

Revisiting the Legend of the Forty Orphans of the Greek Revolution

By Steve Frangos
The National Herald Staff Writer

CHICAGO -The tale of the forty Greek orphans is a legend I have heard my whole life. As this oral tradition contends, with the outbreak of the Greek War of Independence, 40 Greek orphans were brought to the United States of America. Returning Philhellenes, American missionaries and United States naval officers are all cited as the individuals who saved and/or sponsored these children from the terrors of genocidal war. Yet if you take the time to follow the footnotes and read the Greek American and American authors most often cited, you will quickly discover that the 40 orphans were many things - but they were not all orphans, they did not in fact number 40 individuals, and they did not all arrive between the years of 1821 and 1829.

The most often repeated error in this tale is to include Greeks who arrived in the United States after 1829. Between 1830 and 1880, an ever growing number of Greeks were not only settling in North America, but were, for the most part, extremely industrious individuals. A handful of these men are hailed to this very day as notable Americans. To more precisely document which Greeks sojourners arrived in North America between 1821 and 1829, we need focus solely on that cadre.

The explosive response of Americans and Western Europeans to the Greek bid for freedom ignited what was then commonly called the 'Grecian Fever.' The popular press in the U.S. and Europe invariably presented the Greek War of Independence as a heroic struggle. It is difficult to overstate how the stories of these orphans personalized the war for the average American. Constantine Hatzidimitriou's volume of documents, "Founded on Freedom and Virtue: Documents Illustrating the Impact in the United States of the Greek War of Independence,

1821-1829 (New York City; Athens: Caratzas, 2002)", is a prime source offering select examples drawn from period newspaper accounts, diaries, and government documents. Clearly these children, their tales of woe at the hands of the Turks and their subsequent actions in North America spurred on the Grecian Fever.

By way of example we need only cite from "Photius Fisk A Biography" by Lyman F. Hodge (Boston, Mass, 1891) to learn that "in the latter part of October 1822" the brig America left Malta and that "after a stormy, uncomfortable fall and winter passage of four months...Photius Kavasales and Anastasias Karavelles...were safely landed in Salem" on February 22, 1823. These are the first two known Greek orphans brought to the United States during the Greek War of Independence. Photius Kavasales (who would later take the last name of his benefactor Pliny Fisk) was only aged fifteen when he arrived and Anastasias Karavelles, just eleven years old.

In August 1823 the American brig 'Margarita' dropped anchor in Baltimore harbor with seven year old Georgios Calvocorresses on board. On April 7, 1824, we hear, "Captain Partridge, of the military school, at Norwich, Vermont has generously offered to support and educate at his own expense the Greek boy who arrived in this country last year, and whose parents and six brothers were murdered by the Turks at Scio. The lad is now in Baltimore, but will come on to this city as soon as the means are raised. A few dollars of the Greek Fund may here be appropriated to send him to Vermont ('Sandusky Clarion')." The renamed George Calvocorresses attended the Norwich school and became a noted United States naval officer.

In "Hellenic Independence and America's Contribution to the

Continued on page 7

Visiting the Legend of the Forty Orphan

Continued from page 1

Cause", authored by one-time AHEPA Supreme President Harris J. Booras (Rutland, Vermont: Tuttle Co., 1934), we find that in "May 1824, there arrived in Boston on the brig 'Cypress', commanded by Captain Chaddock, four youths of Chios, namely Constantine Ralles, aged sixteen, and his brother Pantias, aged fourteen, and Nicholas P. Petrokokkinos, aged sixteen, and Alexandros Paspates, aged twelve. All these boys were educated by the Society of Friends of the American Board of Commissioners of Foreign Missions—special collections having been made in their behalf."

In the fall of 1824, came the two brothers Stephanos and Pantelis Stephanos. Nearly one year later, the brig 'Romulus', commanded by Captain Allen brought three more young men; Nicholas Psaras, Nicolaos Vlasopoulos and Gregorius Perdikares.

In early May 1827, Garafilia Mohalby arrived in Boston aboard the brig 'Suffolk'. Joseph Langdon, a Boston merchant, was walking the streets of Smyrna one day when young Garafilia, then approximately 10 years old, fell before him grabbing his leg. Langdon discovered, that Garafilia's "father and mother, were murdered at Scio (modern day Chios), and that she and her two sisters were carried to Smyrna and sold." Langdon not only purchased Garafilia but also "her sisters. We are happy to learn they were taken by two Europeans, who have humanely made provision for their education (Farmer's Cabinet May 5, 1827)." As many accounts reported, Garafilia became an adored member of the Langdon household. Yet three years later, on March 17, 1830, Garafilia died.

Far from simply disappearing into the pages of history, Garafilia became a Nineteenth Century media sensation. Poems and songs were written about her, American-made ships were named 'Garafilia', an entire generation of young American girls were not only named 'Garafilia', but had her full name "Garafilia Mohalby" as a first and middle name, and her widely read tale of



The tribulations of the Forty Martyrs of Sebasteia, depicted in the above icon, are often associated with stories of the 40 Greek orphans.

under the pressure of a full recollection of the calamitous events which have brought her to her present state; and she stands exposed to the gaze of the people she abhors, and awaits her fate with intense anxiety, tempered indeed by the support of her reliance upon the goodness of God. Gather all these afflictions together, and add to them the fortitude and resignation of a Christian, and no room will be left for shame (Wikipedia.org)."

In his autobiography, "The Greek Exile", Christophorus Plato Castanis notes that he and three other Greek youths Christopher Evangeles, Ioannis Zachos and a Greek girl Castanis only refers to as 'Sophia' are all brought to the United States by Samuel Gridley Howe. During

these Greeks pioneers were doing in North America during the winter of 1827. Curiously, Castanis never mentions what became of 'Sophia.'

The individual Castanis identifies as 'Constantine Fundulakes' claimed his real last name in Greek was Rodocanakis. Just to complicate the historical record one step further, Constantine Rodocanakis went by the American name Newell when he became a highly successful merchant in Boston.

Nicholas Vlassopoulos, another of these early pioneers died in 1827.

s of the Greek War of Independence

Sometime in the late 1970s, I believe, the "Hellenic Chronicle" of Boston ran two brief accounts on Vlassopoulos, one under a headline along the lines of "Oldest Greek gravesite in North America". While I have looked through my files, I cannot now locate these two very short accounts. The gist of these stories was that a Greek American had located the gravestone of Nicholas Vlassopoulos and in one front page vignette showed a photograph of the grave. What was puzzling at that time was the letters "A.B.C.F.M." that also appeared on the headstone. As I later surmised, those letters stood for the 'American Board of Commissioner of Foreign Missions' the agency that undoubtedly sponsored Vlassopoulos.

Sometime in 1828, American Philhellene Jonathan P. Miller brought not only Lucas Miltiades Miller to the United States but also Lucas' brother, whose name I have never been able to locate, and an unidentified Greek girl. We do learn in "A History of the Greeks in the Americas 1453-1938" by Paul Koken, Theodore Constant and Seraphim Canoutas that, "This Greek girl was adopted by Winthrop, the Lieutenant Governor of Massachusetts (1828-1832) who educated her, along with his children, as his own (Ann Arbor, Proctor Publications, 1995)." For those of you who were asleep that day in Greek School, Lucas Miltiades Miller was the first Greek-born individual to be elected to the United States House of Representatives.

Other Greeks who were brought to North America during the 1821-1829 era include Michael Kalopathakes, Nickolas Prassas, and George Sirian. George Sirian became a warrant officer in the United States Navy and served with distinction.

I have not located any in-depth information on either Michael Kalopathakes or Nickolas Prassas, but I suspect that someone in Greek

America knows something of their life-stories and careers.

In point of fact, for those of you who have been reading closely I have not even spelled the names of these 'orphans' the same from one cited source to another. Spelling is very 'big' with some Greek Americans and nearly all academics. I have opted to disturb each of these groups because if you in fact only use one spelling for any given name in your research, on the Internet or elsewhere, you will miss many key references.

In the early 1960s, when I was an altar boy at the St. Demetrios church in Chicago, Illinois, on one feast day I carried the icon of the 40 martyrs and the three youths in the furnace. This icon was rendered in the romantic Western influenced-style so much out of favor today. Later during coffee hour, sitting with my family as various friends and relatives came by to talk, I heard, once again, of the forty Greek orphans.

As I was told that day (and many times after) the martyrs in the icon I carried could not be burned, even when they were forced into the dreaded Babylonian furnace. How these 40 individuals subsequently got to be martyrs was never explained to me. And in point of fact I do not know if the account in this form is found in any Orthodox book of theology. Perhaps this tale is part of what I have heard called the 'living tradition of the church'.

As these oft-told fragments of

tales related, these early orphans entered the furnace of the ksenitia and lived! They suffered, as I was told, just as our fathers and grandfathers did.

Those modern Greek orphans discussed above (just like all the other Greeks who followed) never gave up their Greek heritage or their Orthodox faith. Clearly, in the end, that is the point of such tales Greeks tell themselves in the vastness of Ameriki.

Still, we must pause and be sure to do as much as we can to collect



The O.T. story of the "Three Youths in the Fire" reminds Greeks of suffering in the "ksenitia".

and preserve the actual life experiences of these early Hellenic pioneers to American shores.

Readers interested in contacting Mr. Frangos are welcome to e-mail him at grecianmon@yahoo.com

capture, rescue and death become the basis for Hiram Power's story that 'clothes' his 1844 nude statue, "The Greek Slave".

"The Greek Slave" is the first internationally acclaimed statue created by an American-born artist. "The statue depicts a young woman, nude, bound in chains; in one hand she holds a small cross on a chain. The title suggests that she is some sort of captive, and is on display for sale as a sexual object in an unknown market. Powers himself described the subject of the work thus:

The Slave has been taken from one of the Greek Islands by the Turks, in the time of the Greek Revolution; the history of which is familiar to all. Her father and mother, and perhaps all her kindred have been destroyed by her foes, and she alone preserved as a treasure too valuable to be thrown away. She is now among barbarian strangers,

the winter of 1827, upon his arrival Castanis notes, "From the exile-befriending city of New York, I was wafted by steamboat to New Haven, where Stephanos Galates and brother (Pantelis), and Constantine Ralles and brother (Pantios) congratulated me in sharing the benefits of their home-like exile. These young Sciotes were students in Yale College. From this place, we went by stage to Boston."

From Boston, Castanis is taken to Mount Pleasant Classical Institution at Amherst Massachusetts, once there he meets: "several Greeks Gregory A. Perdicaris and Mengouses (teachers) and Constantine Fundulakes, John Zachos, Christopher Evangeles, and the Chian Paspates, (scholars) (Philadelphia: Lippincott, Grambo, and Company, 1851)." So from this first person account we have a thumbnail sketch: we know who, where, when and what at least a dozen of

D O N T M I S S

Our annual
Christmas

To advertise or to obtain rates
tel: (718) 784-5255 ext. 101,
e-mail: advertising@the-national