

A TASTE OF GREECE IN GREENVILLE

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The Greenville Greek Community is typical of many other communities of immigrants in America. They came together with common needs: to find a place to live, raise their families, earn a living, form a place of worship, and preserve their ethnic culture. From different parts of Greece, young men began their American journey to pursue their dreams. Despite great hardships they began their quest with courage from God and their families.

Quite often the ships on which they traveled were referred to as "cattle boats" due to the huge number of passengers they carried. There is no way these vessels could even begin to pass United States Maritime Regulations today.

Imagine the anxiety of these Greek immigrants as they tried to move their way forward on the crowded ships to get their first view of America, and immediately looked into the compassionate eyes of a lady wading out in the New York harbor to greet them, saying:

Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses
yearning to be free,

The wretched refuse of your teeming shore.

Send these the homeless, tempest tossed to me.

I lift my lamp beside the Golden Door.

Did they find America everything they imagined? The answer is "no." America was far more than they could ever imagine.

According to the best sources available, George Konduros and Sotiros Maurogeanis were the first permanent Greek residents in

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Greenville, arriving in 1894. They operated a candy store on South Main Street where Wachovia Place now stands. The serious migration of Greeks to Greenville, however, took place in the early twentieth century.

Their first need, of course, was to find a place to live and raise their families. Greenville has always been tolerant of new ideas and people; therefore, Greek immigrants with a limited knowledge of the language found it a good place to meet their objectives. In fact most of those early immigrant families settling here in the early twentieth century still have descendants residing here today.

Their second need, a critical one, was earning a livelihood. The food business attracted many Greek immigrants; since operating cafes, as they were referred to in those days, did not require a great deal of language skills initially. As a result numerous café/restaurants were established by the early arrivals.

The Sanitary Cafe, on West Washington Street, was owned by George Boudoucius, Pete Bybee, and Frank Solas. The Blue Ribbon Cafe was located just across the street.

The Deluxe Diner was located on North Main Street, just a few feet from the Carolina Theater. Owned by Jimmy Tzouvelekas, the Deluxe was unique for introducing counter service only.

My father's cafe was located on West Washington Street, just below the Greenville Hotel - about halfway between the hotel and the First Presbyterian Church parking lot. The living quarters were in the back of the cafe and on the second floor. Five children were raised in this location until my entry into the first grade. At that time, the A. J. Theodore family moved to a house on DeCamp Street.

Pete's No. 1 opened in 1921 in the first block of Pendleton Street. Owned by George Manos, the restaurant was known for its specialty type hot dogs, which sold for five cents, and hamburgers, which sold for ten cents. Pete's catered to students from Greenville High, Parker High, Furman, and Clemson; as well as celebrities, who were passing through Greenville and staying at the Ottaray and Poinsett

Hotels. Among these were Hank Williams, Tex Ritter, John Payne, Ann Rutherford, Mickey Rooney, and Betty Grable. Even Sammy Kaye's Orchestra enjoyed the Pete's specials, as well as many others, whose pictures appeared on the office wall of George Manos. Pete's delivered orders to many textile plants, including Woodside, Mills Mill, Judson, and Monaghan Mills, which operated 24 hours a day with three shifts. Unfortunately for our county, these mills are a thing of the past.

While they delivered food, Pete's was innovative and served motorists parked next to the curb in their cars, with auto trays attached to the vehicles. Hence, the term "curb service" was initiated. Pete's also furnished food frequently to the Salvation Army and to orphanages - especially during holidays.

Also opened in 1921 and located on West Coffee Street, was the popular Charlie's Steak House. In 1933 the business moved to its present location at 18 East Coffee Street. In 2006 it will celebrate its 85th anniversary. During the Depression, Charles Efstration, the owner, provided food for soup lines at the YMCA across Coffee Street from the restaurant. He remembered that often individuals in need of food would be dressed with spats on their shoes. A commentary on those hard, difficult years in America and the effects laid on the shoulders of so many. Cafes in Greenville were noted for helping to feed Greenvillians, both black and white, who were down on their luck.

