

# Land-Use Change and Preservation in Fresno's Armenian Town, 1916–2005

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## Abstract

Fresno, California, has seen many changes over the past 100 years. Urban sprawl and suburbanization have resulted in a city of polarities. While the northern areas flourish with new residential and commercial development, the downtown languishes. One of the city's greatest strengths lies in its diversity. Within a ten-square-block downtown area, one can find at least five distinct ethnic neighborhoods. Armenians have been present in Fresno since the early 1900s, flourishing during the several decades that followed but subsequently leaving the area. This paper discusses land-use change and preservation in the Armenian Town district of Fresno, by analyzing Sanborn maps in 1916 and 1950, current photographs, and personal observations. Unveiled is an increasingly changing area, from predominately residential, to commercial, to blight, to possible urban revival.

Fresno, California, has seen many changes over the past 100 years. The downtown alone has changed from a thriving Victorian business and residential district to a cutting-edge shopping Mecca, and recently to an area of blight and decline. Urban sprawl and suburbanization have resulted in a city of polarities. While the northern areas flourish with new residential and commercial development, the downtown languishes. City planners, however, are optimistic about the future of Fresno's downtown. One of the city's greatest strengths lies in its diversity. Within a ten-square-block area, one can find at least five distinct ethnic neighborhoods. Among the many ethnic groups that have chosen Fresno as home over the past century, the Armenians remain prominent in the area. This paper details land-use change in the Armenian Town district of Fresno by discussing Sanborn maps from 1916 and 1950, current photographs, and personal observations. The future of Armenian Town is then discussed as the forefront of the city's redevelopment goals.

## Early Geographical History

Present-day Armenia comprises only a small part of historical Armenia. The frontiers of the original Armenia at times reached from the Black Sea to portions of the Mediterranean Sea. The origins of the Armenian people are disputed. According to many studies and oral histories, the ancestor of the nation was a man named Hayk, who is reputed to be a direct descendant of Noah. It is said that Noah established the nation of Hayastan, the Armenian word for “the country of Hyes” (Armenians), on the Ararat plateau (Hayastan 2005). This land is said to be part of the “cradle of civilization.” According to the Old Testament, Noah’s Ark landed on the top of Mt. Ararat following the Great Flood and is said to be one of the oldest artifacts in Armenia. A piece of wood believed to be from Noah’s ark is safeguarded in the Etchmiadzin Museum, in present-day Armenia.

The Armenians first appear in historical texts approximately eighth-century B.C. The greatest glory for independent Armenia was during the reign of Tigranes the Great, from the Arsacid Dynasty period of 95 to 55 B.C. The kingdom covered land from the Caspian Sea to the Mediterranean and from the Black Sea to the location of present-day Syria (Bournaoutian 2003). This region is the largest territory Armenia ever occupied.

Rule over Armenian land followed with a dynasty of Parthian origin between 53 B.C. and 430 C.E. The two most conspicuous events of this period are the conversion to Christianity of King Tiridates III by St. Gregory the Illuminator (301 C.E.) and the invention of the Armenian alphabet by Mesrop Mashtots in the late fourth to early fifth century (Hayastan 2005). In 885 C.E., Prince Ashot Bagratuni was crowned King of Armenia by the Caliph and the Emperor of Byzantium (Bournaoutian 2005). One of his successors, Ashot III, founded the city of Ani and made it the capital of his kingdom. The “Golden Age of Armenia” lasted from 952 until 1064 C.E., when Ani was completely destroyed by the Turanians. The spectacular ruins of the city are in Turkish territory today, a short distance from the Armenia border.

Faced with constant massacres, Bagratid Prince Ruben led the Armenians to Cilicia, when in 1080 they founded a new state, Lesser Armenia, whose fate was linked to the Crusades. In 1342, the Armenia dynasty became extinct through lack of heir and the fall of Cilicia to the Mosems.

Greater Armenia, devastated by invasions, was conquered by the Turanians after Ani fell in 1064. Later, the Mongols invaded in the 13<sup>th</sup> century, the Turks in the 15<sup>th</sup> century, and the Persians thereafter. Russia conquered the eastern provinces of Armenia in the early part of the twentieth century, when this ancient land became part of the Soviet Union.

## The Migration of Armenian People

The nineteenth century saw the birth of Armenian nationalism, but the promises of autonomy and a constitution with influences from the Western and Russian powers put the Ottoman rulers under pressure. Conflicts over tax extortion and double taxing of agrarian communities led to massacres in Armenian villages. Many Armenians fled to nearby mountains for refuge, but as the killings continued, many more left the country. The United States was the destination of choice during this first mass migration (see Table 1). Many of these first American Armenians settled in New York and Massachusetts, seeking industrial opportunities, and these states today still contain large Armenian ethnic enclaves (Deranian 1998; Armenian Historical Society 1937).

