
Bridge Building
10th Annual Mayor's
Unity Day Celebration

presented by

The City of Raleigh
Human Relations Commission

*The speech on Greek Contributions to
America and Society by Foti Fotiu*
Saturday, December 6, 2014
City Club, Raleigh, North Carolina

"The Ancient Greek civilization has made several influencing contributions to the western nations. Here are few of their contributions: democracy, philosophy, art, architecture, mathematics, chemistry, medicine, science and technology. The Greek immigrants also set their foundation in America. From 1453 -1938, the Greek immigrants had a great influence on the Americas where they set their foundation. One could learn by reading Paul Cooke's book "A History of the Greeks in the Americas."

According to official records, the Greek sailor Don Theodoros Griego, who sailed to America with the Spanish explorer Panfilo de Narvaez in 1528, was the first Greek to land in America. The names of the other



Greek sailors who came to America during this period are John Griego and Petros the Cretan. And Juan De Fuca, who discovered the straits south of Vancouver Island and whose Greek name was Ioannis Phocas.

One of the first Greek colonies was at New Smyrna near Saint Augustine, Florida. Dr. Andrew Turnbull and his wife Maria Rubini, the daughter of a wealthy Greek merchant, persuaded approximately 450 colonists to journey and settle to America. Greek colonists, primarily from the City of Mani in the south of Greece, began arriving in Florida on June 26, 1768. The colony was a devastating failure and was officially disbanded. Many of the colonists had moved to neighboring Saint Augustine,

where they were becoming successful as merchants. This small community of Greeks built a chapel named Saint Photios and a school which are located in Saint Augustine Florida; it is now an historical shrine. The U.S. Greek population remained small until the 1880s, when poor economic conditions in Greece prompted many Greeks to immigrate to the United States. Most were young, single males who came to the United States to enhance their freedom and to seek their fortunes. During the 1890s, Greeks began settling in major urban areas, including the industrial cities of the Northeast and Midwest. The first immigrants settled in Massachusetts and Southern New Hampshire. The city of Lowell, Massachusetts attracted the majority of Greeks, and by 1920 it had the third largest Greek community in the United States. The largest Greek settlement in the twentieth century was in New York. Greeks also settled in western Pennsylvania, particularly in Pittsburgh, and in the Midwestern cities of Detroit, Milwaukee, Cleveland, Youngstown, and Chicago. Small Greek communities existed in Galveston Texas, and Atlanta Georgia, but the largest concentration of Greeks in the South was at Tarpon Springs, Florida. In the first half of the twentieth century, this unique settlement of Greeks made its living by sponge diving. In the 1920's, Greeks owned thousands of confectionery stores across the country;

they owned the candy-manufacturing businesses that supplied the stores. When the candy businesses collapsed, Greeks became restaurant owners. By the late 1920s, several thousand Greek restaurants were scattered across the country. Many of the immigrants of the 1950's and 1960's started first as restaurant employees and then managed to own their successful restaurant businesses. The Greek professional class remained small until the 1940s. During the first quarter of the twentieth century, most Greek professionals were doctors. The next largest group comprised lawyers, dentists, pharmacists, chemists, professors, politicians, and astute businessmen. Several of them became renowned for their academic accomplishments and their contributions to the United States and to the world. **When Mr. Constantine Vurnakes departed his native Sparta in 1895, little did he realize he would be the first Greek immigrant to arrive in Raleigh, North Carolina. Like so many of his fellow countrymen, he was searching the American dream, a dream which brought immigrants from all parts of Europe.**

Greeks were among the first immigrants who crossed the Atlantic to get their first glimpse of the Statue of Liberty, and Ellis Island, the customary landing and processing point for The secret of what brought Mr.Vurnakes to Raleigh in 1895 is buried with him. Why did he choose to come to a small southern town of only 13,000 people? Records indicate that he was the proprietor of the California Fruit Stand in the first block of Fayetteville Street, in the shadows of the state capital. Mr.Vurnakes was soon connected with many other immigrants from central Greece, who then immigrated to Raleigh.

