



# The South End Historical Society



## Spring 2010 Newsletter

E-Newsletter Issue 1

April 19, 2010

### Remembering My Two Lost Neighborhoods

by *Gloria Ganno*

This is the story of my family and our experience in the South End when I was a child and the impact of *Eminent Domain* in the 1940s and the urban renewal movement that began in the late 1950s and the 1960s. Two of my family's homes were taken using Eminent Domain by the City of Boston within twelve years forcing us to move twice. Eminent Domain is a law that allows government entities to seize private property, without the owner's consent, for a public purpose. Owners must be paid "due compensation," however, many people often complained that they weren't paid their property's true worth.

My family lived at three different addresses in the South End. Our first home (and the first to be taken away) was located at 31 Harvard Street. It was taken by the city in 1944 to allow a hospital on the adjoining property to expand and the property is now part of New England Medical Center. When our home was taken, I was six years old and my family was comprised of my parents, myself and two brothers - Tom and Peter.

My Lebanese grandparents owned the house, which was a free-standing four story, four family, red brick building with a big front yard, which was unusual in the city. The wood walkway leading to the sidewalk was lined with trees and several benches. I remember playing in that front yard while my grandmother, whom we called Situ, sat on a bench in the shade of the trees.

My grandfather, whom we

called "Jidu," spent a lot of his time in the cellar making Araaq, a Lebanese liquor, and other potent drinks. In the cellar there was a deep well, covered with a large wooden board. My dad said that when he dropped a stone down the well it took a long time to hit the water far below - a fact that added to its mystery. Although my grandfather drank his share and smoked all his life, Jidu lived in his apartment until he died at age 103.

Our neighborhood was adjacent to Chinatown and Syrian Town in which people of diverse backgrounds - Chinese, Syrians, Armenians, and other ethnic groups - co-existed peacefully. Some were immigrants and their dress and different cultures added lots of old world flavor to the street life. As Syrians and other groups moved away in the 1950s, the growing Chinese population expanded and eventually more of the entire area became known as just Chinatown.

We moved from Harvard Street in 1944 to a nearby section of the South End called the "New York Streets," which were named after cities and towns in New York - Troy, Genesee, Rochester, Oswego, Decatur, Oneida and Seneca - connecting Harrison Avenue with Albany Street. The Boston & Albany Railroad had a depot nearby whose trains traveled through those cities.

After we were forced out of Harvard Street our new home was a third floor apartment at 8 Florence Street, named after a town in Oneida

County. We lived across from Our Lady of Pompeii Church where I made my First Communion and Confirmation. As a youngster, from my window, I watched parishioners throwing rice on couples leaving the church after getting married. Four Greek families lived in the building until we moved in and broke the pattern. My grandparents moved to Decatur Street, the next street over.

I began first grade at the Andrew School on Genesee Street wearing a brand new dress and with my hair in long pigtails. From grades four to eight, I attended the Abraham Lincoln School in Bay Village while my mom and dad worked in clothing factories. My mom also sang in nightclubs downtown in the evenings.

Florence Street was only one block long connecting Harrison Avenue and Washington Street and we could hear the squealing wheels of the elevated trains of the Orange Line snaking along the tracks to Dover Street Station. On this sunny street with its four-story, red brick row houses, mom and I made many lifelong friends. Mel King, who later made history as the first black man to run for Mayor of Boston, lived at Florence and Washington Streets.

When I was a child, automobile traffic was light, so neighborhood kids could easily roller skate on the street, play hopscotch on the sidewalk, and play baseball in three empty lots that at one time held three houses.

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## (Remembering, continued from page 1)

The church owned the lots; it paved them in asphalt and maintained them. It was a playground for us and a place for the older boys to play a competitive game of handball against the blank brick wall that stood at one end. With three missing buildings plus the church and rectory, there were fewer residences, so our street was less crowded than the others. On hot summer nights, we played “kick the can” and “hide and seek” in the dusk while our parents socialized on the stoops.

