19-11-2022

Boston’s Little Syria

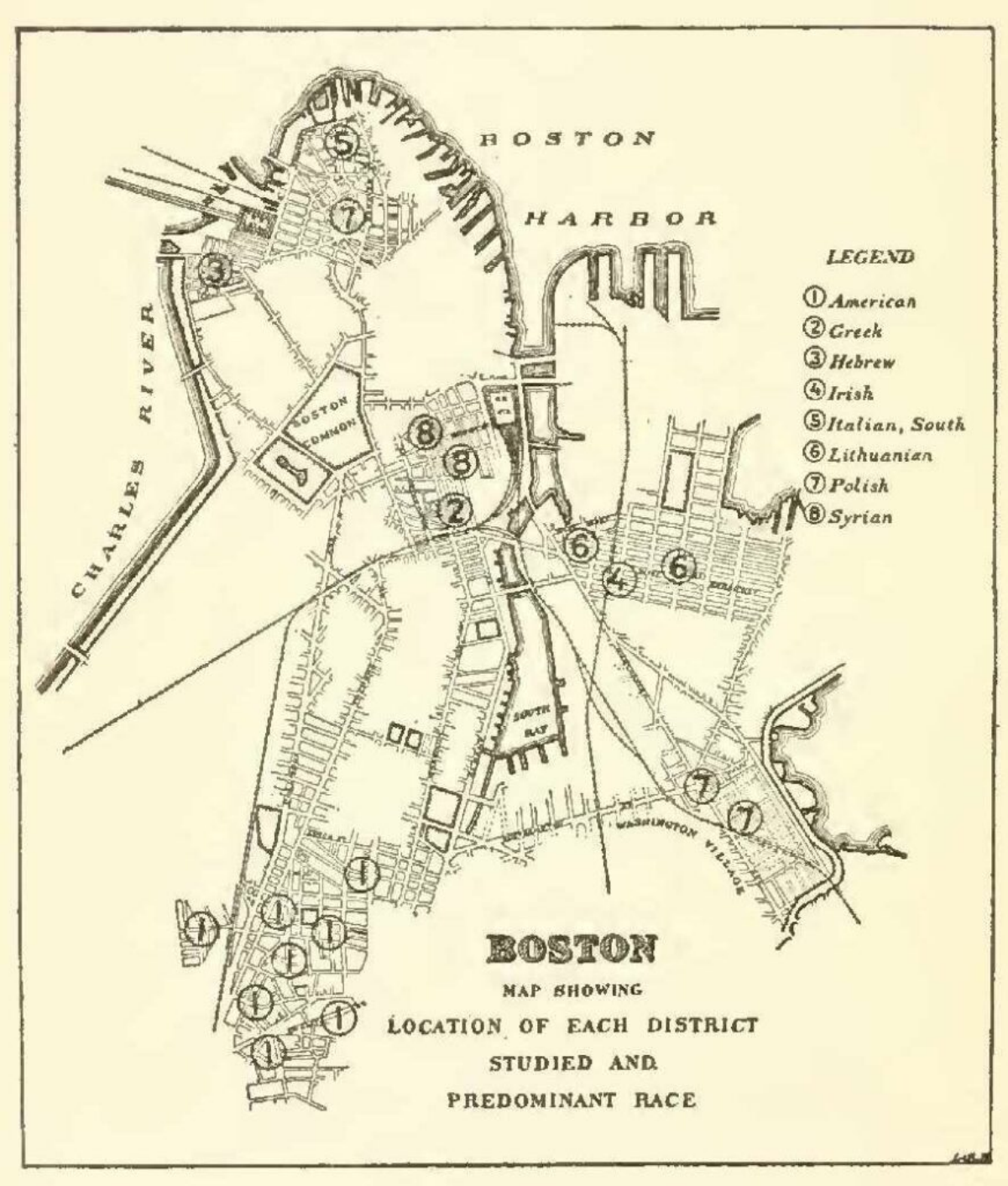
The Rise and Fall of a Diasporic Neighborhood

Chloe Bordewich

The Rise and Fall of a Diasporic Neighborhood

Golden Chinese calligraphy glistens against the painted steel of the nine-meter gate that arches across the corner of Beach and Hudson Streets, a few blocks south of the central train station in the American city of Boston. Just beyond lie the bright, bilingual signs of the Hot Pot Buffet and Hing Shing Pastry Shop. This is Chinatown, where city residents flock today for pork buns and mooncakes. But they once came here to sample kibbeh and puff nargileh. A century ago, this corner lay at the edge of Little Syria.

In the late 1880s, immigrants from present-day Syria and Lebanon, all of whom were then known as Syrians, began moving to Boston's South End. This was part of the first major wave of migration from the Ottoman Empire to the Americas. "Little Syrias" cropped up from New York to Havana and Rio de Janeiro and within thirty years, most properties in Boston's Arab neighborhood were owned by families with names like Haddad, Shibley, Homsy, and Hadge. Nearly all were Christian (Maronite, Melkite, or Orthodox), and most came from the corridor between Damascus and Zahle, a region pummeled by the collapse of the silk industry, war, and famine. Members of this community fought for the U.S. army in the two world wars and debated politics in Fatat Boston and al-Wafa', local Arabic newspapers. They established churches like St. John of Damascus and Our Lady of the Cedars, and founded charities such as the Lebanese Syrian Ladies' Aid Society of Boston. And they lobbied against—or navigated through—the United States' racist and exclusionary immigration policies.



This 1911 government report shows the first center of the community in Boston around Oliver Place and Hudson Street. From Dillingham, Immigrants in Cities **(1911).**

Syrians joined several other immigrant communities in making up what we might consider “Ottoman Boston”—families and individuals who migrated from Ottoman territory to Eastern Massachusetts from before the founding of the United States through the aftermath of the

First World War. Turkish men temporarily worked in the leather industry in the nearby town of Peabody and a small number of Lebanese Muslim families built a community around the Quincy shipyards. Watertown became known for its Armenians, South Boston for Albanians, and Somerville and Cambridge for Greeks.

Some Syrians also settled and labored outside the city. This 1911 photograph by Lewis Hine shows children wading through bogs to pick cranberries, a fruit native to the New England region. Library of Congress.

By the late 1930s, according to the Boston Globe, as many as forty thousand Syrians lived in the northeastern state of Massachusetts, fifteen thousand of them in Boston.“al-‘Arab fi Amrika: Jaliyyat Bustun al-‘Arabiyya,” host Nadim Maqdisi, Sawt Amrika, June 1953;“Syrian American Club to Note Anniversary,” The Boston Globe, April 8, 1937, 6 But not long after this, they began moving out of Little Syria.

Alongside their Chinese neighbors, Syrians led a campaign against the City of Boston's mid-century urban renewal program, the plan to "improve" neighborhoods that the municipal government deemed decrepit and unsanitary. Yet the construction of highways, luxury condominiums, and a medical school eventually fused with generational socioeconomic shifts to accelerate residents' departure for the city's outskirts and suburbs.

