

Grace Abbott, "A Study of the Greeks in Chicago," *American Journal of Sociology* 15 (1909): 379-393.

It is only since 1900 that the Greeks have regarded the United States as a good field for settlement. At that time there were, according to the census of 1900, only 8,655 Greeks in the country. Since then they have come in increasingly large numbers until during the year 1907 alone there were 46,283 Greek immigrants admitted.¹ In 1908, because of the financial stringency which caused the general decline in immigration, there were only 28,808 admitted,² but with the return to normal business conditions more are coming and there can be little doubt that the next ten years will see an enormous increase in our Greek population. Appreciating that its immediate neighborhood was becoming Hellenic, an investigation of the Greeks in Chicago was made by Hull House in order that with reliable information about their housing conditions, their occupations, their family life, and their ambitions, the resources of the House could be made more useful to its new neighbors. For this purpose, in a preliminary investigation made last summer, 350 Greek residences were visited and 1,467 Greeks counted on the schedules. These were not confined to any one neighborhood but were representative of the city's entire Greek population, the wealthier as well as the poorer. During the winter and spring a Greek-speaking woman was employed by Hull House to do systematic visiting among the Greek families of its neighborhood and among the Greek boys of the downtown district. Upon the information thus secured by Hull House this study is almost entirely based.

According to the school census for 1908 there are 4,218 Greeks in Chicago of whom 3,521 are foreign-born and 697 [end page 379] American-born. The Greeks claim four or five times as many and undoubtedly during the winter the colony is very much larger. The school census was taken in May after the "gang" workers on the railroads had gone out for the summer,

so that a great many of those who make Chicago their home during the winter months and come back to us between jobs in the summer, were not counted.

Most of the Greeks who come to the United States are from the Peloponnesus. All of them talk of "the Athens" as though it had been their home, but although it belongs to them in a very intimate sort of way, very few of them have ever seen it. For example, out of 424 who live within a few blocks of Hull House 205 came from Sparta, 102 from Tripolis, and 5 from Athens. Moreover, most of those who say they came from Sparta and Tripolis, have not really lived in those towns but in the country villages near by.

Like all pioneers who come from the various countries of Europe to the United States the Greeks expect to return. Many of them are sending money home not only to support the wife and children they left behind them, but to buy land in Greece. But of those who return, undoubtedly the great majority will find that ten or fifteen years in the United States has unfitted them for contented residence in Greece. To those who succeed in the United States the quiet simplicity of life in the Peloponnesus will prove irritating and they will feel more at home with their partially Americanized friends in this country. By no means all of them expect to return to stay permanently. Out of 790 men over twenty years of age who were reached through the investigation made last summer 124 had been naturalized—not a small number when it is remembered for how short a time the Greeks have been coming to the United States.

The largest settlement of Chicago Greeks is in the nineteenth ward, north and west of Hull House. Here is the Greek Orthodox Church, a school supervised by the priest in which about thirty children are taught a little English, some Greek, much of the achievements of Hellas, and the obligation that rests on every Greek to rescue Macedonia from the Turks and [end page

380] the Bulgarians; here too, is the combination Greek bank, steamship-ticket office, notary, public, and employment agency, and the coffee-houses, where the men drink black coffee, play cards, speculate on the outcome of the next Greek lottery and in the evening sing to the accompaniment of the Greek bag-pipes or—evidence of their Americanization—listen to the phonograph. On Halsted Street, south of Harrison, almost every store for two blocks has Greek characters on the windows, and recalling one's long-forgotten college Greek, one learns, that first coffee-house is the "Cafe Appolyon," and that their newspaper "The Hellas" is published next door. A block west on Blue Island Avenue one finds the "Parthenon Barber Shop" and the Greek drug store. If an American were to visit this neighborhood on the night of Good Friday, when stores are draped with purple and black and watch at midnight the solemn procession of Greek men march down the street carrying their burning candles and chanting hymns, he would probably feel as though he were no longer in America, but after a moment's reflection he would say that this could be no place but America for the procession was headed by eight burly Irish American policemen and along the walks were "Americans" of Polish, Italian, Russian Jewish, Lithuanian, and Puritan ancestry watching with mingled reverence and curiosity this celebration of Good Friday, while those who marched were homesick and mourning because "this was not like the Tripolis." Although the Greeks have scattered much more widely over the entire country than the Italians and most other immigrants, still they are little known or understood. They have suffered, both here and in Europe from extravagant praise or unreasonable criticism. With the glory of ancient Greece and Byron's romantic championship of the modern Greek in mind, one is shocked when he meets for the first time a representative of that people in the thrifty, good natured, and polite keeper of a fruit stand or "shoe-shine parlor." Before the Civil War in the days when the Native American or Know Nothing Party flourished, many good Americans were