My parents weren't getting along and decided to split up. Afterward, my mom rented an apartment for us near Florence Street at 364 Harrison Avenue at the corner of Troy Street. I remember a nice Jewish lady with a heavy accent, named Tillie, who owned the building, which was comprised of 12 apartments on the upper floors and two commercial spaces on the street level. Tillie was always cheerful and was very proud that even as a widow she was able to be financially independent. Tillie's son, a doctor in Brookline, was constantly asking her to move there. He couldn't understand her fervent attachment to the neighborhood. However, she preferred to stay surrounded by her many friends and what, for her, was a fulfilling social life. In fact, she was among a number of people who lived in the New York streets by preference who could afford to live elsewhere.

The Italian bakery next door to us, *Geoffries*, emitted the scrumptious aroma of bread and cookies baking, which wafted up to our third floor apartment, and we could rarely resist buying a loaf fresh from the oven. The bakery also sold cold cuts and had big wheels of cheeses imported from Italy. On the next block was a Jewish bakery called *Green Friedman's*, where we bought bagels and pumpernickel and rye breads also hot from the oven. There

were stores that sold fresh fruits and vegetables, meat and fish markets, and specialty stores catering to different ethnic groups. *Girdis's Meat Market* at the corner of Florence Street exclusively sold lamb. We never ate so well as when we lived in the New York streets.

During the mid-1950s, residents of the New York streets received a notice to move. The Boston Housing Authority (BHA), later replaced by the Boston Redevelopment Authority (BRA), was taking homes using Eminent Domain. Tillie sadly moved to Brookline. Although she was living in a more upscale place, she was lonely and missed her friends and her old neighborhood life. The elderly, the longest-time residents, seemed especially hit hard by the upheaval.

Without their long-time customers, the food stores closed, and created a hardship for the surrounding neighborhoods who also shopped there. According to the BHA records, the authorities believed the New York streets were over served with food markets. The South End had no

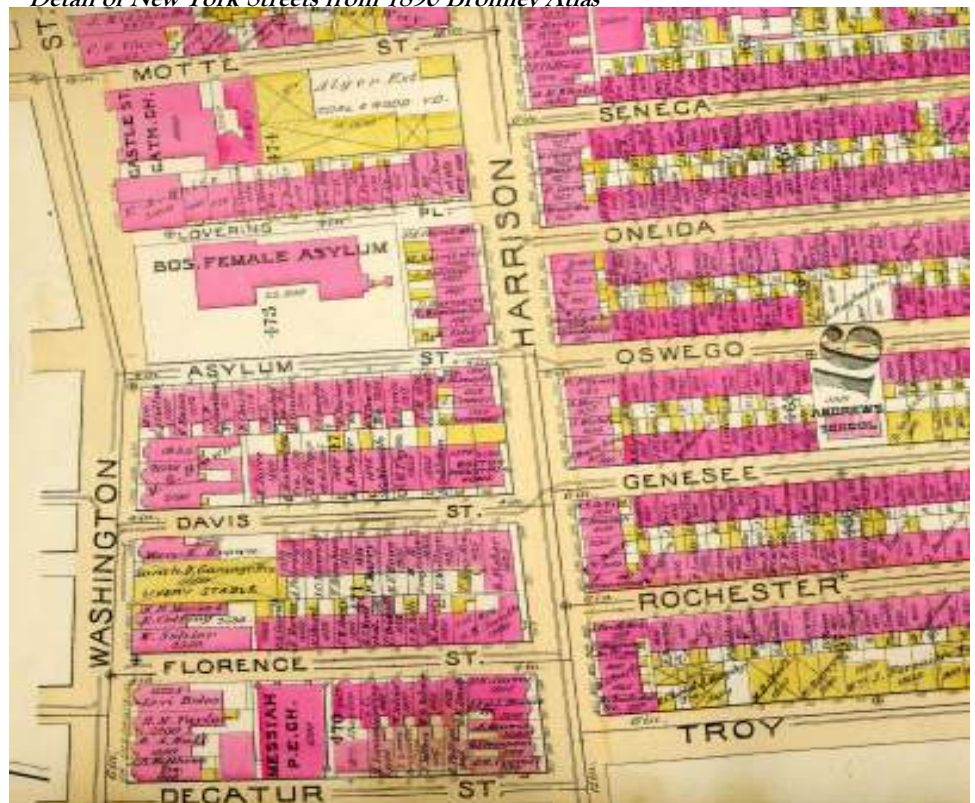
supermarkets, so everyone shopped in small stores. However, the BRA didn't recognize that people in the surrounding area depended on those markets to buy food. When they were gone, people lost their local places to buy food.

