese and non-Vietnamese — could sample Vietnam’s signature dishes, including spring rolls (cha gio), soup (pho), lemongrass chicken (ga nuong xa), or bánh mì sandwiches.

“The Vietnam War had been a huge part of the American experience,” said Dick Woodruff, a member of Arlington’s Historical Affairs and Landmark Review Board, in an oral history interview. “And so to go into Clarendon and then gradually begin to see
more and more Vietnamese there, it was actually surprising. It seemed very foreign in a lot of ways. But then as we began to interact with the Vietnamese and go to restaurants and stuff, it became a really nice experience. There was a good thing about the sort of diversity that was beginning to grow in Clarendon because it really wasn’t there before. It was just kind of a seedy, run-down area that nobody lived in."

The area began to take on different names among patrons (not to mention the news reporters who were covering the new enclave with greater frequency), including Little Saigon, Saigon Strip, and Mekong Delta, among them. To Anhthu Lu and her family, the area was known simply as “Wilson Boulevard,” for the main street where most of the establishments were based. Kim Cook’s family called it “Vietnam Corner” or "Vietnam Market.” Whatever the name, all the Vietnamese in the area knew that people were talking about those two or three blocks in Clarendon that had begun to look a lot like home.

The aisles of Mekong Center, a Little Saigon grocer, were often as crowded with people as its shelves were with food staples. The aisles of Mekong Center, a Little Saigon grocer, were often as crowded with people as its shelves were with food staples.

During its heyday, Little Saigon boasted regular foot traffic and a thriving street life. During its heyday, Little Saigon boasted regular foot traffic and a thriving street life.

In addition to goods, Little Saigon offered much-needed services to Vietnamese refugees, such as dressmaking and tailoring. In addition to goods, Little Saigon offered much-needed services to Vietnamese refugees, such as dressmaking and tailoring.
Despite the positive effects of establishing a new community in Clarendon, Vietnamese immigrants to Arlington continued to face certain challenges, some of which are fairly universal among all immigrants: learning a new language; earning enough money to survive; acclimating to new schools; and dealing with the percentage of existing residents who were wary of foreigners, particularly the perceived changes they brought and costs incurred with assisting them. There was also the innate internal struggle many immigrants face — between preserving one’s cultural traditions and assimilating into American life. In 1977, a Vietnamese Catholic priest living in Alexandria, Virginia, used a Vietnamese proverb to describe this conflict: “You can’t catch two fish with two hands.”
In the 1970s, Clarendon—once a thriving shopping area—had fallen into a period of decline. This created affordable rental opportunities for Vietnamese immigrants who arrived after the fall of Saigon. Over the next decade and beyond, the Vietnamese opened jewelry shops, grocery and department stores, cafés, and more, many in historic buildings that dated to the 1920s and ‘30s. As you walk around Clarendon today, imagine how it looked when it was known as Little Saigon.

The G. H. Rucker Building and Odd Fellows Hall (both built in 1925), housed several Vietnamese establishments between them, including Queen Bee restaurant, Kim Ngoc Jewelry, and Saigon Souvenir.

Built in 1929, the corner-oriented Rees Building had a succession of Vietnamese businesses, including Vietnam Custom Tailor.

Jewelry is a valuable commodity in Vietnamese culture. Little Saigon had several jewelry stores, including Kim Son Jewelry and the tiny Dat Hung Jewelry.

Saigon Market was one of the first Vietnamese businesses in Clarendon. By the mid-1980s, it was flanked by Kim Photo and the popular Café Dalat.

In the late 1970s, a New York Times article touted Mekong Center (E) as a good source for Vietnamese groceries. (Photo courtesy of Minh Van Nguyen and Bach-Luu Nguyen, who ran Mekong Center.) Opened in 1977, the prominent Pacific store (F) sold food, antiques, and wedding items. On the corner was My An, which had one of the first cafés on the strip.
Almost as soon as Vietnamese refugees reached our shores, Arlington County began setting up programs to support them. One early important effort was the establishment of a Vietnamese Community Center at Page Elementary School in Arlington in 1976, which was founded and run by Nguyen Ngoc Bich. The Center hosted cultural events and boasted a well-used Vietnamese reading room; it also offered tax preparation services, translation services, and classes and exhibits. Bich would later become the Vietnamese language coordinator within Arlington Public Schools for what was then known as the Intake Center (now the Language Services Registration Center), helping to coordinate instruction and other services for students.

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. This program, which eventually became the Refugee Education and Employment Program (REEP), had a major impact on the way immigrants were taught English, earning nationwide attention for its recognition of the need to teach not just grammar and simple language skills but also crucial life skills for the workplace and elsewhere.

