

A Downtown With Greek Roots

By Julie Strauss Bettinger

"I think I found your grandfather."

I didn't let the words from my friend's e-mail sink in at first. Call it self preservation, but I had been chasing down leads on this man for most of my life and I just didn't want to set myself up for another disappointment.

By now I knew he was a runaway, a compulsive gambler and he had stolen an underage girl away from her family. He was uneducated and had numerous aliases. It would be just like him to slip away again.

I clicked on the computer file and confronted the contents. There he was...one of about a thousand passengers, many of them Greek immigrants like himself, headed for Ellis Island. He was already hiding under an alias.

Gotcha.

Theodore Alexandros "Alec" Stratas – or at least I think that was his name – had just spent eight days at sea traveling third class on the S.S. Lorraine. Top speed 20 knots. About 10 years old, Alec could neither read nor write in his native Greek language and spoke no English. He had gained passage to America through an uncle and his traveling companions were his 26-year-old aunt and her 59-year old father.

He was New York City bound.

It was December of 1902 and the temperature at the mouth of Ellis Island was about a third of the 60 degrees Alec had left days before in Patmos. And the murky water at the port where the Lorraine docked was nothing like the sapphire seas of his native isle. He bit his lower lip in determination, pressed his small satchel next to his side and awaited his future.

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Stories about my paternal grandfather sparked my curiosity from an early age. The man I remember only from Sunday morning donuts-and-coffee visits after church until age six was a favorite topic in family tales. I knew he started out with nothing, but at one point owned an entire block of prime real estate next to Florida's capitol – and he paid cash for it.

This Greek immigrant was a part of Tallahassee's story, and, in many ways, of early America's. It's the story about how a relatively large Greek community helped build the city's core. Virtually all of Tallahassee's early restaurants and hotels were owned and operated by Greek immigrants, from around 1912 to 1950, the majority coming from the tiny island of Patmos.

An informal apprentice-made-owner career track gave Greeks a stronghold in Tallahassee's food service business, which lasted until the end of World War II. At least 80 percent of the restaurants in the early 1940s were Greek-owned.

Miami has its Hispanics; Jersey its Italians. There were pioneers that preceded these concentrations of culture, and my grandfather was one of the Greek pioneers in early Tallahassee.

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Young Alec's fisherman father had impressed upon him the importance of making it in America. There was no future for him on the tiny island of Patmos, where whitewashed stone houses cling to rugged hillsides under an expanse of blue skies.

Once used as a place of banishment for criminals and religious troublemakers, in 95 AD, St. John the Apostle was exiled there. During his time in the sacred cave, or Holy Grotto, St. John composed the Book of Revelation and the fourth Gospel.

After his death, the isle of Patmos became a place of worship and pilgrimage, but suffered frequent raids by Arabs and pirates. A Monastery built at the site of the sacred cave was fortified to withstand the attacks and the island enjoyed periods of wealth. It served as a commercial center over the centuries, but later came under Turkish rule and was stymied.

The Greek Revolution ending in 1832 had gained the independence of Greece, but did not include the 12 (Dodecanese) islands as part of the newly built state, leaving Patmos in limbo. Like its neighboring islands, this 21 sq. mile jewel, once called "The Jerusalem of the Aegean," languished in poverty.

America – the land of the free – had become the hope for many of the families to preserve their proud heritage. Standing in line, waiting to depart the ship, that hope now weighed like a huge sack of flour on young Alec's shoulders.

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Most of Tallahassee's early Greeks were teenagers when they boarded the big ships, with heads full of dreams of America and hearts promised to child brides. They crossed the Mediterranean Sea, then sailed the huge expanse of the North Atlantic Ocean. It was the early part of the century, before big jets and mass media. The majority were uneducated, even by their homeland standards, making the English language even more confusing.

