

## Arab-Americans Discover Forefathers in Little Syria



Syrian Quarter in New York City between circa 1910-1915. (photo by Library of Congress)

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By: [Charlotte Alfred for Al-Monitor](#) Posted on **June 11**.

When Carl Antoun, a young Lebanese-American, had bugged his grandmother enough times about her past, she directed him to a long-abandoned closet in their basement in New York.

“There was this steamer trunk, and on the side of it was written: '1662 Washington St.' I opened it and found hundreds of pictures, documents and postcards, all perfectly preserved,” Antoun recalled.

He had unearthed part of the [lost history of Little Syria](#), the first Arab-American neighborhood established in the 1880s. Located near the site of ground zero in lower Manhattan, the first wave of immigrants from the Ottoman Empire lined

Washington Street with new businesses, newspapers, and music and literary studios.

The grandfather of Antoun's 94-year-old grandmother had arrived in New York from Lebanon in 1890, setting up a business that imported silk, jewelry and dry goods from Latin America through the nearby New York docks.

Antoun, 22, is now part of a movement pushing to put Little Syria back on the map. He co-founded the [Save Washington Street campaign](#), which is lobbying to landmark the cluster of remaining buildings in Little Syria.

After Antoun put much of the contents of his grandmother's trunk online, former Little Syria residents and their families have started sending him their own mementos from the neighborhood for his collection.

The [Arab American National Museum](#) in Michigan has also pulled together artifacts from former residents, and dug up archive music recordings, documents and press cuttings to create an immersive portrait of the neighborhood. The exhibition was recently shown next to Little Syria itself, and is currently traveling around the United States.

"Most Arab-Americans were as surprised to learn about Little Syria as others were," said Elizabeth Barrett Sullivan, who curated the exhibition. "People are definitely excited that these stories are finally being told, stories that had been completely forgotten."

Physically, most of the neighborhood was knocked down by the building of the Brooklyn-Battery Tunnel in the 1940s and the World Trade Center in the 1960s. Many residents were displaced; others had already moved on to more spacious parts of Brooklyn, Atlantic Avenue and later Bay Ridge.

"Brooklyn was seen as a step up, you could get more bang for your buck," said community historian Mary Ann DiNapoli, 60, whose grandfather worked on Washington Street as an elevator operator. Other Little Syria residents moved across New York and to other states across the United States.

DiNapoli, of Syrian and Lebanese heritage, rediscovered Little Syria for herself when the church she had attended on Washington Street, St. George Melkite Church, became the first and only official landmark in the neighborhood in 2009.

At a hearing a few weeks before the vote by the Landmarks Preservation Commission, she heard testimonies from former residents, historians and architects, and became enamored with the tales of a close-knit community that was both multiethnic and an Arab cultural hub.

“It’s strange that there are millions of people across the country who are descendants of Little Syria,” said Todd Fine, who set up Save Washington Street with Antoun. “But they might never think about it.”

There are many reasons why the street faded from popular memory. Fine said that when the United States moved to restrict immigration between 1924 and 1965, continuity was lost, and traditions disappeared. Historians describe the first arrivals from the Ottoman Empire as being socially mobile and keen to assimilate. The majority were Christian, easing their integration. Moreover, Fine said, after the creation of Israel, “being visibly Arab became a liability,” further pushing Arab-American heritage into basements.

“The community did less to create a narrative than other ethnic groups,” he said.

For Antoun, this created a visceral gap in his own history. “My Jewish and Italian friends all have places they can say, there’s our area. But people from Lebanon and Syria don’t have anywhere like that,” he said. “There’s been nothing tangible to memorialize this history.”

## **New Generation**

Today, New York’s Arab-American population is estimated to be between 250,000 and 300,000, according to Sarab al-Jjakli, president of the [Network of Arab-American Professionals](#). Recent immigrants from the Levant — Syria, Lebanon, Jordan and Palestine — are strongest in Bay Ridge, Brooklyn, whereas North Africans tend to head to Astoria, Queens.

“It is important for us as a community to assert that our presence did not start at 9/11, we’ve been contributing to the country for over 100 years,” Jjakli, 37, said.

Fine said that 9/11 was “such a shock that it affected people psychologically on a deep level, hearing psychotic racist stuff on the news had a big effect on young people. And now they tend to want to tell their stories.”