Those early settlers became extremely active in the community, but found themselves without a church to worship in. By 1924, the Greek families of Raleigh decided the time had come to establish their church. The first service was held in April 1924 on the second floor of a grocery store. The church, or hall, as it was known then, was located in the 100 block of South Salisbury Street. It was located where the first Presbyterian Church now stands. The Greek community met on Salisbury Street for four years before moving again to an upstairs hall on South Blount Street, over a small grocery store. As the community grew, it soon became apparent that a larger church was needed. In October 1935, Rev. Elias Skipitary received a call from the Greek Archdiocese of New York to organize and build a Church. By 1937, when the church was erected on Person Street, Raleigh had grown to a population of 25,000 and the church now numbered 25 families.

In May of 1975, a new church was built on Lead Mine Road in Raleigh to accommodate the growth of the incoming Orthodox parishioners. As of today, The Holy Trinity Greek Orthodox Church of Raleigh is supported by 430 families, the current facility deals with many space constrains. Plans are set in motion for a larger Church at the existing land. Hopefully this plan will be realized within the next 3-5 years.

Hellenism and Greek Orthodoxy are intertwined. This belief kept the immigrants attached to the mother country, nourished their patriotic appetites, and helped them to preserve their parents faith and language. The Greek Orthodox Church was instrumental to their emotional and spiritual needs. The early churches grew out of small communities where their first priority was to raise money to build their church. The first Greek Orthodox Church in the United States was founded in New Orleans in 1864. As Greek communities grew, other churches were established in New York, Chicago, Lowell, Massachusetts and Boston. By 1923, there were 140 Greek churches in the United States. an church, and remains the guiding force in all matters of faith. The archdiocese was founded in 1922, and it is located in New York City.



Photo right: Fotiu at Mayor McFarlane's table

Greece features a rich culture full of customs and rituals that have been passed down from generation to generation. The tight-knit family structure, their faith, and their church have been an important part of life. There are many family traditions and religious, celebratory events that continue to thrive today. Parents stress the value of education and their Greek Orthodox faith. The Greeks in America have quickly integrated with the American traditions and learned the English language. They thrived to become American citizens and to uphold the United States Constitution. Families are fundamental units of support and identity, and marriage is considered the normal condition of adulthood. Arranged marriages in which parents negotiated spouses, dowries, and inheritance for their children was once common but have declined. Greek weddings are very elaborate and celebrated to the extreme. Some of you who have seen the film “My Big Fat Greek Wedding” are probably amused by the complexity of the Greek wedding. This film denotes that “Windex” is not the cure for illnesses as the father of the bride professed; also he twisted every English word to make it like Greek. In his defense, I can attest that there are more than five hundred Greek words in the English vocabulary. Here are just few to prove a point; Democracy, Politics, Architecture, philosophy, psychology, hematology, cardiology ophthalmology, and a whole slew of scientific words added every day in NASA’s lexicon. Greeks share the American dream, work ethic and desire for success. The Greeks are largely perceived as hardworking and family-oriented. They are also said to possess a "Zorba-like" spirit and love of life. They love to party and dance, break dishes, throw dollars on the dance floor in appreciation of friends and to commemorate their freedom, their inner feelings of joy or sorrow as they perceive them. Greek music and dance are an expression of their national character and are appreciated by people of all ethnic backgrounds. The Greek dances and outfits are majestic in their interpretation of their originality and historical events. The Greek songs have several distinct musical rhythms which denote their origins. Greece is blessed with a great number of meaningful song writers who express their life views, love, happiness, miseries, and family affairs. If you are interested to hear great music listen to the songs written by Nikos Kazantzakis, Mikis Theodorakis, and of course the famous composer Yanni and many others renowned composers.

For the Greeks, the sounds and rhythms of music express their very essence; it invites nostalgic places, deep emotions of love, and their dreams, sorrows, and joys. The music relates to divorce, motherhood, poverty, and many human passions which bring up concealed feelings. Add dancing and a little ouzo to this equation and you will discover a temporary panacea from any distress. The wedding, baptismal, and funeral services conducted by a Greek Orthodox priest may be said in both Greek and in English, but the traditional elements of these services remain unchanged and always according to the Greek Orthodox scriptures. The national drink of Greece is ouzo; it tastes like licorice and remains popular with Greek Americans. Traditionally, it is served with a variety of appetizers called (mezethes). A popular Greek wine, called retsina is also inviting for mezethes. Retsina is produced only in Greece and is imported to the United States.