Table 1: Distribution of Armenians in the United States by States, 1900–1930.

State	1900	1910	1920	1930
California	649	4,441	10,112	12,379
Connecticut	226	1,263	1,728	1,458
Illinois	286	1,556	2,210	na
Massachusetts	2,896	8,307	13,204	14,035
New Jersey	636	1,942	3,519	na
New York	1,915	4,006	7,054	na
Pennsylvania	551	1,402	3,548	na
Rhode Island	284	2,902	2,950	3,591

Source: Mahakian, C. 1932, *History of Armenians in California*.

The events of World War I led to a second wave of Armenian migration. From the spring through fall of 1915, massacres and deportations were carried out in a deliberate and systematic way in all sectors of the Ottoman Empire. Many scholars estimate that in 1915 alone, one million Armenians died (Balakian 2003). It is estimated that 80,000 Armenians immigrated to the United States during this time, many once again settling in the Northeast to work in factories. Many, however, later became dissatisfied with Atlantic coast opportunities and like many Americans, headed west to California.

## The Beginnings of Armenian Town: 1916

Approximately half of all Armenians living in the United States today reside in California (Vartanian 2002). The majority of Armenians who fled from the Armenian genocide between the years 1915 and 1923 migrated to the vicinity of Fresno and Los Angeles by 1930 (Bulbulian 2001; Patterson 1999) (see Table 2). Much of the data available regarding historical land-use in the Fresno area comes from Sanborn maps, which provide a wealth of information for geographers. Sanborn maps were drawn for fire insurance purposes in early London, thus they are also referred to as Sanborn Fire Insurance maps. Collections include a uniform series of large-scale maps dating from as early as 1867 to the present. Since they were used to inform insurance companies of fire risk, each map shows the size, shape, and construction of houses, commercial buildings, and factories. Some are so detailed that they also include widths and names of streets, property boundaries, building use, and house and block numbers. Sanborn maps thus give geographers an excellent sense of land-use in American cities. The Sanborn maps reproduced in this manuscript were taken from the collections of California Historical Archives of the Fresno County Public Library System.

Table 2: Distribution of Armenians in California Counties, 1930.

County	Number of Armenians
Alameda	542
Fresno	4,389
Imperial	38
Kings	122
Los Angeles	4,768
Sacramento	270
San Francisco	928
San Joaquin	51
San Mateo	56
Santa Clara	42
Solano	84
Stanislaus	104
Tulare	704
All others	281

Source: Mahakian, C. 1932, History of Armenians in California.

During the first few decades of the twentieth century, most of the Fresno-area Armenians found residence west of the Southern Pacific Railroad tracks, near the 300 blocks of G and F Streets (Figure 1). Early Armenian settlers who arrived in Fresno prior to the genocide moved northward across the railroad tracks around 1914 after the reconstruction and relocation of Holy Trinity Armenian Apostolic Church to the corner of Ventura Avenue and M Street. This area eventually became known as “Armenian Town.” Although “Armenian

Town” consisted of a greater area, the central portion of this ethnically thriving community was within the borders of Ventura