Only the sparest traces of Little Syria remain visible to someone walking through the neighborhood today. Names are masked by spellings once deemed easier for English-speaking tongues, buildings were repurposed long ago, and the early generations that arrived in Boston Harbor or down the coast at New York's Ellis Island are gone. Yet as the present Syrian diaspora reaches around the world, the story of Boston's Little Syria offers a window onto how an earlier wave of migrants shaped the places they landed.

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The first documented Syrian families to settle in Boston in the late 1880s clustered around Oliver Place (now Ping On Alley) and Oxford Street, just north of where the Chinatown gate now stands, and on Hudson Street to the south. The neighborhood drew them for several reasons. First, it was a transit hub, close to both the wharves that drove Boston's busy Atlantic shipping industry and, from the 1830s, the city's central rail terminals. The mid-nineteenth century also saw the rapid filling of harbors and marshes and the transformation of this landfill into a chic residential district with stately row houses. But when the stock market crashed in the 1870s, mortgages failed, wealthy residents moved out, and Black and immigrant Bostonians moved in.

By 1910, most houses were four-story brick tenements shared among four to six families, with ten to fourteen rooms and one outdoor toilet used by all. Delia Khoury Tinory, “The First Years in America,” in Eugene Tinory, Journey from Ammeah: The Story of a Lebanese Immigrant (Brattleboro, Vt: Aman

One such building stood at 6 Hudson Street, a microcosm of the neighborhood’s history. Today, it’s an empty lot beside a small, leafy park where groups of elderly men gather to chat in Chinese. Before being demolished in 1989, it was Ruby Foo’s Den, famous as one of the first restaurants in the country to popularize Chinese food among non-Chinese. Beneath this layer of the past, however, lie others that are largely forgotten. Built in the 1840s, the four-story structure became a crowded boarding house for the Irish immigrants who poured into Boston during Ireland’s potato famine.City of Boston ArchaeologyProgram, Site History of 6 Hudson St., Boston (Chinatown), 2020 Then, in 1899, its first Syrian owners were recorded: a couple named Theodore and Futeen Nahass. The Nahasses ran a grocery store on the first floor and at least three other Syrian families lived upstairs. The address was also advertised as Al-Lokanda al-Wataniyya, whose proprietor, Hanna Nikola (or John Nichols, his chosen English name), boasted of running the sole establishment in the city that had “perfected Middle Eastern cuisine” and of his Turkish coffee and tobacco.

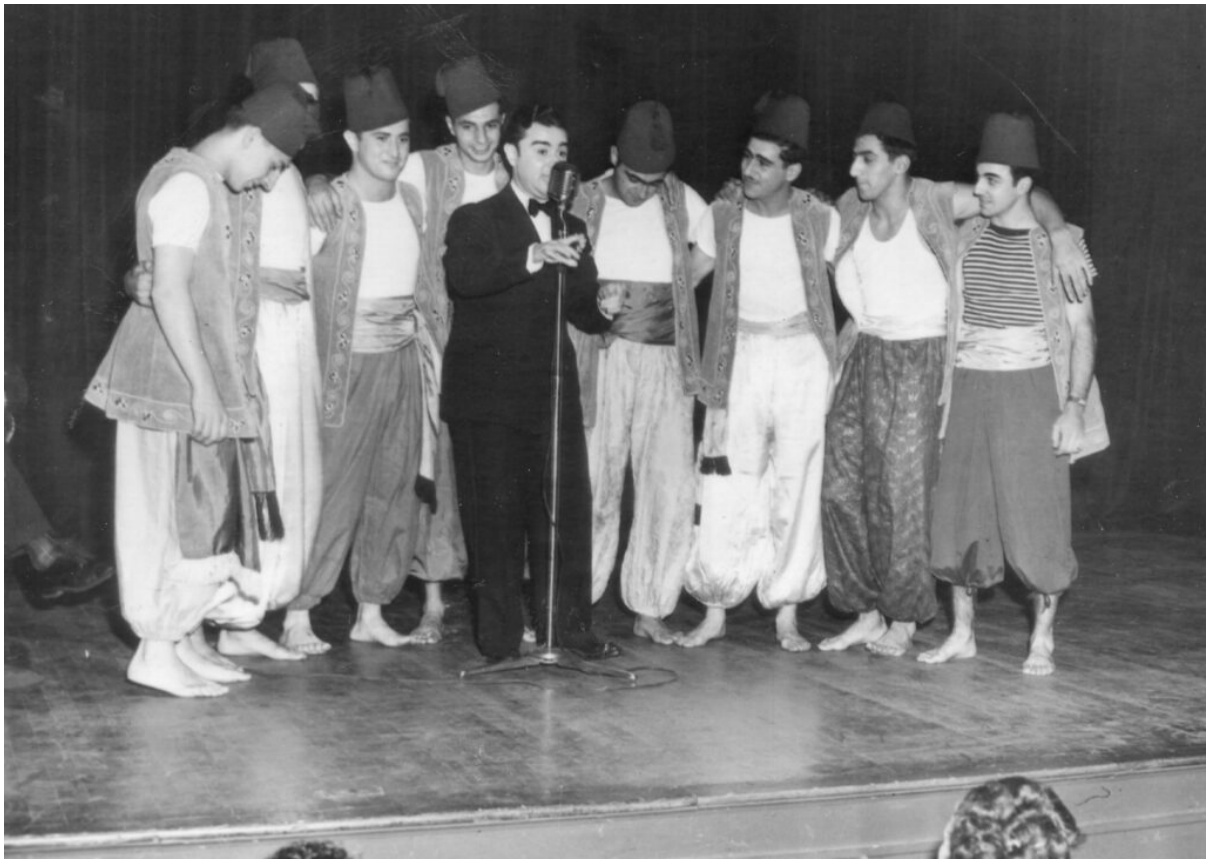
The Nahasses’ space-sharing arrangement was common in Little Syria. Grocers’ basements were typically used to store dry goods such as cosmetics, underwear, and scarves. The newest immigrants loaded these products into large packs and sold them on the street as peddlers, a profession that came to be associated with Syrians across the continent.

Peddling was a trade they could dive into immediately upon arriving in Boston, since it required little knowledge of English to start. The streets of Little Syria were filled with the sounds of these peddlers and their carts, haggling with customers over the price of goods. Among the most popular products peddlers sold was lace, which women had learned to make in Syria and continued to create to support their families in Boston. And while at first peddlers were mostly men, they soon realized women had better luck marketing their wares to some of the most reliable clients: housewives who lived on the outskirts of Boston, far from city's department stores. The peddling and dry goods businesses were fed by a thriving Garment District, which had developed by the mid-nineteenth century between nearby Washington, Essex, Kingston, and Kneeland Streets. There, laborers made ready-to-wear clothes and leather shoes in tall, brick loft factories where Syrians worked alongside Jewish, Italian, Hungarian, Egyptian, Greek, Armenian, and Chinese workers.