Paul Efstration, the oldest child of the family relates this story along with the following letter. Apparently Mr. Charlie believed in the power of advertising, using his picture in newspaper ads, book matches, etc. He requested James A. Poag of the Price & Poag Law Firm to patent his picture. James Poag sent the following letter:

I enclose certificate issued by Commission of Patent. You have been granted a trademark as applied for. You are now at liberty to spread your face all over the country. I hope your fan mail will be plentiful and Mrs. Efstration will not divorce or shoot you in a fit of jealousy.

While Charlie's Steak House is the only surviving restaurant from these early years, there are many others today providing delicious foods: Pete's, the Clock, Como's Petes, Carolina Fine Foods, and many others.

Some Greek restaurants have taken a different approach by creating multiple locations: such as the chain of Stax Restaurants, known for presenting a variety of foods at each unique location, in addition to delicious baking products from Stax Bakery. The owners are George Stathakis and Stanley Como. There is also the Open Hearth Restaurant founded by the late Michael Melches. With Jimmy Melches as the owner and operator, the Open Hearth is under the management of the second generation of the family.

While the food business captured the attention of the majority of Greenville's Greek immigrants, there were other interests in entrepreneurship. The Eagle Bus Lines, founded by Henry Theodore, grew into a substantial transportation company.

Quite often Greenvillians would naturally associate Mr. Henry as my father; in fact early one morning, about 6:00 a.m., my bedroom phone rang, and who should be the caller but our then senior United States senator, Strom Thurmond. The conversation went something like this.

Nick, this is Strom Thurmond. Good morning senator. Did I wake you? No sir. I had to wake up and answer the phone anyway. I'm sorry to hear about your father dying. Perplexed, I responded: my father died? Isn't Henry Theodore your father? No sir. Is he your Uncle? No sir. Your cousin? No sir, but I've known him all my life. Always thinking. Strom said: I see. Would you call Drakes Flowers and have them send a funeral spray to Mrs. Theodore and send me the bill. They know my address. Yes sir. Good day.

In Greenville, Henry Theodore's first venture was to open a shoe shine stand/fruit shop on the corner of Main and Washington

Streets. However, his passion for automobiles, which were not in abundance at the time, led him to transporting people for a fee: especially soldiers to and from Camp Sevier during World War I. In time Mr. Henry advanced to transporting passengers to Columbia and points in between as well as to Greenwood. These routes became quite profitable for Henry Theodore who, upon the advent of federal regulations, acquired these rights under the Grandfathers Clause. Later he sold these lucrative routes. The route to Columbia was sold to Greyhound, and the Greenwood route went to Carolina Trailways. Quite an Horatio Alger story.

Local bakeries were prevalent in the 1920s, which prompted George Paouris to start the Peoples Bakery, which originally was in the second block of Pendleton Street. Mr. Paouris grew the business rapidly and escalated Peoples to a level of competition with Claussens Bakery, requiring a much larger building to be built on Rutherford Street. Peoples Bakery was known for its Big Boy loaf bread and a large package of cinnamon rolls which cost the magnificent sum of five cents.

A single cigarette machine was the beginning of Atlas Vending Company in 1933. Now located on Lowndes Hill Road, it employs in excess of 400 workers, serves all lines of vending products, and operates in several states. Alex Kiriakides, Jr. is the board chairman.

My father first migrated to America in 1906; then returned to Greece and came back permanently in 1911 to join his future father-in-law, Nick Meros. My father sent for my mother, who traveled alone for 30 days by ship to New York; then by rail to Greenville's Southern Depot, where Nick Meros, my grandfather, owned a cafe.

An underlying need for Greenville's Greek immigrants was to establish a place of worship. Freedom of worship had been forbidden for Orthodox Christians until Greek independence from the Ottoman Empire was won in 1821, after several centuries of Turkish rule.

In 1916 Andreas and Stavroula Theodorakos were married in what was considered the first Greek Orthodox wedding in Greenville.

