

The Greek-American Community

A Brief History:

“Greek Americans – who are we?? What are our distinguishing attitudes, habits and beliefs? The answers may be found by looking to the first immigrants and their dreams, difficulties, values, and their accomplishments. Our folk and ancestors believed in the ability of the individual to succeed. Through education, hard work and opportunity of an open society they managed to develop a Greek American way of life rooted in Hellenism and American society. “

Zaffie Hadiaris, Saco

According to Greek-American sociologist Charles Moskos, at the end of the nineteenth century close to 15,000 Greeks had immigrated to the United States. Between 1890-1917, the largest wave of Greek immigrants, numbering 450,000, arrived in America. They came primarily for economic reasons, initially settling in large cities and finding work in factories, restaurants, shoeshine parlors, candy shops and produce stands. In New England, the Greeks worked in textile and shoe factories or opened small businesses such as grocery stores and candy shops.¹

In Biddeford, the first to arrive were unmarried young men. They lived modestly, sharing apartments, while they worked and saved money in order to bring their families to this country. The number of Greek men who came to Biddeford-Saco at the turn of the twentieth century to work in the textiles mills was relatively small compared to the French-Canadian immigration. Sam Anagnostis, John Anagnostis' father, came from Greece through Ellis Island and then headed north to work in the Pepperell Mills. He first rented a room on Factory Island and eventually settled in the area of Common Street in Saco, Maine where other Greek families lived. Like many Greek immigrants, he was an entrepreneur and opened a hot dog stand in Old Orchard Beach. Eventually he opened up a fruit store in Saco called Olympia Fruit and became a leader in the Greek community helping to establish the first Greek Orthodox Church in Maine.

While some intended to return to Greece, a substantial number stayed and began to develop a Greek-American way of life rooted in Orthodoxy and Hellenism (Greek secular culture) and built on the family, church and ethnic heritage. Like the French, early immigrants fiercely protected their culture. A close family was the primary base and once established, the church provided a much-needed center for cultural and social needs, helping to preserve the Greek language and culture.

As early as 1902, a small church of close to 300 members was formed in Biddeford. In the next decade, the community grew to include relatives, future wives and other Greeks moving north from Massachusetts. In 1914, St. Demetrios Greek Orthodox Church was founded, the first Greek Orthodox Church to be established in Maine.

¹ Marilyn Rouvelas, *A Guide to Greek Traditions and Customs in America*, p. 2

In celebration of the growing Greek community, the Pan-Hellenic Enosis Day parade was organized in 1912. Biddeford residents greeted the Greek Ambassador to the United States and over four hundred people marched the length of Maine Street in Biddeford to Greek melodies played by the renowned Painchuads Band.

Initially, the Greek community had services in rental halls. In 1914, the members of St. Demetrios purchased a building on lower Emery Street in Biddeford. A three story wooden structure, the building was converted into a second-floor Church. The balcony was the designated area for the women of the congregation, while the men traditionally stood on the main floor. In traditional Orthodox fashion, there were no seats or pews.²

The first floor was the Greek School. In the beginning, forty-three boys and girls attended the Greek American Parochial School. Started by a desire to maintain their cultural heritage as well as to properly educate their children, by 1920, the Greek School had enrolled sixty-two pupils ranging in age from 6 to 17, all of which were taught in English and Greek. The peak enrollment was 1924-25 when over one hundred students attended.

Then in 1936, the former Baptist Church on Jefferson and Adams Streets in Biddeford was purchased by the members of St. Demetrios and served as the church till 2000. Recognizable by its beautiful Byzantine dome, the City of Biddeford bought the Adams Street structure from the Greek community and then sold it to the Serbian community of Portland, where it still serves as an Orthodox Church and is still named after St. Demetrios.³

Through the hard working efforts of the Greek community, groundbreaking for the new church began in May 1, 1999. For a few months, services were held in the unfinished hall while work continued on the church structure. Located on Bradley Street Saco, the current St. Demetrios Greek Orthodox Church opened on Palm Sunday, 2000. Like the previous generation, parishioners carried Icons and furnishings from out of their old church in Biddeford to the new location in Saco.

In Biddeford/Saco, the church is the center of the Greek community. As one member of the church describes it: "In Greece, every village has a church where everyone could meet. But here, our church is the only meeting place for Greek people." Unlike Greece, where family and friends are more accessible on a daily basis, the church acts as a symbolic village. Today, the church remains not only a house of worship, but also the primary place to be with other Greek people and share in religious and secular events.

