

Greek Cotton Merchants in the New Orleans Mosaic

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Beneath the headlines of the mid-nineteenth-century cotton trade was a well-financed network of Greek commodities merchants operating in New Orleans and New York, part of a network established in the major ports of Europe, the Mediterranean, and India. This network played a niche role in the Southern cotton trade and a primary role in Anglo-French efforts to develop alternative supply chains to Southern cotton during the Civil War by shipping cotton from Egypt, India, and the Ottoman Empire. The network also founded the first Orthodox church community in the United States.

En retrait des manchettes du commerce du coton au milieu du XIX^e siècle se trouvait un réseau prospère de négociants grecs en matières premières qui faisaient affaire en Nouvelle-Orléans et à New York. Ces villes faisaient partie d'un réseau qui était actif dans les principaux ports d'Europe, de la Méditerranée et d'Inde. Le réseau jouait un rôle particulier dans le commerce du coton du Sud et un rôle primordial dans les efforts franco-britanniques visant à développer des chaînes d'approvisionnement de rechange pendant la guerre de Sécession en important du coton d'Égypte, d'Inde et de l'Empire ottoman. Le réseau a également été à l'origine de la première communauté de l'Église orthodoxe aux États-Unis.

New Orleans presents something of a cultural anomaly with the rest of the United States geographical and cultural region known as the “South.” As a port at the mouth of a huge inland river system, just a short sail from the Gulf of Mexico, the city was bound to be a trading center with global connections. Such places are often a cosmopolitan mosaic, wherein cultures mix as part of

the tolerance necessitated by commerce. Added to geography was history: the city and surrounding areas possessed a French and Spanish imperial legacy different from the other Southern states, combined with a large, locally rooted French Catholic ethnic element different than the rest of the South. Other primary ethnic elements in the New Orleans mix included people of African and Native American background, along with European Americans of various ethnicities.

Within this mosaic, a small yet quietly significant Greek merchant community emerged in the early and middle nineteenth century. This community was part of a globalized, politically and economically powerful Greek merchant diaspora that played a primary role in establishing the first Orthodox Christian community in the United States and an important, though understated, role in shifting cotton production to Egypt and India during the American Civil War at a time when many Southerners believed that a “cotton famine” would require Anglo-French intervention on the Confederacy’s behalf. This Greek commercial colony in New Orleans is unique, both different from and, ultimately, the bridge to the large-scale immigration of Greeks and other Southern and Eastern Europeans into the United States beginning in the 1890s and which was particularly large in the first decade of the twentieth century. Further, these globalized merchants and their kin around the world played a little-known yet vital role in developing alternative supply chains to Southern cotton. This paper seeks to bring these topics to light by leveraging both primary and secondary sources and in particular the oral histories of descendants collected by the author.

The First Greeks

Archives in the Greek Orthodox community of New Orleans claim that the first Greek resident in New Orleans was Michael Dragon, who arrived in the 1760s. At the time, what is now Greece was either under the rule of the Ottoman Empire or the Republic of Venice.¹ He served in the Spanish army during their intervention in the American Revolution, perhaps the only verifiable Greek who served in the conflict.² In a manner not atypical of New Orleans “whites” of the era, he married a local woman of French and Native American (or,

¹ Charles Moskos, Jr., “Greek American Studies,” in *The Greek American Community in Transition*, ed. Harry J. Psomiades and Alice Scourby (Pella Publishing, 1982), 35.

² Alexander Billinis, “New Orleans Stories: A Chat with Vicky Dimitry, Descendant of the First Hydriot in America,” *Cosmosphilly*, 16 July 2023, <https://cosmosphilly.com/vicky-dimitry-descendant-first-hydriot-america/>.

more likely, African) descent. Her ancestry would become an issue for her descendants in the 1850s South.

