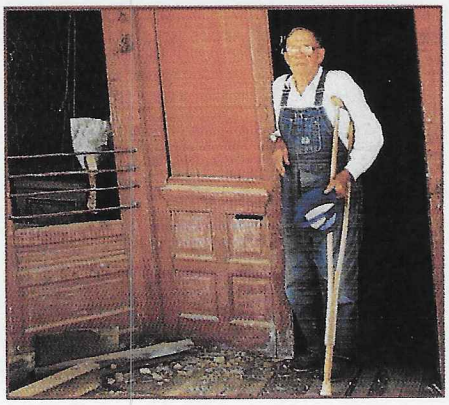
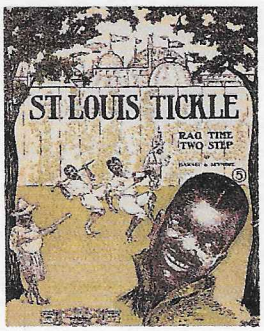
Gateway Heritage

Features





Front Cover: Lindell Towers. *Oil on canvas by Joe Jones, ca. 1930. Missouri Historical Society Art Collection.*

Back Cover: Welcome Home March. *Sheet music, ca. 1927. Lindbergh Collection, Missouri Historical Society Archives.*

Departments

The Odyssey of the Early Greek Community in St. Louis

BY MICHAEL G. TSICHLIS

Throughout the history of the United States, the influence of Hellenic civilization on American civic and cultural life has been significant. From political philosophy and institutions to architecture, the arts, and language, Greek ideas and themes are surprisingly ubiquitous. It is no wonder that when the Greek people set out to overthrow the yoke of four centuries of Turkish rule, Americans fervently cheered them on.

When Greece declared its modern independence in 1821, the United States was a young nation experiencing a period of republican optimism, Missouri entered the Union under the cloud of slavery and political compromise, and St. Louis was still a predominantly French settlement whose commercial life was just beginning to be affected by the arrival of the steamboat. However, by the beginning of the twentieth century the massive flood of immigrants would forever change the societies of both Greece and America.

Greek immigrants contributed to the cultural richness of St. Louis by bringing their Greek identities to the "new country." From Greek food and language to traditional gender roles and social mores, immigrants proudly made their culture a part of the city's daily life. By founding businesses, Greek Orthodox churches, and fraternal and benevolent organizations, they helped shape the social landscape of their adopted hometown, as well. Though their children would develop a more Americanized identity, they never forgot their Greek heritage and still take pride in the strong community their predecessors established.

The first known Greek to settle permanently in St. Louis was Dimitrios Jiannopoulos, a native of Thessalonica who became the first Greek Consul to St. Louis in 1873. While several hundred Greeks lived in St. Louis by the 1880s, the immigration rate did not steadily pick up until the time of the World's Fair. By 1910 the Greek population had grown to nearly 2,800. As major immigrant magnets such as New York and Chicago quickly filled up, St. Louis became known as a prime destination for employment opportunity, particularly among the large influx of Greek men who would join their Italian and Chinese counterparts employed as "gandy dancers"—seasonal railroad workers who laid tracks throughout the West.

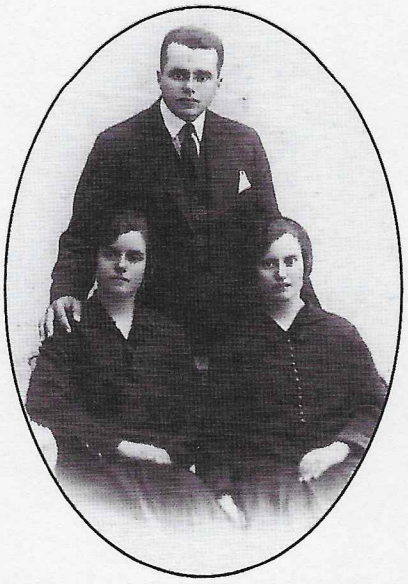
About the Author: Michael G. Tsichlis is a communications consultant and freelance writer. He is a native of St. Louis and a graduate of Saint Louis University, where he earned his Ph.D. in Public Policy Studies.

Above: *Peter Tsichlis (at right in white shirt) stands behind the counter of his Greek grocery and import store on Elm Street; his partner, Anastasios Rallis, stands at left. Located in the heart of old Greektown, the store's site is now the far left outfield of Busch Stadium. Photograph, ca. 1924.*

Left: Tsichlis and Rallis grocery store exterior. *Photograph, ca. 1928.*

Greeks arriving in America in the early twentieth century came primarily from rural areas and left a homeland beset by a failing agrarian economy, disproportionate taxes, and an unstable government. However, their sense of nationalism and ethnic pride was strong, especially since Greece had been gradually expanding its borders and shedding Turkey's dominance for over seventy years. Most were young men in their teens or early twenties who came to America with one overriding goal: to earn money to send back to their families in Greece and eventually to return themselves with pots of gold from the New World. Emmanuel Leontsinis, who came to the United States in 1907 at the age of sixteen, recalled the enthusiasm of his fellow Greeks as they listened to the band play aboard the American cruise liner on their journey across the Atlantic: "We were going to a rich country where we expected to see and find things better than [we left behind] in Greece." Leontsinis left a small farming village on the island of Kythira to pursue a better life. "We thought we'd come to America because a lot of our friends had . . . and they [had done] pretty good."

A special social responsibility of Greek men at the time was to care for the women in their families by working to provide their daughters and sisters with a dowry (*prika*) that would make them more attractive to suitors. As a result, in the early years Greek male immigrants outnumbered females by more than ten to one. Some scholars estimate that one of every four young Greek men had traveled to America in the early part of the century. With the annual influx of millions of American dollars, the government of Greece tacitly encouraged the exodus.