After landing on Ellis Island, their names were recorded with various spellings on the ship manifests, as clerks struggled to understand their alien tongue. Within hours, they had boarded a train headed for a farmland in Alabama – honoring their promise of two years' worth of work to pay back their travel fare to a fellow Greek. The debt settled, they sought their fortune at the next stop – a small town called Tallahassee.

This is the ancestral tale of many Tallahassee Greek Americans – the surnames of Patronis, Petrandis, Joanos and Camechis among them. Most of Tallahassee's early Greeks are either deceased or long retired, their once bustling restaurants – the Busy Bee, F&T and Venetia included – replaced by upscale downtown eateries or offices. Only a few remnants remain. Northwest Florida restaurants with Mediterranean roots include Georgio's, Torrey Grille and the Silver Slipper in Tallahassee; Angelo's in Panacea and Capt. Anderson's in Panama City. The children and grandchildren of the first generation have moved away from food service, choosing fields such as real estate, music and law instead.

Still, there's an unspoken connection between us Greek descendents. Like we're part of a secret club, but don't feel worthy of membership. We know what's in our DNA – but wonder if we could possibly have the same level of courage and perseverance of those early Greeks.

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Compact for his age, Alec found himself quickly lost in a sea of bodies on the streets of New York. The horse-drawn carriages, raised rails and walls of buildings assaulted his senses. For the first time in his life, he felt fear. He reached for the sleeve of his aunt's coat, so as not to be swallowed up by it all.

Alec first met his uncle at his dry goods store below the flat where they would live. "Here, take this coal upstairs to the stove," was his gruff greeting. It was the first blow to the promise of education and a future for Alec.

While carrying out the duties of slave labor for the uncle, Alec managed to catch on to this strange tongue being spoken around him. Remembering his father's expectation, he paid

attention to his surroundings and studied the people. He quickly figured out that there were some people he could trust, and one of them was a New York City cop.

Alec's situation was something the cop had seen before. With the promise of freedom and a future, parents in other parts of the world readily handed over their children to distant relatives or friends coming to America. The children were told they must work off their fare, and not knowing the language, the law or anyone in their new country, they often ended up in abusive situations.

Some of them, like Alec, were tougher than others. And it was that tenacity and perseverance that eventually won over the officer's heart.

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When Tallahassee's Greek forefathers left Patmos, the island was in a Depression. It was the lower class looking for opportunity that fled. Many were illiterate because education was unavailable to them.

"It wasn't the mainstream leadership of the community," said Jimmy Joanos, a second generation Greek American. "It was just a group of young men who realized there was no opportunity for them on the island. They came here to live the dream."

For many, the route was from New York's Ellis Island to a plantation property called Malbis (near Mobile), Alabama, which was settled in 1906 by Greek immigrants Jason Malbis and William Pappageorge.

As a boy, Malbis – then Antonios Markopoulos – was brought to a Greek monastery by his father and dedicated to God. He lived as a monk for several years, but felt a calling to a more active practice of his faith. As young people from Greece started emigrating to the U.S., the young monk decided to follow in order to teach them the principles of the Gospel and how to apply those principles in their daily lives – especially in their work. He landed in America at the turn of the century and went to live in Chicago, where he had his name legally changed to Jason Malbis.

The vision that guided Malbis was for his fellow countrymen to live and work together on a parcel of land – owning everything in common, like the disciples of the Jesus.

Shortly after his arrival in the U.S., he and William Pappageorge set out to find that land. After six months of searching in Illinois, Missouri, Oklahoma, Texas and Mississippi, they landed in Mobile.

Broke and exhausted, they planned only to rest for a few weeks before moving on. While touring the area, though, Malbis received a vision that they were to purchase a specific tract. They scraped together money to buy 120 acres and started farming it. Despite nearly starving to death, Malbis and his companions stayed committed and slowly other Greeks joined them. Three years later they purchased another 600 acres.