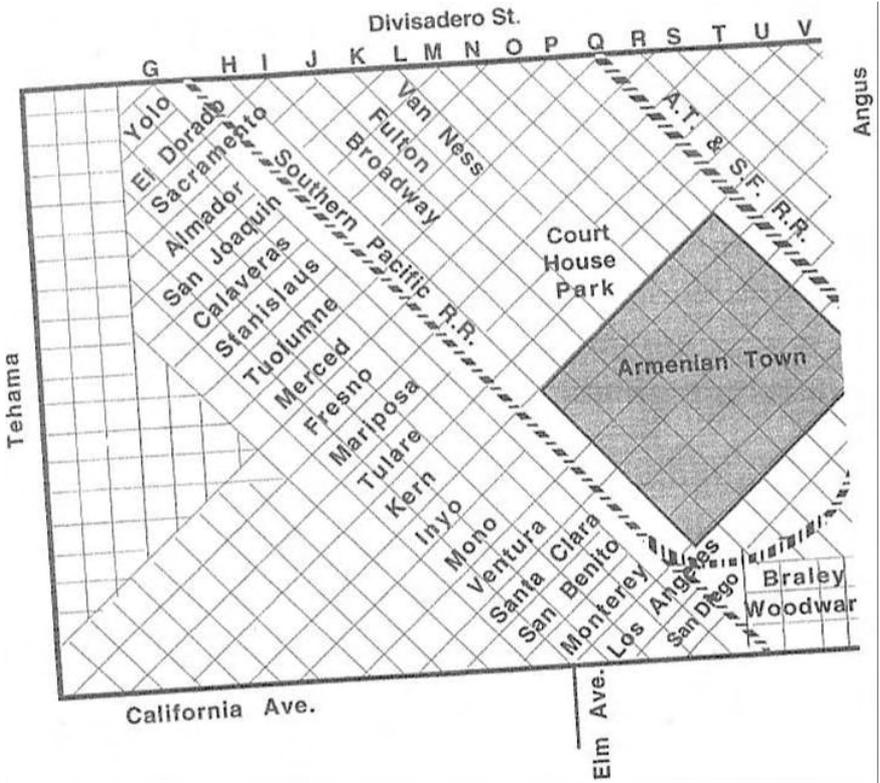


Figure 1. Bulbulian's map of downtown Fresno including "Armenian Town."

Avenue to San Benito and Van Ness (previously K Street) to N Street (Figure 1).

In 1916, the major feature of Armenian Town was the Holy Trinity Armenian Apostolic Church. This church was the first built in the traditional Armenian style in the United States as well the first designed by an Armenian architect (National Register of Historic Places 1997). The church was formally established on the corner of F and Monterey Streets in 1900. Due to an unfortunate fire in 1913, the church and adjoining hall burned to the ground. Touted as proud descendants of the first Christian nation, the Armenian community joined together to rebuild a more beautiful and larger church. On January 9, 1914, the first stone of the church was laid, and the church was completed on December 13 of the same year, at its present location on the corner of M Street and Ventura Avenue (Figure 2; Bulbulian 2001). This church today remains one of the focal points of the community.

