



† Cultural Heritage In-Between: The Worcester Armenian Community through the Lens of The Armenian Church of Our Saviour

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Background

- ◆ Last semester, I took a **course on Armenian history, art, architecture, and culture** with Professor Christina Maranci, titled, **“The Power and Beauty of Being In Between: The Story of Armenia”**
- ◆ **Final capstone prompt:** “Choose an image, artifact, monument, site, or other cultural practice that speaks to you and ask how it expresses the condition of being in-between. And, since so many cultures ‘in-between’ are underrepresented in university curricula and textbooks, conclude with an argument for why your example is important to an understanding of world culture.”

Methodology and Special Thanks

- ◆ I examined relevant archives at the Worcester Historical Museum on December 13th and conducted field interviews at the church, including a brief interview with Pastor Tadeos
- ◆ I attended a service on December 15th as well as the annual Armenian Christmas Market that was held in the Cultural Center after the service. There, I talked with members Mark Markarian and Vasken Chagaian about their experience in the church
- ◆ **Special thanks** to the Armenian Church of Our Saviour and its community for being so incredibly warm, welcoming, and supportive in my research process, but especially Pastor Tadeos, Mr. Markarian, and Mr. Chagaian for being so generous with their time and open to sharing their experiences





The Armenian Church of Our Saviour serves as both a physical and spiritual symbol of the Armenian diaspora's cultural heritage preservation and flourishing in the U.S., reflecting themes of in-betweenness through its role as a monument of cultural survival, community connection, resilience, and hope.



Its continued preservation marks the enduring cultural production of a diverse diaspora community, embodying the transition between displacement and rootedness, memory and continuity, and transmission of cultural heritage and faith between generations.



01

Armenian Immigration to Worcester

◆ **1830s to 1850s:** many young Armenian men came from Constantinople to the U.S. for educational opportunities presented by American Protestant missionaries in the region hoping to convert Turkey to Christianity

◆ **1880s:** immigration increased significantly. “**Worcester**” in particular became **synonymous with “America”** due to its status as an industrial center in close proximity to Ellis Island

- Philip Moen, President of the **Moen and Washburn Wire Company** (largest wire factory in the world at the time that employed many Armenians), had close contacts with Protestant missionaries and encouraged emigration from Armenia to Worcester through them
- Connections highlighted by the experience of an Armenian man named **Garabed**, who was a servant to an American missionary Reverend George C. Knapp stationed in Bitlis

- ◆ **By 1887, there were 400 Armenians in Worcester**
 - **All men**, including married men, mainly from the **Khapert area**
 - Eager to obtain jobs to earn money to send back to their families and return to their native land, which often meant being willing to work harder and for lower wages at the wire company
 - Armenians were subjected to violent physical and verbal agitation by Catholic Irish workers who felt their job security was threatened and thought that Armenians were all Protestant, profaning Armenians as “Turks”
 - Armenians faced conversion pressures by Protestant ministers
- ◆ After heightened political and religious persecution at the hands of the Ottoman “Bloody Sultan” Abdul Hamid II in massacres against Armenians from 1894 to 1896 and again in 1906, the outbreak of World War I, and the atrocities of the Armenian Genocide of 1915, the ability of Armenians in Worcester to return to their ancestral homeland became impossible



**The
Armenian
Church of Our Saviour—
The first
Armenian Church in the
U.S.**

02



- ◆ **By 1888, “Armenian Club”** group tirelessly advocated for establishing Armenians' own sanctuary of worship to preserve their faith
 - Armenians were forced in between, resiliently holding services in different city halls or churches who offered their spaces
- ◆ Armenian Patriarchate of Constantinople sent **Reverend Hosep Sarajian** to the U.S. to become the pastor for the Armenian community in Worcester
 - Organized trustee board and raised funds to purchase and build on a plot of land on Laurel Street close to where most Armenians lived
- ◆ **The Armenian Church of Our Saviour**—the first Armenian church established in the U.S.—was **built in nine months for a total cost of \$9,460 and consecrated by Reverend Sarajian on January 18, 1891**
- ◆ First service had around 324 people with an offering totaling only 27 cents
- ◆ Church of Our Saviour “became the core of community life” to “preserve the national heritage,” with Armenians “investing everything they had in the Church” and considering it “the citadel of Armenian spirit”



03 A Growing Community



- ◆ The **new Armenian Church of Our Saviour built in 1952** was the “**first church of authentic Armenian architecture in the United States**”
 - Domed basilica style and cruciform shape
 - Resembles the Church of Hripsime
 - Designed by an Armenian man, John S. Bilzerian, who also built an Armenian Church in Cambridge
- ◆ Construction of the Salisbury Street church “once again inspired other Armenian communities throughout the United States to build their own churches, particularly adhering to the traditional Armenian architectural style”
- ◆ As the diaspora community in Worcester and church membership flourished and strengthened, the community’s ability to preserve Armenian cultural tradition and Christian identity increased



The Cultural Center

04

- ◆ **1950s:** Church **membership triples**, with growing need for additional facilities
 - Sunday Church School for children and Armenian Language School using the building “seven days a week, often with several meetings scheduled simultaneously”
- ◆ **1959:** Purchased the Boynton Street property next to the church and the Frost Estate
- ◆ **1967:** Boynton Street property demolished and ground broken to begin building the new **Cultural Center**, designed by Raymond Hovsepian, **costing \$450,000**
- ◆ Exterior and interior of the Cultural Center reflects traditional Armenian architecture while bridging between modern styles
 - “Exposed columns and the stone-textured walls with their golden hue get their inspiration from the buff-colored stone used in many churches in old Armenia”
 - Interior “walls made of rough-faced pumice block,” once again are similar to the “walls used in ancient Armenian churches”

THE START OF CONSTRUCTION



Representatives of Church affiliated organizations break ground . . .

