

## **The Forgotten Enclave of Little Saigon**

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If you're not familiar with the Little Saigon enclave in Arlington, you are not alone. This Vietnamese community, formed in the 1970s, had a significant impact on shaping the diversity of Arlington. On an informal Instagram poll I conducted, I found out that over 90% of my Arlington friends had never heard of the area or its history. As many of my followers represent a younger generation, none of them were alive during the heyday of the once-booming ethnic commercial district. Perhaps if I had an older audience, the results would be different. But as memories fade with time, so does history.

The capital of South Vietnam, Saigon, collapsed on April 30th, 1975(6). Not only did this event mark the victory of North Vietnam and the soon to be created socialist republic, but it also led to the evacuation of hundreds of thousands of Vietnamese to countries like the Philippines, France, and the United States (US). The US saw the biggest influx of Vietnamese immigrants in American history. The conditions in Vietnam were far too dangerous after the war, especially for people tied to the US government and its embassies, so the United States sponsored the evacuation of over 125,000 Vietnamese(2). Many of these refugees evacuated by boat to California and other states on the West Coast, but many of these same people took planes further across the country to the east coast and eventually settled in Northern Virginia (5). Conditions on the boats were not glamorous to say the least. Nguyen Ngoc Bich, a passenger of one of these vessels described it like this: “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.” (5)

Since many immigrants coming from Vietnam had political ties to the American Embassy and government, the DC metropolitan area was desirable for them (3). Hence, Clarendon was a prime location for many immigrants and became known as Little Saigon. Along with the location, the cheap rent rates in Clarendon also made it desirable. During the first wave of immigrants in 1975, the Metro was still under construction and the streets were being torn up. For some commercial buildings, the rent was as low as \$1.50 to \$5.00 for one square foot (4). This enabled Vietnamese immigrants with few resources to open shops to support their families.

Although the main influx of immigrants began in 1975, the first Vietnamese business, called the Saigon Market, in Clarendon was actually opened in 1972, by a former Vietnamese Embassy employee. The second business, a grocery store called the Vietnam Center, was opened shortly thereafter (3). This inspired more Vietnamese people to establish their businesses in Clarendon as well. Despite the fact that banks would not give out loans to these newly immigrated people, the Vietnamese still found success in starting businesses with the help of family friends and their community. Not only did Arlington provide the space that the immigrants needed to start a new life, but it provided a welcoming community of people who provided support for the many refugees (5). Lieu Nguyen, daughter of the owner of the Mekong Center shared this perspective: “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.” (5)

The small neighborhood of Clarendon very quickly became a center filled with stores for Vietnamese immigrants who had recently been evacuated. These stores introduced authentic Vietnamese goods that were not available at other local American markets. These markets helped provide immigrants with a feeling of home in a country very different from their own. In 1960, the census showed that around 94 percent of people in the US were white. Although the US has always been a country built by immigrants, an overwhelming majority the immigrants were of European descent(5). Only an extremely small portion of the United States and Arlington was Asian until the late 20th century. Arlington is often labeled today as one of the most diverse “cities” in the United States, although this has only been true for recent years(~2000 to present)(5). This Vietnamese enclave in Clarendon brought much-needed diversity to Arlington County.

In the time that the Metro was being constructed, the Clarendon neighborhood did not experience an increase in development as many developers awaited its completion. Developers waited because many streets were in poor condition, and it wasn’t worth it until more people could access it through the Metro. Unexpectedly, even after the completion of the Metro, it remained mostly undeveloped due to absentee landowners who would not sell their land(5). Many projects, such as shopping centers and larger buildings, that were envisioned, could not be carried out because of the lack of space(5). But as time went on and Clarendon was prioritized for redevelopment by the county board, rental rates soared and many Vietnamese were unable to keep up with the increasing costs. Some relocated to other locations like the Eden center in nearby Falls Church, but some of them, unfortunately, went out of business and closed down.

Even today, the DC metropolitan area has one of the highest Vietnamese populations of all major cities. Despite the gentrification of Clarendon, many Vietnamese people stayed roughly in the same area, although not necessarily in the same neighborhood. Arlington has not always been such a diverse community, but the Vietnamese were one of the first pioneers in Arlington that helped accelerate its growing diversity. Today, unfortunately, the Nam Viet restaurant is the only remaining business establishment of the original Little Saigon community (1). Although Vietnamese businesses have relocated, the development and history of Clarendon will always partly be owed to the Vietnamese immigrants that once made it their enclave.

Although this represents an important part of Arlington history, much of this history, unfortunately, goes unnoticed because as the Vietnamese merchants have been priced out of the neighborhood and memories of their contribution to Clarendon have faded. Had I not researched it, I would have never found out or guessed that Clarendon was once a Vietnamese hub. Now that I have, I think more should be done to recognize the Vietnamese community's contribution to the area. Today, Clarendon is one of the most recognized commercial districts in Arlington, with many expensive restaurants serving food from around the world, offering anything from Mexican to Japanese cuisine. This diverse choice of cuisine and the diversity of Arlington, in general, is partially owed to some of the first non-European immigrants in Arlington, the Vietnamese.

## Bibliography

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