

Chittenden County Historical Society



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OpenStreetMap®

The shaded area on the above map of downtown Burlington shows the urban core neighborhood.

Burlington's historic urban core: evolution of a neighborhood

Second of two parts

**By Vincent Feeny
and Brendan Keleher**

To continue our discussion of Burlington's urban core we compared our subject

neighborhood's population figures for 1900 and 1920 with those for the entire city. At the turn of the century Burlington had 18,640 residents. Twenty years later that number had grown to 22,779, and

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their towns. For instance, there are some historical societies that don't have their own publications or that don't host a website or utilize social media who could benefit from using Bulletin space to publish their articles. We are also happy to co-host digital programming for those societies or museums that need assistance in reaching their audience outside of their physical space.

CCHS is asking for members to reach out to us with information that could be helpful toward this venture. If you or someone

you know is affiliated with any of these organizations from around the county, please contact us. We are excited to collaborate with other historical organizations to bring even more content to our members and to help expand the reach of our cohorts.



Lisa Evans
CCHS President

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of these, 3,116, or 14 percent, were foreign born. Like the city, the overall population of the urban core had grown substantially since 1900, going from 1,458 to 2,088 in 1920. And also like the city in general, about 14 percent of the urban core's residents were foreign born.

The urban core neighborhood comprised nine square blocks on 27 acres bound by Battery Street on the west, Pearl on the north, St. Paul on the east, and College on the south. By 1920, the urban core saw a continued decline in the number of Irish and French Canadian immigrants while welcoming new immigrants from Italy, Lebanon (Syria),

and a few from Greece.

A smattering of other new arrivals came from England, Scotland, and Germany. The increase in Italians was marked: The two-generational number increased from 27 in 1900 to 144 in 1920. Besides the availability of laboring jobs, the phenomenon of chain migration played a role in this increase. Francesco "Frank" Merola, born in 1888 in Cervinara, a small town east of Naples, arrived in Burlington prior to 1910 and encouraged an old-world neighbor, Luigi Varricchione, to join him.¹ Others from Cervinara followed: Olios, Nannas, Boves and Albarellis.² Urban core residents now frequently heard the

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language of Italy on their neighborhood streets.

But still the foreign tongue of the neighborhood was more the language of Quebec than that of Italy. In the 1920 census year there were far more two-generational French Canadians living in the urban core than there were Italians — more than double the number of Italians. And this was without factoring in the unknown number of third- and fourth-generation French Canadians who must have been living in the neighborhood by this time.

But over the next 20 years this picture shifted slightly. Our best estimate for two-generational ethnic groups in the urban core in 1940 puts the Italians at 141, French Canadians at 96, and Lebanese and Greeks together at 61. The Irish all but disappeared. But, as previous census reports indicated, there were anywhere from 1,600 to 2,000 individuals living in the urban core area in 1940, many more individuals than those whom we identified as part of an ethnic group. Given the long association of French-Canadian immigrants with the neighborhood surely there were hundreds of grand- and great-grandchildren of earlier arrivals from Quebec residing in the urban core. And possibly they had been residents for so long in Burlington that they were thoroughly assimilated Americans and can no longer be referred to as part of an ethnic group.

While the ethnic makeup of the neighborhood had changed since 1900 there had also been shifts in its economic footings. As a result of changes in tariff laws, the lumber industry moved south and west after the 1890s, taking jobs with it. Where once sawmills and stacked lumber lined the waterfront there now stood numerous oil and gas storage tanks. Only a few companies remained milling lumber and manufacturing wood products — brush handles, window sashes, doors and bobbins. In the late 1930s the Wells Richardson Co., which manufactured drugs and dyes in its plant on College Street, closed, leaving hundreds without jobs. Interestingly, an Italian immigrant — Alfred Perrotta — who had begun as a grocer on Cherry Street in 1912, then become a builder/developer and prospered, bought part of the Wells Richardson property in 1942. In the course of Perrotta's career he often partnered with two friends from the neighborhood — Frank Merola and second generation Lebanese American Frederick "Freddy" Fayette.³

What were our Italians, French Canadians, Lebanese, and other ethnic groups of the urban core doing for work in these hard times? Given that the 1940 census abandoned asking respondents the place of birth of their parents — which it had been doing since 1880 — we could no longer accurately track second generation members of ethnic groups. Thus, in terms of ethnic



Photo courtesy of Patrick Farrington

Bernardini's Café on Pearl Street.

occupations we could only identify the work done by the first generation — the immigrant generation. The 1940 census showed that in the urban core area there were 90 residents of the first generation, men and women, working outside the home.