Dragon's daughter married Andrea Dimitry, a native of the Greek commercial island of Hydra. By the time Dimitry set foot in New Orleans, the Greek merchant fleet, centered on his native island of Hydra, had become a principal carrier of bulk goods throughout the Mediterranean and Black Sea basins, as well as on the Danube River.³ By 1803 he was writing to family back on the island of Hydra talking about his establishment in New Orleans and his marriage to the daughter of a fellow "Romios" (Greek).⁴ Andrea Dimitry distinguished himself in the Battle of New Orleans, and his son Alexander Dimitry would also do so in Louisiana state, the United States, and the Confederate service.⁵

The Dragon–Dimitry family converted to Catholicism, which was the state religion during the periods of French and Spanish rule, but they remained in contact with Greece and in some cases married Greeks. For example, Alexander Dimitry's niece married a British-born Greek named Paul Pandely, who established a plantation in the New Orleans region. His son George became an assistant alderman in New Orleans, and several people tried to prevent him from serving, claiming he had African heritage. Pandely resigned and filed suit for slander in what became known as "The Great Pandely Case," gaining national attention for the question of race, "passing," and rights.⁶ Pandely won the suit but without damages.

The Cotton Merchants

Greeks, or perhaps more precisely Greek Orthodox Christian subjects of the Ottoman and Venetian Empires, had begun a remarkable commercial revival by the late 1700s, which helped to provide the financial and moral support for the emergence of the Greek state in the 1820s. In a manner not atypical of politically and culturally repressed minorities, the Greeks and other Orthodox

³ Gelina Harlaftis, *A History of Greek Owned Shipping* (Routledge, 2015), 9.

⁴ *150th Anniversary Commemorative Album* (Holy Trinity Greek Orthodox Cathedral, New Orleans, 2017), 37. It is worth noting that Romios in this context means Greek or Byzantine Orthodox. At the time, Greece – Hellas – did not exist.

⁵ Interview with Maggie Spiros Maag, curator of the archives of Holy Trinity Greek Orthodox Cathedral, New Orleans, Louisiana, 30 January 2020; Billinis, "New Orleans Stories: A Chat with Vicky Dimitry."

⁶ It is worth mentioning that, in contrast to the early twentieth century when southern Europeans may not have been socially classified as white, the Greek ancestry of Pandely, Dragon, and Dimitry was never questioned in terms of whiteness. "End of a Remarkable Trial," *New York Herald*, 5 March 1854.



Nicholas Benachi was a prominent Chios-born merchant who worked for the global mercantile firm Ralli and Co. in New Orleans. The first Orthodox services were held in his home in 1864, and he was also a cofounder of the First Greek Orthodox Church in New Orleans, Holy Trinity, in 1866. (Photo courtesy of James Derbes, former owner of the Benachi House)

subjects of the Ottoman Empire turned to commerce for agency and began a period of remarkable commercial growth.⁷ This included both a merchant marine resurgence, centered initially on the islands of Hydra (Dimitry's homeland), Spetses, and Psara, as well as a growth in commodities merchant houses trading in the Ottoman, Russian, and Austrian Empires.⁸ On the commodities merchant side, no island could match the reach of the island of Chios, which by the end of the Napoleonic Wars possessed a network spanning the Mediterranean and Black Sea basins, along with a strong presence in the British market.⁹ Greek expertise in the bulk carrying trades, and the role of Greeks in local cotton production and distribution in the Ottoman Empire, naturally made the Southern entrepot of New Orleans, America's greatest cotton market, of particular interest as Greek merchant concerns expanded globally. By 1861, several Greek commercial houses were in New Orleans.¹⁰

⁷ See generally Trajan Stoianovich, "The Conquering Balkan Orthodox Merchant," *Journal of Economic History* 20, no. 2 (June 1960): 235.

⁸ Stoianovich, "The Conquering Balkan Orthodox Merchant," 275.

⁹ "The Greek Merchants," *New York Times*, 20 October 1855.