The honking of car horns is now the prevailing sound on crowded Kneeland Street. But in the early years of the last century, one's ear might instead have caught the voice of Sheikh Salama Higazi, the Egyptian star, wafting from the gramophone in the shop at number 30. The first commercial Arab records were produced in Cairo in 1903; less than six years later, the owner of Kneeland Street's Arax Grocery, an Armenian named Michael Ajamian, was already proudly advertising records imported from the Arab world alongside his foodstuffs. Eventually, Boston came to be known as the source of some of North America's best homegrown Arabic music. Among its biggest successes was Anton "Tony" Abdelahad (1915-1995), the son of immigrants from Damascus. Abdelahad's oud captivated

audiences on the hafleh and mahrajan circuit across the continent, playing classics like Umm Kolsoum's"Ifrah ya Qalbi" and Nazim al-Ghazali's "Yam al-'Uyun al-Soud." Abdelahad also ran his own label, Abdelahad Records, from Hudson Street. One of the era's most popular songs was "Misirlou," an old tune that was traded among Greek, Arab, Jewish, and Armenian musicians before finding its way into Quentin Tarantino's 1994 cult classic Pulp Fiction. Dick Dale (1937-2019), who composed the film's trance-like "surf rock" version of "Misirlou," was in fact named Richard Monsour, and he, too, grew up in Boston.

Anton Abdelahad's rendition of the popular song "Misirlou," issued on his own label. Courtesy of Anthony Abdelahad.



Anton Abdelahad sings with the St. John of Damascus Church Male Choir. Courtesy of Anthony Abdelahad.

What were other Americans' perceptions of newly arrived Syrians? "They didn't know who we were," lifelong resident Jeanette Hajjar (1928-2004) explained. "They'd say, 'What are you'?'" and at the mention of Lebanon, which Hajjar's father left in 1902, they would ask, "'Is that anything like Chinese or Japanese?'" Government authorities were, for their part, keen to measure and compare the suitability of different groups for cultural assimilation based on what they believed to be collective "racial" traits–professional and cultural stereotypes. A 1921 study by the Massachusetts Department of Education on "Immigrant Races in Massachusetts" representative of such assessments describes Syrians as "born traders," alluding to their occupations as peddlers and dry goods sellers. In their comparative hierarchy, authorities generally ranked Syrians high. But even admiring comments were often

patronizing: “Allowing for their oriental cunning,” the author of the 1921 report states, “they are thoroughly honest.” He adds that Syrians loved to talk about “the glory of ancient Syria,” yet “the Syrian […] is first and last and always an American in spirit and action. He has no other country which claims the slightest part of his allegiance.”William Isaac Cole, Immigrant Races in Massachusetts: The Syrians (Boston: Department of Education, 1921)

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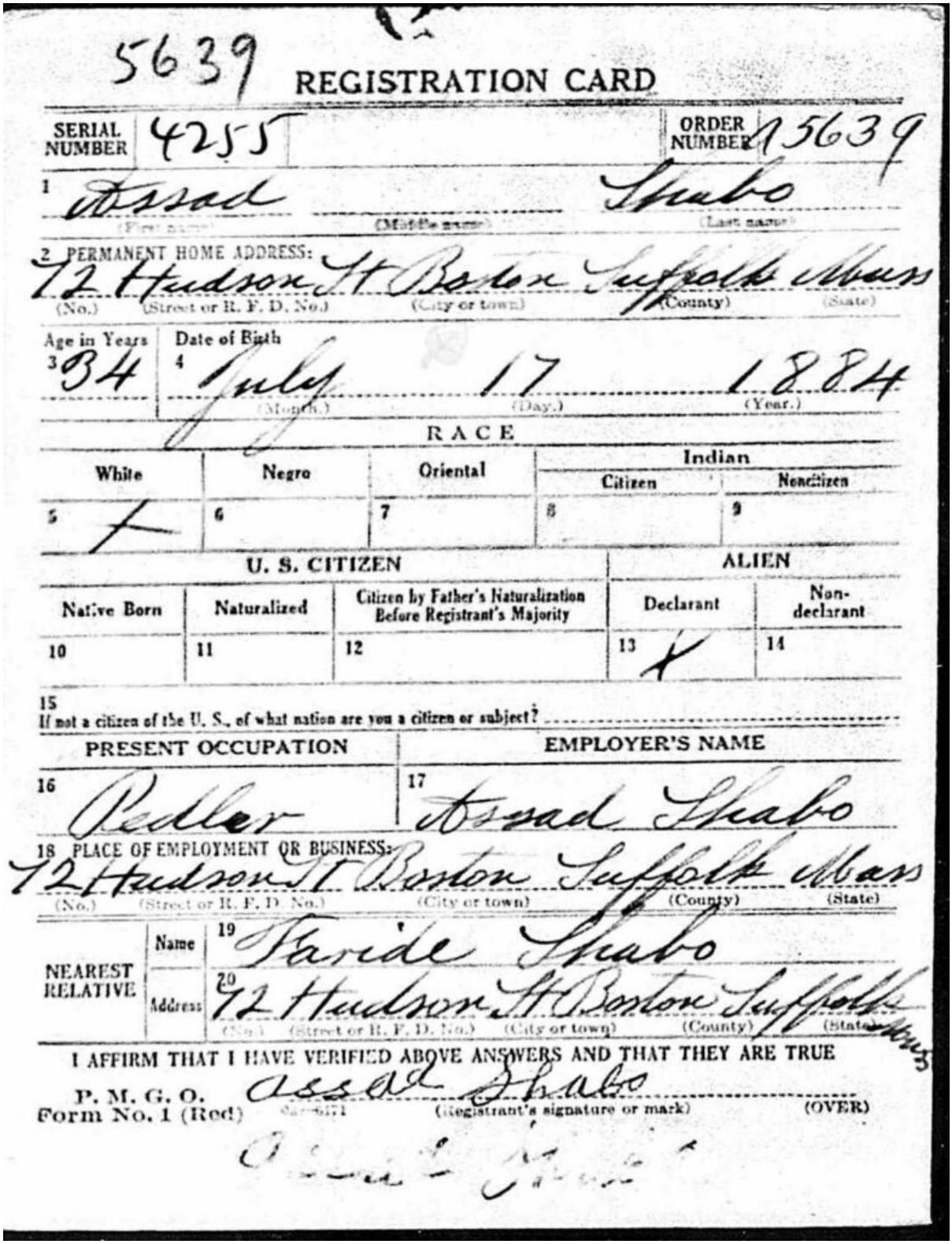
The Department of Education report came out in the aftermath of World War I, which devastated the lands from which Little Syria’s population had come. It was also a catalyzing moment in terms of the community’s relationship to its new country. Residents who were not yet naturalized as U.S. citizens were listed, in their papers, as subjects of Turkey. Few American officials at the time understood the unhappy dynamic of Arab-Turkish relations, and Syrian Americans seized the opportunity to underscore their patriotism and loyalty to the United States. At the same time, they reaffirmed ties to Syria and Lebanon by organizing fundraising drives and dispatching aid.For a detailed study of the Syrian and Lebanese diaspora in the Americas during World War I, see Stacy D. Fahrenthold, Between the Ottomans and the Entente: The First World War in the Syrian and Lebanese Diaspora, 1908-1925 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019)