afraid that the immigrants who then came principally from Germany and northern Europe were going to [end page 381] destroy our institutions and ideals and there was organized opposition to their admission. Now the fear is that because the immigrants are coming from southern and eastern Europe, those prophecies of sixty years ago are about to be fulfilled. The average American expecting every Greek to have the beauty of an Apollo and the ability of a Pericles, and reading only sensational newspaper accounts of some crime he may or may not have committed, concludes that the race has degenerated and constitutes a most undesirable addition to our population. This is manifestly unfair. The Greek immigrant should be accepted for what he is worth in modern society. And we should inquire not only as to his moral standards, his capacity for self-government and his economic value but, equally important, whether his development in these directions is being promoted or retarded by the treatment he receives in the United States.

The only way of measuring the morality of a people is by the very low test of their criminality. For this the only statistics available are the records of the courts, police departments, and penal institutions. These need most careful interpretation. Classifications are usually very carelessly made and do not distinguish between Americans of native and foreign parentage, so that no conclusions can be drawn as to the effect which residence in the United States has upon the conduct of the foreigner. It should also be remembered that the immigrant's offense is too often only his ignorance of the English language which to an irritated Irish policeman is in itself a crime. Violations of the city ordinances through ignorance of sanitary regulations, of the requirement of a license for peddlers, and of similar regulations, cause more arrests than viciousness. The newly arrived foreigner must speak through an interpreter and a careless translation often gives the court an incorrect idea of what has been said. The testimony of the

witnesses against him, and occasionally the charge, are not translated to him and so as he is unable to appreciate the full bearing of the questions asked him, his chances of acquittal are fewer than the American's. The report of the Commissioner-General of Immigration for 1908 shows that 15,323 aliens were detained in the various penal and [end page 382] reformatory institutions of the United States. Of this number one hundred and ninety-six were Greeks.³ In the north central group which includes Illinois and eleven other states forty Greeks and 2,570 other aliens, are reported as so detained.⁴ These figures undoubtedly do not give the number of criminals for the entire year, but they seem incredibly small even for any one time of the year when it is remembered that they include alien adult and juvenile offenders held in municipal, county, state, and federal institutions. The Chicago Bureau of Police Records in its report for 1908 shows that in Chicago during that year 141 Greeks committed felonies, 125 state misdemeanors, and 891 violated some city ordinance, making, 1,157 Greeks whose names appear on the criminal records of Chicago. Using the figures given by the school census for 1908, which are the only ones available, this means that approximately twenty-seven out of every hundred Greeks in Chicago have violated some law of the city or state. During the same year only seven out of every hundred Americans and less than four out of every hundred of the entire population—native, negro, and foreign—were convicted of such an offense. The Greeks can, however show that these figures are unfair to them. There were probably about three or four times as many Greeks in the city during the year 1908 as the school census shows, and those who go out to work on the railroads from April to November and spend four or five months in idleness in Chicago, although not counted in the census, are probably the very ones who are found most frequently in the municipal courts, charged with disorderly conduct. The fact that so many of the Greeks are independent peddlers and merchants instead of employees in some large

factory is in part some explanation of their difficulties. Hot-headed and independent they are, like the Irishman, drawn into disputes, which often end in serious quarrels. Undoubtedly their criminal record in America is worse now than it will be in the future. The Greek is one of the last to come into this complex population of ours and the colony as a whole is still ignorant of our language [end page 383] and customs. The young men and boys have been coming in large numbers during the past eight years and the women are following as the men graduate from work on the railroads to the proprietorship of a fruit-stand or restaurant. Still as the following table shows, a very large proportion of the Greeks are men between the ages of twenty and thirty—the sex and age of greatest criminality in all nationalities.

