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PLACES THAT MATTER

109 Washington St.

Tenement in the heart of vanished "Little Syria"

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Place Matters Profile

The tenement at 109 Washington Street is one of the last architectural remnants of what was once a thriving and diverse Lower Manhattan immigrant enclave. From the

late nineteenth to the mid-twentieth century, the area west of Broadway, and extending north from Battery Place roughly to Chambers Street, was home to New York City's largest Middle Eastern community, as well as a large concentration of Central and Eastern European settlers. The construction of the Brooklyn Battery Tunnel and the World Trade Center successively displaced the ethnic populations and resulted in the demolition of much of the district's historic fabric. 109 Washington Street has witnessed and survived these and other, unforeseen cycles of neighborhood destruction and rebirth. As of 2011, the building itself, which has served as a multi-family dwelling for over one hundred years, appears to have changed very little. But the gravity of the histories embodied by the modest residence could overwhelm many a larger structure.

In the early nineteenth century, the Lower West Side's Greenwich Street was lined with mansions owned by wealthy merchants and ship owners. Recognizable former residents included the Schermerhorns, the Delafields and the Roosevelts. By the 1840s these affluent families moved uptown, and their palatial single-family homes were replaced by tenements featuring small rooms, hallway or backyard toilet facilities, and kitchen bathtubs. The Irish were the first immigrant group to settle in the area, but by the late nineteenth century, the environs were home to large numbers of immigrants from the former Ottoman Empire.

In 1903, *The New York Times* reported positively on the "quaint" quarter of the "bright, progressive Syrians," the nucleus of which was Washington Street. The article characterized the population as polite and attractive, and the paper praised their religious piety. Many of the immigrants were practicing Christians, and the neighborhood contained numerous churches, including the first Lebanese Maronite Church in the country. St. George's Syrian Catholic Church, once home to the Melkite parish, stands as a New York City landmark at 103 Washington Street. (Today the building houses a restaurant instead of a congregation.)

Arab intellectuals and literati fostered a local golden age in the first few decades of the twentieth century. In 1898, residents Naoum and Salloum Mokarzel founded *Al-Hoda* (The Guidance), the country's leading Arabic newspaper. The brothers created Linotype typesetting machines for Arabic characters, which helped to stimulate Arabic journalism in the Middle East. *Syrian World*, the first English-language Syrian American journal, and the Pen League, an experimental and influential literary group, were also headquartered in the

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109 Washington Street, photo by Esther Regelson

(http://placematters.net/sites/default/files/places/109-Whole_sm.jpg)

Lower West Side. Lebanese-born author and activist Ameen Rihani lived on Washington Street and featured his surroundings in his powerful 1911 publication, *The Book of Khalid*. Despite the fact that Rihani and his circle espoused religious tolerance and democracy, Manhattan's Arab community did face its fair share of discrimination. Only two years after *The Times* extolled the Syrian Quarter's virtues, it recounted a local skirmish involving exotic "wild-eyed Syrians" with swords.

As the Middle Eastern community's main street, Washington was lined with commercial concerns including import-exporters, restaurants, clothing stores, lingerie shops, and grocery stores like Abraham Sahadi's flagship establishment, which opened in 1895. These ground floor storefronts were often located in the tenements that characterized the early built environment. One of these, 109 Washington Street, was constructed in 1885. The five-story, sixteen-unit (originally nineteen-unit) apartment building displays a Philadelphia brick facade, a neo-Grec sheet metal cornice and brownstone window trim. The original apartments each contained three rooms: a street or yard-facing parlor with two exterior windows, a small back bedroom, and a kitchen in the middle through which residents passed from the front to the back of the apartment and into the hall. As was the case with many of its former neighbors, the four upper stories are residential, while the ground floor contains a storefront. Between the 1890s and the 1920s, merchants of Syrian descent variously operated a cigar factory, a cotton, silk and dry goods export business, and a textile shop in 109 Washington.

