

A Greek-Speaking America? The Power of Popular Myth

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There are several American folk tales about the Greeks and their language. If we are ever to understand how Americans perceive our culture and us, then these American myths of things Greek must be reckoned with.

Some of the myths are remarkably old, others quite new.

One of these folk tales was presented, most recently, in the Chronicles section of Time Magazine: "In the years following the Declaration of Independence, aversion to all things English extended to the language. Among languages seriously suggested for the new nation: German, French, Greek" and even Hebrew.

The proposals went so far as to state that whatever new language was chosen, "it should be taught in the schools, and made use of in all public acts."

As this account continues, "Fortunately...the sheer inconvenience of such proposals prevented their adoption. As Continental Congressman Rodger Sherman observed, "It would be more convenient for us to keep the language as it is and make the English speak Greek (c.f. Volume 146 (12) September 18, 1995: 38)."

Rodger Sherman (1721-1793) was

someone that would be listened to with considerable respect. He was a Founding Father of some prominence. A Connecticut legislator Rodger Sherman was the only man to sign the Declaration of Independence, Articles of Association, Articles of Confederation, and the Con-

1963).

According to Menchen it was William Gifford, the decidedly anti-American editor of the Quarterly Review, who claimed that certain members of Congress at the close of the War of Independence proposed English be banned and that Hebrew be substituted for it.

Gifford, it seems, took this story from the Revolutionary War eyewitness the Marquis de Chastellux's, *Voyages dans l'Amerique septentrionale* in 1786 (English translation in 2 vols. London, 1828).

Menchen credits Charles Astor Bristed with substituting Greek for Hebrew in his 1855 essay, "The English Language in America." It is Bristed who, "reported that Congress had rejected the proposal on the ground that "it would be more convenient for us to keep the language as it is, and make the English speak Greek (Menchen 1963: 89)." Belief in this mythic Congressional Proposal has never gone away but always found new life in one account after another. Just to name one more example we see the story repeated, yet again, in Randolph Quick's, *The Use of English* (London, 1962: 2-3).

The proposal to substitute English with another language in Congress

*The story of how
Greek almost became as
the official language
of the U.S. has been told
and retold with pride by
generations of Greeks.*

The question is:

Is it true?

stitution.

We must stress that this but the latest version of a perennial folk tale. In the 1940s, the famed American journalist Henry Lewis Menchen (1880-1956) took particular issue with this story.

In his authoritative volume, *American English*, Menchen traces the origin of this fable back first to January 1814 (New York: Alfred A. Knopf,

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seems to be based on a misunderstanding of a vote in the House of Representatives.

According to Menchen there was a proposal before Congress in 1794 that "was simply to provide for the publication of some of the laws in a German translation, for the accommodation of immigrants in Virginia...who had not yet learned English. A petition from the Virginian Germans was favorably reported, on two occasions, but both times was voted down in the House (Menchen 1963: 89)." In time this story somehow became the fable of substituting Greek for English in the American Congress.

Gratifying, as this folk tale may be for Greek-Americans to hear it is nothing but an old American legend of the Greek language and its presence in the halls of the nation's capital.

Speaking America?