

Chelsea Under Fire: Urban Industrial Life, Crisis, and the Trajectory of Jewish and Latino Chelsea

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BOSTON COLLEGE
DEPARTMENT OF HISTORY

Chelsea Under Fire:
Urban Industrial Life, Crisis, and the Trajectory of Jewish and Latino Chelsea

By

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Introduction:

Jewish and Latino Immigration in a “city under fire”

On April 10, 2008 the *Boston Globe* published an article in commemoration of the 100th anniversary of the Great Chelsea Fire of 1908. Entitled “When Chelsea Burned,” the article provided four theories explaining why Chelsea burned on that fateful morning in mid-April: either a smoker dumped his ashes near a lot full of rags, a group of mischievous kids gave into the temptation of pyromania, a gluttonous business owner committed arson for insurance money, or the ever-so-flammable rags spontaneously combusted. It seemed odd to the author that in a city notorious for bursting into flames—the city burnt again during the Great Fire of 1973—nobody knew who or what ignited the devastating conflagration. Yet to those who are familiar with the history of Chelsea and her residents—and indeed there are very few of us—the question of who or what burned Chelsea is neither here nor there. From 1834 to 1997, Chelsea endured over thirty fires of considerable (if not appalling) size not because the city was full of smokers or deranged businessman, but because the city itself was under fire. Cast into the crossfire of industrialization and demographic flux, Chelsea suffered as people, industry, and financial assistance migrated in and out of the small city. Industry, poor housing quality, oil tanks, municipal incompetence and the Mystic River Bridge, are just a sampling of the many factors that besieged Chelsea and erupted in fire throughout the twentieth century. ¹

Chelsea’s unique spectrum of urban problems, however, only explains the trials and tribulations leading up to the Great Fires of 1908 and 1973 and not the events created by them. In Chelsea, escalating urban crisis occurred simultaneously with rapidly growing immigrant

populations. In the years before the fire of 1908, Jewish immigration pushed Chelsea to the brink of demographic succession; likewise, in the handful of years before the fire of 1973, Latino migrations forced Chelsea to recognize the changing dynamic of a once-homogenous city. As isolated events, the Great Fire of 1908 and the Great Fire of 1973 were urban disasters, but as decisive moments in the local history of Jewish and Latino immigrants, the fires were nodal points in the interplay between urban-industrial life, urban crisis and immigration.

Extraordinary events such as fires expose the machinery of spatial and social order. While the destructive quality of conflagration fills the air with suspended trauma, the leveling effects of rampant flames provoke immediate and dynamic riposte. In the aftermath of urban turmoil, the reconstructive process not only restores infrastructure to the city's skyline but a sense of order to the economic and social hierarchies. The relationships between the rich and the poor, capital and labor, and immigrants and natives, are dependent upon the scaffolding of the city itself; and thus to rebuild the urban is to make and unmake the destinies of the city's people. The phenomenal effect of fire on the urban milieu is chronicled in Karen Sawislak's narrative of the Great Chicago Fire, *Smoldering City: Chicagoans and the Great Fire, 1871-1874*. Through exploration of the reconstructive processes, Sawislak unearthed how commercial interests, popular opinion, and public interests emerged as combatants—and protagonists—in the struggle for the city. Though *Smoldering City* is not a history of Chicago's immigrant populations, the narrative nonetheless identifies the methodology of disaster relief and renewal as the key to the livelihood of interested parties. In the case of Chelsea, both the early Jewish population and the later Latino population had much at stake during the aftermath of the fire. As new members of American society and new contenders in the urban arena, the destructive effects of the fire

produced an unparalleled degree of uncertainty in their communities. The sudden efflux of residents and businesses presented new opportunities for resourceful migrants to exert agency and prerogative in the urban milieu. In the years following the Great Fires of 1908 and 1973, Jews and Latino opened small-businesses and fortified kinship networks that accelerated the continued growth of their ethnic communities. At the beginning of the twentieth century, many referred to Chelsea as “the Jerusalem of America,” but by the end of the century nicknames for Chelsea included “little San Juan” and later on “ChelSalvador.”²

The divergent paths of Jewish and Latino Chelsea shed light onto the relationship and interconnectedness between urban industrial life, urban crisis and immigrant neighborhoods. The same industrial characteristics that launched Jews into the suburbs prevented Latinos from leaving the inner urban area. As is evidenced by Llana Barber in her dissertation entitled “Latino Migration and the New Global Cities: Transnationalism, Race and Urban Crisis in Lawrence, Massachusetts, 1945-2000,” the effects of national phenomenon such as deindustrialization and suburbanization—or “white flight”—were most acutely felt in small cities such as Lawrence or Chelsea. Mass migrations to suburbia induced urban disinvestment, and deindustrialization spurred economic decline. Although the combined effects of demographic decline and deindustrialization eventually spelled urban crisis, lingering industrial cities experiencing demographic efflux, moreover, destined Lawrence and Chelsea to be primary recipients of Latino migrations. Just as industrialization provided the framework for the upward trajectory of the Jewish population, suburbanization and urban disinvestment laid the parameters that restricted the upward (and outward) trajectory of Latinos.³

Located on the frontline of urban phenomena and perpetually under siege, the city of Chelsea and her residents had long lists of grievances. Change had occurred quickly; and as memories of the past influenced perceptions of the future, Chelsea became the battleground of the struggle between “Old Chelsea” and “New Chelsea.” At the beginning of the twentieth century, many mourned the death of the pastoral town as the influx of capital and labor shaped the city’s industrial and ethnic character. At the beginning of the nineteenth century, Chelsea had been a country retreat and summer playground for Boston’s leaders, but as dramatic population growth ensued, urbanization threatened the city’s rural roots and was resented by many older Yankee residents. Walter Merriam Pratt, the author of *The Seven Generations of Chelsea and Prattville* and *The Burning of Chelsea*, was one of the most vocal opponents of industrialization and Jewish migration.

Why is it, then, that during the few years previous to the fire Chelsea had lost so many desirable citizens? Why was it that in less than fifty years it had entirely lost its standing as the most aristocratic suburb of Boston, a place where people came to spend their summers. . . How was it possible for a city of wealth, with a population of ten to fifteen thousand, to change in so short a time to a business and manufacturing community with a population of forty thousand, including ten thousand Hebrews?⁴

Much in the same way that Pratt blamed the Jews for Chelsea’s changing environment, many white-ethnics conflated Latino growth with urban decline. During the seventies, accounts of the city’s escalating narcotics trade, for instance, overwhelmingly blamed Hispanics for the introduction of drugs. In more recent years, one of the librarians at the Chelsea Public Library referred to the Latinos as “all the undesirables.” Although constituents of “Old Chelsea” tended to attach culpability to immigrants, the true culprits of urban crisis were circumstances out of the city’s control.⁵

A Brief Overview of Chelsea

In 1624 Samuel Maverick founded Winnisimmet—which occupied the present areas of Chelsea, Revere, and Winthrop. Located at the intersection between two rivers and facing the harbor, the settlement was the ideal place to establish a trading post. Shortly thereafter, Winnisimmet became the location of the country's first ferry. In 1631, the General Court of the Massachusetts Bay Colony granted approval for a privately owned ferry to operate between the settlement and Boston, and with that began the first water route between Boston and its environs. In 1634, Boston incorporated Winnisimmet as a part of the city and a hundred years later, in 1739, an act passed by the Great and General Court of Boston declared Chelsea as its own township. From the end of the Revolutionary War onwards, Chelsea rose to prominence as a retreat for Boston's elite. Many city leaders stayed at the Highland Park House, the grand resort of New England, and others built their mansions on either Powderhorn Hill or Mount Bellingham.⁶

Accessibility defined Chelsea's demographic development during the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. In 1831 the operators of the Chelsea ferry decreased the toll to three cents and initiated a period of tremendous population growth. Between 1830 and 1840, the population tripled from 770 persons to 2,182 persons, and by 1900 Chelsea boasted a population of just over 34,000. At the turn of the twentieth century, Chelsea was Boston's single most accessible suburb. The Chelsea-Charlestown Bridge, the Chelsea Street Bridge, the Chelsea and East Boston Railway, the Lynn and Boston Street Railway, the Boston Revere Beach and Lynn Railroad, and the Revere Beach Parkway were just a handful of the roads, railways, and bridges that had emerged over the past century. In the words of Walter Merriam Pratt—who in addition to being

an author of local history was a member of one of Chelsea's wealthiest families—Chelsea was “the easiest to reach of all the suburbs of Boston, being connected with it by the Winnisimmet Ferry, the Boston Elevated by the East Boston Tunnel, the Boston and Northern Electric line, and the Boston and Maine Railroad. From Chelsea Square to Scollay Square, in Boston, the running time is but thirteen minutes.”⁷

Chelsea's proximity to Boston and its multiple venues of transportation inevitably attracted industry to the city's waterfront and interior. Chelsea's earliest industry was shipbuilding. Yet due to the introduction of steel ships, many of the shipyards closed during the second half of the nineteenth century. Regardless, the innate value and accessibility of the waterfront property encouraged further industrial development. During the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Chelsea witnessed the maturation of local industries that included—but were not limited to—coal, shipping, chemical processing, shoe manufacturing, clock production, and the gamut of enterprises dependent upon recycled materials (i.e. “junk business”). The growing presence of these factories transformed Chelsea into an industrial city. While the production of oils, paints, and varnishes dominated the industrial economy during the second half of the nineteenth century, shoe manufacturing and oil production rose to prominence during the early part of the twentieth century. By the time the Jews arrived in Chelsea, the industrial fabric of the city was incredibly diverse. Producers of shoes, rubber goods, elastic fabric, boxes, steel and wallpapers—to name a few—all shared the same 1.8 square miles of city.⁸

¹ Katherine Conti, “When Chelsea Burned,” *Boston Globe*, April 10, 2008.

² Karen Sawislak, *Smoldering City: Chicagoans and the Great Fire, 1871-1874* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995); Isidro Vega, interview by Lake Coreth, March 25, 2011; Norman Finkelstein, interview by Lake Coreth, November 16, 2010.

³ Llana Barber, “Latino Migration and the New Global Cities: Transnationalism, Race and Urban Crisis in Lawrence, Massachusetts, 1945-2000” (PhD diss., Boston College, 2010).

⁴ Walter Merriam Pratt, *The Burning of Chelsea* (Boston: Sampson Publishing Company, 1908), 28-29.

⁵ Survey of Industrial Sites, Chelsea Public Library Archives, Boston.

⁶ "Samuel Maverick," Chelsea Historical Society, accessed April 11, 2011, <http://www.olgp.net/chs/d1/sammaverick.htm>; Pratt, *Burning of Chelsea*, 15-17; "Chelsea's Population Through the Years," Chelsea Historical Society, accessed April 11, 2011, <http://www.olgp.net/chs/people/population.htm>

⁷ "Important Events in Chelsea's History," Chelsea Historical Society, accessed April 7, 2011, <http://www.olgp.net/chs/timeline.htm>; "Winnisimmet Ferry," Chelsea Historical Society, accessed April 7, 2011, <http://www.olgp.net/chs/d2/ferry.htm>; Pratt, *Burning of Chelsea*, 29.

⁸ Cynthia K. Orellana, Melissa Quirk, Melanie N. Spencer, and Yvette Villa, "Chelsea Economic Development Community Impacts" (report, Department of Urban & Environmental Policy and Planning, Tufts University, Boston, 2006); "Shipbuilding Industry in Chelsea," Chelsea Historical Society, accessed February 16, 2011, <http://www.olgp.net/chs/d4/shipbuilding.htm>.

Chapter One:

Cinders of Jerusalem: Industrial Succession and the Rise of Jewish Chelsea, 1890-1950

Dear Old Chelsea

I've just been back in Chelsea, Bill, I've seen a city new,
The place has changed so greatly. Its made me fearfully blue.
Familiar scenes are missing, Bill, The fire, don't you know,
It altered almost everything, Some twenty years ago.

-Walter Merriam Pratt, 1928¹

Arriving in Boston at the turn of the twentieth century, the Jews of Chelsea established their community during the vanguard of Jewish emigration from Eastern Europe and Russia. In 1890, just eighty-two Jews lived in Chelsea. But by 1910 their numbers had grown to 11,000, comprising one-third of the city's population. Notwithstanding the damages and crisis caused by the Great Fire of 1908, Chelsea remained a major destination for Europe's Jewish migrants. Confronted with the task of recovery and unfavorable public opinion, Chelsea rose from the ashes of the conflagration as a community renewed. A period of tremendous industrialization quelled the wake of the fire, and as industry hummed so, too, did the Jewish population. Evolving up until the 1950s, Jewish Chelsea was both the ideal destination and point of departure for Jewish immigrants. Seeded with first generation Jews and plentiful employment opportunities, Chelsea was a staging area for a population in transition. As a midpoint between the oppression of anti-Semitic Europe and the abounding—yet distant—opportunities of twentieth century America, Chelsea's unassuming and industrial character allowed Jewish migrants to take small, but decisive steps towards socioeconomic ascent. For the Jews, Chelsea

was the “Jerusalem of America”; but ultimately, the momentum of modernity led the Jews out of Chelsea, and in search of “richer pastures” in the city and suburbs.²

The Mother of Exile

The mass arrival of Jews from Russia and Eastern Europe began in the 1880s, just as the flow of Jewish immigrants from Germany was trailing off and right as industrialization in Chelsea took flight. Like their German brethren who had sailed to Boston a half a century earlier, the Jews of Russia and Eastern Europe left their homeland because of the poverty and religious intolerance of Europe. The anti-Semitism of Old World Europe was pervasive and debilitating—incorporated as it was in both law and popular belief—and inhibited the socioeconomic mobility of Jewish communities. Affecting Jews in Germany, Eastern Europe, and Russia alike, anti-Semitism and socioeconomic inertia impelled the Jews to leave Europe and to seek “the promised land” across the Atlantic in America.³

The arrival of Russian Jews permanently changed the urban landscape of Jewish Boston. Whereas the period between 1840 and 1880 witnessed an influx of Jews from Germany, nearly every Jew who arrived between 1880 and 1918 came from Russia or Eastern Europe. As a direct result of the anti-Semitic policies enumerated by the Russian Czar Alexander III, tens of thousands of Jews left Russia. At odds with his predecessor, the liberal Czar Alexander II, Alexander III reversed the laws that had granted Jews civil rights under the previous administration. The May Laws of 1882 prevented Jews from selling or mortgaging land, owning or leasing property, and managing estates for others. The May Laws also prohibited Jews from attending Russian universities and professional schools. Institutional anti-Semitism imprisoned

Russian Jews in economic serfdom. They earned low wages, paid high taxes, and competed against other Jews for a meager livelihood. As Mary Antin, a Russian immigrant who settled in Chelsea, stated in her autobiography *The Promised Land*, “it was bewildering to hear how many kinds of duties and taxes we owed the Czar. We paid taxes on our houses, and taxes on the rents from the houses, taxes on our business, taxes on our profits. I am not sure whether there were taxes on our losses.”⁴ For Jews, socioeconomic mobility in Russia was unfathomable and as a result they fled. Though the majority of Russian Jews who sailed for Boston settled in the developing city, thousands of Russian immigrants—like Antin and her family—came to Chelsea.⁵

The onset of Jewish emigration from Russia was contemporaneous with industrialization in Chelsea. Between 1890 and 1910 Chelsea underwent tremendous industrial growth. Whereas the production of oils, tarnishes, and paints had dominated the city’s economy during the second half of the nineteenth century, box factories, foundries, machine shops, and most of all, shoe factories, dominated the industrial landscape at the turn of the twentieth century. The largest of Chelsea’s shoe factories was the A.G. Walton & Company, which was founded in Lynn in 1899 but moved to the corner of Chelsea’s Maple and Heard Streets in 1907. Arriving in the year prior to the Great Fire of 1908, A.G Walton & Company was unaffected by the devastating conflagration. By 1910, the firm reported that it employed over 1,800 persons and manufactured over 12,000 pairs of shoes daily. Other important companies that prospered during this period included the Standard Box Company and the Revere Rubber Company.

If Chelsea’s industrial expansion was unanticipated, the rapid growth of its Russian Jewish community was completely unprecedented. During the second half of the nineteenth

century, Irish immigrants flooded Boston and its environs and comprised the greatest segment of the city's foreign-born. By 1875, Chelsea already had 2,009 Irish immigrants and the numbers were still growing. Yet in the fifteen years before and after 1900, immigrants from Russia surpassed the Irish as Chelsea's most populous group of foreign-born individuals. In 1885 there were just eleven Russian immigrants living in Chelsea but by 1915 there were over nine thousand.

Population of foreign born residents in Chelsea, 1875-1915⁶

	1875	1885	1895	1905	1915
Foreign Born Total	4,511	6,581	10,056	13,883	19,297
Irish	2,009	2,326	2,942	2,267	Not listed
Russian	3*	11	1,042	3,769	9,217

** Included people from Russia, Poland, and Finland*

Between 1885 and 1895, over a thousand Russians settled in Chelsea and in the span of another ten years they exceeded the number of Irish-born by another thousand persons. The arrival of Russian Jews drastically changed the composition of the city's immigrants and dramatically altered the demographic landscape. Just seven years after the Great Fire of 1908 forced many Jews out of Chelsea, the Russian-Jewish population had not only recovered, but grown to 9,217 persons. In 1915, Russians accounted for 47.7 percent of Chelsea's immigrant population and moreover, housed the largest population of Russians living in Massachusetts outside of Boston.⁷

Located at the crossroads of metropolitan Boston and her waterways, Chelsea beckoned industry and immigrants to the city's shores. The steam-powered Winnisimmet Ferry made transportation from Boston to Chelsea cheap, and the institution of fire codes in Boston's North

End brought the shantytowns to Chelsea—the most accessible inner-urban city. The intersection between capital and labor flourished in Chelsea and hastened the city’s industrial and demographic growth. The change was gradual, noted Walter Merriam Pratt, but it was shocking nonetheless.