Of these, 48, or 53 percent, worked in menial jobs: laborers, servants, clerks, waitresses and peddlers. A few found employment in a greatly reduced wood products industry making venetian blinds and brushes. Some hired on with the New Deal's Works Progress Administration (WPA), and at least one person worked for a public utility. One individual worked as a barber and another as a cobbler. Reflecting the contraction in once large-scale industries, only one person, a French Canadian, worked for

the railroad, and just two people, a French Canadian and an Italian, were listed as working for a lumber company. Notably, nine Italians worked in restaurants and groceries. Underlining the working-class complexion of the neighborhood, there were no teachers, physicians, lawyers, etc.

It's unfortunate that we could not track second and later generations in the 1940 census because it might have shown us how these new Americans were progressing socially and economically. Were second generation Italian Americans, for example, like their fathers before them, continuing to work in railroad crews, or were they moving into more middle-class occupations? Evidence suggests that Burlington's Italian Americans quickly assimilated and plunged into middle class life. Three



Photo courtesy of Patrick Farrington

Merola's Grocery Store on the corner of Cherry and South Champlain streets.

of Alfred Perrotta's sons entered the professions, two as physicians and one as a lawyer.

For the Italians of the neighborhood — despite the hardships of the Great Depression — the pre-World War II years were something of a social/cultural “Golden Age.” Old-timers still spoke Italian among themselves and taught their American-born progeny a few phrases from the old country. Their businesses dotted the neighborhood. For groceries in general, but particularly for pasta, salami, and olives, neighbors shopped at Colaceci's on South Champlain, Izzo's on Pearl, or Merola's on Cherry, just as they had at Perrotta's on Cherry Street and at Bellino's on the corner of Battery and Cherry years before. For a night out people dined at Bernardini's Café on Pearl, and beginning in 1941 and continu-

ing for the next 70 years Bove's on Pearl was the restaurant to treat family and friends to an inexpensive Italian dinner. And before they went out for an evening on the town local men might get their haircut at Donald Antonicci's New York Barbershop on the corner of Bank and South Champlain.

The significant presence of Italians in the grocery business is related to two factors. The first is obvious. With streets teeming with Italian Americans there was a ready-made clientele for grocers catering to Italian tastes, keeping shelves stocked with popular cheeses, pastas, and olives. The second factor may not be so obvious. As Italians entered the United States in the late 19th century there was a strong bias against them. Even in Burlington in the 1930s, as sociologist Elin Anderson has pointed out, there were

many city residents who questioned whether the Italians (and the Lebanese) were even white—an example of a double prejudice, against both blacks and Italians.⁴ When an Italian got in legal trouble local newspapers always pointed out that he/she was Italian. This labeling was also found with people listed as “colored,” but rarely did we find it with other immigrant groups.⁵ Prejudice made it difficult for Italians to get jobs other than of the manual labor type. Consequently, enterprising Italians — like the Eastern European Jews who suffered from similar prejudices — sought to get ahead by becoming independent businessmen. If no one would hire them, they would hire themselves. Many of the Italians began as peddlers selling fruit and vegetables from a cart, and after acquiring enough capital they moved their business into a storefront. This was the path the Merolas, Izzos and others took.