For the great majority of Greeks the pursuit of higher education remains their utmost objective. The 1990 Census reports that the ethnic Greeks ranks high among university degrees received in the United States and a significantly higher proportion are matriculated to receive advanced degrees.

Numerous Greek American political and social organizations have existed since the 1880s. In 1922 the American Hellenic Educational Progressive Association acronym for (AHEPA, was founded in Atlanta, Georgia, to protect individuals from the evils of bigotry and discrimination. AHEPA is the largest and oldest grassroots association of American citizens of Greek heritage with more than 400 chapters across the United States, Canada, and Europe. AHEPA focuses on the promotion of the fundamental virtues of the Hellenic Spirit: Hellenism, Education, Philanthropy, Civic Responsibility, Family, and Individual Excellence. Although a majority of the memberships is comprised of Greeks or Americans of Hellenic descent, application for membership is open to everyone who believes in the mission of the organization.

The American Hellenic Institute, Inc. acronym (AHI) was founded on August 1st 1974, following Turkey's invasion of Cyprus with the illegal use of American-supplied arms in violation of U.S. laws and agreements. The AHI initiated the rule of law issue in the Congress in the interests of the U.S., thus changing the face of American politics. AHI has a strong lobby presence which protects the American and Greek interests home and abroad. There are several other Greek benevolent organizations which promote the Greek American democratic principles.

Greek Americans have participated in large numbers in all major wars fought by the United States. Most recently, 100,600 Greek American men and 2,630 women have earned veteran status. Group Contributions

There are 27 Greek American newspapers in the United States; they are published in Greek and English, languages. They focus on community events, church news, as well as local and international interests to the Greek communities, including news from Greece and lobbying activities of the Greek American politicians.

The Greeks are proud of their Greek heritage and the United States of America where they established their livelihoods in their adopted country and vowed to support the United States Constitution.

Greeks have an assortment of traditional customs, beliefs, and superstitions. To ensure success they blame the evil eye for misfortune. These old beliefs persist to exist to this day, in some communities in the United States. Precautions against the evil eye include making the sign of the cross when there is suspicion. It is believed that placing a blue eye amulet on the child's lapel provides protection and comfort.

Greeks may also respond to a compliment with the expression *ptou, ptou*, to keep the evil eye from harming the person receiving the compliment. Greeks also "knock on wood" to guard against misfortune, and reading one's fortunes in the patterns of coffee residue in the cup remains a popular belief.

The Greeks "have a saying for it." "In wine there is truth." (When intoxicated you tell the truth). "You make my liver swell." (You make me sick). "An old hen makes the best soup." (Quality improves with age). "Don't let the wolf guard the sheep." (Make sure you understand with whom you are dealing.) "When the chicken drinks water she lifts her head up to see God." (Do the right thing). There are many more meaningful phrases that are unique to the Greeks.

Greek food is very well received in the United States; Greek American restaurants flourish. For the Greeks, meals are great social occasions where friends and families come together to celebrate. The Greek Festivals throughout the States are well attended by all cultures and attendees look forward to authentic Greek cuisine, and to music and dance. You are invited to attend The Holy Trinity's Greek Orthodox Festival of Raleigh in September of each year. You will enjoy the authentic Greek cuisine, delicious pastries; watch the Greek dancers perform in their traditional costumes, to dance with them and say "Opa" to the Greek rhythms. You'll be pleased to know that a percentage of your spending will go to The Habitat for Humanity organization. Greeks are well known for their generosity and their resilient support for charitable causes. The Philoptochos, translation; (Friend of the poor) is a Greek ladies' Society fundraising organization that contributes a significant amount of dollars to charities.

The Greek language throughout the years has retained much of its original integrity. During Byzantine times, the language underwent modifications of dialects from many regions. Modern Greek retained the ancient alphabet and grammar. Today Greek language schools continue to encourage the study of Greek, and new generations are discovering its' rich rewards. Community Dynamic

If there is one self-defining concept among Greeks, it is the concept of *philotimo*, which may be translated as "love of honor." *Philotimo* is a highly developed sense of right and wrong involving personal pride and honor and obligation to family and community. It shapes and regulates an individual's relationships as a member of both the family and the community. It is "the love of honor" that laid the foundation for Greek successes in America.

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- Fotis Fotiu

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