¹⁰ The New Orleans city directories show twelve Greek businesses in 1861. *Gardner's New*

They worked with Greek commercial houses in New York, Britain, and France, involved on the import and finance side of the cotton trade.¹¹

The Greek merchant in mid-nineteenth-century New Orleans was usually a scion or relative of a major Greek commercial house, originating from the large Greek island of Chios where a merchant aristocracy had built a global network of commodities merchants.¹² Whereas the twentieth-century mass immigrant might be barely literate in Greek and with generally little to no knowledge of English, the 1860s merchant would generally know several languages and if not English then certainly the French ubiquitous in Europe at the time.

The merchant houses were at their zenith in the late 1850s to the 1870s, right about the same time “King Cotton” was at its height. The several Greek houses included families with large, interlocking relations by blood, marriage, or baptism such as Benachi, Ralli, Negroponte, Agelasto, Fachiri, Rodochanachi, and Botassi.¹³ Nearly all these families were from Chios. New Orleans was a spoke in a global mercantile hub dominated by families from the same island, almost always family members or close kin.¹⁴ In Europe and the Mediterranean and Black Sea littorals, they had established what amounted to vertically integrated operations combining export, import, and shipping. Greek merchant houses controlled much of the Russian Empire’s outgoing grain trade from Odessa, including exporting on Greek merchant ships and import agents at ports of entry, such as Marseilles in France or Trieste in the Austrian Empire.¹⁵ They also developed a growing foothold in New York, particularly active in the “Cotton Triangle” trade, where cotton from New Orleans and other Southern ports might be transhipped via New York to British and French ports.¹⁶

While the Greek New Orleans merchants’ primary focus was cotton, other Southern export staples, particularly sugar, also filled their warehouses. “The business of [these merchants],” to paraphrase President Coolidge’s iconic remark about America, “is business.” The Greek merchant community also actively leveraged the Cotton Exchange in New York, and many of the same

Orleans Directory for 1861 (New Orleans, 1861). Harlaftis, *Greek-Owned Shipping*, 7.

¹¹ S.B. Williams, *The Greek Community in Liverpool: A History 1822–2022* (World of Creative Dreams, 2023), 15. *Gore’s Directory for Liverpool and Its Environs. 1860* (Liverpool, 1860).

¹² Michael Contopoulos, *The Greek Community of New York City: Early Years to 1910* (Aristide D. Caratzas, 1992), 31. “The Greek Merchants,” *New York Times*, 20 October 1855.

¹³ *Gardner’s New Orleans Directory for 1861*.

¹⁴ “The Greek Merchants,” *New York Times*, 20 October 1855.

¹⁵ Scott Reynolds Nelson, *Oceans of Grain* (Basic Books, 2022), 61.

¹⁶ Contopoulos, *Greek Community of New York City*, 40.

family and “houses” could be found in Manhattan.¹⁷ The Greeks’ parallel presence in New York is another reminder of the key role of New York City in the Southern cotton system.

No discussion of the mid-nineteenth-century South can or should avoid the central question of enslavement. Of the Greek community in 1861 numbering one or two hundred, there were some slaveowners, and Paul Pandely, as a plantation owner, certainly owned enough slaves to operate a plantation.¹⁸ Further, there are many accounts of the Dimitry family owning slaves.¹⁹ The co-founder of the Greek Orthodox Church of New Orleans, Nicholas Benachi owned two household slaves.²⁰ The relatively late arrival of many of the merchants (late 1850s) and their merchant activities would make them less likely to have slaves.²¹

Though the Chiot merchants profited directly from the cotton economy based on the horrific suffering of enslaved peoples, some Chiots may have been reluctant to own slaves given the very recent and proximate experience of the Chios massacre during the Greek War of Independence in 1822, where the Turks enslaved approximately one-third of the island’s population. Every family lost relatives to the massacre or to enslavement.²² Further, though Greek merchants actively participated in creating alternative cotton sources to the American South, the motive was the business opportunity rather than any latent abolitionism.