The majority of the Biddeford/Saco Greek community is from the Pellaponas region of Greece. While some older members of the congregation maintain distinct regional dialects, cooking styles and other cultural expressions, many of these regional

² St. Demetrios Greek Orthodox Church, 75th Anniversary Memorial Album, 1984

³ Ibid

variations, have blurred in America. Being Greek is no longer solely defined by a geographical location but by the spiritual nexus of the Greek Orthodox Church. In Biddeford/Saco, old world traditions are maintained and new world customs are created out of a need to perpetuate a sense of Greek heritage.

The more Americanized second and third generations, however, have pressured the church to downplay the Greek language and culture but unlike the Franco's community relationship to the Roman Catholic church, the church hierarchy has resisted these pressures, leaving each parish and its priest to make its own accommodation on these issues.⁴

In Saco, St. Demetrios Greek Orthodox Church remains at the heart of the Greek culture. Here is where the community's weddings, baptisms, name day celebrations and festivals take place. Most church parishes sponsor a Greek festival once or twice during the year. The festival (paniyiri) is similar to those typically held by churches, cities, and towns in Greece to celebrate a name day. St. Demetrios' Greek Heritage Festival is held on the church grounds in July every year. Now in its ninth year, the two-day event features Greek dancing, music, food, a Greek Coffee House, tours of the beautiful new church, a book store and a Greek grocery store. Much of the money raised for the building fund comes from festival proceeds, especially the sale of delicious Greek foods and pastries.

The preparation of the food is largely the undertaking of a relatively small group of women who meet at the church's kitchen to prepare Greek pastries and other specialties like gyros, shiskabob and domales. One of the first things that was built in the new church was the kitchen and what an impressive kitchen it is. Over 30,000 pieces of pastries are produced for the festival and even then they run out. This generation of women grew up speaking Greek and preparing traditional foods for church and for holidays. They are keepers of a rich vein of traditional foodways and customs. In the preparation of these pastries, many traditions are passed on, for example in making Kouloraka, the delicious cookie, the dough must be carefully twisted around a red egg to signify Easter.

Some pastries made by the women's group of St. Demetrios Greek Church:

- * Bakalva – Filo dough with honey and nuts
- * Kouloraka – Easter egg Cookie
- * Paximathia – A type of Biscotti cookie
- * Kourambiethes - A type of short bread with sugar
- * Finikia – A spiced cookie dipped in honey syrup,
- * Galatoubourkio – A custard with filo dough and honey syrup in triangles
- * Spinakopita – Filo dough with feta cheese
- * Karithopita – Spice Cake with honey syrup and walnuts

At Christmas time, the same group of dedicated women bakes *Christompsomo* to benefit the church. Traditionally on Christmas Eve every household would bake a

⁴ Rouvelas, p.157

Christopsomo or “Christ bread”. The loaf is often decorated with engraving on the crust that represents aspects of the family’s life and profession. For example, in Greece (and possibly in Maine) a loaf from a fishing family would have a picture of a fish on it.

Christopsomo – Greek Christmas Bread

1 package active dry yeast	¼ cup warm water
1/3 cup sugar	1 tsp ground cardamon seeds
¼ tsp salt	1 egg
¼ cup milk	¼ cup melted butter
1 ½ cups whole wheat flour	1 cup all purpose flour
¼ cup golden raisins	¼ cup chopped walnuts

Grease an 8-inch circular cake pan. Dissolve the yeast in warm water and allow to stand for a few minutes. Meanwhile, combine the sugar, egg, milk, cardamon and butter in a large bowl and mix well. Add the yeast to both types of flour, raisins and the walnuts. Mix well. If the dough is too moist, add a little all-purpose flour to the dough. Turn the dough out into a floured surface and knead by hand until its smooth and elastic, about 5 minutes. Shape into a round loaf. Place the dough into the cake pan, cover with a towel and allow to rise in a warm place until doubled in volume. Meanwhile, preheat the oven to 350. When risen, bake the loaf for 35 to 40 minutes or until brown and it sounds hollow when tapped on the bottom.

Another important aspect of the Greek Heritage festival is the dancing to the live music performed by the Hellenic & Near East Musical Society Ensemble. Favorite dances are the Zeibékiko and the Kalamatianos. Traditionally, the Zeibekiko is a solo dance performed with much skill and control. The dancer lowers his head and outstretches his arms. Totally self-absorbed, no one interrupts the dancer’s trance-like movements. Today, however, many people dancing the Zeibekio occupy the dance floor at the same time. The steps are usually improvised, making each dance different.⁵ The Kalamatianos is a very popular open line dance. Contrary to popular belief, it did not begin in the town of Kalmata but originated from a very old dance, the sirtos.⁶ Easy to master, it is danced everywhere.