Old residents did not realize the number that were locating in the city. The water front properties were too valuable to lie idle, and large manufacturers secured them and located their factories there. With them naturally came a poorer class, and every two that came drove one old resident away.⁸

Over the course of just a few decades, the city had become one of the most densely populated areas in the country, and was the new home of a myriad of manufacturing and business enterprises. What had once been the playground of Boston’s Protestant elite, had become a bona fide industrial city with a distinctly Jewish character by the turn of the twentieth century.

In light of the tendency—especially among Germans—to shed their Jewish identity upon settling in the U.S., Chelsea’s Jewish community was particularly unique. The new immigrants from Russia and Eastern Europe identified with Judaism as both a religion and culture and moreover, many of the Jews who came to Chelsea spoke Yiddish and practiced Jewish Orthodoxy, a sect of Judaism based upon the strict interpretation and application of the laws canonized in the Torah. As Antin eloquently stated,

. . . harassed on every side, thwarted in every normal effort, pent up within narrow limits, all but dehumanized, the Russian Jew fell back upon the only thing that never failed him,—his hereditary faith in God. In the study of the Torah he found balm for all his wounds; the minute observance of traditional rites became the expression of his spiritual cravings; and in a dream of a restoration to Palestine he forgot the world.⁹

Isolated and persecuted, Chelsea's new immigrants embraced Judaism as a way of life. Whereas Jews of the Reform movement believed in modernizing Jewish traditions and reforming Jewish law in ways that were compatible with American culture, Orthodox Jews maintained their old world religious traditions. By abstaining from work on Saturdays and abiding by the Jewish dietary laws, the earliest Jews of Chelsea observed Shabbat, the Saturday Sabbath, and Kashrut, the maintenance of a Kosher diet.¹⁰

That being said, Jewish employment in Chelsea reflected the demands of labor, the guidelines of Orthodox Judaism, and the signs of a community on the rise. A small sampling of the community from the city directory revealed the rough patterns of Jewish occupation. Of the fifty-six Cohens—one of the most common Jewish-American surnames—living in Chelsea in 1906, the four most represented sectors of the economy were clothing, shoes, junk, and construction—in that order. Those involved in construction were laborers or masons, those in the junk business were either junk dealers or collectors, and those in the clothing and shoe industries held various posts. In fact, in both the shoe and clothing industries there was a spectrum of occupations not seen among the junk dealers or masons. Of those involved in shoe manufacturing, two were shoe factory operators, two were shoe repairers, and two were shoemakers; and likewise, of those in the clothing business, five were tailors, one was a dress cutter, and one was a clothing worker. For a relatively new immigrant population, the Jews had penetrated the city's economy from a variety of angles and in a number of resourceful ways. Dealing recyclable materials and working in the city's shoe industry were particularly advantageous occupations. Junk dealers capitalized on the waste created by industrialization, and shoe operators benefitted from the likelihood of ascension in an expanding industry.¹¹

The Great Fire of 1908 threatened the industrial and demographic succession that had been underway for the past two decades. Chelsea was a tinderbox, and over two-fifths of the city went up in flames. Destroying eighteen city blocks, the fire leveled the industrial districts along Marginal and Williams Streets and the densely populated residential districts located slightly inland. Not to mention the junkyards had all but been destroyed and the Jewish enclaves by Arlington and Williams Streets burned to the ground. In many ways, the uncertainties that the fire created were more frightening than the conflagration itself. The city had to reconstruct the urban grid, and rebuild the socioeconomic hierarchies that were lost to the flames. In the aftermath of the fire nothing was guaranteed. Yet what did become increasingly clear was that Chelsea, for better or for worse, would never be the same.¹²

The Breadth of the Fire

At 10:44 am on Monday April 12, 1908 an unidentified caller reported the genesis of a fire billowing from a pile of rags sitting in a vacant lot in the industrial district—located along the riverbed. Springing from the water, the fire was stoked by winds that reached 40 mph at noon and carried the burning heap of rags to the rooftop of the Boston Blacking Company, setting the building aflame. From mound to mound the high-powered winds pollinated the dry rags with ignited debris, and in a matter of minutes the small fire had exploded into a full-fledged industrial conflagration. The old housing stock used for rags and junk was the first to ignite, soon to be followed by the dwellings of the lower and middle classes.¹³

As the fire blazed, the city erupted into commotion. Many people huddled in the Garden Cemetery, crouching low to the ground, while others ran to the northern marshlands in search of refuge. Walter Pratt's account of the fire painted a portrait of utter chaos and terror.

The wind blew with such force that women were blown into fences and trees or lost their balance and fell. Great pieces of furniture went bounding end over end down the hill, blown by the wind. Horses were running away, and the scene was one of terrifying confusion. Escape was possible only by enduring the hostile breath of flames, running, tripping over abandoned furniture in the blinding, sickening smoke. . . The wails of the frantic parents vainly searching for their children added to the excitement.¹⁴

The fire spread westward to Broadway, the thoroughfare connecting Chelsea to Boston, and quickly made its way eastward towards the Chelsea Street Bridge. The rapidly moving fire was out of control, and Chelsea was not adequately equipped to combat the flames. Firemen and fire equipment poured into Chelsea from throughout metro Boston. Dedham, Brookline, and Boston from the South along with Lynn, Saugus, and Revere from the North were just a few of the towns that battled the flames during the height of the blaze.¹⁵

Throughout the night the militia restored the first semblances of order. Dispatched by acting Governor Ebenezer Draper at the request of Mayor John Beck, over twelve hundred men came to Chelsea to restrict movement in and out of the city. They formed a barrier around the burned area and inspected the city for hazardous zones. While the presence of the militia was a testament to the epic proportions of the fire, the duties of the soldiers also underscored the troubles yet to come. The primary objective of the militia—as decreed by Colonel E. Leroy Sweetster—was to protect private property and to restore order to a city rife with chaos.¹⁶

The damage caused by the fire was cataclysmic: 492 acres burned, 1,822 buildings collapsed, and 17,450 people lost their homes. Along with eighteen miles of Chelsea's streets,

the city hall, public library, YMCA, state armory, and the U.S. Post Office burned. The fire leveled nine schools and two hospitals, nine churches and three synagogues. Not to mention the fire had consumed residencies of all sorts including 1,781 wooden homes, 652 brick homes, and 210 tenement houses. Real estate loss amounted to \$12,450,000 and personal property loss to \$20 million. In a matter of minutes, social and spatial barriers that had developed over the course of one-hundred years had crumbled into ash. Consuming everything from rag-shops to real estate offices, tenements to brick homes, the conflagration had laid waste to the city. The Jewish quarter located between Arlington and Williams Streets had burned, and shortly thereafter the elite residential district of Bellingham Hill had followed suit, “hundreds were going the same way; poor and rich were on equal terms.” As day dawned upon Chelsea it became apparent that the fire had leveled Chelsea and spared none. Both the palatial mansions of the rich and the wooden shacks of the poor were among the masses of ruins that covered two-fifths of the city.¹⁷

For a New and Better Chelsea

The process of reconstruction began with relief. A total of eighteen thousand people were homeless. Days after the fire refugees filled the courthouse, local high schools, and a number of churches and synagogues. The most fortunate found refuge in adjoining cities and the least fortunate occupied one of seven-hundred tents sprawled throughout the city. Heeding the call for food and shelter, a diverse assortment of organizations and people rose to the occasion. In addition to the five official relief stations operated by the Chelsea Relief Committee, over a dozen religious bodies, labor unions, and social clubs spearheaded independent efforts. Examples include the Central Congregational Church on Washington Avenue, the Hebrew Information

Bureau on Winnisimmet Street, and the Knights of Columbus on Park Street. Though Walter Pratt noted that such organizations “looked out for their own people,” conflicting accounts of the relief effort suggested that the first battle between Jewish Chelsea and “Old Chelsea” was fought over the question of relief.¹⁸

The Jewish residents of Chelsea suffered enormously in the immediate aftermath of the fire. As an immigrant neighborhood constantly living from hand to mouth, few of the tailors, grocers, junk dealers, and other small business owners had insurance to cover their losses. Recognizing the anguish of the city’s Jews, the Young Men’s Hebrew Association issued a distress call to Jacob de Hass and Max Mitchell, the presidents of Boston’s Greater Federation of Jewish Charities (GFJC). Immediately after receiving the call, the GFJC sent one thousand breakfasts to Chelsea’s homeless—regardless of denomination—and soon after opened quarters on Charles Street in Boston to house victims of the fire. Given that the fire had blazed on Passover, the GFJC also provided materials and venues for Jewish residents to celebrate the annual holiday. In addition to sending over ten thousand pounds of Matzos, the GFJC organized two Seder dinners at the YMHA and many more at synagogues in Boston. Through the lens of the greater Boston Jewish community, the obliteration of Chelsea had reached Biblical proportions. Evoking religious imagery the *Jewish Advocate* noted that “for all the world it looked skyward like one of those old prints of the destruction of Jerusalem.”¹⁹

That being said, who received Jewish charity became a source of conflict and accounts of the Jewish relief effort varied enormously. In an article published in the *Chelsea Evening Record*, the author noted that all but “the Hebrews” received aid from the official relief stations. Given that the GFJC was involved in the relief effort, this absence of Jews was not completely

surprising. Just as Pratt noted that the Catholics sought assistance at the old parochial residence, the Jews sought assistance from the YMHA and GFJC. Yet according to De Haas, after distributing materials for Passover, the general relief committee forced Jewish social workers to comply with their relief efforts—and for all intensive purposes they did. Jewish social, athletic, and educational organizations turned over proceeds to the general relief committee and staff members of the GFJC served as Yiddish translators on behalf of the relief effort. But given that the GFJC was complying with the general relief effort, it was odd that the newspaper singled out the Jews as the only group of citizens not frequenting the official relief stations. Something was awry.²⁰

Though inconclusive, the terms of GFJC-provided charity highlighted underlying tensions between Chelsea's Jewish character and the non-Jewish community. The GFJC, of course, joined Chelsea's relief effort on the grounds of religious solidarity. In light of the divisions in Boston's Jewish community, De Haas—who was also the editor of the *Jewish Advocate* and the secretary of the Federation of American Zionists— and his colleagues were determined to wield philanthropy as a tool for promoting an all-inclusive Jewish identity. The devastating fire had provided the opportune moment. Yet in their noble attempt to forge bonds between Boston's German Jews and Chelsea's Russian Jews, the GFJC both encroached on the jurisdiction of the general relief committee and singled out the Jewish community as their “preferred” recipient. By pledging support in the name of Judaism, the GFJC's overwhelming demonstration of relief must have been unsettling to a community that viewed Jewish empowerment as a threat to the preexisting social order or at the very least, considered the thought unpalatable.²¹

As the question of relief gave way to that of recovery, the terms of reconstruction once again echoed underlying tensions between capital and labor, immigrants and natives. In the days after the fire, residents voted in favor of a bill that placed Chelsea in the hands of a Board of Control. Once enacted, the legislation endowed the board with the power of Mayor, School Committee, and Board of Alderman and, moreover, provided each of the five members with salaries so as to ensure that the board acted in Chelsea's "best interests." The bill, however, was clearly the brainchild of the urban elite. As rich civic officials, business magnates, and entrepreneurs—indeed ex-Mayor Strahan of the Strahan Paper Company was all of the above—the attendees granted exceptional powers to an unelected, governing body for commercial and personal interests. The Commission was neither subject to the ballot box nor responsible for advancing the interests of any one faction "to the detriment of the city," as Walter Pratt put it. Though impartial rhetoric framed the municipal hearing, there was little doubt that many of the Jews were the "undesirable citizens" who inhabited the much despised "light and flimsy buildings" within the city. Yet public opinion aside, the Board of Control had no control over who benefitted from the policies they instated. The commission established city parks; widened city streets; regulated the height and material of newly constructed buildings; solicited \$20,000 from Andrew Carnegie to build a public library; rebuilt the Williams and Shurtleff schools; and most importantly, restored financial confidence in the city by promoting economic growth.²²

In the years following the conflagration, Chelsea was reborn as an industrial boomtown. Manufacturing enterprises of all sorts prospered in the aftermath of the fire and hastened the speed of industrialization. The Globe Shoe Company, Chelsea Shoe Manufacturing Company,

Standard Box Company, Bay State Improved Box Company, W.A. Snow Iron Works, Union Metal Works, and the Revere Rubber Company, were just a few of the dozens of industries that expanded or emerged in post-1908 Chelsea. By 1922, the city's industrial economy grossed over \$30 million and employed approximately seven-thousand wage earners. The city's top employers were the A & G Walton Company and the Revere Rubber Company, employing a thousand persons a piece, and the city's fastest growing industries partook in the shoe and oil business. By 1930, A & G Walton was one of the largest manufacturers of boys and girls shoes in the country, and with the arrival of Valvoline Oil, the Texas Oil Company, and the Mexican Petroleum Company, a new oil industry permanently furnished Chelsea's waterfront. ²³

In the wake of industrialization, unfavorable public opinion towards Jews did not prevent the upward movement of the religious community. Though men such as Walter Pratt hoped to see reconstruction force the "Hebrew junk dealers" out of the city, the combined effect of demographic efflux and renewed industrialization encouraged the growth of the city's Jewish population. Many of Chelsea's privileged residents left of their own accord. Without business ties to the city there was no reason to stay and, moreover, other towns had greener property and larger homes to offer. As for those residents who had made their living in Chelsea, a significant portion left as well. Fifty grocers, twenty-nine barbers, twenty-eight doctors, thirteen pharmacists, twenty-eight tailors, twenty-one real estate offices, and seventeen insurance offices lost their places of business to the fire. The ever-growing Jewish community benefitted tremendously from the flight of proprietors. Resourceful Jews opened small-businesses catering to the industrial economy and the religious community, and Jewish newcomers attracted to this thriving community replenished the supply of working class-labor. ²⁴

A sampling of Jewish professions from the city directories from 1906 and 1916 revealed that the Jews had not sustained irrevocable losses after the fire. In fact, the community grew. While many of the proprietors from 1906 were no longer listed, a new crop of Jewish entrepreneurs and laborers emerged during 1916. Even the much despised “Hebrew junk dealers” showed signs of prosperity. While the Plotinsky & Rubin had disappeared from Second Street altogether—the factory was in the fire area—Myer Sowsky still owned and operated his business on 276 Second Street. David Rosenthal moved from 171 Arlington to 79 Heard Street, and Harry Cohen on Second Street changed his business name to Cohn H. & Co. Likewise, similar trends appeared amongst the meat, shoe, and rag markets. Hyman Baer and Joseph Levine, for instance, had abandoned their shoe businesses on Broadway and Winnisimmet, but companies such as the Katzman Brothers and the Kornetsky Brothers had taken their place by 1916. While there were quite a few Jews still working as rag pickers, peddlers, and shoe factory laborers, the change over time suggested significant social mobility. Of the 112 Cohens living in Chelsea in 1916 (a two-hundred percent increase from 1906), there were six clerks, two lawyers, two insurance agents, and a reporter for the *Chelsea Record*.²⁵

Riding on the wings of industrialization, the city’s Jewish population became the largest population of Jews living outside of New York. In 1915 Chelsea housed twelve Orthodox synagogues, fifteen congregations, a Young Men’s Hebrew Association, the United Chelsea Mother’s League of Massachusetts, the Chelsea Hebrew School, and a dozen other philanthropic and community organizations. Though still a working-class community, Chelsea’s religious neighborhood had gained the respect of its Jewish brethren and the attention of metropolitan Boston. When Louis Brandeis, the popular Jewish lawyer and future Supreme Court Justice,

visited Chelsea in 1915 he proclaimed that the small metropolis was “America’s Most Jewish City.”

We have come here at your invitation, which has been so graciously presented to us. . . because, in the first place, there is this body of Jews in Chelsea who constitute as large a part of the population and who, by their conduct, have given to the Jewish name here and throughout the Commonwealth so good a reputation, and in the second place, because one of our greatest leaders [Jacob de Haas]. . . stated that nowhere had he found a more sympathetic and intelligent audience in America than in your city.²⁶

From 1915 up until the decline of the Jewish community in the 1950s, Jewish Chelsea remained a salient coalition of Boston’s Jewry and a prosperous working-class community. The religious community that developed a Jewish Chelsea during the first two decades of the twentieth century laid the foundation for what became a dynamic working-class community. In the 1930s, there were approximately 20,000 Jews living in Chelsea and they comprised almost half of the population. By the 1950s Jewish food stores lined the streets, and Yiddish resounded throughout the city’s narrow alleyways. “Even if you weren’t Jewish, you were Jewish,” recalled Norman Finkelstein, a longtime resident of Chelsea. The Jews owned the stores and they owned real estate. On Rosh Hashanah, the Jewish New Year, and Yom Kippur, the Jewish Day of Atonement, Chelsea’s public schools closed.²⁷

Leaving Chelsea

In 1930, Jewish Chelsea peaked at 20,000 persons, and from then onward the population began to decline. Owing to increased prosperity and social mobility, many of Chelsea’s Jews voluntarily settled in the emerging neighborhoods of Brookline and Brighton and more moved to the North Shore and settled in towns such as Swampscott and Marblehead. At a time when

housing costs were cheaper in the suburbs than in the city, thousands of Boston's Jews moved in what was a sustained exodus to the suburbs. Socioeconomic mobility was limited for Jews in the "old neighborhoods" such as Chelsea. Many of Chelsea's Jews had increased income by buying property, becoming landlords, and through opening small businesses. Take Louis Kaplan for example. As a 27 year-old man, Kaplan fled from Russia in 1905 and settled in Chelsea, speaking only Yiddish. He was the father of ten children; day in and day out he and his brood sorted rags for his rag-picking business. The clothing shortage that began during World War II was a turning point for Kaplan. The rag-picking business benefitted enormously from the war effort and in the aftermath, Kaplan and his brother began to invest their new wealth in property. Upon his death, he held property in five Greater Boston communities: Stoneham, Melrose, Roxbury, Wellesley, Peabody, and Lynn. His real estate assets totaled \$1.5 million, while other assets, including bank accounts, securities, and bonds, amounted to another \$1.5 million. Looking beyond the extraordinary wealth that Kaplan amassed, his narrative nonetheless detailed one of the many avenues that led the Jews out of Chelsea. None of his children resided in Chelsea and all but one had a professional career.²⁸

Though the diaspora of Jewish Chelsea is intimately tied to the greater experience of Jews in Boston, the history of Chelsea's Jewry is distinct. As one of the original neighborhoods of immigrant settlement, Chelsea's Jewish community was in constant flux. Home to thousands of poor immigrant families and a thriving network of Jewish institutions, Chelsea was a point of origin for Jewish migration and movement throughout the greater Boston area. Yet as the second generation of Eastern European and Russian Jews heeded the call of assimilation and modernity, Chelsea's Jewish residents left the tenements and religiosity of their hometown in search of new

opportunities. In fact, though Antin affectionately described her year spent in Chelsea, she nonetheless noted that Chelsea was “the proper locality for a man without capital to do business.” Though formative in her pursuit of English and her efforts to acquire an “American” identity, Chelsea was not the final destination on her journey from Polotzk. After just a year of living in Chelsea, Antin and her family moved to Boston, “so went the life in Chelsea for the space of a year or so. Then my father, finding a discrepancy between his assets and liabilities on the wrong side of the ledger, once more struck tent, collected his flock, and set out in search of richer pastures.”²⁹

Antin’s brief sojourn in Chelsea was, in many ways, the paradigm of the Jewish immigrant experience in Chelsea. As a small, industrial city located on the “wrong side” of the Mystic River, Chelsea offered limited socioeconomic mobility. With pull factors such as suburbia and push factors such as an inner-urban environment and a lack of single family homes, much of Jewish Chelsea moved out as they rose into the middle class during the thirties and forties. Although many Jews kept their small businesses and property in Chelsea, they no longer resided in the city itself. Jewish Chelsea may have been the “Jerusalem of America” but as the generation of American-born youth came of age during the 50s and 60s, they left for good. As Norman Finkelstein plainly put it, “the idea was we love Chelsea, but the dream was to get out of Chelsea. And that is exactly what happened.”³⁰

¹ “An Account of the Great Chelsea Fire: April 12, 1908,” Chelsea Historical Society, accessed April 14, 2011, <http://www.olgp.net/chs/photos/fire1908/writeup2.htm>.