Between 1914 and 1918, roughly three hundred Syrian men from Massachusetts enlisted in the U.S. army, among many thousands across the country. Several were killed in action. One was John S. Lufty, memorialized with a “Hero Square” street sign at the corner of Oak and Tyler Streets. A child of

Syrian immigrants, he enrolled in the army at sixteen years old and died in the Argonne in France on October 30, 1918, just days before the armistice. On September 25, 1921, the Mount Lebanon Club organized a parade that drew three thousand people, mostly Syrians, and the City of Boston dedicated the square to Lufty. It is one of several street corners named to honor the patriotism of Syrian Americans in U.S. military service, though it also suggests that ultimate assimilation comes through the sacrifice of one's own life. Striking to Arabic speakers is that Lufty is an Anglicization of "Lutfy," a two-letter swap intended to make the name easy and familiar for native English-speakers. Such linguistic switches were among the common ways immigrants and their children negotiated identities as they sought to blend in while still maintaining their language, culture, and traditions.

Najeeb George Kennan settled on Tyler Street in 1912 and volunteered for the U.S. army during World War I. His artillery unit was deployed to France, where he was exposed to German poison gas attacks. He survived and returned to Boston in 1919 but died of lasting lung damage only two years later, aged twenty-four. Courtesy of Father Timothy Ferguson.



5639

REGISTRATION CARD

SERIAL NUMBER 4255 ORDER NUMBER 5639

1 Assad Shabo
(First name) (Middle name) (Last name)

2 PERMANENT HOME ADDRESS: 72 Hudson St Boston Suffolk Mass
(No.) (Street or R. F. D. No.) (City or town) (County) (State)

Age in Years	Date of Birth
3 34	4 July 17 1884
	(Month.) (Day.) (Year.)

RACE

White	Negro	Oriental	Indian	
			Citizen	Noncitizen
5 X	6	7	8	9

U. S. CITIZEN			ALIEN	
Native Born	Naturalized	Citizen by Father's Naturalization Before Registrant's Majority	Declarant	Non-declarant
10	11	12	13 X	14

15 If not a citizen of the U. S., of what nation are you a citizen or subject?

PRESENT OCCUPATION	EMPLOYER'S NAME
16 Peddler	17 Assad Shabo

18 PLACE OF EMPLOYMENT OR BUSINESS: 72 Hudson St Boston Suffolk Mass
(No.) (Street or R. F. D. No.) (City or town) (County) (State)

NEAREST RELATIVE

Name: 19 Farida Shabo

Address: 20 72 Hudson St Boston Suffolk Mass
(No.) (Street or R. F. D. No.) (City or town) (County) (State)

I AFFIRM THAT I HAVE VERIFIED ABOVE ANSWERS AND THAT THEY ARE TRUE

Assad Shabo
(Registrant's signature or mark)

P. M. G. O. Form No. 1 (Red) (OVER)

World War I U.S. military draft card of Assad Shabo, an Arabic-speaking Assyrian from Midyat, near Mardin, in present-day Turkey. He first fled with his family to Damascus during the Armenian massacres of the 1890s, when non-Armenian Christians were also killed. The card lists Shabo's profession as peddler and his residence as Hudson Street. U.S. National Archives and

Records Administration.

Those who remained in Boston participated in the war in other ways, including through the press. According to government statistics, close to eighty percent of men in Little Syria at this time had basic literacy in English, though the number was much lower—roughly thirty percent—among women.Dillingham, Immigrants in Cities (Reports of the Immigration Commission) (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1911), 499. But a newspaper of their own, tailored to coverage of the violence and destruction in Syria, met a critical need at a moment when most Bostonians' attention was fixed on the war's European front. Fatat Boston (The Boston Girl), a twice-, then thrice-weekly Arabic journal during the war years, was published by a prominent local entrepreneur named Wadie Shakir (b. 1886) and headquartered at 40 Tyler Street, in the heart of Little Syria. Before emigrating from Zahle with his widowed mother at age fifteen, Shakir had studied at a Protestant missionary school; these were the main points of contact with Americans in Syria and Lebanon. The young Wadie chose Boston as the family's destination because, according to his daughter, the late literature scholar Evelyn Shakir, he had heard it was "the literary center of America."Evelyn Shakir, Bint Arab: Arab and Arab American Women in the United States (Wesport: Praeger, 1997),18.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Syrian Tri-Weekly Newspaper
PUBLISHED BY
W. E. Shakir
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Annual Subscription
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In Foreign Countries $ 4.00
Entered as Second Class Mail Matter at the Boston Post Office

FATAT BOSTON

فتاة بوسطن

تصدر ثلاث مرات في الاسبوع

السنة السادسة عدد ١١

قيمة الاشتراك
في الولايات المتحدة و كوبا والمكسيك
عن سنة — ثلاثة ريالات
عن نصف سنة — ريالان
في الخارج — اربعة ريالات
صاحب الجريدة ومديرها
— وديع شاكر —
— ٤٠ شارع تيلر —

BOSTON THUR. MAY 8, 1919

بوسطن الخميس في ٨ ايار سنة ١٩١٩

Masthead of Fatat Boston, May 8, 1919. Khayrallah Center for Lebanese Diaspora Studies.

Fatat Boston was more than a local paper. Subscriptions were available throughout the United States, Cuba, Mexico, and “abroad” for $3-4 a year (roughly $100 today), hinting at the well documented links between clusters of Syrian settlement across North and South America. It was also not the only Arabic newspaper in the state of Massachusetts: Joseph Khoury and M.A. Najjoum’s al-Wafa’ (Fidelity) was already established in the nearby industrial town of Lawrence. The geographical reach of the diaspora press was, moreover, extensive enough to be viewed as a possible threat by Ottoman officials in Istanbul, who read the Arabic and Armenian publications printed in the United States and frequently banned the import of issues they deemed subversive into Ottoman territory.

Throughout World War I, Fatat Boston featured content from Iraq, Syria, and throughout the region that conveyed the accelerating pace of human displacement, the machinations of Jamal Pasha, the Ottoman governor in Damascus, and, eventually, the Central Powers’ defeat. At the same time, Fatat Boston was packed with advertisements for the financial instruments the U.S.

government sold citizens to finance the war. On May 8, 1919, a front-page editorial pleaded with Syrian Americans to open their wallets for “victory bonds” (qurud al-nasr). Percentage-wise, they had already bought more “liberty bonds” (qurud al-hurriyya) than any other immigrant group, the article declared; would they not now take the final step to ensure that Uncle Sam (al-‘amm Sam) could follow through on his promises to “free small, subjugated nations… like the Syrians”? This language echoed that of President Woodrow Wilson’s Fourteen Points speech, delivered a year earlier to Congress. Colonized people around the world had listened with considerable skepticism. Nevertheless, such rhetoric found a platform in publications like Fatat Boston at a time when French and British diplomats were preparing to carve up the Middle East into their own fiefdoms.


