FROM THE GREEK-AMERICAN FRUIT AND CANDY COMPANY, 1901

TO THE MIDDLESEX FRUITERY, 1981:

THE ASSIMILATION OF A GREEK-AMERICAN FAMILY

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INTRODUCTION

The migration of 5,000,000 European peoples to foreign lands between 1815 and 1865 was precipitated by a variety of economic, social and political reasons.\(^1\) Very few citizens of Greece, however left their homeland before the 1890's. The overwhelming majority of those who emigrated sought economic gain because of the lack of opportunity in Greece. The sharp decline in the demand for currants, Greece's principal export crop, the inability of the peasants to borrow money to purchase and cultivate land, and the general unhealthy state of the non-industrialized Greek economy are just a few basic reasons for the exodus.\(^2\)

The Hellenics emigrating from the Ottoman Empire, which included the island of Lesvos, before liberation in 1912, may have left for political rather than economic reasons. A new Turkish constitution adopted in 1908 required Greeks under their jurisdiction to render military service. During 1914-1915 economic hardship on the island of Lesvos encouraged immigration of not only individuals, but entire families.\(^3\)

Greeks in the United States worked as laborers in the West, factory workers in the East and in the large cities, performed menial tasks. But through their intrepreneurial ability they soon established themselves into the middle class. In their homeland, Greek peasants participated in a market rather than a subsistence economy so that negotiations in the marketplace were familiar endeavors.\(^4\) The first Greek immigrant entreprenurs were street vendors and peddlers, but with the acquisition of capital (and with their natural ambition) they opened shops; shoe-shine, batters, dry cleaning, fruit, confectionery shops and of course restaurants.
The prime motive for Greek migration to the United States was overwhelmingly economic advancement. The intent of the majority of immigrants was to return to Greece with their American earnings to enjoy a village life.⁵
In the 1890's when Nicholas Xenelis emigrated from Greece, he left behind family and familiarity to seek greater career and financial opportunity. His native village, Eressos, on the island of Lesvos was a rural community, with a strict class system, the "soubanae" or farmers and the ruling land owners, forming the lower and upper classes respectively. Nicholas Xenelis was from the upper class, a landowner by birth. The village of Eressos functioned on a somewhat medieval market economy, commodities were bought and sold, the farmers performing the labor of the land and the upper classes the activities of commerce.

Nicholas was educated in Constantinople and Paris, borrowing the finances for his education from his uncle, the patriarch of the family, using his village fields as collateral. He studied marine engineering, a typical and useful profession in the Mediterranean-Aegean Sea area, but he never pursued this career. His education did, however, give him command of the French, Italian and perhaps English languages and a knowledge of the world outside the isolated village of Eressos.

From this background of the village as a marketplace, having capital borrowed from family and the knowledge of European languages Nicholas Xenelis came to the United States, a well-equipped immigrant, to pursue the goal of financial success. It was his intent at that point, and during the many years of his life in the United States to return to Greece with sufficient capital to enjoy a comfortable life in Eressos.
The citizenship papers of Nicholas Xenelis are dated 1899 in New York City. How he came to settle in Middletown is unknown, but his living and working in Middletown before that time is assumed by his family. We can speculate that knowing the language he may have socialized and worked with Italian immigrants in this small city. He perhaps worked as a pushcart peddler of fruits and vegetables and most certainly made the acquaintance of a Peter Pantalakos, a Greek who is listed in the 1900 Middletown City Directory as owning a confectionery shop on 374 Main Street.

Being of marriageable age (30 years) and having established citizenship in the United States, Nicholas returned to his native village to choose a bride. In point of fact, the bride was chosen for him, the Greek custom being that the parents, (more often the father), choose spouses for their children according to class and amount of dowry that the brides family will provide. The dowry system, which continues in the Greek villages, gives the prospective husband a home, fields, and sometimes the initial capital to begin married life. In Eressos this meant two separate homes, one in the winter village which is nestled in the mountains and one at the shore where all citizens, rich or poor, of Eressos migrate for the summer months. The dowry system places a considerable burden on the fathers and brothers of the girls to provide the largest and best possible dowry so that they may marry well. The dowry system is not unique to the Greeks, although the circumstances of the marriage differ from the Italian system.