At the start of WWI in 1917, the "Greek brotherhood," as it was called, started canning fruits and vegetables and shipping to Chicago, New York and Boston. Next, they established a successful bakery and then a plant for processing and manufacturing resin and resin by-products. Later they added an ice plant and a power plant. In every instance they expanded without having adequate funds or knowledge, but always succeeded.

The self-sustaining plantation was the ideal stopover for many newcomer Greeks who could help toil the land. Those who liked the communal life stayed, while others with entrepreneurial aspirations moved on.

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When Alec was nearing the age of 13, the New York cop told him about a colony of Greeks that he'd heard about in Alabama. Did he have any relatives there that he could live with?

After some investigation Alec found an aunt in Montgomery who was willing to take him – her people were making their future with restaurant jobs, all Greek-owned. Alec could learn the trade, move up in the business and eventually have his own restaurant. No formal education was required.

And he was in luck – a new wave of Greek immigrants were coming through New York City in a matter of weeks and would be traveling by train to Montgomery. His aunt would send word.

That old sense of fear welled up inside Alec. Could he trust this aunt or the people she was sending?

He was willing to risk it. Alec knew his uncle would forbid him from leaving, so he packed up his satchel and, with the officer's help, stowed away in a horse-drawn carriage on its way to meet the ship.

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Montgomery, Alabama had seen its first Greek immigrant in 1884 with the arrival of Alex Cassimus. He and his brothers, George and Marcus, had been sailors on British ships. They were working as seamen on blockade runners supplying guns to the confederacy. When the war ended, they landed in Mobile and headed north, each choosing a different area to settle.

Alex's brother, George, landed a job in Birmingham's fledgling fire department until he saved enough money to open a short order restaurant. His business venture laid the groundwork for a tradition of food service by Greek-Americans in Birmingham that has continued for over a century.

By 1910 there were 302 Greek residents in Birmingham, making it one of the largest Greek communities in the southern United States. Montgomery, 90 miles south of Birmingham, also became a magnet, while Mobile – along the bay – grew with the expansion of Malbis Plantation.

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Alec's new life in Montgomery was more like what he had been promised. The food service business required long hours, but he could see the path of progress. Dish washer – kitchen help – waiter – manager – owner. And if he wanted to specialize, he could be a chef.

It was in Montgomery that Alec started to understand his roots. Greeks did *everything* together. They shared homes, meals, possessions and businesses. They even had their own church.

Orphan though he was, Alec was Greek and that's all that mattered in this community. He belonged.

Child labor laws were just beginning and had not yet caught on in the south, so Alec worked as many hours as the restaurant owners would allow. He listened intently to the conversations of patrons and whenever possible, inserted himself in them. Especially when important people of the community were involved.

Getting to know Alec at one of the restaurants, a non-Greek banker grew fond of him. He wanted a better life for the lad and offered to adopt him. But the New York experience had accelerated Alec's manhood and he turned down the offer.

The banker continued to help Alec try to better himself by hiring a tutor to teach him to read and write English. Sessions with the young woman were more of a distraction, though, as Alec's tutor would cradle him from behind, holding his hands in place to write, her breasts seductively brushing against his back.

Unable to concentrate, he learned nothing.

Help came in the way of Alec's first cousin, John Camechis. Formerly a sailor, the 18-year-old Camechis came to Alabama to live with a cousin, Emanuel Fokakis, in 1905. Camechis was more literate than many of his Patmos contemporaries – he could read and write. Like Alec, he

became an apprentice in Greek-owned restaurants, with the intent of being his own boss one day. He quickly picked up the English language and became Alec's primary reader of letters from home.

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Like other immigrants, Greeks sought refuge among their fellow countrymen – to have the familiarity of language and an opportunity to work. In spite of the trend, they didn't go into the restaurant business because of some genetic trait that made them good at the culinary arts; rather, there was a void in food service. The business required long hours, a strong work ethic and a hospitable attitude – requirements they had no trouble meeting.

