



Survive, Remember, Thrive:

Armenian Traditions in Western New York

February 2 - May 7, 2023





(detail) Aerial view of St. Sarkis Armenian Church, at the corner of 9th and Falls Street in the City of Niagara Falls, in 2021. Buffalo Documentary Project, 2021.



(detail) Front facade of St. Hagop Armenian Apostolic Church and Community Center, on 9th Street in the City of Niagara Falls, in 2022. Edward Y. Millar, 2022.

(front detail, from top)

Laurice Ghougasian serves a fresh slice of baklava, from a recipe passed down in her family through her grandmother. Gianna Lopez, 2021.

Mary Movesian demonstrates a needlework technique. Edward Y. Millar, 2022.

Arthur Garabedian demonstrates the fitting of a new door made in his wood shop for a local restaurant in Niagara Falls. Edward Y. Millar, 2021.

James Ieda shows the restoration work on his great-great uncle Garabed's violin, an Armenian violinist who survived the Genocide. Edward Y. Millar, 2022.

(front background)

The *Khachkar* (Armenian Cross Stele) in the City of Niagara Falls, NY. Edward Y. Millar, 2022.



Exhibit Overview

Walking through Oakwood Cemetery in the City of Niagara Falls, New York, you might notice the presence of many Armenian surnames like Sarkissian, Gamboian, Stepanian, and more.

In fact, there are over 600 in this one cemetery.

While the city is known for the vibrant cultural heritage of its African American, Haudenosaunee, Italian, and Polish communities, there is another lesser-recognized historic ethnic group who have called the city home since the early twentieth century: the Armenians.

Survive, Remember, Thrive: Armenian Traditions in Western New York is a documentary video series produced by the Folk Arts Program at the Castellani Art Museum of Niagara University that celebrates local expressions of Armenian culture and heritage.

The series contains one short film by the Buffalo Documentary Project and thirteen shortform videos created by the Castellani Art Museum of Niagara University.

This video installation raises awareness of the traditions, memories, and stories of the local Armenian community by pairing shortform videos with select historic photographs, family heirlooms, and created works loaned from featured community members.

Learn more about the local Armenian community, cultural heritage, and connection to the City of Niagara Falls in *Survive, Remember, Thrive*.

(detail) *Shish kabob* grills over charcoal during the Armenian Picnic at St. Sarkis Armenian Church, in a custom-built grill made out of an old steel barrel. Gianna Lopez, 2022.

On the Crossroads of Empires

Armenia is a small, ancient nation located in the South Caucasus.

Throughout recorded history this region nestled between the Black and Caspian Seas, has been the site of frequent conflict between the Byzantine, Persian, Ottoman, and Russian Empires.

Despite being influenced and even at times absorbed into neighboring rival empires, Armenians have maintained a distinct cultural and linguistic identity.

Food, music, and dance play an important role in Armenian culture and society, including the *duduk*: a double reed woodwind instrument seen as the national instrument of Armenia.

1.5 Million

During the collapse of the multi-ethnic Ottoman Empire, uprisings in the Balkans and conflict with the Russian Empire led the Ottoman Armenian community to be viewed with suspicion.

Ottoman Armenians were targeted and brutally persecuted, suffering through the Hamidian massacres of the late 19th century and then the Armenian Genocide of 1915 – amid the outbreak of World War I and fighting between the Russian and Ottoman Empires.

During the Armenian Genocide, an estimated 1.5 million Armenians

were killed or forcibly deported by the Ottoman government from their homeland.

Uprooted

The Armenian Genocide of 1915 resulted in a massive displacement of Armenians from their homeland, leading to the formation of a significant refugee community.

Many Armenians initially settled in neighboring Syria, Lebanon, and Egypt – and as far as France and North America.

In the early and mid-twentieth century Niagara Falls (NY) and the Niagara Region in Canada became home to a sizable Armenian community.

In the City of Niagara Falls (NY), the East Falls Street neighborhood became a major hub for the local Armenian community.

Two churches and a community center were built in this neighborhood in the mid-20th century: St. Sarkis Armenian Church, the Armenian Community Center, and St. Hagop Armenian Apostolic Church.



Genocide survivors formed the foundation of a major Armenian diaspora around the world.

հիշել REMEMBER

Practicing cultural traditions is impactful for individuals and their community.

A Tradition of Importance

Oral histories that tell of the resilience and struggles of family members. The coordinated rhythms of the communal *kochari* dance. The intricate needlework designs of a lace doily.

For the Armenian diaspora, passing down cultural traditions carries a heavy weight: preserving knowledge and practices that were almost lost—save for the dedication of genocide survivors and their descendants to carry them on.

Whether learning to make the braids of *choereg* from a family member, practicing Armenian with a fellow community member, or brewing a pot of *soorj* for friends; the traditions the Armenian community brought with them to Niagara Falls continue to add to the vibrant ethnic heritage of this area.

Where Two Gather

The savory scent of shish kabob.
The excited swells of laughter.
The warm embrace of friends reunited.

For over 60 years, annual picnics and community gatherings

organized at St. Sarkis and St. Hagop bring together the local Armenian community for a day of celebration in Niagara Falls, NY.

These major events attract local community members, former members who moved away, members of neighboring Armenian communities, and the general public.

Community events like these and those organized by a new community organization, provide opportunities to celebrate Armenian cultural heritage and community bonds.

New Roots

While the local Armenian community has shrunken numerically from its peak in the mid-twentieth century and is more spread out across the region, it remains a tight knit group dedicated to preserving and sharing Armenian culture

locally.