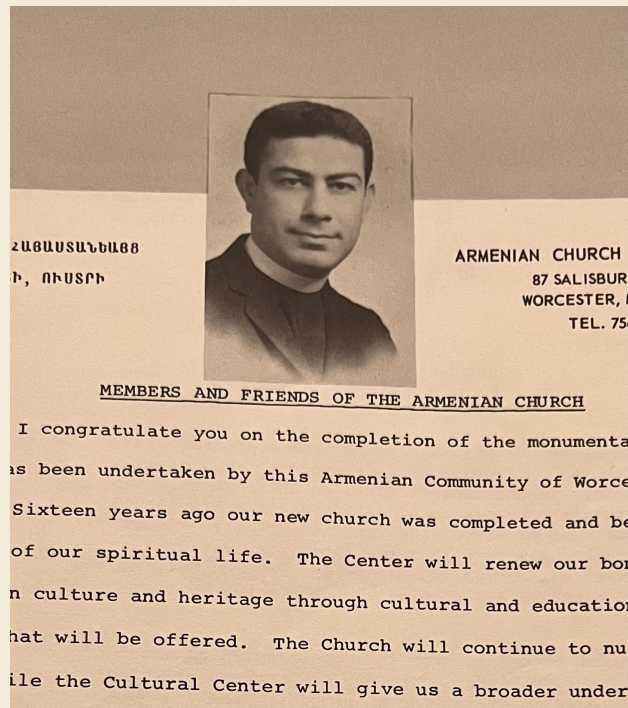


Prayers and Closing Benediction before placing cornerstone, October 15, 1967

Sponsored by
WORCESTER FEDERAL SAVINGS & LOAN ASSOCIATION
22 Pearl-Elm St., Worcester, Mass.

◆ Statement to church members released by **Deacon Dickran Metjian, Assistant to the Pastor on November 11, 1968:**

- “The Center will renew our bond with Armenian culture and heritage through cultural and educational programs that will be offered. The church will continue to nurture our soul while the Cultural Center will give us a broader understanding and appreciation of our identity as American-Armenians. Christian Education in the Armenian Church has played an important part in the life of our community. It has been the bridge between its past and future. Through the teaching of history and faith to her children, it has prepared the future parishioners of our church...I hope that the new Cultural Center will be a laboratory of faith and culture where we will sense our growth.”





Recent events and programs implemented at the Cultural Center to foster traditional Armenian cultural heritage education and preservation across generations

- Classes in Armenian dance and traditional musical instruments
- Master classes in Khachkar making
- A gift shop bringing items and souvenirs from Armenia to support Armenian artists, creators, and businesses abroad while bringing Armenian cultural goods to the community
- Presentations on Armenian history such as evidence of earliest winemaking and the oldest leather shoe discovered in the Areni-1 Cave from the Bronze Age
- The Armenian Christmas Market





I had the chance to speak with two parishioners-Mark Markarian and Vasken Chagaian-about their experience with the church

- **Mr. Markarian's** parents were extensively involved in the establishment of the Cultural Center, mortgaging their home to help contribute the funds for the project, demonstrating the immense sacrifice of Armenians in the church community giving everything to be able to promote the preservation and education of Armenian cultural heritage
- **Mr. Chagaian**, who owns an Armenian bakery called Starbread in Worcester, baked for the market and shared how his ancestry comes from Beirut, Lebanon. When he first came to the church, he did not recognize many of the foods featured in the festivals and markets, demonstrating the diversity of the cultural heritage of the Armenian diaspora and how many different traditions in-between are brought together in celebration of cultural survival in the community connection of the Armenian Church of Our Saviour.





05

Conclusions



- ◆ **Armenian Church of Our Saviour is both a physical and spiritual monument of the diversity of the Armenian diaspora's cultural production** and flourishing preservation of Armenian history, cultural heritage, and Christian faith, bridging the space between generations past, present, and future
- ◆ **Generosity of faith** and spirit of the Armenian Church of Our Saviour's community does not waver, reflected in the many church initiatives giving back to the community in Worcester and Armenia
- ◆ The physical honoring of Armenian architectural styles reflected in the Salisbury St. location and its Cultural Center, along with the spiritual resilience of the Worcester Armenian community to build the first Armenian Church in the Western Hemisphere, serves as a model that inspired countless other churches to be built similarly.
- ◆ This legacy of the Armenian Church of Our Saviour is not only distinctly and uniquely Armenian but is also a fundamental chapter to understanding the shared story of American and world history, underscoring diaspora and immigrant communities refusing to let their identities become lost while contributing vibrantly to global culture.



THANK YOU!