In the public schools, English as a Second Language (ESL) classes increasingly adapted to new Vietnamese students (the term English for Speakers of Other Languages, or ESOL, is preferred these days). According to a survey of limited English-proficient students in 1975-76, Spanish, Korean, and Vietnamese were the most frequent primary languages represented in Arlington ESL classes. During this period, Arlington Public Schools emptied contingency funds to support programs for the new arrivals and fill gaps in staffing. At the time, then County Board Chairman John Purdy expressed reluctance about using additional county funds to support the new arrivals, especially in light of federal refugee aid funding. “I’m not prepared to ask the taxpayers of Arlington to shoulder the burden of all those extra Vietnamese students,” he said.

He was not alone in his feelings.

NEGATIVE REACTIONS

Within months of the Vietnamese arrivals, some Arlington County officials and citizens publicly voiced concerns that the influx of refugees was putting undue pressure on county resources. “Under what law is this burden placed upon Arlington taxpayers?” asked Ethel Allsopp, president of the Organized Women Voters, in a 1975 letter to the County Board, according to an October 1975 article in the Arlington Journal newspaper. “Of course, I feel very sorry for [the refugees],” Allsopp told the newspaper. “I thought the churches would take care of them in every detail.”

Another member of the same group said, “The County keeps taking on more and more burdens while reducing services to Arlington...
taxpayers. They certainly don’t have to take them in. It used to be that, when refugees came to this country, they got their education on their own. People were not wet-nursed.”

Residents of Buckingham Village, some of whom had lived there since its construction in 1937, charged that the influx of Vietnamese and other foreign-born residents had led to overcrowding and decreased maintenance. One resident disparagingly called the village “Little Hanoi” and lamented that “you can’t tell what they’re saying.” (And yet this resident acknowledged that her elementary schooler had learned much from his foreign-born neighbors. “He’s more tolerant than I am,” the resident admitted, “and I think that’s good.”)

The shopkeepers in Little Saigon felt some negativity occasionally too. “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 1979. “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.’”

“[T]he appearance of success is also a cause of envy and resentment,” said Nguyen Van Hoan, owner of the Pacific department store, in 1978. “The Indochinese and other immigrants and refugees have not received a fond embrace by Arlingtonians. Instead they have been greeted with a cold shoulder.”

This statement was far from universally true, however.

HONORING TRADITIONS

There was much to learn for the Vietnamese in a new land, and for the most part, Arlington County was doing what it could to support its new residents and workers. At the same time, there were many traditions to celebrate and hold onto. Clarendon and other Arlington neighborhoods often hosted Vietnamese commemorations, including the annual Tet festival, which recognizes the Lunar New Year. At a 1979 Tet celebration, held at Thomas Jefferson Middle School, elderly Vietnamese men came dressed in ceremonial blue caftans over white trousers, singing a traditional drum-based chant. (Surplus proceeds from the festival were sent to help other refugees.) “The festivals were one of the few times when you felt steeped in your culture,” Nguyen Ngoc Bich said in an interview with the author, adding that it was a relief to speak one’s native tongue there. “People said that speaking English was a sport because you had to practice your mouth muscles and it was so painful.”
Arlington was also the site of a Vietnamese “Women’s Day” festival, which paid homage to 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. 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. Food served included traditional sesame balls, cha gio, and shrimp chips, but the only drink available was Coca-Cola.

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 to The Washington Post in 1978. “The U.S. is like a garden of flowers. Everyone should bring their own flower to it and enjoy the flowers brought by others.”

For years, Nguyen Ngoc Bich helped to organize an annual Mid-Autumn Festival in Arlington, which still continues today. In Vietnam, the Mid-Autumn Festival is geared toward children, with the singing of certain traditional songs and the hanging and carrying of lanterns. Bich made an effort at Key Elementary School to teach students the songs and stories related to the festival. “I even made English singing versions so that Americans could sing those songs with our kids,” he recalled. “In fact, being kids, they learned the Vietnamese version, and if you turned your back you could not tell whether it was American kids...
singing Vietnamese songs or Vietnamese kids singing those songs.”

The Arlington Mid-Autumn Festival continues to this day, under the leadership of Quang “Kevin” Le, who came to Arlington as a child with his family after Saigon fell. “We are the children of the first generation, and we’ve gone through a cycle of American history,” he said in an oral history interview. “Every [immigrant] community that blossoms, [eventually] then they blend in with the general public. The children of the first generation are grown now, and we have to decide if we want to continue those traditions.”