Residents of the New York streets were heartbroken to be kicked out of their homes. Just as in the better documented Eminent Domain taking of Boston's West End, the BHA resorted to playing dirty tricks to get us out. For example, they shut off all the street lights at night, so that you couldn't see your way home, especially on starless nights. It was a dangerous thing to do to people and anything could have happened. You won't find that tidbit of information in the city's records. You had to experience it to know about what they did to us.

The BHA tried to place us and other residents in the Columbia Point Housing Projects, recently built in South Boston.

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*Detail of New York Streets from 1890 Bromley Atlas*



### (Remembering, continued from page 2)

The housing was a desolate location, set off by itself with no stores and little bus service. I told the BHA that I wanted to live in Bromley Park in Jamaica Plain where my friends had moved. They became angry and wouldn't help us anymore because I had the audacity to refuse to live in Columbia Point. If you were poor, you didn't get much respect from those people. Who were we to choose where we wanted to live after they snatched our homes from us?

“Urban Renewal didn't stop with the New York Streets. We were the first neighborhood to be razed, but during the 1950s, '60s and '70s urban renewal craze, the South End lost 25% of its buildings.”

Everyone from our neighborhood was scattered, city and suburb. We rented an apartment at 34 Amory Street in Jamaica Plain. However, my brother and I still returned to the South End to hang out, and so did our friends. Our Lady of Pompeii Church was razed, but our parish priest, Father Pitaro, held annual reunions for his parishioners until he died. He always maintained a soft place in his heart for that small, 22-acre neighborhood. Our Jewish neighbors also attended these reunions, so that they could see people from the old days. With Father Pitaro gone, parishioners continued the reunions until several years ago. For more than 50 years they had come together, but sadly there were no longer enough of them left to hold a

reunion anymore. The Syrians from Syrian Town used to hold a huge event every year at the Chateau DeVille in Randolph, which accommodated several hundred people. They served a family style roast beef dinner on large platters that kept coming if you asked for more. They also featured a 20-piece American orchestra for regular dancing and a Syrian orchestra for line dancing. The event sold out quickly, so you had to buy your tickets early, and what a time that was! That event is no longer held, but people from different parts of the South End still hold reunions to this day.

As teens, we used to walk or take the “T” all over the place. We even had a bus at the Broadway Bridge that took us to South Boston's City Point and Carson Beaches. Being city kids, we could go almost anywhere on our own. Today parents are always in their cars driving their kids somewhere. Imagine the luxury of having kids with no rides needed.

It's important to note that Urban Renewal didn't stop with the New York streets. We were the first neighborhood to be razed, but during the 1950s, '60s and '70s urban renewal craze, the South End lost 25% of its buildings. Residents who chose to stay in the South End were forced to move

from place to place as the city took more properties. People began to fight back to keep the destruction from continuing and fortunately they succeeded.

Today, the South End's Victorian Era buildings are cherished, rather than distained, and are listed on the National Register of Historic Places. The district contains the largest intact Victorian rowhouse area in the nation. These architectural treasures are what our city would have lost if urban renewal had continued unchecked. Although the New York Streets were replaced with commercial buildings more than 50 years ago, at least people like me are still around to write the story of a time and place where many nationalities and ethnicities lived together peacefully.