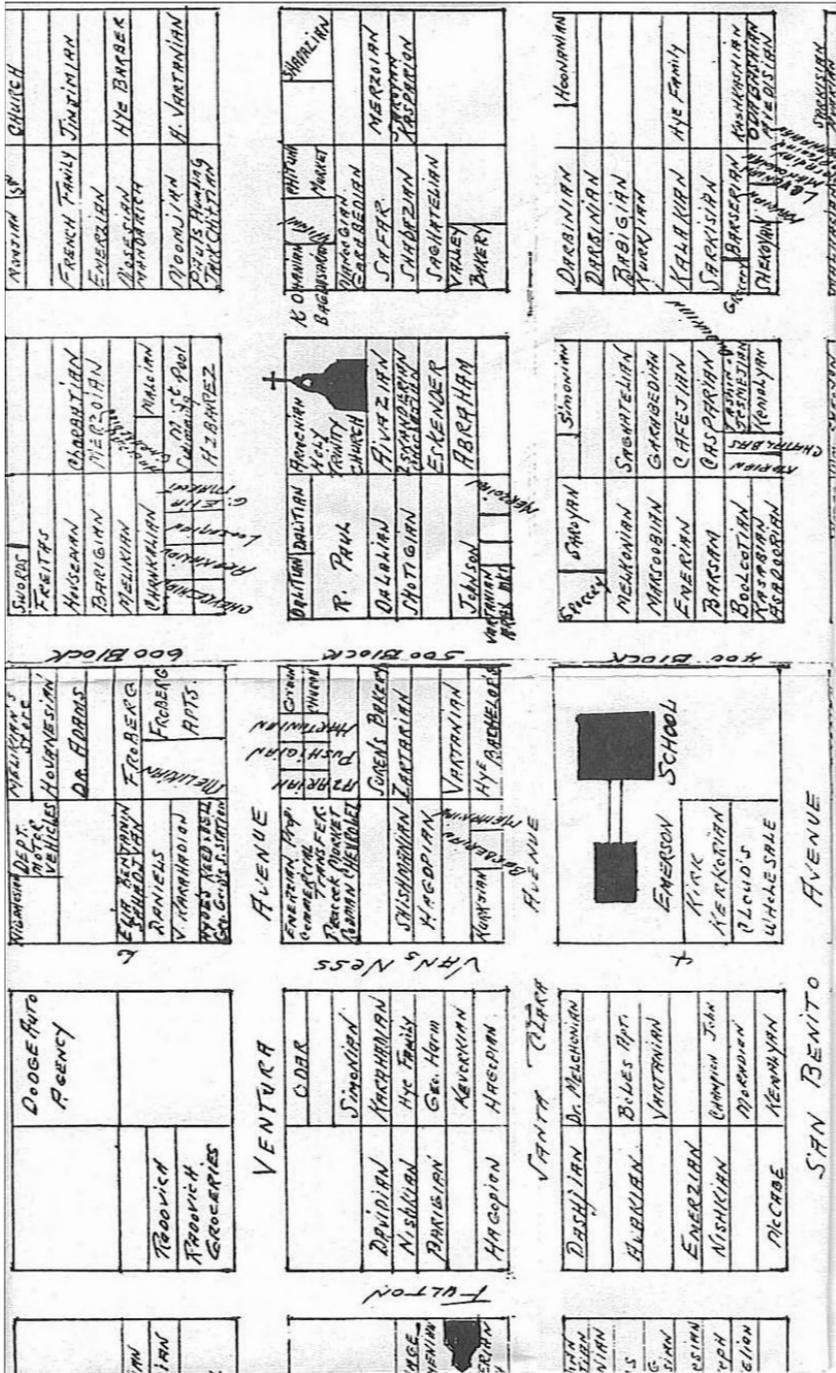


Figure 2. Armenian Town as remembered by Elish Shekoyan 1915-1939.

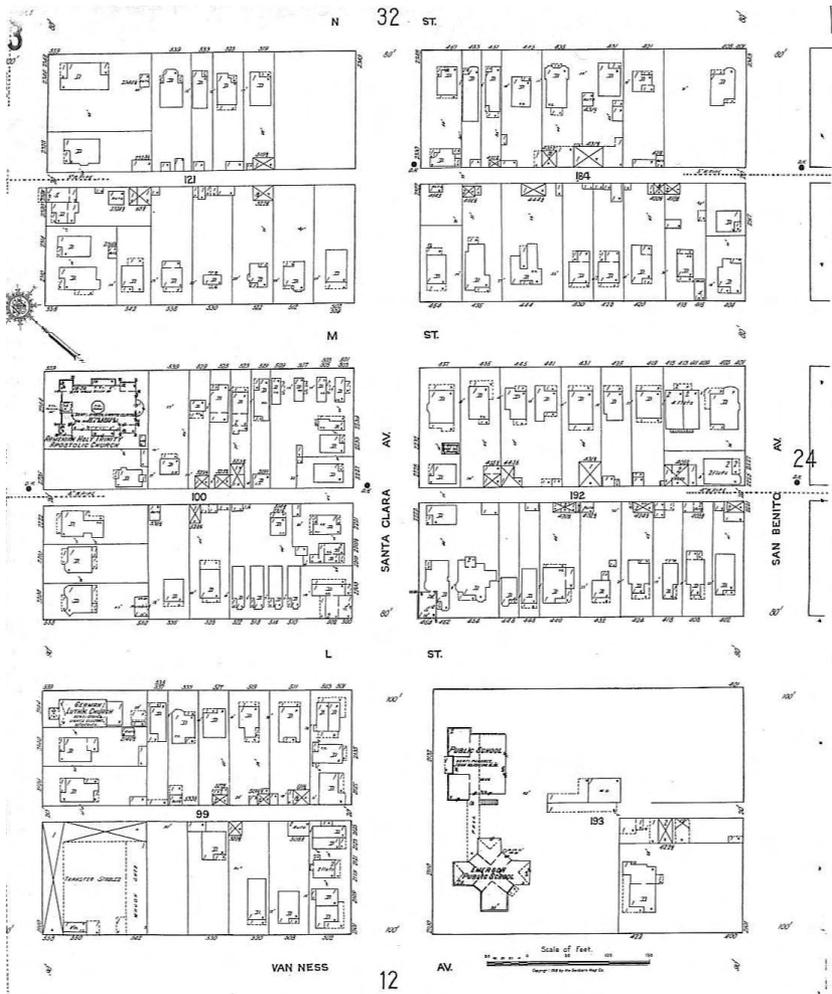


Figure 3. 1916 Sanborn map.

Another prominent landmark in the area was the Emerson Public School (Figure 3). This school catered to the surrounding Armenian community. Encompassing the entire northern portion of the block between Van Ness Avenue and L Street and San Benito and Santa Clara, the Emerson Public School was the location that many remember as the hub of neighborhood activity. The German Lutheran Church located at the corner of Ventura Avenue and L Street served a second group of immigrants around and within the boundaries of Armenian Town.

Armenian Town at this time was primarily occupied by residential homes with little commercial development. Arax Market was one of the few commercial buildings, located at the corner of L and Santa Clara Streets (Figure 4). Arax Market was considered a “general store.” It was a family-owned business that remains today in its original location but is no longer in use.