During the 1920s the small Greek community in Greenville began holding worship services at Christ Episcopal Church, with an occasional visit by a priest from Atlanta.

With only 11 families, this small community was incorporated in 1929 as the Greek Community of Greenville, Inc. under the able leadership of Aemil Pouleropoulos. In 1931 a house was purchased at 15 DeCamp Street to be used for church services, Sunday school classes, and a fellowship hall. The name, St. George Greek Orthodox Church was adopted. In 1936 St. George hired its first full-time priest, Father Michael Mercouris.

By 1941, with 30 families, St. George Church had achieved sufficient growth to construct a church building and fellowship hall. Constructed during World War II, when building materials were extremely difficult to acquire, the Byzantine-Empire-style structure had a frame made entirely of wood. The twin-tower facade faced DeCamp Street. The architectural firm of Joseph G. Cunningham and Frank H. Cunningham designed the building, with a construction cost of \$28,500 and a seating capacity of 260. The first service was held in the new church on Christmas Day 1942. Forty years later, in 1982, the Hellenic Center was constructed to provide more adequate space for a Sunday School, a Greek School, and social events.

In 1993 the church that St. George parishioners had worshiped in for 50 years was demolished to build a much larger structure. By the 1990s the congregation had grown to 325 families. Construction began in 1993 on a new 17,000-square-foot sanctuary with a seating capacity of 684. The first service was held in December 1995. Four years later St. George reached yet another milestone in its history. In 1999 it was named the official Cathedral for South Carolina.

As a vibrant Christian Community, it is now the mission of St. George Cathedral to look to the future and seek ways to enhance the Orthodox ways of life and to share them more widely with others. In order to accomplish this mission, the Cathedral has embarked on a new construction program, "Building Through Our Faith." Plans include a

Family Center/Gymnasium, expansion of the Education Building, a new parking area and landscaping, and a lounge addition to the Hellenic Center.

Father Tom Pistolas began his spiritual leadership in Greenville in 1987. Through his guidance St. George Cathedral has enjoyed its greatest period of progress. Father Tom explains the Greek and Eastern Orthodox faith in this way:

Historically, traditionally, theologically, ritualistically;
we are continuing Christianity as it was followed in the
early Apostolic Church over 2000 years ago.

The Greek immigrants, who made Greenville their new homeland, shared a deep dedication to preserve their ethnic culture, and Greenville encouraged them to do so.

The church became the bond that held the immigrants unified and assisted them in meeting the challenges of a newly adopted homeland. Many of them lived within walking distance of the church. Many lived on Decamp and Barrett Streets and on Marshall and Central Avenues. They would visit one another on a regular basis, especially on certain saint's holidays, such as: John, George, Nicholas, and Andrew. Individuals named for the saint were given the opportunity to open their home to guests without the need for invitations.

March 25th continues to be a most important day of celebration. On that date in 1821 the Greeks began their fight for independence from the Turks, after four centuries of suffering and slavery. The odds were insurmountable. Greek courage overcame the odds. Revered leaders inspired Greek freedom fighters time after time. On March 25th patriotic statements are prevalent and quoted often:

It is better a life of freedom even for one hour, than a
life of 40 years of slavery;
God has signed the freedom of Greece and He cannot
take back his signature;
The Revolution started!!!!

Each March 25th, Greek School students and others reenact the heroism and patriotism demonstrated in 1821 with drama, parades and celebration, much the way we celebrate July 4th. New York City, Chicago, and other large cities still sponsor parades lasting for hours spotlighting the independence of Greece.

