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PICTURING THE MODERN GREEKS

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"Greek Soldier", October 1911, Ellis Island. A.F. Sherman, photographer.
One of the earliest photographs of Greeks in U.S.A.

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Picturing the Modern Greeks

By STEVE FRANGOS

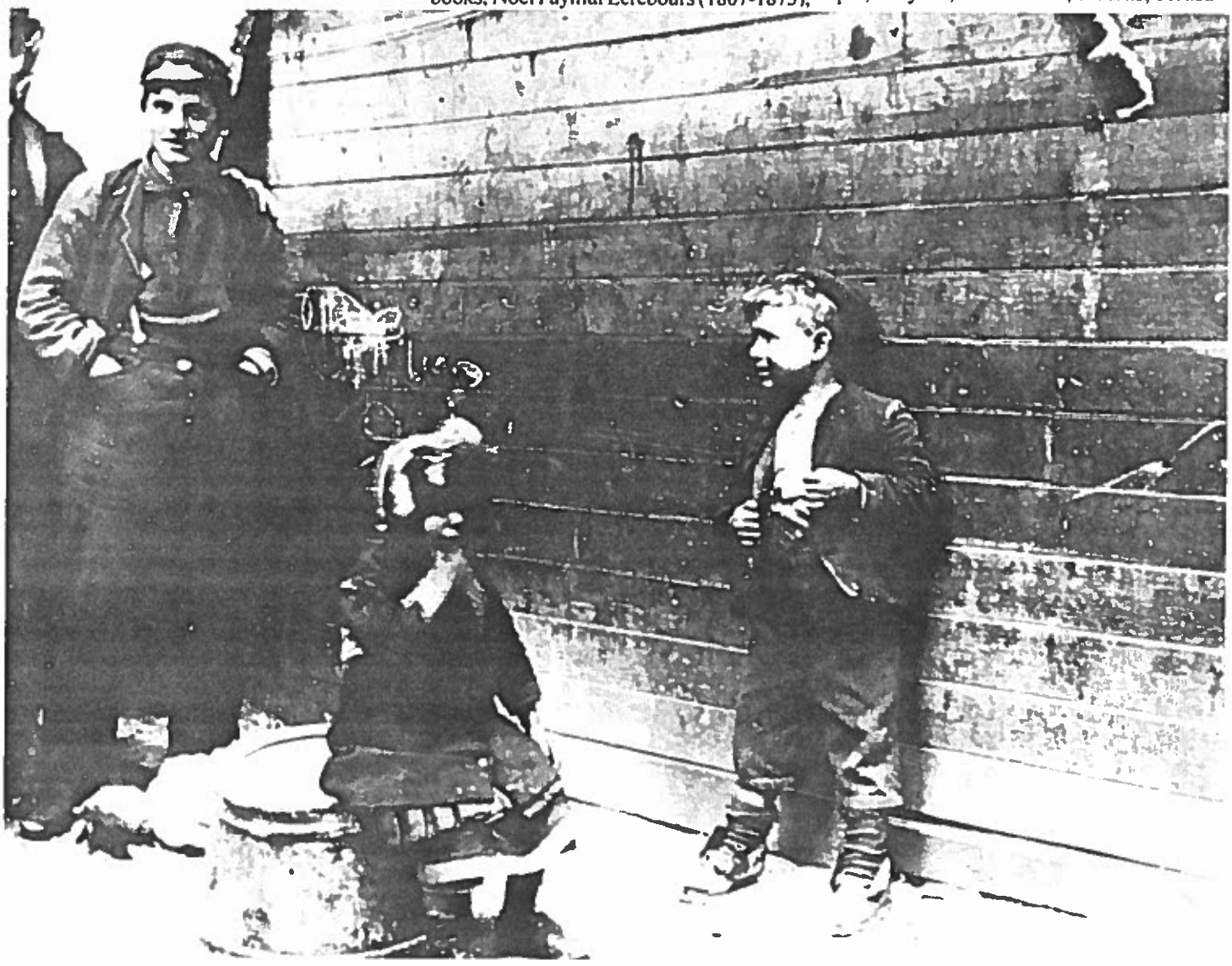
At first sight, as with so many areas in Greek-American studies, it is difficult to find anything written about photography. Rather than utilizing photography as a means to better understand the Greek-American experience, what has been published is illustrative in intent. This is all the more curious given that a vast array of photographs of things and persons clearly demarcated "Greek" date from 1839.