So far, as evidenced by the Mid-Autumn Festival and other events, many of those traditions are indeed being continued. These days, however, it’s generally happening in a different place than Clarendon.

**EDEN CENTER: A NEW PLACE TO GATHER**

The seeds of Little Saigon’s gradual decline were planted even before the fall of Saigon. On December 1, 1979, after years of planning and anticipation, the Clarendon Metro station opened, ending the construction and turmoil that had allowed the Vietnamese shops to open there and flourish. Clarendon had been Arlington’s signature neighborhood — its historic downtown — and it was now easier than ever to get there.

Once the Metro opened, county government and local developers set their sights on revitalizing and reinvesting in the neighborhood, which they viewed as an essential hub in a plan for transit-oriented development. Landlords, in due course, began raising the rents on Vietnamese shopkeepers. In 1975, for example, a
storefront in Clarendon could be rented for 
as little as $5 a square foot. By 1989, that same 
retail space would go for $25 per square foot. 
Although that number pales in comparison 
to today’s three-digit square-footage costs in 
Arlington, it represented a 400% increase in 
costs in less than 15 years.

One by one, like actors taking a curtain 
call, the Vietnamese establishments closed. 
A longtime anchor store for Little Saigon, 
Pacific’s owners closed the store in 1989, 
renaming it Global Market and relocating it 
to Columbia Pike in Falls Church, and also 
opened another establishment in Hyattsville, 
Maryland. Mekong Center and My An closed 
that year as well.

In 1995, two decades after the fall of Saigon, 
only a few signature restaurants remained, such 
as Café Dalat, Little Viet Garden, and Queen 
Bee. Clarendon was changing, but a sense of 
Little Saigon persisted, with these restaurants 
drawing steady crowds who had grown fairly 
sophisticated about Vietnamese cuisine. 
Some patrons began to use the Vietnamese 
terms pho, banh mi, and cha gio when they 
ordered their food. (The Washington Post’s 
former restaurant critic, Phyllis Richman,

once wrote that, at Queen Bee, one’s tongue 
would be treated to “a stimulating succession 
of impressions — sweet, salty, sour, bitter.”) By 
2015, however, 40 years after the fall of Saigon, 
only one holdout from the Little Saigon era 
still stood — Nam Viet restaurant on North 
Hudson Street. All around it, Clarendon has 
completed its transformation from a low-

scale shopping district to a high-rise mecca of 
apartment and commercial buildings, upscale 
restaurants, and chic stores.

For the original Vietnamese 
entrepreneurs who settled in Clarendon 
after the war, the changes were difficult. 
“They felt sad,” says 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.”

NEW INVESTMENTS
Around 1982, many Vietnamese shop 
owners saw the writing on the wall (and the 
numbers on their rent bills) and moved their 
businesses. Several Vietnamese investors 
pooled their resources and purchased a 
failing supermarket at Seven Corners in
Falls Church to open a new “Little Saigon” — which they would call Eden Center. The center was named after the Eden Arcade, an upscale shopping and retail area on one of Saigon’s most prominent streets (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, according to research by Dr. Joseph Wood. By 1984, according to Wood, 60% of local Vietnamese lived within three miles of Seven Corners.

Since then, Eden Center has been the chief gathering place for Vietnamese within driving distance of Northern Virginia, now including more than 120 shops and restaurants in a self-contained strip mall. The Center is similar to a famous shopping center in Saigon (now Ho Chi Minh City) called Ben Thanh Market, itself a symbol of survival that dates back well over 100 years.

Eden Center similarly offers an eclectic array of shops, including jewelry and gift stores, delis and bakeries, pho restaurants, bubble tea purveyors, and grocers.

“Little Saigon in Clarendon was a serendipitous afterthought, because all of a sudden some business venues became available and affordable on account of the Metro construction,” recalled Nguyen Ngoc Bich in an interview for the Washington Business Journal. “Eden Center is special because it came at the right time when the then-young Vietnamese-American community had enough money to be able to think in longer terms. People came there who used to go to Saigon Market and Pacific Center in Clarendon, and that pretty soon drew a large crowd.”

In addition to an elaborate lion’s gate at its entryway, two flagpoles stand in the middle of the Eden Center parking lot — one waving the American flag, and the other carrying the banner of the pre-Communist Republic of Vietnam, three horizontal red stripes on a yellow field. “The flagpole at the Eden Center reminds us constantly of our heritage and where we come from,” Anhthu Lu has said.