It is worth considering the reception afforded to the Greek merchants in America. Late nineteenth and early twentieth-century Greek immigrants would endure substantial prejudice in America, including riots and pogroms.²³

¹⁷ “The Greek Merchants,” *New Orleans Times Picayune*, 7 January 1872. Contopoulos, *Greek Community of New York City*, 41.

¹⁸ Interview with Maggie Maag, 23 July 2025. Paul Pandely is listed as a slaveowner with two slaves in the 1850 Slave Census in Orleans Parish; US Bureau of the Census, “Schedule 2. – Slave Inhabitants of the City of New Orleans,” 25 October 1850, <https://archive.org/details/populationschedu0245unix/page/n6/mode/2up>.

¹⁹ Interview with Vicky Dimitry, 23 March 2023.

²⁰ Interview with James Derbes, former owner of the Benachi House, 21 March 2023.

²¹ Parker Agelasto, descendant of New Orleans antebellum (and postbellum) cotton merchant Alexander Michael Agelasto, did not find any record of slave ownership by his ancestor. This also corresponds with family oral history. Interview with Parker Agelasto, Richmond, Virginia, 23 July 2025.

²² David Brewer, *The Greek War of Independence* (Overlook Press, 2001), 162.

²³ For example, in Omaha, Nebraska, there was an anti-Greek pogrom in 1909. Helen Papanikolas, a Utah-born Greek American historian, writes in several books about the deep prejudice faced by Greek immigrants in Utah and elsewhere in the American West in the early twentieth century, as well as in her article, “Toil and Rage in a New Land: The Greek Immigrants in Utah,” *Utah Historical Quarterly* 38, no. 2 (Spring 1970): 112.

It is also worth noting that another group of Southern Europeans – Italians – endured the largest mass lynching in American history in New Orleans in 1891.²⁴ As is often the case in the American experience, the merchants' wealth and social class served them in good stead, as did Americans' identification with classical Greece and the relatively recent memory of Greece's 1821–29 war of independence, an American cause célèbre. In that war, Americans specifically identified Greeks as “white” and “Christian” and, therefore, deserving of assistance against the Muslim, “non-white” Turks.²⁵ That said, the 1855 *New York Times* article “praising” the Greeks' commercial acumen is not above stereotyping them for a lack of trustworthiness and honesty, typical of “tribes with oriental blood.” The message was equivocal; acceptance yet the potential for ethnic or cultural bigotry and “otherness,” in a muted, lesser form, remained.²⁶ The tone would grow less muted as the nineteenth moved to the twentieth century.²⁷

The Civil War and the Partial Exodus

Senator James Henry Hammond boasted that England would collapse without Southern cotton, ending with a flourish, “Cotton is King.”²⁸ During the American Civil War period, many of the Greek houses scaled down or closed operations, sensing a loss of business opportunities or isolation if the North imposed a blockade – or if the South voluntarily placed an embargo on cotton exports.²⁹ Plenty of the New Orleans merchant class believed in using a self-embargo to force recognition, though far more spent the months post-secession frantically selling cotton to New York or Europe prior to the establishment of

²⁴ Brigid Katz, “New Orleans Apologies for 1891 Lynching of Italian-Americans,” *Smithsonian*, 15 April 2019, <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/smart-news/new-orleans-apologizes-1891-lynching-italian-americans-180971959/>.

²⁵ Subtleties of race and identity in the Balkans were not part of the discussion. Rather, the Americans of the early mid-nineteenth century placed a construct on the conflict. Maureen Connors Santelli, *The Greek Fire: American-Ottoman Relations and Democratic Fervor in the Age of Revolutions* (Cornell University Press, 2020), 8.

²⁶ Parker Agelasto recalls an ancestor, A.M. Agelasto's son, an Olympic tennis player, being drawn in caricature as swarthy with an exaggerated hook nose as part of an article highlighting his tennis skills for a particular match. Interview with Parker Agelasto. “Agelasto Plays in Splendid Form and is Favorite for Championship,” *Atlanta Journal Constitution*, 6 August 1902.

²⁷ Papanikolas, “Toil and Rage,” 112.