This very large proportion of men makes the life of the Greek colony entirely different from that of a people who have been coming for the last thirty or forty years. The men who are here alone must live together in large groups without the restraining influences which come with normal family relationships. Certainly this would account for much of the immorality with which Greek men have been charged. There is little doubt that in this respect they are worse than at home, due probably to the demoralizing effect which living in a city's congested district, where invitations to vice are on every side and where there is not counter-claim or attraction of a home, always has on men or women.⁵

The most hopeful sign is that the Greeks who have been in the country for some time are coming to appreciate this and are trying to make their fellow-countrymen realize the danger which the situation presents. [end page 384]

Considered from other standpoints, the Greek is a most desirable immigrant. With the political training he has had at home, he should be able to adapt himself quickly to our

republican institutions. Greece is a constitutional monarchy, in which the people enjoy universal manhood suffrage and freedom of the press. There is no aristocracy and the “whole nation is more intensely and thoroughly democratic than any other in Europe,” and the people “only tolerate a king, because they cannot endure one of themselves as their superior.”⁶

The patriotism of the Greek is one of his most prominent characteristics and takes very often the exceedingly boastful form usually credited to “Yankees” in English novels. They are always ready to tell you of the superiority of the Greek soldier over any other and the men who have been to college in Greece speak of American schools and American scholarship with almost German contempt. A small Greek boy was sure that he won the affection of his Irish school-teacher by showing her pictures of “the Athens.” Most of them feel it their duty to spread the fame of their noble race whenever possible. Approving of Hull House, they succeeded in convincing the Bulgarians, for a time at least, that it was intended for the Greeks alone, and the first Greek boy who went through the Juvenile Court felt that he had added to the glory of the Greek name and dignified that worthy American institution as well. While somewhat exasperating at times, this enthusiastic devotion to their mother country is after all a most desirable characteristic and one which the Anglo-American should readily appreciate.

Industrially the Greek is a positive asset in the United States. There is peasant proprietorship of land in the Peloponnesus and most of those who emigrate have lived on small farms which they owned and worked for themselves. In the United States their occupations are quite different as the table on p. 386 shows.

But this does not tell the whole story of their employment. Because the colony is so largely masculine, large numbers of the men live together keeping house on some cooperative

arrangement and form what may be called *non-family groups* to distinguish them from the ordinary *family group* in which the wife or daughter does the housekeeping for the family and a lodger or two. Approximately 71 per cent. of the laborers given in the table below and 84 per cent. of the peddlers belong to these non-family groups, while 65 per cent. of the owners of ice-cream parlors and 75 per cent. of the restaurant keepers belong to the family groups. This shows very clearly how the system works. Like other foreigners most of the Greeks must first serve an apprenticeship in the gangs that do the railroad and general construction work for the country. But their apprenticeship is shorter than with most nationalities. A labor agent who supplies two or three thousand foreigners a season for this sort of work says that the Greek seldom "ships out" more than once or twice. In that time he has learned some English and has accumulated enough money to venture on a small commercial enterprise for himself. He becomes a peddler, perhaps later owns a fruit-stand and finally an ice-cream parlor. By this time he is ready to send for his wife and children or some Greek woman who becomes his wife and they are able to live comfortably and happily. During the short time that he has been in Chicago the Greek has established his reputation as a shrewd business man. On Halsted Street they are already saying, "It takes a Greek to beat a Jew." Historically there is of course some reason for this. Mahaffy, an authority on ancient as well as modern Greece, says of them: "They are probably as clever [end page 386] people as can be found in the world, and fit for any mental work whatever. This they have proved, not only by getting into their hands all the trade of the eastern Mediterranean, but by holding their own perfectly among English merchants in England."⁷

