



HISTORIC BRIGHTON

Newsletter and Journal

Exploring our Town's history and educating our community about Brighton's past.

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FAITH IN BRIGHTON CONTINUED:

THE BEGINNINGS OF THE ISLAMIC CENTER OF ROCHESTER



Signage announcing the future construction of the ICR, c. 1984



Present day photograph of the Islamic Center of Rochester, with the original building at left, and newer addition at right

ON THE HISTORY OF THE ISLAMIC CENTER OF ROCHESTER:

AN INTERVIEW WITH DR. SALAHUDDIN MALIK

By Jessica Lacher-Feldman

Dr. Salahuddin Malik, a longtime community member, was instrumental in establishing the Islamic Center of Rochester (ICR), located in Brighton, on Westfall Road. Dr. Malik was kind enough to share his experiences about the work that he and others did to make the ICR a reality in our community. In addition to his tireless work for the Muslim community, he served as a longtime professor at SUNY Brockport, specializing in South Asian history, the history of British imperialism, and the history of Islam.

The Islamic Center of Rochester (ICR) was established in 1975 to support the Muslim community in the Rochester area. In the late 1960s there were a few families in the area; the Malik family was among them.

Today, the Islamic Center is central to the life of several hundred families in the area, with a diverse membership including American-born, those who have accepted Islam and the immigrants who come from most of the Muslim countries of the world, including students at the colleges and universities in the area.

The Islamic Center of Rochester's building was completed in 1985 on four acres of land on Westfall Road in Brighton. The facility includes space for prayer, multipurpose halls, offices, a library and a kitchen. It also includes outside space for summer recreation. The Islamic Center has a full time Executive Director/Imam who provides religious guidance and leadership and is in charge of education programs at The Center. There is also an elected Board of

Directors and a Council of Trustees. The Council develops the policies and is responsible for long term planning while the Board implements the policies and manages the facilities, programs and day to day activities.

Dr. Malik arrived in Rochester in June of 1967 with his wife, the late Dr. Sarwat Malik, a medical doctor. Dr. Malik was hired to teach South and Southeast Asian history at RIT. Dr. Sarwat Malik met with some adversity at first, finally gaining a position as an intern at Genesee Hospital under Dr. Alvin Ureles in 1968. Dr. Malik said, "At that time, the Muslim community in Rochester practically did not exist. There were six Pakistanis (two couples and two brothers). We raised the number to eight. Rochester's Muslim population received a boost in the Fall of 1968, when more than 300 Turkish tailors, sponsored by Hickey Freeman, arrived in the city." Although they shared a faith, language barriers were a challenge to the new members of the Islamic community. For Friday prayers they would take refuge at the Interfaith Chapel of the University of Rochester. At times, they did not have the required five worshippers to offer Jum'a prayer with a sermon. They also used the Interfaith Chapel for their bi-annual festivals.

In 1968 and 1969, the population started to multiply significantly with new immigrants coming primarily from South Asia and some from Iran and Arab countries. "They were all highly educated professionals (PhDs, MDs, engineers). In the mid-1970s, non-professional family members started to flow in," said Dr. Malik.

It was in the early 1970s that families with children felt the need for religious education. "Five Iranian and Pakistani families started to meet at each other's homes on Sundays. When this number grew we rented part of Moran's Paint House on Monroe Ave in Brighton. We felt the need for our own place, but could not do it because of a total lack of funds. A suggestion to buy a property with a bank loan was quickly rejected as it involved interest which Islam forbids."

Dr. Malik was inspired to take on a leadership role in establishing the Islamic Center following an incident with his then third grade daughter. His daughter was the only Muslim in her school at the time, and she was not permitted to speak on Islam, the prophet Muhammad, or Pakistan as part of holiday presentations by students discussing their cultures. Uncomfortable with the situation and angry with himself for being unable to console his own daughter over a situation that felt clearly discriminatory, he felt he should take action.

"Soon thereafter, I called a meeting of several Muslims: African Americans, Turks, Arabs, and South Asians on December 25 at RIT. At this meeting we established the Islamic Center of Rochester, at least on paper. I was unanimously asked to lead the group. We incorporated the ICR, worked on the constitution and increased our efforts to raise funds. But the fund-raising was not commensurate to build a new facility; far from it," said Dr. Malik. This important meeting led to a significant organizational

effort beginning in 1982 to raise funds and establish a plan for the future Islamic Center.