²⁸ United States Congress, *Congressional Globe*, 35th Congress, 1st Session (Washington, 1858), Appendix, 68.

²⁹ Scott P. Marler, “An Abiding Faith in Cotton: The Merchant Capitalist Community of New Orleans, 1860–1862,” *Civil War History* 54, no. 3 (September 2008): 250.

a blockade.³⁰

Faced with a Federal blockade, many of the Greek merchants relocated either directly to Alexandria, Egypt, or India or did so via their family firms in Liverpool and Manchester. Greeks were already well established in the Egyptian cotton trade, controlling, even in 1839, about one-third of the market.³¹ In particular, and crucially, they brought in the latest British cotton gins to Egypt. The Ralli company, with New Orleans operations in addition to a network that spread from Britain to India, was particularly active.³² Many merchants formerly resident in New Orleans in the late 1850s were living in Alexandria or India during the Civil War, no doubt putting their expertise in the largest and most technically and financially enabled cotton market to work to develop Egyptian cotton for the British and European factories starved of the fiber. The numbers tell an important story. In 1860, Egypt exported a bit over 104,000 bales, while the 1865 figure was 522,300 bales, a five-fold increase.³³ Greeks controlled a major portion of this growing market. India also geared up production for the British market and there too Greek houses were active, though their role was not as prominent as in Egypt.³⁴

The trajectory of Alexander Michael Agelasto is in many ways emblematic of the Greek New Orleanians' reaction to the Civil War. After New Orleans fell to Federal forces, Agelasto left via New York to Liverpool in 1863, making his way back to his Greek birthplace, Syros, where he married Polyxene Mavrogordato who, like Alexander, was a scion of several Chiot merchant dynasties, and they decamped to India in 1865, where Alexander worked in the cotton trade.³⁵ His brother, Nicholas, left family operations in Marseilles to work in Alexandria.³⁶ We will revert to Alexander Michael Agelasto in the postbellum era.

While it would certainly be hyperbole to suggest that Anglo-French

³⁰ Marler, "An Abiding Faith in Cotton," 250.

³¹ Sven Beckert, *Empire of Cotton: A Global History* (Vintage Books, 2015), 29.

³² Alexander Kitroeff, *The Greeks and the Making of Modern Egypt* (University of Cairo Press, 2019), 41.

³³ Eli Ginzberg, "The Economics of British Neutrality during the American Civil War," *Agricultural History* 10, no. 4 (October 1936): 150.

³⁴ The Ralli office in New York alerted its affiliate in Bombay about the need to buy cotton in response to the secession crisis. Vikram Doctor, "Ralli Brothers: The history remains as a reminder of the entrepreneurial abilities of economically shattered Greeks," *Economic Times*, 2 August 2015. The Greeks' commercial intelligence service, complete with their own "code books," were no doubt actively sending intelligence and asking for instructions. Interview with Dimitri Petrocochino, Athens, Greece, 21 March 2025.

³⁵ Interview with Parker Agelasto, Richmond, Virginia, 17 June 2024.

³⁶ Interview with Parker Agelasto, Richmond, Virginia, 17 June 2024.



Alexander Michael Agelasto, 1872. Agelasto was born in Syros in 1833 of Chiot parents who survived the massacre. He worked in New York and New Orleans, leaving New Orleans after the Union capture of the city to work with his family's company in India until the close of the Civil War, when he returned to New Orleans. He co-founded the Memphis Cotton Exchange, eventually settling in Norfolk where he continued to work with the far-flung Chiot merchant network in the cotton and jute trades. (Photo courtesy of Parker Agelasto)

