

ARNIE JARMAK

Photographing Chelsea in Transition, 1977-89



Joshua Resnek, *Arnie Jarmak with His Deardorff Camera, Walnut Street, 1978*

This exhibition features the photography of Arnie Jarmak (born Marblehead, Massachusetts, 1949) who worked as a photojournalist from 1977 to 1989 for the *Chelsea Record*, that city's daily newspaper. The selection of photographs displayed here comes from an archive of over twenty thousand negatives being digitized by Boston Public Library.

Jarmak's images are a time capsule documenting fundamental social and demographic changes in Chelsea, a small city three miles north of Boston, at a time when it was evolving from a predominantly Eastern European Jewish immigrant community into a primarily Hispanic one. Such transitions were taking place in cities across the United States in the 1970s and 1980s. It was common in this period to see places like Chelsea as in decline or in crisis, but Jarmak's photographs tell a more complex story about the endurance of old ways and the arrival of dynamic newcomers.

Influenced by twentieth-century American documentary photographers including Walker Evans and Lewis Hine, and reflecting a rich engagement with wide-ranging literary sources, Jarmak's Chelsea photographs are rare and poignant records of this transitional era. They record persistence and transformation with a deeply human sensibility and compassion for the city's resilient residents. The exhibition complements Boston College's ongoing digital project, *Global Boston*, directed by Prof. Marilyn S. Johnson, chronicling the history of immigration to Greater Boston since the early nineteenth century.

Organized by the McMullen Museum, the exhibition has been curated by Diana Larsen and Ash Anderson with major support from Boston College and the Patrons of the McMullen Museum. Photographs in the exhibition are digital prints made and loaned by Arnie Jarmak.

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PHOTOGRAPHS PRINTED, FRAMED, AND LOANED BY ARNIE JARMAK



Audio Tour

ARNIE JARMAK

Photographing Chelsea in Transition, 1977-89

Use the QR code above to load the audio tour.

Works in the exhibition that have commentary by the photographer are marked on their labels with this icon:



Jarmak's 8 x 10 inch Deardorff Field Camera, pre-1942 🎧

Jarmak learned to love the art of photography with this camera. He admired Walker Evans (1903–75) who used a Deardorff 8 x 10 inch Field Camera, and bought this similar model from George Garian, a retired photographer from Lynn, Massachusetts, for \$200 in 1978. It was missing a bellows so he drove out to meet the Deardorff brothers, descendants of the inventors of the camera, in Chicago. They identified his pre-1942 model and added necessary pieces from their inventory to the front of the camera so it could swivel.

*Deardorff, Adams Point Road,
Durham, New Hampshire*

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*Mary Kowalczyk, Arnie Jarmak
in Utila, Honduras, 1974*

Arnie Jarmak was introduced to photography at his grandparents' home where he became fascinated with a book of Civil War photographs taken by Mathew Brady (1822–96), one of America's earliest professional photographers. An avid reader, Jarmak studied history and economics at Lehigh University.

He developed a keen interest in how social and economic inequality had been addressed historically in literature and art. With a camera given to him by his parents for graduation, Jarmak captured the destruction of the iconic Fishermens' Institute in Gloucester; this early work is now in the permanent collection of the Cape Ann Museum.

Harry Siegel with Kids, late 1970s

Harry Siegel photographed children, teenagers, and adults on the corner of Broadway and Third Street in Chelsea every day for decades. He developed his photos on the spot and in the 1970s charged twenty-five cents for them. As seen here, Siegel always wore a long coat and hat. At the end of each day, his son helped him carry his equipment to the bus they took home together. From Siegel, Jarmak learned to shoot portraits in shadow to realize softer and more even face tones.

Jarmak's Nikon F 35 mm Camera (left above)

Most of the photographs in this exhibition were taken with this camera.