*Figure 4. Arax Market (market established prior to 1915).*

The original sidewalks were quite wide, for a residential area, at approximately six feet in width, signifying heavy pedestrian traffic. The street width ranged from 80 to 100 feet. The 2100 block of Santa Clara had the widest streets and was perhaps the “main” street of the neighborhood at that time.

## **The Later Decades: Armenian Town from the 1950s to the Present**

Significant changes were made to the area in the 1950s (Figure 5). The German Lutheran Church was no longer in existence, replaced by The Fresno Café at 2146 Ventura Avenue, Saghatelyan Bond and Trust at 2144 Ventura Avenue, and Marcus Bail Bonds at 2142 Ventura Avenue. Many ethnic groups had moved in and out of this area, and since it had become predominately Armenian by this time, the German population was no longer large enough to support a church of that size.

Another significant change in urban landscape was the removal of a portion of the Emerson Public School, located on the eastern corner of the block. The Ventura Avenue facade, between M Street and N Street, had changed in appearance as well. The previous location of dwellings was now home to many different businesses. These stores consisted of a barbershop, a grocery store, and a restaurant. The downtown area was becoming increasingly commercial and less residential.

The major landmark on the 1950 map was the establishment of the Valley Bakery on the corner of M Street and Santa Clara, in 1922. This bakery, established by the Saghatelyan family, was first built to cater to the needs of the immediate community (Seacrest 1993). Valley Bakery became known for an Armenian and Middle Eastern bubbly, thin, cracker bread called Lavash. This was a staple in all the Armenian families' diets. The bakery today is noted for its historical presence and lifelong dedication, which has expanded to include a wider community over the years (Figure 6).

In the next half-decade, Armenian Town and its surrounding area experienced its most dramatic changes. The dwellings that had lined the streets on the 1916 and 1950 Sanborn maps no longer existed, and many Armenians, now financially and socially successful, had moved to other areas of the city (National Register of Historic Places 1997). The only homes that remained were those at the corner of N Street and Santa Clara, which are now Fresno landmarks.

At 461 N Street, the Hoonanian home remains in its original location since the time of its construction in 1900. This was one of the only homes in this area to have historic Queen Anne architectural detailing. The owner thus requested that the home be registered as an historic landmark. The request was approved due to its unique

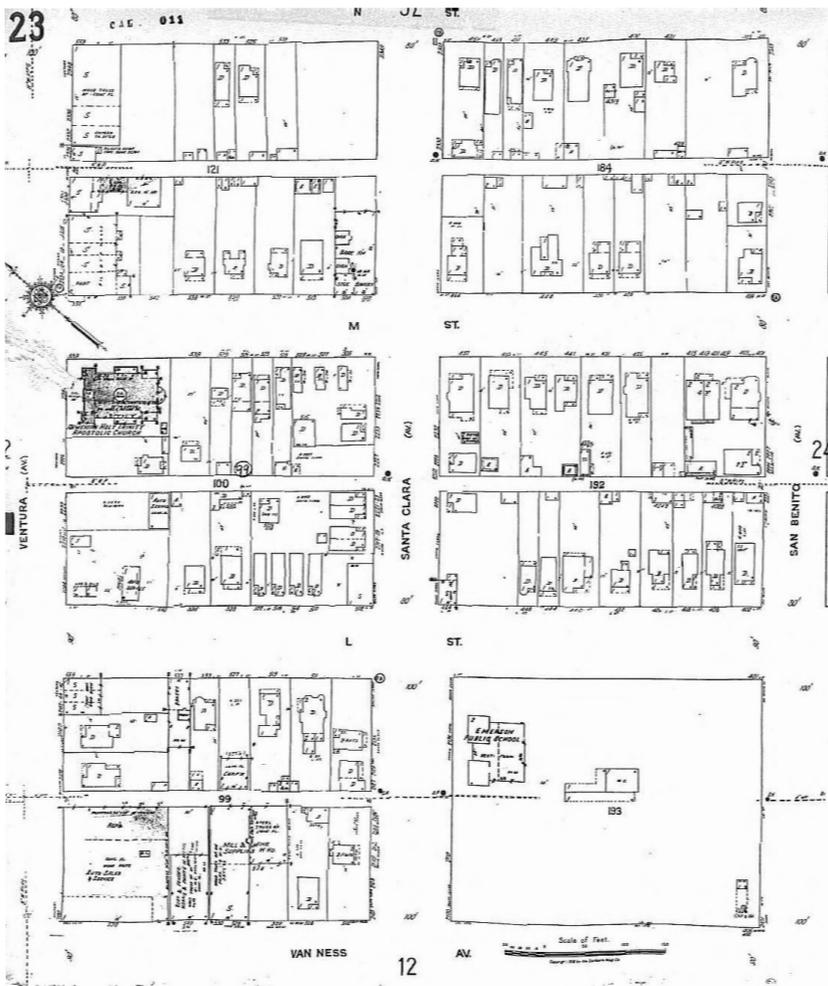


Figure 5. 1950 Sanborn map.