intervention in the American Civil War was avoided solely by alternate cotton supplies in Egypt and India, or that the Greeks' role in the development of these alternatives was instrumental in thwarting recognition of the Confederacy, the key role of these expanded alternative supplies and the central role of these commercial Greeks in cotton procurement at this crucial time merits due consideration and substantial weight. While the question of cotton supplies in the outcome of the Civil War has been a subject of debate among historians, the role of the Greeks in the process has largely been overlooked. In terms of the numbers, though, by 1865 India and Egypt managed to cover a substantial portion of the former American exports.³⁷ Further, both markets, as well as Brazil and the Ottoman Empire (itself an area with a large Greek population and active merchant presence) would be active players in the postwar global cotton market. The era of American cotton monopoly was over, and Greek merchants would be active throughout the global cotton supply chain.³⁸ In particular, the Greeks realized incredible wealth in the Egyptian, Indian, and Ottoman cotton trades, controlling most of the supply chain from finance to brokerage, shipping, and importing.³⁹ This would continue in the postbellum

³⁷ Ginzberg, "Economics of British Neutrality," 150.

³⁸ Sven Beckert, "Emancipation and Empire: Reconstructing the Worldwide Web of Cotton Production in the Age of the American Civil War," *American Historical Review* 109, no. 5 (2004): 1406.

³⁹ For example, in Egypt, Greek grocers in Egyptian villages kept the local peasantry in a type

era, with Greeks ensconced throughout the cotton production supply chain on four continents.

Postbellum in New Orleans

Not all the New Orleans Greeks left when Louisiana seceded. Further, dozens of Greek New Orleanians answered the call of their adopted country and joined Louisiana units of the Confederate Army.⁴⁰ The exact number is difficult to ascertain due to legal citizenship and the degree of flexibility for the term “Greek.” Nicholas Benachi, of Ralli, Benachi, and Co., was one of the most prominent merchants who remained and continued with his merchant activities. Union forces overran the city and immediate environs rather early in the war, and many of the remaining Greek merchants were viewed with suspicion by Union Army General Benjamin Butler, who disliked “foreigners” and was himself hated by the local population.⁴¹

In one case, sugar belonging to M. Covas, a Greek merchant, was impounded by General Butler despite the intervention of the Greek, British, and French consuls, as the alien in question was thought to be purchasing arms for the Confederates abroad.⁴² As Greek consul, Nicholas Benachi was involved in the proceedings. General Butler’s antforeign sentiment, together with upriver opportunities, also resulted in a shift of Greek merchant activity north to St. Louis, where another Greek consulate was established in 1864, the fourth Greek consulate in the United States.⁴³ Butler’s removal eased the pressure on the merchant community.

With the end of the war in 1865, thoughts again turned to the establishment of a church for the still considerable “Greek” Orthodox community. Up until that time, there had been no Orthodox Christian house of worship anywhere in the United States, despite a trickle of Balkan, Russian, and Syrian/Lebanese Orthodox into various American cities. In 1866, Nicholas

of debt servitude which helped to tie them to their jobs laboring in the cotton fields. Kitroeff, *Greeks and the Making of Modern Egypt*, 44.

⁴⁰ Multiple sources cite Greek soldiers in the Confederate Army. Exact numbers are hard to come by because some Greek names, particularly from certain islands, could pass as Italian and many Greeks were not born in Greece or held Greek nationality. Dean Kalymniou, “Greeks who whistle dixie,” *Neos Kosmos*, 8 December 2014, <https://neoskosmos.com/en/2014/12/08/dialogue/opinion/greeks-who-whistle-dixie/>.

⁴¹ Correspondence between Major General B.F. Butler and foreign consuls protesting General Order No. 41, 11 June 1862, Holy Trinity Greek Orthodox Archives, New Orleans.

⁴² Correspondence between General Butler and foreign consuls.

⁴³ Vocha-History, “Habemus Consulem: the first Greek consul at St. Louis,” *STLGreeks*, 9 October 2016, <https://stlgreeks.wordpress.com/2016/10/09/habemus-consulem-the-first-greek-consul-at-st-louis/>.