Diana Larsen, Arnie Jarmak, Oxford, Massachusetts, 2018 (left below)

8 x 10 in. Sheet Film Holder for Jarmak's Deardorff Camera (center above)

Entering Chelsea (center below)

Harry Siegel, Portraits of Arnie Jarmak with Cameras, 1977 (right above)

Gustave Flaubert [Harry Siegel's Portraits of Arnie Jarmak with Andrew Quigley and Joshua Resnek], 1977 (right below)

The *Chelsea Record*

Publisher Andrew Quigley acquired Chelsea's daily newspaper in 1976 during a typographers' strike. Founded in 1948, the paper was struggling after losing half its circulation as a result of the strike. Quigley believed the *Record* should be circulated daily as the voice of the city. With Joshua Resnek as writer and Arnie Jarmak as photographer among his staff of ten, Quigley transformed the paper into a chronicle of the city's life that people queued up to buy each day. By the time Jarmak left the *Record* in 1989, his photographs had appeared on the front page of forty-five hundred editions of the newspaper; he had become a familiar figure to many of the *Record's* readers.


Copy of the “Chelsea Record” on the Sidewalk, 1976 (above)

Al Goldman, 1978 (below)

The *Chelsea Record* came out between 12:30 and 1:00 p.m. Al Goldman sold the newspaper in Bellingham Square, which was the heart of the city, known locally as the “hub of the universe.” It was Chelsea’s center of institutional and commercial life with banks and City Hall.

Getting the “Record” in the Square (above)


Jarmak enjoyed the varied tasks he was called upon to do while working for the daily newspaper, including its delivery. He delivered, often tardily, to eight or more corner stores. A small cluster of people regularly waited for a copy of the *Record*, allowing him to capture their reactions to his front page photo and their devotion to picking up the paper as part of a daily routine.

Andrew Quigley at the “Chelsea Record” Offices, 1980 (below) 

The *Record*'s owner and publisher peruses the day's headlines in the front office; he views a photograph of the Stebbins Fountain (1898) in Chelsea Square, a source of civic pride built with money bequeathed by banker and onetime mayor Isaac Stebbins. In the background is Josephine Galicia, a beloved secretary who put up with the antics of the *Record*'s young staff.

The Quigleys, originally haberdashers from Co. Cork, Ireland, were a well-known political family. Andrew's father was a former state senator and a popular eleven-term mayor of Chelsea; his brother was commandant of the soldiers' home; Andrew himself was chairman of the school committee. The Quigleys together managed thirteen hundred jobs in a city of thirty thousand people.

“Record” Readers (above left)

Reading the “Record” in the Square (below left) 

Reading the “Record,” 1979 (right) 

Five men sit on a wall reading the *Record* in Bellingham Square. The headline on the front page, “Devils look fine in ’79,” refers to the upcoming high school football season. Jarmak recalls choosing this photo of Chelsea residents reading his newspaper to gladden the heart of his boss, Andrew Quigley.

Issues of the "Chelsea Record," July 5, 1979,
Feb. 13, 1978, Dec. 20, 1977, June 14, 1977,
Mar. 29, 1979, Feb. 6, 1979 (left to right)

Several of these newspapers feature Jarmak's images, often on the front page. He took more than twenty thousand photos during his time in Chelsea, knowing that they would be viewed surrounded by text. In this exhibition, the photos can now be appreciated by themselves as works of art.