In addition to the historic community, more recent immigration from Armenia to Western New York—settling primarily in Erie County—followed with the collapse of the Soviet Union and ongoing conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan.

New members of the community have brought new traditions, knowledge, and expressions of Armenian culture into the area.



Video Series List

Survive, Remember, Thrive

Pilot film in the series, providing an overview of the historic Armenian community in Niagara Falls, NY.

Robert “Butch” Kazeangin Jr. - Niagara Falls (NY) Armenian Community History

Learn about the history of the Armenian community in Niagara Falls and Oakwood Cemetery.

Laurice Ghougasian - Paklava

Learn about the meanings and memories of making Armenian paklava.

Ophelia Adjemian - Seamstress

Learn about working as a seamstress, Armenian traditional dresses, and owning a small business.

Mary Movesian - Needlework

Learn about the different types of needlework practiced in Armenia.

Lisa Ohanessian Mies and Lori Ohanessian Hurtgam - Choereg

Learn about *choereg* (Armenian Sweet Bread) and the passing down of food traditions.

Tony Mooradian Jr., Mike Petrosian, and Tom Mooradian - Mooradian Rug Company

Learn about the origins of the Mooradian Rug Company and growing up in a family business.

Arthur Garabedian - Carpentry

Learn about growing up in the Armenian community in Niagara Falls and working as a carpenter in the community.

Sonya Gregian & Rachele Aversa - Rice Pilaf and St. Hagop Armenian Apostolic Church (Kitchen)

Learn about the role of rice pilaf in Armenian households and community events.

St. Sarkis Armenian Church - Armenian Picnic

Visit the annual picnic at St. Sarkis and learn about the baked goods and grilling of *shish kabob*.

St. Hagop Armenian Apostolic Church - Armenian Picnic

Explore the annual picnic at St. Hagop and experience the bustle of the community kitchen.

James Ieda - Komitas Armenian Folk Miniatures

Uncover the unique family heritage of

violinist James Ieda and his violin's connection to the Armenian Genocide.

Glenn and Gadge Choolokian - Genocide Survivor Narratives

Learn about oral history and the role it plays on family identity, and their connection to the City of Niagara Falls.

Dawn and John Sakalian - Family History Narratives

Learn about the importance of preserving family narratives, their impact on Armenian cultural identity, and connecting with other community members.





(detail) Ani Avdoian and Kathy Peller make *choereg* in the kitchen of St. Sarkis Armenian Church in Niagara Falls, NY. Buffalo Documentary Project, 2021.

“Because of the Genocide, certain foods that were brought over by the survivors, like *choereg*...those recipes were brought over. Its our link to the past – and when we continue to make these foods, I feel it’s a (sign of) respect to those people who did not survive. In my family, or in anybody’s family.”

Ani Avdoian

“All Armenian girls had to know how to sew, as there weren’t services outside of home. When I came here, I had to do something for a living and I started to work at a sewing place in the Summit Park Mall. When the mall closed and we had Gayane (here), we decided to open our own business, and its been almost seventeen years now!”

Ophelia Adjemian

(detail) Ophelia Adjemian shows the fabrics she is using to create the veil of a new Armenian dance dress for her granddaughter Gayane, at her alteration shop in Niagara Falls. Edward Y. Millar, 2022.



գոյատևել SURVIVE հիշել REMEMBER բարգավաճել THRIVE

ARMENIAN TRADITIONS IN WESTERN NEW YORK

Video Series Online Access

The full *Survive, Remember, Thrive: Armenian Traditions in Western New York* video series can be watched online for free by visiting the [Castellani Art Museum of Niagara University Youtube Channel](#), or by scanning this code.



Project Staff

Project Director

Edward Y. J. Millar

Western New York Armenian
Community (WNYAC)

Assistant Project Director

Dawn Sakalian

Cinematography

Buffalo Documentary Project

Community Support and Outreach

St. Sarkis Armenian Apostolic Church
St. Hagop Armenian Apostolic Church

Videography

Gianna Lopez
Edward Y. J. Millar

Acknowledgements

Special thanks to Dawn Sakalian, the Buffalo Documentary Project team including Mani Mehrvarz and Maryam Muliaee, and Gianna Lopez. And all of our collaborators and participants in this project, who've helped with outreach and guidance: Ani Avdoian, Kathy Peller, Deacon Albert Amato, Debbie Avdoian Amato, Anjelika Abrahamyan, Laurice Ghougasian, Art Garabedian, Lisa Ohanessian Mies, Lori Ohanessian Hurtgam, James Ieda, Alex Dzadur, Sonya Gregian, Rachel Aversa, Tony Mooradian Jr., Mike Petrosian, Tom Mooradian, Ophelia Adjemian, Mary Movesian, Gayane Ghukasyan, Robert "Butch" Kazeangin Jr., Glenn and Gadge Choolokian, John Sakalian, and more.

Survive, Remember, Thrive: Armenian Traditions in Western New York is made possible through the New York State Council on the Arts with the support of the Office of the Governor and the New York State Legislature, NYSCA Living Traditions, and Niagara University.



Council on
the Arts



CASTELLANI
ART MUSEUM
OF NIAGARA UNIVERSITY

7 VARSITY DRIVE | NIAGARA UNIVERSITY, NY 14109
716.286.8200 | [castellaniartmuseum.org](#)

Please visit our website for current hours of operation.

*The Castellani Art Museum is a free admission art museum.
Donations welcome.*

