

The Greek-Bahamian Community: “Past, Present, and Future”

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RÉSUMÉ

La communauté grecque des Bahamas a été fondée en 1887 par des pionniers venus des îles de la mer Égée, oeuvrant au sein de l'industrie des éponges. A partir des années 40, les membres des deuxième et troisième générations se dirigent davantage vers d'autres domaines comme l'hôtellerie et la restauration.

L'actuelle communauté grecque des Bahamas est prospère et on retrouve ses membres au sein de différentes professions libérales et entreprises. Les caractéristiques observées dans cette communauté sont similaires à celles des autres communautés de la diaspora grecque.

ABSTRACT

The Greek-Bahamian community originated in 1887. It emerged out of the sponge industry of the *protoporoi* (pioneers) who came from the Aegean Islands. By the 1940's, the coming of age of the second generation and the start of the third generation, Greek-Bahamians turned to other areas of business.

The present Greek-Bahamian community is a prosperous one branching in various enterprises and professions. The patterns observed in this community are similar to the other communities of the greek diaspora.

Sixty miles off the South coast of Florida and stretching as far as Cuba, Haiti, and the Dominican Republic lies the Commonwealth of the Islands of the Bahamas. A coral archipelago of 700 islands, only 29 of which are inhabited, along with 2,000 or more rocks and cays. The Bahamas has a population of about 269,000 people, most of whom live on ten islands (New Providence, Grand Bahamas, Eleuthera¹, Abaco, Exuma, Long Island, Inagna, Cat Island, Bimini, and Andros²). With the exception of 10-15 per cent which is of European background, the rest of the inhabitants are of African descent and some of mixed parenthood. While Andros is the largest of the islands and the least explored and populated, New Providence is one of the smallest and most populated. The city of Nassau, located on New Providence Island, is the capital of the Bahamas, and has a population of approximately 165,000 people, which is more than half of the total population of all the Bahamian Islands.

The Bahamas is an English-speaking country that gained its independence from England on July 10, 1973. However, the Bahamas continues to be a mem-

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ber of the British Commonwealth. It has a British-type parliamentary system along with a prime minister and a governor general who is recommended by the prime minister and who must be approved by the Queen of England. The parliamentary democracy has operated without interruption for 275 years.

The economy of the Bahamas depends predominantly on tourism, international banking, and other financial services. In addition, retail and wholesale distributive trade, light manufacturing, agriculture, and fisheries comprise the other sectors of the Bahamian economy. The gross domestic product (GDP) of the Bahamas exceeds \$3 billion, 60% of which comes from tourist related activities. The per capita income of the country was \$11,000 in 1994. The Bahamian dollar is on par with the U.S. dollar. Except for property taxes, there are neither income nor corporate taxes in the Bahamas.

The Discovery of the Greeks of the Bahamas

On December 27, 1994, George Kourvetaris, Professor of Sociology of Northern Illinois University, landed at Nassau, the capital of the commonwealth of the Bahamas. Two days later his daughter Sophia and his two sons Andreas and Nicholas joined him to spend the next couple weeks in the Bahamas. Before leaving the United States, they had very little knowledge of the islands of the Bahamas other than the usual information of a tourist haven for those who wanted to escape the zero temperatures of the Midwest and to enjoy the sun and the sea of the Caribbean beaches and Islands. What made their vacation more intriguing was the discovery in Nassau of a highly prosperous and successful Greek community.

Initially, we were introduced to some members of the Greek community including the Greek Orthodox priest through our host and hostess Mr. Stephanos and Maria Antonas, who operate a Guest House on Market Street³ in Nassau. Using a variety of approaches including participant observation, informal interviews with members of the Greek community and extensive field work, we were able to collect some useful data about the Greek community of Nassau in Providence, Bahamas. In the next few pages we would like to present our joint report about our experiences and perceptions of the Greeks of Nassau⁴.

Three major questions guided our research of the Greek community of the Bahamas. When and why did the Greeks come to the Bahamas? What is their present socio-economic status? And how does the future look for the Greek-Bahamian community? In other words, questions dealt with the past, present, and future.

