

Tales of Greek Slavery in 19th Century America

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ROUND LAKE, ILL. - Somehow, in the ongoing debates over the Black Athena and the roots of Greek culture, the long historical exchanges between Africans and Greeks in the Americas have been totally ignored. Among the earliest of these shared nexuses in history is the common experience of slavery. During the 1820s, when a sizable wave of Greek immigrants and refugees began arriving to the United States, their prior status as slaves of the Ottomans was clearly understood.

In the new American setting these Greek sojourners were often treated as near equals with the Anglo-Saxon majority by their African counterparts who had been brought to America as slaves or were descendants of slaves. In point of fact, both the general public and the nation's elite were so fascinated with these Greeks that between 1820s and the 1890s many published accounts report upon this rather small grouping of Hellenes.

Without question it was the out-

break of the Greek War of Independence that gave these few Greek arrivals a special place in the consciousness of the American public.

'The Grecian Fever,' is the term coined for all the support the embattled Greeks enjoyed among the American public. Between the years of 1821 and 1829 American newspapers offered detailed coverage of the Greek struggle for independence. Also embedded in these newspaper stories were the events of the Federalist Period (1750-1830) in American history.

What is little remembered today are the public statements, writings, and actions of a significant number of these Greeks against the institution of slavery in North America. Quite literally from the moment of their arrival these Greek sojourners went before the American public-at-large as vocal witnesses against slavery, and perhaps most importantly, as committed abolitionists. Although few in number, these Greeks helped institute major social changes as well as serve as spark to the American imagination.

Some Greek slave narratives were

fashioned after similar narratives on slavery by former African slaves. In the 1830s, as the American abolitionist movement gained focus and strength, large public gatherings began to take on greater and greater significance. Parades, massive outdoor rallies, foot-stomping prayer meetings, and all-day lecture programs were each employed to educate the general public to the real nature of slavery in the United States.

As part of this process African-Americans who were either runaways or freed slaves began to appear on the anti-slavery lecture circuit and to publish accounts of their former lives. In the 1800s, slavery was still a worldwide phenomenon and these horrific autobiographic narratives of bondage were written in a variety of languages describing conditions all across the planet. Yet the vast majority of published narratives by African slaves and their descendants were written in English and published in the United States.

Before the end of the Civil War, over one hundred African-Americans

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had written (or narrated) their stories on the conditions of their bondage and servitude. Among the most notable of these first accounts were "The Life of Olaudah Equiano" (1813), "The History of Mary Prince a West Indian Slave" (1831), "Narrative of Sojourner Truth" (1850), as well as the many editions of "The Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass" (1845).

By 1944, when George Washington Carver's (1864-1943) autobiography appeared, over 6,000 former slaves had written—what later came to be known as a distinct literary genre—slave narratives.

At present the Greek slave narratives written by the refugees of the 1821 Greek War of Independence expressly for the American public are completely absent from the pages of Greek American history. While they are not as numerous as those produced by their African-American counterparts they provide an insight into Greek and American relations that few other published accounts offer.

However, the first Greek slave narrative was not written by one of the 1820 generation. The first Greek slave narrative to appear in North America was an account similar to those of-

fered by African-Americans. This is the collective account that appeared in the summer 1788 issue of *Columbian Magazine*.

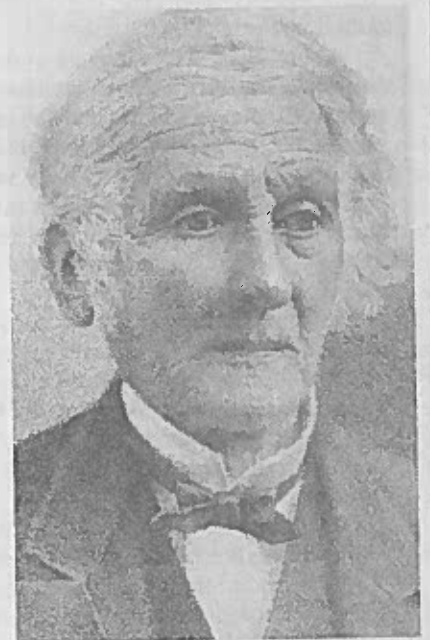
Presented as a collection of experiences by Greek and Italian survivors of the ill-fated New Smyrna Plantation, the account accuses Dr. Andrew Turnbull (1718-1792) the colony's leader, of numerous injustices. Many had willingly joined the colony as indentured servants with detailed contracts as to their duties along with detailed guarantees of what Dr. Turnbull would provide them upon their arrival.