In this case, Eleni Tavernarells at the age of 17 was betrothed to Nicholas Xenelis, with the dowry of a large winter home, and a summer home, in addition to olive groves and fields. Her mother, a widow, gave up her
home for the dowry and returned to her husband's neighboring village.

At this point I will digress from the personal history to provide some facts and observations about the role of women in marriage and their status in the Greek society. These traditions described were observed by the first generation immigrants and are an ongoing practice in contemporary village life.

In the village, girls are allowed to continue public school up until grade six. Besides learning primary skills of reading and writing they are taught domestic skills, crochet and embroidery, so that they may provide linens for their dowry. Her main purpose in life is to become a good homemaker.

Women are considered of marriageable age at sixteen. In the arrangement of a marriage, the man is generally over thirty years of age, the women is under twenty. The discrepancy in age is desirable from a Greek perspective because the woman is expected to care for their husbands in their old age. Consequently the majority of Greek women between the ages of 40-50 are widows forced to wear black for the rest of their lives. Their "solace" is usually the Greek Orthodox Church, which relegates women to subservient positions, but is their only allowable source of social interaction.

The society excludes women from its social institutions. The church physically and spiritually separates men from women. During the holy liturgy the women stand in the left of the church while the men stand on the right. Women are not allowed behind the alter and are refused holy communion if they are menstruating, since they are "unclean".
The "Kafeneon" or coffeehouse is an established social institution in every village of Greece, but for men only. Women socialize in sewing circles, or in communal domestic activities such as bread baking or laundering.

The first Greek immigrants were almost exclusively male. It was not unusual for husbands and wives to be separated for years. While the husband sought his fortune in a foreign land, the wives remained in the village to rear the children and waited for the return of their husbands—and the fortune. Many husbands did not return to the old country; some sent for their wives, others never brought their families to America. The male to female ratio of Greek immigrants to the United States was 20:1 in the decade of 1900-1910, but between 1919-1920 the proportion dropped to 5:1.

The Greek community was anchored in this country with the arrival of wives and mothers to provide a permanent family life. On the voyage across the ocean the women were almost always accompanied by men—fathers, husbands, brothers or cousins. Since marriages were frequently arranged across the ocean, these "picture brides" were often forced to travel alone. This burdened them with the anxiety that they would be suspected forever of having questionable moral since..."In the Mediterranean countries where a poor man's only possessions were his self-respect and his daughter's virginity, women were chaperoned with paranoid obsession." 7

It was unusual for the Greek immigrant women to work outside the home because the husband was considered a poor provider if his wife worked for wages. These women were isolated from American society. Their lives re-
olved around their families, a circle of Greek friends and the church; consequently these women rarely learned to speak English, yet functioned well enough to accomplish all domestic duties.

Nicholas and Eleni Xenelis, both American citizens, came to Middletown after their marriage in Eressos. In 1900 their first daughter was born at their apartment on 100 Main Street with an American mid-wife attending. In 1901 a second daughter was born at 22 Washington Avenue. The Greek American Fruit and Candy Co., on 276 Main Street was opened in 1901 by Nicholas, the sole owner and operator. (See Advertisement Page 66.) At this time the same Peter Pantalokos continued his business, the Hartford Candy Kitchen on 374 Main Street at the corner of Washington Street.

There were very few Hellinics in Middletown at this time (I was able to document only these two Greek businesses) so the clientele in these businesses were obviously not Greek. Perhaps the stores were frequented by the Italians in Middletown, but judging from their location on Main Street, the candies and fruits must have been enjoyed by the general public, the businessmen on Main Street and their customers.

However, by 1903, there were six Greek-owned confectionery and fruit dealers on Main Street. Four of these stores were owned by Eressotians. There is no doubt that Nicholas Xenelis helped these fellow villagers to establish their businesses.