The Beginning of the Greek-Bahamian Community

In 1887, the arrival of 24 Greek sponge divers from the island of Kalymnos,

one of the Greek Dodecanese islands in the Aegean Sea, marked the beginnings of the Greek presence in the Bahamas. The most likely sponsor of these men was the Vouvalis Sponge Packers and Exporters Company. The Vouvalis head office was in London and was established in 1882. (Public Records Office, Archives section, 1974:14). Indeed, the Vouvalis Company had been one of the first major firms to establish a sponge business and warehouses in the Bahamas. This Company was a Greek company, which in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, expanded its operation to major sponging centers in Africa, Cuba, Bahamas, and Tarpon Springs, Florida (Public Records Office, 1974:14). Three years later in 1890, the George Damianos Sponge Company was also established as packers and exporters of sponges in Nassau, Bahamas (Public Records Office, Archives Section, 1974:16). It must be noted that the arrival of the 24 pioneer Greek Sponge divers was perceived by the native Bahamian sponge merchants as a threat to the local control of sponge fisheries. In a letter to the *Nassau Guardian* paper in December 1887, sent by Joseph Brown, a leading sponge merchant at that time he wrote: "Twenty-four aliens have arrived, experts in the gathering, clipping and packaging of sponge, and if I am rightly informed, determined to handle it themselves in all stages from the gathering to the packing, thus excluding native labor. If the experiment should be successful, it is quite probable that we should soon have hundreds of men in our midst, whose ways are not our ways, who would form a distinct section of the population, and who would only continue to remain here until such time as the sponge beds become exhausted or the business ceases to be profitable". (*Nassau Guardian*, Dec. 28, 1887).

This letter by Joseph Brown had some discriminatory and alarming remarks against these early Greek men due primarily to economic competition. The letter further suggested that a law should be enacted to protect native sponge fisheries, against 'encroachment of aliens'.

Brown's letter triggered a similar wave of letters of protest by Bahamians sent to local papers to dramatize the threat which the entry of the two dozen Greeks in the sponging industry posed to native spongers. An additional demand for protective legislation against this alleged Greek "invasion" into the sponge business was made in a petition, signed by 14 of 29 members of the House of Assembly and 141 other citizens, presented to the Governor of the colony in March 1888. (*Nassau Guardian*, 3 March, 1888). The argument in the petition was basically an urgent plea to protect local resources from foreign intrusion and from the dangers of attracting foreigners who would not easily be integrated into Bahamian society. Indeed, the thrust of the petition was outright anti-Greek arguing that the "Greeks by culture and race were not amenable to be integrated into the Bahamian society. The petition went on to state that the only objective of the Greeks was to gather that product of nature, the sponges, and thereby crush the backbone of our prosperity, and upon which the very existence of a large portion of this community exist" (*Nassau Guardian*, 3 March, 1888).

Later, however this anticipated “invasion” of Greeks into the sponge business never materialized. Some attempts by Greeks to bring sponge divers from the Greek Islands to compete with the natives proved to be an utter failure. The Greek sponge divers “could not compete with the natives and those who had embarked in the undertaking suffered to considerable loss in both time and money” (*Nassau Guardian*, 5 Oct. 1889). In general, Greek immigrants to the Bahamas concentrated on the buying, packing, and exporting of sponges. Indeed, initially many Greeks came to the Bahamas as buying agents for the Vouvalis Company. Some of them established their own sponge business after accumulating some savings. As we mentioned one of the earliest independent buyers of sponges was George Damianos and his son who started his business in 1890. Other early Greek buyers of sponges were such individuals as Christofilis, Esfakis, Psilinakis, Mungos, Tiliacos, and Mailis (Transcript of interview with Mr. Psilinakis, 15 Oct. 1973, Dept. of Archives; also “The Greek Connection”, *The Tribune*, 26 March 1981).

By 1924, the Greek community had established their control of the sponge/trade as buyers and exporters. Specifically in an editorial in the *Nassau Tribune*, August 1924, it was noted that the “Greeks practically control the sponge business of the island”. It was estimated that they paid 20,000 annually in wages. However, despite the growing economic importance of the Greeks, they were not readily accepted socially by members of the white “Bahamian elite” (The “Greek Connection”, *The Tribune*, 26 March, 1981).

It must be emphasized that the Greeks prospered in the sponge business as sponge merchants and not as sponge divers. They were the buyers and traders. Native Bahamians actually went out on the boats and picked up the sponges on the sea floor of various Bahamian Islands, such as Acklins Island, Abaco, Mayaguana, Turks Islands and so on. The competition was most intense among the Greek sponge merchants and buyers themselves. Even brothers competed for the price of sponges. Over all we believe it was the Greek merchants who benefited more from the sponge industry than the natives, who “always found themselves in debt”. Dr. Gail Saunders, in the video on “The History of the Sponge Industry” also attended to this. The Greeks were essentially the middle men and the entrepreneurs who bought the sponges and sold them throughout the world. This entrepreneurial ethos of the Greeks is similar in most Greek communities of the diaspora, and is one of the primary sources of economic prosperity of the Greeks.