العم سام هو الاخ الاكبر للشعوب الصغيرة
أن مساعدتنا ونصائحنا ينبغي أن تحفظ الامم الصغيرة الجديدة من الانحلال والهبوط الى قعر الاوقيانوس العالمي
أن الواجب يتطلب منا أن نشجع وننصح بلطف اولئك الشعوب لكي يتمكنوا من بناء حكوماتهم على أسس العدل والامن والاختبار
Willi Gass

An Arabic translation of a postwar propaganda campaign image declaring Uncle Sam the “big brother” of the small nations of the world. Fatat Boston, May 8, 1919. Khayrallah Center for Lebanese Diaspora Studies.

The residents of Little Syria were political actors on the local, national, and international stage, debating the fate of the Arab provinces of the dissolving Ottoman Empire at a moment when this fate was yet uncertain. One option that seemed plausible to some at the time was a U.S.-administered Mandate. As the war wound to a close, New York’s New Syria National League lobbied Boston’s Syrian American Club to support one. The club, less than a block from Fatat Boston, fostered cultural ferment simultaneously with political dialogue. During World War I, it hosted what was perhaps the United States’ first performance of Hamlet in Arabic, with men and women from the neighborhood appearing on stage together.“Hamlet Given in Syrian,” Boston Daily Globe, April 6, 1914. Nearby, Hannah Sabbagh Shakir (1895-1990), a textile worker and seamstress married to Fatat Boston’s Wadie Shakir, mustered women to form the Society for the Relief of Syria and Lebanon (later the Lebanese Syrian Ladies’ Aid Association). The group focused on raising money to send overseas—to Syrians, Lebanese, and Armenians—then later shifted to assisting immigrant women in Boston.

Syrians gather on Boston Common, in the city center, during the 1918 Liberty Loan fundraising drive. U.S. National Archives and Records Administration.

Bostonians from eleven countries, including the young Syrian boy in front, gather in their “national costume,” during the Liberty Loan Drive to drum up support among foreign-born residents. U.S. National Archives and Records Administration.

This wave of civic activism came at a watershed moment for Syrians’ status in the U.S. immigration hierarchy. Officials were preoccupied with classifying new and would-be arrivals by race, submerged as they were in the ethnological pseudoscience that was then in vogue. The right to naturalization was limited to those who were either “white” or of African ancestry (a legacy of laws passed after the U.S. Civil War). But they could not agree on whether Syrians—as well as Armenians, a major presence in other parts of Boston—were “white” or not. The alternative was “Oriental” or “Mongoloid,” preposterous catch-all terms of the era which derived from U.S. authorities’ targeted efforts to exclude and dispossess Chinese and Japanese

immigrants. Massachusetts judges were more lenient than some in their interpretation of statutes. But Syrians' legal right to naturalization was at their whim as debates over different groups' racial attributes raged in the courts. Then, in 1915, a Syrian in the southern state of South Carolina named George Dow successfully challenged the denial of his citizenship application by a judge who had claimed he was not white. By reversing the original judge's ruling, a federal appeals court set an enduring precedent: Syrians were now officially "white" in the eyes of the government and had an unequivocal legal right to naturalization.On the reverberations of the Dow case, see Sarah M.A. Gualtieri, Between Arab and White: Race and Ethnicity in the Early Syrian American Diaspora (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009). Meanwhile, authorities doubled down on exclusionary policies aimed at people of other nationalities. But there was a major caveat: because nearly all immigrants arriving from Syria and Lebanon at the time of these legal battles were Christian, the category of "Syrian" was understood to refer specifically to Christians. Where Muslims from Syria fell in the government's racial hierarchy was left poorly defined, and thus their eligibility for citizenship was still not guaranteed. Federal courts remained divided on the eligibility of "Arabians," i.e., Arab Muslims, until the mid-1940s.

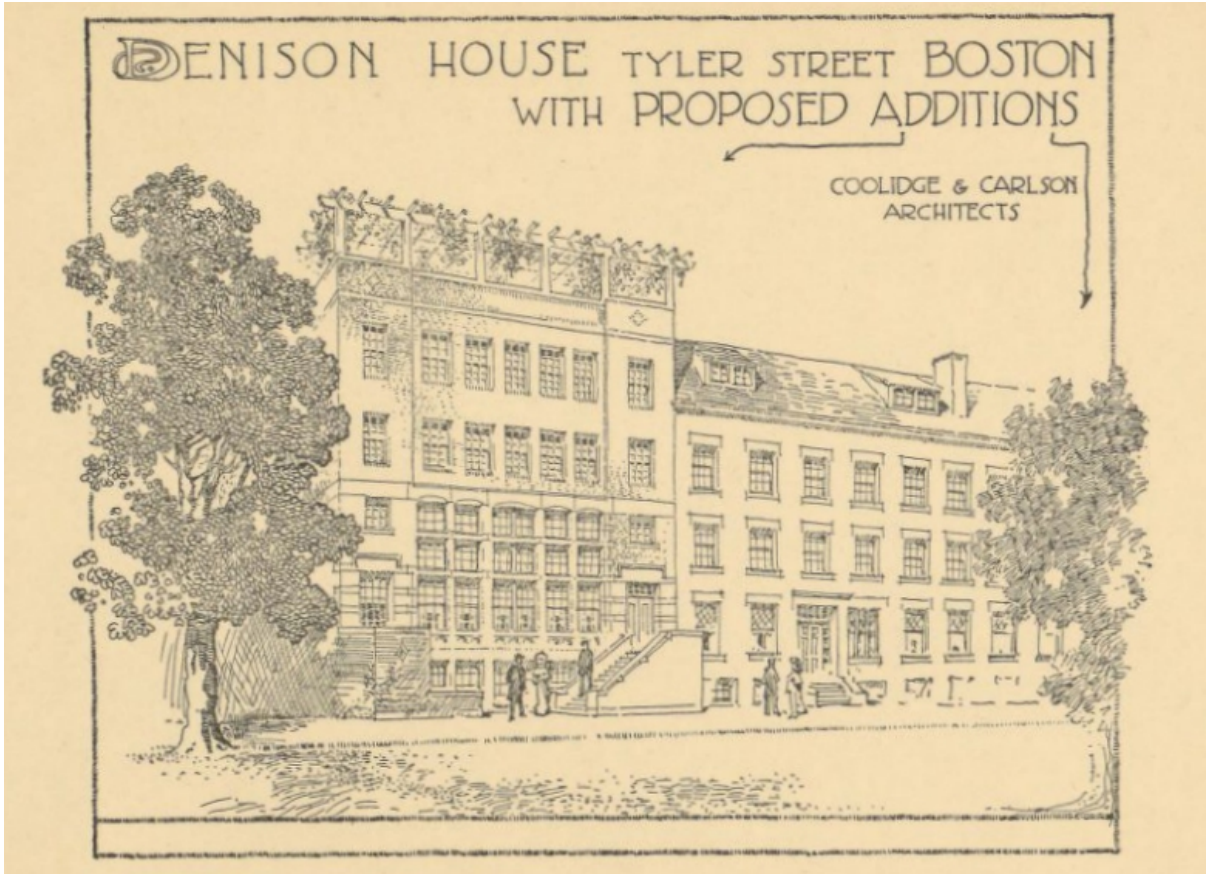
Quincy Grammar School, on Tyler Street, was one place where children from dozens of the government's favored and disfavored nationalities alike studied side by side. "Every one of us could swear in six different languages," remembered Jeanette Hajjar. At night, working people from priests to bricklayers sat at the pupils' desks, learning