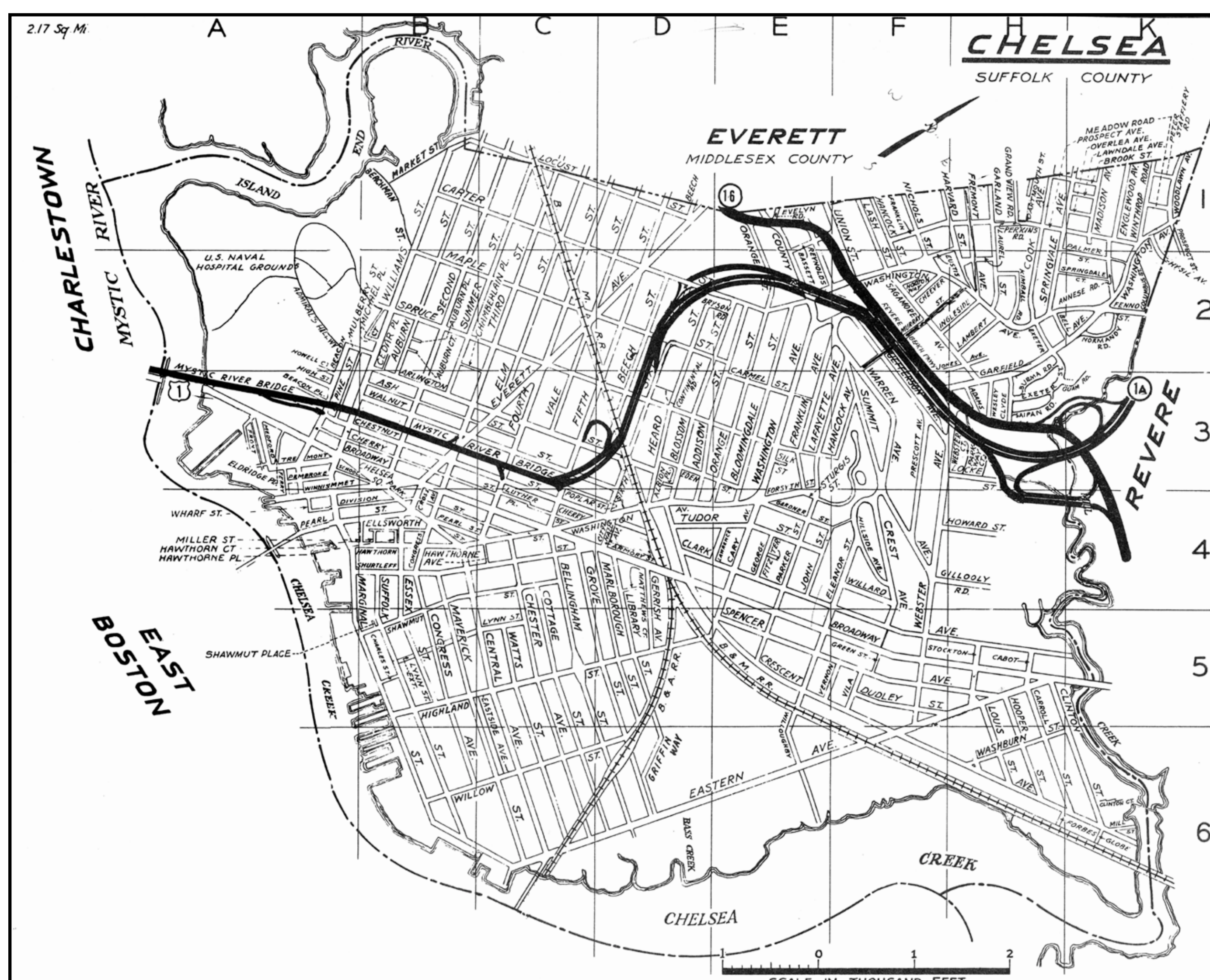
Setting the Scene

Located just north of Boston across the Mystic River, Chelsea is a compact city of about forty thousand residents. Historically the homeland of the Massachusetts people, the town was incorporated in 1739 as a rural escape for wealthy Bostonians. By the mid-nineteenth century, however, industry moved into the area making it a strategic location for shipbuilding and oil, paint, and varnish factories that employed Irish immigrants escaping the Great Famine and French Canadians from Nova Scotia.

In the 1890s, another wave of immigration brought Polish and Russian Jews and Italians fleeing poverty and religious discrimination to the city. At the turn of the twentieth century Chelsea underwent another industrial boom with the building of foundries and rubber, paper, and shoe-making factories including the mammoth A. G. Walton and Company.

In 1908 a fire devastated the city, destroying all of Chelsea's downtown and waterfront. The old city was obliterated and residents, left homeless, moved away in droves. Many immigrants, Jews in particular, returned to rebuild the city, coming from other settlements around Boston. They established numerous synagogues and retail businesses and reconstructed City Hall.

Chelsea's Jewish community remained vital through the Depression and World War II but saw a rapid decline in the 1950s. High residential tax rates, decrepit housing stock, and the building of the Mystic River Bridge that sliced through the heart of the city, all contributed to Chelsea's post-war decline. By 1965, its longtime residents were leaving in large numbers. Newcomers included Puerto Ricans working in agriculture and a smaller group of Cubans.