² “Chelsea’s Synagogues,” Chelsea Historical Society, accessed November 10, 2010, <http://www.olgp.net/chs/church/synagogue.htm>

³ William Alan Braverman, “The Ascent of Boston’s Jews, 1630-1918” (PhD diss, Harvard University, 1990), 37-38; Norman H. Finkelstein, “Jewish Chelsea/Jewish America: Dreams and Realities” (Speech, Jewish Historical Society of the North Shore, Salem, MA, April 19, 2009).

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- ⁴ Mary Antin, *The Promised Land* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1969), 20-21; Braverman, "The Ascent of Boston's Jews," 59-70; *Census of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts*, 1905.
- ⁵ *Massachusetts Census of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts*, 1905.
- ⁶ *Census of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts*, 1875; *Census of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts*, 1885; *Census of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts*, 1895; *Census of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts*, 1905; *Census of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts*, 1915. The Russian category in these censuses were not all entirely Jewish. The statistics likely include a small number of non-Jewish Eastern Europeans.
- ⁷ *Census of Massachusetts*, 1875; *Census of Massachusetts*, 1885; *Census of Massachusetts*, 1895; *Census of Massachusetts*, 1905; *Census of Massachusetts*, 1915.
- ⁸ Pratt, *The Burning of Chelsea*, 30.
- ⁹ Antin, *The Promised Land*, 29.
- ¹⁰ Antin, *The Promised Land*, 29.
- ¹¹ Chelsea City Directory, 1906.
- ¹² "Summary of Losses from the 1908 Chelsea Fire," Chelsea Historical Society, accessed April 9, 2011, <http://www.olgp.net/chs/photos/losses1908.htm>.
- ¹³ "The Great Chelsea Fire: April 12, 1908," Chelsea Historical Society, accessed November 10, 2010, <http://www.olgp.net/chs/photos/fire1908/writeup.htm>.
- ¹⁴ Pratt, *The Burning of Chelsea*, 63-64.
- ¹⁵ "Great Chelsea Fire," Chelsea Historical Society.
- ¹⁶ Pratt, *The Burning of Chelsea*, 93-99; "List of Cities and Towns that responded to Chelsea during the 1908 Fire," Chelsea Historical Society, accessed April 10, 2011, <http://www.olgp.net/chs/photos/08response.htm>; "Great Chelsea Fire," Chelsea Historical Society; "After the Great Chelsea Fire: April 12, 1908," Chelsea Historical Society, accessed April 10, 2011, <http://www.olgp.net/chs/photos/fire1908/writeup3.htm>.
- ¹⁷ Jacob De Haas, "Fire Victims in Distress. Pen picture of the aftermath of suffering and desolation following the Chelsea fire, which caused such widespread ruin, from the pen of Mr. J. De Haas, who rendered signal service to his stricken co-religionists," *Jewish Advocate*, April 24, 1906; "Great Chelsea Fire," Chelsea Historical Society; "An Account of the Great Chelsea Fire," Chelsea Historical Society; Pratt, *Burning of Chelsea*, 134.
- ¹⁸ Pratt, *The Burning of Chelsea*, 117-119.
- ¹⁹ De Haas, "Fire Victims in Distress.;" "Thousands Homeless. Most disastrous fire in forty years in this section lays waste the city of Chelsea—the heart of the business district is a mass of ruins," *Jewish Advocate*, April 17, 1908.
- ²⁰ "For a New and Better Chelsea," *Chelsea Evening Record*, April 27, 1908; De Haas, "Fire Victims in Distress.;" *Jewish Advocate*, "Thousands Homeless.;" "Helping the Poor," *Jewish Advocate*, May 29, 1908.
- ²¹ Susan Ebert, "Community and Philanthropy," in *The Jews of Boston*, ed. Jonathan Sarna et al. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005), 232.
- ²² "Board of Control due to the Great Chelsea Fire of 1908," Chelsea Historical Society, accessed April 13, 2011, <http://www.olgp.net/chs/mayors/mayors.htm>; Pratt, *The Burning of Chelsea*, 148.
- ²³ James P. Heaton, "Study in Industrial Evolution," *Current Affairs*, February 27, 1922; Survey of Industrial Sites, Chelsea Public Library Archives.
- ²⁴ "Summary of Losses," Chelsea Historical Society."
- ²⁵ Chelsea City directories 1906, 1916; Pratt, *Burning of Chelsea*, 145-148; Heaton, "Study in Industrial Evolution."
- ²⁶ "Chelsea outvies Boston in public demonstration," *Jewish Advocate*, July 2, 1915.
- ²⁷ Norman Finkelstein, interview by Casey Fishman and Amanda Bernstein, *Mystic River Jewish Community Project*, July 1, 2009, http://www.mysticriverjews.jcam.org/Pages/OralHistories/FinkelsteinNorman/02_FinkelsteinNorman.php; "Chelsea's Synagogues," Chelsea Historical Society.
- ²⁸ Gerald Gamm, "In Search of Suburbs," in *The Jews of Boston*, ed. Jonathan Sarna et al. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005), 146; Norman Finkelstein, interview.
- ²⁹ Finkelstein, "Jewish Chelsea/Jewish America: Dreams and Realities; Antin, *The Promised Land*, 29.
- ³⁰ Finkelstein, "Jewish Chelsea/Jewish America: Dreams and Realities

Chapter Two:

Out of the Flames, Under the Bridge: Emerging Urban Crisis and the Genesis of Chelsea's Latino Community, 1950-1973

The city was economically dead, contracting, beaten down by years of neglect and out migration of its first families and major businesses.¹

The Chelsea Record

Continued industrial activity and demographic decline provided the foundation for the growth of the Latino community in Chelsea. The need for factory workers accelerated Latino population growth and the loss of both native-born workers and residents promoted Latino settlement. The population decline between 1950 and 1970 was the key to Latino growth before 1973. In twenty years the general population fell from 38,912 to 30,625, and during the interim the Latino population expanded to over a thousand. Urban crisis had Chelsea in its grip—and at its mercy—long before the Latino population rose to prominence during the 1970s. The rise of suburbia and federal disinvestment left Chelsea in the exhaust of post-World War II prosperity, and the construction of the Mystic River Bridge stripped the city of both its property and dignity in a debilitating one-two punch. After the Second World War, federal policy and state infrastructure prioritized the needs of returning veterans and encouraged suburban growth, and it was those decisions—not poor people—that drove Chelsea into the ground. From 1950 onwards, Chelsea suffered from chronic urban failure that worsened each decade as existing problems remained unaddressed and as new ones emerged.²

The financial assistance available after the Second World War contributed to the city's first boom in federal and state housing. Although many cities had created housing authorities during the late 1930s as a result of New Deal policies, Chelsea inaugurated its housing authority

in 1946. The Chelsea Housing Authority was the vehicle through which housing advocates, receptive government executives, and legislators procured state and federal funding. The authority completed applications, solicited contractors, supervised construction, and eventually chose tenants that met the eligibility requirements set forth by the state and the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD). In Chelsea, all but one of the six housing developments built during the post-World War II period were for returning veterans. The four state-subsidized projects were the Fitzpatrick, Prattville, Innes, and Union Park Apartments, and the two federally subsidized projects were the Scrivano and Mace Apartments. The Fitzpatrick, Prattville, Innes, Scrivano, and Mace projects were family developments of predominantly two and three-bedroom apartments, though there were a limited number of four and one-bedroom arrangements. The Union Park Apartments, on the other hand, was a development for the elderly and/or disabled. With the exception of the Innes Apartments, each of the five developments was located at the city's northernmost boundaries—by either Everett or Revere. Three were located along the Revere Beach Parkway, and the elderly development was located in the Jewish neighborhood surrounding the Orange Street Synagogue. The Innes Apartments resided on the eastern end of Chelsea by the bridge to East Boston. The construction of these state and federal subsidized developments had little—if any—effect on the densely populated and poorly constructed neighborhoods that congregated around Bellingham Square. Not only were the developments located on the city limits, they were reserved for a specific demographic that did not equally encompass all of the city's residents.³

In consideration of the greater context of federal policy and financial stimuli during the post-World War II period, Chelsea fared poorly in the market for government assistance. The

state and federal funds that Chelsea received did not stimulate the urban economy in the same way that postwar programs fueled the growth of the suburbs and, moreover, such financial support paled in comparison to the money pouring into suburban areas. Federal incentives not only overlooked small cities but favored the growth of suburbia. Federal programs encouraged the construction of new homes and not the renovation of existing homes, and provided credit opportunities for citizens to become homeowners and not renters. Under the G.I. Bill, the federal government guaranteed mortgages and lending services to veterans, and as a result an increasing number of middle and working-class families settled in the suburbs. Inner-urban cities like Chelsea faded into the background as urban dwellers moved across Metro Boston. Without the space to construct single-family homes or the financial incentives to build them, Chelsea suffered as veterans—and the government assistance that supported them—moved out of the city and into the suburbs.⁴

By 1950 it was already apparent that Chelsea lagged behind the prosperity that was evident across many parts of the nation. In January of 1950, the *Chelsea Record* published a platform that prioritized what the newspaper believed to be the most pressing issues inhibiting future growth. The platform called for efficient economical city government; comprehensive rehabilitation for veterans; improved rapid transit service; full retail and industrial development; adequate parking facilities in business areas; lower automobile insurance rates; and a cleaner Chelsea. Change, however, never came easy to Chelsea, and from 1950 to 1973 the platform of the *Chelsea Record* remained exactly the same. Over a twenty-three year period, the grim prognosis of Chelsea's future continued to define its present. Though industry quietly hummed throughout the fifties and sixties, urban disinvestment; the devastating effects of the Mystic

River Bridge; and the battle between industrial and residential Chelsea, primed the city for a deepening urban crisis.⁵

The Real Green Monster

In 1946, the Massachusetts State Legislature approved plans to build a bridge that facilitated the flow of traffic across the Mystic River. The bridge was the keystone of an express-highway network connecting Boston and its environs. Urban accessibility was integral to suburbanization and as Boston's suburbs grew so, too, did the need for more efficient transportation. The Mystic River Bridge was a watershed because it relieved congestion throughout the city and consolidated a handful of major thoroughfares. Yet what was a breakthrough for Boston was a breaking point for Chelsea. The decision to build a bridge through the city had far-reaching consequences. Already suffering from urban disinvestment and the accession of suburbia, the bridge cast a shadow over the city and physically devastated the urban environment. The bridge bisected Chelsea and flattened significant portions of the densely inhabited city in order to make room for approaches and ramps. For Boston, the bridge was a harbinger of prosperity, but for Chelsea, the superstructure was an omen of decline. Postwar suburbanization compelled the reorganization of Boston's transportation system to Chelsea's disadvantage. Before construction of the bridge, all traffic between Boston and the North Shore depended upon the Chelsea North Bridge: a drawbridge that connected Chelsea Street of Charlestown with Broadway of Chelsea. Though the drawbridge often caused delays and traffic jams—due to its frequent openings (approximately 7,000 per year)—local businesses benefited from the daily flow of people. During the first half of the century, Chelsea was the gateway to

Boston, but in 1950—when the structure began operations—the route of the bridge stripped that title away.⁶

Cutting through the heart of Chelsea, the Mystic River Bridge marked the beginning of the end of “Old Chelsea,” which during the second half of the century referred to the city’s white-ethnic inhabitants. Mike Szpuk, a resident of Saugus who grew up on Arlington Street, noted that Chelsea residents began migrating soon after the building commission broke ground. The assembly of the bridge affected hundreds of people. Seventy homes in Ward One were relocated to Gilooly Road and Webster Avenue, and those homes that were not in any condition to be transplanted were torn down. The bridge also displaced 462 families. At the time, the city was experiencing the greatest housing shortage it had ever known, and yet neither the state nor the federal government provided funds to aid the erection of new houses. The bridge commission reimbursed the city with \$200,000 dollars to cover the cost of relocating homes, but offered no compensation for the taxable property lost. In one fell swoop the city lost \$13 million worth of taxable property, which was a cost it could not afford. In addition, the birth of the bridge also posed serious risks to the residents of the Williams School district. The Williams School district (now the Walnut Street School district) was a working-class neighborhood that served the most ethnically diverse community in Chelsea. The district was once the home of Mary Antin, who once described Arlington Street as being “inhabited by poor Jews, poor Negroes, and a sprinkling of poor Irish.” Upon construction, traffic approaches buried the district and endangered children walking to and from school. The first exit ramp off the bridge unloaded traffic a few blocks away from the school and moreover, the bridge itself permanently isolated the Williams School District from Broadway—the center of town.⁷

In an attempt to halt the reorganization of their city and their lives, Chelsea's residents participated in public hearings, protests, and visits to the State House and to Washington D.C. Most notably, in July of 1948 an irate group of residents from Poplar Street stormed the aldermanic chambers of Mayor Tom Keating. The act was a desperate protest against being evicted from their homes in September of that same year. Irving Kahan, a grocer, led the group of Poplar residents and spoke on behalf of everyone when he interrogated the mayor about what the city planned to do "when the people are forced into the streets." Pressed to address the infuriated crowd, the Board Alderman-at-large, Joseph B. Greenfield, spoke to the protestors and appeased them by offering a three-point plan describing how to stop or—at the very least—postpone eviction. Though city hall was virtually powerless to petition the state authorities, Greenfield nonetheless agreed that the taking of homes was "outrageous, inhumane, and un-American." Protesting the location of the approaches was yet another way that the community voiced their opposition to the bridge. In a "letter to the editor" of the *Boston Globe*, Charles Smith Jr., a resident at 72 Sagamore Avenue, expressed his fear that the approaches leading to and from the bridge would continue to afflict the city for years to come. For Smith, it was imperative to the integrity of the city to protest the routes of the "tentacles" that stretched into their community: "will we protest the route, or location, of the new approaches? And will the protest accomplish anything. When will we protest? Now? Or will we wait until it is too late to do anything and then cry 'we've been fooled again?'" Fortunately, the activism of residents like Smith successfully exerted some influence over the course of the overpass. Before breaking ground, the bridge commission agreed to cut the width of the structure in half—through adopting

a double-deck design—and after construction finished the bridge commission, in response to popular demand, actively abstained from building new approaches.⁸

Yet in the face of eminent domain, the pragmatism of residents like Smith took on a Panglossian character. The location of the approaches did not change the fact that the bridge permanently blemished the physical and economic wellbeing of the city. Rife with indignation, an editorial in the *Chelsea Record* likened Chelsea's predicament to a small child left alone in the middle of a busy street. Caught in the midst of traffic and immobilized by "state interests," Chelsea was as vulnerable and marooned as a forsaken child. The city and residents of Chelsea disproportionately bore the burden of a multi-million dollar structure that served the needs of suburbia and not small, urban centers like Chelsea. The bridge offered no short or long-term benefits for the city and moreover, buried it in a grave that it would occupy for the half century to follow. Nadine Mironchuck, the chairwoman of the Chelsea Historical Society, blamed the bridge for devastating her community. Her mother's home on Poplar Street was one of the homes relocated to Webster Avenue. The state authorities, Mironchuck noted, foisted the bridge onto her community at a time "before people ever had comprehension they could fight city hall." Devastated by property loss, disfigured by residential displacement, and depreciated by a three-span cantilever truss and thirty-six northbound traffic approaches, Chelsea emerged from the Mystic River Bridge debacle with many, many scars.⁹

The official dedication of the bridge took place on February 25, 1950. Governor Paul A. Dever and Mayor John Hynes presided over the ceremony, and hundreds braved the bitter cold to participate in the highly anticipated dedication. In an editorial entitled "The Big Event," the editors of the *Chelsea Record* noted their excitement in regards to the completion of the bridge.