Next door, 105-107 Washington Street, is the former Downtown Community House, a large Colonial Revival structure erected in 1925. The Community House once provided the largely immigrant community with resources including a health clinic, library, nursery, milk station and dressmaking school. Until four years ago, a Buddhist Temple occupied the now-vacant space. To the east of the temple is the former St. George's Syrian Catholic Church, which also started life as a tenement. According to Joe Svehlak, an urban historian and tour guide whose mother lived in 109, the three contiguous buildings constitute an important historic zone representing the residential, social and religious life of the former Arab and Arab-American community. Svehlak and the preservation organization, The Friends of the Lower West Side, are working to create a recognized historic district in this area.

Svehlak's mother came as part of the third group of settlers to the Lower West Side. This wave hailed from Slovakia, Poland, Moravia, Turkey, Ukraine and Czechoslovakia. In the first decades of the twentieth century, they settled in alongside the Middle Eastern community, which had also expanded to include transplants from Palestine, Jordan and Iraq. Svehlak's mother arrived from Moravia in 1912. By 1927 the family had left downtown to purchase a house in Brooklyn. Svehlak writes, "109 Washington Street is a touchstone for me, and my family. It's where they established roots in the New World." By the 1920s, the Lower West Side, while ethnically and culturally heterogeneous, was a tight-knit village. The neighborhood's small town ambiance was only reinforced during the 1920s and 1930s, when the nearby skyscrapers of the Financial District building boom began to render their enclave quaint indeed.

Many former residents recall that it was a haven for summer time rooftop camping and standing Sunday stickball games in Albany Street, or picnics in Battery Park. The locals also rallied during difficult times. In 1942, Michael Yanoscik became the community's first soldier to die in World War II. Yanoscik, who was of Carpatho-Rusyn descent, was honored in a neighborhood parade organized by his neighbors, including a Lebanese dockworker, an Irish policeman and a Polish tavern keeper.

Eddie Metropolis currently lives in 109 Washington, and other than a nine year hiatus during the 1980s and early 1990s, he has lived in the building his entire life. His mother, his grandmother and several of his aunts also lived in the building, and many of his other family members lived in the neighborhood throughout his childhood. Eddie's grandfather was a coal miner from Czechoslovakia, and his grandmother came to the United States as an indentured servant to a wealthy family. Metropolis' family moved into the neighborhood in the 1940s, and he grew up hearing about the construction of the Brooklyn Battery Tunnel, which commenced in 1940 and lasted for a decade. He recalls that although many of his relatives' tenements were condemned to make room for the tunnel, "it was very easy for the people that lived in that particular area simply just to move several blocks. There was a large surplus of apartments, and they simply moved over." However, many of the Middle Eastern families chose to relocate to Brooklyn's Atlantic Avenue, which soon became the new heart of the Arab-American community.

By the 1960s, the district was known as "Radio Row." Metropolis recalls, "basically, if you needed any electronic part of any type, that was the area to get it." Although long-time residents began to leave after World War II, the neighborhood still had a "very ethnic flavor." But Metropolis says that the immigrant community was not prepared for the changes brought by the construction of the World Trade Center. During the 1940s and 1950s, New York City's economic growth had been concentrated around Midtown, and it was suggested that building the World Trade Center in Lower Manhattan would help with the area's revitalization. Ground was broken in 1966; the North Tower opened in 1972 and the South Tower in 1973. This time, the construction destroyed a significant portion of the housing stock, and many locals were forced to relocate out of the neighborhood. Metropolis recalls that, compared to the Brooklyn Battery Tunnel campaign, "the World

Trade Center was a different scenario. A lot of people moved out voluntarily, but several of my family members refused to move; held out. Friends held out, and essentially were bought out." Many moved to Staten Island or Brooklyn.