Robert Caswell, who grew up on South Champlain Street in a non-Italian family in the 1930s and 1940s, and who later in life styled himself a poet, related this little ditty in an interview in the 1970s:

*I first went to Italy
when I was six,*

*It was only a block away.
I set sail from Champlain Street,*

*And made it all the way
to Izzo's Market.⁶*

The neighborhood was home to Italian institutions. In 1933 Italian men of Burlington joined with their fellow countrymen of Winooski to form the Twin City Italian Club (TWIC). Its professed purpose was “to raise the standards” of the Italian community and to prepare immigrants for citizenship,⁷ but it was also a place where old country Italian men could socialize, talk about news from home, and perhaps make job connections. By 1936 the club was sufficiently prosperous that it bought a vacant lot on College Street between Battery and South Champlain and built a social hall. The hall was the center of Italian social life in Chittenden County for the next dozen years. Italian women socialized in an organization called Regina of Mount Carmel, a group that attended Mass together once a month. The Regina of Mount Carmel was Mary, who for centuries had a devoted following in the impoverished south of Italy from where so many Italians had emigrated.

There is no record that Burlington's immigrants played the popular Italian lawn bowling game of bocce ball, but that they excelled at its American cousin is clear. In 1937 the National Duck Pin Bowling Congress invited an urban core team comprising three Italian Americans — Mario Izzo, Louis Lucchini and Orero Bernardini — and Irish American Ed Lynch and

Lebanese American Ernest Handy to compete for the national championship in Norfolk, Va.⁸ Though they finished 12th in the team competition, Izzo and Lucchini were runners up in the doubles category.⁹ Alfred Perrotta, the former grocer and developer, helped establish the area's Knights of Columbus Bowling League in 1919 and was himself an excellent bowler, continuing to bowl into the 1950s when he was in his 80s.¹⁰

Most of the neighborhood Italians were Catholic, and although the Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception from its inception in the 1860s was known as the "Irish" church — in contrast to St. Joseph's, the "French" church — the Italians quickly adopted it as their parish church. Their sons and daughters attended the Cathedral's nearby grammar and high schools. Names like Evelt and Merola became well known throughout Burlington in the 1930s as boys from those families starred on many highly successful Cathedral High School basketball teams.

By the 1930s an ethnic merger of sorts in the neighborhood was taking place: Italian American boys and French-Canadian girls (and vice versa) walking to school together, attending classes together, oftentimes ended up marrying and creating blended families. Luigi Varricchione, who had arrived in the United States in 1912, saw his son Francesco (Frank) marry Quebec-born Simone Poulin. Two of

the French Canadian Proulx sisters married into Italian families: Thelma became an Izzo and Norma a Bernardini. A third sister, Doris, married a Marcelino, from a Portuguese family that itself may have had an Italian connection. The common Catholic religion of the French Canadians and the Italians made cultural differences easier to overcome. As if to underline the close communal relations between the two peoples, in 1933 they joined together to form the Franco Italian Social Club.

The hub of this bustling neighborhood was Cherry Street between Battery and St. Paul. Up and down the street one found a mix of Italians and French Canadians: Charbonneaus, Varvilles, and Greenwoods (Boisverts) living amongst Varricchiones, Luchinis, Merolas, and Albarellis. Besides the Cathedral on the corner with St. Paul, and its adjacent rectory, other notable establishments on the street included Converse Elementary School, Girard's Bakery — one of the largest commercial bakeries in the city — Ready's Funeral Home and Dwyer's Funeral Parlor, the office and shop of the Salvation Army, and a Community Center catering to the needs of women and children (later, and at another location, this would become the Sarah Holbrook Center). Merola's Grocery Store at the corner of Cherry and South Champlain served as the street's unofficial social center where popular Frank Merola func-

tioned as a community organizer. He had helped found the Italian Club and served for a number of years as its president. This was a Jane Jacobs neighborhood where neighbors knew one another and oftentimes were related to one another.