Though originally opposed to the project, the *Chelsea Record* adopted a new position that accepted the bridge as the herald of a “new Chelsea.” The newspaper commended the event as an “instrument of change” and in an editorial it likened the opening of the bridge to “the fateful Sunday in April of 1908, when fire swept away practically all of this city.” Indeed, the *Chelsea Record* was not alone in its decision to amend its perspective of what the future had in store. In the days leading up to official dedication, optimism encouraged residents to believe that the opening of the Mystic River Bridge would increase retail trade and allow the city to share in the sense of progress and prosperity that permeated the country. The day the bridge was dedicated, twenty-five vintage automobiles—dating back to 1911—crossed over the Mystic River in a “Progress of Transportation” motorcade. The bridge linked Boston with the North Shore, and the *Chelsea Record* felt proud to be located on one end of one of the greatest bridges of its type in America. “Whether one believed that the advent of the Mystic River Bridge is for the best or is for the worst, insofar as Chelsea is concerned there is no doubting that it has and will bring about the greatest changes in the community since the disastrous fire of 1908.” By comparing the Great Fire of 1908 to the inauguration of the Mystic River Bridge, the editorial emphasized the need for change and improvement in—what the editorial board believed to be—a stagnant community. Keeping abroad with the times was essential to the economic wellbeing of Chelsea, and given that the fire encouraged further industrialization, the article suggested the possibility that the bridge would encourage modernization. Unfortunately, those who believed that the “green monster” was for the worst spoke the last word. In the decades to follow, the bridge came to be universally despised by many—if not all—of Chelsea’s residents. In spite of the technological developments and rhetoric of “progress” associated with the bridge, the \$27

million dollar project was three giant steps ahead of the small city. Overwhelmed by high taxes, stunted by urban disinvestment, and in the midst of a housing shortage, Chelsea was the victim and not the beneficiary of the “motorcade of progress.” In the end, the promise of a “new Chelsea” was no more than political lip service and at the very least, a good way to sell newspapers.¹⁰

Chelsea. . . a City of Industry

As a small city of 1.8 miles, Chelsea always had a limited tax base, but from 1950 onward Chelsea suffered at the hand of exorbitantly high tax rates. In addition to the taxable property lost during the construction of the bridge, many non-profit, charitable, religious, and government institutions were exempt from paying taxes. In 1950, over 19.6 percent of the city’s tax base was exempt. The renters, small business owners, and other property holders thus disproportionately bore the burden of government spending and services provided to the entire town. And to add insult to injury, industrial property holdings located along the edge of town, though not exempt, enjoyed generous corporate tax breaks that overlooked the everyday citizen.¹¹

By 1950 Chelsea already demonstrated a pro-corporate bias that disfavored residents. One example of such pro-corporate leanings among local municipal leaders was Mayor Thomas Keating (1948-1949). Born and raised in Chelsea, Mayor Keating was engaged in the fuel oil business in all parts of the city. Though his mayoral career was short, Keating served on the Board of Alderman from 1939 to 1948, which meant he had a substantial political career. Given that Keating occupied a powerful municipal position during a decade that witnessed unprecedented government spending and unparalleled manufacturing productivity, his ties to the

oil industry more likely than not influenced the expansion of the oil industry. Not to mention Keating was a man who lived well above the means of the average Chelsea resident. With a home on 28 Harvard Street, in an area located at the northernmost part of Chelsea between Everett and Revere, Keating lived in a quasi-suburban locale that had nothing in common with the three-decker homes and housing projects located along Arlington Street. Safe to say, as a resident of Harvard Street, Keating was never in harms way of conflagration nor subject to the eyesore of oil refineries.¹²

With or without a deliberate pro-corporate bias, industry was nonetheless woven into the very fabric of the city. As an urban satellite and a gateway to Boston, both the city's identity and integrity depended upon the presence of industry. In a true demonstration of the asymmetrical relationship between Chelsea and industry, from January 10 to January 25 of 1955, the city hosted an industrial exposition entitled Chelsea . . . "City of Industries." Taking a page out of the World's Fair handbook, the Chelsea Chamber of Commerce organized the exposition with the two-fold intent that it would launch Chelsea's new Industrial Development Program and "educate" residents about the industrial foundations of Chelsea's economy. The Chamber of Commerce invited a myriad of local industries to the event, and all who accepted exhibited their products in miniature pavilions at the Chelsea State Armory. The exhibitors and co-sponsors of the event included the American Biltrite Rubber, American Oil, Chelsea Chevrolet, Suffolk Farms Packing, Sweetheart Paper Products, Chelsea Clock, and the United Farms of New England—the most prominent names in Chelsea at the time. The *Chelsea Record* praised the exposition as an integral part of continuing the city's tradition of attracting and welcoming industry within the city limits. "This big time presentation of Chelsea's advantages and some of

its important industries for all to see, is the first step in a program of wider scope to sell the city as a desirable spot for new industry.” In light of urban disinvestment and the recent construction of the Mystic River Bridge, Chelsea’s warm reception of the exposition—and the aims of the Industrial Development Program—was particularly tragic. Conflating industrial development with progress, Chelsea failed to address the needs of a changing urban milieu. Housing stock was aging, taxes rising, and vehicles zoomed overhead. Yet instead of facing this new crop of urban problems, Chelsea welcomed industrial development as an urban elixir.¹³

Though the first signs of urban crisis emerged during the fifties, it was not until the sixties that urban crisis became a tangible threat. Fearing the onset of financial decline, any evidence of growth in the city’s business sector garnered front-page news. In 1960, an analytical survey conducted by the Chamber of Commerce issued a report defending the integrity of Chelsea’s industrial sector. The report assured city residents that “Chelsea is not going to pieces,” that “businesses of all kinds are not in a slump in Chelsea,” and that “there are a great many advantages to be found here.” Just ten years after the industrial exposition, the Chamber of Commerce no longer promoted industrial growth but defended the existence of growth at all. Clearly, the efforts of the Industrial Development Program were not bearing fruit. The decline in public confidence confirmed the shortcomings of the city’s open-door policy towards industry. Changing public opinion, however, did not release the city from its industrial contract. In early 1960, the town approved plans to build a handful of oil tanks by the waterfront that had the capacity to hold 965,000 gallons of petroleum. Though three aldermen vehemently opposed the construction on the grounds that the tanks endangered the public health and ensured higher insurance rates for the city, the Board of Alderman granted the oil companies approval.¹⁴

By 1965, the deterioration of residential properties had reached alarming proportions. The municipal expediency that characterized the allocation of permits and the construction of oil tanks, was all but absent from the ongoing discussion regarding the revitalization of housing stock. Decrepit housing threatened the health of both Chelsea and her residents. According to the city engineer, substandard structural problems afflicted between ten and fifteen percent of the city's residences. Given that dilapidated housing caused unseen health damages and devalued nearby residencies, part of the agenda of the newly elected mayor, Alfred R. Voke, was a rezoning project intended to renovate a number of blighted residential areas. Board Alderman Zazula joined Voke in his campaign for residential renewal and actively criticized landlords for failing to initiate repairs. Ultimately, however, the efforts of men like Voke and Zazula went nowhere. Though building inspectors had deemed sixty-four buildings unsuitable for habitation, tenants continued to occupy them and landlords continued to forego repairs.¹⁵

Yet to say that urban crisis was the defining characteristic of Chelsea during this time would be to paint an inaccurate picture of the city's everyday life. More industry also meant more employment. At the same time that city authorities were busy grappling with the budget and property devaluation, large portions of Chelsea were gainfully employed. In fact, unemployment decreased between 1960 and 1970—from 5.3 to 3.8 percent. Although increased industrial development endangered Chelsea's long term health—both fiscally and physically—it nevertheless provided much needed employment opportunities. Isildro Vega, a Puerto Rican and lifelong resident of Chelsea, was one of the many Latinos who benefited from industrial employment. Arriving in 1965 as a young man of seventeen, Isildro moved into a single room located on Beacon Street. He lived side by side with an American family and found a job

working for a company that made paper. Though Isildro did not make a lot of money, he noted that factories “paid well” and that he was content with the wages he received. His income was sufficient to support his low cost of living and he worked a steady job. “There was a great need for workers,” Isildro explained, and industry employed everyone and anyone looking for employment. The demand for workers meant that many had the opportunity to choose between jobs, and as a result men like Isildro had the option of upgrading to better homes and jobs in other parts of the city as their savings accumulated. ¹⁶

In fact, after successfully soliciting a better paying job at a factory that picked and killed chickens—and the occasional turkey around Thanksgiving—Isildro moved from the room he rented on Beacon Street, which runs east to west directly below the Mystic River Bridge, to Shurtleff Street, which was located near a grammar school and in a better neighborhood. When asked to what extent the city’s housing shortage affected his first few years, Isildro responded from experience and on behalf of his fellow Latinos that “we bought where we could.” Not surprisingly, as a newly arrived immigrant who did not speak English, the daily admonitions of urban decay that splashed the newspaper headlines and filled the vestibules of Jewish synagogues did not reach Isildro’s ears. In decline or not, Chelsea offered him possibilities that he did not have in Puerto Rico. There was employment and housing—no matter how inadequate—to be had in Chelsea and as a result, he stayed. ¹⁷

Yet as the sixties came to a close, the dangers of urban decline were more present than ever—even for immigrants like Isildro. If the less than desirable state of housing and taxes were invisible signs of growing crisis, than the Gulf Oil Fire of 1969 was a harbinger of urban catastrophe. As one of the first events of the new year, the Gulf Oil Fire sounded the alarm

concerning Chelsea's injurious relationship with industry—and the oil industry in particular. On the third of January, a fire began at the loading docks of the Gulf Oil Company, where two oil tankers had been receiving fuel. One of the tanks backfired and ignited gasoline that had spilled along the dock. A booming explosion, heard by Suffolk County residents as far away as Quincy, signaled the beginning of the fire. Subsequent explosions continued to feed the flames and strengthen the raging inferno. Firefighters and city officials made frantic distress calls to nearby communities out of fear that the fire might spread to other oil refineries located along Eastern Avenue. Meanwhile, nearby residents and employees of the M & M Transportation Company and Ace Building Supply evacuated the area in anticipation of yet another industrial conflagration. Firefighters from Everett, Malden, Boston, Saugus, Lynn, Newton, Somerville, and Quincy, among others, responded to Chelsea's desperate call for aid. The crews managed to successfully arrest the fire and limit its breadth to the property of the Gulf Oil Company. The two employees operating the Gulf Company machinery were badly injured, and four firefighters were harmfully burned.¹⁸

The following day, city officials called and adjourned for a special meeting in response to the fire. Representatives from the various oil companies attended and met with city officials at the office of John J. Slater, Chelsea's mayor. At the meeting, the Board of Alderman, along with police and fire staff, appealed to the oil companies to provide the community with a foam truck, which would be able to protect Chelsea's residents in case of fire. Chelsea's fire department did not have the foam equipment or the funds to buy what was necessary to combat fires as large as the one that erupted on the Gulf Oil dock. Had Logan airport not sent their foam equipment, the officials noted, the fire would have spread across the city waterfront. Though the oil company

representatives respectfully received the town's request, Chelsea had no authority to demand anything from the companies. "The oil officials indicated interest in the proposal," the *Chelsea Record* reported, "and told the city leaders that they would present it to their respective companies for their consideration and possible approval." One of the Alderman, Joseph Margolis, even went so far as to assert that Chelsea had the "moral right" to demand such precautionary measures from the oil companies. Yet the fact that morality was invoked as a device to demand safety measures was a telling indication that the city's relationship with industry had soured. Driven by profit, Chelsea's oil industry capitalized on the city's location without regard for the wellbeing of the community. Though the Gulf Oil Fire was only one of many fires that blazed between the fires of 1908 and 1973, the significance of the Gulf Oil Fire was of great consequence. Sixty-one years after the conflagration of 1908, Chelsea and its residents were still secondary citizens in a city dominated by industry.¹⁹

During the same week as the Gulf Oil Fire, Mayor Slater, in his mid-term address, delivered a grim—but honest—picture of the city's future for the upcoming year, "unless the Commonwealth produces a realistic tax plan to redistribute the cost of government so that it is placed upon those best able to bear it, and distributes state aid on a formula based on need, our financial future is weak." The mayor noted that the city could not support itself solely on the revenue collected from local real-estate taxes. The Commonwealth of Massachusetts had promised a sales tax to decrease the financial burden on the taxpayers and renters of small cities, but in the end a distribution formula was adopted and therefore, did nothing to stimulate the economy of cities such as Chelsea. To add insult to injury, that same term, the Commonwealth also decided to finance the welfare deficit with local funds, thus plunging Chelsea deeper into

debt. “A city can only be as great as its people and a people can only be as great as their environment,” remarked Mayor Slater. And indeed, looking at the environment in which the people of Chelsea resided, the future was devastatingly bleak. According to the mayor, Chelsea’s most desperate need was decent and safe housing for all its citizens, but without the assistance of private developers or the state or federal government, the city’s hands were tied: “we must do all we can to encourage and assist private developers to build standard low and moderate rental housing to meet the need of our citizens.” As a new decade approached Chelsea was faced with a catch-22. The only way to increase the tax base was through attracting industrial and commercial development and yet, the growth of oil and other industries only served to further endanger the city and its constituents.²⁰

From Jerusalem to San Juan, changing immigrant identity

The Census of 1970 was very telling of the sudden emergence of Chelsea’s Latino population. Whereas there was no clear precedent of Latino migration in the censuses 1950 and 1960, the figures of the 1970 census made it clear that Latinos had become the city’s dominant migrant group. According to the 1970 census, 1,618 individuals identified themselves as being of Hispanic descent and 1,098 of those individuals were Spanish-speakers. At 719 persons, first and second-generation Puerto Ricans comprised the majority of the Latino population, and with 120 Cubans and 102 people from the “Americas,” other nationalities comprised sizeable minorities. Considering that the two preceding censuses demonstrated minimal Latino residency, the figures revealed by the 1970 census were a cultural watershed. Chelsea’s demographic landscape had changed dramatically, and all roads pointed to San Juan.²¹

Although Chelsea's Latino population emerged during the fifties and sixties, it was not until the seventies that Latinos became the principal—and most visible—group of immigrants in Chelsea. From 1950 to 1973 Jewish Chelsea was still very much alive. News of Jewish marriages, Bar Mitzvahs, and social events frequented the pages of the *Chelsea Record*, and only the sporadic advertisement printed in Spanish even alluded to the presence of a Hispanic community. Articles such as “Elm Street Synagogue groups dedicate Hebrew Menorah” and “Medford Rabbi Addresses Hebrew School Auxiliary” made headlines and Jewish names punctuated the daily text. Ironically, however, the Jews of Chelsea made headlines only as their population was in decline. Though Chelsea still bore the vestiges of a once vibrant Jewish community, Jewish Chelsea had long been in the process of diffusing into the Greater Boston area.²²

The persistence of Jewish identity during this period was more a product of propriety than demography. The Latino community celebrated Jewish holidays because they had Jewish bosses and they ate Jewish food because they dined at Jewish restaurants. Entrepreneurship and business ventures had made Jews wealthy and indeed, as Isildro put it, “Jews were the ones with the money.” That being said, Isildro affirmed that the Jews of Chelsea were generous and hospitable proprietors. They gave the Latinos jobs and opportunities, and one of Isildro's bosses even lent him money to pay for the passage of his father-in-law and mother-in-law from Puerto Rico to Chelsea. Propriety aside, the Chelsea that launched Louis Kaplan, the Jewish rag picker, into the millionaires club was entirely different than the Chelsea that welcomed the first wave of Spanish-speaking immigrants. Latino immigrants had less of an opportunity to penetrate the skilled labor force than did their European counterparts. Arriving during the second half of the

twentieth century, Latinos operated within a different economic structure. The industry that sustained the growth and livelihood of earlier European immigrants no longer boomed. During the second half of the twentieth century, Boston was beginning to transition from an industrial to a service economy, and Chelsea, along with many other small, industrial towns, suffered as they failed to follow suit.²³

For the past two centuries, Boston had been a port of arrival for immigrants. Though not always welcoming, Boston's urban manufacturing and commercial base provided jobs for the city's newcomers, thus attracting large numbers of Latino migrants. In 1960, Boston's Latino population had reached 2,000 strong, and by 1970 it had surged to 17,984. The Hart-Cellar Act of 1965—also known as the Immigration and Nationality Act—changed the face of American immigration policy. Abolishing the national origins quota system that had been active since the 1920s, the Hart-Cellar Act prioritized immigrants based on their skills and family relationships with U.S. citizens. Though the act was not as important for Latinos from the western hemisphere the legislation was, nonetheless, a watershed for American immigration policy. Puerto Ricans were the main contributors of Boston's Latino growth and accounted for approximately seventy percent of all local Latinos. After World War II, Puerto Ricans had begun a massive migration to the mainland in search of employment, and a significant number came to Boston. The Puerto Rican government encouraged migration to the mainland and moreover, Massachusetts employers recruited Puerto Ricans for both agricultural and industrial work. As early as the 1940s, the Migration Division of the Department of Labor of the Commonwealth of Puerto Rico and the Massachusetts Department of Employment Security agreed to mutually support the recruitment of Puerto Ricans to Massachusetts as farm workers. As the second generation of

European immigrants and African Americans began to seek employment in the service and skilled sectors, there emerged a need for a new, inexpensive source of labor. Both formal and informal recruiting practices, ranging from company recruitment on the island to oral recruitment via community leaders, brought Puerto Ricans to Greater Boston to replace the jobs that white-ethnics and African-Americans had abandoned.²⁴

In the early sixties and seventies, small numbers of Central American immigrants also settled in the Boston area, but most were affluent students and professionals who came in search of white-collar work. Central Americans from the lower classes found domestic work in suburban households and as low-paid employees in other sectors of the city. Boston's Central American population would not boom until the eighties. Widespread chain migration began with the Puerto Ricans and it was the constant influx of people from the island that drove the growth of Boston's Latino population. Puerto Ricans arrived with their nuclear and extended families, and encouraged their neighbors to do the same.²⁵

