

NARRATIVE TEXTS

Greek Texans

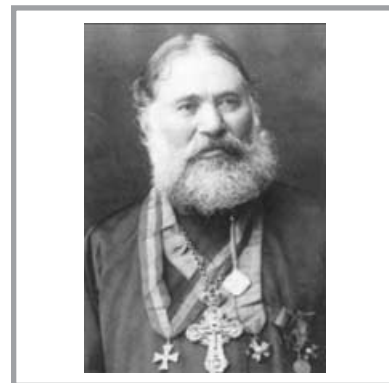
Greeks and people of Greek heritage came to the Americas and Texas mostly between 1890 and 1920. Greece has been a colonizing country for some 2,500 years; thus, some Greeks came from Greece itself, others from satellite colonies in the Middle East. Many Greek colonials were expelled from Turkey during warfare. In Greece economic depression at the turn of the century, overpopulation, and not incidentally social customs such as an expensive dowry system that had to accompany marriage, drove many individuals to seek fortunes elsewhere.

Greek emigrants to Texas went directly into cities. Here, the typical single man would work in a low-paying job until he had earned the money to open his own business. If he met with success, and most did, this prosperity led to a trip home for a marriage and a quick return to Texas.

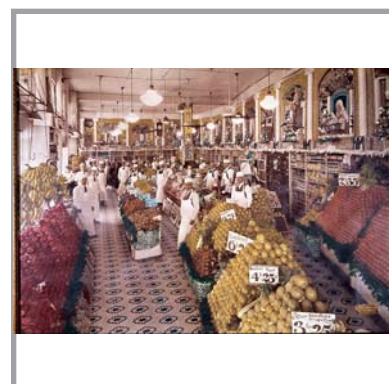
Later Greeks, seeing Texas as a home, stayed and formed small communities. Galveston, as Texas's leading seaport before the rise of Houston, was a lure to fishermen, sailors, and merchants. There, joining with Orthodox Syrians, Serbians, and Russians, the Greeks helped build the SS. Constantine and Helen Orthodox Church, where the first priest, the Greek Theoclitos Triantafilides, conducted services in Greek, Russian, and Serbian.

Some individuals worked their way to Galveston as seamen, leaving ship there for other lives; others abandoned railroad work for urban Texas settings; many lived elsewhere before moving on; and a few had heard about Texas and took it as their first choice. In an era when women did not travel singly or alone, most women were brought as brides.

Greek urban communities typically centered around the church or social societies. By the 1940s communities existed in all of Texas's larger cities—San Antonio,



The Very Reverend Theoclitos Triantafilides, first priest of the Serbian, Greek, and Russian Eastern Orthodox church of SS. Constantine and Helena, Galveston



The Garden Fruit Store, San Antonio, belonging to Elias Varessis (Pappa Louis)

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Dallas, Houston, Galveston—and also in Waco, Austin, Wichita Falls, El Paso, Port Arthur, and San Angelo.

March 25, Greek Independence Day, has been observed officially in Texas since the governor's proclamation in 1943 of "Greek Independence in Texas." The day is marked in homes, churches, and community centers with a feast, costumed dances, religious services, and speeches.

The church is the focus for most of the Greek festival days, which include Christmas Eve midnight services; gifts on New Year's (St. Basil's Day, although this is yielding to today's commercial Christmas); the blessing of the waters at port cities on Epiphany; somber Good Friday processions; and the feast of Easter Sunday with its notable breads, pastries, cheeses, and, in former years, roast lamb and costumed dancing.

And the Greek wedding may still extend in excess of the hour needed for the exchange of ceremony, although the duration is shorter than the former 10-day celebration. Also, to nearly everyone's delight, the dowry system has been mostly abandoned.

Ancient Greeks contributed much to Western culture—structures of literature and government, music and philosophy, science and drama; modern Greeks have helped construct Texas.