Over the next decade, the city's population surged with the arrival of thousands of refugees from Central America fleeing violence and civil wars in El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras. By the early 2000s, Chelsea had become an important center of Hispanic life in the Boston area, playing a role similar to that which it did for Jews a hundred years earlier. Jarmak's photographs capture this complex and multilayered demographic history.

View from City Hall Spire 🎧

Taken from the spire of Chelsea's City Hall, this mid-winter image looks toward the city of Boston. Using a wide-angle 24 mm lens, Jarmak creates a bird's-eye view showing the geographical relations between the cities. Completed in 1950, the bridge cut a swathe through Chelsea's neighborhoods to carry cars northward, bypassing the city.

Civil War (Soldiers' and Sailors' Monument), Chelsea

The largest of Chelsea's three Civil War monuments, the Soldiers' and Sailors' Monument, designed and sculpted by Franklin Simmons (1839–1913) of Lewiston, Maine, was erected in 1869 in Union Park. Spared in the Great Fire of 1908, the monument subsequently was relocated to Bassett Square opposite City Hall. It is one of the first large-scale "standing soldier" monuments in Massachusetts, depicting a soldier atop a 33-foot-tall column dedicated to the memory of 167 fallen soldiers from Chelsea.

Triple-Deckers and City Hall Spire

City Hall was built after the fire of 1908 and modeled after Independence Hall in Philadelphia. Here the spire rises amidst the characteristic triple-decker houses that abound in Chelsea, providing homes to multiple families.



Independence Hall, Philadelphia

Low Tide, Chelsea Creek, August 1979 🎧

The eighteenth-century building in the distance is the first tide mill in the United States; Chelsea Creek was dammed to turn a wheel that operated the mill. Once a pristine, pastoral setting, the photo shows that by the 1970s Chelsea's residents had turned the area into a dumping ground for old TVs and shopping carts.

Tank Farm, Chelsea Creek

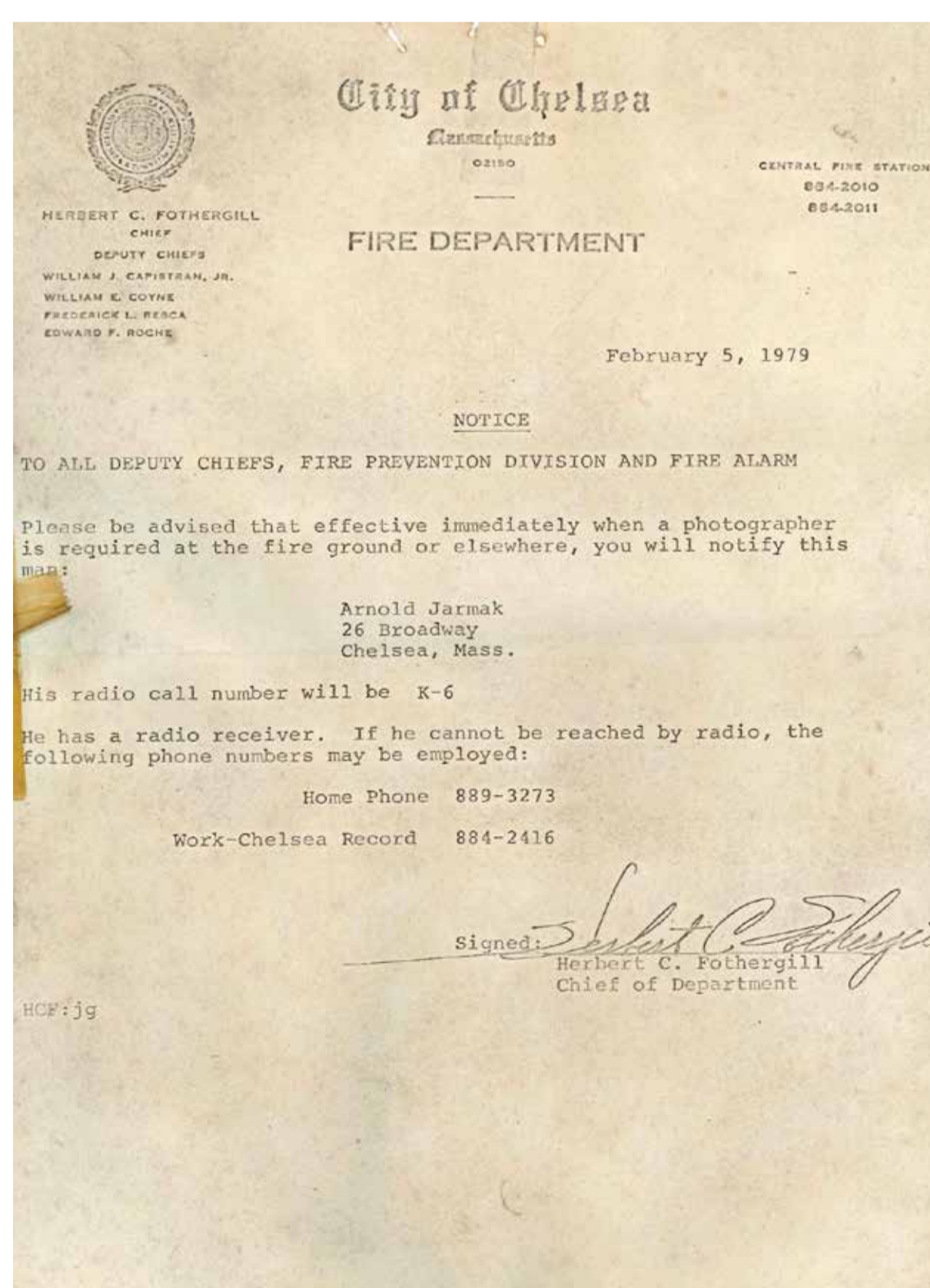
With the closure of the A. G. Walton Shoe Company, Chelsea's economic fortunes declined. As a result residents were burdened with one of the highest tax rates in Massachusetts. Gulf Oil was one of the new industries recruited by town officials to replace the lost revenue. The company built a tank farm along the banks of Chelsea Creek in the 1960s, which later leaked into the water. Other industries dumped sewage and chemicals into Chelsea Creek and Mystic River, further fouling the city's water. Jarmak took this photograph of a Citgo tank farm, down the road from Gulf's, with his Deardorff camera.