Emmanuel, Helen, and Despina, brother and sisters of John Leontsinis. *Photograph taken in Kythira, Greece, ca. 1920.*

Peter Tsichlis, who was born and reared in the Greek coastal village of Platanos on the Pelleponese (about eighty miles west of Athens), came to North America about 1900 at the age of twenty-three, first working in the Canadian sugar mills. He soon migrated to St. Louis and found work with the railroad crews, wintering in St. Louis along with many other Greek men. In a way of life shared by Greek immigrants across the country, they often lived ten or more to a small apartment, sharing domestic chores while saving money. Because few early Greek immigrants spoke English well, they initially took menial, task-oriented jobs. After working for a few years on the railroads, in factories, mills, restaurants, or whatever they could find, many would eke out enough savings to launch their own businesses. These businesses, along with nearby residences where Greeks originally settled, formed what was called Greektown.

St. Louis's Greektown

Historically, people of common ethnic and cultural backgrounds have moved near one another for mutual support. Greeks followed a similar pattern of clustering, with many cities on the East Coast and Midwest containing sizable enclaves of Hellenes. In St. Louis, the first Greektown occupied south central downtown where Busch Stadium now stands. Many Greek settlers in St. Louis exhibited strong traits of entrepreneurship, opening a variety of business establishments that typically included confectioneries, groceries, dry goods stores, restaurants, coffee houses, and shoe shine parlors.

On Valentine near Sixth Street, Peter Tsichlis and his partner, Anastasios Rallis, opened their grocery and Greek specialty store about 1908. As their business prospered, it moved in 1910 to larger quarters on Elm near Sixth Street in the heart of Greektown, where it remained for over two decades. Near the Tsichlis and Rallis grocery on Clark Avenue and Elm Street were a Greek-owned barber shop, an import store, the Theodorow family bakery, a restaurant, two pool halls, and two coffee houses.

Farther north on Broadway between Market and Chestnut was a Greek peddler who stood on the corner selling fruit, peanuts, chick peas, and pastries. The Tompras family owned the Maryland Cafeteria on Sixth Street between Olive and Pine, as well as three dry cleaning establishments in the area. A restaurant known as The Whip stood on Tenth and Washington near Harry Stathis's elegant Washington Restaurant, located next door to the Missouri Athletic Club. Many prominent St. Louis businessmen and politicians patronized the Pine Cleaners and Hatworks on the northwest corner of Broadway and Pine, owned by John Lekometros.

The west end of downtown also housed many Greek establishments. The Gem Restaurant, owned by Nick Larandos and Costa Cassimatis, was on 18th Street across from Union Station. Next door was the Furla Brothers Fruit Company, which grew to become a major player in the St. Louis wholesale produce market. Facing Union Station at 1900 Market was the Pontiac Hotel, owned by Theodore and Emmanuel Leontsinis. While most businesses

Dimitrios Bouras is shown cutting yarn to assemble mop heads. The Bouras's manufacturing business, now in its third generation of family ownership, exports mops and floor-cleaning equipment around the world. Photograph, ca. 1925.

were downtown, by the early 1920s a number of Greek-owned stores and restaurants could be found as far out as Grand Boulevard to the west, Chippewa to the south, and West Florissant to the north. A number of Greek-owned movie theaters were scattered across the city.

In a break with the trend of Greeks opening food and retail businesses, Dimitrios Bouras, an immigrant from Kalamata, Greece, entered the manufacturing industry in 1904. Using scrap parts and cotton remnants from a nearby mill, he developed a durable cleaning mop that sold well. Bouras started his business in space he rented at the Fisele Mop Company on Fourth Street near Cerre. In the mid-1920s, he developed one of the first car wash mops manufactured in America. By the time he moved into his own production warehouse on Page Boulevard near Spring Avenue in the 1930s, Bouras's mops could be found in most of the major grocery and hardware stores in the city.

A few St. Louis Greeks really hit it big. Arriving in the area in 1908, Charles Skouras initially took work as a waiter and a bartender. Soon, he sent for his younger brothers, Spiros and George, who also worked menial jobs while Charles went to night school to learn business techniques and to polish his English. In 1914 the brothers took a chance and bought a nickelodeon that they turned into a movie theater named the "Olympia." The gamble paid off. By 1926 the Skourases owned thirty-seven theaters in St. Louis, and by the 1930s the chain had grown to more than four hundred theaters nationwide, making them major players in the motion picture industry. In a gesture of appreciation for someone who had helped them get their start, the Skourases provided lifetime movie passes to Nick Larandos, who had employed them in their early days as waiters in his restaurant. In the mid-thirties the brothers left for Hollywood where, in 1942, Spiros Skouras became the president of Twentieth Century Fox.

By 1922 the reported number of Greek-owned establishments in St. Louis came to more than two hundred and fifty, half of them restaurants. Those who did not own businesses often worked for other Greeks. This was especially true of later Greek arrivals who often were related to established immigrants. Emmanuel Leontsinis came to St. Louis where his older brother and cousin had already settled. After a short stint as a waiter in an American restaurant, he soon found work in a Greek-owned eatery, busing tables and later cooking. When Peter Tsichlis's

Near the Tsichlis and Rallis grocery on Clark Avenue and Elm Street were a Greek-owned barber shop, an import store, the Theodorow family bakery, a restaurant, two pool halls, and two coffee houses.

nephew, Kimon, arrived in St. Louis in 1927, he took a job as truck driver for the Consumers Grocery Store, a major wholesale food distributor owned by the Rallis brothers.

Greeks already established in the community often counseled new arrivals to St. Louis. One such Greek was Nick Saganis, a marble cutter who came to St. Louis in 1910 and later opened a coffee shop on Sixth Street. Saganis helped newcomers find a place to stay, fed them, and lent them money. When new immigrants from the island of Kythira arrived at Union Station, Greek redcaps advised them to walk across the street to see fellow Kythiran and restauranteur Nick "Mr. Nick" Larandos at the Gem Restaurant for information and referrals.

Emmanuel Leontsinis, a veteran of World War I, recalled how the American attitudes toward Greeks appeared to change after the war. "By that time . . . the Greeks were in business, had made money, had good homes and families and began sending their children to college. . . . Americans got to know [the Greeks] better." Prejudice still existed, however. At one point in the 1920s, Dimitrios Bouras and his family moved after neighbors began complaining about the presence of "foreigners" in their neighborhood.