English and, the Boston Globe declared, how to be “Good American Citizens.”“Making Good American Citizens: Evening Schools of Boston,” Boston Daily Globe, November 5, 1905. Indeed, authorities preoccupied with probing the moral assimilability of immigrant groups constantly sought to measure their supposed predispositions toward civic participation. The Quincy School building itself was meant to inspire reflection on the democratic ideals associated with the U.S. Revolutionary War (1775-1783). It was designed in 1848 by the star Boston architect Gridley J. F. Bryant, known for foundational buildings of Harvard and Tufts universities, in the Greek revival style popular in the mid-nineteenth century. Syrians who attended Quincy Grammar school were also immersed in what were understood to be the most progressive pedagogies of the time. Most famously, the school pioneered the “single-headed” classroom, in which schools were divided into several classes taught simultaneously in different rooms. This is the system still widely in use. Quincy closed in 1976 and moved a few streets over, after which the Chinese Consolidated Benevolent Association of New England bought the building and installed the large statue of Confucius that presides over the site today.

Quincy Grammar School, 2022. Notable Greek revival features included the facade's pediment and the tiny, temple-like structure on the roof. By the 1930s, a fire and hurricane had left the building flat-roofed, as it is today. Neil Larson, National Register of Historic Places–National Park Service.

These days, this end of Tyler Street is mostly calm and quiet. But in place of the long, plain block of brick that faces the old Quincy School, a hub of social services for new arrivals once stood. Denison House, established in 1892, was run by women who professed an egalitarian philosophy of social order and perceived the institution they founded as an engine of upward mobility. Denison was among the country's first so-called "settlement houses," where middle-class workers organized classes ranging from cooking and woodworking to English and public speaking, as well as accommodation, work, and sometimes food. Well before he wrote The Prophet (1923), which catapulted him to fame,

writer Kahlil Gibran (Gibran Khalil Gibran) (1883-1931) numbered among Denison's pupils. After arriving from the village of Bsharri with his mother at age twelve he enrolled in Denison House's art classes, which served as his entrée into Boston's bohemian art world.



Denison House. From Denison House Annual Report, 1913.

The education of the mind and hands at Quincy Grammar and Denison House paralleled the nurturing of the spirit. Since nearly all the inhabitants of Little Syria were Christian—Maronite, Melkite, or Orthodox—churches were the center of social life: places to congregate, worship, preserve the Arabic language, and celebrate holidays. By the early 1930s, four separate Syrian churches sat within a five-minute walk of one another. The Maronites had Our Lady of the Cedars, while the Orthodox community cleaved in three: St. George's, St. John of Damascus, and St. Mary's. All of them boomed. The four-story Our Lady of the Cedars,

for example, next to Quincy Grammar school, was dedicated in 1899 by Father Joseph Yazbek. The church's name invoked an unmistakable symbol of parishioners' homeland, Lebanon, as they laid claim to a permanent spiritual home in Boston. By 1902, the congregation had already grown significant enough for its Easter Bazaar fundraiser to draw the city's Irish-born mayor, Patrick Andrew Collins. Two years later, Our Lady acquired a piece of what was said to be the True Cross—the cross on which Christ was crucified–and it held the local memorial service for Kahlil Gibran when he died in 1931. It continually outgrew its space, moving repeatedly to accommodate the number and geographical center of parishioners. A Chinese Christian mission moved into the original location at 78 Tyler Street in 1946.

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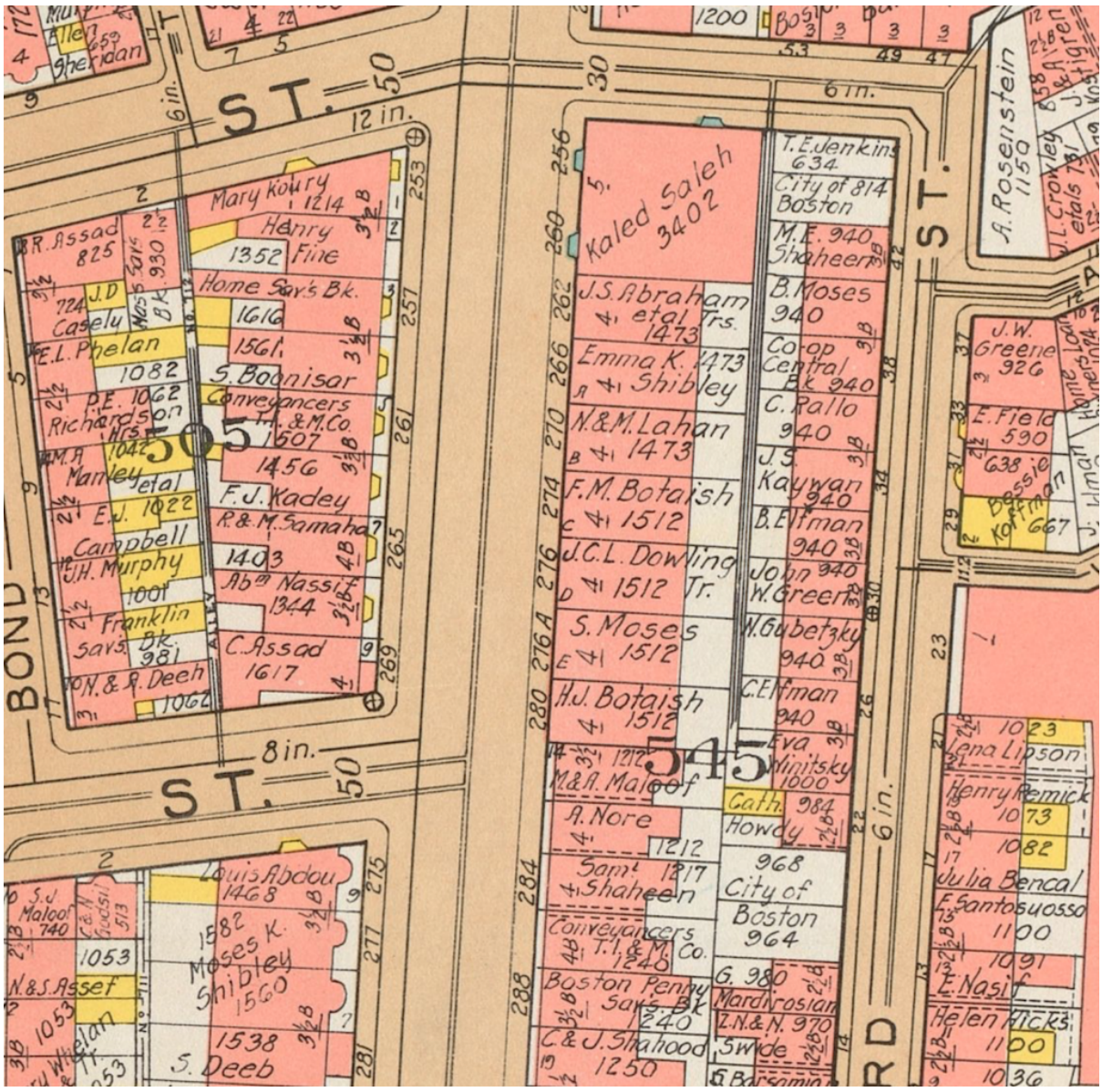
As the population of Little Syria grew in the 1920s and 30s it shifted south, away from the Garment District and parallel to the elevated rail line that hauled residents from the farther reaches of the city into the heart of the business district. The names on property deeds along Shawmut Avenue changed from the English-sounding Cabot, Adams, and Dobson to Arabic ones like Khoury, Shaheen, and Saliba.