Although Eden Center has witnessed some well-publicized incidents of Vietnamese gang activity, overall the shopping center has been a safe and welcoming place for more than 30 years. Now owned by Capital Commercial Properties, Eden Center hosts regular events such as an annual Tet festival (honoring the Lunar New Year) and Vietnamese beauty pageants, and street performers and vendors enliven its sidewalks on weekends. A few years ago, the Center also staged a traveling exhibition about the Vietnamese diaspora called “Exit Saigon, Enter Little Saigon,” sponsored by the Smithsonian Asian Pacific American Program. The exhibit temporarily took over an empty warehouse and found its visitors often turning emotional recalling their shared history.

Now, in a symbol of Eden Center’s ongoing success, that once-empty storefront has been redeveloped into yet another Vietnamese market. Today, Eden Center is the largest Vietnamese commercial center on the East Coast.

“I had very fond memories of Little Saigon,” says Quang “Kevin” Le, whose family now runs the Huong Binh deli at the Eden Center. “It was really the genesis of this community...Arlington has such a rich history for the Vietnamese. But we’re still here. We’re just five miles down the road.”
In 2007, the Arlington County Board took an extraordinary public step of issuing a Resolution Supporting Arlington’s Newcomers. “Whereas, in Arlington,” the resolution began, “we believe in a community where people trust their government and each other; a community that welcomes and values all of its residents, treating them with human dignity and respect, regardless of immigration status.” The resolution built on what was then 30 years of growth and expansion, due in part, at least, to the fact that Arlington was widely viewed as a progressive, welcoming place to people of all backgrounds. This is a process that began in earnest with the Vietnamese arrivals after 1975.

According to a University of Virginia study, before 1970, only 1 in 100 Virginians was born outside the United States. By 2012, however, 1 in 9 Virginians was foreign-born, according to the same study. “Not only has the percentage of foreign-born people in the Commonwealth been consistently rising,” wrote the authors, “there also has been a large shift in the composition of the immigrant population over time.” Whereas most foreign-born immigrants to Virginia were from Europe before 1970, now most foreign-born Virginians hail from Asia or Latin America, with the top five origin countries being El Salvador, India, Mexico, the Philippines, and Korea. Today, Arlington is home to people from nearly 120 different countries, including Vietnam, Cambodia, Bolivia, Guatemala, Mongolia, Honduras, Bangladesh, Ethiopia, and Afghanistan. Nearly 10% of Arlingtonians are of Asian origin.

REEP (the Arlington Education and Employment Program) has seen its mission to support refugee education evolve with
each new wave of immigrant arrivals. What began specifically as a project to teach English and job skills to Southeast Asian refugees after the Vietnam War expanded in the 1980s with new waves of refugees from Ethiopia, Afghanistan, Iran, Somalia, and Eritrea, as people escaped war, famine and unrest in their homelands. After an explosion of Latino immigrants in the 1980s, facilitated by the passage of the 1986 Immigration and Reform Act (which offered amnesty to certain undocumented immigrants), REEP's enrollment continued to grow quickly.

“In Arlington, [the immigration act] brought hundreds of Central Americans out of the shadows and gave them the chance for U.S. citizenship after meeting a number of requirements,” says Phil Cackley, a long-time teacher at REEP. “Enrollment in English classes at REEP grew exponentially a year or so after the passage of the law, as previously undocumented residents had the chance to work and study without fear of federal immigration authorities.”

University of Virginia scholars also found that a higher percentage of foreign-born citizens is part of the labor force in Virginia than the native, non-immigrant population, contributing to the state's economy and belying the common preconception that immigrants are merely a drain on state and local resources. When compared with other Virginia counties, Arlington consistently ranks at or near the top in terms of gross domestic product per capita, income, and property values, with relatively low poverty rates and low unemployment, even while maintaining its status as among the most diverse counties in the Commonwealth.

In an oral history interview, former refugee Toa Do called for greater documentation of the immigrant financial contribution to the county over the past 40 years: “First the Vietnamese and now the Hispanics — [we need to] document that, so that with all the discussion about immigration right now, maybe we can prove that we aren’t here to be a burden but we are here to also make a contribution.”

As they are elsewhere, the issues surrounding immigration in Arlington are complex, and even with current programs, not all immigrants are adequately housed, employed, or fed. Neither are new arrivals always welcomed where they work and live. Providing affordable housing in the county remains a constant challenge, one that still draws mistrust and anger from certain sectors of the Arlington population. When an affordable housing project in south Arlington was announced on a local website in early 2016, one commenter wrote, “More money out [of] our pockets for these lazy people who want to live for free.” On the same piece, another commenter wrote (with the original capitalization retained): “There is not enough work or housing to go around for AMERICANS and AMERICAN FAMILIES AND CHILDREN.”