When new immigrants arrived at Union Station, Greek redcaps advised them to walk across the street to see restauranteur Nick "Mr. Nick" Larandos at the Gem Restaurant for information and referrals.

By the early 1920s, the Greek community in St. Louis numbered three thousand; as it grew, families began to migrate west to the area near Chouteau and Kingshighway and farther north near Delmar and Kingshighway. While these areas became the primary Greek settlements during the depression, they never quite captured the unique social and commercial interaction of the first Greektown near Sixth and Elm.

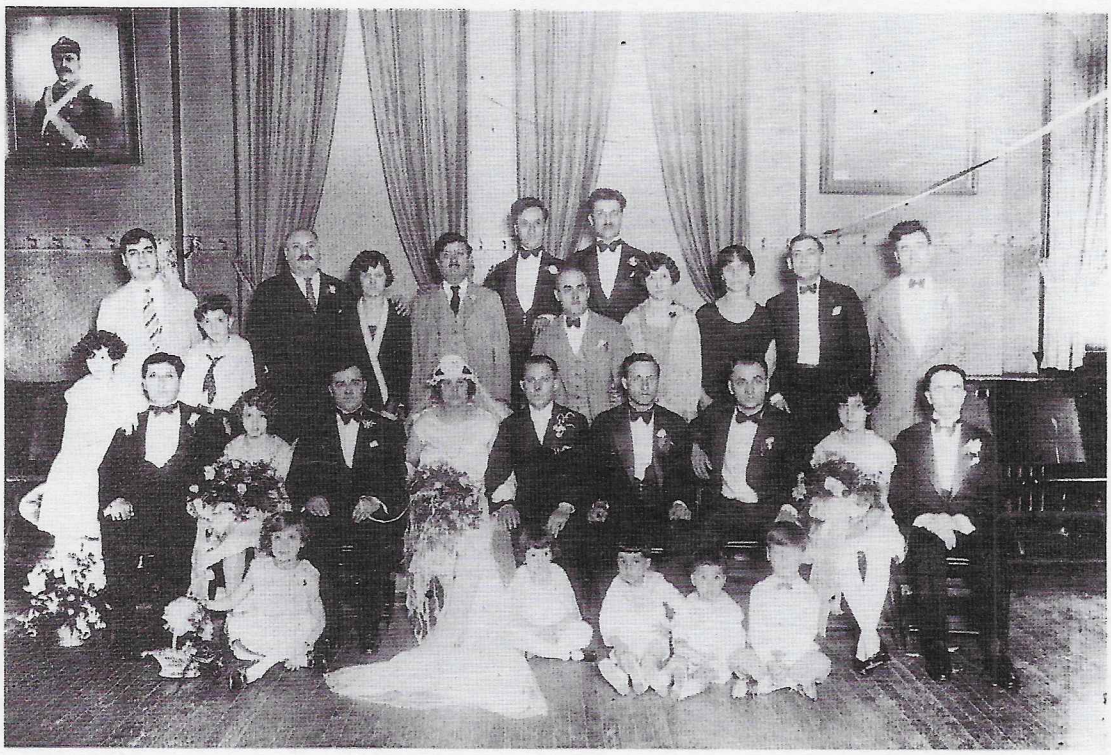
Social Life

The social life and customs of Greek immigrants were rooted in their childhood experiences in the Greek village (*horio*) and dominated by the daily calendar of the Greek Orthodox Church. Religious feast days such as the Annunciation of the Mother of God (March 25, which is also Greek Independence Day), the Dormition of the Mother of God (August 15), the Exaltation of the Holy Cross (September 14), and Christmas-Epiphany (December 25–January 6, preceded by the Advent Season) were important periods involving fasting and church services. Christmas, while a major feast day in the Orthodox Church, is generally overshadowed in importance by Easter (*Pascha*). Greeks celebrated namedays, the day of the year dedicated to the saint for whom a person was named, instead of birthdays. On the nameday of a family member, a Greek household in St. Louis typically opened its doors to visitors from all over the community, celebrating with Greek food, music, and line dancing.

Family was central to the Greek way of life, and many of the young bachelors who came to America eventually married a Greek spouse, even if they had to return to Greece to find one. Peter Tsichlis visited the village of Akrata, where in April 1912 he met and married Margaret Delucas—a full seventeen years his junior. They soon returned to St. Louis to set up house, start a family, and resume the grocery business. At first they lived in a flat on Clark Street in the old Greektown, but by the 1920s they joined the exodus west. Unconventional for their time, their marriage was mutually chosen, not prearranged through families.

Because few eligible Greek women lived in St. Louis in the early 1900s, many immigrant men without ties to someone in Greece remained single their entire lives or wed non-Greek spouses. Depending on the level of social and cultural influence by the American spouse, some Greek men reduced their associations with the Hellenic community or lost contact altogether.

While immediate and extended family formed the nucleus of Greek immigrant social support, other relationships extended the network further. The role of *koumbari* was of special importance. To attain the relational status of *koumbaros* (male) or *koumbara* (female), one must participate as a sponsor in marriage or be godparent to a couple's child. In the tradition of the Orthodox Church, koumbari go beyond the role of the "best man," "maid of honor," or "witness" and implies a lifelong personal commitment to the new family.



A Greek wedding reception. *The affair was held at the Italian Fraternity Hall on North Vandeventer, a frequent setting for large gatherings in the Greek community. Photograph, ca. 1925.*

Immigrants formed other extended relationships with *patriotis,* those whose families hailed from the same village or region of Greece. Those with no family, church, or regional ties were still accepted as part of the greater Hellenic community.

Outside the Greek enclave, interaction with non-Greeks was less social and tended to be more businesslike and formal. Of course, many Greek businessmen dealt with the public on a regular basis. While Greeks and non-Greeks—including other recent Italian, Polish, and Irish immigrants—did socialize, such interactions often required a sponsor from the welcoming group to "vouch" for the alien newcomer.

