

North End Bathhouse Historical Significance (continued)

The North Bennet Street Bath House and Gymnasium (MACRIS Inventory No. BOS.5405) is the last building remaining in public use from the original North End Municipal Area on North Bennet Street. (MACRIS Inventory No. BOS.ACN North End Municipal Area), whose central organizing feature was the North End (Polcari) Playground. Known today as the Nazzaro Community Center, the building bears the family name of Michael Nazzaro, a state representative renowned for his efforts to save the North End from demolition in the 1960s by the Boston Redevelopment Authority.

Five years after the land for the building was acquired by the City of Boston, the ornate bath house was designed in 1907 in an Italian Renaissance style, at a cost of \$130,000. By the time the bath house opened in 1910, after delays due to fiscal constraints, the area was largely Italian and Jewish.ⁱ

The demand for public baths was part of the wider demand for public health reform following the 1849 cholera epidemic, with new worries about typhoid, and the wider acceptance of the germ theory of disease.ⁱⁱ Bath reformers maintained that the baths would not only improve health, but also improve the moral character of the poor, making them better citizens. Public baths aimed to bridge the gap between the classes and help achieve a small measure of social justice. Cleanliness was extolled as one of the hallmarks of civilization and progress.ⁱⁱⁱ

The first demands for public baths came with the waves of Irish immigrants, and didn't wane until the mid- 20th century, as the massive influx of refugees from eastern and southern Europe subsided. The notion that slumlords should be required to provide bathrooms for their tenants was largely disregarded as cities exploded with new tenements.^{iv} This history was exemplified in Boston, where the Massachusetts Sanitary Commission reported in 1850 that the lower classes could not afford the cost of the 12 commercial bathhouses in the city.^v A joint committee of the Common Council and Board of Aldermen was established in Boston in 1866 to study the locations for new public baths. Even as late as 1940, approximately 90% of North End homes were without private baths and about 50% lacked private toilets.^{vi}

On Oct. 15, 1898 the *Boston Herald* proudly reported the opening of Boston's first year-round public bath house, the Dover Street Bathhouse in the South End. "The inauguration of winter bath-houses for the free use of the people is something of a novelty in any city in this country, and Boston has the proud distinction of being the pioneer in the work," the newspaper said. Although bath reformers can be criticized for not demanding for the poor the same private bathing facilities that they enjoyed in their homes, Boston Mayor Josiah Quincy VI maintained in 1898 that the public baths were "architectural monuments of the city" which raised "the whole idea of public bathing to a high and dignified plane."^{vii} After Dover Street, all the city's new public baths would be constructed to include gymnasiums. The most notable example of this was the ornate North Bennet Street Bath House, as cited by Maureen Meister, *Arts and Crafts Architecture: History and Heritage in New England* (Hanover and London: University Press of New England, 2014.)

By 1916, The Boston Globe recognized that the North End's North Bennet St. area had become "Boston's Public Service Corridor," thanks in large part to the elegant Bath House and Gymnasium, schools, and the adjacent Prince Street Playground, which featured "a beautiful pergola" topped with rows of spruce and hemlock trees.^{viii} The playground, which extends from Prince Street to North Bennet Street, has been in continual use for over 100 years, in the heart of the dense North End community. The bathhouse building remains the last of four buildings flanking the playground, designated together with the playground in MACRIS as the North End Municipal Area. The other three buildings, two of them schools and one a public library branch, have all been sold to private developers and turned into condos. The bathhouse and playground remain public areas owned by the City of Boston. By 1916, the Boston bath system included 15 year-round baths, most with gymnasiums attached.

World Welterweight Champion Tony DeMarco started his boxing career at the North End Bathhouse, in the 1940s.^{ix} The municipal bath program was discontinued in 1959, but the North Bennet Street Bath House and Gymnasium remained used regularly as a bathhouse by an estimated 900 North End residents until it closed in 1976. In 1985, the building was restored and repurposed as the Nazzaro Community Center, with youth, senior citizen, and other recreational and community programs for all ages. The community center was named for Michael A. Nazzaro Jr., who gave up a promising job in Washington DC in the 1950s to come home to Boston to rescue his neighborhood from destruction by the New Boston Committee and the Boston Redevelopment Authority. As a Massachusetts state representative, Nazzaro saved much of the neighborhood from being taken by eminent domain for development, as had happened in the adjacent West End.^x The North End community votes and holds its meetings today in the Nazzaro building. It underwent another \$1 million renovation in 2004 under Mayor Thomas Menino, Boston's only Italian-American mayor.

The North End (Polcari) Playground spans the length of the block from North Bennet Street to Prince Street. Today the Nazzaro Community Center and the playground, which was renamed for Capt. Louis Polcari, a North End World War II hero who served on General MacArthur's staff, remain heavily used as the center of community life in the North End. Citizens vote here, seniors meet here, schools bring their students here for recess and after school programs, and neighborhood residents use the gym and lighted outdoor basketball court both indoors and at the playground. Old-timers still remember taking showers here and, as teenagers, getting ready for their dates: "Back then there was no bathtub or shower in my childhood apartment. We had the North End Bathhouse," wrote Natalie Cinelli in NorthEndWaterfront.com a year ago. "My cousin Lucille, who grew up with me in my grandmother's building on the fourth floor, recalls the Saturday nights at the bathhouse when all the young girls would be getting ready for their big dates, doing their hair, primping and putting on makeup, gossiping about boys. A true communal experience!"^{xi}

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ⁱ Williams, Marilyn Thornton, *Washing the Great Unwashed: Public Baths in Urban America, 1840-1920* (Columbus: 1991, Ohio State University Press), pp. 77-79. In Boston, the Italian population swelled from 4,700 in 1890 to 31,380 by 1910. (from Puleo, Stephen,

https://scholarworks.umb.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1155&context=masters_theses)

ii Williams, op. cit., p. 14, 24.

iii Ibid, p. 2, 22-27

iv Ibid, p. 26

v Ibid, p. 15

vi Goldfeld, Alex, *The North End: A Brief History of Boston's Oldest Neighborhood*, (Charleston, 2009, The History Press.), p. 168

vii City of Boston, Statistics Department, *City Record 1* (Oct. 20, 1898), 593. As quoted in Williams, p. 136. The Dover Street Bath House has been demolished and the site is now a parking lot.

viii "North Bennet St. Now is Boston's Public Service Center, *Boston Daily Globe*, Apr. 6, 1913

ix Tony Demarco, interviewed in "Boston's North End: An Italian-American Story," film by the North End Historical Society, 2016.

^x Michael A. Nazzaro Jr. obituary, Legacy.com

^{xi} Cinelli, Natalie Romano, "Then and Now—Boston's North End," NorthEndWaterfront.com, Aug. 1, 2017