Figure 6. Valley Bakery (established 1992).

design, superior condition for its age, and the significance for Armenian culture in the area.

Neighboring the Hoonanian residence is the Schmidt-Terzian home, also a local historic site. This home shows evidence of the early German influence in the area, with an outdoor or “summer” kitchen. Built and first occupied by Germans (Schmidt) and then later by Armenians (Terzian), it was purchased by the city of Fresno in 2002 and now stands as a remnant of both cultures. The other dwellings that remain are duplexes on the 2200 block of Santa Clara. These homes have been in existence since the 1950 Sanborn map (Figure 7).



Figure 7. Hoononian House, 461 N Street (Fresno Historic Site).

Several auto body shops and automotive dealers exist in the area. Haron’s Jaguar at the corner of L Street and Ventura Avenue became a part of the neighborhood in 1952. In addition, there is an automotive sales lot on the corner of Van Ness and Ventura Avenue,

which has changed ownership many times. Yet another auto body shop is located in the middle of L Street just north of Santa Clara (Figure 8). Agglomeration of businesses such as these is not uncommon in an urban setting.

The Holy Trinity Armenian Apostolic Church has expanded its property boundaries over the past fifty years. In 1958 and 1959, the church expansion included a social hall. This provided a place for people to gather following the church services. An additional larger hall was connected and was often used for receptions and annual banquets. Continuing to add to the property, the church built a gymnasium and Sunday school in 2002 and 2003. This is now where you can find the church basketball team practicing throughout the week (Figure 9).

The Armenian Community Center and Asbaraz Club (formerly known as the Armenian Patriotic Club) now stands on the corner of N Street and Ventura Avenue (Figure 10). These establishments took over storefronts in the early 1980s, when they moved from the corner of M Street and Ventura Avenue, where the Radisson Hotel is currently located. Here, the community center provides an atmosphere for local Armenians to gather. Patrons are mostly older Armenian men who commonly can be found talking over homemade Shish Kebab and pilaf. The men who gather here come for entertainment as well. They play cards and the traditional game of backgammon, while socializing and reminiscing.

The only city building in the area is the Fire Headquarters, established in 1956, on the corner of M Street and Santa Clara. This was originally a local fire station, but changed in recent years due to its prime downtown location. The building encompasses all the property from Santa Clara south to the freeway. Hye Quality Bakery, also on Santa Clara, has been in its present location since 1978. The locally owned Armenian bakery serves the local delicatessen and supermarkets with traditional Armenian-style breads and pastries.

The oldest building that remains is the previously mentioned Arax market. Although the Arax market is no longer in business, you can occasionally find the owner, Harry Kaloustian, sitting inside playing backgammon with friends.

There have been significant changes to the streets and sidewalks since the removal of most of the dwellings. Today an average side-

