

Hellenic Spirit Firmly Rooted in New Orleans

By Steve Frangos

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Such is the unprecedented destruction of Hurricane Katrina that the full extent of damage to the Holy Trinity Greek Orthodox Cathedral of New Orleans remains unknown. It is generally agreed that the Holy Trinity parish is the first Greek Orthodox community established in North America. Given this community's historic role in American Hellenism and its uncertain status, something of its early development and accomplishments should be more widely

known.

By no later than the 1830-1840 era, Pan-Orthodox collectives were meeting to worship together, without the benefit of clergy, in the major port cities of the United States. Mixed congregations of Eastern Orthodox immigrants were to be found in diverse metropolitan areas like Boston, Chicago, Charleston, Galveston, New York City, Mobile, New Orleans, San Francisco, Savannah, Seattle and elsewhere. While the majority of Greek American scholars agree that the Holy Trinity Greek Orthodox Church is the

first Greek Orthodox parish established in this country, this is not ascribed without some qualifications. Given the ethnic divisions which overtook the Eastern Orthodox Church in North and South America in the early 1900's, there is an ongoing debate which is unlikely to go away.

In "Greek Orthodox Communities in America Before World War I," the late Archimandrite Alexander Doumouras (1936-1987) reports that, "Saints Constantine & Helen's Church in Galveston, Texas was another early parish with Greek membership. Al-

though the exact date of the founding of this church is not known, it is reported that it chronologically preceded the parish of New Orleans, in that it was said to be formed in 1862 by Greeks. The difference is that the parish in New Orleans today remains the Holy Trinity Greek Orthodox Cathedral, whereas the parish in Galveston later split, and today Saints Constantine & He-

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len's Church is in the jurisdiction of the Serbian Orthodox Church. Since the parish was founded and named by Greeks, and since the present Greek parish of Galveston was formed in 1932, it would seem that the first Greek parish was actually in Galveston, Texas and not in New Orleans (Saint Vladimir's Seminary Quarterly XI)." While this debate will no doubt continue, the historical circumstances surrounding the establishment of the Holy Trinity parish of New Orleans remain diverse but eminently clear.

In keeping with the circumstances of the 1830's and 1840's, Holy Trinity of New Orleans, "During the early 1800's... (saw) the first recorded settlers (arrive)... including Orthodox faithful of primarily Greek origin, but also of Serbian, Russian and Syrian citizenship. Most of the settlers immigrated due to their trades, such as merchants and sailors. An association was formed in the 1840's to assist those affiliated with the shipping industry. As the Orthodox community increased, the need for a church became apparent. Early attempts failed, due to a lack of sufficient financial support (www.holytrinitycathedral.org)."

Greek American accounts have always stressed the role of the Greek merchant class in helping to

business journal, cited 2,005,662 bales of cotton being shipped out of New Orleans exclusively to foreign ports.

What the American reporters did not see was the spirit of cooperation between these import-export merchants. In "The Greek Community of New York City Early Years to 1910 (New Rochelle, New York: Caratzas Publisher, 1992)," Michael Contopoulos reports, "The Rallis, Botassis and Benaki families were friends. They were associates in joint ventures; acted as agents for their respective enterprises in various cities in the South and, on occasions, worked for each other. Rigid employer-employee caste relations never existed among the wealthy Greek cotton entrepreneurs. Personal relations were fraternal and business associations temporary."

In 1860, Nicholas Benaki, a businessman and Consul of the Royal Government of Greece, "spearheaded an effort to secure a site for the construction of the church, which was also unsuccessful. Finally, in 1864, Mr. Benaki offered his personal property for a temporary location for worship... Until 1866, services were held there, as well as at other locations (www.holytrinitycathedral.org)."

After the Civil War, the Greek mercantile concerns reorganized their business activities. In the pre-

thodox faithful in New Orleans.

It was Demetrios Botassis who alerted Nicholas Benaki to the presence of the Ukrainian Orthodox priest, the Very Rev. Agapios Honcharenko (1832-1916) in New York City. Father Honcharenko was brought to New Orleans where he celebrated the Orthodox liturgy in St. Paul's Protestant church on April 15, 1865. For reasons that remain unclear, Father Honcharenko did not stay long. In a letter dated March 14, 1936 Father John Zografos, a former pastor, states the first efforts toward raising money for the church began on June 12, 1865. According to the Holy Trinity website, in 1866, "Mr. Benaki sold a parcel of property to the Community (for \$1,200) on 1222 North Dorgenois Street and, with the assistance of generous donations by Mr. Benaki, Demetrios Botassis and John Botassis." The foundation for the Dorgenois Street parish was laid in 1866. Sometime in July 1867, the first Divine Liturgy was celebrated in the new church building by Father Steve Andreades, the community's second priest. The original church edifice was small, but it was said to have been enlarged as the size of the congregation increased.

