

OCTOBER 9, 10 AND 11

## GREEK FEST 2015

### UNCOVERING SKOPELOS' ROOTS in PENSACOLA'S HISTORY



Parishioners standing in front of the original church on Reus and Wright. Early 1900s.

Photo courtesy of University of West Florida Historic Trust photographic collections. Location: UWFHT Archives

By Hamishe Randall

Decadent aromas of rich lamb and spiced dishes, savory grape leaf-rolled dolmathes, and cinnamon and honey covered baklava fill the air. A whirling of dancers in traditional costumes invite you to dance along to the lively, up-beat Greek music. Surrounded by the sights, sounds, and the people of the Greek culture, you're immersed. And for today, you are Greek too. Welcome to the Greek Fest.

For a few days every October, (this year's 2015 festival is October 9, 10, and 11) Pensacola locals and visitors from around the Gulf Coast are invited to celebrate the Greek culture. The Greek Festival, hosted by the Annunciation Greek Orthodox Church of Pensacola, has delighted guests with a melding of traditional music, food, dancing, culture and faith for generations.

The Greek culture has a long and rich history rooted in Pensacola. As far back as the mid-to late-1800s Greeks left the shores of their homeland and immigrated to Pensacola. These early Greeks brought with them a love of their culture, heritage and faith which is still shared today, mainly through the Annunciation Greek Orthodox Church and the festival.

The first Annunciation Greek Orthodox Church was built on the corner of Wright and Reus Streets in 1910. Greek community members in Pensacola founded this first church. The Greek community was established in 1904, and prior to 1910 formed an association called the Anagennisis Greek Association. Anagennisis means rebirth. The association set out to select a site and build the church.

These early Greek members of the community and association were mostly

grocery shop owners, restaurateurs, and fishermen, and they had a deep love for their faith. Establishing a church was of great importance. They pulled together as a community in ingenious ways to make it happen.

Judge Nick Geeker, the grandson of Nicholas Geeker who first came to Pensacola in 1906 from the Greek island of Skopelos, recalls a story of how his grandfather, an association member, and other community members helped raise money for the first church.

According to Nick Geeker, because Nicholas Geeker owned three grocery stores, he had a little bit of buying power leverage, so he went to the people who owned the Coca-Cola bottling company and asked to borrow \$250 to help build the church. The owner told Nicholas Geeker they were not in the banking business and didn't loan money out. So he got all the other grocery store owners, many who were Greek, to boycott selling Coca-Cola products. They bought and sold Pepsi-Cola only for about six weeks and finally the owner of the Coca-Cola Company offered Nicholas Geeker the \$250 he wanted to borrow, plus another \$250 as a donation.

The first church was built and named The Annunciation. According to Nick Geeker, in Skopelos, the main monastery is called Evangelismos, which means annunciation. Because many of the Greeks were from Skopelos, they chose the name Evangelismos as the name for their church.

"The people from Skopelos were instrumental in establishing the ecclesiastical community here; they were deeply pious people," said Geeker.



Clockwise:  
Early Philoptochos Society ladies, circa 1939.  
1952, laying of the church cornerstone.  
Inside the first church, early 1900s.  
Dancers at an earlier festival.

Photos courtesy of University of West Florida Historic Trust photographic collections. Location: UWFHT Archives



Traditional Skopelos bridal gown



Early Greek immigrants took it upon themselves to establish the Greek community in their new home of Pensacola. AHEPA and Philoptochos, which are organizations of the church, would hold fundraising benefits and functions in order to support the church and to celebrate the culture with the community, and continue to do so today. AHEPA stands for American Hellenic Educational Progressive Association, and the Ladies Philoptochos Society (philoptochos means friend of the poor) acts as the philanthropic arm of the church.

Around 1948, with the increase of the Greek population, it became evident the community needed a larger church. AHEPA helped secure the property where the current church is built. The community decided to build the Hellenic Center first, and later, by 1952, construction for the new church began.

Many of the early Greek immigrants were from Skopelos, which is what this year's festival theme is about. Keeping the heritage from Skopelos alive is of great importance to many local Greeks. Their journey from the shores of their homeland to the shores of Pensacola marked the beginning of a new life.

Athena Staviski, whose parents are from Skopelos, grew up in the church. Her uncle and dad owned Stamatelos Grocery, a popular market in Pensacola. Athena's mother Ourania "Nina" Talandianou Stamatelos came to Pensacola around 1959. According to Nina, her whole life changed. She left her family and home. Because the Greeks in Pensacola all left their homeland and families to come to America, they bonded closely as a community.

"The church was such a focal point back then," said Staviski. "The culture and the church are intertwined. I try and instill in my children the same groundwork I had from my mom. For my mom it was important to maintain the language."

The festivals we know today started as small luncheons, and later became a single day event called the Bazaar. The first Bazaar was officially held in 1959. The women used to make pastries at home and bring them to the church. The first Bazaars were an opportunity for fellowship, to raise money, and to involve the community in the church.

"I remember rolling dolmathes as a young child," said Staviski. "The love and commitment to community is what they (Greeks) yearned for. That's what is mimicked here in Pensacola."