About the same time in 1896, the first Greek man arrived in Tarpon Springs, Florida who later became the first pioneer of the sponge Greek community. His name was John Cocoris who came from Leonidion, Kynouria, the eastern province of Arcadia, Peloponnesos, in south central Greece. John Cocoris became the driving force of the sponge diving industry and the builder of the

Greek community of Tarpon Springs. (Frantzis, 1962:40). The history of sponge fishing in Florida began in 1849. Hook-spongers were natives of Key West, Cuba, and the Bahamas. (Frantzis, 1962:38). In 1889, John K. Cheyney, a wealthy banker from Philadelphia, and a rich landowner in Tarpon Springs, entered the sponge business and built warehouses in 1890.

Gradually, an influx of sponge merchants arrived from Greece, particularly from the Dodecanese Islands of Kalymnos, Halki, and Simi, and they established warehouses in Tarpon Springs (Frantzis, 1962:54-55). In Tarpon Springs the sponge industry was a multi-million dollar industry which flourished until the 1950s when the industry declined due to the use of synthetic and plastic products. It must be stressed that the sponge industry became the focal point of Greek community building in both Tarpon Springs, Florida and Nassau, Bahamas.

Although most early Greeks of the Bahamas engaged in the sponge trade, by the 1920s they began to venture into other businesses. For example, Theophilus Mungos established a bakery in 1924. By 1927, there were 4 branches of this bakery. Also the Mungos family opened the "Parisian Store" which sold women's wear imported from Paris, including perfumes, and which catered to the lucrative tourist trade (*Nassau Tribune*, 17 Dec. 1927). Other Greeks owned fresh fruit stores and imported vegetables imported from the United States. One of these was the Californian Fruit Store owned by the Bantouvanis family. By 1930 two other fruit stores owned by Bahamian Greeks were established - the Olympia Fruit Store and The Acropolis Fruit Store ("Greek Connection" 26 March 1981; *Nassau Tribune*, 17 Dec. 1927; 10 Dec. 1930).

Another area of Greek enterprises was the restaurant business, which primarily depended on winter tourism. For example, D.N. Photiades, who had previously owned a central lunch stand, operated a fruit, vegetable, delicatessen and light lunch business called The Grand Central in 1926. (*Nassau Tribune*, 21 Aug. 1926). Other restaurants owned by Greeks included Bahamas Restaurant (operated by Steve Plakaris & Co.) and Prince George Restaurant (operated by Jim Glico) (*Nassau Guardian*, Sept.1928; *Nassau Tribune*, 8 Jan. 1930). Although sponge trade was the first attraction that led Greek immigrants to the Bahamas, the sharp increase in the size of the Greek community after World War I was largely due to individuals joining friends and family members who had immigrated earlier (the "Greek Connection", *The Tribune*, 26 March 1981).

A Profile of Present Greek Community of the Bahamas

For years, the words "Greek" and "sponge merchant" were practically synonymous in Nassau, Bahamas. In 1939, a mysterious marine disease attacked the sponge beds and virtually wiped out one of the most lucrative businesses in the Bahamas (*Bahamas Handbook*, 1970-71:55). Though some

species recovered the blight, synthetics quickly took the profitability out of fishing for natural sponge. Today the sponge industry is no longer an important source of income. You can still find sponges in souvenir shops. In addition, a few merchants still maintain small sponge businesses but only as a sideline.

During the early 1930s, the Greek Orthodox Church was built largely through the efforts of master carpenter-builder James Mosko who came from Kalymnos a little later when Italy controlled the Greek Dodecanese Islands. At present, Mosko (second generation) is considered one of the wealthiest Greek-Bahamians. The Greek church in Nassau was the first Orthodox church in the entire West Indies. Since its founding, three priests, including Father Kolyvas, the present one, have served the church. Father Kolyvas, who by profession is also a printer, came to Nassau in 1953. He became the parish priest, the Greek school teacher, and the printer who operated his printing shop from his home to supplement his income. In his words, "there was no other way to support myself and my family but to continue my printing business which I knew before I migrated to Nassau from Kalymnos, Greece." The community could not adequately support a full-time priest and his family. However, the Greek community has provided him with a home that is adjacent to the church. A number of Greeks concede that even if the priest retired, he and his wife would continue to live in the present church home. At age 79, although retired from the priesthood, Father Kolyvas continues to serve as priest of the Bahamian Greeks. For his services to the Greek community, the Greek Archdiocese of North and South America has given him an appreciation award. In addition, the Greek Government has awarded him an award for his contribution to the resistance movement against the German occupation of the Dodecanese and Greece during WWII (1941-45).