Eleni, living in a language and children-bound isolation, suffered with asthma and had a miscarriage so that ill-health and loneliness forced the Xenelis family to sell the store and move from Middletown in 1903, back to Eressos. Life in the village was less complicated and there was a better social and physical climate for Eleni to rear her children. A third daughter was born in the village in 1905.
For what must have been financial motivation, Nicholas returned to Middletown in 1905 to establish the Boston Fruit and Candy Co., 102 Main Street, in partnership with his cousin Charles Andrews. (See Advertisement Page 16). This business partnership existed from 1905 until 1918, although the city directory indicates (as well as the births of two daughters and a son in Eressos) that Nicholas was in Greece from 1907-1909 and 1911-1914. In Middletown, more and more Eressotians were working and establishing businesses, not only fruit and candy, but dry-cleaning, shoeshine, and hatter shops.

In fact, Nicholas brought nephews to work in his fruit store. By 1914, there were eight confectionary and fruit stores owned by Eressotians, all staffed by relatives.

The beginnings of social institutions were established at this time. The "Kafeneon" may not have been an established business, but the apartments of these Eressotians served the purpose — a gathering spot to play cards, smoke, drink Turkish coffee and perhaps home-distilled ouzo.

In a burst of Ethnic pride on December of 1911, the fraternal organization THE NEW ERESSOS was incorporated in the city of Middletown by George Xenelis, Nicholas' half-brother, Ernest Andrews and A. Avayanos. The purpose was ... "to associate the natives of Eressos, Greece, residing in the United States, for mutual improvement, co-operation and progress, and the general good of their native town, and to collect funds by dues and voluntary contributions and to render assistance to their fellow townsmen and their native town, and any lawful enterprise in such a manner as may be provided in their By-Laws, to be adopted pursuant to Section 90, Chapter 194, of an Act Concerning Corporations and the Laws of the State of Connecticut".9
The accomplishments of "The New Eressos" are not readily apparent. Perhaps the advent of the first World War, and the political problems associated with liberation from the Turks in Eressos thwarted their good intentions. In 1920, however, a new Eressotian organization was formed, "Theophrastos", which succeeded in providing funds for a new primary school in the winter village by 1925, and eventually funded the building of a new church in the summer village.

Saint George Greek Orthodox Church in New Britain was established in 1915 with an initial membership of 187. Eighteen families were from Middletown and the remaining congregation constituted Greek immigrants from Hartford, New Britain and Bristol. Nicholas Xenelis became a member in 1916.

A Greek school was established in 1919 within the Church, for the immigrant children. From a full academic program, the curriculum has gradually evolved into merely an after school language program.

The American Hellenic Educational Progressive Association or the Ahepa is a Greek-American fraternal organization with Masonic influences whose purpose was to promote Americanism among the Greeks in the United States. The organization was committed to a Greek identity within an American context. An Ahepa lodge was established in the Middletown-New Britain area in the 1920's and eventually Nicholas' sons became members.

The Plomarion Brotherhood in this area was a fraternal organization established by the immigrants from the island of Lesvos. The development of this organization testifies to the concentration of immigrants from Lesvos in this area of Connecticut.
Nicholas was destined to make his living in the United States, although on two different trips back to the village he brought "modern" farm equipment from the United States (an incubator for chicken eggs, a water pump, and farming tools) in hopes that he could support his family in this rural community. But by 1914 he had five daughters, who would require dowries of not only one house, but two. More money was required for him to perform his duty as a good provider.

In 1914, leaving the village, his children, and his wife Eleni he returned to Middletown to the same Boston Fruit and Candy Co., but in 1918 he sold the store and dissolved the partnership with Charles Andrews to return to Greece once again. His intentions to remain in the village were eventually dissolved as his eldest son finished the 8 years public education in the village and became of working age (another son was born in 1914). The limits of the village were felt more acutely by the young man, so in 1921 accompanied by his father, Costas Nicholas Xenelis came to the United States. [All of Nicholas's children were United States Citizens, so the political problems of immigration were minimized.]

Again Eleni bore a son after Nicholas left the village. Nicholas was never to see this son, or his wife before his death.

Instead of Middletown, however, they went to New Jersey where there was another stronghold of Eressotian immigrants. Nicholas went into the fruit business with his brother-in-law and they both sent their sons out into the city streets with push-carts. This business was not particularly successful, so upon the advice of the Middletown compatriot, Peter Pantalakos, (who at this time owned a store in Pennsylvania) father and son returned to Middletown. They bought the store on 191 Main Street, with the ownership in Costas' name. This fruit store was called "Lesvos", a continued statement of ethnic pride.
This store eventually became The Middlesex Fruiterer.