Cuban immigrants composed another portion of Boston's Latino migrations during this period. The majority of Cubans in Boston were exiles who had fled during and after the Cuban Revolution of 1959. Whereas the first wave of Cuban immigrants carried wealthier refugees to the US, the second wave included more than 200,000 persons from the lower and working classes. In 1961, President John F. Kennedy established the Cuban Refugee Program, which was a federally funded program that sponsored the resettlement of Cuban refugees in the states. Under the auspices of the program, the U.S. sponsored a mass departure of Cubans from the island between 1963 and 1968. The program paid for transportation costs from Cuba to the U.S.; paid for settlement costs for Cubans settling outside of Miami; subsidized institutions and

agencies that provided services for the refugees; and provided medical, financial, and employee benefits to Cuban refugees. Seventy-two percent of Cuban exiles registered with the Cuban Refugee Program and cumulatively, they received \$957 million in support. No other faction of Latino migrants received as much federal support as did the early waves of Cuban immigrants. By the early seventies, Cubans composed approximately one quarter of Boston's Latino population. However, unlike the Puerto Rican population, the Cuban population in Boston was not self-sustaining, given that many relocated to Miami during the last quarter of the twentieth century.²⁶

The migratory, settlement, and employment patterns that characterized Boston during the second half of the twentieth century were also true of Chelsea. The early seventies witnessed the beginnings of Chelsea's Central American population; the short-term demographic growth of the Cuban population; and the maturation of the Puerto Rican population and their kinship networks. While most Latinos in Chelsea were Puerto Ricans, Isidro noted that he had many Cuban friends in Chelsea before they moved to Miami and other parts of the country. They left, he said, "because they liked to own businesses and eat fish," whereas the Puerto Ricans came to work. As for those from South and Central America, Isidro recalled that there were a few families from Costa Rica and Colombia, but not many.²⁷

Chelsea, however, was hard-pressed to support the surge of poor Latino migrants that entered the community. By 1972, Chelsea had the highest rate of working people with an income less than \$3,000 and twenty-four percent of Chelsea's residents lived on that amount as opposed to the eleven percent in the metro Boston area. Approximately thirty percent of lodging in Chelsea was classified as dilapidated or deteriorated, and the only recently built housing was an

eight story high rise of 209 state-subsidized units constructed for the elderly—in 1972. Chelsea also had the highest rate of alcoholism in the state and the highest number of children per capita who went to the state youth service board. According to one resident, approximately forty percent of high school freshmen left school before graduating. Jack Croucher, a resident and an advisor to the Community Action Programs Inter City (CAPIC), confirmed the downtrodden condition of Chelsea in an article published by the *Boston Globe*:

...young people have no reason to stay here, and the middle class is moving out because the tax rate is backbreaking—it's the second highest in the state—and the schools are bad. My own parents moved out. They wanted to stay because they had ties here, but it wasn't worth it. And whatever else you might be able to say about them, when the stable middle class leaves, you lose something. For example, education and pollution are important issues for everyone, but poor people are too concerned with housing to get to these other things. It's almost unfair to bring any more poor people in here. The city can't provide for them.²⁸

Poor Latinos, however, continued to pour into Chelsea throughout the seventies. And they came because there was employment, housing, and local support.²⁹

Saint Rose's Catholic Church opened its arms to Chelsea's Latino population and according to Isildro Vega, became the unofficial center of the city's Hispanic community. As Spanish-speakers began to organize, Saint Rose offered parishioners rooms to hold meetings and as migrants arrived, established parishioners—such as the Puerto Ricans—loaned money to the newcomers. In fact, according to Isildro Vega, parishioners from Saint Rose used to frequent the Cathedral of the Holy Cross on Washington Street in Boston in order to welcome new crops of immigrants. Specifically, Isildro recalled that on many occasions the church aided Cuban refugees who arrived at the church's doorstep because, “there wasn't anybody to meet them.”

While the activism associated with the Saint Rose parish might explain why the Cuban Refugee Center was located in Chelsea, it was nonetheless true that Cubans and Puerto Ricans were settling in Chelsea in large numbers. Cubans found hospitality at the Cuban Refugee Center, and Puerto Ricans found employment as low-skilled workers at Suffolk Farms Packing Company, Sweetheart Paper Company, and the American Biltrite Incorporated, among others. Though such jobs were neither desirable nor skilled, Latinos acted upon available employment opportunities and made the most of their new home.³⁰

Other factors contributing to Latino growth was the city's small size and decreasing population. Chelsea had jobs, was easy to get around, and was an ideal setting for someone who did not speak English. Moreover, Chelsea was not a crowded city and it was considered by many Latinos to be "better" than Boston. According to Father Borges, the minister of Saint Rose's in 1972, Chelsea was a quiet community that offered Latinos the possibility of living in a "peaceful village"—which was a reputation that encouraged Latino migration and relocation from New York and Springfield. "Mostly it's family groups and here they can have a stable community. Furthermore the city and the social agencies have been very responsive. The former mayor was interested in them, and [Mayor] Spelman has continued the good relationship. Other than language their problems are the same as the English-speaking residents. The most serious one being housing."³¹

The Great Fire of 1973

The Great Fire of 1973 intensified the social, economic, and residential woes that beset Latinos in Chelsea. The area that was engulfed by yet another industrial conflagration was a

densely populated area of aging tenements, occupied mainly by Spanish-speaking families. Thousands of people evacuated their homes and among them were Isildro and his young family of five. On October 14, 1973, he and his family sought refuge in the home of Cuban family friends in East Boston; from there they watched as their “peaceful village” burned.³²

The conflagration began at 3:56 pm within a shop on Summer Street— just one hundred yards away from where the 1908 fire began on Second and Carter Streets. The fire destroyed Ward Two in its entirety and caused upwards of \$100 million dollars in damages. Over 1,500 firefighters from all over the state worked day and night to prevent the fire from spreading to other wards of the city. More than sixty fire departments answered Chelsea’s call for assistance, and came from a radius of seventy miles. The fire billowed a mile along the Mystic River, almost reaching the Mystic River Bridge, and reached a half-mile into the city from the waterfront. The smoke from the city blanketed Chelsea and spilled over into Winthrop, East Boston, Revere, and into Boston Harbor. Local authorities ordered residents of Everett Avenue, Fourth, Walnut, Arlington, and Elm Streets, among others, to evacuate their homes. The municipality prepared the State Armory to accommodate 1,100 displaced persons and in total, 1,000 of Chelsea residents registered at the armory. Countless other evacuees found lodging with friends and family. The fire destroyed eighteen city blocks and forty-five acres—an area one mile long and one-half mile wide. Twelve of the fourteen ruined streets had been the same streets decimated by the 1908 fire. The commercial and residential loss was catastrophic: sixty-one local businesses and 127 residencies burned. Not to mention, 600 workers lost their place of employment and 250 families lost their homes. According to officials, the fire was the third largest in the history of

Greater Boston—the largest being the Great Fire of 1908. Though there were no casualties, sixty residents were hospitalized along with four firefighters.³³

The day after the fire Senator Edward M. Kennedy toured the ravaged city. After speaking with the mayor and other city officials regarding the economic implications of the fire, the senator promised to aid the city in procuring federal funds to cope with the disaster. Senator Joseph DiCarlo and Representatives Robert Donovan and Francis Doris also pledged their support to rebuild Chelsea. Together, DiCarlo, Donovan, and Doris filed joint legislation that would provide \$500,000 as emergency relief funds and \$10 million in long-term relief through the purchasing of state bonds. The congressman presented the bill requesting \$10 million as the Disaster Relief Loan Act of 1973. As for local mobilization, city officials made the Williams School the central headquarters for all relief efforts; several supermarket chains offered unlimited supplies to aid the city's evacuees; and the city created the Chelsea Fire Disaster Fund. At the insistence of state officials such as Governor Francis W. Sargent and Sen. Kennedy, President Nixon declared Chelsea a disaster area on the seventeenth of October—just two days after the fire. The designation was the first in the country's history following a major fire; normally, only flood and hurricane-torn areas merited such a grave title. As a result of Nixon's declaration, Chelsea received the services of seven federal departments. The Department of Housing and Development (HUD) handled the allocation of temporary housing, the most immediate concern, and offered grants for the construction of housing comparable to that before the fire. The federal Small Business Administration (SBA) provided loans payable over thirty years at five percent interest to business owners whose insurance did not cover their losses. The SBA also provided loans to individuals in order to finance the loss of personal property. The

Environmental Protection Agency paid for damages caused to the sewage and water systems. The Department of Agriculture sent surplus food items to the city and supplemented the city's supply of food stamps. The Federal Highway Authority assumed the cost of repairing all roads damaged by the conflagration and the Labor Department reimbursed the Massachusetts Department of Employment Security for money spent aiding Chelsea's residents who had lost their place of employment. Federal funds were also made available to repair the Williams Street School, City Hall, and all other municipal buildings destroyed by the fire. ³⁴

Though crucial to the rehabilitation process of the city, the federal and state aid that poured into Chelsea managed only to address the city's most superficial needs. The fire, noted an editorial of the *Chelsea Record*, was inevitable and unavoidable. The city had known that the area that burned was a tinderbox; that run-down housing stock posed a risk to the city's residents; that state insurance officials had warned that the water pressure in the local hydrants was too low, and yet necessary precautions were not taken. Not to mention, the city was already aware of its predisposition to fire given that the Gulf Oil Fire of 1969, and another dozen fires, had blazed during the interim of the two great fires of 1908 and 1973. Chelsea had long been subject to the whims and decisions of state projects, local industry, and misguided municipal government. The leading issue in Chelsea was not that the city sat in a mass of decay, but that Chelsea's residents were the victims of an environment and circumstances beyond their control. An eyewitness account of the fire showed the level of desperation and vulnerability facing the residents of Chelsea in the aftermath of the fire.

I walked around the entire area, an area I had known well. A sense of helplessness overtook me as I looked north and south, east and west. Chelsea burned last night the Boston papers wrote. But what did they know? Who but the people of this proud city

could comprehend the magnitude of this incredible loss? Who but the proud people of this city could weigh and measure that thankless task that lay ahead if the city was to recover and go forward? Who but the people of this city would care that Ward Two had disappeared in a funnel of smoke and burning embers up into the sky?”³⁵

In comparison to Walter Pratt’s account of the 1908 fire, this description of the 1973 fire painted an honest portrait of a troublesome future. From the vantage point of the average Chelsea resident, everything had been lost to the flames of the fire and a full recovery was neither imminent nor likely.

The group of residents that most acutely felt the immediate effects of the fire was Chelsea’s Latino population. As the city’s most recent and vulnerable newcomers, many Spanish-speaking residents lost everything they had to the fire. Mayor Spelman called for clothing donations, directed them to Saint Rose’s Church, and placed them in the care of Father Borges—presumably for the purpose of distributing them to his Latino congregation. The town called in forty Spanish-speaking volunteers and the Hispanic administrator of the Atlanta Small Business Administration in order to aid communication between Latino residents and relief authorities. Spanish-speaking families, like that of Mrs. Santa Ruiz, densely populated the tenements of Ward Two. Mrs. Ruiz and her six children evacuated their home and lost everything to the fire, “when I walked into the street with the children, the whole house caught on fire.” Claudio Mitro, another Latino resident of Chelsea, also suffered losses. He reported to the police that a blue suitcase containing a Spanish Bible, a pair of binoculars, and ten shirts, had been stolen from him as he fled from his burning apartment on Chestnut Street.³⁶

In the aftermath of the fire, Chelsea received millions of dollars worth of state and federal funds. In total, the town accepted \$5 million in state urban renewal funds, a five-year \$7.5

million federal community development grant, and a total of \$15 million pledged by the federal and state governments. The city used a lot of the money to repair city hall and other damaged buildings, erect new infrastructure, and redesign the city's water system—which had, in part, contributed to the magnitude of the fire due to low water pressure. As for the remaining funds, they went towards the completion of the city's Urban Renewal Project at Murray Industrial Park.³⁷

The construction of Murray Industrial Park was an opportunity lost for Chelsea's community. Instead of constructing much needed housing, the Urban Renewal Project created new space for commercial and business real estate. In fact, not one single housing development was built with funds received after the fire. That being said, plans to build Murray Industrial Park had been underway since 1972, and officials estimated that eighty percent of the buildings destroyed by the fire were within the boundaries of the city's Urban Renewal Project. As for what became of the remaining eight blocks, all but the area directly behind the Williams School was amended into the urban renewal area. At one point there was talk of adjusting the project to include 250 housing units behind the Williams School but in the end, nothing came of such a proposal. Shortly after the fire, the city began to acquire 400 parcels of land, relocate 400 families and individuals, and reposition 200 businesses and junkyards in preparation for what would become Murray Industrial Park.³⁸

In a desperate attempt to revive Chelsea's economy and curb forthcoming deindustrialization, the city erected the industrial park and replaced the former "rag-shop" district with office condos, banks, medical buildings, the Mystic River Mall, and a seven-story hotel, along with other locations for white-collar businesses. In the process, Chelsea's federal

and state-funded urban renewal completely overlooked the needs of its lower class residents. The fire had destroyed homes that housed the city's expanding Latino population and moreover, accelerated deindustrialization, thereby limiting employment opportunities for the working class. Lingering Jewish proprietors closed their doors, and factories did not bother to rebuild on the property that the Great Fire of 1973 had singed. The Murray Industrial Park, as the Executive Director of the Chelsea Urban Renewal Authority forewarned, was not Chelsea's grand salvation, "sometimes it seems to listen to certain people that all Chelsea's problems are in the 100 acres of the renewal project. That there are no dilapidated buildings, no fires, no delayed programs anywhere else in the city. . . Urban Renewal cannot be the salvation of Chelsea—as it promises to be—if there is no city around to save." From 1950 to 1970 the city suffered from high taxes, substandard housing, ecological misuse, and demonstrated symptoms of future problems such as drug abuse and widespread discrimination. And yet for twenty years the only decisions that the municipality made were ones that placed the burden of urban decline on the shoulders of its residents. The city needed lower homeowner taxes and affordable housing, but instead Chelsea attempted—yet again—to stimulate the economy with industrial growth. But in light of an evolving national economy that had begun to favor the service sector over the industrial, pro-commercial policies proved futile. Deindustrialization was well underway; as a result, Latinos did not rise out of the ashes of fire in the same, upward fashion as the Jews had sixty-five years earlier.³⁹

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² "Chelsea's Population," Chelsea Historical Society.

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⁴ Barber, "Latino Migration and the New Global Cities," 36-39.

⁵ "The Record's Platform," Chelsea Record, January 12, 1950.

⁶ “Maurice J. Tobin Bridge: Historic Overview,” Eastern Roads, accessed February 16, 2011, <http://www.bostonroads.com/crossings/tobin/>.

⁷ Christopher Cox, “The Real Green Monster: the 50-year old Tobin Memorial Bridge was a watershed, but does it et any respect?,” Boston Herald, May 17, 2000; “New Mystic River Bridge Now a reality,” Chelsea Record, February 25, 1950; Editorial, “The Old One-Two,” Chelsea Record, February 11, 1948; Antin, *The Promised Land*, 191.

⁸ “The people of Poplar Street are up in arms!,” Chelsea Record, July 29, 1948; Charles Smith, letter to the editor, Chelsea Record, July 29, 1948.

⁹ Cox, “The Real Green Monster”; Chelsea Record, “The Old One-Two.”

¹⁰ Editorial, Chelsea Record, February 25, 1950; Chelsea Record, “New Mystic River Bridge.”

¹¹ “Chelsea always suffered,” Chelsea Record, February 1, 1950.

¹² “Mayors of Chelsea, 1857-1991,” Chelsea Historical Society, accessed February 25, 2011

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¹³ “Chelsea. . . ‘City of Industries,’” Chelsea Record, January 7, 1955.

¹⁴ “Board grants oil permits,” Chelsea Record, January 5, 1960; “There are a great many advantages to be found here,” Chelsea Record, January 18, 1960.

¹⁵ “Rezoning project,” Chelsea Record, January 15, 1960; “Appropriation asked to rid city of 64 condemned buildings,” Chelsea Record, January 21, 1960; “Says Dangerous buildings are still occupied,” Chelsea Record, January 27, 1960.

¹⁶ “Isildro Vega,” interview.

¹⁷ “Isildro Vega,” interview.

¹⁸ “\$235,000 General Alarm fire erupts at local gulf Oil Company terminal,” Chelsea Record, January 3, 1969.

¹⁹ “After the Fire,” Chelsea Record, January 4, 1969.

²⁰ “After the Fire,” Chelsea Record, January 4, 1969.

²¹ U.S. Decennial Census, 1950; U.S. Decennial Census, 1960; U.S. Decennial Census, 1970.

²² “Elm Street Synagogue groups Dedicate Hebrew Menorah,” Chelsea Record, January 10, 1950; “Medford Rabbi Addressed Hebrew School Auxiliary,” Chelsea Record, January 10, 1950.

²³ Miren Uriarte, “Contra Viento y Marea: Latinos Build Community in Boston,” in *Latinos of Boston*, Miren Uriarte et al. (Boston: University of Massachusetts Boston, 1992), 5.

²⁴ Uriarte, “Contra Viento y Marea,” 6; “1965 Immigration and Nationality Act, a.k.a. the Hart-Cellar Act,” US immigration legislation online, accessed April 15, 2010, http://library.uwb.edu/guides/USimmigration/1965_immigration_and_nationality_act.html.

²⁵ Uriarte, “Contra Viento y Marea,” 6-7.

²⁶ Uriarte, “Contra Viento y Marea,” 12.

²⁷ “Isildro Vega,” interview.

²⁸ Deckle McLean, “Chelsea: a desperate Renaissance. In a city long beset, a new spirit struggles for birth against heavy odds,” Boston Globe, June 25, 1972.

²⁹ McLean, “Chelsea: a desperate Renaissance.”