The Fire Brigade

The acceleration of industry in Chelsea at the turn of the twentieth century attracted thousands of new immigrant workers who densely populated the city. The fire of 1908, which started in the Rag District, destroyed nearly fifteen hundred buildings and much of the downtown and waterfront.

The presence of petroleum facilities added in the 1960s, the deterioration of old wooden houses, a malfunctioning hydrant system, and an underfunded and poorly equipped fire department did not bode well in the event of another major fire. Unfortunately for Chelsea, that day came on October 14, 1973. In an eerie echo of 1908, the fire began in the old Rag District just two hundred yards from where the earlier conflagration had started. More than eleven hundred people

were displaced, many of them recent migrants from Puerto Rico. The Great Chelsea Fire of 1973 swept away the bulk of the city's Ward Two.



Conditions in Chelsea did not change significantly during the time that Arnie Jarmak was photographing. He was asked by the fire department to be on call day and night to photograph all fires (see letter, left). His images of the *Chelsea Clock Fire* (1978), the *Poplar Street Fire* (1978), and many others provide haunting glimpses into all-too-frequent devastation.

Row Houses, Beacon Street

This streetscape presents a series of mid-nineteenth-century façades dating from the time when a nearby ferry connected Chelsea to Boston. The three-story brick buildings reflect a period of economic boom and are typical of commercial architecture throughout the Boston area in this period.

Poplar Street Fire, 1978 (left) 

Chelsea Clock Fire, 1978 (right)

Vol. 2, Fire 17 (above left)

Night Fire (below left)

Chelsea Firefighters (above right)

Fighting the Fire (below right)

Betsy Siegel, Poplar Street (above) 

This night image captures an elderly resident, Betsy Siegel, having been awakened and led out of her burning home by locals (in the background) who arrived before the fire department. On the right is Fire Captain Denning.

Chestnut Street Fire (below) 

Officer Frederick Sullivan looks with concern at an anguished woman whose apartment has been made uninhabitable by fire. Scenes like this of Chelsea's old houses ravaged by fire were commonplace during the years when Jarmak was photographing.