As mentioned before, the present Greek-Bahamian community emerged out of the sponge industry of the *protoporoi* (pioneers), that is, all those who came primarily from the Greek Island of Kalymnos, some however came from the Greek islands of Skopelos and Crete in the Aegean also. The nature and social structure of the present Greek-Bahamian community reflects the beginnings of the *protoporoi*, but is not a pale replica of the early sponge industry which at one time was dominated by the Greek merchants.

By the 1940s and the coming of age of the second generation, the Greeks of the Bahamas, like their counterparts in Tarpon Springs, Florida, branched out in other types of businesses. From a sponge business community, the second and third generation of Greek-Bahamians entered other areas of business and professions. As one would expect, the first generation Greek immigrants provided the economic base for their progenies who in turn branched out in other business ventures and professions. Similar to the Greek communities in the United States, the early restaurateurs and other service establishments provided the economic base for the second generation (see Moskos, 1990, Kourvetaris, 1987,

1994). Many second generation Greek-Bahamians pursued careers in other occupations and professions such as medicine, law, architecture, construction, real estate, retail stores, restaurants, jewelry and perfume shops, hotels, accounting, carpentry, and teaching. In our view, we believe Greek-Bahamians have achieved a middle and upper middle class status economically in the Bahamian society. In addition, at least a dozen or so millionaire Greeks from the U.S. and Greece live in exclusive areas of Nassau, along with other local and foreign elites. Most Greek shop owners have resort homes in the Bahamas and belong to exclusive clubs. For reasons that are unclear, these wealthy Greeks are not visible in the Greek-Bahamian community. They usually appear once or twice a year in the Greek church. In this wealthy group of foreign Greeks there are at least half a dozen wealthy Greek-Bahamians.

According to the Greek priest Father Kolyvas, the Bahamas in general and the Greek community in particular began to bloom in the 1950s. The closing of Cuba in 1959 contributed to a shift of tourism from Cuba to the Bahamas. The last 30 years or so, the Bahamas and the Greeks have prospered due primarily to American tourism. There is a fear, however, that the re-opening of Cuba with the anticipated end of Castro's regime, might hurt the economy of the Bahamas.

At present, there are approximately 320 Greeks in Nassau, Bahamas of which according to the Greek priest 80-85% are members of the local Greek Orthodox Church. This includes first, second, and third generations including mixed marriages. There are at least another 100 Greeks on other islands of the Bahamas. This includes first generation (recent immigrants from Greece), their children (second generation), and grandchildren (3rd generation). Only a few families and individuals came since the 1960s. Most second generation Greeks speak Greek but not the third generation. Similar to other ethnic groups, the Greeks of the Bahamas have married non-Greek spouses. Those who marry non-Greeks, usually bring their spouses to the Greek church. By third generation however, most marriages tend to be mixed and very few of the 3rd generation children speak Greek. Second generation parents no longer speak Greek to their children. Furthermore, the Greek language is not taught by the Greek priest to the Greek-Bahamian children. However, the liturgy at the church continues to be mostly in Greek. Only the sermon is in both Greek and English.

The first generation Greeks came primarily as workers and eventually became entrepreneurs. They opened restaurants (about 8-10), including one cafeteria and two carry-outs and Dominos Pizzas⁵.

The second generation is mostly in the professional realm 5-6 doctors, a dozen or so lawyers, about half a dozen teachers, and informants told us that many of the second and third generation Greek-Bahamian children go to the United States, Canada, and England to pursue their higher education. After they finish their education many of them return to the Bahamas.

Granting independence to the Bahamas benefited all Bahamians including the Greeks. One of our interviewees put it this way: "Prior to independence, the British ruled the Bahamas with a local ruling elite. At present if you have an idea and want to work, you are free to make money." Indeed, the Greeks and other white ethnic groups in the Bahamas are doing well especially after the Bahamas gained their independence from the British.

When Archbishop Iakovos, the primate of North and South America visited then Governor Sir Charles Dundas in the 1970s prior to the Bahamas independence, it has been reported that "the governor told the archbishop that the best element in Nassau was the Greeks" (Bahamas Handbook, 1970-71:61).