Typically the young men would work for a restaurant or two bussing and waiting tables, cooking and managing, then would strike out on their own – many times with the financial backing of their former employer.

"It was hard work and something they could learn to do," said Tallahassee's Jimmy Koikos, whose roots are in the Greek mainland of Sparta. "It provided them with an opportunity to raise families."

Koikos took over the A&J Grille (the "A" standing for his wife's name, Anne) at age 29. He has since owned and been a partner in four other restaurants – Jimmy's, The Spartan, Brothers Three, Brothers-Three-By-The-Sea and Torreya Grille.

Like his Greek predecessors, Koikos has fed the masses – governors, legislators, lobbyists, businessmen, lawyers, college professors, civic leaders and, yes, the rest of us.

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At age 18, Alec was anxious to become an entrepreneur, but the field of Greek-owned restaurants had become crowded in Alabama. Word was that Bainbridge, Georgia, where another relative had a grocery and fruit business, was experiencing a population boom. There was only one Greek restaurant and that meant less competition to Alec and his cousin. Having savings from their jobs, they said their goodbyes to the Heart of Dixie and rode the rails to their new destination.

Life in Bainbridge was short lived. The Flint River had been the main avenue of trade for the town, and with the railroad extensions, travel and trade were easier. However, one of the rail lines reached the capital city of Florida and after a few visits, the cousins decided the Sunshine State was better suited for their own pioneer adventure.

On January 13, 1913, John Camechis and Alec (now Alexander Strous) arrived in Tallahassee. There were only two other known Greeks there at the time, neither from the Isle of Patmos.

Camechis and Alec opened a "lunch room" together and built it for two years before deciding to go their separate ways. Though the two parted on good terms, Alec left to run a grocery business and taxi service.

By 1919, the seeds planted by the cousins began to germinate for Tallahassee's own Greek colony.

Joined by his brothers – Nicholas, Victor and James – in 1919, John Camechis purchased the Busy Bee restaurant from two other Greeks and later added the Busy Bee hotel and the Candy Kitchen, both on College Avenue. The brother partners then opened the Venetia Restaurant and Hotel, a modern cafeteria with a soda fountain and deli serving 50 varieties of sandwiches. With curbside service, it was Tallahassee's first drive in.

In 1920, Alec brought one of his brothers – Mikelis "Louis" Stratas – to Tallahassee and the same year, yet another brother of John Camechis – Bill – arrived.

The Busy Bee became the training ground for many of Tallahassee's Greek newcomers. Jimmy Joanos' father, Emanuel Joanos, worked at the Venetia and the Busy Bee restaurants as a teenager and later became a partner in the Busy Bee. He opened his own restaurant, The Blue Line Lunch, in 1934 and later brought over his half brother, Angelo Joanos (the namesake of the former Angelo's Restaurant downtown) from Patmos.

In 1925, Alec purchased the Star Café, right next to his cousin's Busy Bee. He opened the Seminole Hotel around the corner, making his brother Louis manager a year later. After making renovations to the Star, he renamed it the Seminole Café.

Other Tallahassee Greek restaurants known through the years include: the Blue Plate, Manny's, Mike's Café, Nick's Café, the Seven Seas, Maxine's Delicatessen, the Spartan, Tallahassee Café, Opelika Café, M&N (for Mike & Nick, owners), the Table Coffee Shop, the Splendid Café and the F&T (formerly 5&10 Cents Lunch Room – hot dogs were a nickel and chili was a dime),

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While the new crop of Greek settlers were working in hotel and restaurants in Tallahassee, families of the men were busy preparing their future brides in Patmos. Arranged marriages are a custom throughout the Mediterranean world and it wasn't unusual for a young girl to be promised to a young man before she reached the age of 10.

Margarita Joanos' marriage to her now deceased husband, Angelo, was arranged. He was serving in Germany during WWII and first came to Tallahassee in 1946 at the age of 17.