With the establishment and success of "Lesvos" in the 1920's, came the reunion of family. In 1925 the eldest daughter returned to her birthplace with her new husband, and Eressotian who owned a shoe-shine business in Middletown. The marriage was arranged in the United States by Nicholas, but the groom returned to the village where the marriage ceremony took place.

The second daughter, whose desire to come to the United States was strong, refusing to be wed under the dowry system, accompanied the newlyweds to America and lived with them on Main Street. She learned to speak English with the help of a private tutor and by helping at the fruit store. Her marriage was arranged to an Eressotian dry-cleaning business man. The ceremony was performed by a Greek Orthodox priest at the home of a cousin.

In 1927, the second son came to Middletown at the age of 12. He worked in the store and started public school at the 4th grade level. The depression of the 1930's slowed business considerably, which allowed the boy to continue his education. There was no night school in existence for non-English-speaking persons, but the public school offered remedial reading after school. Three boys attended, although there must have been many children that required that service. In 1940 he earned a degree from Wesleyan University.

For the Xenelis family the 1930's brought many tragedies beside the economic depression. With the stock-market crash, the eldest daughter and her husband were forced to return to Eressos because of severe financial losses, and his suffering a stroke. He died soon after their return to the village, leaving two sons and a young widow.

In 1930 Nicholas was planning to retire in Eressos, to be united with his wife and the son he never saw, as well as three daughters. But became ill with cancer and underwent surgery at the Middlesex Memorial Hospital. He died at his daughter's home, May 23, 1931, age 61.
The tragedies of the thirties were not over. In 1935 Eleni came to Middletown with her youngest son to make a home with her 3 boys. A few months later, she was killed in an auto accident at the age of 47.

Both Eleni and Nicholas are buried in the Pine Grove cemetery in Middletown. The graves are separated by two rows and are surrounded by the graves with the family name of Porfiri, Horton, Little and Urashka. All the deceased Middletown Eressotians are buried in this cemetery.

The "Lesvos" fruit store continued in operation throughout the depression. Only when the sign on the window had decayed to GEEK Produce and a customer asked Costas for a Mr. EEK did he decide to change the name to the Middlesex Fruity. However, the map of Lesvos still hangs in the store.

Eventually, all the Xenelis children but one came to the United States to pursue career and economic goals. Two sisters returned to continue village life, the others established family ties and successful businesses or white-collar careers.

The families of the Xenelis siblings all have established roles in the American middle-class by virtue of their bourgeois direction. They all purchased their own homes, and have financed their children through secondary education. Yet the patterns of their Greek Ethnic identification are strong, through language preservation, the Greek Orthodox religion and the social customs and traditions. Hellenic pride is ubiquitous in their thoughts and actions.

It is interesting to note that even in this generation their Hellenic pride was not simply anything Greek, but that particularly Eressotian. All the siblings but one married immigrants from Eressos or their first generation daughters.
When the couples settled outside of Middletown, their homes were in close proximity to fellow Eressos-Americans. In every household, olive-oil from Leavos is used exclusively (the best of course!) and the high point of the year is when a package arrives from Eressos with dried figs, fava beans and "Hakles", a sun-dried wheat and sour milk pattie.

The twenty-one grandchildren of Nicholas and Eleni grew up in this atmosphere of ethnic pride, but the pattern of continued assimilation into the American middle class society is apparent. Although none of the grandchildren have rejected their ethnicity completely, less than half of them married Greeks and only half of them are practicing members of the Greek Orthodox Church.

These grandchildren are named in the traditional fashion, the eldest son and daughter for their paternal grandparents, the younger for their maternal grandparents. In this generation there are five Nicholas's and four Elenis.

Through Nicholas Xenelis, who came as an early Greek immigrant to Middletown, the pattern of establishment and assimilation in American society emerges as typical of the Greek experience in this country.