However negatively it was intended, this is undeniably a true statement. The central point of contention, however, is how the term “American” is defined. In Arlington County, refugees and immigrants have long been included under this welcoming umbrella, treated as part of our community — as equals — under the law. In late 2015, as concerns arose about an influx of Syrian refugees escaping terrorism in the Middle
East, the Arlington County Board once again affirmed that it would be a welcoming place for these new arrivals, with a public statement that referenced a long history that began with the Vietnamese:

“The County is no newcomer to refugee resettlement activity. Over the past four decades we have welcomed those fleeing the Vietnam War, civil wars in Central America, the Ethiopian/Eritrean conflicts and the Bosnian War. We have confidence that the federal process of application, screening, placement and resettlement coupled with partnership with our regional resettlement agency, Catholic Charities of the Diocese of Arlington, can once again lead to the successful integration of refugees into our community.”

ECHOES OF LITTLE SAIGON: LOOKING BACK, LOOKING FORWARD

The Clarendon of today looks very different from the one that greeted Vietnamese immigrants more than 40 years ago. The historic buildings that once housed modest restaurants and stores with crowded shelves are now filled with upscale, posh restaurants and bars. In some areas, the low-scale streetscape of the late 20th century has been replaced with high-rise 21st-century office and condo buildings. Retail stores offer everything a consumer could want, from organic groceries to paper goods, books, and eyeglasses. The renewal and revitalization that Arlington County planners had once hoped for in Clarendon has arrived.

But growth and success have come with a
cost — the loss of the small-scale neighborhood that helped create a Vietnamese village in the 1970s and ’80s. With Clarendon thriving, and the Eden Center now the cultural heart of the Vietnamese community, Arlington’s Little Saigon seems like a distant memory. And yet, as the first generation of Vietnamese immigrants gets older, and the second generation comes of age as Americans, interest in recording the history of Little Saigon has been growing.

To commemorate this history, Arlington County staff, along with graduate students, artists, preservationists, and members of the Vietnamese community, have developed a series of projects to understand, record, and preserve Arlington's Vietnamese heritage. In one significant project, students from the Urban Planning program at Virginia Tech’s Alexandria Campus recorded more than a dozen oral histories of Vietnamese immigrants, which have been transcribed and are available to researchers at Arlington Central Library’s Center for Local History (and more interviews may be added in the future). In 2015, to recognize the 40th anniversary of the fall of Saigon, Arlington County staff worked with a local Vietnamese American artist, Khanh Le, to create a temporary public art installation in the center of Clarendon, which was unveiled in a public program. Other projects included a series of documentary videos and a walking tour of downtown Clarendon that showcased its Vietnamese heritage.

Future efforts might involve the creation of a historical marker or other public art to permanently acknowledge Clarendon as the first major gathering place for Vietnamese immigrants in the Commonwealth of Virginia and in the Washington, D.C., area after the war. One such reminder has been there all along — Nam Viet restaurant, the only remaining Vietnamese establishment from the Little Saigon era. “[Little Saigon is] similar to the Mayflower or Plymouth Rock,” Richard Nguyen, Nam Viet’s general manager, said in a PBS (WETA) video about Little Saigon. “I wouldn’t say ours is as big as that, but it’s essentially just as important to the Vietnamese community.”

In 2014, the story of Little Saigon came full circle, to a certain extent, when Clarendon saw a new Vietnamese restaurant come into the neighborhood rather than leave it — Four Sisters Grill, a “fast casual” eatery that is related to the larger Four Sisters restaurant in Merrifield, Virginia (which itself started out at the Eden Center). The fact that Four Sisters Grill is just one of many cuisines that can now be found in Clarendon — and that its employees are not only Vietnamese but represent Latino and other backgrounds as well — shows just how much Vietnamese culture and cuisine have become integrated with American life.

Integration is certainly an important part of the immigrant experience. But so are customs, food, language, and history. For a short but significant period, Arlington’s Little Saigon provided all of those things for Vietnamese immigrants to America, at a time when they needed them most. It’s a story of loss and gain, of individuals and community, of ripping apart and gathering together again. It’s a Vietnamese story, certainly, but in many ways, it is the quintessential story of America.

“[Little Saigon is] similar to the Mayflower or Plymouth Rock,” Richard Nguyen, Nam Viet’s general manager, said in a PBS (WETA) video about Little Saigon. “I wouldn’t say ours is as big as that, but it’s essentially just as important to the Vietnamese community.”
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