

Tracing New Orleans' Greek Geography, from Bayou Road to the banks of Bayou St. John

by Richard Campanella *New Orleans Times-Picayune* InsideOut section, May 9, 2014

“New Orleans,” wrote A. J. Liebling in 1961, lies “within the orbit of a Hellenistic world that never touched the North Atlantic.” Each May, New Orleanians are reminded of their city’s Grecian aura at the popular Greek Fest, held Memorial Day weekend at Holy Trinity Orthodox Church on the banks of Bayou St. John.



Greek Fest, Holy Trinity Orthodox Church, on the banks of Bayou St. John.

Holy Trinity is as central to the festival as it has long been to the Greek-ancestry population of New Orleans. Originating 150 years ago at a locale in the Sixth Ward, Holy Trinity was the first Eastern Orthodox church in the Western Hemisphere.

The Greek presence here can be traced to colonial times, when a wealthy Athens merchant named Michael Dracos arrived in the 1760s and married a local woman of mixed Acadian and Native American lineage. When their daughter married a Greek native in New Orleans in 1799, it became recorded as the first known marriage of two people of Greek origins in North America.

The maritime-driven prosperity of the antebellum age planted seeds for a larger permanent community based around Greek shipping tycoons, who held a special interest in New Orleans for its command of the cotton trade.

Together with their families, these Greek New Orleanians numbered around 150 by 1850, the first year in which the Census recorded birthplace, thus allowing tabulation. They comprised a small element of an extraordinarily multicultural city: 40 percent of the city’s 119,460 residents that year were foreign-born, and denizens citywide attended more than 60 houses of worship, representing Roman Catholicism, eight Protestant denominations and Judaism. A relatively prosperous group, Greek New Orleanians, nonetheless, lacked in this area: there was no house of worship, here or anywhere in the New World, for their Eastern Orthodox faith.

A group of local cotton merchants of the worldwide Ralli Brothers firm, led by Greek Consul Nicholas Benachi, aimed to change that. Scion of a prominent Athens family, Benachi was a diplomat, businessman, community leader and real estate magnate in one of the city’s fashionable new “garden suburbs,” the recently extended Esplanade Avenue near Bayou St. John.

In 1864, Benachi offered his own property (likely his circa-1859 mansion which still stands at 2257 Bayou Road) as a temporary church, and from 1864 to 1866, the Eastern Orthodox Church practiced its rituals on these semi-rural outskirts of the Crescent City.

In 1866, the Orthodox congregation assembled enough money to purchase for \$1,200 one of Benachi’s undeveloped parcels, a block and a half off Esplanade in the recently renumbered Sixth Ward.

At what was then 230 North Dolhonde St., the newly founded Eastern Orthodox Church of the Holy Trinity erected its first permanent structure, arguably the first building in the city whose design may be aptly described as truly Greek rather than the Greek “Revival.”

The church’s classical pediment sitting atop high Corinthian columns, which gave the otherwise bucolic little wooden chapel a majestic demeanor, reflected the congregation’s ancestral pride as much as the classicism popular nationwide at that time.



At what was then 230 North Dolhonde St., the Eastern Orthodox Church of the Holy Trinity erected its first permanent structure in 1866. Photo courtesy Southeastern Architectural Archive, Tulane University.

The establishment of Holy Trinity imparted cultural identity and geographical unity to the Orthodox peoples of New Orleans. Noted *Harper’s Weekly* in 1870, “There is a Greek chapel in New Orleans, in which city is quite a large population of Russian Greeks and Moldavians from the Danubian provinces.”

Wrote a New York journalist in 1873, “In New-Orleans the Greek colony is important enough to maintain a church of their own religion, built some five years ago by subscription, and divine service is celebrated every Sunday in the Greek language by a priest educated in the National University of Athens.”

Although by some accounts, Saints Constantine and Helen’s Church in Galveston, Texas, may have preceded Holy Trinity as the first Orthodox parish in the hemisphere, most assessments generally validate Holy Trinity’s status as, in the words of historian Alexander Doumouras, the “oldest Orthodox community in America which included Greeks,” and as the “first parish of the Greek Orthodox Church in America,” particularly the first documented effort to survive to the present.

Holy Trinity Church expanded on North Dorgenois to include a rectory, library, community center and tomb in St. Louis No. 3 Cemetery. By this time, Progressive Era reforms in city management had revised the house-numbering system in 1894, and after subsequent street name changes, Holy Trinity’s address became 1222 North Dorgenois St.

The organization itself was chartered by the state in 1909 as the Eastern Orthodox Church of the Holy Trinity, and in 1920 as the Hellenic Orthodox Church.

In a city where religious institutions typically were built in response to neighborhood ethnic settlement patterns, the case of Holy Trinity and the Greeks was the opposite. The church arrived to its site mostly by happenstance, and congregants settled around it, mostly in the late 19th and early 20th century.

Greek immigrants and other Orthodox faithful of Syrian, Slavic and Russian descent settled near Holy Trinity throughout the adjacent Fifth, Sixth and Seventh Wards, an area which also benefited from nearby streetcar service connecting with downtown and the North Broad commercial district. Cottages and shotgun houses were erected throughout the neighborhood, and live oak trees were planted, forming gorgeous canopies today.