The next major challenge was finding a location for the future Islamic Center building. After three false starts, the group turned their attention to Brighton and a parcel of open land on Westfall Road, and they purchased the four acres. The Brighton Town Board and the seller met this proposal with open arms. The location was ideal for the establishment of the ICR. Dr. Malik said about the location, "Westfall Road was closer to the city where most of the African American Muslim community resided. It was on two bus routes; it was also close to the University of Rochester, Monroe Community College and the Rochester Institute of Technology. Above all, most of the immigrants from Pakistan, Bangladesh, India, and the Middle East were settled in Pittsford. I began to feel as if a Divine hand prevented us from obtaining Henrietta/ Irondequoit locations."

Feeling deeply supported by the Brighton community was a great relief for those who were planning the development of the ICR. Says Dr. Malik, "the irony was Brighton was a Jewish suburb. But we did not sense Middle East conflict here. The town, its supervisor, the police department were all supportive. We interacted with all of them in a mutually supportive way and we continue to enjoy that relationship."

Fundraising and building were twin challenges facing the group. They first contracted with a masonry company to create the shell of the building but met with many issues. "The first phase of the Center was completed in June 1984. The lowest

bid to construct it was \$1.5 million dollars. We did not have that money. I became my own contractor. Hired all kinds of help at negotiated prices, personally purchased all materials, and completed everything for \$550,000. Our first congregational prayer was Eid al Fitr, the celebratory prayer after the month of Ramadan. There were around 65 worshippers. Today, around 1,500 worshippers from all over the world pray on Fridays," said Dr. Malik.

Significant donations from within the community and from all over the world helped to make the ICR a reality. Investing some of the funds allowed for major expansion of the space to accommodate a continually growing community. They did this through prudent financial responsibility and care. "We kept our expenses at the minimum. I purchased a riding lawn mower and volunteers from the community mowed the lawn ourselves. Four families would come every Sunday with their lunch bags and jointly clean the Islamic Center. We did not hire an Imam until 1989. We saved in every way possible. Membership was not needed to use the Islamic Center facility, except for voting to elect the Board. That was kept at \$5 per year per family."

Growing needs for Sunday school led to the building of a slab-based heated shed which was a vast improvement from classes meeting under the stairway. From there, a second phase of construction began in 2004. The plan included nine classrooms, a 7,200 sq. ft gym, multi-station bathrooms for wadu (ablution) before prayer, three powder rooms, an escalator, two large lobbies, two offices, a nurse's station etc.: a total of 21,000 square feet. Dr. Malik was deeply involved in this second

expansion as well. "This time we did not have to rely on outside funding. \$500,000, plus new donations, provided us with good seed money. The community was generous and was donating to the best of their ability. This expansion started in 2004 and completely ended in 2010. I set up accounts at Home Depot, VP Plumbing, Maynard Electric, etc., hired our sub-contractors, and completed everything at a cost of around 3 million dollars." There is now a regular school to sixth grade with over 100 fee-paying students.

Building a community and meeting the community's needs also included identifying a space to build a Muslim cemetery and a place for charity. A space was identified in Avon, just fifteen minutes from the ICR, on high ground. The parcel included fifty acres of land, with ten acres set aside for a cemetery, and the other 40 acres for future development, perhaps as a college or university. The ICR also established a Muslim charity house on Jefferson Avenue in the city of Rochester. It regularly distributes food, books, clothing etc. to the poor.

Through the efforts of Dr. Malik and many others in our community, the Muslim community of Rochester and of the United States has come of age. Says Dr. Malik, "We have to create and develop our institutions as our contribution to America - institutions like universities, colleges, schools, hospitals, business development etc. so that our future generations feel comfortable about their identity in the American milieu. I hope the 40-acre piece of land in Avon becomes a site for a university or a college."

Dr. Malik shares with the Historic Brighton readership: "We as

American Muslims want to share, with confidence, our heritage with fellow citizens without pride or prejudice. While all of the above effort gave me immeasurable spiritual joy, I took a loss too. It was in the area of my research. I am trying to make it up as much as possible now, but I am 86 years old! Thank you for letting me share this with you and your readers.”

We thank you Dr. Malik and your family, for your decades of contributions to our diverse and dynamic community.

—HB—



Some of the founding members of the Islamic Center of Rochester, c. 1982-1983

LOST BRIGHTON: WHO WAS CHARLES BROWN?

By Sharon Bloemendaal

Brighton was once much bigger, including what is now the Browncroft neighborhood. Voters concerned with water supplies chose to join the city of Rochester, with the area near East Avenue annexed in 1905, and the Browncroft neighborhood in 1914. Charles and Robert Brown’s nursery was originally in Brighton. But who was Charles Brown?

Charles Brown was an entrepreneur, horticulturalist, and co-founder of Brown Brothers Nursery. In 1894 he and his brother Robert bought the Steven Corwin farm for their nursery, with the office in the Corwin farmhouse (now apartments at the corner of Corwin and Winton Roads). Brown coined the name “Browncroft” for his subdivision, with space for gardens; a “croft” was a field in England, described in more detail as “a fenced or enclosed area of land, usually small and arable, and usually, but not always, with a crofter’s dwelling thereon. A crofter is one who has tenure and use of

the land, typically as a tenant farmer, especially in rural areas.”