Between 1890 and 1910 the social photographers who documented the arrival and circumstances of the massive immigration to America took notice of the Greeks. Not every one of these photographers is complimentary. Yet even by reviewing but a few of the photographers and no more than a handful of their images we can come to a more refined understanding of how Greeks have been recognized and stereotyped in North America.

The Greek Portfolio

Daguerreotype photographers were in Greece little more than two months after the camera's official recognition as an invention in January 1839. Quick to realize the potential profits from illustrated travel books, Noel Paymal Lerebours (1807-1873), a French publisher, sent a group of photographers to Greece to take the first daguerreotypes of Classical monuments.

Eight years later Filippos Margaritis, the painter, become the first documented Greek photographer. *The East Facade of the Propylaea,* taken in 1847, is Margaritis' first known daguerreotype. Other Greek photographers soon established studios throughout the Ottoman empire. Daguerreotypes, albumen prints, calotypes, and cabinet card photographs were all taken by Greek photographers in Constantinople, Smyrna, Alexandria, Athens, Jerusa-



"Greek Children in Gotham Court". Jacob A. Riis, 1890. One of the earliest social Photographs.

lem, Thessaloniki and elsewhere.

Imaging Greek-Americans

The documented photographic presence of Greek immigrants in North America is less certain. Greek-American photographs do exist but in numbers, yet, unknown. Around the Civil War period we begin to see portraits of famous Greek immigrants. For the moment, these photographs are exclusively of successful men: Michael Anagnos, Constantino Brumidi, Captain George Musalas Colvocoresses, Alexander Dimitry, Colonel Lucas Miltiades Miller, Professor Evangelinos Apostolides Sophocles, John Celivergos Zachos, and others. In 1864 with less than thirty people shown standing in front of the church we have the first community photograph; the Holy Trinity Church in New Orleans.

Given what we know about the scattered Greek communities of the 1860-1890 period it is surprising that more photographs have not re-appeared. What of the Greeks in New York City? We know from *The Greek Community of New York City, Early Years to 1910* by Michael Contopoulos that by 1870 wealthy Greek merchants made New York City their home. Did Napoleon Sarony, the fashionable New York social photographer, welcome any of these Greek merchants into his Union Square studio?

The majority of early photographs show Greek immigrants as street peddlers and not wealthy merchants or successful intellectuals. This image of the 'Greek' as peddler is pervasive.

Street Types

Aside from the Greek vendor in the streets photographs lent themselves to this early stereotype. The image of Greek as peddler, if not based directly on, was certainly enhanced by the 1893 Chicago World Exposition diorama *The Constantinople Street Scene.* Exhibited in the Ethnography Building this diorama's 'Greek' figure is a peddler. Many photographic souvenir booklets of this diorama circulated around the United States.

Informing all these images of Greek as peddler were eugenic theories of racial types. The *Street Types* genre of photography followed social evolutionary ideas by depicting an array of characters in a village or city neighborhood setting as 'types' e.g. the farmer, the policeman, the blacksmith, the mayor, and so on. The insidious aspect to these depictions was that these 'types' were seen as unchangeable social breeds. No individual could move up the social ladder or change their 'type.' Rather than seeing European and even American society as inherently hierarchical these types were presented as accurate depictions of the individual's physical heredity.

All the confusion and racism towards southern Europeans had its own photographic image. In 1896, *Street Types of Great American Cities,* by Sihmund Krausz presented a photograph entitled *Banana Peddler.*

A degenerate descendant of the ancient people of Rome or Sparta, the swarthy banana peddler pushes his cart contentedly through the thoughfares of the city. No thoughts of the ancient glory of his nation disturbs his mind when he cries out his 'Ba-na-nos! Ba-na-nos!! He is not sentimental. He is bent on making his profit, and the commercial instinct is far more

developed in him than that warlike spirit which predominated in his ancestors. The banana cart is the war-chariot behind which he fights his battle of life. The few paltry dimes which form the profits of a day are to him perhaps as much as the spoils of a victorious battle were for one of his progenitors."