For at least 30 years, the Holy Trinity parish was a Pan-Orthodox community. During these three decades, Greek, Russian, Serbian





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Search and rescue personal go house to house through the floodwaters of Hurricane Katrina on Wednesday, September 7, in New Orleans.

finally establish the New Orleans parish. An exceptional group of individuals by any standards, it is no wonder that on October 20, 1855 the New York Times described, at some length, these Greek merchants who were only then becoming visible to the American eye. The extensive commercial networks of these entrepreneurs drew the most attention: "The Greeks have establishments at Constantinople, Smyrna, Syra, Broussa, Teheran, Odessa, C×diz... Vienna, Marseilles, Trieste, Alexandria, Liverpool, Manchester, St. Petersburg, New York, New Orleans, Rio de Janeiro, Calcutta and many points of the globe; and while on the one hand they supply Western Europe with the seeds, grain, silk, fruits, drugs and spices of the East, they supply the East with the manufactured goods of England and continental Europe, with coal, iron, hardware and coffee, with tea, indigo, etc... and, in fact, form the main link of civilization between Asia and Europe by controlling the main springs of commerce."

During the 1850's, in order to have closer contact with the cotton trade, the Greek merchants opened a number of new branch offices in New Orleans and other cities in the southern United States. In 1852, New Orleans was the third largest city in America. During the 1859-60 season, De Bow's Review, the noted southern

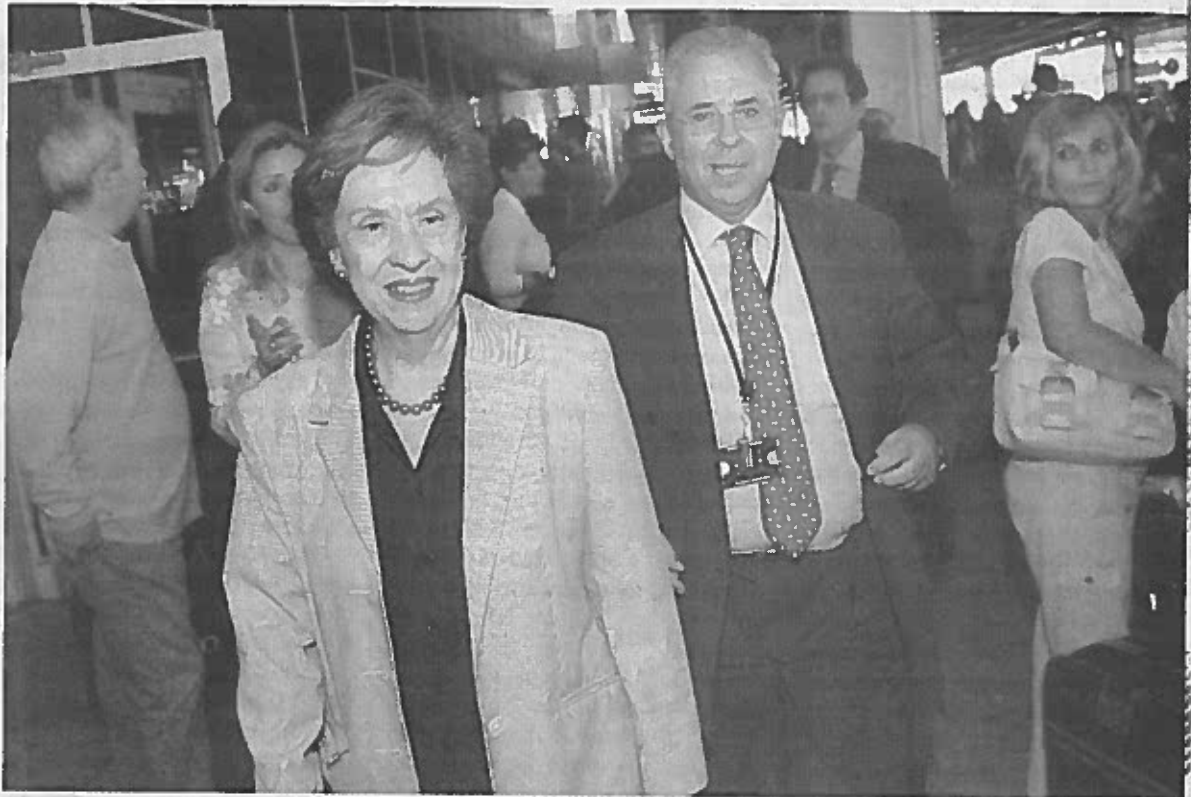
vailing spirit of cooperation the Greek entrepreneurs established the new firm of Rallis, Benaki and Company in New Orleans. Nicolas Marino Benaki (1812-1886) managed the new office and soon became the Crescent City's Greek Consul-General. "Nicholas Benaki's brother Emmanuel became Mayor of Athens. Emmanuel's son Anthony donated his Athens house, which is now the prominent Benaki Museum. Nicholas was a speculator in real estate and slaves (www.nolabb.com)."

