

His Honor The Mayor

By Steve Frangos

Constantine Apostolos Panagiotou (1846-1909) was one of the early Greek settlers in North America. The complicated story of Constantine Panagiotou, and his many relatives, provides an unexpected chapter in the history of Greeks in the diaspora. The story is far from over.

Choosing Pensacola

Beginning in the 1860s Greek sailors began appearing all along the Gulf of Mexico coast from Galveston, Texas down to the Florida Keys. Documents report that many of the earliest Greek sailors who visited Pensacola, Florida were from the island of Skopelos. Given the close associations of family and work in the diaspora the majority of these early Greeks hailed from the town of Glossa on the southwestern end of Skopelos.

Sometime in 1864 Constantine Panagiotou permanently settled in Pensacola. Constantine was, then, a sailor on Spanish cargo ships traveling from South America up along the Gulf coast. Eventually Constantine convinced his three brothers George (or Andrew), Nicholas, and John to join him. As far as public documents report the Panagiotou brothers were the first Greek settlers in Pensacola. Their influence would be immediate and lasting.

Constantine Panagiotou married Margaret (Burns) Bosso, a widow with children, who originally came from Clark County, Alabama. Between 1893 and 1909 Constantine Panagiotou's store at 14 East Government Street was popular for its confectionery creations, imported cigars and tobacco, and for the manufacture of the patent medicine "Bosso's Celebrated Blessing to Mankind."



few years in America.

First Greek Mayor

In 1864 Constantine Panagiotou was appointed a "Pensacola City Official." This vague title seems to have included a number of duties related to his ability to speak Russian, Spanish and English. Constantine Panagiotou was apparently so successful in his duties that he was elected mayor of Pensacola for the period 1887-1888. This one year tenure makes Constantine Panagiotou the first Greek immigrant elected to public office in the United States.

One of the concessions to life in North America was that the Panagiotou brothers eventually changed their surnames. Constantine and Nicholas Panagiotou took their father's first name as their "American" name and became known as the Apostle brothers. But Constantine Apostle's active life as sailor, pharmacist, city official and businessman did not end in 1888. This pioneering immigrant was to continue to influence the city of Pensacola in many other ways.

Sister's Sons

In 1893 Constantine Apostle brought his sister Andromache Liollo's three children from Glossa to Pensacola. The three Liollo brothers came as no more than children: Apostolos was 14, Constantine 12 and Angelo only 10 years old. Constantine insisted that the three attend and graduate from Pensacola High School. Under the watchful eye of their Uncle Nick, all three Liollo brothers worked at his busy South Palafox Street restaurant. Eventually each of the brothers made such work a lifelong career.

Today, the Liollo descendants can be found in Birmingham, Alabama.

Nicholas Panagiotou (1863-1913) became a successful restaurateur noted for serving the very best oysters and seafood. In 1911, the United States Navy began using Nick's restaurant at 211 South Palafox Street as the location to disburse the sailors' and officers' pay. This rather unusual procedure was due probably to the location of the restaurant near the old navy yard, undoubtedly its liquor, and, unquestionably, the character and respect for Nick Panagiotou.

From the 1880s until 1914 Nick's restaurant was the most popular eating and social drinking establishment in Pensacola. This was directly across the street from the First National Bank. Given that the Saenger, the city's principle theater, was also located across the street late night dining after a theatrical performance, at "Nick's," was a regular feature of Pensacola's refined society.

John only stayed briefly in Pensacola returning finally to the tall ships. George owned a fruit stand at 4 West Main Street in the center of town. The Panagiotou brothers were not the only Greeks in Pensacola during this era. Something of the larger community must be related in order to understand the role and contributions of the Panagiotou family.

The Parthenon Society

Soon after the American Civil War an ever growing number of Greek seamen began to make Pensacola their permanent home. By the 1875-1890 period there were a number of Greeks in the city besides the Panagiotou brothers. But these men were transient and with the exception of one, remembered only as Petinakis (or Peters) from the island of Skiathos, none of them are mentioned by name in public documents.