John Anagnostis and his sister, Irene Macos, taught Greek dancing and the Greek language in Biddeford and Saco for many years. Their mother, originally from the Myrna region of Greece (which eventually became Turkey) passed on her love of Greek dancing. John Anagnostis also had a Greek music program at the local radio station for many years and playing from his extensive collection of Greek dance music. Today, community dances take place at the church on the Oct.26 St. Demeritus Name Day Dance, on March 25 for an intergenerational line dance, on Greek Independence Day and at the Greek Heritage Festival in July.

⁵ Rouvelas, p.198

⁶ Rouvelas, p. 197

Beyond its fundraising aspect, the Greek Heritage Festival creates a feeling of unity among Greeks in Biddeford and Saco. The workers, cooks, musicians and dancers are bound together by shared experience: together they produce the festival, together they enjoy the feeling of accomplishment that comes from preserving both publicly and privately their sense of ethnic identity.

Other Community Celebrations:

The most significant life cycle events in the Greek community are weddings, baptisms, and funerals. Weddings are particularly rich source of traditional culture. The bridal couple wears *stefana*, or crowns joined by a ribbon, during the wedding ceremony. The *stefana* symbolize the union of the man and the woman and their status as king and queen of the new household. After the religious ceremony a wedding feast is usually held in the church hall. The *koumbaros* or sponsors, distribute *boubounieres* (small packets containing seven sugar-coated almonds) to the guests. The almonds, which symbolize fertility as well as the sweetness and bitterness of married life, are usually wrapped in netting material. It is customary for young girls, after the wedding to slip *boubounieres* under their pillows to dream of their future husbands. At Saint Demetrios, the local custom is to give out candy-coated Jordan almonds. Weddings usually take place after the Sunday service when the entire community sticks around to celebrate.

At funerals, Helen Vlahakos reports that the older generation of Greeks would wear black armbands for forty days while women would wear black dresses. After the funeral, a group of women would prepare a “mercy meal” of fish for the grieving family. For christenings, the godparents were expected to give a complete outfit, all in white, along with a cross.

Name Day:

Many of the older generation of Greek Americans in Biddeford and Saco remember when family members and friends gathered to celebrate a name day. Along with Easter and Christmas, name days were an important family holiday. The name day, not the birthday, was celebrated. A person’s name day is the feast day of the saint for whom he or she was named. In most cases, the feast day is the anniversary of the saint’s death.

Name day celebrations were community celebrations with different kinds of food and drink were offered to visitors. An invitation was not required. For example on St. John’s day, January 7 or the Feast Day of St. John, every household with a member named John would hold an open house. One simply dropped by different homes to wish the honoree, “Chronia polla” (or many years). After the 1960’s, people started getting too busy for name day celebrations and the custom of visiting homes pretty much died out.

The name day tradition began during the first century when Christians prayed to God in the catacombs on the anniversary of a particular martyr or saints' death, thanking God and asking for the saint's intercessions to guide and direct their lives. Frescoes depicting such gatherings still exist in some of the catacombs. According to the church, saints come to earth on their name days. A common bond exists among people with the same name and guardianship by the same saint.⁷

New Years:

Greek Americans love to party and play cards on New Year's Eve. One belief is that you sample your luck for the coming year on the last day of the old. Card playing may follow a dinner party or just be combined with sweets and cookies. Helen Vlahakos remembers another old New Year's custom, the cutting of the Vasilopita (bread for St. Basil). Each family member hopes to get the lucky coin baked inside.

The Vasilopita commemorates a miracle performed by St. Basil while serving as a bishop. The legend varies as to how St. Basil became the guardian of the gold, silver and jewelry of the people of Caesarea. Some say thieves stole the village's valuables and they were eventually recovered. Another belief is that the government asked St. Basil to collect to a tax but then decided to cancel the tariff. In either case, St. Basil became responsible for returning riches to the people. Unfortunately, not everyone could agree on the rightful owners. St. Basil then asked that the women bake the gold and silver inside a large pita. When the pita bread was cut, each owner miraculously received the right valuable. Today, a single silver coin is baked inside each loaf affording the recipient good luck for the New Year.⁸

Easter:

The most significant celebration in the calendar year is Easter. Easter provides one of the most concrete expressions of the community's shared cultural heritage. Around this "Feast of Feasts," a host of rich traditions in ritual, art, custom and food preparation have evolved through the centuries and continue to flourish. The meaning of Easter is best described in the words hope and renewal and is evident as the outward signs of nature mirror the spiritual belief in new beginnings. The promise of renewal is fulfilled in both the sacred and the secular worlds; from the flurry of such domestic activities as spring-cleaning and bread baking to the rituals of the Resurrection Service on Easter Sunday.

