

# The First Greeks in US Politics

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One of the most enduring stereotypes of Greeks is their passion for politics, so it's not surprising to find that from the moment Greeks arrived in the United States they were deeply involved in the nation's political process. What is less likely imagined, even by the most ardent Greek patriot, is that Greek immigrants and their children, from their earliest arrivals, were elected or appointed political figures. Greeks in politics is meant in the widest sense of the phrase including people at all levels of government, city, county, state, federal, as well as those in the Foreign Service. American historical definitions and concerns are not always the same as Greek American or for the Modern Greek Diaspora. Former Greek Prime Minister and statesman Eleftherios Venizelos reworked the defini-

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tion of a Greek, saying it's someone who says they're a Greek, believes they are Greek, and acts like a Greek. The first place to look for Greeks in political office would be in communities where Greeks first settled, such as St Augustine, Florida and the port cities of the Gulf of Mexico, but we know nothing of the role of Greeks or their descendants in the political life of St Augustine or St. John County, where the city is located. While individuals and families across the American South proudly proclaim themselves descendants of the New Smyrna Colony, there are undoubtedly some who held elected or appointed office.

From 1832 to 1859, John Ralli, an Odessa merchant, was not only the first American Con-

sul to Russia but also the first Greek-Russian national in diplomatic service to the government of the United States. Technically, Ralli was "the Consul of the United States for the port of Odessa on the Black Sea in Russia. Ralli and his extended family were, during the Victorian Age, among those merchants of Chios who soon became some of the most important and wealthiest individuals in the world. Detailed accounts of these merchants of Chios can be found in the research of Christopher Long ([www.christopher-long.co.uk](http://www.christopher-long.co.uk)) and in Michael Con-topoulos' *The Greek Community of New York City: Early Years to 1910* (New Rochelle, New York: Aristide D. Caratzas, Publisher, 1992.) From 1830 onward, Greek and other merchants who shared their Eastern Orthodox

faith were becoming visible ever increasing numbers North American seaports. In 1909, the Ralli Brothers firm had more than 50 branch offices in the United States.

## THE BEGINNINGS

Ralli was born on Nov. 1785 on Chios, the oldest of five brothers who formed the trading firm of the Ralli Brothers. Around 1830, Ralli settled in Odessa, Russia. By 1845, Ralli made his family company one of the largest export-import businesses in the world. Patricia Herlihy summarizes Ralli's service to the United States as follows: "Ralli fulfilled the duties of consul with high competence as his long tenure suggests. His dispatches to Washington were always informed and written in faultless English (by a secretary.) He alerted the government to commercial opportunities for American ships in the Black Sea and stressed the profits to be made by shipping colonial products directly to Russia. He had the advantage of information flowing to him from his offices in Rostov, Taganrog, and other Azov towns, as well as his numerous connections in the West. As an example of his good commercial sense, he advised

## GREEK POETRY

### EPITAPHIOS (Excerpt)

*WHERE DID MY BOY FLY AWAY (POU PETAXE T'AGORI MOU)*  
 Son, my flesh and blood, marrow of my bones, heart of my own heart,  
 sparrow of my tiny courtyard, flower of my loneliness.

ISTORY

# Showed a Real Civil Sensibility



Christodoulos Evangelides

Amherst, was a professor of Greek at Harvard University, and lived in New Haven where he was a teacher in a boarding school. While there he married Margaret Hanford, one of his pupils. After 1845, Perdicaris returned to the U.S. and settled in Trenton, New Jersey where he became a prosperous businessman. Perdicaris was the father of the notable Ion Perdicaris. In 1844, Christodoulos M.L. (Evangeles) Evangelides was appointed American Vice-Consul to the town of Hermoupolis on the Greek island of Syra. Evangelides is one of the earliest Greek pioneers to American shores and so is often mistakenly included with the 40 Greek orphans, the group including Perdicaris.

Evangelides' life and actions on behalf of both the United States and the nation state of Greece are extensive. On March 21, 1828, Evangelides arrived in New York City at the age of 12. Fortunately, he kept a diary so historians have some grasp of his daily life. In 1828, the notable American poet William Cullen Bryant wrote a work called *The Greek Boy*, inspired by his meeting with the youth. That same year renowned Amer-

grain shipments to Europe during the Crimean War to take advantage of the prohibition against cereal exports, which the Russian government had recently imposed" (see *Odessa A History 1794-1914* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard Ukrainian Research Institute, 1986.) Ralli remained the American Consul to the Port of Odessa until his death in 1859.

