

Tracing the History of an Old Photograph

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I was walking down Manhattan's 20th Street around noon. Since I was early for a luncheon date at Periyali, and had not been in that section of New York before, I thought I'd see something of the neighborhood. Traffic was especially bad. All the more so for my walk since the sidewalks there are especially narrow. Nothing in particular caught my eye. No gem of old stone architecture nestled between the bad taste of subsequent construction as is usually the case. And then, on my left, I saw the two children.

They were in a sun-faded poster in a store window. I went inside, and as is the oh-so-common experience in New York City, that it escapes the attention of all but the visitor, I had to wait endlessly in line. My first excited question really made no sense, "do you know who these children are?" It was a graphics services store. Quite busy, as one would imagine, given that they do high quality work for the city's professional community. Not at all the first place one would seek out to find a turn of the century photograph of Greek-American children.

The owner was called. Stuart was a complete gentleman and answered all my questions as best he could. The original cabinet card photograph was also in the store window but further down than the poster that first caught my eye. But in all honesty, he could not remember if he bought the photograph or, as he said, "saw it on top of the trash somewhere and simply picked it up."

I asked for a copy of the original, making sure to request that the photographer's name and business address be included. Since all we have is the photograph itself, inductive reasoning, and some knowledge of Greek American history, is all we have to go by. Obviously, we know the children had their picture taken by a professional studio photographer named Johns in Lexington Kentucky. Given their age and the costumes, we can assume they were the children of Greek immigrants. Immigrants who were clearly proud of their heritage (their children) and that they, presumably, wanted to express the continuance of their Greek identity by this formal photograph. Such photographs were not inexpensive. So it

was a very deliberate and conscious act on the part of the parents. In all likelihood some considerable financial sacrifice was involved.

These are not traditional Greek costumes. Rather they are the King Ortho and Queen Amalia style of costuming. Such choice of attire does not automatically carry any political connotations. Few Greeks in the United States, from the time period when this

report, Greek American photography is being lost on literally a daily basis. Another undisputable point is that no academic researcher is actively collecting Greek American photographs for any public institution. At a time when there are more Greeks in university positions than any other time in our collective history, our community has no one systematically documenting its memories, its history or its images.



photograph was taken, had brought local traditional costumes with them.

The photograph itself is what is called a cabinet card photograph. As you can see it is a black and white image attached to a stiff cardboard back. This type of photograph stopped being widely produced in America in the first decade of the 1900s. So we can infer that these were among the very first children born of the 1880 to 1920 generation of Greeks to arrive in the country. Given that fact it seems unlikely that either of these two individuals is still alive. And that is about all we can deduce.

The printing of this photograph here, and brief account of its chance recovery, marks more than simply a symbolic return of the two children to their community of origin. By its very existence we know that these two children were loved. But why did their portrait end up in a graphic shop in New York City? We may never know.

But as this one beautiful image can

What is to be done? We must approach the problem of maintaining Hellenism in America as if it were work-related. If it has no real-world value for us how can we expect anyone else to care? We have to do it all by ourselves. So, first, the basics. Do you have photographs similar to the one seen here? Can you identify everyone in each photograph? Even if you don't have a photograph as old as this one or a professionally taken photograph it seems very unlikely that you have no family photographs at all. Every historical society and archive in the United States of America wants photographs and documents that are related to the history of their area. Greeks so often forget that they, and their immediate ancestors, helped to build the America we all live in today. Find the local organization that preserves such historical documents. No one will be Greek for you or your family. The historical fate of our experience in America is, without exaggeration, in your hands.