³⁰ McLean, “Chelsea: a desperate Renaissance”; “Isildro Vega,” interview.

³¹ McLean, “Chelsea: a desperate Renaissance”; “Isildro Vega,” interview.

³² Ray Richard and Michael Kenney, “Some only had time to flee their homes,” Boston Globe, October 15, 1973.

³³ “1,000 homeless, damage \$100 million in Chelsea’s second disastrous fire: most of Ward two, City yard, 60 homes destroyed; Williams School, City Hall, Fire House Burn But Saved. . . ,” Chelsea Record, October 15, 1973; “Summary of losses from the 1973 Chelsea fire,” Chelsea Historical Society, accessed February 20, 2011, <http://www.olgp.net/chs/photos/losses1973.htm>; “Streets damaged or destroyed during the 1973 Chelsea fire,” Chelsea Historical Society, accessed February 20, 2011, <http://www.olgp.net/chs/photos/streets1973.htm>; Gretchen Reiser, “Massive Aid beings pouring into city from federal, state agencies, others,” Chelsea Record, October 16, 1973.

³⁴ Reiser, “Massive aid beings pouring”; Chelsea Record, “1,000 homeless, damage \$100 million”; “President Nixon declares Chelsea disaster area, substantial deferral aid assured,” Chelsea Record, October 17, 1973.

³⁵ “Eyewitness Account of the fire,” Chelsea Historical Society, accessed February 21, 2011, <http://www.olgp.net/chs/photos/1973writeup2.htm>.

³⁶ Chelsea Record, "1,000 homeless"; "Break-Ins, thefts occur Sunday during confusion of fire," Chelsea Record, October 16, 1973; "Disaster aid for homeless, jobless pours into city," Chelsea Record, October 16, 1973; Reiser, "Massive aid."

³⁷ "The Second Great Chelsea Fire: October 14, 1973," Chelsea Historical Society, accessed February 20, 2011, <http://www.olgp.net/chs/photos/1973writeup2.htm>; Chelsea Record, "1,000 homeless, damage \$100 million."

³⁸ "Scores detractors of authority, second urban renewal project," Chelsea Record, January 31, 1975; Susan Gretman, "250 Housing units in New Plans. . . auth'y acts to include entire fire area in renewal project," Chelsea Record, October 9, 1973.

³⁹ "The Second Great Chelsea Fire," Chelsea Historical Society; Chelsea Record, "1,000 homeless, damage \$100 million"; "Scores detractors of authority, second urban renewal project," Chelsea Record, January 31, 1975.

Chapter Three:

Combating Crisis: Urban Decline and Chelsea's Latino Boom, 1973-1990

Following the Fire of 1973, Chelsea's population changed dramatically. In a survey conducted by the city in 1978, the city's Hispanic population had risen to 19.5 percent of the total population. Less than one-fourth of the Latinos living in Chelsea had resided there for five or more years and approximately half of the population had arrived during the past three years. As "white flight" and deindustrialization spurred the decline of the overall population, the availability of housing and, to a lesser extent, jobs ushered in waves of Latino migrants, with Central Americans and Puerto Ricans heavily represented. Chelsea's Latino boom sent shockwaves through the small city. The influx of low-income, Spanish-speaking residents changed the face of Chelsea and, moreover, changed the needs of an already "dying" community. Fraught with urban crisis and brimming with residents of low and moderate means, Chelsea successfully solicited federal funds for a variety of projects under the Housing and Community Development Act of 1974. Latinos, however, were seldom the intended beneficiaries of these projects. Though the city was clearly standing on the brink of demographic succession, Chelsea chose not to accommodate its new residents. The city built luxury housing instead of affordable housing, opted for elderly developments instead of family developments. The Latinos of Chelsea were victims and bystanders of their environment. Though they inherited a city already in decay, the Hispanic population bore the blame of preexisting urban troubles and bore the burden of municipal blunders.¹

“If you can’t find anyplace elsewhere to live you jump into Chelsea.”²

As a community buried by a bridge, encircled by oil tanks, plagued by contaminated, junk-filled land, and burned twice by conflagration, Chelsea found it difficult to retain middle-class families. In 1960, Chelsea’s general population numbered 33,749 persons; in 1970, 30,639; and by 1980 the population reached an all time low of 25,431. Not since 1880 had Chelsea housed a population below 25,000. Mayor Joel Pressman, who served from 1976 to 1983, attributed the efflux of Chelsea’s residents to “fires, general deterioration and abandonment, high taxes and few amenities and fewer services.” Not to mention there was a shortage of single-family homes and limited employment opportunities. Rental housing, on the other hand, was plentiful; as rents in Boston skyrocketed, Chelsea’s lower cost of living became an attraction for immigrants. It was no coincidence that the rapid growth of Chelsea’s Latino population took place during a period that also witnessed an overall demographic decline. A study of historic Boston neighborhoods conducted by Mauricio Gastón and Marie Kennedy of the University of Massachusetts indicated that minorities, such as blacks and Latinos, tended to move into areas previously occupied by white ethnics. As industry fled, what were once poor, but stable communities of European immigrants succumbed to the woes of disinvestment. Disinvestment preserved low levels of rents and as a result, people of color replaced white ethnic workers. Indeed, this phenomenon was true of Chelsea. The city’s Latino population quadrupled during the 1970s, increasing from 3.6 percent of the population in 1970 to at least 14.2 percent in 1980.³

Table 1: Total and Hispanic Population in Chelsea⁴

	1970	1980	1990
Total population	30,639	25,431	28,222
Hispanics (%)	1098 (3.6)	3602-5433 (14.2)	11,800-12,7000 (42-45)

The Census of 1980 unveiled a demographic portrait of Chelsea that was unlike anything the city had ever seen. Immigrants from South America, Central America, Mexico, and Cuba comprised the most populous group of foreign-born residents in the city; Spanish-speakers constituted the largest group of non-English speakers; and persons of Spanish origin dominated the ethnicities of the native-born. White ethnics no longer composed the majority of Chelsea's immigrants; the Latinos had taken their place. Officially, 3,602 Latinos lived in Chelsea, but in reality the population was much larger. Some non-English speaking Latinos were likely missed by census takers, and the growing numbers of undocumented immigrants from Central America were no doubt undercounted. The figure of 3,602 persons was a minimum and a low projection of the actual Latino population; a study conducted by the Gaston Institute of the University of Massachusetts suggested that the population was closer to 5,433 persons at the time of the census.⁵

Accompanying the news of the sudden growth of Chelsea's Latino population was the awareness that the community was already demonstrating signs of stress. A higher percentage of the city's Hispanics were eligible for assistance from the federal Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), resided in rental households, reported inadequate housing

conditions, and lived in an overcrowded environment. The Hispanic population was also much younger than the city's overall demographic, and the educational development of Latino children lagged far behind the children of non-Hispanic families. In 1980 the median age of Chelsea Latinos was 17.2 years, whereas the median age of non-Hispanics was 37.6 years. Seventy-five percent of the Latino population had not completed a high school education, and only one percent of the Latino population had completed four or more years of college. Given the high proportion of young children, Latino residential patterns were overwhelmingly dominated by large family households with children under the age of six. Ninety-five percent of Latinos lived in family households, averaging 4.1 persons per household, as opposed to the 81 percent of non-Hispanics who lived in family households, averaging 3.2 persons. Latinos required large family residential units, but no such units were erected during the 1973-1990 period—when Latino population soared. Their families tended to be larger than non-Hispanics, but given that their income was lower, adequately sized apartments could not be financed. At the time, the average price of homes in Chelsea was \$120,000-150,000, while the income needed to purchase such a home ranged from \$44,000 to \$55,000. The average income of Latino residents was far below this range. In 1979, the median family income of Hispanic families was \$6,519.⁶

Table 2: Median family income by race/ethnicity, 1979⁷

	Whites	Blacks	Hispanics
Chelsea	16,090	15,096	6,519
Boston	18,816	11,779	9,027

The pronounced indigence of Chelsea's Latinos was a phenomenon typical of Greater Boston. In a national comparison between economic and racial groups in metropolitan Boston and 11 other urban areas, Chicago's Urban League discovered that Boston Latinos had the worst

educational and economic status among whites, blacks, and even other Latinos nationally. The manufacturing base that propelled the economic advancement of Boston's European immigrants was all but gone when the Latino boom was in full swing. Between 1965 and 1987, Suffolk County (where Chelsea is located) lost 50 percent of the positions once available to manufacturing workers. The industries that remained were food processing plants and packaging firms: both of which offered jobs characterized by low wages and poor working conditions. Kayem Inc. and the New England Produce Company are two examples of the industry that remained. Despite the tendency to relocate, Kayem, a marketer and manufacturer of some of the leading brands of meats in Massachusetts and the country, chose to expand the plant instead of leaving Chelsea. In operation since 1909, Kazimierz Monkiewicz founded the Kayem factory after emigrating from Poland. At the beginning of the century, Kayem was no more than a meat market, but by close of the century it had become the number-one brand of hot dogs in New England and the number one brand of chicken sausage in the entire country. (Alumni Stadium at Boston College is one of the many distributors of its hot dogs.) The other manufacturer that remained in Chelsea was the New England Produce Center—also known as the Chelsea Produce Center. Originally located in the docking area of Fanueil Hall, forty-two distributors of wholesale produce moved to Chelsea after unsuccessfully searching for a site in Boston. Upon relocating to Chelsea in 1968, the distributors became incorporated as the New England Produce Center. Together these two manufacturers employed a large percentage of Latinos in the Chelsea workforce.⁸

During the last quarter of the twentieth century, socioeconomic turmoil consumed Chelsea's Latino population because the city itself was in the throes of crisis. Utterly dependent

upon industry during the fifties and sixties, Chelsea suffered as Boston began to transition from a manufacturing economy to a service economy. Given that Chelsea's industry remained viable for most of the seventies, the city felt the effects of deindustrialization most acutely during the eighties. In 1984, American Bilrite Inc., Sweetheart Paper Co., and Cabot Paint all closed their doors in Chelsea. Five hundred jobs that were once available were no more; and without a growing service sector in the city to compensate for the loss, unemployment rose. Only seventy percent of Chelsea's Hispanic labor force held full-time positions in 1980, and of those who were employed forty-five percent worked in the manufacturing sector. While disproportionately employed in the industrialized sector, Chelsea Latinos were underrepresented in white-collar and civic jobs such as finance and transportation. Consequently, Latinos bore the brunt of deindustrialization. Between 1980 and 1988, the total number of jobs in Chelsea grew by just one percent, while, during those same years the Latino population grew by at least twenty percent. This strikingly slow job growth was not substantial enough to maintain the rapid growth of the Hispanic community. During the same decade, Massachusetts underwent tremendous growth in the service sector and associated employment—but mainly in downtown Boston and its more affluent suburbs. Without a budding service sector, Chelsea lagged behind. Brian Krasner of the Community Development Department in Chelsea noted that wholesale trade, especially trade concerning the produce markets, was one of only two sectors that experienced growth during this period.⁹

In spite of deindustrialization and high levels of unemployment, the Latino population underwent rapid growth during the eighties. Chelsea was a “city of immigrants,” and the insecurity of the housing and employment markets did not deter further expansion. Chelsea had

low rents—certainly lower than those of Boston—and moreover, it was in the position to supply many of its citizens with state and federal vouchers. In fact, the rate of Latino growth during the seventies was so astounding that the city began to gain recognition as a “haven” for Latino immigrants. Between 1986 and 1987, Chelsea, along with Boston, Lawrence, Springfield, Holyoke, and Worcester, was one of the cities with the highest proportion of Hispanic births in the state. As the Latino population grew, the city became more and more attractive to incoming migrants as chain migration facilitated the development of a local Latino community. What had been the Blue Moon Deli and a favorite of the defunct Jewish community, gave way to the Lechonera Criolla, a restaurant that specialized in home-style pork, a staple of Latin culture. The transition of leases not only signified a change of ownership but a change of identity. Chelsea was one of the most diverse and ethnically mixed communities in the state, and the city’s emerging Latino identity became a beacon for new migrants. Chelsea may not have been the ideal place to live well, but for the waves of Central Americans arriving during the late seventies and eighties, more affordable housing and a familiar culture made Chelsea a popular destination.

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Moreover, the economic and political instability of Central America in the 1970s and 1980s forced thousands of Salvadorans, Hondurans, Nicaraguans, and Guatemalans, to flee their native land and seek residency in the U.S. The threat of left-wing revolutions—like Cuba’s successful revolution in 1959—led the U.S. government to sponsor the despotic oligarchies and dictatorial rulers who wielded power at the expense of the general population. Human rights abuses by Central American military regimes were widespread. By the late 1970s, insurgents began to mobilize and conflict erupted in several Central American countries—the first and most notable being Nicaragua. On January 10, 1978, Pedro Joaquin Chamorro, the editor of *La Prensa*

and an opponent of the Somoza family—which comprised the country’s dictatorship—died at the hand of Somoza assassins as he was driving to work. Enraging the Nicaraguan people, the event catalyzed the resistance, violence, and war that consumed the country for the next eighteen months. The war did not spare any group or class of people; all were affected. The official policy of the US under the Reagan administration was to defeat the Sandinista rebellion at all costs, and for this reason the administration supported the authoritarian Somoza regime. War also erupted in El Salvador and Guatemala, terrorizing the countryside. In particular, rural inhabitants of El Salvador and the indigenous in Guatemala underwent continuous military aggression. As the military massacred those believed to be involved in guerilla warfare in rural El Salvador and Guatemala, indigenous villagers ran for their lives as the military murdered leaders of their towns. ¹¹

Between 1978 and the 1990, approximately 300,000 persons died in the wars in Central America, and thousands more fled to nearby countries such as Mexico and the US. In El Salvador alone, 600,000 persons were displaced, and in Nicaragua an estimated 120,000 became exiles. In spite of the conflicts that permeated all of Central America, the US government granted official refugee status only to the anti-Communist Nicaraguans. Nevertheless, the lack of official refugee status did not prevent Honduras, Guatemalans, and El Salvadorians from entering and seeking to rebuild their lives in the US. As violence escalated during the 1980s, undocumented migrants from all ranks of Central American society filed into the US. Families with children, *campesinos*, and *obreros*—groups previously unrepresented among Central American migrants—joined the ranks of already established domestic workers and professionals. The myriad of experiences that the Central Americans carried with them further complicated the

urban landscape of small cities like Chelsea. *Campesinos* (roughly “farmers” in English), had the dual task of adjusting to urban life in addition to life in the United States. Given their lack of experience in factory and constructions settings, rural workers were more susceptible to urban exploitation.¹²

According to a study conducted through interviews with people working in social, legal, and employment services in Chelsea, it was likely that half of all Hispanics living in Chelsea were undocumented by 1990. Persons from El Salvador comprised the majority, but large numbers of Hondurans, Guatemalans, Nicaraguans, Colombians, and Mexicans were also represented. By the end of the decade the Central American population was growing at an unprecedented rate. Between 1987 and 1990 just over two-thousand immigrants entered into Chelsea’s neighborhood and the overwhelming majority hailed from Central America.

Table 3: Shifting Origins of Latinos in Chelsea, 1970-1990¹³

	Cuba	Central America	Mexico	South America	Spanish Speakers Total	Foreign Born Total	Total Population
1970	120	Not listed	Not listed	105	1,098	4,399	31,391
1980	219	Not listed	16	173	2,959	3,215	25,431
1990	101	2,356	54	320	7,165	6,250	28,710

Table 4: Origin of Chelsea’s Central American Population, 1990¹⁴

	Costa Rica	El Salvador	Guatemala	Honduras	Nicaragua	Panama
1990	81	1,121	458	654	42	0

Including undocumented immigrants, the Gaston Institute of the University of Massachusetts estimated that 9,500 Hispanics were living in Chelsea in 1990. Another estimate, made by one of Chelsea’s social service agencies, suggested that upwards of 15,000 undocumented Latinos lived

in Chelsea. Regardless, both studies agreed that the majority of Chelsea's undocumented were between the ages of fifteen and forty, and they had just recently taken up residency in the city. That being said, one of the main consequences of sudden population growth was the increasing demand for housing. Chelsea was a city notorious for inadequate housing conditions and a lack of residential space. The Latinos who arrived after the fire of 1973 had limited, if any, options of where to live. It was common for two or more people to share a single room, and in some instances some migrants even found themselves renting the space below a bed.¹⁵

“Aren't Hispanics living in Chelsea our own?”¹⁶

Above all, Latinos required adequate, affordable housing. Yet between 1973 and 1990 this need—though acknowledged—was not met. Struggling to overcome the effects of urban disinvestment and ongoing deindustrialization, the city of Chelsea adopted a strategy that sought to reinvigorate the city through industrial and commercial development. Industrial and commercial developments, however, did not—and could not—rescue the city. Murray Industrial Park and Admiral's Hill, the two major developments built during this period, benefitted businesses and people located outside of the city at the expense of Chelsea's residents. The shortage of adequate and affordable housing remained a problem before and after the completion of these two developments, and the population that most acutely felt the housing scarcity was the Latino population. According to Joshua Resnek, a resident of Chelsea, “what was bad about Chelsea got worse” after the commercial and industrial developers left town. For Resnek, it was a shame that residential developments meant to provide low-income housing never left the

drawing board. Had such projects been executed, he noted, “a lot of lower income people would have better housing instead of no housing.”¹⁷

By 1985 Chelsea was a city of multi-unit housing structures: 725 buildings contained a single unit; 1,529 contained two units; 948 contained three units; and 455 contained four or more units. Between the losses incurred by the two great fires and the flattening of ward two by the Mystic River Bridge, single family homes were a dying breed. Rental households comprised 73.3 percent of all residencies and housed the majority of the population. Chelsea grappled with housing shortage and a myriad of housing problems. More than eighty percent of its housing stock was aged thirty years or more, and housings troubles such as sewage backup, leaky roofs, broken ceilings, and pest infestation were habitually reported. Nevertheless, a 1976 survey showed that Chelsea had a mere one percent vacancy rate. In other words, the city needed additional housing; and with the majority of the population eligible for federal assistance, presumably, low-income residents needed housing most.¹⁸