Alexander Dimitry, an individual of Greek descent, served as an appointed official in a number of federal, state and diplomatic posts. In 1805, Dimitry was born in New Orleans, of Greek and Alabama Indian ancestry. His father, Andreas Demetrios, a native of the island of Hydra, arrived in New Orleans in 1794 and was for many years a merchant in that city. Dimitry received his education from private tutors and private schools in New Orleans and Georgetown College in Washington D.C. He was an able scholar and an especially proficient linguist, reportedly fluent in 11 languages. In 1835, Dimitry was employed in the general post office in Washington, although what he did there is not available. In 1842, Dimitry returned to New Orleans where he is credited with creating and organizing the free school system in Louisiana. Dimitry has the distinction of being appointed by Governor Isaac Johnson as the first state Superintendent of Education in Louisiana, serving two terms from 1847 to

the Louisiana school system. Dimitry's last report documented that 646 schools were in operation within the state, claiming an attendance of 22,927 students.

#### A MAN OF TONGUES

In 1856, Dimitry returned to Washington as a translator to the State Department. On Aug. 16, 1859, President James Buchanan appointed Dimitry the Minister Resident of the United States to the Republic of Nicaragua, authorizing him "to meet and confer with any person or persons duly authorized by the government of that Republic ... to agree, treat, consult and negotiate of and concerning claims of citizens of the United States upon the Republic of Nicaragua, and to conclude and sign a Convention or Conventions touching the premises; transmitting the same to the President of the United States..." As this appointment was made during a recess of Congress, Buchanan submitted Dimitry's appointment, as well as his appointment as Minister Resident to Costa Rica to the Senate on Dec. 19, 1859. During his stay in Central America, Dimitry wrote the text for treaties, lectured, sent diplomatic reports on the region to Washington and translated documents into Spanish. Buchanan issued his approval for Dimitry's plan for a land-and-water route across Nicaragua. In 1861, at the beginning of the American Civil War, Dimitry asked to be re-

States of America as Assistant Postmaster General. Dimitry has the distinction of having served both the Federal and Confederate governments and is the only documented Greek American to have done so. In 1868, Professor Dimitry was appointed Assistant Superintendent of the New Orleans public school system. On Jan. 30, 1883, Dimitry died in New Orleans.

American historians do not always share the same perspectives as those concerned with the Modern Greek Diaspora. A case in point is the passing mention of two of Dimitry's relatives. The Feb. 16, 1854 edition of the *New York Daily News* carried an extended account on the Dimitry family. When Dimitry's tenure as Superintendent of the Public Schools of Louisiana is mentioned we hear, in passing, "Two other members of the family had employment in the Public Schools. Mr. Pandelly, Junior, was made a City Councilman a few years since." Curiously, the other Dimitry relative is never mentioned by name or in any other fashion.

From 1837 until 1845 Gregory Perdicaris was appointed the first United States Consul in Athens. Perdicaris (1804-1883) was one of the fabled 40 orphans who sojourned to North America during the Greek War of Independence. Perdicaris arrived in the United States in June, 1826. He taught Ancient and Modern Greek at Mt. Pleasant Classical Institute at

Painted Evangelides' portrait. The Grecian Fever had already seized the imagination of the average American and the notoriety of the poem and the painting helped Evangelides gain not just public recognition but sponsorship for his education. A diligent student Evangelides became the first Greek immigrant to graduate from Columbia University. He became a naturalized citizen and served in the militia. Known as "Christy," to his many friends, the young Evangelides was a tireless proponent of Hellenism in North America, lecturing and fundraising on behalf of the Greek cause wherever and whenever he could. As the "Greek Boy," Evangelides entered the homes of some of the most notable and wealthiest Americans and directly influenced some of the most prominent personages of the day.

Evangelides returned to Greece committed to establishing an American-style of education among the Greeks. Evangelides, known in Greece and America alike as "The Greek Yankee," returned to North America during the Crimean War to lecture and write articles on behalf of the Greeks and remind his fellow Americans that the Ottoman Turks still kept vast numbers of the Christian Greeks in vile slavery. Three other Greeks or individuals of Greek descent were elected or appointed to political office before 1867. Their stories will be told in the next part.