Life's rites of passage were integral to the Greek community, which celebrated them passionately. Baptism and chrismation (a joint ceremony) welcomed Greek infants into the Orthodox Church. Until the establishment of a permanent church, baptisms were usually held in homes. Weddings were often large events, with receptions usually held at the Italian Fraternity Hall on North Vandeventer or at the Swiss Hall on Kingshighway near Chouteau. By the 1930s Greeks added American customs, such as the march of the bridal party down the aisle, to the wedding ceremony. Certain unique old-country customs and rituals also accompanied the death of an early Greek immigrant, with vigils commonly held over the deceased, usually in the living room of the family residence. In a practice that has been traced back to ancient times, female relatives and friends of the deceased mourned by wailing out loud for extended periods of time.

In keeping with the patrilineal social structure of the old country, Greek Americans considered the father the head of the household. Women seldom worked outside the home, tending instead to the rigors of domestic chores and child rearing. While modern standards deemed such rigid gender-based roles outmoded, families were cohesive and delinquency among children and youth was very low.

The coffee house (*kaffeneion*) was a popular gathering place for Greek men and one of the true bastions of old-country life. Sipping on thick black coffee in a room filled with cigarette, pipe, and cigar smoke, men wiled away the hours exchanging stories or job leads, playing cards or backgammon, and, of course, debating any subject under the sun, especially Greek politics. Greeks were known for their strong opinions and passionate debates. In his classic study of Greek Americans, Theodore Saloutos aptly noted that "when two Greeks met, three ideas emerged."

St. Louis Greeks enjoyed socializing in large groups. Elva Saganis Tompras recalled the many community picnics held at the Chain of Rocks and Christy Parks. A Greek social group or the church usually hosted such outdoor affairs, which featured lamb roasted on an open spit, Greek music, dancing, and poetry reading. Another popular activity was organizing amateur theatrical productions, with performances held at the Saint Louis University gymnasium on West Pine. Greeks in St. Louis also maintained relationships with a smaller community of Hellenes who had settled in Madison, Granite City, and East St. Louis, Illinois, and frequently crossed the river to visit friends and kinfolk.

Despite appearances, relations between Greeks in St. Louis were not always harmonious. A major wedge in the community was rooted in events occurring thousands of miles away in Greece. Prior to the First World War and lasting well into the twenties, Greeks in America split their loyalties between factions in their native homeland supporting King Constantine of Greece and those supporting the popular democratic Prime Minister, Eleutherios Venizelos. Heated debates in the Greek-American press fueled the divisions, and Greeks in St. Louis and other cities took sides in a dispute that reverberated through social organizations, the church, and even families for many years.

Social and Service Organizations

Sociologist Charles Moskos wrote that the Greek experience in the United States has been a blend of ethnic pride and resourceful participation in American society. Nothing attests to this more than the Greek penchant to form a variety of ethnic social and service organizations. By the early 1920s a number of such Greek "societies" in St. Louis promoted social, cultural, and philanthropic activities. In 1919, eighteen men founded the first of these organizations, the American Hellenic Progressive League, which organized community picnics and other popular social events such as the annual Masquerade Ball held just before Lent. The group also helped its members acquire U.S. citizenship. By 1924 the league had four hundred members, and in 1937 it purchased "the farm," a two-hundred-acre wilderness site near Cedar Hill, Missouri, used for personal retreats and community picnics.

The women of Elpis aided new immigrants in getting settled, visited Greeks confined to hospitals, comforted the dying, and provided assistance to widows and orphans.

A church-related Greek women's benevolent organization called Elpis (Greek for "hope") was created in 1920 to provide moral and material support to the needy in the community. Raising funds by hosting dinners and other activities, the women of Elpis aided new immigrants in getting settled, visited Greeks confined to hospitals, comforted the dying, and provided assistance to widows and orphans. They also helped cover funeral expenses for the poor, including the Greek bachelors who died in St. Louis with no family and little savings. The behind-the-scenes work of Elpis made it the premier Hellenic charitable organization of its time.

Another Greek fraternal organization, the American Hellenic Educational and Progressive Association (AHEPA), was formed in St. Louis in 1924. This group was actually the 53rd chapter of what had quickly become a national Greek-American organization. Founded in Atlanta in 1922 in response to the harassment of Greeks by native residents and the Ku Klux Klan, AHEPA's principal goal was to encourage a more rapid assimilation into mainstream American society. English was the official language of the organization, and membership was open to non-Greeks. An annual highlight of the organization was the May Festival, an opulent dinner dance held at the Jefferson Hotel on Twelfth Street (now Tucker Boulevard). The festival was clearly modeled after the Veiled Prophet Ball, with an AHEPA queen and her court selected from a pool of applications reviewed by a committee of members. Community involvement, education, family background, and membership in the church were the primary criteria for selection. Ellie . Canellakos was crowned the first AHEPA queen in 1927.

A variety of other Greek social organizations formed—some short lived and with peculiar names like the "Society of Euripides" and the "Jolly Bachelors." Some organizations, such as the Brotherhood of Kytherians and the Epirotic and Rhodian Societies, were established around common Greek provincial affiliations. A group of officers elected by the membership administered most Greek social and service organizations. Some came with the trappings of typical fraternal and pseudo-Masonic organizations, such as embroidered hats, official banners, established rituals, and a stated level of secrecy. To the Greeks, these organizations, as parochial and peculiar as they sometimes were, nevertheless served as important agencies for preserving the customs and values of a faraway homeland. Yet, the Greek Orthodox Church superseded all these organizations in importance to the Hellenic community.