"Angelo's mother wanted me," Margarita said. "A nice girl, a nice boy, that's how it went."

When Angelo was able to get a furlough to Patmos to see his family, he and Margarita were introduced. Within a few days they were engaged. He left for seven months and they were married very quickly on his next visit. After his military service, he returned to the states to become part owner in the Seven Seas Restaurant and sent for Margarita three months later.

The two later owned the Table Coffee Shop and then opened Angelo's downtown in 1962. After Angelo's death, Margarita and her son George re-opened the restaurant in Northeast Tallahassee. It has since gone out of business.

Calliopi "Popi" Joanos also had an arranged marriage. She was promised to her husband, the late Mike Joanos, at age 14. "I was crying. I didn't want to get married," she admits. Her betrothed didn't return until she was age 19 and her mother kept her on a tight leash in the interim. Mike didn't speak Greek well and she did not speak good English, but he wrote her a beautiful love letter that still warms her face on recollection.

"We didn't know each other, but we matched," she said. They were married 40 years before he died. "We had a good life."

Anne Patronis Koikos said arranged marriages were sometimes interrupted. Her mother's sister was promised to Nick "Eugene" Patronis, co-owner of the F&T Restaurant, until he met the younger sibling, Souragio (called "Sarah") Gazis. They were engaged in 1929, when her mother was 14. He returned for her in the summer of 1935 and the two were married.

The late Theo Patronis, also of the F&T, was promised a bride when he was 16. She was six years old. He immigrated to the states in 1913 and returned to Patmos 10 years later to marry Evangelia Petrandis.

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A short time after arriving in Tallahassee, Alec found himself in front of Judge Ben Meginniss on charges of assault and battery. Meginniss repeated the charges to Alec, who promptly replied, "Yes, I hit him." When the judge started to impose a sentence he protested, "No, no, Judge, I hit him – but he called me a (repeating a vile epithet)."

Meginniss suspended charges against the assailant, Alec, and the other man was charged with and fined for public use of profane and indecent language.

Relating the story in a newspaper column, Meginniss said, "As lawyers we are taught that mere words do not justify an assault, but there are times when such language furnishes at least an excuse – at least in the opinion of the Court which handled the case."

Alec's first experience with the legal system kicked off a long friendship with Meginniss and helped boost his profile among Tallahassee aristocrats. And he did his part to be accepted by the non-Greek business leaders, including dressing the part. At five feet five inches, Alec was small in stature, but his tailored clothes increased his presence. When he pulled off his short brimmed hat, a hand reached up to arrange neatly cropped charcoal hair, severely parted on the left. Alec's oval face was smooth, save for a scar on his right cheek from a childhood accident, and his slightly arched eyebrows framed gentle brown eyes. His heart shaped lips never gave themselves fully to a smile, offering a sense of reserved sophistication.

This newcomer Greek was soon catching the eyes of the Tallahassee ladies and in the spring of 1915, one of them caught his. On an afternoon visit to Chateau San Luis, a vineyard on the outskirts of town, Alec met Morna June Beroud. She was the daughter of Frenchman Etienne Beroud, who managed the business and farmed on property adjacent to the vineyard. Only 17 at the time, June was not allowed to date the 22-year-old Alec. That didn't stop him from visiting, which he often did, driving one of Tallahassee's early autos through trails better suited for ox carts to reach their farm.

Despite protests from June Beroud's chaperone on a train ride to the Lanark Inn beach resort, Alec managed to steal enough time with June to win her affections. A week before her 18th birthday, the two eloped.

Things didn't go quite as smoothly as the couple planned, however. They drove to Bainbridge to find a Justice of the Peace but by the time they reached the river, the ferry captain had already retired for the evening. Too scared to go home, June didn't have a choice except to spend the night in Alec's car. To her horror, after returning to Tallahassee, Alec told everyone they spent the night together before being married. It never failed to win a blush from her in the early years, a disapproving frown in later ones.