In the Biddeford and Saco Greek community, families dye Easter eggs red on Holy Thursday to symbolize the blood of Christ. Among the Orthodox, red egg dye is used most commonly, in the Greek Church, red is the only color used. For the Orthodox, red symbolizes Christ's voluntary passion ("the blood spilt for mankind"). As a result, Holy Thursday, the day traditionally reserved for dyeing eggs, is often referred to as "Red Thursday."

⁷ Rouvelas, p. 97

⁸ Rouvelas, p. 245

A custom among Greeks is to exchange Easter cards with the familiar “Christos Aneste” (Christ Has Risen) greeting combined with a red egg Easter motif. These cards are also made in the “pop-up” variety and are displayed on mantelpieces during the season or sent as tokens of good wishes for the holidays.

Egg tapping is another way to invoke good fortune. A playful spirit pervades this Easter contest: families begin their breakfast feast with a roundtable tapping of the dyed eggs, as each family member says, “Christ is raised”. The principle of the tapping contest is to hold one’s own egg firmly while using it to attempt to break the eggs of all assembled. The person whose egg is left unbroken is assured good luck in the upcoming year. The egg, which survives this tapping ordeal, is usually placed in front of the family icon.

In many Orthodox countries, egg tapping also has a semi-religious significance. The cracking of the Easter egg represents the rending of Christ’s tomb and the release of eternal life. In Greece, where the custom is known to have existed since the thirteenth century, many break their eggs at the Resurrection Service, after saying the ritual blessing, “Christ is raised.”

Iconography:

In the Eastern Orthodox Church, the beauty of the spiritual world involves all the senses. The breathtaking iconographic interiors of many of the churches, the music and poetry of the church liturgy and a deep sense of religious ritual bear witness to this aesthetic. For Orthodox believers, the religious icon is a source of grace both in worship at church and in prayer at home. From as far back as the eighth century, when the Church of Constantinople prohibited the worship of realistic representation of Holy Personages, iconography has been the fundamental decorative element in all Orthodox churches.

Unlike western religious art, which stresses a direct three-dimensional representation of religious figures and scenes, icons strive to suggest a likeness. Influenced by the abstract, symbolic quality of Byzantine art, icons are characterized by a flat, two-dimensional style. Figures are exaggerated in size, especially facial features, which are usually painted in a state of prayer, looking at the congregation. This perspective and scale are purposely used, creating a distorted image that is meant to appear to worshippers as otherworldly. The aesthetics of the icon appeals to the spirit and the spirit alone.

Unlike secular public-oriented art forms, icon painting is considered a service to God. Individual artistic expression is secondary; the preservation of traditional painting techniques as well as the rich heritage of spiritual expression is foremost. This year, two iconographers from Greece will paint the icons inside St. Demetrios. In December, a Romanian craftsman created the iconostasis, the intricately carved wooden screen that divides the sanctuary from the main body of the church. Although this work can be

appreciated for the sheer beauty and mastery of craftsmanship, for worshippers these “prayers of color” are a visible reminder of their faith.

Resources:

Cooks/pastries makers:

- Mary Morsey 284-5297
- Helen Spirounias 934-2159
- Helen Vlahakos 283-3455
- Viola Vlahakos 283-3455
- Zaffie Hadjaris 284-8827
- Antonnia, “Tony” Spirounious 934-2159
(owns Venitias, restaurant in Old Orchard Beach)
- Sofia Ifantides 284-7435

Community & Church history:

- Father Basil Arabatzis 284-5651
- John Anagnostis 282-6938
- Natalie Bean

Greek Culture:

- John Anagnostis 282-6938
- Zaffie Hadjaris 284-8827
- Irene Macos 282-1346
- Stephanie Koutourulis 284-5651

Suggestions for future projects:

1. Through the Maine Arts Commission apply for Apprenticeship on Greek dancing through Maine Arts Commission.
2. Through New England Apprenticeship Program apply for apprenticeships on Greek music.
3. Document and develop exhibit on visiting Greek iconographers working in church.
4. As part of larger exhibit on seasonal traditions of the Franco-American, Jewish and Greek communities of Biddeford and Saco document Greek Easter week.