The Church and the Greek Community

The Greek Orthodox Church was the center of Greek culture and community life, providing not only a place of worship but also a common gathering place. Before 1904, the religious needs of Greek immigrants living in St. Louis were administered by two priests from Chicago who arrived once a month to perform sacraments (baptisms, weddings, etc.) and a divine liturgy (the chief service or mass of the Orthodox Church). However, the arrival of more Hellenes at the time of the Louisiana Purchase Exposition highlighted the

The Church of the Holy Trinity, the first Greek Orthodox church in St. Louis, was ministered by Fr. Panagiotis Phiamboli (in sacramental robes). Photograph, 1907.

need to establish a permanent local church. Greek Consul Dimitrios Jiannopoulos, who by that time had lived in St. Louis for three decades and was a recognized leader of the Hellenic community, joined with a core group of other Greeks to form the Church of the Holy Trinity (*Agias Trias*). Father Panagiotis Phiambolis soon arrived from Boston with his family and became the first permanently assigned Greek Orthodox priest in Missouri. A learned man of sixty-five who spoke seven languages and was a former teacher and school director, Fr. Phiambolis also happened to be the father-in-law of Consul Jiannopoulos.

The new parish found its home in a former Protestant church on the northwest corner of 19th and Delmar Streets, paying fifty dollars rent per month. However, in following years the young parish faltered financially and had to establish special fees for services such as baptisms, weddings, and funerals. The fees caused a great deal of discord over the commingling of sacred ministerial functions, which were the responsibility of the priest, and the secular administration of organizational matters, which in America was usually left to the laity.

These disagreements over the administration of church affairs eventually prompted a disaffected group to form the Church of the Annunciation (*Evangelismos*) in 1910. Services were held in a rented church building at 17th and Olive Streets. However, the new community dissolved in 1913 after many of its young male members returned to Greece to fight in the Balkan Wars. The Annunciation's legacy was assured when proceeds from the dissolved church went toward the purchase of a portion of St. Matthew Cemetery on Bates Street near Morganford Road just south of Bevo Mill. For the first time, Greeks in St. Louis would have a place to bury their dead.

Although early attempts to establish a self-sustaining church faltered, on Palm Sunday in 1917 a group of Greeks assembled to discuss the difficulties they had experienced in maintaining a viable church and to examine the options before them. After much heated debate they decided that the best course of action was to establish a new church and organized a committee of sixteen for this purpose. One of the committee's first directives was to obtain the services of a priest, and in September 1917, Fr. Constantine Liakopoulos assumed the duties of his new parish.

At first the initiative to create a new parish met with staunch opposition from some members of Holy Trinity. However, the commitment to start anew was strong, and within a few months a church building (the former Grace Lutheran Church) and a residence were purchased for fifteen thousand dollars on Garrison and St. Louis Avenues on the city's near north side. In the midst of fervent American patriotism, St. Louis Greeks did what they could to show support for their new homeland. Joseph Constantourakis, the first president of the new church community, captured the mood of the time when he told the *St. Louis Globe-Democrat* that "the members of this church are for America first and for America alone. St. Louis is our home. Here we will live and here we will invest our savings in our own enterprises and in community enterprises for our own betterment as loyal citizens of the country."

Picnics were common in St. Louis's Greek community. Fr. Constantine Liakopoulos, the first priest of the newly organized St. Nicholas Church, stands on the picnic table to command the crowd's attention at a picnic held at Chain of Rocks Park. Photograph, 1918.

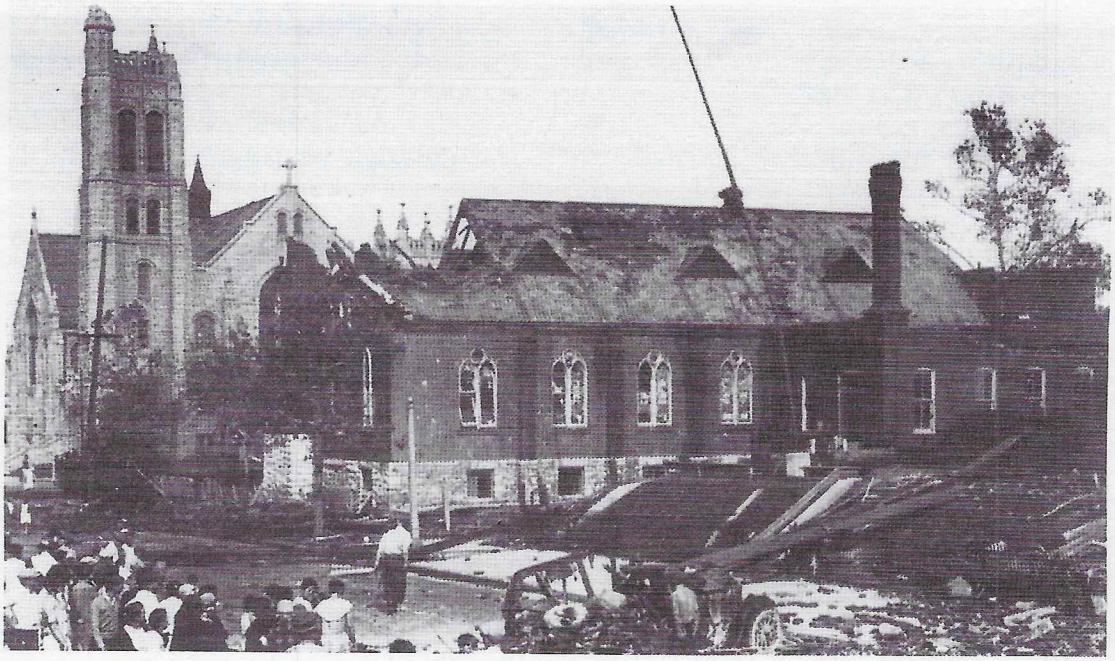
At Nick Saganis's recommendation, the new church was named after one of the most popular and revered Greek saints: St. Nicholas. In a not-so-subtle reference to the spirit of their adopted homeland, press releases were prepared announcing the formation of the new community, which was described as "consisting of the people, being administered by the people, and working for the people." On Saturday, December 22, 1917, Archbishop Germanios of Antioch presided over an elaborate dedication ceremony that was covered by the local press. After the church opened, many Greek immigrant families began migrating to the surrounding neighborhood, located just several blocks from Sportsman's Park.