The Greeks and Italians describe how Turnbull misled them and failed to keep his end of the deal. Writing in the third person, the accused doctor responded with his own version of events in "An Answer to a Publication" in the August 1788 issue of *Columbian Magazine*, in which an attempt is made to calumniate Dr. Turnbull's character.

The slave narratives from the generation of men and women of the 1820s records, in some considerable detail, not only the life of Christians as Ottoman subjects but also eyewitness accounts of the Greek War of Independence. In this vein is the volume "Turkish Barbarity. An Affecting Narrative of the Unparalleled Sufferings of Sophia Mazro, A Greek Lady of

Messolonghi" (Providence: Rhode Island, 1828).

Rather than a single narrative this slim volume is a collection of personal accounts not all of which were written or narrated by Greeks. Aside from Sophia Mazro we hear from another woman known only as 'The Exile of Scio.' The volume then presents a number of different letters and accounts by Dr. Samuel Gridley Howe,



Photius Fisk.

n 19th Century America

Jonathan P. Miller, and even a very young Gregory Predicaris.

The next account tells most of its tale in the lengthy title: 'The Personal Narrative of the Suffering of J. Stephanini, A Native of Arta, Greece: Including Accounts of the capture of Patras-some of the principal events of the Greek Revolution-of some of the most conspicuous characters which have been developed by those events; of the manners, customs, and religion of the Albanians, Turks, Egyptians, and Bedouin Arabs' (New York: Vanderpool and Cole, 1829).

It is with the third Greek slave narrative that one can find, aside from the usual narrative on the author's life, something on the individuals and actions of the American Greek Committee. 'The Greek Exile, or A Narrative of the captivity and escape of Christophorus Plato Castanis During the Massacre on the island of Scio by the Turks, Together with Various Adventures in Greece and America' (Philadelphia: Lippincott, Grambo and Co, 1851) eventually proved so popular it went through numerous editions.

Unexpectedly with 'Photius Fisk: A Biography' by Lyman F. Hodge (Boston, 1891) we move beyond a traditional slave narrative and learn in considerable detail about a dedicated

Greek-American abolitionist. Fisk, who was born Photius Kavasales in the 'Greek Archipelago,' came to the United States through the offices of the Rev. Pliny Fisk (1792-1825), an American missionary. In 1828, young Kavasales was admitted to membership in the Congregational Church and began to prepare for the ministry. In 1840, Kavasales both secured an appointment as a chaplain in the United States Navy and through an act of Congress a new name, after his benefactor. Fisk holds a distinct place in American naval history. After his three-year voyage aboard the USS Columbia Fisk wrote a damning report on the treatment of marines and sailors that resulted in the prohibition of flogging in 1850.

Whatever popularity this prohibition may have had with the general public among the naval-officer class such a decision was seen as leading to nothing but endless problems in discipline. Given Fisk's extremely vocal position as an abolitionist, his naval career was ruined. Yet Fisk took his revenge in a most unusual fashion. Many of the American abolitionists were so dedicated to the Cause of Freedom that they devoted their entire lives and fortunes exclusively to this end. After the Civil War quite a number of these men and women were paupers. Fisk,

whenever he learned of one these individuals, would go to any lengths to send them monetary aid. One of these individuals George Bailey died in Muskegon, Michigan without enough funds available for his burial. Bailey who had helped numerous African-Americans escape to freedom in Canada was caught at his pre-Civil War crime. As punishment the letter "S" was branded onto his hand. Fisk saw to it that a large marble and granite monument was erected over his grave.

There is not room enough to mention those men and women of the 1820 generation who spoke about their lives as slaves. One such individual was John Celivergos Zachos (1820-1898). Among this exceptional man's many accomplishments was his role as teacher and virtual governor of Parris Island, South Carolina. There Zachos led the then pioneering 'experiment' which demonstrated that Negroes were capable of benefiting by instruction.

More of these Greek slave narratives may yet be discovered. Still, as even this all to brief survey clearly documents much more is involved in the social, political and personal exchange between Africans and Greeks in North America than the recent Black Athena issue allows.