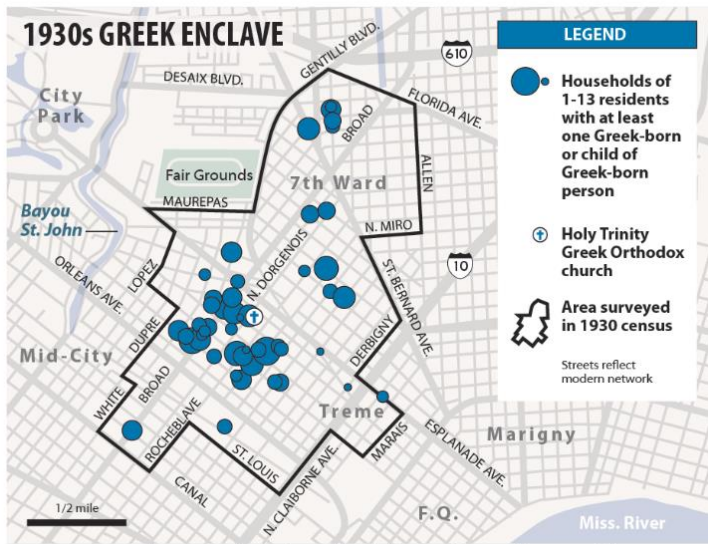
While the North Dorgenois area was the closest the city ever came to having a Greek neighborhood — roughly half of all Greeks in New Orleans lived within a mile of Holy Trinity — it fell short of being the sort of “Greek Town” seen in cities like New York, Chicago, Detroit and Lowell, Mass. In fact, the neighborhood was thoroughly mixed ethnically and, to some extent, racially.

Census records from 1930 indicate 200 people of Greek ancestry lived near Holy Trinity, distributed in 52 households, of which nearly 80 percent spoke Greek at home. Of these 52 households, eight had members born in Turkey, Egypt or Bulgaria who nonetheless spoke Greek. There were an

additional 10 Syrian households in the area, home to 45 Syrians immigrants or Syrian-Americans.

Greek New Orleans families in the early 20th century were mostly working- to middle-class, employed primarily in food services (restaurateurs, bakers, fruit sellers, seafood merchants, cooks, waiters) and as skilled craftsmen (carpenters, electricians, mechanics, steamship engineers, telephone or construction company employees).

By the mid-20th century, the circa-1866 wooden church at 1222 North Dorgenois no longer satisfied the congregation’s needs, and was cleared away for a new brick structure. The second Holy Trinity, built in 1951, featured a more Mediterranean style, with a domed tower, mosaics, and Greek crosses.



Source: 1930 U.S. Census data Analyzed and mapped by Richard Campanella; recreated by NOLA.com | The Times-Picayune

Over the next two decades, the Orthodox congregants would number, by one 1974 estimate, roughly 750 families within the metro area and 1,500 throughout its diocese. Ninety percent were Greek in ancestry, the remainder being Russian, Syrian, Romanian, Serbian, Lebanese, Albanian or Bulgarian.

But social circumstances would change in subsequent decades, and like the Orthodox Jews of Dryades Street, the Sicilians of the lower French Quarter and the Chinese of Chinatown, denizens of the century-old Greek enclave increasingly pulled up their urban roots and resettled in suburban-style neighborhoods inside and outside city limits.

In 1976, Holy Trinity, too, decided to leave its original home, and after three years in temporary locations, settled into a spacious red-brick Hellenic Cultural Center (1980) and new cathedral (1985) overlooking the scenic banks of Bayou St. John at Robert E. Lee Boulevard. The old North Dorgenois building became home to St. Luke’s Episcopal Church, a congregation of predominantly African Americans whose roots may be traced to the 1850s in what is now Central City.

To many New Orleanians in the 1970s, “Greek culture” brought to mind not Holy Trinity, nor the Greek Fest (which started in 1974), but rather a very different cultural space along 100 to 200 blocks of Decatur Street in the upper French Quarter. There operated a solid line of bars and clubs catering to Greek sailors calling at the Port of New Orleans.

At the time, the Greek Merchant Marine, the largest in the world, sent more than a thousand registered ships per year to New Orleans. Since each vessel employed around 40 marines, of whom at least 30 to 50 percent had to be Greek, about 20,000 Greek seamen arrived here annually. These young *thiodiotis* (luck chasers), according to a 1979 paper *Odysseus in Louisiana: The Greek Sailors in New*

Orleans by Andrew Horton, “wished to taste the salty air of new adventures”— and found it in New Orleans, which they selected hands-down as their favorite city in America.

The tiny district was possibly unique in the nation in its density and catering to Greek *naftes* (sailors); clubs with names like the Athenian Room, the Greek Club, Zorba’s, Habana Bar, Scorpio’s, Casa Cuba, the Acropolis, Los Amantes, Trade Winds, Casa Angelo, Mediterranean Room and the Greek and Italian Seamen’s Club lined Decatur and adjacent Iberville. Inside, patrons spoke Greek, ate typical foods, listened to live *bouzouki* bands, danced the traditional *zeybekiko*, and paid astronomical bills to Greek owners.

Although united by Greek blood, the contrast between the Greek American families worshipping at Holy Trinity and the young male Greek nationals letting loose on upper Decatur could not have been greater. Technological advances and structural changes in the shipping industry in the 1980s would thin the ranks of mariners, including Greek seamen. By 1990, New Orleans’ rambunctious little Greek entertainment district was gone.

The residential population, on the other hand, remains as vibrant as ever. People of Greek ancestry today are scattered predominantly in modern subdivisions of the metropolis, with about 40 percent more living in Jefferson Parish (particularly Pontchartrain Shores) than in New Orleans proper. Nevertheless, Holy Trinity remains *the* cultural nucleus for Greek-American families throughout the region. It is to this site that thousands of locals come to celebrate the annual springtime Greek Fest — a little bit of Liebling’s “Hellenistic world” touching the banks of Bayou St. John.



1222 North Dorgenois today: this second Holy Trinity Church, built in 1951, is now home to St. Luke’s Episcopal Church. Photo by Richard Campanella

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