Worshippers were expected to stand during the entire service, which often lasted more than two hours. The introduction of chairs in 1920 initially caused a stir but was eventually accepted.

Worship at St. Nicholas included many old-country practices. During the first several years all but old and infirm worshippers were expected to stand during the entire service, which often lasted more than two hours. The introduction of chairs in 1920 initially caused a stir but was eventually accepted. Even with seating in place, men and women were segregated from one another, a practice continued until the 1950s. A choir, uncommon in the Greek tradition of Orthodox worship, formed in 1928.

The days on Garrison Avenue in the 1920s were difficult for the young church community. Disputes related to Greek national politics split churchgoers into factions that simply could not unite to govern the church, which ultimately caused the parish to be placed in receivership for six months. The Hellenic Progressive League played an important role in reconstituting the church board. Just when all appeared to be back on track, a new catastrophe struck. On September 29, 1927, the Church of St. Nicholas was ravaged by the Great Tornado that ripped through the Central West End and Midtown, killing eighty-six people, injuring twelve hundred, and causing $20 million in property damage. The tornado demolished the church building, and the Greek community once again faced a huge challenge.

Within a few months of the disaster, the parish held a general meeting at the Italian Fraternity Hall and set up an executive committee to assess options for relocating the church. Until a new facility could be found, the parish rented a former synagogue on the southwest corner of Enright and Kingshighway for one hundred dollars per month. Meanwhile, the executive committee

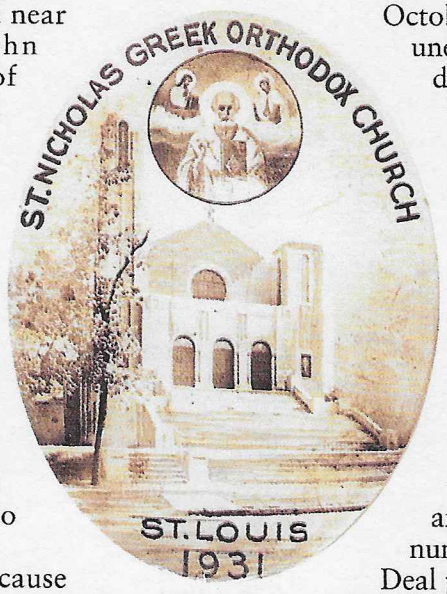


Left: *On September 29, 1927, the Church of St. Nicholas was ravaged by the Great Tornado that ripped through the Central West End and Midtown, killing eighty-six people, injuring twelve hundred, and causing $20 million in property damage. The tornado demolished the church building. Photograph, 1927.*

Below: Button worn at the dedication of St. Nicholas Orthodox Church on Forest Park Boulevard, 1931.

examined several prospective church sites in the vicinity of the new Greek settlements near the Central West End. The need for a new location became more urgent after part of the floor of the temporary building collapsed during Good Friday services in 1929. Fortunately there were no serious injuries.

In September 1929, the parish purchased a site at 4957 Forest Park Boulevard near Kingshighway for $27,500. John Mavrakos, a Greek businessman of modest beginnings who opened a series of candy stores well known to St. Louisans, chaired the construction committee. Building plans frequently changed as the depression deepened, and construction of the church eventually cost $104,815. On September 20, 1931, Bishop Kallistos of Chicago presided over an ornate dedication service (the Greek Orthodox community of St. Louis has been under the jurisdiction of the bishop of Chicago since the 1920s).



Although the depression would cause crises in servicing the debt on the facility and a fight against foreclosure in 1936, the dedication of the new St. Nicholas Church on Forest Park Boulevard marked a watershed for the Greek community in St. Louis. After more than two decades and four church locations, a permanent structure could finally serve the needs of the entire local Hellenic community. This feat was especially impressive since it was accomplished by a group of immigrants who came to America with few possessions, little education, and limited fluency in English.

The Impact of the Great Depression

Although most St. Louis Greeks may not have been immediately affected by the crash of October 1929, the bank closures, high unemployment rate, and lack of disposable income eventually affected the Hellenic community as it did the entire St. Louis area and the nation. As the economy worsened during the 1930s, more Greeks began leaving America than were arriving, although the majority who had settled down remained. Emmanuel Leontsinis recalled that things got so bad that some families left St. Louis to go back to Greece, although most later returned as the economy improved, very few turned to socialism as an answer to their plight. While the number of Greeks employed by New Deal programs is unknown, most Greeks looked toward the Roosevelt administration for support and leadership.

Throughout the 1920s Peter Tsichlis's grocery on Elm did relatively well, although his partner Anastasios Rallis eventually left the business and returned to Greece with his family. However, as the depression progressed the business climate began to change. Tsichlis, by now one of the established Greeks

in the community, began to extend credit to many customers who could not settle their purchases up front. As the economy worsened, customers began defaulting on their accounts in greater numbers, and Tsichlis had to close the grocery. After nearly three decades in business, Peter Tsichlis, a man whose resourcefulness and entrepreneurial spirit had sustained him since his arrival in America, found himself in his mid-fifties, stricken with rheumatism, and without a livelihood to support his seven children.

Greek mop manufacturer Dimitrios Bouras had to adjust rapidly to the harsh new economic realities. Soon after he made large deposits at the Delmar Bank to cover operational expenses, the banks closed "on holiday," freezing up all customer accounts. Bouras lost all the money he deposited. Rather than settling business transactions with cash, for many months Bouras bartered with his clients, exchanging cleaning equipment for items such as groceries and hardware. Soon, however, the federal government would force banks to remain open and investor accounts would be insured.