This map from the Atlas of the City of Boston shows property ownership along a short stretch of Shawmut Avenue in 1938. The names suggest that most of the lots belonged to Syrians. Courtesy of Leventhal Map Center, Boston Public Library.

To the pedestrian, the original core of the neighborhood around Tyler and Hudson Streets now feels profoundly disconnected from the “new” stretch of Little Syria along Shawmut Avenue. While the railroad had always bisected the neighborhood from east to west, a zeal for urban planning seized municipal officials across the country in the 1950s and ‘60s. The result was the profound transformation of the built environment. A wider, deeper gash was cut

along the rail lines to accommodate the central node of the interstate highway, feeding into an uninviting tangle of road spaghetti that still interrupts the landscape. In tandem, city officials razed the edges of the neighborhood and entire adjoining blocks to make way for new development that would be decades in coming to fruition.

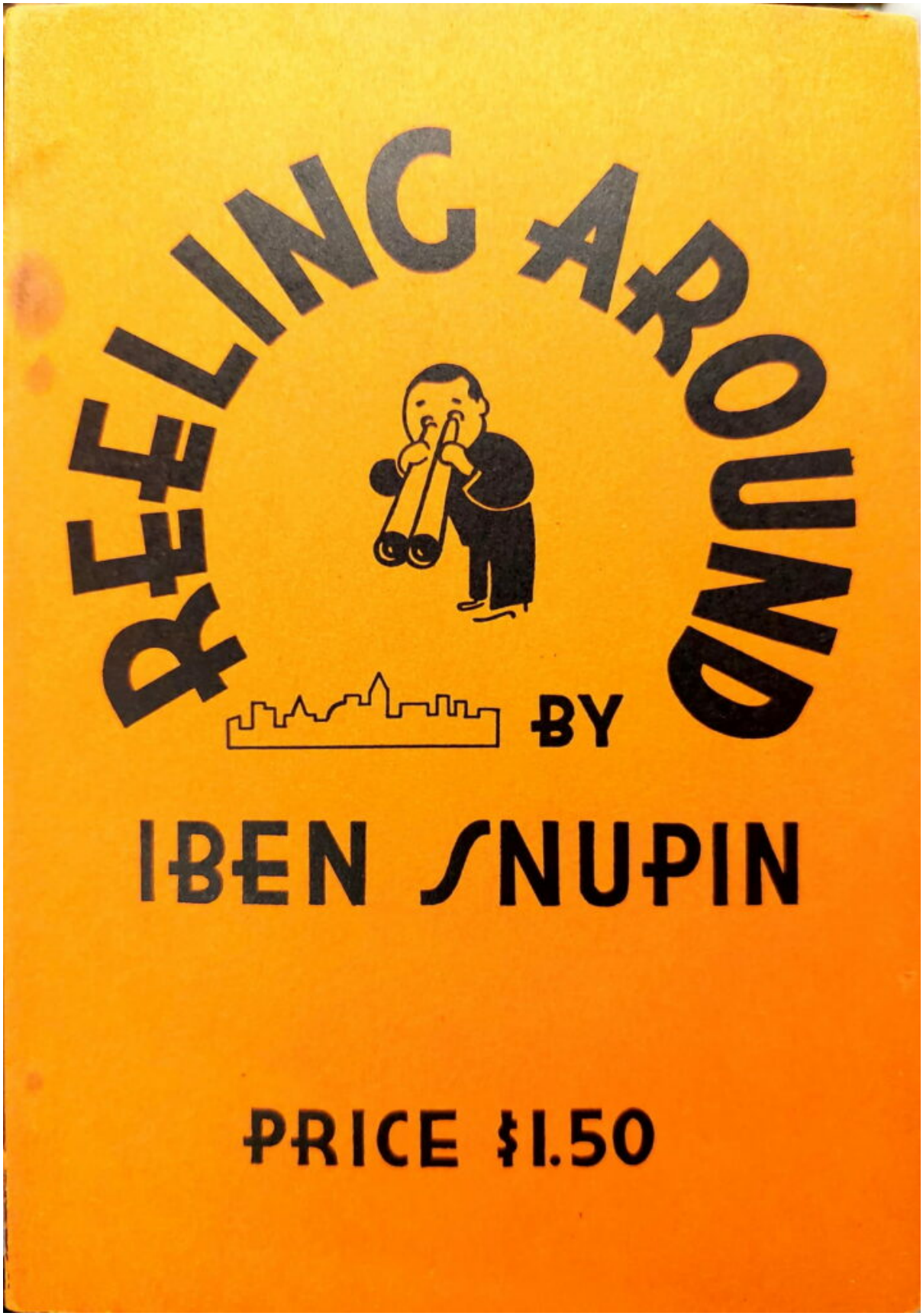
The Boston Redevelopment Authority (BRA), the department charged with remaking neighborhoods deemed old and unsightly, initially sought to involve residents in imagining their future. Nabeeha Hajjar (1900-1978), Jeanette Hajjar's mother and the owner of a boarding house, was among those who agreed to participate. But six years of talking, she later said, left her "disgusted." The City had produced map after map, "building and tearing down and building" again, and none of it seemed to benefit the people who lived there.