Political Machinations

Chelsea's chaotic politics provided regular content for the *Record*. Its readers eagerly followed the machinations of the city's politicians and party organizations. By the end of the 1980s Chelsea was bankrupt and in 1991 a state-appointed overseer took control of the city. In 1993, long-standing political corruption was brought to light when former Mayor Joel Pressman admitted to accepting bribes during the city's redevelopment following the 1973 fire. The final three politicians to hold the office of mayor following Pressman were convicted of obstruction of justice. While Jarmak avoided overt political commentary in his work, he believed that "reality and appearances don't always align" and used photography to undermine some of the misleading political rhetoric he encountered.

Joel Pressman on Election Night, 1977

Under the gaze of John F. Kennedy, Joel Pressman speaks victoriously to his constituents on the night he was elected mayor of Chelsea. Pressman served three terms until 1983.

Pressman Mayoral Headquarters, 1977 (above)

Petition to Recall Mayor James D. Mitchell Jr., 1984 (below)

Using a dramatic elevated view, Jarmak captures John Dallas and other city officials certifying the signatures of several thousand registered voters seeking to recall Mayor Mitchell in 1984 just six months after he took office. Following months of public clashes between the mayor and aldermen, school committee, chief of police, and city treasurer, the recall ultimately failed on a technicality. This was one among many chaotic events during this period of Chelsea's history as various parties vied for control of City Hall.

Let's Keep Chelsea Clean 🎧

In partnership with city officials, the Salvation Army pickets a theater in Chelsea showing X-rated movies. The protesters failed in their attempts to shut down the theater.

Joel and the Duke 🎧

Jarmak features Mayor Pressman and Governor Michael Dukakis (in office 1975–79) with the light from the mayor's office window highlighting their faces. Both politicians understood the value of a good image and were happy to pose for Jarmak. Dukakis was a popular Democratic governor, who supported many liberal causes for Chelsea.

Alderman Thomas J. Nolan (Mayor of Chelsea, 1986–87) in front of City Hall, 1982 (center) 🎧

Jarmak's popularity in the *Record* brought him independent work from politicians seeking election. Here Jarmak photographs Alderman Thomas Nolan, scion of an Irish political family with deep roots in Chelsea, from below with City Hall behind him. Nolan became a one-term mayor.

Ballot Boxes, Election Night (above) 🎧

At City Hall, a police officer escorts ballot boxes from polling stations to the city clerk's office. In Chelsea each ward had its own city councilor and political action groups. Residents voted on paper ballots at the polling booth in their ward. Jarmak looked on with interest as election results came in, with each ward usually voting as a block.

Station Wagon with Political Bumper Stickers, early 1980s (below)

Before elections political posters and bumper stickers abounded in Chelsea where political success was often built on personal connections. Residents displayed their support for a state or town candidate in order to secure the politician's help for pressing issues affecting their livelihoods.

A City in Transition

Chelsea has long been a city populated by immigrants whose arrival transformed the city in successive waves. Irish Catholics in the mid-nineteenth century were followed by Canadians, and at the end of the century Russian and Eastern European Jews began to move to Chelsea in increasing numbers. During the following decades they built businesses, housing, and synagogues, transforming the city's residential and commercial neighborhoods, and by the 1920s, Chelsea was booming. In the 1950s, a growing Puerto Rican population began to transform the city once again, but by the time Jarmak arrived in 1977, the city was in steady decline. In the wake of the 1973 fire, the population diminished. Much of the city's housing stock was owned by absentee landlords who let their buildings fall into disrepair. Jarmak's photographs reflect these trends without losing sight of the resilient local cultures established during the preceding decades: the shoe manufacturing that drove Chelsea's growth in the nineteenth century, the delis and luncheonettes that served generations of locals, and the repurposed sanctuaries that symbolize the importance of religious community shared among diverse residents.

In these pictures Jarmak demonstrates where his interests overlap with a variety of twentieth-century photographic practices as well. He evokes the quirky spontaneity and eccentric personalities that characterized interwar street photography, as well as the sober representations of failed ambitions in the form of urban blight that recall the 1930s. Some of his pictures are imbued with anger at the social inequality they describe, drawing on a long history of social documentary photography and photojournalism.