Athena's mother Ourania Talandianou

Stamatelos and Marouthitsa Raptou Stamatelos, natives of Skopelos, contributed to keeping the Skopelos heritage alive by hand making a traditional bridal costume, called a skopelitisa. The costume is on display at the Voices of Pensacola Multicultural Center in its multicultural exhibit. The UWF Historic Trust will lend the costume to the Annunciation Greek Orthodox Church for display at the festival.

Other local Greeks are also committed to keeping their heritage alive in the community, and this is one of the primary missions of the festival.

"I have a deep-seated love for the Hellenic culture and our religion," said Geeker. "When you go and attend church and rec-

Skopelos natives. They settled in Pensacola in 1966. A lot of people from Skopelos immigrated to Pensacola because of the church and because there was an established Greek community. Also the landscape of coastal Pensacola reminded the Greek people of their island homeland.

"I do think first-generation American kids like myself share a similar perspective," said Verzwyvelt. "We have kept that bond of where our parents are from because it is our second home, and now my kids have that connection. It was very important for me to keep the heritage alive for my kids, because it is a big part of their history and it's through the church they remember where they're from."



Church youth dancers wearing traditional Greek costumes.

ognize the history that is there, when you hear the gospel in the original Greek as it was written in the time of Christ, that's one thing that stays with you. The food and the culture and the dancing and the music and the Greek sense of philoxenia (hospitality, or love toward strangers) is wonderful, as is the Greek language, but first and foremost is our faith."

This faith and heritage isn't just instilled into Greeks upon birth, but like all cultures, it's also learned. The church for over a hundred years has continued to teach its members and the community about the Greek culture, language, and faith in order to keep the connection to their homeland real.

Stella Geeker Verzwyvelt's parents are

The church festivals have evolved over the years into the three-day celebration it is today. From its humble beginnings the festival is now celebrating its 56th year and receives thousands of visitors from around the Gulf Coast.

"The festival has taught us all more than just how to raise funds for the church, it gives us an opportunity to learn about our history and teach our kids," said Verzwyvelt. "Even people who may not go to the church every Sunday, the festival is where we all come back, it's a family reunion."

One local Greek who taught in the Greek Church and privately in our community for over 50 years shares her passion of her Greek heritage through education



and dance. According to Demetra Morres, known as Mrs. Mitza in the community, she feels a great sense of pride seeing her former students as directors and dancers in the festival, calling her students her "greatest reward."

"The festival is important, not just to raise money; it's more important than that," said Morres. "Our faith, the church tours, the aromas and tastes of the food, a festival enhances our senses, it makes us feel good. You enjoy the day, then go to another ethnic festival and enjoy that culture. We learn from each other and understand each other. America is multicultural, multi-religious and multi-lingual. Every immigrant group brings their good qualities, they bring their heritage, and if we bring all the positive things, we will make a wonderful, whole society, all of us different cultures."

Morres's in-laws, Constantine (Charles) and Mary Bruno Morres was the first marriage to take place in the first Annunciation Greek Church on Dec. 28, 1913. They arrived in Pensacola in 1910 and lived in Pensacola for the rest of their lives. Morres's late husband Tommy Morres was the oldest life-long active member of the Annunciation Greek Orthodox Church before his passing. Morres recalls how her husband helped cook the very first meal for the festival and cooked all the years before he passed. He left a legacy of faith and a passion for promoting the education of the Hellenic culture.

"Education is a treasure, and culture never dies (as long as we continue this education)," said Morres. "That's what I want, for our culture to never die. I hope to give young people the love of the faith and love for the heritage, and I hope they continue and share

it with the rest of the public, that's my goal."

The festival's purpose is not only to promote the culture and heritage of the Greek community, but it's also to give back to our community. The Philoptochos Ladies Society is involved in local charities, and over the years it has raised money for scholarships and community outreach programs. This year's community outreach program benefits the Gulf Coast Kids House, Manna Food Bank, and Guardian ad Litem.

The festival is an event that takes a great amount of effort. The church members begin preparing for the festival months in advance. Church members make the food, and the festival grounds and booths are built and set up by the church members. The church members do everything from the costumes to the dance routines.

Paula Maria Brown calls the festival a "labor of love." Her grandfather, Kosta Silivos, immigrated to the United States around 1917 from Skopelos. Her family settled in Pensacola for the benefits of church and community. She and her husband Philip are mainstays in this labor of love today.

"The thread of the festivals (from its beginning throughout the years) is hospitality," said Brown. "We welcome the Pensacola community and surrounding communities, because we want to share our culture."

There is much to see and do during your visit to the festival. Traditional fresh foods, drinks, and especially the pastries are

something locals look forward to every year. There is live music and dancing, and opportunities to purchase imported Greek goods. Church tours are available, where you can learn about the hand painted icons from the monasteries in Greece, learn a bit about the history of the oldest facet of Christianity, and see what a traditional Orthodox Christian Church is like on the inside.

"Pensacola has such a rich history and culture," said Geeker. "Greeks who settled here have been able to contribute and be a part of Pensacola's history. We get to celebrate that every year when we have the festival."

Over a hundred years ago, men and women left the shores of Greece and made

Pensacola their home. They brought with them a passionate love for their homeland, their culture, and their faith. Today the descendants of those Greeks keep the passion, the culture and faith alive by sharing it with the community that has become their family. When you go to the festival this year, let the history you are experiencing and the food and music you are enjoying sink in. Over a hundred years worth of generations have enjoyed the same before you. Welcome to the Greek Fest.

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