Demetrios Nicholas Botassis, the Greek Consul-General in New York City, was also a prominent cotton exporter in New Orleans. Several New Orleans business directories provide evidence for the intimate business relationships between Rallis and Company, Nicholas Benaki, and Demetrios Botassis. In the Duncan & Company's, New Orleans Directory for 1866 – while all three men are listed separately – they maintained a common office at 14 Union Street. Compounding these connections even further Benaki's sister Marie (ca. 1842-1894+) married Demetrios Nicholas Botassis in December 1862. So the men, aside from being occasional business partners and compatriots, were also brothers-in-law. The bonds of family, friendship, business cooperation and open communication among these merchants in general would affect the lives of all the Or-

and Syrian Orthodox faithful worshipped side-by-side. It is also likely that some of these parishioners had married American-born women. The parish council consisted of members from various nationalities, so it is not surprising to learn that the parish board minutes were kept in English. We know that at least one member of the Board of Trustees was a man by the name of M. Popovitch.

The Pan-Orthodox character of the parish can also be confirmed by the array of religious artifacts especially telling in this regard are the liturgical books in various languages. During the later half of the 19th Century, the parish also maintained periodic but vague relations with the Russian Mission in North America. Sacerdotal vestments and other religious objects were donated by Czar Alexander II (1818-1881).

In 1915, Rev. Michael G. Andreades (1874-1959), a Greek priest under the jurisdiction of the Russian Church in North America, conducted a survey of Greek parishes in the United States submitting a written report to Bishop Evdokim (Basil Michaelovich Meschersky, 1869-1935). Father Andreades visited the Holy Trinity parish in New Orleans and observed that the baptismal records were kept in English and that "on half of the parish of Americanized Greeks did not speak the Greek language."



TNH/COSTAS BEJ

Expressing solidarity with New Orleans families

President of the Hellenic Parliament Anna Psarouda-Benaki, the first woman ever to hold this post, next to Greek Ambassador to the UN Adamantios Vassilakis, upon her arrival to New York on Tuesday evening, September 6. She attended the UN World Conference of Speakers of Parliaments between September 7-9. Mrs. Benaki, a member of a pioneering New Orleans family, took time to express her solidarity with the victims of the Hurricane Katrina disaster. Nicholas Benakis, the Royal Consul-General of Greece to New Orleans in the 1860's, spearheaded construction of the Greek Orthodox church in the city.

In this very early period, for reasons yet to be determined, no priest seems to have remained for long. Many accounts attest that Rev. Michael Karydis, a native of Philippopolis, was a dynamic individual whose greatest contribution was his stabilizing influence. Father Karydis served the parish from 1880 (or 1882) until 1901. Even with all those difficulties, it must be remembered that, after 1865, almost 30 years went by before another Greek Orthodox parish was established in the United States.

This is the point at which most historical accounts on the Holy Trinity Greek Orthodox parish end. But there is a great deal of documented historical information on the Greeks of New Orleans which is not included into this account of historical events.