Seven grandchildren remain in the Connecticut area, but all twenty-one recognize the importance of the establishment of "Lesvos" or the Middlesex Fruiterly on their destiny as Americans.
United States of America

District Court of the United States of America

Southern District of New York
This photograph of Nicholas and Eleni Xenelis was taken in 1899 just before their departure for America.
The Xenelis family, 1902, in Middletown
Greek-American Fruit and Candy Co.,
N. XENELIS, Proprietor.
MANUFACTURERS OF HIGH GRADE
Chocolates and Bonbons, also Ice Cream.
HIGHEST DEALERS, AND FRUITS WHOLESALE AND RETAIL.
276 MAIN STREET,   MIDDLETOWN, CONN.

Advertisement from the 1901 Middletown City Directory

GEORGE XENELIS.  NICHOLAS XENELIS.  CHARLES M. ANDREWS.

THE BOSTON FRUIT AND CANDY CO.,
Xenelle & Andrews, Proprietors.
Wholesale and Retail Dealers in
Foreign and Domestic Fruits, Nuts, Etc.
Manufacturers of Fine Confectionery and Ice Cream.

TELEPHONE.  GOODS DELIVERED TO ALL PARTS.  102 and 272 1-2 MAIN STREET.

Advertisement from the 1909 Middletown City Directory
State of Connecticut,
Office of the Secretary.

ARTICLES OF INCORPORATION
OF
THE NEW BRESSOS, (Incorporated).

BE IT KNOWN, That we, the subscribers, do hereby associate ourselves as a body politic and corporate, pursuant to the statute laws of the State of Connecticut regulating the formation and organization of corporations without capital stock, and the following are our Articles of Association:—

ARTICLE I. The name of said corporation shall be,

THE NEW BRESSOS, (Incorporated).

ARTICLE 2. The purposes for which said corporation is formed are the following, to wit:—

To associate the natives of Bressos, Greece, residing in the United States, for mutual improvement, co-operation and progress, and the general good of their native town, and to collect funds by dues and voluntary contributions, and to render assistance to their fellow townsmen and their native town, and any lawful enterprise in such manner as may be provided in their By-Laws, to be adopted pursuant to Section 90, Chapter 194, of an Act concerning Corporations and the Laws of the State of Connecticut.

ARTICLE 3. The said corporation is located in the town of Middletown, State of Connecticut.
Dated at Middletown, Connecticut, this 28th day of December, 1911.

George Xenelis
Ernest Andrews
A. Avayanos

STATE OF CONNECTICUT, )
COUNTY OF MIDDLESEX  )

Then and there personally appeared GEORGE XENELIS, ERNEST ANDREW and ANDENS AVAYANOS, signors of the foregoing instrument, and acknowledged the same to be their free act and deed, before me,

( seal ) Geo. Burnham
Notary Public.

Approved, Jan. 6, 1912.
Matthew H. Rogers,
Secretary,

by E. H. Leunshbury.

Fee §10. paid
Dec. 30, 1911.
C. S. Wightman
for Treas.
1930, The facade of "Lesvos", 191 Main Street in Middletown, the present location of The Middlesex Fruitery.
1920 The interior of the store, Nicholas is standing in the center of the photograph, Costas on the right and in-between, the hired help.
The graves of Nicholas and Eleni Xenelis at the Pine Grove Cemetery on South Main Street in Middletown.
Middle Street Renewal Progressing
Footnotes

1. Handlin, Page 26
2. Saloutos, Page 29-31
3. Saloutos, Page 33-34
4. Mouskos, Page 140
5. Mouskos, Page 9
6. Farrell and Grimalde, Page 1
7. Mouskos, Page 27
8. Mouskos, Page 40-43
9. "Articles of Incorporation", Page 1
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Farrell and Grimaldi, "A Study in Depth of Italian Wedding Photos of Middletown Families" Student Paper, Wesleyan University, 1980

Middletown City Directory, Volumes for the years 1899-1940


State of Connecticut, "Articles of Incorporation of The New Eressos", December 28, 1911 (See Xerox copy)

Personal Interviews:

Father C. Bouras
Marika H. Lesbines
Costa Nicholas Xenelis
Michael Nicholas Xenelis