Benachi, together with a Serbian coffeehouse owner Michael Draskovich and Constantine Kililis, a Greek from the Ottoman Empire, established the Holy Trinity Church.⁴⁴ This marked the first time a consecrated Orthodox Church existed in the United States. A few Orthodox churches existed in Alaska, but this territory was not purchased by America from Russia until 1867. It also followed proper Orthodox tradition that a Greek community required a church as a spiritual reference point.⁴⁵ All Greek communities of any appreciable size had a church, and often, as in this case where the community was multiethnic, accommodation was made by having liturgy celebrated in Liturgical Greek and Old Church Slavonic.

New Orleans geographer Richard Campanella, in his book on the urban and cultural geographies of New Orleans, provides a picture of what might later be called a “Greektown” in New Orleans.⁴⁶ While his figures are from the twentieth century, Greeks, Serbs, and Syrians of various socioeconomics settled in the area around the Greek Orthodox church in a pattern that started 50 years prior. This was typical of Greek immigrant and commercial enclaves either in Europe/Mediterranean or in the United States. A church was a key community reference point, not only for religious services but also for community and business activities, so its proximity to home, particularly in a pre-automobile era, was crucial.

The Greek community of New Orleans in the 1870s recovered from the Civil War exodus. Many returned to the city, such as Alexander Michael Agelasto with his wife and growing family. They settled in the vicinity of the Greek Orthodox church along Esplanade Avenue, minutes from Benachi’s home and Holy Trinity Church.⁴⁷ The community remained multilingual, supported by large donors such as Benachi and Agelasto, and the efforts of dedicated priests, such as the Bulgarian-born Father Misael.⁴⁸ A trickle of immigrants arrived. Nicholas Benachi remained the grand old man of the community, one of the merchants who stayed during and after the Civil War. The *New Orleans Times Picayune*, writing in 1872, commented on these Greek

⁴⁴ “1866 Organizing Document,” *150th Anniversary Commemorative Album*, 39.

⁴⁵ Contopoulos, *Greek Community of New York City*, 46.

⁴⁶ It is worth noting that Campanella does not use the term “Greektown.” Richard Campanella, *Geographies of New Orleans: Urban Fabrics before the Storm* (Center for Louisiana Studies, 2006), 288.

⁴⁷ Interview with Parker Agelasto, 17 June 2024.

⁴⁸ It is worth noting that Nicholas Benachi was related to the mayor of Athens, Emmanouil Benachi, and to the Benachis who were a large presence in Egyptian cotton. The business network was a family network with its own way of sharing market and political intelligence. Ματούλα Τομαρα-Σιδερη (Matoula Tomara-Sideri), *Ο Αιγυπτιακός Ελληνισμός: Στους Δρομους του βαμπακιου* [*Egyptian Hellenism: On the Roads of Cotton*], (Kerkyra Publishing, 2022), 19.

merchants' "influence in commercial and financial circles" which made them "respected by the boldest of operators."⁴⁹ The article continued, quoting from the New York *Commercial and Financial Chronicle*:

The influence of the Greeks at New York and Liverpool in the markets for cotton, grain, and other produce is so great and constant that a few words about their country and themselves may not be out of place ... They furnish some of the most daring sailors of the Mediterranean. The growth of the merchant marine has been rapid and astonishing ... [with] 5000 vessels of which 1154 are seagoing and 30 are steamers [totaling] 207,404 tons. Greek [merchant] houses abound in nearly all the Mediterranean ports, and also at Liverpool, London, the French Atlantic ports, Bombay, Calcutta, Rio, our [US] Southern ports, and we have some eight or ten in [New York].⁵⁰

Contemporary sources clearly indicate that the Greeks played a key role in local New Orleans cotton trade prior to the war and that they had a major role in the global cotton trade and shipping. Beyond their residences' proximity, the merchants tended to office close to one another. There were nine cotton merchants in operation from 1871 to 1876 in New Orleans, all within a few minutes' walk.⁵¹ Interestingly this mirrors the way the Chios merchants operated elsewhere, such as in London, where most of the Greek merchants officed in Finsbury Circus.⁵² They were family, friends, competitors, all with profit in mind, tempered by a sense of mutual loyalty.⁵³

Further, the Greek merchants began to expand into real estate and intermarried with local prominent families. They also moved northward up the Mississippi River, where Alexander Michael Agelasto in particular played a central role in the Memphis Cotton Exchange.⁵⁴ City directories from 1872

⁴⁹ "The Greek Merchants," *New Orleans Times Picayune*, 7 January 1872.