*Gloria Ganno, a lifelong resident of Boston, grew up in the South End and has great memories and knowledge about what it was like living in the inner city during the 1940s and 1950s. She has regaled her three children with interesting, humorous, sometimes bizarre, stories about her old city neighborhood, and they've always asked for more. When her two grandchildren are old enough, she plans to do the same for them, hopefully with similar results. Utilizing her strong interest in history, after retiring at age 62, she began a new career writing about Boston's historic events.*



### The South End Historical Society Officers and Board of Directors

Michael Leabman, President  
Maryellen Hassell, First Vice President  
Rob Kilgore, Second Vice President  
Susan Park, Treasurer  
Anne Smart, Secretary



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Rick Minot, Fundraising Director-at-large  
Paul Odelson, Meetings and Functions Chair  
John Neale, Historian  
Ted Vasiliou, Preservation Chair  
Nancy Parker Wilson, Fundraising Chair  
Harvey Wolkoff, Counsel



# Upcoming Events

## Membership Renewal

If you have not yet sent in your membership renewal for the 2010-2011 year, please do so.  
 -Yearly single memberships are \$25  
 -Family/Dual memberships are \$40  
 -Additional opportunities to support the Society are also available.

Please send cash or check to:  
 The South End Historical Society  
 532 Massachusetts Avenue  
 Boston, MA 02118

-or-

To pay by credit card via PayPal, please visit our website at [www.southendhistoricalsociety.org](http://www.southendhistoricalsociety.org) and click on "Become a Member".

## 44th Annual Spring Dance

Join us on Saturday, May 1, 8pm to midnight at The Benjamin Franklin Institute, 41 Berkeley Street for hors d'oeuvres, dessert, and dancing.

*Cash bar available, creative black tie event*

General tickets are \$125 per person (\$62.50 is tax deductible)

To order contact the SEHS office or use the PayPal link on the Programs/Events page of our website, [www.southendhistoricalsociety.org](http://www.southendhistoricalsociety.org).

*Proceeds from this event benefit the South End Historical Society.*

## Billy Bulger and the SEHS Annual Meeting

Join us at our Annual Meeting, Thursday, June 10, at 6pm and listen to featured speaker William "Billy" Bulger as he discusses his book about Mayor James Michael Curley.

Location to be determined (it will be in the South End).

**Please call or email the SEHS office to RSVP. RSVP is required.**

(617) 536-4445 or [admin@southendhistoricalsociety.org](mailto:admin@southendhistoricalsociety.org)



## Cast Iron Questions?

Need help restoring, repairing, or replacing your cast-iron fence? The South End Historical Society can help! Call or email the SEHS office at (617) 536-4445 or [admin@southendhistoricalsociety.org](mailto:admin@southendhistoricalsociety.org) for more information.



## Welcome to our newest Board Member

The South End Historical Society welcomes Paul Odelson as our new Meetings and Functions Committee Chair. Before joining the Board, Paul was a SEHS volunteer and member of the 2009 House Tour Committee. Paul spends his time between Boston, working for Coldwell Banker, and at home in New Hampshire with his 2 dogs.

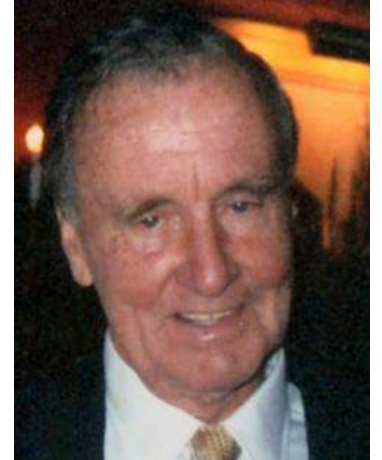
## Welcome to our new Members

Amy Brink  
 Mark S. Carrig  
 Matthew and Allison Godoff  
 Don and Maxine Goldberg  
 Jack and Emily Green  
 Sean Hennessey  
 Norm and Mary Knickle  
 Jeff Shamp  
 Barbara Sittering  
 Ann Webster and Susana Gil