The economic crisis affected every member of the Tsichlis family. Mary Tsichlis Katsinas recalled how all seven children, ranging in age from preadolescent to young adult, had to go to work. "It wasn't that we wanted to," she said, "but we had to. It was essential in those days." The two oldest Tsichlis children, Ann and Mary, sold tickets at movie theaters, including the Fox, Ambassador, and Loew's State. The eldest son, George, first worked as a theater usher and later found employment at Butler Brothers Dry Goods Store. The fourth child, Frieda, worked in a dress factory, while the three youngest boys—Jim, Angelo, and Sam—sold *Liberty* magazines for a nickel each on street corners. Together, they made enough money to get by. "Work was hard to find and when you found it you worked cheap," said George. "I worked [for] as low as three dollars a week, working eight hour days, five and a half days a week."

Like many St. Louisans, some Greeks were forced to sell apples, peanuts, and other items on the street to make ends meet. Elpis, the ladies' benevolent society, helped many Greek families during the period, providing coal for heat, food, clothing, and transportation to local welfare offices. Although some Greeks received government assistance, it apparently was not a pervasive occurrence.

Greeks on the whole exhibited a large level of resiliency amidst the economic hardship of the 1930s. They assisted one another as much as they could, which often meant helping someone find a job or aiding a family in need. In his vivid recollection of the "Hooverville" on the Mississippi riverfront, George Tsichlis could not recall any Greeks having been forced to live in the tiny shacks made of cardboard, metal scraps, and driftwood. "The Greeks helped each other to the point where you had nothing like that," Tsichlis said. "Even though we didn't have [much] . . . we passed along to others and they did the same for us." Indeed, the depression was a period of great bonding among Greeks. As the influence of regionalism and old-country politics began to diminish, the Greek community developed a more cohesive group identity.

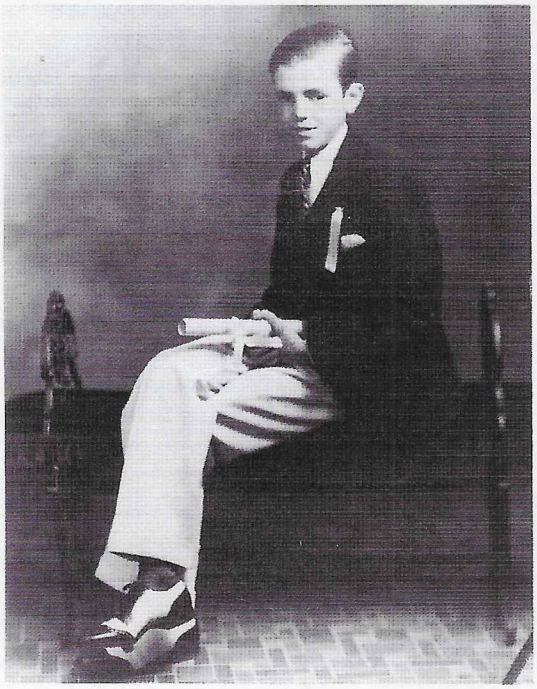
Left: Greek Boy Scouts. *The organization survived for only a few years, as families struggling in the depression could not pay for scouting activities. George Tsichlis is shown in the back row to the viewer's right of the boy holding the flag with the Greek word for scouts. Photograph, 1930.*

Facing: George Tsichlis's graduation from Stix School. *Photograph, 1932.*

Old World Values and American Culture: the Second Generation

With the lowering of immigration quotas mandated by the Reed Johnson Act of 1926, Greek immigration to the United States slowed to a trickle almost overnight, falling from twenty-eight thousand in 1921 to an annual rate of approximately two thousand in the late 1920s. Immigration would remain relatively low until restrictions eased in 1966. Thus, after years of steady and rapid growth, Greeks in St. Louis and around the nation began to really settle into their adopted homeland. While old-world ways were still prevalent, a new generation was creating its own unique identity.

Before entering school, many of the children of Greek immigrants knew little or no English, as Greek was spoken not only at home but also among relatives, koumbari, and kinsmen with whom they socialized. During the 1910s and early 1920s, Greek children living in the old Greektown attended Madison School. There they sat side by side with Italians, Irish, Chinese, and Jews. As a student at Madison in the 1920s, Elva Tompras recalls the occasional taunts directed at Hellenic-American children by non-immigrant-born classmates. Due to the cultural attitudes of the time, Greek parents advised their children to avoid playing with non-Greek children. As Greek families began to migrate to the western part of the city in the 1920s, most second-generation Greek children enrolled in either Dewey or Stix Schools (the latter was torn down for nearby hospital expansion in 1997). At Stix School George Tsichlis recalled no stigma for being Greek, since Greek children made up a sizable minority of the student body.



There were a few attempts at providing Greek-based instruction and social organizations for children. The Hellenic Progressive League helped form a short-lived Greek Boy Scouts group. However, the principal institution for the inculcation of Greek language and culture was Greek School. Although Greek language instruction had been set up through the church and was well attended in the early days, a group of Greek Americans approached the St. Louis public schools to ask that Greek language classes be taught at Stix School in the evenings from 4 to 6 P.M. Classes later met at Turner Hall on Chouteau. However, few kids were genuinely excited to attend class after their normal school day ended and other children were outside playing.

By the 1930s, when the first American-born children had reached young adulthood, it was clear which sex was having more fun.

Greek immigrant parents were known for their strict discipline, and rules for socialization were particularly distinguished along sexual lines. While Greek boys enjoyed a fairly large measure of freedom outside the home, parents sternly admonished girls to avoid social settings outside the Greek community and the church. Thus by the 1930s, when the first American-born children had reached young adulthood, it was clear which sex was having more fun. Lula Larandos Leontsinis remembers that "if a Greek girl was seen with a boy, it was just assumed they would be getting married." As an involved student who served on many student committees at Central High School in the mid-1920s, not only was she warned about dating "American" men, but she also found out that parents of male students had discouraged them from becoming involved with a Greek girl. "There was social discrimination," Lula recalls, "and it was felt on both sides."

The AHEPA-affiliated Sons of Pericles was an early attempt to organize second-generation Greek boys for social and athletic activities. Photograph, ca. 1936.