"I don't think [the South End] was worse than any other place, North End or West End," Hajjar told an interviewer. "But somehow… they pointed to the South End and called it the slums." There were a lot of bars, which attracted drunks, and in turn prostitution, she conceded, but these had not destroyed the fabric of residents' lives. For another vocal BRA skeptic, the seamier side of things was what made the neighborhood so interesting. Frederick Shibley (1905-1970) pursued a colorful career as a vaudeville acrobat then local journalist, with stints in between as a dancing teacher and in jail on bank robbery charges. A 1910 government report noted the presence of "immoral resorts confined to no race" in its study of the Hudson Street enclave, but it was only beginning in 1938 that Shibley turned the seedy underbelly of the larger neighborhood into the exclusive subject of a wildly popular

local newspaper. For the twenty-eight year publishing project, he adopted the pen name “Iben Snupin,” a bilingual pun that combined the Arabic ibn, “son,” with the English “I been snoopin’”–digging into other people’s business. His Mid-Town Journal was packed with crime-oriented, tongue-twisting headlines such as “Nab He in She Masquerade” and “Three in Bed Tangle Lasses—Sheik and Two Gals in a Single Cot.”Iben Snupin, Reeling Around (Boston: Journal Publishing Company, 1945), 5, 23. Iben Snupin relished these debaucherous tidbits from the neighborhood: where city officials came to see communal degradation, Iben Snupin had long seen a place rife with good stories.**)**

A Shibley family portrait, including Frederick, his siblings, and his parents, Moses Shibley and Emma Abraham, 1925. From Gladys

Shibley Sadd, True Love Stories (Santa Clarita, CA: Glastebar, 2000). Courtesy of Richard Shibley.



Frederick “Iben Snupin” Shibley’s Reeling Around. Courtesy of Richard Shibley.

Sadie Peters (from the Arabic “Boutros”) (d. 1975), a community organizer from Kfar Hilda, Lebanon, successfully advocated for local residents against the BRA’s plans for her stretch of neighborhood. The names of Sadie and her husband, shoemaker George Peters, are carved into a boulder at one entrance to Peters Park, a few strides from their former home. Back across the broad new highway, the garment industry where many Syrians had started off, and which now employed primarily Chinese women, also challenged redevelopment with some success. But the industry declined anyway as foreign competition stiffened and second- and third-generation immigrants moved into white-collar jobs.

Sadie Peters, 1970s. Peterspark.org

By the 1970s, Syrians had largely relocated to the edges of the city and to its suburbs. At least one business stuck around, however. The Mansour family cut the ribbon on their Syrian Grocery Importing Company at 270 Shawmut

Avenue in 1940; the next generation still keeps it open, from time to time. The shop’s large front windows display colorful ceramic bowls, coffee sets, and nargilehs–items used by the earliest residents of Little Syria and by both Arab and non-Arab customers today. This is an example of the import stores so essential to Chinatowns, Little Saigons, and Little Syrias, providing immigrants with items from their country of origin while attracting new customers curious to sample the unfamiliar.

Shawmut Avenue reflected in the window of the Syrian Grocery Importing Co., 2022. Courtesy of Alison Terndrup.

Just down the street, at 296 Shawmut, a retro white and yellow sign bearing the name “Sahara Syrian Restaurant” hangs on the corner of a shabby, boarded-up building constructed in the mid-nineteenth-century Greek revival style. The site began as a German Lutheran church but by

the 1960s was one of the hottest tickets in town. The name of the restaurant, Sahara, as well as the Pyramids featured in some of its ads, appealed to a generic Orientalist exoticism. It offered both Syrian food, for the neighbors, and “American” food, to draw those with a blander palate. Newspapers from Sahara’s heyday list hummus, grape leaves, kibbeh, “shish-ke-bab,” “lamb delicacies,” “tempting pastry,” and, most ambitiously, “steak and chops—fit for a sultan!” The restaurant closed in 1972 and was sold to the Mansour family who own the Syrian Import Store nearby. While the building remains mysteriously shuttered more than fifty years later, the sign lingers as an unusual and iconic landmark on the street. Bostonians and visitors headed for the block’s upscale restaurants often pause here, curious and a bit puzzled by this incongruous allusion to the desert.

Ad for the Sahara Restaurant promoting an all-night New Year's party. From The Boston Record-American, December 27, 1965.

The former Sahara Restaurant, 2022.

Once one begins looking for Little Syria, pieces of it come into view across Chinatown and the South End—connected to the larger legacy of immigration to the Americas from the Ottoman Empire and the nation-states that emerged after its collapse. Although Little Syria may not stand out as

a cohesive neighborhood to the casual stroller today, the squares named for veterans and businesses like Syrian Grocery Importing are reminders of a community that lives on in Boston. The churches that once dotted the blocks around Hudson and Tyler streets are long gone from this fragment of the urban landscape. But the institutions themselves remain, rerooted in the places to which Little Syria's population dispersed and replenished by more recent waves of arrivals.

These important continuities aside, the shuttering of the Sahara Restaurant coincided with several disjunctures: the disruption of the physical urban landscape and the dispersal of people, but also national-level political and demographic shifts. The passage of a new U.S. immigration act in 1965 eliminated longstanding quotas grounded in racial pseudoscience and opened the door to larger-scale migration from West Asia and North Africa. Though the process of immigration remained onerous and often arbitrary after 1965, the geographical origins of newcomers grew more diverse and the proportion of Muslimsamong them steeply increased. On paper, such as census forms, all remained "white," a classification for which the first wave of Syrians to come to the country lobbied aggressively and successfully, but that activists in recent years have pushed to change. Before the Cold War, meanwhile, missionaries had been nearly the only Americans acquainted with the region; the 1950s, however, marked a dramatic acceleration in military and economic interventions. In the 1970s, the country witnessed both the embrace of an ideology of multiculturalism and a dark shift in discourse around Arabs as the oil crisis, a string of PLO hijackings, and confused understandings of the 1979 revolution in Iran fueled the crystallization of caricatures and suspicions.

Thus, the post-1965 era was one both of newly opened doors and of hardening stereotypes that, in hindsight, appear a prelude to the panicked politics of the so-called “War on Terror” and the so-called “Muslim Ban” imposed in 2017.

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Boston is a city that trades on history. It was founded in 1630, on the land of the Massachusett tribe. This might have been more than a century after Sultan Selim I’s conquests brought Arab lands under Ottoman rule, but the date places Boston among the oldest continuous settler-colonies in North America. The tourists that crowd its downtown streets come above all to see what has long been celebrated as the “birthplace of the American revolution.” Yet few who stroll through this dense forest of historical plaques erected to the eighteenth century—indeed few who live among them—are aware that a Little Syria ever existed. Recent rhetoric on the U.S. national stage shows the political urgency of asserting the presence of the community and the ways it has been knit into local, national, and transoceanic networks. But this wander through Little Syria also illustrates an approach to the past that reaches beyond the ephemeral politics of our present, and beyond the single American city it traverses. It glimpses the lives of the Nahasses, Shibleys, Shakirs, Abdelahads, Hajjars, and Peterses from family photographs, property records, newspaper clippings, reminiscences, and oral histories, recorded on cassette. Yet it also allows for lingering at curious street signs, following unnatural curves in the street, and pausing in empty lots. Walking, slowly and attentively, assembles the shards and shadows of the past into a larger and more meaningful history.