Remembering Little Saigon

The Story of Arlington's Vietnamese Community

By Malia Humphries-Do

Arlington's Little Saigon was a foundational part of the Vietnamese community in the Washington, DC, Metropolitan area, providing a sense of community and assistance to countless Vietnamese immigrants and refugees. While many Vietnamese residents were forced to relocate following rising rental prices and gentrification, they left a long legacy on Arlington's community. Businesses like the Saigon Market grocery store and My-An fabrics, two institutions of the Vietnamese community, have been replaced by upscale national chains like Whole Foods and Lululemon. Only one family-owned business remains, a lone survivor of Clarendon's transformation from Vietnamese ethnic enclave to an urbanized, trendy downtown area. This is the story of the Nguyen Van Thoi family, whose restaurant, Nam-Viet, represents the last remnant of the Little Saigon community.[1]

Nam-Viet Restaurant, located near the corner of Hudson Street and Wilson Boulevard in Clarendon, packs an unassuming punch into a small space (Fig. 1). Although today, restaurant-goers range from Clarendon natives to tourists, the restaurant is proud to serve what family matriarch Mrs. Thoi once described as "the same cooking that our elders enjoyed: handcrafted and precisely perfected for over three decades."[2]

The Nguyen Van Thoi family's journey to the area mirrors that of many Vietnamese refugees in the wake of the Vietnam War. Immediately following the fall of Saigon in 1975, a "first wave" of around 134,000 Vietnamese refugees emigrated to the United States. Many of these "first wave" refugees had ties to the US government and were

highly educated. Over 3,000 Vietnamese settled in the Washington area, with many moving to the Northern Virginia communities of Arlington, Alexandria, and Falls Church.[3] These communities offered proximity to the nation's capital, and with it, a wider government support network of financial, cultural, and job assistance. Kim O'Connell, a writer who specializes in local Vietnamese history, explained, "[F]or those fleeing Saigon in particular, living near the capital of the United States—a long-time political and military ally, and now a refuge—seemed like a fitting choice."[4]

In 1978, a "second wave" of refugees moved to the United States, coming from mainly rural areas of Vietnam and traveling on rickety fishing boats in hopes of a better life. They followed in the footsteps of their earlier counterparts, settling in already established Vietnamese communities throughout the US. The Nguyen Van Thoi family came in this second wave, and their journey here was not easy. Family patriarch Nguyen Van Thoi had served as an interpreter for the US Army during the Vietnam War, but following the war, the Northern Vietnamese captured him and forced him into a reeducation camp. Orson Swindle, USMC (Ret) Purple Heart, a frequent customer at My-An and later, Nam-Viet, and a close friend of Van Thoi, explained, "He had suffered terrible hardships for his loyalty to the American Armed Forces in South Vietnam."[5] After two years in the camp, he managed to escape and created a plan to help his family leave Vietnam for good. Like many other refugees, he and the rest of his family crammed onto a small fishing boat, navigating perilous water across the South China Sea to Thailand.[6]

By 1979, the Nguyen Van Thoi family, thanks to the help of Catholic Charities, moved to Arlington from Thailand. With an already growing Vietnamese community in the DC area, along with the many government opportunities it afforded, Arlington seemed like a good choice for the

Fig. 1: Nam-Viet Restaurant, 2017.

Courtesy Michael Horsely.

family. Van Thoi's son, Richard Nguyen, recounted that the DC metropolitan area had "always been a home basin, a little welcoming area to my family."[7]

Resettling in America was difficult for many Vietnamese refugees as they struggled with a loss of cultural identity, especially because they had little time to prepare for migration due to the abrupt nature of the war. Furthermore, refugees faced a hostile environment within the US. According to a 1975 Gallup Poll, 54 percent of Americans opposed Vietnamese settlement. For these reasons, "Vietnamese have […] a greater need to live in enclaves than other Asians."[8]

Clarendon in the 1970s provided the perfect area for Vietnamese settlement. As the rest of Northern Virginia became more suburbanized in the '60s and '70s, large-scale shopping malls and strip shopping centers lured consumers away from Clarendon. The district, once Arlington's most prominent shopping destination, "entered a period of decline."[9] Vacancies abounded, and landlords were desperate for renters, enticing tenants with inexpensive short-term monthly or half-yearly contracts. The affordability of Clarendon, along with nearby affordable housing opportunities, presented a prime opportunity for

Fig. 2: Storefronts of Little Saigon, 3100 Wilson Boulevard, ca. 1987.

Courtesy of Michael Horsely.

Vietnamese refugees, who had limited resources or financial capital available to lease expensive buildings in gentrified areas.

Vietnamese throughout the region seized on the opportunity to establish businesses and a centralized community in Little Saigon. The Nguyen Van Thoi family appreciated the support network that Little Saigon offered, first as consumers and eventually as business owners. Richard Nguyen explained, "It was a nice mixture of Vietnamese restaurants, shops, and fabric stores, just a little Asian community." (Fig. 2) Immediately after moving to Arlington, Thoi and his wife, Ngoc And Tran, worked odd jobs in the DC area. His son recounted, "My dad was a mechanic, and he would also work as a contractor's assistant and gas station attendant. My mom would be a nanny, and she'd work at restaurants learning the trade, but she always had a knack for cooking."[10]

Like many other Vietnamese families, "owning a business has always been a goal." In 1983, they finally got their chance to open a restaurant in Arlington, My-An. They started small, as their first eatery only seated ten to twelve customers. Their restaurant was in good company, and Little Saigon was in its prime, with over a dozen shops, ranging from Kim Long gift shop to grocery and jewelry stores.[11]