Arrow Sign Service (above)

Joe's Quality Market (below)

Hy's Shoes, Broadway, 1980s (right)

Shoe Shelf 🎧

While Jarmak often photographed Chelsea's varied façades and inhabitants separately, here he brings them together in a picture that is both a streetscape and a portrait in which all subjects are similarly worn. The peppy tone of Shoe Shelf's painted signage belies the picture's otherwise grim atmosphere. Jarmak's unusual decision to place the man at the picture's center, cropped below the knees, rhymes his form with the other prominent verticals in the background, and results in an image that is structured by formal relationships as much as by social commentary.

Allen's Cut Rate, Broadway, 1977 🎧

Opened in the late 1930s, Allen's Cut Rate remains in business today. When Jarmak photographed the store in 1977, its appearance was little changed from decades earlier. Jarmak recalls his first impression of the façade as “a Walker Evans photograph just waiting for someone to take it.” The energetic combination of signs, products, and prices recalls Evans's photographs of similar storefronts with hand painted signs, from the mid-1930s.



Walker Evans (1903–75), *Storefront Façade of C. J. Fite Jazz Feeds, Jackson, Mississippi*, February 1936, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York

Abandoned Buildings, Walnut Street (above)

Last House on Third Street (below) 🎧

Nearly an entire ward of Chelsea's triple-deckers burned in the fire of 1973, leaving only a few standing. Most owners sold their property to the city for redevelopment. Harry Gurman, the owner of this house, would not allow the city to take it down and went to court to protect his ownership of the property. It had been his family's home for decades: his parents had lived on the first floor, his grandparents on the second, and his aunt and uncle on the third. Gurman wanted to preserve the last vestiges of the old Chelsea he knew. Eventually the city took the property by eminent domain, demolished the house, and built a mall on the site.



Mystic Mall, Chelsea

Pardon the Temporary Inconvenience, 1976-77 (left) 🎧

Walnut Street Shul (left)

Taken from the balcony where women sat, this image features a magnificent hand-carved wooden religious ark in the Walnut Street Shul. The turn-of-the-twentieth-century Orthodox temple was the grandest of eighteen synagogues in Chelsea and often welcomed about one thousand worshippers. Today, the congregation has all moved or passed away and the building has become a repository for collections of Judaica and archives relating to Chelsea's Jewish history. It remains symbolic of a vibrant Jewish community in Chelsea at a time when the city was known as the "Jerusalem of America."

Iglesia de Dios (right)

This photo was taken on Chestnut Street, down the street from the Walnut Street Shul. Once a synagogue and now the Chelsea Spanish Church of God, the photograph visually epitomizes the changing demographics of the city.

Sausage Making, Kayem Foods (above)

Owned by the Monkevich family from Poland, Kayem Foods began making Polish kielbasa and hot dogs in this three-story factory on Winnisimmet Street, close to where Jarmak lived. Now, three generations later, the business has grown to sell products throughout the world. The Monkeviches hired many immigrants and were known as benevolent employers.

Independent Cab (below)

Murray (left), Eddy (center), and Sam Rosenberg inside Their Deli (above)

Three Rosenberg brothers owned this delicatessen on Broadway. The menu boards list sandwiches named for successful and popular Chelsea lawyers like Ritchie Clayman (corned beef with Swiss cheese on dark rye) and Evan Gellar (pastrami with sliced pickles and potato salad). Jarmak took this photograph on the day the deli closed after thirty years. Its back door faced the *Chelsea Record's* back door.

Sam Pressman, Counter of Pressman's Deli, Central Avenue (below) 🎧


Jarmak captures the cantankerous character of this deli owner. Pressman, with his ubiquitous cigar, often insulted his returning customers, especially those who had moved away and still came back for their corned beef.


Faces of Chelsea

Alongside his pictures of the city itself, Jarmak photographed its residents. He was interested in documenting local culture, but he was also moved to make an ongoing series of closely cropped, sharply observed portraits. Unlike photographers he admired—Walker Evans and Diane Arbus among them—who made similarly framed portraits of struggling or marginalized people, Jarmak developed long-standing friendships with most of his subjects, his sense of identification with them defining the relationship. The results are clear-eyed, and avoid taking advantage of their vulnerability.

