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Immigrant races in Massachusetts

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IMMIGRANT RACES IN MASSACHUSETTS

THE GREEKS



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WRITTEN FOR
THE MASSACHUSETTS BUREAU OF IMMIGRATION
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IMMIGRANT RACES IN MASSACHUSETTS

THE GREEKS

Written for the Massachusetts Bureau of Immigration, by William I. Cole, Professor of Applied Sociology, Wheaton College.

Of the fifty or more races represented in the immigrant population of the United States, the Greeks make the strongest appeal to our imagination. Try as we will, we cannot help associating them with the great history, although now so remote, of the country from which most of them have come. We not only connect them with that history in a general way, but we link them up in our minds with its great outstanding figures — with Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle, with Pericles, with Demosthenes, with Herodotus and Thucydides, with Praxiteles and Phidias, with Aeschylus, Euripides, and Sophocles, with Homer — where shall the list end? Whether they can rightfully claim such ancestry, we do not stop to consider. They bear the name of Greek and that fact alone appeals to us and quickens our imagination.

We see even the humblest bearer of the name Greek against a background recalling many of the noblest achievements in human history. The Greek bootblack who shines our shoes suggests the place where

“The mountains look on Marathon
And Marathon looks on the sea,”

although he may have come from some remote village of Laconia; or the fruit vendor who sells us bananas from his push cart calls up a picture of “hundred-gated Thebes”, a city of which more than likely he had never heard. Behind the quarter given over to the Greeks in any of our cities, however dilapidated, over-crowded, and even noisome such a quarter may be rises, in our mind’s eye, a vision of the Acropolis.

Number.

How many Greeks are there in America?

The census of the population of the United States taken in 1910 gives the number of inhabitants born in Greece or born here of parents

one or both of whom were born in Greece as 109,665. These figures, however, assuming that they are substantially correct, represent only a part of the Greek population of this country. They do not include, of course, the Greeks born in Macedonia, Asia Minor and other parts of "unredeemed Greece", nor their children born here. These constitute no small proportion of the total number of Greeks in this country, possibly two-fifths of the whole. Their actual number, however, there is no way of determining, since the classification of the census is solely by country of birth. Therefore, the exact size of the Greek population in the United States must be more or less conjectural. The best informed of the Greeks themselves put the total number of Greeks here at 350,000, an estimate which is perhaps not far from correct. At least it is, undoubtedly, as trustworthy as any that could be made.

Sources and Motives of the Immigration.

Tripolis and Sparta, both cities, or rather districts, in the interior of the Peloponnesus, may properly be regarded as the originating points of the Greek influx into this country. Tripolis, the city, and the villages which are grouped around it are situated on a broad and fertile table-land surrounded by rocky and barren mountains, the egress from which is through a few narrow passes. Sparta, on the other hand, is in a valley, and although also surrounded by mountains its access to the sea is easier than that of Tripolis.

From these two centers the "fever of emigration" has spread not only to all parts of the Peloponnesus but to Attica, Thessaly and Euboea, to Macedonia, Asia Minor, and "the Islands". In fact, no part of "redeemed" or "unredeemed" Greece has been altogether unaffected by it. However, the largest contingents are still coming from the regions of Tripolis and Sparta. With the beginning of the recent war, as was inevitable, Greek immigration, like most other immigrations, rapidly decreased, and after awhile practically ceased altogether.

The relatively large Greek immigration — Greece which furnishes no less than three-fifths of the total has a population about the size of that of New Jersey — is due almost wholly to wide-spread and extreme poverty at home; and its motive is predominantly, if not wholly, the desire to get money. Religious persecution cannot be said to be even a contributory cause; for there is no religious

persecution of the Greeks in Greece or in the Turkish Empire. In fact, practically every Greek is a loyal adherent of the Greek Orthodox Church, which is to him a symbol of his nationality as well as of his religion, and wherever his lot is cast he enjoys the free exercise of his form of faith. Neither can political oppression nor compulsory military service be included among the contributory causes of Greek immigration, at least of that major part of it which comes from Greece, where the government is most democratic and compulsory military service is slight. America as seen by the Greek, whether from "redeemed" or "unredeemed" Greece, is first of all the land in which to make money. Asked as to his reason for leaving home, the Greek immigrant will say almost invariably, in substance, "It is hard to make a living there. America is rich. I can make more money here. It is the money." That word "money" is the keynote of Greek immigration.

What part of this immigration is in Massachusetts, and how is it distributed?

Of the 350,000 Greeks, more or less, in this country, possibly 45,000 or 50,000 are in Massachusetts. If this estimate is approximately correct, then the Greek population of the State is not far from one-seventh of that of the entire country. It has been estimated to be also somewhere around two-thirds of that in all New England. The largest number in any one city or town in the State is in Lowell, which has an estimated Greek population somewhat in excess of 12,000; and the next largest number is in Boston, where there are probably between 3,500 and 4,000. Lynn has approximately 3,000; Worcester about the same number; Springfield from 1,000 to 1,500, and Haverhill not far from 1,000. There are smaller numbers in Peabody and New Bedford, and smaller still in Fitchburg, Holyoke, Chicopee, Somerville, and Cambridge, and twenty or more other places. Thus the 45,000 or 50,000 in the State are not gathered together in a few centers or confined to any one section, but are widely distributed.

The Greek colony in Lowell is not only the largest aggregation of Greeks in Massachusetts but one of the largest in the United States. In fact, it is third in point of size, the first being that in New York, numbering possibly 30,000, and the second that in Chicago, smaller than the colony in New York by perhaps 5,000.