Opening a business was still not without its hurdles. Many Vietnamese entrepreneurs faced discriminatory lending practices, so prospective business owners had to borrow money from friends and family at higher interest rates. Bureaucratic hurdles also posed a struggle as many refugees were unfamiliar with business licensing and regulations. Furthermore, other residents and even the Arlington County government raised concerns that immigrants were straining the county's resources.[12]

Despite these issues, the businesses of Little Saigon were able to flourish, and they formed an integral part of the Vietnamese American experience in the DC area. Local historian Elizabeth Morton explained, "The Vietnamese refugees came to Little Saigon for more than just groceries; the neighborhood became the place where they could receive news of Vietnam and of friends and family."[13] Richard Nguyen recounted that growing up in the Little Saigon community was "almost…utopia." He recalls doing homework at restaurant counters after school with other neighborhood kids as their parents worked: "You

knew everybody down the street. You knew their family. You knew their extended family. It was more homey."[14]

Courtesy Malia Humphries-Do.

Fig. 3: Photograph of the Clarendon neighborhood today.

Little Saigon would not last for long. After construction of the Clarendon Metro stop finished in 1979, new developments started trickling in, and rents began rising. Almost a decade later, a redevelopment plan for Clarendon, which proposed more high-rise commercial and residential buildings, added to the pressure. Kim Cook, a Vietnamese resident in Arlington, reflected on the development: "It was so new, I don't think we knew how it was going to impact [Little Saigon]." As rents astronomically increased—in one instance, from $5 a foot in 1975 to $25 in 1989—many businesses struggled to cover their overhead cost.[15] Many moved further out to the cheaper Eden Center. Another Arlington resident, Richard Woodruff added, "It just seemed very gradual, one by one they seemed to disappear." Nguyen Ngoc Bich, an active member of the Vietnamese community in Arlington explained, "I think this is basically just an economic issue: when one didn't have a lot of money, you could only afford temporary kinds of arrangements. There is almost no Vietnamese rich enough to compete with many of the American establishments."[16] (Fig. 3)

Nam-Viet is now the only business that remains in Clarendon. When asked what set his family's restaurant apart, Richard explained, "There has always been a struggle, but we always had a great foundation in terms of name recognition and support."[17] At the end of the day, that legacy of community support kept their business alive through the hard early years to more recent struggles like the COVID pandemic. Richard reflected, "It's an ever evolving dynamic, especially with things going on the last four or five years, especially with COVID.… [T]he thing is restaurants are just one of those unpredictable entities that, just a little bit of everything keeps it going."

That same community support is what keeps the Nguyen Van Thoi family committed to Arlington and in the restaurant business. For them, "the rewarding thing is building the connections that you establish with the longtime customers and the community." It's the reason they've stayed in Arlington through the many ups and downs of the past few decades. After all, "It's home."

About the Author

Malia Humphries-Do is a high school student and longtime resident of Arlington, VA. As a daughter and granddaughter of refugees from the Vietnam War, she has always been particularly interested in the history of the Vietnamese community in the United States and especially in Arlington. When a family member shared with her information about Arlington's own Vietnamese community, Little Saigon, she felt it was so important to not only learn more about this period in Arlington history but also to share its impact with those around her. She previously contributed an article about the Freedman's Village community in Arlington to the *Arlington Historical Magazine*. She would like to thank Dr. Pat McCullough and Ms. Sahar Siddiqui of the Holton-Arms School for their support of this article and continued support for her literary endeavors.

Endnotes

1. Richard Nguyen, Personal Interview, March 2025.
2. Richard Nguyen, "Nam Viet Restaurant - 213 Photos & 396 Reviews - Vietnamese - 1127 N Hudson St, Arlington, Va - Restaurant Reviews - Yelp," Nam Viet Restaurant, Yelp, 2023, www.yelp.com/biz/nam-viet-restaurant-arlington.
3. Kim O'Connell, *Echoes of Little Saigon: Vietnamese Immigration and the Changing Face of Arlington*, Virginia Humanities, Virginia Foundation for the Humanities, 2016, 7–8, virginiahumanities.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/09/Echoes-of-Little-Saigon.pdf.
4. Ibid.
5. Andie Judson and Nicholas Garbaty, "After Losing His Own POW Dad, This Restaurant Owner Carried on a Family Legacy of Honoring Vets," WBIR-TV, February 11, 2019, www.king5.com/article/syndication/heartthreads/after-losing-his-own-pow-dad-this-restaurant-owner-carried-on-a-family-legacy-of-honoring-vets/507-e9834fc1-9d85-462a-b376-2bc343f9f115.

6. Louie Estrada, "Nguyen Van Thoi Dies," *Washington Post*, December 30, 2005, www.washingtonpost.com/archive/local/2005/12/31/nguyen-van-thoi-dies/8d10436d-f587-4678-8efe-b1a3e6f12b42/.
7. Richard Nguyen, Personal Interview, March 2025.
8. Kim O'Connell, *Echoes of Little Saigon*.
9. Ibid., 10.
10. Richard Nguyen, Personal Interview, March 2025.
11. Elizabeth Morton, "History: Echoes of Little Saigon," *Echoes of Little Saigon*, October 15, 2024, littlesaigonclarendon.com/the-history/.
12. Kim O'Connell, *Echoes of Little Saigon*, 17.
13. Elizabeth Morton, "History: Echoes of Little Saigon."
14. Kim O'Connell, *Echoes of Little Saigon*, 12.
15. Ibid., 21.
16. Elizabeth Morton, "History: Echoes of Little Saigon."
17. Richard Nguyen, Personal Interview, March 2025.