Future Prospects of the Greek-Bahamian Community

As the first generation gradually dies out, more and more second, third, and subsequent generations are replacing the Greek-Bahamian community. In our interviews and participant observation, we have come to certain conclusions about the future of the Greek-Bahamian community. Some of our observations are presented in terms of tentative propositions for further research.

1. The Greek Orthodox Church is the focal point of the Greek-Bahamian community. However, the present structure and facilities of the church do not adequately serve the needs of a growing third and younger generation of Greek-Bahamians and mixed parenthood children. The old timers are attached to Greek traditions and to the Greek language who are represented by the *protoporoi* (a few still alive) and by those Greeks who came during the 1950s, including Father Kolyvas. The young congregation and children of mixed marriages do not understand the liturgy which is almost entirely in Greek (with the exception of the gospel, the apostle, and the sermon which are in both).

2. We found no sense of strong ethnic Greek identity among the Greek-Bahamians. The most salient characteristics of the Greek-Bahamians seemed to be a pervasive entrepreneurial ethos bordered on individualism, competition, and enterprising. In the words of some Greeks who arrived in the 1960s to the Bahamas: "Greek-Bahamians are for money... They don't talk to you if you are not well off... Even relatives and members from the same family are competing."

3. Most Greek-Bahamians, both old and new, came overwhelmingly from the island of Kalymnos in the Dodecanese. Many of them are related. The new Greeks (who came here in the 1960s and later) are a minority and as a rule do not associate with old timers and their progenies, especially if the new Greeks were from different regions of Greece. We learned that many of the new Greeks who came during the 1960s to Bahamas returned to Greece. Only a small number of the new Greeks remained especially those who had relatives already

there. Some of the new arrivals came as sailors working in Greek ships in the Caribbean and decided to settle to make their living in Nassau, Bahamas.

To our question what three things stand out about the Greeks of the Bahamas, one second generation respondent put it this way: "Greeks are prosperous, law abiding, and Christian." Another second generation informant phrased it this way, "Greeks are now well accepted and integrated into the Bahamian society. The Greeks feel at home, and no serious problems exist between the Greeks and the rest of the Bahamians." we found no evidence of poor Greeks in the Bahamas.

In conclusion, we can say that Greek-Bahamian s have evolved from a limited number of original Greek sponge entrepreneurs to a full-fledged Greek-Bahamian community branching out in various other small enterprises and professions. As a rule, the early Greek immigrants started as workers and with small business. By second generation, some Greek-Bahamian s continued in the same line of business as their fathers while others branched out in other enterprises and professions. Similar patterns can be observed in other Greek communities among the Greeks of the diaspora.

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ENDNOTES

1. Eleuthera is a fairly large island in the Bahamas. In 1649, English dissidents in search of religious freedom, shipwrecked on the shores of this island, named it Eleuthera, from the Greek word "free" or "freedom".
2. There is a similar Greek Isle in the Cyclades Islands in the Aegean Sea called Andros. The Greek Andros is famous for its shipowners. The Bahamian Andros was once famous for sponges. Some of the Greeks of the Bahamas believe the first Greeks who reached the island were from Andros. However, the most likely derivation of the name was from the British colonial Governor of Massachusetts and New England, who is said to have received a grant of land in the Bahamas from the Lord Proprietor. (**Handbook**, 1965-1966 fifth edition p. 98). The name of the governor was Sir Edmund Andros.
3. A guest house is a private house approved by the city to be in part used as a place of accommodation for tourists. Guest houses provide shared bathrooms and showers, have a refrigerator, room services including clean bed sheets and towels everyday. There is no radio or T.V. in the room. There is also a local telephone. As a rule guest houses are cheaper than hotels or other accommodations.
4. Interviews and participant observations were supplemented by a visit of the father and his son Andreas to the Department of the Archives where they met Dr. Gail Saunders, the Director and a native Bahamian historian educated both in Canada and England. Dr. Saunders and her staff in the department were very helpful in providing us available historical information in the Archives concerning the Greek community of the Bahamas. A video which was used at the Pompey Museum on Bay street in Nassau for visitors was also helpful in giving us a historical background and the social structure of the Bahamian society. Dr. Gail Saunders was the major speaker in that video.
5. Five of the Greek-owned restaurants are named Lums, Grand Central, Skans Cafeteria, Coco, and Imperial. They also own and operate hotels such as the Olympia, El Greco, Parthenon (recently sold). There are 5 jewelry shops owned mostly by second generation Greeks.