The end for this vibrant neighborhood came in the 1960s. In the late 1950s Mayor C. Douglas Cairns called the area a “slum,” but it was no worse than other sections of the city.¹¹ Studies assessing Burlington’s housing stock in 1915 and 1938 pointed to lower Battery Street and sections of the Old North End as areas that needed attention, but made no special mention of the urban core. What led to the demise of our subject neighborhood was its proximity to Church Street and the potential of exploiting the area’s views of Lake Champlain. As Burlington’s business and political leaders watched the growth of suburbia with its malls and parking, they grew fearful that Church Street — the city’s retail center — would be eclipsed. To fight the threat to business, they believed retail space had to expand, parking increased and amenities offered. Expanding west from Church Street to the lake was the obvious option. To do this, the old urban core neighborhood had to go. Urban renewal was the means.

The question of urban renewal was put to city residents in March 1962. They approved it with 59 percent of the vote. Despite opposition — sometimes

intense — from many long-time inhabitants of the tightly knit neighborhood, by 1968 the city had forced out the last of its recalcitrant residents. Wrecking crews reduced old homes and storefronts to rubble. Then began the slow process of developing the property. Within a decade the transformation from a neighborhood of aging residences and “mom and pop-”style businesses to a flashy mall and glitzy hotels was well underway. A process that continues to this day.

By the late 1980s a number of Burlington’s Italian Americans in a nostalgic look back at this lost neighborhood began referring to it as “Little Italy.” Interestingly, we could find no use of this term in the local press prior to urban renewal. Moreover, the neighborhood appears to have been as much French Canadian as Italian. For example, there were 54 owners of 88 single- and multi-unit residential properties taken by urban renewal for demolition. Of the 54, urban renewal records show that 15 owners were Italian Americans and 16 were (French) Canadian Americans.¹² These figures, however, show ownership only, and do not reflect who in fact was living in these units. Still, one is left to conclude that “Little Italy” was demographically as much French Canadian as Italian.

So, does it deserve to be called “Little Italy?” Perhaps sheer numbers is not the way to judge it. Perhaps people in the middle years of

the 20th century simply thought of it as the place where *most* of Burlington's Italian-Americans resided. Alden Robins, a city politician in the 1940s and 1950s, always thought it essential to contact Frank Merola to ensure a strong Italian vote for the Democrats in aldermanic elections.¹³ Moreover, restaurants like Bove's and Bernardini's, and groceries like Merola's and Izzo's, put such a strong Italian stamp on the neighborhood that it was difficult to think of it as anything else. French Canadians in large numbers could be found almost everywhere in Burlington, but only in this one place did one find so many Italian Americans. It's in this sense that

Burlington's "lost neighborhood" deserves to be called *Piccola Italia*.

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Endnotes

¹ *Burlington Free Press*, 10 May 2013. Telephone interview with John Varricchi-one, grandson of Luigi Varricchi-one.

² Conrad, "Neighborhood." Conrad's information on families came from an article by John Gittleston, "In the name of Progress," *Vermont Magazine*, 3 June 1984.

³ Technically, Fayette did not live in the urban core but on lower Maple Street, just south of Main where a number of Lebanese had settled.

⁴ Elin Anderson, *We Americans: A Study of Cleavage in an American City* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1937), 63.

⁵ Historian David R. Roediger has written that in the slow transformation of new immigrants from Southern and Eastern Europe into "white ethnics," they were identified with African Americans. See David R. Roediger, *Working Towards Whiteness: How America's Immigrants Became White*

(New York: Basic Books, 2005).

⁶ *Burlington Free Press*, 15 September 1975.

⁷ *Burlington Daily News*, 24 March 1933.

⁸ *Burlington Daily News*, 16 March 1937.

⁹ *Burlington Free Press*, 1 April 1937; *Burlington Daily News*, 4 May 1937.

¹⁰ *Burlington Daily News*, 13 August 1920. When in the grocery business one of the sales people for a Boston supplier from whom Perrotta bought goods was Carlos "Charles" Ponzi.

¹¹ Quoted in Conrad.

¹² "City of Burlington Urban Renewal Agency Property Records: Champlain Street Urban Renewal Project, 1963." City of Burlington Planning Office, Burlington, Vermont.

¹³ Telephone interview with Patrick Robins, 10 August 2020.