At virtually the same moment, in Jane Addams' autobiography *Twenty Years at Hull House* (1910), we learn that: *"{A} Greek was much surprised to see a photograph of the Acropolis at Hull-House, because he had lived in Chicago for thirteen years and had never before met any Americans who knew about this foremost glory of the world. Before he left Greece he had imagined that Americans would be eager to see pictures of Athens, and as he was a graduate of a school of technology, he had prepared a book of coloured drawings and had made a collection of photographs which he was sure Americans would enjoy. But although from his fruit stand near one of the large railroad stations he had conversed with many Americans and had often tried to lead the conversation back to ancient Greece, no one had responded, and he had at last concluded that "the people of Chicago knew nothing of ancient times."*

The Social Use of Photographs

The American social photographers totally ignored the Greek's peddlar street-type image. Instead these men focused on the Greek immigrant's everyday lives and activities. Jacob August Riis (1849-1914), one of the most known of the early American social photographers, was himself a Danish-born immigrant. Riis, a journalist and social reformer turned photographer, used photographs to document the social and economic plight of the poor and immigrant classes. *How the Other Half Lives* (1890), Riis, most famous book, presents photographs taken on the Lower East Side of New York. The photographs are not pretty. Riis employed his photographs to substantiate his case against the conditions under which the people shown in his book lived their daily lives.

Among the photographs seen in this book are *Greek Children in Gotham Court.* An unresolved mystery surrounds this photograph. In 1890 when *How the Other Half Lives* was first published printers had not yet perfected the halftone process of re-producing photographs. Therefore the photographs were rendered as line-drawings. The various editions since 1890 include different croppings of this photograph so it is difficult to understand how Riis originally intended to depict the Gotham Court Greeks.

The Gotham Court photograph is most often reproduced alone without any direct reference to the book's narrative or in the *'Street Arab'* section. Yet, Riis' note on this photograph is much kinder and frankly less emotionally exploitative than the mere exhibition of it. The note also suggests Riis' continuing contact with the Greeks: *Two Greek children in Gotham Court debating if Santa Claus will get to their alley or not. He did!*

Byron and The New York Greeks

Joseph Byron (1846-1923), the famed New York City photographer, has left striking images of Greeks. In two well-known photographs Byron unexpectedly docu ments class differences. In the 1904 photograph *Greek Restaurant on the Bowery* we see well-dressed but clearly working class Greeks in a modest but spotless restaurant. In *High Class Greek Restaurant 42nd ST NYC* taken in 1905 we see a palatial interior panorama. Four huge paintings of classical Greek ruins adorn the wall. Elaborate light fixtures, an ornamental tin ceiling, mirrors and custom wood-work furnish the interior. And unlike the 1904 photograph at the virtual sea of tables we find two of the finely dressed patrons are woman.

The Greek Soldier

At the turn of the century literally at the peak of the massive waves of immigration to America, A.F. Sherman (d. 1926) was chief clerk at Ellis Island. Sherman was an amateur photographer. As the chief clerk at Ellis Island Sherman was in a phenomenally unique position in which to photograph the new arrivals. No original glass plates or even a full spectrum of his photographs have ever been found.

Nevertheless, sometime in October 1911 Sherman photographed an elderly Greek immigrant in a fustanella. Our only source for even this scanty information is that on the one print Sherman left : *"Oct-1911 The Greek Soldier"* appears handwritten at the top. The Greek-American Press has fully embraced Sherman's *Greek Soldier,* reprinting it many times since its first appearance. Unfortunately, what does not see publication is Sherman's portrait of the same man.

Obviously further research needs to be conducted to reclaim the heritage of Greek-American photographs. How this wide array of images have influenced American notations about the character of Greek immigrants--and their descendents--also awaits study. With all this in mind for Greek-Americans the beginnings of just such a study may be no further away than the family's photograph album.

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