Greek girls paid another price. Because of the traditional belief that girls need only be ready for marriage and domestic life, most did not continue their education past high school, if that far. In what was certainly a break with the conventions of the time, Lula Larandos and the daughter of the Greek Consul were among the first women from the Greek community to graduate from college. Lula, who received her bachelor's and master's degrees in history from Washington University, later went on to a career in teaching.

While most Greek girls were prohibited from going where they could openly mingle with men and were permitted to attend only Greek dances, many young Greek men danced to big band and swing tunes at popular nightclubs such as the Arcadia, Tune Town, and Casaloma. "If you went out with a Greek girl you were cautious not to drop her off in front of her home," Nick Bouras remembers. During the mid-1930s, eighteen-year-old George Tsichlis brought together two dozen young men from his neighborhood, approximately half of whom were non-Greek, to form a fraternal athletic and social organization called the Sportsmen's Club. The club held popular annual social dances where Greek American and non-Greek American youths could mingle, but it dissolved when its members left for service in World War II.

The 1930s saw attempts to organize the growing numbers of second-generation Greek youths into social groups. Founded in 1930, the Sons of Pericles, the AHEPA auxiliary for boys and young men ages fourteen to twenty-two, organized a variety of sporting events, including golf and baseball leagues at Forest Park. Another AHEPA auxiliary for young women was the Order of the Daughters of AHEPA, later known as the Daughters of Penelope. The group occasionally invited Greek boys to its social activities. A coed social and philanthropic club called the Hellenic Young Peoples Association was finally organized in 1937.

The social identity of second-generation Greek Americans spanned two worlds. While by and large respecting their Hellenic origins and holding steadfastly to the Greek Orthodox faith, they became more and more American, foregoing the coffee house for the nightclub, celebrating birthdays rather than namedays, and concerning themselves more with events in America than with those in Greece. Greater courtship choice also increasingly replaced the pervasive presence of Greek matchmaking.

Second-generation Greek Americans were more than simply Greek. They were part of that influential generation of Americans who lived through the worst economic disaster in history, fought the most massive war ever, and built the strongest economy in the world. They formed—and continue to form—an important bridge between the values and ways of an ancient culture and that of twentieth-century America.

Epilogue

As we approach the twenty-first century, no known members of the early Greek immigration survive to tell the story of the first decades of Greek settlement in St. Louis. Greektown and the Greek neighborhoods that existed through the 1930s are long gone. Even the numbers of second-generation Greek Americans possessing adult memories of the days before World War II are dwindling. As the Greek community matured after the war, the American-born children of the original immigrants began to move into mainstream middle-class society and, like many others of their generation, sought the amenities of suburban life.

Today, Hellenic Americans live and work throughout the St. Louis area. While many carry on in the entrepreneurial spirit of their forefathers and operate their own successful businesses, many others have entered professional fields such as medicine, law, investment services, and academe. A second wave of immigration in the postwar years to some extent replenished the ethnic spirit and vitality of the early Greek immigrants. George Tsichlis, as did his father before him, advised a number of the latter-day immigrants as they sought a foothold on the American dream.

Over the years fragments of Hellenic culture have endured in a number of Greek social and service organizations and, of course, the Greek Orthodox Church. Some early organizations, such as the Hellenic Progressive League, Elpis, and AHEPA, continue their benevolent work and social activities three generations later. New organizations have also sprung up, including a second church-affiliated women's charitable organization called Philoptochos, as well as a Hellenic Veteran's organization and a second St. Louis chapter of AHEPA. Another Greek Orthodox parish, the Church of the Assumption, was formed in the early 1940s. Finally, in 1996 one of a handful of endowed academic positions, the Hellenic Government Karakas Family Foundation professorship in Greek Studies, was created at the University of Missouri–St. Louis with the support of many in the St. Louis Hellenic community.

Perhaps the biggest issue facing the Greek community, both in St. Louis and across the United States, is the degree to which Hellenic culture can be preserved in the face of a dramatic rise in intermarriages between Greek Americans and non-Greeks, a trend particularly evident in the third (and now fourth) generations. The full impact of what the Greek immigrants in St. Louis set in motion at the turn of the twentieth century remains to be seen as we embark upon the twenty-first.

Notes on Sources

Shortly after his death in September 1997, my family and I began the painful process of gathering together my father's personal effects and a lifetime of memorabilia. He was a meticulous organizer of records, correspondence, photos, and other minutia representing a life that spanned the twentieth century. I remembered that back in the 1970s my brother, now a Greek Orthodox priest living in California, recorded our father's recollections of the early Greek community and the depression years as part of a college class assignment. This tape, which was thought to be lost, turned up in the oral history collection at the Thomas Jefferson Library at University of Missouri–St. Louis.

When I first listened to the tape I was at once emotionally moved and intellectually intrigued: this was an hour's worth of continuous talk documenting a bygone way of life. When I approached my eighty-two-year-old aunt about the tape she expressed her concern that memories of those early days would soon be lost to the passage of time. I began seeking out people in the Greek community who were old enough to possess childhood and especially post-adolescent memories of the early Greek community, eventually interviewing four octogenarians, as well as incorporating my father's interview. All were children of the first Greek immigrants in St. Louis and represented the collective memories of four active Greek families. Further digging revealed a most valuable find: an interview of Emmanuel Leontsinis conducted in 1973 by a graduate student at University of Missouri–St. Louis. The thirty minutes of recollections on this tape are priceless testimony on the culture and social life of the times.

There are a number of written sources on the early Greek immigration. The most exhaustive, scholarly, yet readable treatment is *The Greeks in the United States*, written by historian Theodore Saloutos in 1964 and published by Harvard University Press. Although long out of print, Saloutos's work can be found in many larger public and university libraries. A shorter, more recent work employing a sociological perspective is Charles Moskos, *Greek Americans: Struggle and Success* (1989). A readable yet detailed presentation of Greek-American culture can be found in Marilyn Rouvelas, *A Guide to Greek Customs and Traditions in America* (1993). Finally, an outstanding short work on Greek Americans geared to young people and includes a discussion of the early immigration period is David Phillips's contribution to the Cultures of America series, *Greek Americans* (1996).