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In 1938, Tallahassee had become "a little Patmos," as 99 percent of the town's Greeks were from that tiny isle. While the men had been informally helping each other, they decided it was time to organize a chapter of the American Hellenic Educational Progressive Association (AHEPA), a Greek American advocacy group that "promotes Hellenism, education, philanthropy and civic responsibility." The year the association launched, the *Tallahassee Daily Democrat* ran a series of articles hailing the contributions Greeks had made to the community.

Authored by a Greek, it recounted the journeys of the businessmen from their early days in Patmos and congratulated them on their 25th year as a Greek colony in Tallahassee, crediting John Camechis and Alec for starting the trend. The series included quotes from Sheriff Frank Stoutamire, City Manager H.P. Ford and Police Chief Gid Powledge, complimenting Greeks on their "splendid character and law-abiding conduct," their "stewardship" in contributing to the growth and development of Tallahassee and their "exemplary, industrious habits."

One story recalled Tallahassee's original Greek, Constantine Algero, who arrived from the island of Skopelos in 1880. He spoke several languages and acted as an interpreter to foreigners, teaching them English at a city night school. He opened the Constantine Hotel and operated five other businesses in town, plus had extensive real estate holdings. He had a firm foothold as the lone Greek in Tallahassee, until John Camechis and Alec arrived in 1913, the year Constantine died.

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Sometime before he became a naturalized citizen in 1921, Alec traded in his numerous aliases for the first name, "Alex," followed by a German surname, "Strauss." But most of his friends still called him "Alec."

To get around the handicap of illiteracy, Alec relied on his wife, his attorney and his financier at Capital City Bank, which was across the street from his restaurant. They were his trusted confidantes when it came to interpreting documents necessary to run his business.

He kept his affairs simply. At the end of the night in the restaurant, Alec could be seen dividing up money in a series of cigar boxes. There was the IRS box, the operations box and the take-home box.

At one point, Alec decided to expand his restaurant and visited Capital City Bank to talk to them about a loan. The banker, Sam Teague, drew up the loan papers and explained them to Alec. When he talked about the restaurant building being "collateral," Alec asked what that meant. He was told, "If you default on the loan – fail to pay – we get your restaurant."

Startled, Alec stared at the man for a moment, then promptly gathered his papers and left the bank without saying a word. After that, he paid cash for everything. His fiscal conservatism was extreme – except when it came to the Greek custom of gambling.

"Greeks loved to gamble," said Manny Joanos, who followed his father in the restaurant business opening Manny's in 1980. "They would bet on almost anything."

Alec placed bets on everything from high school football games to a voter referendum. In 1946, Wakulla citizens were voting on whether to become a dry county, like Leon. Several liquor stores were located just over the line between the two counties and Alec traveled to do some lobbying for keeping it wet – something he had money riding on. After the votes were counted, Wakulla was dry – they'd lost by 30 votes. The liquor stores lost money and so did Alec.

After granddaddy had a stroke at age 76, his bookie came to visit him at the hospital. When he left, my mother found wads of money in Alec's pajama pocket. He shrugged his shoulders and offered a lopsided grin – exposing bare gums.

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In later years, the Greek Orthodox Church became the glue holding Tallahassee's Greek community together. There was no Greek church for the early immigrants to practice their faith, so most attended services at St. John's Episcopal Church downtown. Weddings and baptisms were held in their homes.

They were finally able to organize and receive a charter for the Holy Mother of God Greek Orthodox Church in 1962. Parishioners met at Kate Sullivan School until they were able to build three years later on Phillips Road.

Through the church and its community-wide Greek Heritage celebrations, the descendents of Tallahassee's earliest Greek families still honor the memory of their forefathers.

"They didn't speak the language and were sometimes ridiculed," said Jimmy Joanos, recalling the first Greek immigrants in Tallahassee. "But with a lot of hard work, everything they dreamed about came true."

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