In 1883 when Christ Tabaras arrived in Pensacola there were only four Greeks permanently residing in the city. In 1939 he told Modesta Hargis, a Greek American researcher working for the WPA Federal Writer's Project, that in 1883 the city streets were of deep sand, the sidewalks were made of planks and there were only a few brick buildings. Old Tabaras

(Left to right): Angelo Liollo, Constantine A. Panagiotou, Paul Liollo, and Constantine Liollo. (Pensacola, FL circa 1914)

laughed when he told her about the street cars that traveled up and down Palafox street pulled by mules.

✓ From 1900 onward Greeks came to settle in Pensacola in ever increasing numbers seeking to bring their relatives and friends. Greeks soon became a recognized presence in the city's famed red snapper fleet. Greeks netting shrimps and dredging oysters in Escambia Bay was soon a common sight. Greeks are also recalled as ship carpenters and even for loading cotton bales at the wharf. Other Greeks operated grocery stores, food stands, tobacco companies, restaurants and other small businesses.

In 1903 "The Parthenon Society" was founded, with Nicholas Panagiotou as president, to establish a Greek Orthodox Church. Eventually renamed the "Anagennis Greek Association" the organization received its charter of incorporation on April 10, 1910. The Annunciation of the Theotokos was completed on August 17, 1910. The original parish building was located at the corner of Reus and Wright Streets. When the church was completed, out of 120 communicants there were only eight families. The vast majority of parishioners were either single men or those who still had their families in Greece.

An aspect of Pensacola's early Greek community history reflects a wider pattern not often mentioned. During the 1880s and early 1900s many Greek immigrants intended on only staying in America for a short period of time. In Pensacola many Greek immigrants, especially those from the island of Skopelos, did in fact return to their home villages. Between 1922 and 1924, when nativist sentiments were particularly high, a large number of Pensacola Greeks sold or simply closed their shops and left for Greece. Interestingly a number of these men, for whatever personal reasons, never resided permanently in either country. These men simply traveled back and forth spending a few years on Skopelos and then a

and and Modie, Alabama, Charleston, South Carolina, Jacksonville and Pensacola, Florida, Biloxi and Greenwood, Mississippi, Memphis, Tennessee, Dallas and Houston, Texas, Fredericksburg, Virginia and various villages on Skopelos. As with this one family the wider Greek community in Pensacola has only grown. Today, 215 families are pledged to the Annunciation church.

First Place City

Historical accounts credit "Don Teodore" as the first Greek to set foot in North America. A sailor and ship caulker Theodore was part of the expedition of conquistador and explorer Panfilo de Narvaez (1478?-1528). In October 1528 Narvaez anchored off the coast of what is, today, Pensacola, Florida to secure fresh water. As part of the agreement reached with the local Indians one man was to be held hostage. Theodore volunteered and went ashore. The Greek never returned and was presumed dead.

Pensacola eventually became the location of the first Spanish settlement in North America. The frequent hurricanes, in time, drove the colonists from their new homes. It is for this reason that St. Augustine, Florida calls itself the oldest "continuously occupied city" in the United States while Pensacola calls itself "the first place city."

Constantine and Nicholas Apostle are buried side-by-side at Pensacola's St. Michael's Cemetery. The inscriptions on the two headstones are in Greek. Many other tombstones of other early Greek settlers are to be found in St. Michael's Cemetery.

Undoubtedly, those who are familiar with the Greek communities of Western Florida will object that I have focused exclusively on Pensacola. Since the 1860s Greek immigrants have proved themselves valued citizens in towns such as Apalachicola, Destin, Milton, and elsewhere within the Florida panhandle. As with so many other aspects of Greek American history the presence of Greeks throughout the rolling red clay hills of Western Florida is a rich area for research only awaiting to be fully studied.