

**From:** [Linda Guerrero](#)  
**To:** [Contreras, Kalan](#)  
**Subject:** CASE NUMBER: C14H-2022-0071 -Tofie Balagia house  
**Date:** Wednesday, August 31, 2022 7:12:30 AM

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FYI- Letter sent regarding the Tofie Balagia House

CASE NUMBER: C14H-2022-0071  
HLC DATE: February 28, 2022; March 28, 2022; May 4, 2022; June 1, 2022  
PC DATE: June 28, 2022  
CC DATE: July 28, 2022  
ADDRESS OF PROPOSED ZONING CHANGE: 1403 E. Cesar Chavez St.  
APPLICANT: Historic Landmark Commission (owner-opposed)  
HISTORIC NAME: Tofie and Bertha Balagia House  
WATERSHED: Urban—Lady Bird Lake  
NEIGHBORHOOD PLAN: East Cesar Chavez  
ZONING CHANGE: CS-MU-CO

Dear Council Member Pool,

I was recently informed that the Tofie Balagia house is being proposed for a zoning change. Tofie Balagia was my great-uncle.

I urge the Council to consider placing a plaque on site at 1403 E. Cesar Chavez St. to commemorate the Tofie Balagia family. The Balagia family made significant contributions to the Austin community. I'm providing our family history below to highlight the deep and rich history of the Balagia family in Austin.

#### Balagia Family Background

Saba and Mary Belagia were immigrants from Lebanon; they established their first home on the corner of East 2nd and Lavaca Streets where they lived with their sons, George, Joe, Tofie, Mike, Pete, and Charles. After an Austin flood in 1900, the Balagias were forced to find new lodging and soon moved to 200 East 5th Street, where daughters Zula and Margaret were born. They lived there until they moved to their final home at 508 East 7th street.

By the time of the 1900 flood, Saba was no longer peddling door to door, but was selling groceries, fruit, and confections at 411 E. 6th. The 1903 Austin Directory only shows a George "Belagie" as a candy peddler at 510 East 5th, but by 1906, the Austin directory listed three Balagia business establishments: Saba with a fruit stand at 211 E. 5th, son George in the fruit business at 812 Congress, and son Tofie, who was barely 17 years old, selling cigars and fruit at 807 Congress. By 1910, Saba had opened a confectionary store at 419 E. 6th, and Joe, George, Tofie, and Mike are listed in the 1910-11 directory as working in Saba's store. The HemisFair history describes the confectionary and ice cream parlor as "the first specialty store of this type in Austin" where "candies and ice creams were manufactured for sale from raw ingredients." Whether it was the first or not, a number of Austin's Lebanese merchants operated confectionaries in the city.

After Saba's death, the confectionary store became known as "Balagia Brothers" and presumably was run by Saba's oldest son George, with Mike and Charles and perhaps Tofie participating, although by November 1913, Tofie was advertising his own cigar store at 407 East 6th. By 1917, the brothers were in the grocery business, probably separately and operating under different names, including Balagia Grocery and an early iteration of the Balagia Produce Company, which was advertising in the *Austin American* to

buy turkeys, chickens, and eggs, first at the location at 403 East 6th Street, then at 406 East 6th.

The Balagia brothers were active in the community, sponsoring a baseball team called Balagia Brothers in Austin's minor leagues. But tragedy struck again in 1917, when Saba and Mary's oldest son George died of tuberculosis on February 2, 1917, a disease for which there was no cure at the time. Tofie, who was next in line, stepped up to the plate and according to Eileen's history, "headed the Balagia family." Charles Balagia's oral history agrees, saying it was Tofie who, at his mother's urging, began consolidating the family businesses.

Further evidence of Tofie's significant civic leadership and involvement came in 1934 when Tofie and other members of the Austin Lebanese Christian community (Tom and George Attal and M.K. Hage) established St. Elias Orthodox Church in a loaned building at the corner of 6th and Congress.

Tofie also owned an interest in the St. Charles Hotel, or St. Charles House, at 316 E. 6th street, an historic Austin structure built in 1871 which operated as a boarding house and a hotel and now carries an historic landmark designation. Tofie would sometimes send his sons to the hotel to collect rent from the tenants there.

Tofie took an active part in the Austin Chamber of Commerce and the Optimist club, as well as Austin's Syrian Lebanon Association. Eileen's history says that Tofie,

"although a firm and determined businessman and father, was humble, kind, and understanding. Helen Corbitt, a New Yorker who became a well-known Texas personality and writer, said 'Tofie Balagia helped me become a Texan.' Helen's father had died shortly after she arrived in Austin and friends were trying to raise money for plane fare to return home for the funeral. Uncle Tofie heard about it and told the girls at Miss Corbitt's University Tea House not to worry. The money for the ticket was at the airport when she arrived."

On July 24, 1921, Tofie married Bertha Johns, who was born in Lebanon on May 15, 1897. Her birthplace was El Berbara in the Mount Lebanon region of the country, and her given name was actually Berbara, the name of the village where she was born. Bertha came to the U.S. in 1913, according to the ship manifest, at the age of 16 from the town of Kfarsghab, a village in Lebanon in the Qadisha Valley, and was married at the time to Yasef Michael, believed to be her teacher. Yasef died either on the trip to the U.S. or shortly thereafter, and Bertha lived with her brother Alex in Longview, Texas, before she met and married Tofie.

Tofie died on November 7, 1941, and his death was widely reported on the front page in various editions of the Austin newspaper. His pallbearers included Austin's Mayor Tom Miller. Bertha died on March 3, 1966. She and Tofie lived for many years at 1403 East 1st Street in Austin and had six children.

Respectfully,  
Linda H. Guerrero

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