That they will become great business and professional men in the United States there can be little doubt. They come willing to do any kind of hard physical work, but thriftily take

advantage of every opportunity for advancement. There is compulsory education in Greece, so that even in the country districts of the Peloponnesus the Greeks are receiving some education. Out of 1,469 men, women, and children counted on the schedules, 891 could read and write Greek and of these 348 were able to read and write English in addition. The testimony of those experienced in teaching immigrants is always favorable to the Greeks. The teacher of the "adult room" of the Jones School, which is just outside of the loop in the downtown district had 81 Greeks enrolled during the past year out of 252. She says of all the different nationalities represented in the room, "I think I have found the Greeks the brightest and quickest to learn." At Hull House they have been eager and intelligent members of the regular classes and the men have shown ability in the organization and management of large clubs and classes for themselves.

In Greece the women are kept in almost oriental seclusion. In the past the number of men has been considerably larger than the number of women,⁸ and matrimony was regarded as the inevitable career of every woman.

The Greek boy has been taught to believe that he must support his sister, provide her with a liberal marriage portion, and [end page 387] care for her after her husband's death if she is left without means. The result of this training is that "the sacred tradition that brothers must see their sisters settled in life before they themselves marry"⁹ has become well established.

Considering their eastern traditions and training the Greek women adapt themselves very quickly to American customs. A Greek Woman's Club has been meeting at Hull House once a week during the past year and a Greek Women's Philanthropic Society has recently been formed there by the more prosperous who expect to help in various ways the unfortunate members of

their colony. This charitable organization is eagerly encouraged by the men for the Greeks, although extremely shrewd in their business dealings, are at the same time generous. They give liberally to one another in times of sickness or unemployment. On Tag Day for the children's charities of the city the women reaped a good profit in the Greek stores and coffee-houses on Halsted Street. When three small Greek children were left without homes it was not difficult to find Greek families in the neighborhood of Hull House who were willing to receive and care for them temporarily or indefinitely if that seemed for the best interest of the children.

Unlike the Italian women they do not work outside their own homes or at sweatshop work. Out of the 246 Greek women and girls over fifteen who were visited in the investigation only five were found to be at work. This is not alone because the Greek man usually succeeds in business but because he considers it a disgrace for his wife or sister to work and the entire family often suffers that this tradition that "the women must not work" may be upheld. An example of this came to the attention of the League for the Protection of Immigrants this spring. A Greek man about twenty-five years old sent his brother-in-law who was ill with tuberculosis back to Athens. His sister and her two children, both old enough to attend school, were left in Chicago. The sister was able to work but this her brother would not consider. Although he had a very small income, he rented a flat [end page 388] for her, paid her bills, and finally with some help from his friends purchased tickets for her and the children to go back home. The woman was not a very good mother or sister and the man had little affection for her but he knew that he would have been disgraced in the eyes of the Greek colony if the "sacred tradition," as Professor Andreades calls it, had not been upheld.

The women are good housekeepers. The Greek houses are almost uniformly clean and comfortable and the women and children neatly dressed. Even in non-family groups the houses

are often well kept and the food well prepared by the men themselves. Still, as it is usually only after the Greek has accumulated a little money and is somewhat prosperous that he sends for his family or marries, the living conditions of the family groups are better than those of the non-family group as the following table shows:

According to this table 42 per cent. of the family groups average fewer than one person per room while only 15 per cent. of the non-family groups are as well situated. On the other hand only 1 per cent. of the non-family groups average more, than 2.5 persons per room, while 11 per cent. of the non-family groups average over that number.¹⁰