Though housing problems affected the entire community, procuring adequate housing proved to be exceedingly difficult for Latinos. Members of the Hispanic community were less likely to own homes and more likely to rent than their non-Hispanic counterparts. By 1990, seventy percent of Chelsea’s population lived in rental housing and Latinos comprised the majority of the rental population. Yet of the thirty percent of Chelsea homeowners, only eight percent were Hispanic. Latinos were also less likely to acquire housing. Between 1988 and 1990, Hispanics accounted for only eight percent of all property transfers, while non-whites accounted for seventy-four percent and companies for seventeen percent. In 1990, Latinos comprised at least forty-two percent of the city’s population but purchased only fourteen percent of homes—

all of which were located in Hispanic neighborhoods. Discrimination in the housing sector contributed to the disproportion between Hispanic and non-Hispanic homeownership, and redlining was also commonplace in Chelsea. Only one bank, the Chelsea Provident Cooperative Bank, lent mortgages to all parts of the city. Most lending agencies were located outside the city and did not lend to persons looking to buy real estate in the Latino districts of Chelsea. ¹⁹

To make matters worse for the Latino community, absentee landlords—meaning landlords who did not live in the buildings they rented—owned forty-one percent of the buildings located in Chelsea’s Latino neighborhoods, and seventy-two percent of those landlords lived outside of the city. Many absentee landlords did not repair their units and did not follow regulations and codes in regards to their rentals. Needless to say, living conditions for Hispanics was less than adequate. As the Latino community continued to grow, demand for low-income housing increased dramatically, but the supply remained the same. Nor were Latinos the only group of immigrants in need of modest housing. Inflated rental prices in Boston pushed the Cambodians, along with the Latinos, out of many Boston neighborhoods. Between 1986 and 1989, Boston’s Cambodian community shrunk from 7300 to fewer than 5000, and some of these immigrants ended up in Chelsea. ²⁰

Chelsea’s Hispanic community relied heavily on the assistance of federal and state programs to afford lodging that met the needs of their large family households. Under Section 8 of the United States Housing Act of 1937, the federal government subsidized housing so that low-income families spent no more than thirty percent of their income on housing. Likewise under Massachusetts’ Chapter 707 program (now referred to as the Massachusetts Rental Voucher Program) families who demonstrated considerable need paid only twenty-five percent

of their income toward rent and utilities. In 1990 the Chelsea Housing Authority reported that the city had five family developments (494 units), three elderly developments (414 units), and 807 additional units that relied on either state or federal rent subsidies. While most towns had between ten to twenty state 707-subsidized units, Chelsea had 243—and forty-two percent of those who occupied these units were Hispanic. Moreover, Chelsea also had 480 units of federal Section 8-subsidized units and similar to the state-funded housing, forty percent of those tenants were Latino.²¹

The issue of adequate housing plagued Chelsea's Hispanic community throughout the period between 1973 and 1990. In addition to the difficulties incurred by having lower incomes and in many cases illegal status, Latino families struggled to procure and maintain their homes in the face of gentrification and discrimination. In June of 1985, a Boston development firm evicted fifty neighborhood families from their homes and gave them one month notice to leave. The firm had bought four apartment buildings in the city's Hispanic community and invested in the renovation of the decrepit buildings. The renovations, consequently, caused a surge in rents that the Latino families could not afford. Though there was no indication where these families moved, being evicted was merely the first of many woes to confront such families. Property values and rents had been increasing dramatically over the three-year period prior to the eviction incident, as had reported incidents of racial discrimination.²²

Discrimination against Latinos intensified during the 1970s and 1980s, and was not limited to the housing sector. As the drug trade infiltrated Chelsea's community, the entire Latino community suffered and bore the blame for the activities of a few. Indeed, the drug trade was an insidious issue for Chelsea's residents. Children, growing up surrounded by smoke and

drugs, were caught between the crossfire of competing drug businesses. In 1986, law enforcement officials asserted that Chelsea had been a center of drug activity for over a decade. The Tobin Bridge ironically made Chelsea an attractive hotspot for drug dealers because it provided easy access to the city and areas north and south of Boston. In fact, Chelsea was so desirable a location for the drug trade that, according to the Suffolk County Narcotics Task Force, no place in the Northeast other than New York City made heroin so widely available. During the late eighties, Chelsea authorities launched a drug war that was overwhelmingly associated with the Hispanic population. Adopting the narcotics war as his own, Mayor John J. Brennan joined a five-person, statewide task force against drugs, and launched an initiative to discontinue rent subsidies and welfare cards that were issued to convicted drug dealers. Though the Mayor asserted that he was anti-drug and not anti-welfare, his crusade targeted families living in Section 8 housing. He believed that there were too many families living by subsidies granted to them by Section 8.²³

The drug trade exacerbated racial and ethnic tensions within the community. Afraid of the violence involved in the drug trade, Southeast Asians expressed their distaste for the Hispanic community. In a meeting held at El Comite Latino, a local Hispanic organization, a Cambodian immigrant noted that she and her family were living in fear of the escalating tension that existed between the two populations. On December 18, 1984, four shots from a .24 calibre gun flew through the window of a Cambodian family living on Grove Street. Though no one was injured in the crossfire, which two Hispanic residents initiated over drug trafficking, the event brought considerable negative attention to the Latino community. In an article entitled "Cambodians living in fear here?" the *Chelsea Record* expressed their dismay and indignation

that many of the newly arrived immigrants found Chelsea to be a less than welcoming place. The article highlighted the genocide from which the Cambodians fled, their law-abiding characteristics, and the sacredness of the family unit in their culture. Ironically, these qualities were not unique to the Cambodian community; and yet there was no mention of the genocide and war that Chelsea's Central Americans had escaped. Clearly, the article was blaming and criticizing the Latino community for the city's drug trade. The article ended by noting that "the police blotter here reveals no crimes attributed to Cambodians," with the assumption being that the police blotter was filled to the brim with allegations against members of the Hispanic community. The comparison, however, was neither justified nor fair. Whereas five hundred Cambodians lived in Chelsea, there were over eight thousand Latino residents. As the city's largest minority and as an ethnic group whose presence in Chelsea dated back to the fifties, more Hispanics were bound to be involved in the drug trade. Whereas the real culprit of the city's drug trade was urban decline, many of Chelsea's residents were quick to blame the Hispanic population. Effectively, Hispanic involvement with the lawlessness of the drug trade became a vehicle through which Chelsea's older community expressed their aversion to the changing demographic landscape.²⁴

Though the triumphs of Chelsea's Latino community were often unsung, the Hispanic population had accomplished much during the seventies. Four years before the incident on Grove Street, the *Chelsea Record* had published an article by a Latino resident that saluted and praised the successes of the Latino community. Entitled "Chelsea Al Dia: the 70s decade of great influx of Hispanic influence in Chelsea" and printed in both English and Spanish, the piece acknowledged that the arrival of Latinos had changed the face of Chelsea. Enumerating the toils

and achievements of the community, the author expressed a desire to “make note of the accomplishments of Chelsea’s Hispanic community because we deserve mention and this has not been forthcoming from any other source.” The printing of this article was a milestone for Chelsea’s Hispanic community and the city as a whole. The author’s association with and insight into the happenings of the Latino population provided an important opportunity to bestow accolades and to dispel misconceptions. The article championed the unheard voices of “the other Chelsea” and launched a dialogue in the public arena regarding race and ethnicity.²⁵

Chelsea’s Latino community excelled during the 1970s. In fields as diverse as art, education, and community action, Latino residents demonstrated that they, too, had contributed to the contours of the community. Dahlia Diaz published two novels that were positively received by the literary community; Ester Gonzales contributed beautiful drawings of historic places in Chelsea for the Chelsea Calendar of 1979; and a “Banda Latina” emerged at the Williams School, which dedicated its efforts to showcasing and sharing Latino music with the greater Chelsea neighborhood. In education, a young student named Lucas Rodriguez received a national award from Senator Edward Kennedy, who acknowledged his promising intellect, and more generally, through the Adult Basic Education Program, many Hispanic adults returned to school with the hope of bettering their lives and the livelihood of their families. The Hispanic community was not the ailing body that Chelsea publications and leaders made it out to be. Actively involved in local politics, a united vote from the Hispanic community in 1975 vaulted the young Joel Pressman into the mayoral office with a strikingly close three-vote victory. The Hispanic vote had matured to the point that it had considerable influence in the political arena and such a feat was a landmark for the growing minority community. Though the Hispanic vote

was not strong enough to elect a Latino into local office, the campaigns of two candidates—namely Fernando Epaiza, an editor of the *Chelsea Record*, and Cef Rosa—primed the city’s political terrain for greater Hispanic participation in the decades to follow.²⁶

The labors of LUCHA (Latinos de Chelsea en Accion) demonstrated yet another source of communal potency and development. As the only Hispanic corporation operating in Chelsea during the seventies and much of the eighties, the organization dedicated its efforts to providing housing, education, social, and cultural services to the Hispanic community. Most notably, LUCHA filed a civil rights suit against the municipal and federal governments for discriminating against Hispanics in housing and employment. Though the organization failed to convince the court that the terms of construction of the residential development at Admiral’s Hill—one of the projects in question—was in violation of the Fourteenth Amendment’s equal protection clause, LUCHA’s efforts nonetheless placed pressure on the city of Chelsea to provide benefits for and reduce discrimination against the Hispanic community. The court acknowledged that Chelsea’s actions demonstrated a lack of commitment to the well being of its minority residents. For decades the city had used the majority of its federal funds for programs that were not intended to benefit the city’s Latino community.²⁷

Chelsea, Chelsea tell me please, is it a city or a disease?

Admiral’s Hill was the largest housing development erected between 1973 and 1990. Built on the land once occupied by the U.S. Naval Hospital (also known as the Chelsea Naval Hospital), the project was anticipated to be the “saving grace” of Chelsea. City leaders hailed the redevelopment of the Naval Hospital as a “new beginning for Chelsea,” but, low-cost housing

was not on the agenda. The city's proposal called for construction of a luxury housing development, rehabilitation of existing housing, restoration of a historic area, development of a twenty-six-acre public park, commercial and recreational access to the waterfront, and "light" industrial expansion on twenty acres. By way of the proposal alone, clearly, the city's vision of the future was not taking into account the exponentially growing Latino community. The housing project was a "hilltop development" that overlooked and undermined the needs of Chelsea's low-income residents. Without low-income housing, only a small fraction of Chelsea's Latinos benefited from the multi-million dollar investment.²⁸

By the time the Chelsea Naval Hospital closed in 1974, the hospital grounds boasted eighty-eight acres and over sixty buildings. For 137 years, the hospital had offered continuing service to the town of Chelsea and to veterans from across the country. Over the years, the hospital had opened its doors to the residents of Chelsea injured by the industrial disasters that struck the city; and most notably the hospital treated the victims of the fires of 1908 and 1973. It was an honor for Chelsea to be the home of a U.S. Naval Hospital. In addition to being the country's oldest naval hospital in ongoing service, the facility was also known for treating Presidents John F. Kennedy and John Quincy Adams—before and after their presidencies respectively.²⁹

When the hospital closed on January 7, 1975, it denoted the end of an era both for maritime and local history. Lieutenant Commander James O. Wilder, the head of the hospital, remarked that the decommissioning of the hospital presented a remarkable opportunity for Chelsea to reinvent itself. "Now is the time for us to look to the future. . . . As this hospital has become old and tired, so has its surrounding community. The hospital has almost one-fourth the land mass of

the City of Chelsea and the prospect of this land breathing new life into an area that has no place to expand is monumental. New land has always been the base for new prosperity.” How best to breathe new life into the city, however, was a contentious issue. While Wilder noted that the land previously occupied by the hospital would surely benefit the citizens of Chelsea, what he did not mention was *which* citizens. Sold by the city to Edward Fish of Peabody Construction, Inc. in Braintree, the naval hospital project called for the construction of luxury and elderly residencies.³⁰

The \$85 million dollar naval hospital development—along with Murray Industrial Park—remained the top priorities of the city administration. Upon taking office in 1976, Mayor Pressman remarked that Chelsea represented the “smallest” and “weakest” link in the chain of cities and towns called Massachusetts, “our link was burned from the catastrophe of 1973 and thick with the rust of political inertia and neglect of long range planning.” In regards to the future, however, he pledged that the development of the Chelsea Naval Hospital would mark the beginning of a new era, and many residents agreed. At the dedication ceremony of the project, federal, state, and local officials celebrated the development as an airplane flew overhead carrying a banner that read “Chelsea Pride.” U.S. Rep. Edward J. Markey, Governor Edward J. King, ex-Governor Michael Dukakis, Mayor Pressman, and Mayor Spelman, all of whom were in attendance, lauded the project for the \$1 million in tax revenue that the city would inevitably collect. Likewise, Andrew Quigley, the former mayor and current editor of the *Chelsea Record*, praised the redevelopment for the new residents it would attract. In an editorial he wrote for the *Chelsea Record*, Quigley predicted that the project would have a positive snowball effect on the entire city. “And then a few years after that, the rest of Ward One will be improved with office

workers moving in from Boston because they won't be able to afford the high rents of Boston or to buy a condominium . . . all decent respectable workers from Boston or the airport will go to work from their well kept homes and apartments.”³¹

Effectively, Quigley's editorial articulated what was, presumably, a shared hope that Admiral's Hill would be the key to reversing the “white flight” that left the city in the hands of lower income residents and Latinos in the first place. Luxury housing did not attract blue-collar, immigrant workers but middle and upper-class “decent respectable workers.” If Admiral's Hill was the cornerstone of a new chapter of Chelsea history then the new Chelsea that Quigley and others envisioned was one without a sizeable Latino population. As was made evident by Quigley's remarks, the purpose of the Admiral Hill development was not to tend to the needs of a “dying” community, but to attract new, “more desirable” residents whose presence would reinvigorate the city. In fact, according to some Latino residents, the development at Admiral's Hill was indeed averse to welcoming Latino residents. On the other hand, Isildro Vega—a longtime resident of Puerto Rican descent—insisted that the claim that the development “did not want Hispanics” was a myth. He went on to emphasize economic factors, explaining that “you have to have a lot of money to buy a house, and we (the Latinos) did not come with a lot of money.”³² In all likelihood, both race and class played a role in discouraging Latino settlement in Admiral Hill.

The partiality of the Admiral's Hill development did not go unnoticed. While middle and upper-income residents directly benefited from the housing project, low-income residents were only indirect beneficiaries. According to the Boston Area Office of the HUD, though the proposal lacked low-income housing, “revitalization of the surrounding neighborhoods would

provide expanded housing opportunities for low and moderate-income persons” and moreover, the project itself would create three hundred jobs that were previously unavailable to lower-income persons. LUCHA, however, was not convinced that that new development provided equal opportunities to Chelsea’s residents. In October of 1978, LUCHA, along with four passionate Hispanic residents, filed suit against the Secretary of Housing and Urban Development. In the case—which began as a complaint against Admiral’s Hill but expanded to encompass other grievances as well—the plaintiffs posed a two-fold challenge against the disbursement of federal funds to the cities of Boston and Chelsea and the discriminatory allocation of those funds by the officials of the Department of Housing and Urban Development. More specifically, the plaintiffs argued that the HUD did not ensure that minorities had equal access to the benefits of the projects funded under the Urban Development Action Grant (UDAG) and the Community Development Block Grant (CDBG) programs—the two primary reservoirs of federal monies.³³

The primary objective of the Housing and Community Development Act was to encourage the “development of viable urban communities, by providing decent housing and a suitable living environment and expanding economic opportunities, principally for persons of low and moderate income.” The Community Development Block Grant (CDBG), the Small Cities Program (SCP), and the Urban Development Action Grant (UDAG) were all created to meet the objectives of the HDCA; and over the course of the seventies Chelsea received federal grants from each one. Most notably, Chelsea applied and received \$6,794,000 in UDAG funds for the Admiral’s Hill development. Though both the UDAG and the CDBG programs had nondiscrimination requirements, nondiscrimination provisions were only written into the

eligibility requirements of the former. The specific purpose of the UDAG program was to funnel federal dollars into the nation's hard-pressed cities through proposing projects that took "advantage of unique opportunities to attract private investment, stimulate investment in restoration of deteriorated or abandoned housing stock, or solve critical problems resulting from loss of employment or chronic unemployment in the community."³⁴

As a city beset by urban crisis and full of low and moderate-income citizens, Chelsea fared well in the market for CDBG and UDAG funds. Chelsea participated in the CDBG program for five years. Between 1975 and 1980, CDBG grants benefited several Latino neighborhoods through one, providing services such as fire prevention, housing code enforcement, playground development, street lighting, and road construction and two, allocating funds to a bilingual day care center and a housing-oriented legal services program. Chelsea's participation in the UDAG program, however, was far less even-handed. As a federal program with a clear and deliberate nondiscriminatory clause, the absence of low-income housing from the Admiral's Hill proposal caused quite the stir. The proposal called for the construction of 300 luxury apartments, 570 market rate apartments, 300 subsidized apartments for the elderly, and the rehabilitation of 132 low-income family units in a nearby neighborhood.³⁵

While the city waited to receive project approval from the HUD, both the Massachusetts Commission Against Discrimination (MCAD) and the Fair Housing and Equal Opportunity Division (FHEO) gave the housing proposal low marks. The FHEO rated Chelsea's proposal as "fair" commenting that it "minimally reduced the magnitude of special problems of minority persons" and included no provision for low-income jobs. Likewise MCAD recommended that the UDAG conditionally approve the grant pending the addition of equal opportunity conditions.