Metropolis' family stayed in 109 Washington, which served as his launch pad for exploring the World Trade Center excavation site. He claims that as a youth, he and his friends snuck past security and walked all the way to the top. "You know, you're a small kid, you think that's fun. And it was interesting. We saw it all being built, and now I've seen it all destroyed. So it's run the full gamut."

Although Metropolis was not actually at home to see the destruction of the World Trade Center on September 11, 2001, he could see the events unfold from his office in New Jersey. And luckily, his mother Sophie, who lived in the building at the time, was also out of the house en route to a doctor's appointment. Neighbors from 109, who felt the shadow of the second plane as it passed over the building and flew up Washington Street toward its target, frantically searched for Sophie as the towers began to collapse. They feared that they would not be able to carry her wheelchair out of the debris-laden building.

In early 2001, many of the residents of 109 Washington Street were neighbors, but they weren't necessarily friends. The communal aspect of the neighborhood had dissipated through the outmigration of the late 1960s and 1970s. By the turn of the twenty-first century, the area was something of a no-man's land. The residents who were present on September 11 considered themselves "pioneers" in the Lower West Side of the 1990s and 2000s. Their descriptions of the area are nearly opposite that of the 1903 *New York Times* article. There were no restaurants, cafes, import-exports or grocery stores. There was, most lamentably, no Laundromat. Many of the tenants ran their errands in the World Trade Center.

But September 11 changed everything, and everyone. Except 109 Washington Street itself. The tenants who were in the building that morning took care of each other as they fled from their home like refugees. Many kept tabs on each other throughout the course of the day, and through the ensuing months, when they still could not go back to their apartments. Although they were primarily concerned for their human neighbors, many expressed that they were worried about the building and the neighborhood, as, for many days, they did not know if either still existed. One resident eloquently stated,

I mean, I don't know that buildings have a soul, or something like that, but I thought it was very generous of [the World Trade Center towers] to implode instead of topple. It was very nice of them to do that. Because, you know, it was as if they thought, "We're so big, if we fell over, think of all the damage we'd create. But instead let's just go down straight."

Because the towers collapsed as they did, the building at 109 Washington sustained remarkably little damage. The residents say that there were no extensive renovations after 9/11, other than cleaning, re-plastering and re-painting. FEMA reimbursed the residents for cleaning bills, although hearing a cleaning serviceman say, "Well, the calcium readings are very high, and we all know what that's about," must have been horrifying. Of the sixteen units in the building, only five were not subsequently re-inhabited by the residents who lived there as of September 11, 2001. While they express optimism about the future of the city, the residents have different opinions on what kind of redevelopment construction, or lack thereof, should take place in Lower Manhattan. However, across the board, they hope that their home at 109 Washington Street will endure the changes, just as it always has.

Interviews with 109 Washington Street Residents:

Regelson, Esther and Jack Cadwallader. Interview with Ed Metropolis. *109 on 9-11: An Audio Documentary*. PRI. August/September 2003. Radio.

Regelson, Esther and Jack Cadwallader. Interview with Jim Pederson. *109 on 9-11: An Audio Documentary*. PRI. August/September 2003. Radio.

On the Web

- [BBC News segment, "Preserving New York's Little Syria"](http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/magazine-16936966) (<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/magazine-16936966>)
- [Al Jazeera English segment, "The Big Apple's Little Syria"](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6lm9q3UT_B4) (http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6lm9q3UT_B4)

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Tags

It's the only tenement left on Washington Street, the heart of a once large, vibrant immigrant community known as "Little Syria." A smaller Slavic immigrant group also settled in the area. I first became aware of 109 Washington Street over 50 years ago when my mother walked me by to show me where she and her family had lived after they immigrated to New York from Moravia in 1912. The building is a touchstone for me and my family. It's where they established roots in the new world. My mother and my aunt learned to speak English at St. Peter's School on Barclay Street. I know many stories about their struggles and life downtown. Every time I go by 109 Washington Street, their world comes alive for me.