## The South End Historical Society mourns the loss of two of its members

### *Albert Rondeau Jr.*

Albert Rondeau Jr. passed away at his home in Newburyport in December of 2009. Al started A.E. Rondeau Real Estate in 1965 and was an early pioneer for the South End, lobbying endlessly for community improvements and rehabilitation. Al was honored as one of "350 Most Important Bostonians" for his work in the South End and in 2005 he received the Ellis Association's Arthur Howe Award. Al was a long time member of the South End Historical Society and his presence will be greatly missed.



Al requested that memorial contributions be made to the Newburyport Maritime Museum, Lowell's Boat Shop, or The South End Historical Society.

With the proceeds from Al's memorial contributions, the SEHS is planning to purchase an item in honor of Al's legacy for our collections. If you would like to contribute towards this, please email or call the SEHS at [admin@southendhistoricalsociety.org](mailto:admin@southendhistoricalsociety.org) or (617) 536-4445.

### *Conrad R. Agneta*

Conrad R. Agneta passed away in January. Conrad was a U.S. Marine Veteran of the Vietnam era and worked as an accountant at Quest Diagnostics. He was a member of the Friends of Hayes Park, Boston Harborfest, and The South End Historical Society. In addition to serving on the Board of Directors for the SEHS, he frequently served on the House Tour and Spring Ball Committees. Conrad was a longtime member of the South End Historical Society and he will be greatly missed.



Memorial contributions in Conrad's name can be made to the AIDS Foundation, 1168 Main St., Springfield, MA 01103.



### 1972 Prints Available

Pictures from the South End Historical Society's 1972 survey of all extant buildings are available for purchase. The images are digitized and available in jpeg format at 300 dpi. If you are interested in purchasing an image or if you require another format or resolution, please contact us at 617-536-4445 or email us at [admin@southendhistoricalsociety.org](mailto:admin@southendhistoricalsociety.org).

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The SEHS Newsletter is just one benefit of membership in the Society; a nonprofit organization dedicated to recognizing, preserving and recording the historical, buildings, monuments, parks and artifacts of Boston's South End and through advocacy, outreach, documentation and education to preserve them for future generations.

Individual membership is \$25 per year, Family/Dual memberships are \$40, and opportunities to support the Society at the Supporting (\$100), Patron (\$150) and Benefactor (\$250) levels are also available.

The opinions expressed by the contributors to the newsletter are not necessarily those of the SEHS. Ideas for stories and manuscripts are welcome. Unsolicited manuscripts submitted for possible publication and not used will be returned if they are accompanied by a self-addressed, stamped envelope. Those interested in reprinting articles must obtain written permission from the editor.

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[www.southendhistoricalsociety.org](http://www.southendhistoricalsociety.org)

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Hope Shannon

Editor: Christopher Donohue

Contributors: Gloria Ganno



## New to the SEHS Collections

The SEHS has acquired a framed portrait of the late Arthur Howe. The photograph was taken by well known South End photographer, Peter Urban. Peter passed away in September and his partner, Steven McCarthy, generously donated the piece. Peter Urban and Arthur Howe both contributed much to the South End and the portrait is a wonderful addition to our collections. Thank you Steven!



Mr. Peter Urban

Mr. Urban's portrait of  
Arthur Howe

The SEHS thanks Mr. Jon Anderson-Miller for his recent donation of Victorian period trade cards related to South End businesses. In addition to this contribution, in 2006 Mr. Anderson-Miller generously donated an assortment of Victorian period trade cards related to the South End.

Thank you, Jon, for continuing to contribute to our collections!