As Jarmak established himself as a familiar figure in Chelsea, he was often trailed by groups of children eager to watch him at work and to pose for his photographs. These pictures present a contrast to Jarmak's contemporaneous images of the city's economic struggles—they get to the heart of Chelsea's dynamic and irrepressible spirit. They are defined by their carefully structured compositions as well as by the spontaneity and life they contain.

Ladies in Bellingham Square (above)

The Counter at Riley's Roast Beef (below) 

Jack Shore, 1984 (above) 

Jack Shore immigrated to Chelsea from Eastern Europe as a young man and spoke English as a second language. He started out as a rag merchant and then built a profitable company selling nails. By the time this photograph was taken he was a wealthy man, a prominent and well-respected figure in the city he never left despite his success.

Edwina (below)

Cottage Street Couple. Ward Three (above)

Memorial Day Couple, 1979 (below)

Jarmak took this photograph at Garden Cemetery on Memorial Day in 1979. For many years Chelsea had an annual Memorial Day parade attended by World War II veterans for whom it was an important commemoration.

Broadway Couple (left)

Woman (Kerchief and Glasses) (left)

Man with Derby Hat (above)

Woman on Marlborough Street (below)

Miss Fitzgerald (center)

Woman on Her Back Porch, Ward One (above) 🎧

Jarmak often walked through the city with his Nikon camera whether on assignment or not. He came across this woman on her porch between two rows of wooden houses near City Hall. He photographed her for several minutes but they never spoke.

Chelsea Guy (below)

Man on Broadway, Blizzard of '78 (right)

Mary Arsenault, Bellingham Square (above)

This photo shows one of Chelsea's longtime residents who came to Bellingham Square regularly to pick up the *Record*. Jarmak remembers Mary as very friendly. "Arsenault" was a common French Canadian name in Chelsea.

Man in Bellingham Square (below)

Number Ninety-Nine

Andrew Quigley loved children and frequently commissioned Jarmak to photograph them in order to sell more copies of his newspaper. Cramped living quarters in Chelsea encouraged children to play in the streets. They were eager subjects for Jarmak and frequently followed him around as though he were the Pied Piper. In this picture and others, Jarmak sought to reflect the contrast between the city's buoyant young people and the difficult material conditions in which they were growing up.

Jumping Rope, Quigley Park (right)

Jarmak's timeless photo of girls jumping rope looks as though it could have been taken in the 1940s just as well as in the 1970s. The triple-decker houses in the background have not changed much over the years. The park where they are playing was named for the *Record's* publisher Andrew Quigley's father, Lawrence.

Back Porch (left)

left to right: *Living in Chelsea*

Snow Mask, Blizzard of '78

Girl, Polonia Park

Shurtleff Street Elementary Kid

Girl, Chelsea

Young Boy, Chelsea

Lower Broadway Cops and Robbers (above)

School Kids (below)

Blizzard of '78 🎧

This photograph was taken on Broadway looking toward the Mystic River (Tobin) Bridge in February of 1978 after the monumental snowstorm that paralyzed the area. When Jarmak went into the darkroom, he discovered that many of his photographs unintentionally showed this bridge. A prominent feature in the landscape, the bridge built in 1948–50 contributed to the city's decline by cutting Chelsea in half and displacing thousands of residents.

First Communion 🎧

Jarmak was sent on assignment to photograph the First Communion celebration at Chelsea's St. Rose Church on Broadway, the largest and most important Catholic church in the city, primarily serving an Irish American community. He was able to capture this memorable moment as the girls were coming down the steps of the church by standing on the steps himself and using a zoom lens.

Polish (Pulaski) Day in the Square 🎧

Chelsea had a large Polish community. Here residents are celebrating Pulaski Day in Chelsea Square near the 1931 monument dedicated to Casimir Pulaski (1745–79), a Polish-born general who fought for the United States during the American Revolution. The photograph captures a new generation of Polish women celebrating this festive holiday in traditional dress, alongside their mothers and grandmothers.