And in a social media age, this is easier than ever.

“Things spread quickly in our generation,” noted Norah Arafah, a 21-year-old history student who joined the [Save Washington Street campaign](#) as outreach director, as she described working Facebook “like crazy” to drum up interest in the initiative.

The campaign itself started when Antoun found [YouTube](#) clips of Fine talking about Little Syria, and they started messaging via the video platform. Antoun said their online petition to preserve Washington Street gathered “hundreds of comments of people saying, I’m Lebanese-American. They were learning that they do have a history here for the first time.”

“There is a gap between the fourth and fifth generation and Arab-Americans of the past 30 years,” Jijakli said. “The new community has to rediscover it for themselves. There is an intense curiosity around this.”

Among Antoun’s friends, “the more recent immigrants think [the campaign is] the most interesting thing in the world. They have no idea that they are not new here,” he said.

“The older ones don’t think about it as much, they just don’t know, there’s no footprint, and they never really had a passion for it.”

Arafah’s father, who came to New York from Syria when he was 17 years old, told her, “I’ve learned so much about Arab American history through you.”

As Arafah explains it, while her parents’ generation quietly respects their heritage, younger people are “looking to assert our identity, to assert ourselves in a changing world, especially for Muslim Americans ... to say we made a contribution to New York.”

That contribution rolls on until today. Sahadi’s Fine Foods, a Brooklyn institution and one of the last historic Arab businesses on Atlantic Avenue, was first started on Washington Street by Lebanese immigrant Abraham Sahadi in 1895.

Abraham’s great-nephew, Charlie Sahadi, 69, currently runs the retail and wholesale company, which now employs 70 people. He sent some of his artifacts to the Little Syria exhibition. “It’s the history that got us here,” he said.

The Sahadis still import about a container of goods a year from Syria via Lebanon — including mint, sumac and other spices particular to the area, despite tightened import procedures since 9/11 and difficulties after the Syrian uprising.

Modern Syria is also causing some problems for the campaign.

Antoun said some members of the Lebanese community — after decades of painful history between the modern countries — said, "we don't want anything to do with it if it's called Little Syria."

"They see the word Syria and they freak out," he said.

The Syrian designation is historical. At the turn of the 19th century, immigrants from modern-day Jordan, Palestine, Lebanon and Syria — then ruled by the Ottoman Empire — were all labeled Syrians by US immigration officials, and their neighborhood was called the Syrian Quarter.

As various national identities developed, the Arab-American community wrestled with self-identification and America's race classifications, with the term Lebanese at times used as a rejection of "Arab" identity.

The [spiraling violence in Syria](#) today also tends to dominate the attention of Arab-Americans. "This is a life and death situation, which takes focus away from such historical campaign," Jijakli noted.

But Arafeh is passionate that it is a mistake to overlook history. "Everyone is looking to the future, what will happen with Egypt, Palestine, Syria; no one gives a cop about history. But ultimately we'll have nothing if we don't respect our heritage," she said.

Meanwhile, the timing could not be more relevant than ever for the Syrian population in the United States.

Since the uprisings, more Syrians are arriving in the United States, or getting permission to stay after the government applied Temporary Protected Status to Syrians in 2012, Jijakli observed.

This contrasts with recent decades, when Syrians had more difficulty immigrating to the United States than other nationalities because of poor relations between the countries, he said.

Jijakli's own family is Syrian, and the Little Syria exhibition had a strong impact on him.

In the background of a photograph of a Washington Street banquet in the 1940s, he noticed the ribbons of the American flag and beside it the Syrian flag of independence.

“It amazed me the relationship these folks had with the mother country, the same as we do today. We have this feeling of being caught between two worlds, and it was all there then,” he recounted. “We’ve only started to scratch the surface of the impact Little Syria had on our community. It opens up immense opportunities to understand ourselves.”

Antoun hopes it could also help others to understand Arab-Americans better. “Maybe if Americans of other backgrounds could see something Arab or Middle Eastern here, they won’t shun it anymore,” he reflected. “They’ll realize that they were here when my Jewish or Irish ancestors were here ... they’re people like us.”

*Charlotte Alfred is a freelance journalist and former editor at Ma'an News Agency. On Twitter: [@charlottealfred](https://twitter.com/charlottealfred)*

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