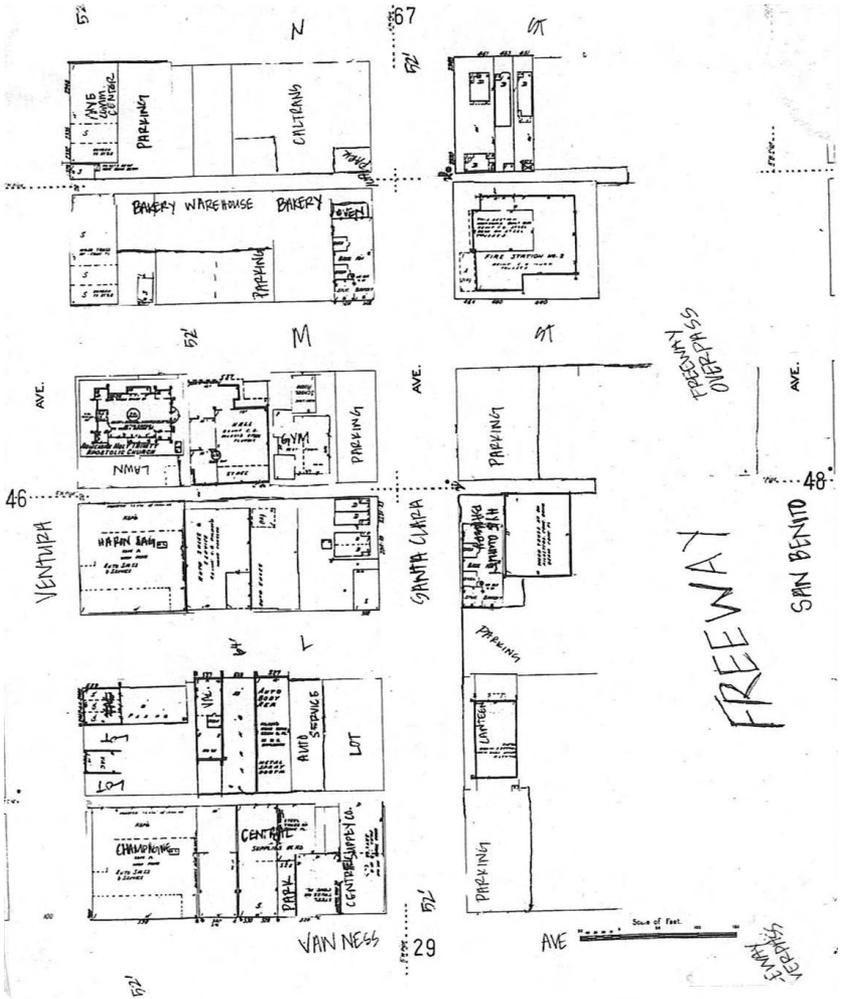


Figure 8. 2004 map (author creation).



*Figure 9. Holy Trinity Armenian Apostolic Church (established 1900, re-established at M Street and Ventura 1914).*



*Figure 10. Asbarez Club and Armenian Community Center (moved 1980–82).*

walk along a commercial street is fourteen feet in width (including planting strip). At the major intersections, the sidewalk-to-building distance is twenty-one feet. The street widths have also been altered. Today the widest street is L Street, between Santa Clara and Ventura, at sixty-four feet, eleven more than the others in the six-block radius. The most significant change to the area was the construction of Freeway 41 in the late 1970s and early 1980s, which has eliminated much of the southern portion of this study area. This area now cuts through Armenia Town, closely parallel to San Benito. Today, there are few remnants of this street, as one passes over it when going under the freeway overpass. Freeway 41 is the path to the north and thus contributes to the downtown's decline as many people simply pass by downtown on their way to newer development. Fresno, like many other American cities, has fallen into the urban-growth dichotomy where "instead of gracious boulevards, avenues and shopping streets, America's urban areas are crossed by arterials and collectors that move traffic, but have no power to move men's souls" (Institute of Transportation Studies 2001:2). The neighborhood has clearly changed from predominantly residential to predominantly commercial.

Although there are many Armenian landmarks in the area, the presence of the Armenian people has significantly declined. Armenia Town, in theory, still exists and has become part of Fresno's re-beautification project for the downtown area. The proposed city project, "Vision 2010," includes adding a designated Armenian district between M and O Streets, just north of Freeway 41. It is planned to include an Armenian Cultural Center, retail shops and restaurants, office buildings, a pedestrian plaza, and the Fifth District Court of Appeals. This proposal has been upheld and there is discussion of ground breaking in the near future. The remaining area of study has no proposed changes by the city. Businesses such as Haron's Jaguar, the Valley Bakery, and Hye Quality Bakery are doing quite well and currently have no desire to relocate their businesses (Figure 11). However, there is discussion of Haron's Jaguar moving north to relocate near the newly developed luxury-car dealerships, such as Mercedes and BMW.

## **Preserving Armenian Town**

There are currently four Armenian Town sites designated as historical sites by the City of Fresno: the Valley Lavosh Baking Company (1921), the Schmidt Home (1908), the Hoonanian Home (1900), and



Figure 11. Haron's Jaguar (established 1952).

the Holy Trinity Armenian Apostolic Church (1914). The primary intent of the Historic Preservation Ordinance is to continue to preserve and improve the historic resources of Fresno for educational, cultural, and economic benefit, and to protect these resources and districts that have a distinctive character or special historic, architectural, aesthetic, and cultural value for the city, state, and nation (Historic Preservation Ordinance 13-400).