Yet another occasion to accent freedom and patriotism is OHI Day, October 28, 1940. This was the day Mussolini demanded that Greece open its country and allow Italy to continue its aggression through the Balkan Peninsula. Greece replied "ohi" and refused to consent. Fascist Italy invaded. The Greeks fought fiercely, hurling back the stunned aggressor, despite Italian superiority in numbers and equipment. The determined Greek defenders drove the invaders back into Albania. Hitler was forced to divert German troops to protect his southern flank and finally overran Greece in 1941. This unforeseen setback cost Hitler thousands of his finest youth and delayed his attack against Russia by several months. Consequently German troops ran into the dreadful Russian winter, helping the Russians to impose appalling losses that contributed to the ultimate defeat of Germany. These incidents and others during World War II caused Winston Churchill to make another famous statement: "Greeks don't fight like heroes, heroes fight like Greeks."

Epiphany, January 6th, is the celebration in the Greek Orthodox Church of Jesus' baptism by John the Baptist. This day is marked by blessing water and immersing crosses. The largest celebration is in Piraeus; however, in America the Archbishop annually blesses the waters in Tarpon Springs, Florida. When a cross is thrown into the water, young swimmers fiercely compete to retrieve it. The successful young person is blessed by the Archbishop.

Epiphany is now observed by many to focus on the mission of the church in reaching others by showing Jesus as the Savior of all people. It is also a time of focusing on Christian brotherhood and fellowship, especially in healing the divisions of prejudice and bigotry that we all too often create between God's children.

Easter is the most cherished religious event of the Greek Orthodox Church. Forty days prior to Easter, fasting and various other restraints begin; culminating with the Crucifixion services on Thursday and Good Friday services and a candlelight procession. A funeral bier, known as the *Epitaphio*, is carried around the Cathedral property on Good Friday. On Saturday a resurrection mass is celebrated at midnight. All lights are turned off; the darkness symbolizing Jesus' passage through the Underworld. At midnight the priest appears from the altar with the only candlelight, singing: "Receive the Light," and finally a procession outside the Cathedral takes place, symbolizing the resurrection of Jesus.

Following the Easter midnight service, parishioners greet one another by saying: *Hristos Anesti*. Christ has risen; the response is: *Alithos Anesti*. Truly he has risen. The Eastern Orthodox religion uses the Julian calendar. The date on which Easter is observed differs from the date established by the Gregorian calendar, used by the Roman Catholic and Protestant Churches.

The Greenville Greek Festival, first held in 1987, has become one of our city's finest; attracting in excess of 25,000 people annually. Greek dancing, outstanding music, excellent foods and delicious Greek pastries are the order of the day - along with *glendi* (fun for all). The festival continues to grow rapidly and receives outstanding local support.

There are various secular organizations whose purpose is to promote Hellenism. The Order of AHEPA is by far the largest Greek/American organization with chapters in the United States, Canada, Greece, and Australia. AHEPA was founded by visionary Americans of Greek descent to help assimilate Greeks into American society, as well as protect them from the evils of bigotry in the early twentieth century. Philanthropy is a Greek word meaning "love of people." AHEPA and its auxiliaries have contributed over a billion dollars to national projects for educational, health, religious, and

athletic programs. International projects are included, such as the Cyprus crisis.

Locally, the Textile Chapter #242 of AHEPA committed \$500,000 to the St. George Cathedral New Building Plan. Also a low-income residential building on Wood Lake Road started construction in the fall of 2005, in conjunction with HUD.

Philoptochos (Friends of the Poor) is our ladies' church organization, which is a vital arm of St. George Cathedral. For the youth of the cathedral there is GOYA (Greek Orthodox Youth of America, which is involved in religious and athletic programs and many other events furthering the Greek Orthodox faith.

The odyssey of Greenville's Greek community began in the early twentieth century. Immigrants coming through Ellis Island arrived in Greenville and struggled to survive. At the beginning of the twenty-first century the Greenville Greek community is composed of first and second generation Greek-Americans who have made a significant mark on their city.

In 1957 Pete Manos graduated from the Medical University of South Carolina. Today, members of the Greek community practice in all fields of medicine. In addition, there are attorneys, engineers, architects, scientists, bankers, financial advisors, entrepreneurs, and others. Some have even dared to enter the risky field of politics.

In looking back over the struggles and accomplishments of the Greek community in Greenville, one can only conclude that: "the best is yet to come."