The non-family groups living above barns and feed-stores were the only ones found in dangerously unsanitary conditions. The men who live in this way are usually peddlers who keep their horses in the barns. Over one such barn there were fifteen [end page 389] peddlers. They were all unmarried between 20 and 30 years old. They earned on an average \$10 a week and paid \$30 a month rent for the barn and the rooms above it. The rooms were unfurnished and dirty. The men slept on mattresses on the floor. This was often the condition in which groups of peddlers were found but there were some exceptions. In one group twenty-two men lived together. They had rented five of the six apartments in the flat building. Ten of these men were laborers who worked for the Rock Island and received from \$10 to \$12 per week and eleven were peddlers who estimated their weekly profits at \$9. Each one of the men paid \$4 a week which went toward the payment of rent, food, and the wages of the man who was cook and general caretaker of the group. With one exception all of these men were under thirty and they were all unmarried. The flats were kept clean and the men lived comfortably. Often the owner of a restaurant, a fruit-store or a shoe-shine parlor furnished his employees board and room. For example, the owner of a restaurant had a nine-room flat where eight waiters who worked for him

and were paid from \$6 to \$10 a week lived with him. The house was comfortably furnished and clean. All of the men were unmarried and between twenty and thirty years of age. In another group were five laborers who paid \$12 a month for a four-room rear house. These young men came from Tripolis. One of them had been here three years and was able to read and write English. [end page 390] The other four were attending night school. The house was very clean and gave the general impression of thrift and industry.

In the non-family groups the Greek boy presents a special problem. The boys often come with some neighbor who passes as their uncle or father and are apprenticed to one of their fellow-countrymen. They work as bootblacks, help around fruit stands, or peddle fruit and vegetables. That many of these boys are worked under a system of peonage there can be little doubt. An investigation of this aspect of the padrone system was made by the United States Bureau of Immigration last year and as a result of the information secured, the report says: "Two padrones of Boston were obliged to plead guilty, while in Chicago fourteen were indicted, six of whom plead guilty, two were tried and found guilty, and proceedings against the remaining six are still pending."¹¹ Some evidence of the existence of this system of peonage and a few cases where boys have suffered gross physical abuse from the older men with whom they lived have come to the attention of the League during the past year. And, in addition to these very ugly possibilities, an investigation of the shoe-shine parlors in the Loop District of Chicago showed the danger of their general mode of life. The ages of these bootblacks range from 13 to 36, the majority being 17. Their hours of work are extremely long, as the following table shows: [end page 391] Saturday is always a very long day and Sunday is shorter than the regular week day. The following table shows the wages paid these boys in addition to their board and clothes is from \$15 to \$20 a month:

An employer who has a large establishment or several small ones, as many of them do, has to provide housing facilities for a number of boys. One man, for example, has eleven rooms—two floors and the basement—for twenty-five boys. The rooms are clean and neatly furnished and the food abundant. Another has eleven rooms for twenty boys with an old Greek man in charge as cook. This place is not clean. There is no furniture except beds and a long table in an inside room which serves as a dining-room. Here the boys were found one night between half-past nine and ten o'clock. They had just returned from work and were eating their supper of soup and stewed corn.

The danger of this life can be readily understood. The boys spend nearly all their waking hours at work. They live, as many of the poor must, near immoral neighborhoods and are easily accessible to men and women who wish to accomplish their ruin. They have no time for regular attendance at evening classes or clubs, no normal home life or relationships. But for the discipline of the bosses who want them to be ready for work the next day an even larger number would find excitement and relaxation in dangerous amusements.

Hard as the lot of these boys is, it is better than that of the young apprentice in Greece.¹² This accounts for the fact that the parents of the boys as well as the boys themselves are satisfied with the terms on which they work and consider deportation a great hardship. They work for long hours cheerfully, confident that in a short time they will be in a position, not to work fewer hours, but to set up as independent business men for themselves.

The Greeks then upon acquaintance prove to be bright, industrious, and capable men and women. Better than some and not so well as others they are meeting the dangerous temptations which come with long hours and unwholesome living conditions. What they become as a result

of their American environment should be an American responsibility. The best way to help them and the city is not by the general condemnation which is too often meted out to "the stranger within our gates" but by recognizing their ability, industry, and capacity for good citizenship and uniting with them to suppress the vice and exploitations from which they suffer. [end page 393]

¹ *Annual Report of the Commissioner-General of Immigration, 1907*, Table III.

² *Ibid.*, 1908, