

The Greek Lafayette and His Legion of Lege

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The Sunday after the Fourth of July, in nearly every Greek church across the United States, a legend is all too frequently heard during coffee hour. In one form or another one Greek-American tells another that Greeks fought shoulder-to-shoulder with American Continental soldiers during the Revolutionary War. In its most elaborate form this tall tale features Greek immigrant volunteers from the Turnbull Colony in Florida riding side-by-side with a young Demetrios Ypsilantis at the Battle of Monmouth on June 28, 1778. In its most pernicious version a mythical being named Count Theodore Caesar leads a contingent of Zakyinthian volunteers to aid the Americans against their common enemy, the British. For the moment no historical evidence exists conclusively documenting the presence of any Greeks participating in the American Revolution (1775-1783) on either side of that conflict.

Let me be clear. No documented articles, books, genealogical or other historical materials or evidence that one can reliably track back to a public source support the claim that Greeks fought with American forces. Nevertheless this unsubstantiated tale has grown over the decades. In fact it is quite surprising that some enterprising folklorist has not gathered together the various Greek-American yarns that deal with the foundation of the United States. Growing up in the Greek community of Chicago, I frequently heard stories claiming - among other things - that President John Adams was descended from Greeks; that the United States Congress lost by one vote the motion to hold its sessions in the Greek language; that Anastasia Island off the coast of Florida was named after a group of Turnbull Colony Greeks who tried to, or did (depending on the version one hears) establish a Greek church on that isle; and that there was

a Greek volunteer unit at the Battle of Monmouth.

It is fantastic fables such as the few cited above (and I certainly have heard others) that keep any and all trained researchers far and away from studying the presence of early Greeks in the Western Hemisphere. This is especially the case since written accounts of this imaginary volunteer unit have seeped into Greek-Ameri-

can published accounts. It gets worse. This tale has also appeared in newspaper accounts and on the Internet.

Given that there are essentially two different strands to this tale of Greek Continental soldiers, let me present both versions in roughly chronological order. In each case I will offer not only the essence of the tale (with its variant details) but also the published sources



COURTESY OF YPSILANTI HERITAGE FOUNDATION
Statue of Demetrios Ypsilantis in Ypsilanti, Michigan, which was named in his honor by one of the town's founders, an American philhellene. Note that the statue is flanked by both the American and Greek flags.

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within Greek-American bibliographic sources that deal with this contingent of Greek volunteers. I am focusing on chronological for a good reason. Over time elements from these two variants have been mixed-and-matched. So following the dates and titles of publications will allow for a grounding for any future review of this tall tale.

THE GREEK LAFAYETTE

Demetrios Ypsilantis (1793-1832), hero of the Greek War of Independence, figures as the hero of the oldest version of this tale. As this version contends, Ypsilantis not only traveled to North America during the struggle for independence but took an active part in the Battle of Monmouth in New Jersey on June 8, 1778. Furthermore, Ypsilantis was not alone at this battle but he was a leader of an all-volunteer unit of Greek soldiers. This battle proved such a disastrous defeat for the Continental Army it led ultimately to the court marshal of General Charles Lee (1732-1782). While it is true that the Battle of Monmouth was so surrounded by confusion that even participants of the conflict often disagreed on what actually took place, there is no American or British documentation for either the lone presence of Ypsilantis or his leading a volunteer unit of Greek soldiers. Whatever dishonor General Lee may have faced, Demetrios Ypsilantis has in Greek-American mythology been dubbed the 'Greek Lafayette.'

As far as I have been able to determine, it is Charilaos G. Lagoudakis, who first traced this unfounded legend to Seraphim G. Canoutas, "O Ellenismos en Amerike, etoi Istoría tou Ellenismou en Amerike" (New York: Cosmos, 1918). Lagoudakis, while citing Canoutas as the origin point of this tall-tale, refutes the presence of Ypsilantis in North America as he also noted that many Greek-Americans frequently used this alleged event "in their speeches as fact." These public speeches are undoubtedly the venue by which this fa-



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Demetrios Ypsilantis, hero of the Greek Revolutionary War.

ble spread, not only to the Greek-American community but beyond. One early non-Greek example of this legend of Demetrios Ypsilantis' presence in America during the Revolutionary War can be found in the Reverend Harvey C. Colburn's 1923 community study, "History of Ypsilante," (Ypsilante, Michigan: Committee on History). The citing of non-Greek-American historical studies such as Colburn's has only complicated the issue by giving this story the appearance of credibility by repetition.

Compounding this core tale are various elaborations. One that regrettably appeared in The National Herald's 2001 special supplement "The Greek Epic in America," by a distinguished writer cites that: "During the American Wars (sic) of indepen-

dence, Demetrios Ypsilanti, a scion of a mercantile Greek family and grandfather of the Greek revolutionary hero of the same name, reportedly outfitted a small ship and came to the new land with a band of followers to fight in support of America. Some sources claim that this group participated in the Battle of Monmouth, New Jersey, in 1778, under the command of General Lee."

To unravel the errors in this particular variant we need to know something of the Demetrios Ypsilantis family. Alexander Ypsilantis (1725-1805) was Demetrios' grandfather, who was ruling Wallachia (in modern day Romania) for the Ottomans when the Battle of Monmouth took place in

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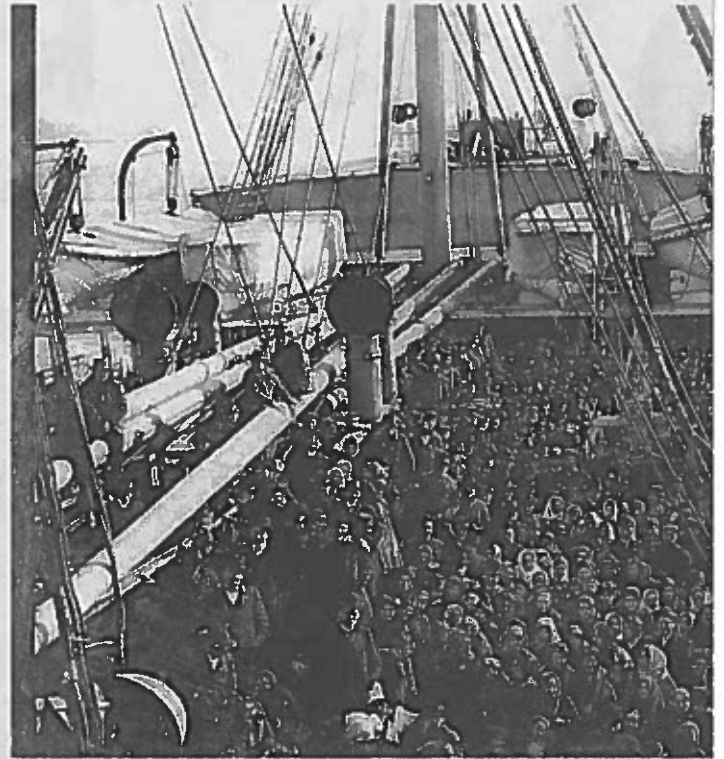
1778. Demetrios Ypsilantis, the hero of 1821 and the person said to have led the Greek volunteers in New Jersey, was the second son of Constantine Ypsilantis (1760-1816). As those familiar with traditional Greek naming customs know it is the first son who is named after the paternal grandfather, which is why Demetrios' older brother was named Alexander (1792-1828). So first we have the wrong member of the Ypsilantis family identified (as grandfather of the revolutionary hero rather than the hero himself) and then we have the other basic problem of ages. In 1778, when the Battle of Monmouth took place in New Jersey Alexander Ypsilantis (1725-1805) would have been 53, while Demitrios Ypsilantis (1793-1832) would have been 15 years old.

This tale takes an exceedingly odd turn in the 1950s that found its way into a number of publications that sprang out of the 1976 Bicentennial celebrations.

THE KNIGHTS OF ST. DENNIS

In 1976, we find a two-page account simply titled, "The Greeks," by George T. Eliopoulos in the Supplement to the Historical Journal of Western Massachusetts. This five-paragraph vignette initially draws upon what appears to be a book, "The Sovereign Greek Order of Saint Dennis of Zante" by James C. Eakes for its first two paragraphs (Southampton, England, 1965). The first paragraph seems to introduce a new contingent of Greek volunteers:

"A small contingent of Greek volunteers came to America to participate in the Colonial struggle against England. Leonidas Zois was the official record keeper and historian of the Ionian Island of Zakynthos (Zante). Zois was responsible for compiling the records of Count Theodore Caesar Logothesis, who led a contingent of Zakynthian volunteers during the American Revolution. Count Logothesis was a hereditary Knight of St. Dennis of Zante. He was an aide to General Lafayette, and in 1781 he led a command of other Greek volunteers in the Continental Army. This Greek



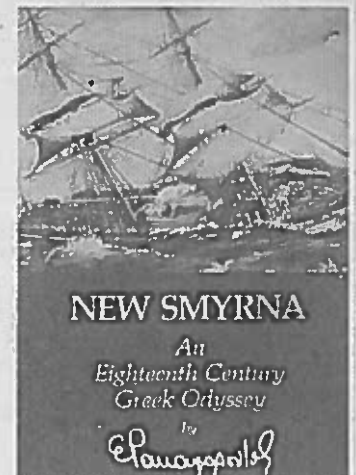
order of St. Dennis of Zante is one of the oldest surviving orders of knighthood. An attempt was made to organize the Knights of Zante in the New World, but this was a failure. This was due to the religious background and the order's constitution of aristocratic knighthood, which were contrary to American principles. Two Logotheti brothers and Michael Vourtzis were members of the first council of the established order. Vourtzis later returned to Zante and was exiled by the British for having served in the Continental Army of George Washington."

The second paragraph returns us to a variant of the older tale:

"Another Greek, Demetrios Ypsilante also became enthusiastic about the American Revolution. It is said that he ventured to the colonies with several companions to help the colonists fight for their freedom. Ysilante and his men fought at the Battle of Monmouth, New Jersey on June 28, 1778, under General Lee. After peace returned, this small band of soldiers returned to Greece. Ypsilante was referred to as 'The Greek Lafayette.'" To his credit, Eliopoulos then writes, "Yet, this researcher found no evidence

that Demetrios Ypsilante led a band of Greeks to America, or that there was any Greek participation at the Battle of Monmouth." If Eliopoulos had only questioned his source on Count Logothetis.

The history of the Knights of St. Dennis is a rather shady one. In the 1950s, a man by the name of Perry [Pericles] Voultsos established the Order of St. Dennis of Zante as a private or international award, in the United States. Not long after, Voultsos presented the Order to



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and His Legion of Legend



various prominent individuals including American Presidents and King Paul in an effort to legitimate this order. It is also reported that Voultsos awarded knighthoods and other levels of orders to less well-known individuals in return for monetary contributions, which were allegedly raised for relieving poverty and public works on the Greek island of Zakynthos. Today various websites describe the Order of St. Dennis of Zante as little more than a confidence scheme.

Regrettably, nothing seems able to stop this tall tale. As one can read in "The Greeks in America, 1528-1977," compiled and edited by Heike Fenton and Melvin Hecker (Dobbs Ferry, New York: Oceana Publications, 1978, p. 4), "D. Ypsilantis led Greek volunteers in the Battle of Monmouth, New Jersey, during the American Revolution. There is no record of their origin, but perhaps some of them

had come from New Smyrna and St. Augustine." So in the Fenton and Hecker volume, rather than see this tall tale fall to the wayside, it has only gained new variant elements—in this instance the Greeks of the New Smyrna Colony joining with the knights of Zante to oust the brutal British!

In 1768, several hundred Greeks arrived in Florida as part of the New Smyrna Colony. The authoritative study on this colony is "New Smyrna: An Eighteenth Century Greek Odyssey" by Epaminondes P. Panagopoulos (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 1966). But even the much earlier study by Carita Doggett Corse, "Dr. Andrew Turnbull and the New Smyrna Colony" (Jacksonville, Florida: Drew Press, 1919) makes no mention of Ypsilantis. Since Corse, aside from her role as a Floridian historian, was also

a descendant of survivors from the ill-fated New Smyrna Colony she would have known of any such volunteer unit. Needless to say no mention to the Battle of Monmouth and the Turnbull Colony Greeks can be found in either Corse or Panagopoulos.

In the end this fable of Ypsilantis and the Greek volunteers at the Battle of Monmouth does more harm than good. First it ignores the actions and real contributions of Greeks in the United States during the 1700s and then perhaps more importantly such tales keep qualified Modern Greek Studies researchers from looking at this period. Ultimately only an informed Greek readership will stimulate more systematic research into the enduring role of Hellenes in their very first ventures and ultimate settlement into the Western Hemisphere.