In particular, the commission advocated for the inclusion of low-income housing for younger families due to the high proportion of minorities among the non-elderly population. This suggestion, however, was not heeded. Though the MCAD review and LUCHA's formal complaint were still underway, HUD informed Chelsea's mayor that the city had been deemed eligible for UDAG funds. Despite receiving frequent criticism from local reviewing agencies, Chelsea chose not to amend the project proposal and went ahead with construction.³⁶

On April 12, 1986, after eight years of appeals and challenges, the court ruled that there was no violation of antidiscrimination laws in regards to employment, housing, and contracts related to the Admiral's Hill development. According to the court, LUCHA and the plaintiffs failed to prove discriminatory intent and without demonstrating intent, the defendant was not in violation of the Civil Rights Act and the equal protection clause of the Fourteenth Amendment. Though the UDAG grant chose to assist other groups instead of focusing on the housing needs of minorities, the court argued that the plaintiff failed to provide evidence proving that the town constructed subsidized housing in spite of the need for minority housing. Additionally, the decision noted that the project did not "entirely ignore the needs of minorities." The project enabled the expansion of the Sweetheart Paper Products Co., a large employer of low-income persons, and reserved fifteen percent of work hours for minority residents. Neither of these job opportunities, however, was permanent. Sweetheart Paper Products left Chelsea in 1984, two years before the date of the final decision, and by 1986 Admiral's Hill was fully constructed and no longer employing minority residents. And moreover, in the year prior to the court's decision, MCAD ruled that Chelsea was not in compliance with civil rights standards. Out of almost five-hundred municipal employees, fewer than ten percent were Hispanic, even though Hispanics

then made up twenty-five percent of the population. LUCHA may not have been able to prove discriminatory intent, but Massachusetts authorities nonetheless reported that the municipality employed discriminatory practices. In the end, “not ignoring” the needs of the Latino community was nothing more than a euphemism for discriminatory aims.³⁷

The Admiral’s Hill project opened in 1986 and was, to a certain extent, a municipal success. The redevelopment of the hospital property enticed other developers to invest in Chelsea, and for six years—at the onset of the eighties—Chelsea was a boomtown. Nevertheless, the developing boom and the Latino boom were not in sync. Development was limited to industrial projects and to the Admiral’s Hill project. The Margolis apartments, located at 260 Clarke Avenue was the only other housing development to be built between 1973 and 1990. Consisting of a brick exterior and thirteen floors, the Margolis Apartments housed 151 units, 144 of which were one-bedroom apartments and eight of which were two-bedroom apartments. Again, federal aid helped to construct the Margolis apartments which were intended to be housing for the elderly and not for families or low-income residents. Indeed, in the short-term the developing boom was beneficial in so far as it caused the value of properties and tax revenues to increase, but in the long-term, the surge in development worsened Chelsea’s urban decline. Once investment stopped, what was bad about Chelsea got worse. The arrival and departure of developers in Chelsea during the eighties shattered any remaining hope that Chelsea could be refashioned as an attractive locale for middle-class workers and moreover, exposed the opportunity cost of not constructing housing for the city’s low-income residents.³⁸

Writing for the *Chelsea Record*, Joshua Resnek published an article in 1990 spelling out Chelsea’s mistakes during the past decade. Entitling the article “What has been, shall be in the

future,” Resnek criticized city officials for relying too heavily on developers to invest money in the city and thereby increase the value of property. The developers, Resnek noted, came to Chelsea to make money; after they left, the bleak future of the status quo reemerged. By 1990, the last territorial frontier available for development was the waterfront, but rag shops and oil refineries had physically ravaged that waterfront for over a century. Blighted by vacant lots and rundown factories, the land was contaminated by toxic waste, isolated by limited roads, and caught between multiple ownership of land parcels. What was once valuable property was now wasteland, but it was all Chelsea had left. In 1986 the city hired Carol Thomas to study the waterfront in the hopes that it would provide Chelsea with one last chance to initiate industrial and residential development. Yet Thomas’ study, instead of recommending the land for future construction, described Chelsea Creek—the channel separating Chelsea from Boston—as Greater Boston’s wasteland. “The waterfront literally was the dumping area of the Boston area for a long time. . . bodies that criminals would dump there. Rag factories. Any use nobody wanted would end up in Chelsea Creek. It’s too valuable. It’s incredible you’d have this kind of activity and be 3-5 minutes to Logan Airport.” By the end of the 1980s, Chelsea’s physical setting and human situation were analogous. Just as the waterfront had been devalued by the demands of industrialization and the erection of the Mystic River Bridge so, too, had the Latinos of Chelsea been cheapened by association with a city already rife with urban turmoil.³⁹

The onset of urban crisis predated the rise of the city’s Latino population. Permeated with problems, towns in the Greater Boston area had long recognized—and singled out—Chelsea as a town that struggled to climb the social ladder. In fact, an old football cheer from one of

Chelsea's rival high schools went so far as to liken Chelsea to an ailment, "Chelsea, Chelsea tell me please, is it a city or a disease?" Indeed, according to neighbors in the Boston area, if the world was filled with winners and losers, then Chelsea was a city filled with the latter. There were, however, some "winners" in Chelsea, they just tended to be developers or city officials and not the general public. As the 1970s witnessed a change in federal attitude towards small, undeveloped cities, large sums of money became available for urban regeneration. Urban neglect characterized the fifties and sixties, but with the passage of the Housing and Community Development Act in 1974, that policy changed dramatically. The HDCA granted local governments the authority to allocate federal funds and as a result, local jurisdictions were more capable of assessing the needs of their community. But the expansive power of Chelsea's local authorities spelled death for the flailing city and its Latino constituents. The mayoral office was corrupt, the municipal leadership shortsighted, and the general public apathetic to the needs of low-income residents.⁴⁰

Between 1973 and 1990, Chelsea was a city at odds with itself. Unbeknownst to the constituents of "Old Chelsea," white flight had bequeathed their city to the Latino population. As the predominantly white, middle-class left the city to settle in suburbia, low-income residents and Latinos became a permanent fixture of the urban milieu. With little to offer in the way of single-family houses and white-collar jobs, Chelsea failed to capture the imagination of the second and third generations of the city's European immigrants. The Latinos, on the other hand, came to stay. Chain migration united families, friends, and compatriots in Chelsea and moreover, led to the fortification of kinship networks and a Latino identity that perpetuated the growth of the Spanish-speaking community. Though Chelsea's future was inevitably Latino, the city was

still in the hands of “Old Chelsea” and the leaders of that constituency had a competing idea of what the future had in store. Even as the Latino population boomed, long-time residents never relinquished the hope that the city would be restored to the glory of Powderhorn Hill and pre-1908 Bellingham Square. Caught between competing images of the city’s future, the Latino population suffered as “Old Chelsea” constructed a future that omitted its Latino residents; and nowhere was that omission more apparent than in the construction of the residential development at Admiral’s Hill. Instead of building affordable, family units, the city erected luxury and elderly housing that de facto excluded the Latino population. Though there was no proof of discriminatory intent, the city’s proposal, nonetheless, disregarded the needs of a large portion of its population.

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³ *Accion v. Secretary of Housing*, at *2; Uriarte, “Contra Viento y Marea,” 15.

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Conclusion:

Urban Industrial Life and the Fate of Ethnic Communities

From the beginning to the end of the twentieth century, Chelsea had a distinct industrial character and a unique set of urban problems that dictated the trajectory of the city's Jewish and Latino communities. Proximity to Boston and the city's waterways encouraged manufacturing enterprises and likewise, accessibility and employment opportunities that accelerated the influx of immigrants and the development of Jewish and Latino communities. Ethnic neighborhoods emerged as older communities dwindled. Throughout the years, many of Chelsea's residents left as a consequence of fire and crisis, and others abandoned the city in search of greater prosperity and comfort outside of the inner-urban environment. Chelsea's Jews and Latinos, however, lacked the means to choose to stay or to leave—at least at first. When Chelsea burned, the Jews and Latinos suffered tremendous losses; and while the city renewed itself, the ethnic communities struggled to follow suit. Under pressure to begin anew, Jews and later Latinos in Chelsea were tied to the heart of the city. During the rise of the Jews, Chelsea had begun a new chapter in its history whereas during the ascendance of the Latino population, the livelihood of the city's residents was no more than a footnote. Following the fire of 1908, there was industrial prosperity and opportunity for Jewish ascension, but after the fire of 1973 there was only urban decline and stagnation for the Latino community. As a post-industrial city with a bridge running through it, Chelsea was past its prime long before the Latinos settled down. Chelsea's Hispanic community inherited the city's problems but it did not create them. For better or for worse,

Chelsea had always been a “city under fire” and it was exactly that feature that defined the city and her residents.

Throughout the twentieth century Chelsea’s urban milieu withstood extraordinary physical abuse. Although industry was always a crucial source of jobs and purchasing power, heavy industrialization was—in the end—a blight more than a blessing. The oil companies and shoe factories, among others, devalued and in many cases contaminated the land they occupied. Not to mention the city’s industrial districts were, moreover, twice responsible for the fires that ravaged the urban landscape in both 1908 and 1973. In fact, 1908 marked the beginning of what became an unbalanced relationship between Chelsea and its industry, as the latter drove property taxes skyward. Chelsea collected fewer property taxes from the city’s industries—many of which were favored by federal policy; without the benefit of sales tax—Massachusetts did not issue a statewide sales tax until 1966—the city’s predominantly low-income residents bore the burden of city government and municipal programs. For Chelsea, industrialization was a double-edged phenomenon. While it did increase and maintain the livelihood of Chelsea and her residents—most notably Jews—its continued presence pushed the city deeper and deeper into a cycle of industrial dependence that erupted in fire and ended—at the close of the twentieth century—in the lap of a growing Latino population.¹

One of the main differences between the Jewish and Latino experience in Chelsea was the extent to which public opinion influenced municipal policy and the distribution of financial support. After the fire of 1908 and 1973, the rebuilding efforts disfavored ethnic populations by choosing not to tend to the needs of the lower class. Chelsea did not build affordable housing for its expanding ethnic and working-class communities. Fire codes implemented after the 1908

conflagration disproportionately affected Jews—the previous inhabitants of wooden shacks and tenements—who could not afford to live in new buildings. As for the reconstruction efforts after the fire of 1973, the city chose not to replace the modest dwellings that housed Latinos before the conflagration. Instead, the city’s urban renewal project amended the former, heavily Latino residential district into the industrial development area and ignored the question of housing altogether. Jews, however, fared better in the reconstruction environment because the fire had made commercial property available at a time when Boston’s industries were expanding outside the city limits. In the absence of federal or state relief, the Board of Control relied heavily on pro-commercial policies in order to jolt the economy and moreover, rescue the city’s industries and livelihood. As a result, those who invested in the city were industrial conglomerates and not federal or state monies placed at the discretion of relief authorities. The 1908 reconstruction policy relied on the free-market system to bring capital and financial confidence back into the city, and thus local politics had little—if any—control over who benefitted from the inflow of capital. In the wake of such practices, Jews prospered because industrial expansion was entirely dependent upon labor. Wages fueled the growth of the Jewish population, and rapid production during wartime primed the population for unprecedented social ascension. Latinos, on the other hand, had no such luck. After the fire of 1973, the federal and state government placed urban renewal funds—meant to remedy urban decline—directly into the hands of the municipality—as was consistent with the policy of the Housing and Community Development Act. Yet although the intent of government assistance was to save the community from deindustrialization, the money only served to reinforce the estrangement of Latinos from the community. The municipality built Murray Industrial Park for the purpose of attracting “community-responsible”

businesses and by the same token, the city constructed luxury housing at Admiral's Hill in order to entice "respectable workers" to buy and live in Chelsea. These two projects invested federal and state funds directly into the white-collar community without equally considering the needs of the low-income residents. Moreover, neither industrial development nor upper-class housing produced the uplifting effect that the municipality anticipated. Murray Industrial Park attracted Boston-based firms looking to save on rent and capitalize on space. And similarly, luxury housing along the waterfront caught the eyes of some of Boston's young, white professionals interested in living above their means. Unlike widespread industrial development after 1908, federally-funded urban renewal projects provided temporary financial gain instead of continuous economic stimulation. The white-collar businesses and people that the urban renewal funds advantaged were isolated fixtures in a working-class environment that needed affordable housing and employment opportunities. The fire had accelerated deindustrialization and destroyed low-income housing, both to the absolute detriment of the Chelsea's Latino population.²

The comparable circumstances but divergent paths of Jewish and Latino Chelsea revealed the limits of social ascension during the second half of the twentieth century. The onset of deindustrialization and the simultaneous expansion of the Latino community confined the newcomers to the inner-urban environment. In the passionate words of Isildro Vega "the Burger Kings and the supermarkets don't pay anything, you see? . . . I had a good job in the factory. . . I had health insurance and vacation days. . . when they left we lost our jobs." Arriving during the first wave of Latino migration, Isildro watched as Latinos inherited a city that had less and less opportunities as the decades wore on. After the fire of 1973, some Hispanics became proprietors and opened up businesses along Broadway and in Bellingham Square, but for the bulk of the

population, there was not enough work to meet the growing demand. By 1990, Chelsea housed a reservoir of human capital. Oversaturated with an exploding population of Central Americans—and especially Salvadorans—Chelsea was a basin of cheap labor. Temporary labor agencies such as Labor Ready and Workers Help capitalized on the demand for work and in many cases exploited undocumented Central American workers. Without papers and without the means to choose, Chelsea's Central American population found itself trapped in a labor system that not only prevented economic mobility but maintained social oppression.³

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On October 14, 2009 the *Chelsea Record* published an article on the anniversary of the Great Fire of 1973. Entirely different from the *Globe's* retrospective of 1908, the article neither dramatized the unknown origins of the conflagration nor described how Chelsea rose up from the ashes. Unlike the first fire, there was no urban myth to be told and no burning questions to be answered. According to the newspaper's editors, the city was already “cascading into the ground” at the time of the fire. It had been run down by years of neglect and vacated by the families and businesses who had once called it home. The article did not recollect memories of people fleeing in the streets, but drinking in a bar. The fear that had filled the air in 1908 was all but absent in a city that had grown accustomed to smoke and decay. As devastating as the fire of 1973 was, Chelsea was a city under fire and it had been for quite some time.⁴

The less than sensational storytelling of the Great Fire of 1973 said a lot about how Chelsea had changed since 1908. There was no “board of control” after the second fire and there was no period of prosperity in the years to follow. In 1919, the population of Chelsea peaked at 52,662 persons and from then onward the city grappled with continuous demographic decline.

Thirty-one years later, in 1950, the Mystic River Bridge carved the urban landscape with miles of roadway and dispossessed the city of its most valuable terrain. Urban crisis grabbed hold of the city during the 1960s—culminating with the Gulf Oil explosion of 1969—and by the time fire erupted yet again, Chelsea had already been singled out as a chief recipient of federal and state assistance. While Chelsea had always been a city of working-class people, in 1973 the residents were living in an urban milieu that was filthy from the residue of industry and subject to the whims of local politics. During the 1970s and 1980s, the city spiraled into fiscal crisis under the weight of deindustrialization and fell into the hands of corrupt mayors and city officials. In 1991, the federal government placed Chelsea into receivership, and the city has not held municipal elections since.⁵

Though it is true that all of Chelsea has suffered in the aftermath of receivership and municipal indigence, Latinos have carried the burden of urban decline. In recent years, the phenomena of undocumented immigration and temporary employment, neither of which applied to the Jewish population, have deepened Latino exploitation and economic hardship. Nowadays, a variety of businesses and people organize and dispatch Chelsea's Latino workforce to factories, construction sites, and other worksites throughout Metro Boston. The workers are loaded into vans and station wagons and transported to their temporary place of employment. Jobs are allocated on a first-come, first-service basis, and those who wait in line are not guaranteed work. The jobs provided by the agencies include backbreaking, often perilous activities, that workers other than the undocumented would not dare touch. Clearing rubble at a construction site near the Liberty Tree Mall in Danvers—which is located in Essex County, north of Chelsea—was just one example of the type of work performed by Chelsea's undocumented. Other examples paint a

more horrid picture. Employed by a produce company and working in a damp and cold environment, one Latino worker was instructed by his superior to remove lead paint with his bare hands and without the necessary protective clothing. Shortly thereafter, the man ended up in the hospital with lead poisoning. His temporary employer denied any responsibility for the worksite injury, and insisted that the man never worked for him. In the post-industrial city, the exploitation of labor has reached new heights. Chelsea's Latino migrants have few rights as temporary laborers and even fewer rights as undocumented workers. Just like the Jews before them, the Latinos came to Chelsea to work and find a better life. Yet this time around, there was significantly less work to be found. The Latinos may have replaced the Jews, but more importantly, white-collar industrial parks and empty space had replaced the factories.⁶

Yet leaving the matrix of urban phenomena aside, the one factor that remained constant throughout the twentieth century was the remarkable vitality of Chelsea's ethnic communities. The Jews and Latinos of Chelsea breathed life into a city that was badly regarded and poorly kempt. At the beginning of the twentieth century, one Boston newspaper called Chelsea "an irretrievable mistake," and by the time Latino migrants arrived, the city's downtrodden character had already inspired the term "dead as Chelsea." Although the city may have had a bad reputation in the greater Boston area, among Jewish and Latino circles the city was known for its unique ethnic character. During the era of the Jews, Chelsea was "America's most Jewish city." And after their religious community bequeathed the township to the Latinos, Chelsea became "un pueblo tranquilo," and one of the most ethnically diverse cities in the state. By 1980, Latinos had become the city's most populous immigrant group and by 2000, Hispanics comprised almost fifty percent of the population. Although constituents of "Old Chelsea"—be they Walter Pratt or

the Chelsea Housing Authority—often frowned upon the development of ethnic identity, others flocked to the city for exactly the same reason. Jewish and Latino kinship networks brought vitality to a city that no longer kept the interest of second generation Americans and middle-class citizens. Although Chelsea had—and has—its fair share of issues, it also had a unique ethnic magnetism that brought new people to the city’s doorstep. For over a century now, Chelsea has been a “city of immigrants” and it is because of them that there is still something to love in the small, run-down city. In the words of Jeremiah Murphy reporting for the *Boston Globe*, “Chelsea had it’s problems all right, but I will tell what it also has: an indefinable charm.”⁷

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