Like most Greek colonies of three or four hundred or more, this colony is organized as a "community", with president, secretary,

and other officers, and various committees. Although its primary purpose is to maintain a Greek Orthodox Church and a school for religious instruction, the "community" serves also various other social ends. Seventeen of the Greek colonies in Massachusetts have the community form of organization. They include, besides the colony in Lowell, the colonies in Boston, Holyoke, Lawrence, Haverhill, Worcester, Salem, Lynn, Clinton, Fitchburg, and elsewhere.

Racial Traits.

Whatever may be true of their physical descent from the Greeks of the Ancient World, there can be no doubt that spiritually, as Professor H. P. Fairchild points out, "the modern Greeks are the direct inheritors of the ancients". "A familiarity with the modern people", he declares, "brings countless illustrations of the similarity of thought and character between the old and the new." In the Greeks who seek our shores and those of whom Homer sang or whom Aristophanes caricatured, there are the same alertness of mind, inventiveness, and plausibility, the same liveliness of disposition, the same courtesy and hospitality to strangers, the same capacity for self-sacrifice, the same love of adventure and readiness to take a chance, the same delight in haggling over a bargain, and the same proneness to disputation, often running into dissension.

Patriotism, which has always been a marked trait of the Greek character is no less apparent among the modern bearers of the name Greek than among those who repulsed the Persians, although necessarily showing itself in new guises. Nowhere is it seen to better advantage than in their enthusiasm for "the Great Idea"—the liberation of "unredeemed Greece" and the revival throughout the East of a Greek culture that shall rival that of ancient Greece. For this object, the Greeks in all countries join hands, freely devoting to its realization their time, money, and abilities. "The large fortunes which they amass abroad," says Mr. James D. Bouchier, "are often bequeathed for the foundation of various institutions in Greece and Turkey, for the increase of the national fleet and army, or for the spread of Hellenic influence in the Levant."

The National-Pan-Epirotic Union of America, one of the largest societies of Greeks in this country, includes among its objects "To stimulate a greater study everywhere in the question of Northern Epirus . . . and to bring about the union of Northern Epirus with its mother country Greece by all lawful means."

During the Balkan War, 30,000 Greeks in the United States, so it is claimed, or about ten per cent of the entire number here, went back to fight in the armies of Greece. When the recent war broke out there was not, it is true, the same rush to the aid of Greece; but there was not the same call. After the entry of the United States into the war, however, thousands of them again took arms, but this time, by advice of Venizelos, under the Stars and Stripes; for the cause of the Allies was the cause of Greece.

The same patriotism appears in the pride which the Greeks feel in all the glorious achievements in philosophy, art, literature, and valor with which the name of Greek is forever associated in men's minds; and even in the country itself of Greece, with its diversified scenery of mountains, valleys, and sea. The Greek bootblack pins a picture of the Acropolis on the walls of his "shoe-shine parlor"; and the Greek vendor of fruit, in the intervals between waiting on customers, peruses the pages of his Homer. Tell a Greek that you have been in Greece and almost invariably he eagerly inquires, "Did you go to Athens? Isn't it a beautiful city?"

Occupations.

Although many thousands of the Greeks in America are employed as mill and factory hands, and many more thousands in railroad construction, in digging sewers, and as farm laborers, there is a strong tendency among the Greeks here, as Professor Ross says, "to take to certain lines of business, such as candy kitchens and confectionery stores, ice-cream parlors, fruit carts, stands and stores, florist shops and boot-blackening establishments."

"This is due to the fact," Professor Ross continues, "that this catering to the minor wants of the public admits of being started on the curb with little capital and no experience. Once his foot on the first rung, the saving and commercial-minded Greek climbs. From curb to stand, from stand to store, from little store to big store, to the chain of stores, to branch stores in other cities — such are the stages in his upward path."

As a people, the Greeks possess marked commercial enterprise and shrewd business ability. They are self-reliant, seek no special favor, and with remarkably few exceptions are self-supporting. When any one of them does fall into need, which is rarely the case, a native pride keeps him from applying for public relief; and as a

rule he is looked after by friends among his own people. In the charitable work of the country, the Greeks are a negligible factor.

Naturalization.

Practically every Greek in the United States expects to return home sometime. Statistics of the number actually going back are not available, but probably they would comprise no very different ratio to the number arriving than in the case of other races from Southern Europe.

Of those who remain here permanently, no very large proportion become naturalized citizens. One-fifth is as large an estimate as has been made and that is probably too large. The Greeks themselves try to encourage citizenship among their fellow countrymen. One of the objects of the Pan-Hellenic Union in America is, as stated in its constitution, "To instil veneration and affection for the laws and institutions of their adopted country, to cultivate friendly relations between Greeks and American citizens, and to assist the former in obtaining American citizenship." As to the results, there are not even safe estimates.

Summary.

Of the 350,000 Greeks in the United States about three-fifths are from Greece itself, the remaining two-fifths coming from various parts of the Turkish Empire. As a part of the Greek race they are inheritors of a great tradition of which they are extremely proud, and they reach back over a period of two or three thousand years and join hands with the ancient Greeks in the common possession of certain mental and moral characteristics whatever may be their kinship with them in blood. They are quick-witted, versatile, and amiable, united in devotion to a great ideal, capable of self-sacrifice, loyal to their church, contentious, keen in business, and self-supporting. Through home attachments and love of country, a considerable proportion of them go back after a longer or shorter stay here; but a good number remain permanently in this country, many of them becoming naturalized citizens and making substantial contributions to the national life.

Thus the appeal which they make to our imagination finds no small justification in a closer scrutiny and a more intimate acquaintance.

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