He doubled the size of the farmhouse for his home, and built a house to the north for his parents and sister, Mary Jane, who also worked for the company. To the south was the duck pond, and an office for 35 workers, with adjacent tennis courts.

The company expanded to Chicago and Toronto; his brother died in 1904.

By 1914 he formed the Browncroft Realty Corporation with his son-in-law, George J. Kaelber, forming 300 acres into lovely homes. The company’s deeds specified lots of a certain size, with no “Boston flats” or apartments. He landscaped the area between the sidewalks and the streets (the parkways), with wisteria, lilacs, and Austrian pines at the intersections, some of which are still living. The decorative 8.5-foot street sign posts were marked “Browncroft”; you can still find three

today that survived the WWII metal scrap drives.

Nearby land to the north, the Shiel and Kingsbury farms and the Charlton nursery, were also subdivided, as was the De Potter farm on Blossom Rd.

Charles Brown influenced the renaming of a section of Atlantic Ave. as Browncroft Blvd. He invested heavily in the Browncroft Extension (now Brighton Browncroft, east of I-590), even building a lovely bridge on Corwin Road over a ravine. He built streets for future homes, but the Depression caused his bankruptcy.

Brown died in 1933, but his dream lives on in the lovely Browncroft neighborhood filled with gracious homes. These homes have character, and so do the people who live there!

Learn more in the 32-page booklet, *Browncroft, a Beautiful Section of a Beautiful City*, written in 1984; read it at www.BrowncroftNA.org.

—HB—



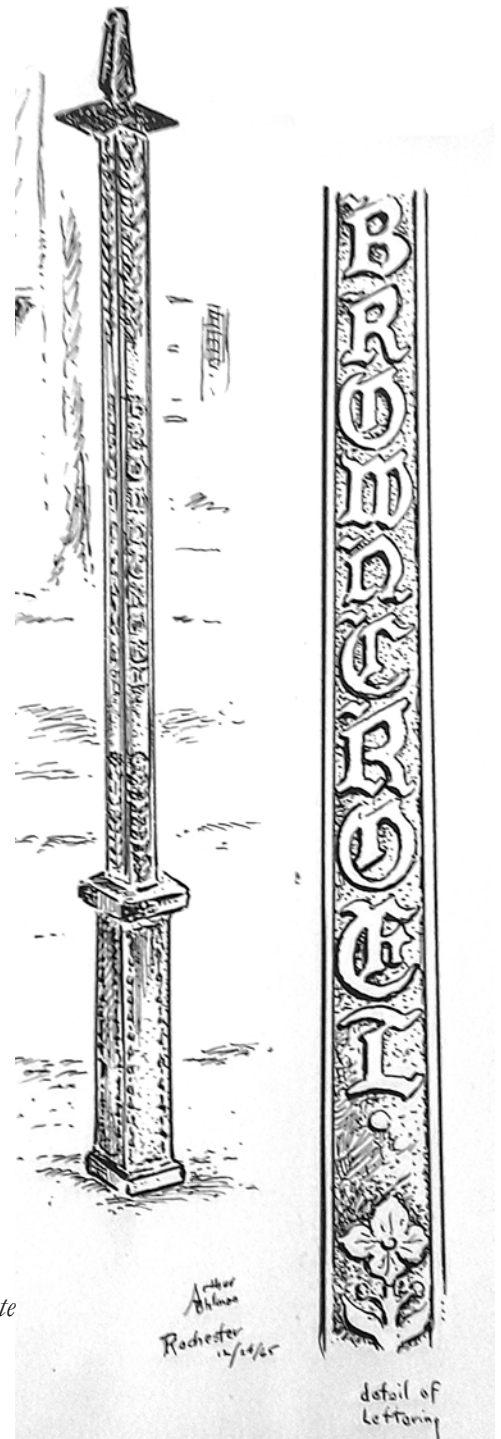
Browncroft Bros. workers gathered on the porch of the company office building, c. 1915



Portrait photograph of Charles J. Brown



Near the pond was a 25-foot-high dovecote for Pouter pigeons and peacocks, c. 1920.



Above: Detailed sketches of the Browncroft decorative metal poles that held street signs, c. 1925. Three poles still exist; most did not survive WWII scrap metal drives.

Left: Ice skating on the "Duck Pond" on Winton Rd. (now the site of two brick duplexes) between Charles Brown's home (now apartments) and the Browncroft Bros office (now demolished), c. 1920.

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Image of Dr. Atwater courtesy of University of Rochester

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