With continued development in the area, it has become increasingly difficult to preserve Armenian Town. Although a district has been designated as part of "Vision 2010," it is not without controversy. The Armenian Cultural Foundation Building is at the heart of the issue. This building, which is proposed to sit on the corner of M and Ventura streets (Figures 5 and 8), is wanted by both the city and the residents of Armenian Town. This area once was the center of news and politics for Armenian Town, so its prime location and historical significance have raised interest among four primary groups: The Armenian Museum Group, The Armenian Technology Group, The Armenian Cultural Foundation, and The Historical Society of Fresno. Their interests are as follows:

**1. The Armenian Museum Group (part of Friends of Fresno):** This group desires ownership rights of the area and would like to build a museum at the same location. It is argued by opposing groups that their intent has little to do with the Armenian Cultural Foundation (ACF) and Armenian culture.

**2. The Armenian Technology Group (ATG):** This group desires ownership to the same location in order to build a 10,000 sq. ft. art center. They originally wanted to build adjacent to the ACF building, but there was not enough land available. It is reported that they were offered one story of the AFC building, but the offer has not been accepted to date.

**3. The Armenian Cultural Foundation:** This group is reputed to hold legal ownership of this area. They desire full rights to the AFC building, as they state were promised by the Vision 2010 project developers. They want to construct a 30,000 sq. ft. building that will house offices for such organizations as the Armenian National Committee, the Armenian Relief Society, and the Armenian Youth Federation. Space for business rentals and a social hall are also envisioned.

**4. The Historical Society of Fresno:** The Historical Society is currently preserving five homes within Armenian Town and would like to move them to the AFC building location. This debate is currently in litigation with the ACF (Mugrdechian 2005).

Much of the controversy arises from the fact that Armenian Town is an ethnic community. Ethnic neighborhoods are voluntary communities where people of like origin reside by choice, showing a desire to maintain group cohesiveness. Ethnic groups tend to act as keepers of distinctive cultural traditions. The neighborhood is often the focal point of various kinds of social interactions; it provides a group identity, friendships, marriage partners, a recreational outlet, business successes, and a political powerbase (Hardwick 1979; Rau 1992). Survival from one generation to the next is guaranteed, since most land is inherited and/or the sale of land is typically confined within the ethnic group. Small group sizes, however, can make populations more susceptible to acculturation and assimilation. Urban ethnic neighborhoods also tend to be transitory. Central-city ethnic neighborhoods experience a "life cycle," where one group is replaced by a later-arriving one. Suspicion, friction, and distrust therefore often arise in the face of change (Conzen 1993; Jordan-Bychkov 2002).

Because of the complexity of factors involved, it is estimated that groundbreaking in the area will not begin for several years.

## Conclusion

Early in the history of Armenian town, the residents lived within close proximity to each other and it was a community in which everyone knew each other. The boundary of the neighborhood extended far past the current boundaries of today. As residents grew older and walking became difficult, many would sit on their front porches and listen to the church bells. Some would wait to see who went to church, in hopes of someone bringing them “mahs” or blessed bread. Streets at this time were primarily for pedestrians, and automobiles were not very common. Children were often seen playing together in the streets or on the Emerson School grounds.

The establishment of the community was grounded in hard labor. The demographics consisted primarily of established entrepreneurs and new immigrants. Farmers of the outlying areas would make weekly trips to town to purchase groceries that they did not grow on their lands. Once residents were established and became financially stable, many began to move to more northern neighborhoods of Fresno. Today, Armenians are dispersed throughout Fresno, some still prospering with local farms. Many have continued with the trade their family brought over when they immigrated, such as jewelers, restaurant owners, and craftsmen.

At present, the area appears abandoned most of the day. The neighborhood's population is much smaller, consisting primarily of older residents of Hispanic and African-American descent. Most pedestrian traffic is limited to Sundays or days of special events. As 11:00 a.m. on Sunday draws near, the parking lots and surrounding streets fill with cars, only to become abandoned once again by early afternoon. The Armenian bakeries maintain a healthy business and are not only patronized by downtown workers on lunch break, but also by valley residents—Armenians and others who wish to do their weekly shopping. Today, the only Armenian residents who gather together are the patrons of the family-owned restaurant in the Asbaraz Club. There one can find older gentlemen eating, smoking cigars, and playing cards and backgammon together. The residential dwellings have been removed, leaving either vacant lots or retail establishments. The commercial businesses cater primarily to the local residents and rely on exports for the bulk of their income.

Many consider Armenian Town part of Fresno's history, but to some it is also a part of their family history. Upon closer inspection, one can discover that people not only lived in this area, they were the

heart of this area. The stories of the area hold fond memories for past, present, and future generations. The cultural landscape tells the story and the next chapter is ready to unfold. The direction that chapter will take depends upon the outcomes of variables outlined above. Historical, cultural, and urban geographies all play a significant role in the rebuilding and preservation of one of Fresno's oldest neighborhoods.

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