⁵⁰ "The Greek Merchants," *New Orleans Times Picayune*, 7 January 1872.

⁵¹ Parker Camp Agelasto, "Agelasto Family," presentation to "New Orleans: Hellenic Shipping/Cotton Merchants, and the 1st Greek Orthodox Community" panel, East Mediterranean Business Culture Alliance (EMBCA), 22 June 2025, YouTube, <https://www.youtube.com/live/R9GJGHmsBI>.

⁵² Timotheos Catsiyannis, *The Greek Community of London* (Nikos Smyrnis, Ltd., 1993), 55.

⁵³ Beyond the family and baptismal relations fostering loyalty, Parker Agelasto believes that the Chiots' experience of the 1822 massacre, where the island and its population was for all practical purposes destroyed, played a key role in fostering an even heightened sense of group solidarity. Interview with Parker Agelasto, 23 July 2025.

⁵⁴ Interview with Parker Agelasto, 17 June 2024.

show that Agelasto and other associates had offices in the Memphis area.⁵⁵ Several Greek merchants established themselves in St. Louis, and the city had enough commercial and local Greek activity for the government of Greece to establish a consulate there in 1864. The first consul was Constantine P. Ralli, a relative of Alexander Michael and, like him, born on the island of Syros from Chios parents.⁵⁶

Greek New Orleans in a Larger Immigration Context

The period of Greek mass immigration to the United States did not begin until the 1890s, and the next established Greek Orthodox churches would be a congregation in New York and another in Chicago, both starting in 1892. The new immigrants were largely agricultural peasantry, generally uneducated and at times with barely more than a few dollars to their name when they arrived. Like most immigrants who first came to America's shores – and to a degree in contrast to their merchant compatriots – they faced huge obstacles, financial, legal, and cultural. Though a wide socioeconomic gulf separated the largely rural peasants from the merchants who arrived several decades before, the quest for personal and financial agency would be the same. The story is a familiar one for millions of immigrants from all parts of Europe, and eventually all parts of the world, to the United States. This is the standard American immigrant narrative, one that is common to most Greek Americans. New Orleans and New York would be transformed by this later mass Greek immigration, which thereafter defined both cities' Greek identity. The Greek American narrative now became one of poor rural immigrants climbing the socioeconomic ladder to reach the "American Dream"; this previous wave faded into obscurity in favor of the mass immigration narrative, one impacted, moreover, by considerable legal and cultural bigotry.

What makes the New Orleans Greek story so interesting is that it is a largely unknown back story to a commercial and immigration narrative. The headlines of European immigration to America and the cotton economy are well known, yet headline stories often have a significant subtext. This is the value of studying the Greek commercial community of nineteenth-century New Orleans. It provides an additional narrative to the conventional Greek immigration story, rather than an alternative. We learn about a world

⁵⁵ According to the 1872 city directory, A.M. Agelasto and Demosthenes Paterachi had offices. *Boyle & Chapman's Memphis City Directory, Embracing the City Record, a General Directory of the Citizens, and a Classified Business Directory for the Years 1872 and 1873* (Memphis, 1872), Shelby County Register of Deeds, <https://search.register.shelby.tn.us/cityimage.php>.

⁵⁶ Vocha-History, "Habemus Consulem."

of successful, global, and largely endogamous, island-based, family-owned enterprises carving out their own agency in the rough economic and political world of nineteenth-century capitalism and also setting the foundations for a community of Orthodox Christians in the United States proud both of their faith and origins, and of the country they then called home. Stories need not be the headlines to be relevant to a reader's understanding of the past. Indeed, often fine print is both more interesting and more important.

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