Without diminishing the significance of wealthy Greek merchant contributions, they only numbered a fraction of the total New Orleans parish. What of the vast majority

"Bob" Bordes, who lived at 2534 St. Philip (which is near Dorgenois), the letter is unfortunately not dated. Since some of the dates cited in this account do not agree with published sources, it appears that Bordes was conveying what he was told by his family or recalled from personal experience. This account also totally disagrees with the generally accepted notion that the wealthy merchants were primarily responsible for building the church. Nevertheless, Bordes' recollections sound so similar to the institutional experiences of other parishes around the country, this report can not be dismissed out of hand:

"It was in early 1875 that a family moved in the neighborhood of Dorgenois... by the name of Theodore. They were Greeks... the family was known by the name Costa Nich Theodore, a river captain who had a fleet of Tug Boats, and who was a very charitable man, and who in time bought nearly the whole front of Dorgenois

Dancas, Adam Dorn, James Degelos, Billi Zambelli, John Bordes and a few others... they came and played cards, and they made jackpots to help the Church. Alex Bordes was one of the first to contribute five dollars to the church, and so was J. Danças and James Degelos... (they) were the three great friends of captain Nich Theodore... this is the best I can give you about the church... I am, 76 years old... and never resided, no further than three blocks from, the church my whole life."

The small wood-frame church at 1222 Dorgenois Street remained in use 83 years until it was demolished on December 4, 1950. A new church complex was constructed immediately adjacent to the original building. Before the onslaught of Hurricane Katrina, an estimated 35,000 Greek Americans lived in New Orleans and the surrounding area. Adding to this number are the 5,000 to 10,000 Greek sailors who arrive annually off the merchant ships. Ties be-

of the early community immigrants? All researchers agree that they were collectively composed of Civil War veterans and provincial immigrants.

Government documents, including most prominently an unofficial memorandum requesting pay, mention that in 1861, "Greek Company A" was part of the Louisiana Militia. The unit was comprised of a captain, one first lieutenant, three second lieutenants, eight non-commissioned officers and 20 privates. The general policy of the Confederate government was to place all European immigrants in their own separate and distinct military units. Greek Company A differed in this regard since it is said to have also included non-Greek immigrants who were of the Eastern Orthodox faith. Far from a mere exercise in locating obscure immigrant veterans of the Confederacy, Bill historical accounts on the New Orleans parish stress, if only in passing, that a notable segment of the early community was composed of Civil War veterans.

It may well prove to be the case that the average working or middle-class parishioner contributed as much, or even more than, the upper class merchants. The August 4, 1873 New York Times feature story, "The Greeks of America," provides us some sense of who the vast majority of Greeks in New Orleans were just after the Civil War: "Over 200 of them are to be found in the Crescent City, where they seem to be thriving... They have all sorts of professions; many are fruit dealers, keep little restaurants and coffee houses, where the American bar is combined with little tables x l'orientales, round which are seated Greeks talking all at the same time generally... drinking coffee and smoking paper cigarettes. Many of them are oyster dealers... owning generally their little craft, which they navigate themselves, and trade all along the coast from New Orleans to Indianola and Matamoras, or on the other side through the lakes to Mobile and Pensacola... In New Orleans, the Greek colony is important enough to maintain a church of their own religion, built some five years ago by subscription..."

A letter found in the City of New Orleans archives also attests to a more collective establishment of the parish. Written by A. J.

1875-1876 donated a plot of that ground to build a Greek church. In that neighborhood resided a few Greeks who had accumulated a few dollars; these men, known as John Stratis, George Theodore, his brothers Christo and Peter, Peter Baker... built the church; a small frame structure and which was built by these men... a priest was brought from Greece, but he was not versed in the American way, and he did not stay here long - about six months - and then the church was closed... a father remained a few years, and then Father Michael was brought here, and to him deserves a great deal of credit. He remodeled the church; had a house built on the grounds and lived there; taught school in certain periods of the year, though the attendance was very small; but he remained many years... he died... there were a few American friends of the Theodores by the name of Alexander Bordes, Jos.

Greeks are strong.

In 1979, the New Orleans Greek Community built the St. Nicholas Maritime Chapel Center, in the lower end of the historic French Quarter. This location was far from arbitrary. All along the French Quarter, Greek-owned business, restaurants and cafes, prior to the disaster, were easily found. And it is during the uncertainty of this moment in time, that we can perhaps find lasting meaning.

All of the material achievements of the Greeks of New Orleans and Louisiana are simply the surface manifestations of a deeper spirit. What a mere handful of men and women struggled to accomplish over 140 years ago is now, a firmly rooted center of Hellenism.

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Part of the Tulane University campus is shown inundated by floodwaters from Hurricane Katrina on Wednesday, September 7, in New Orleans.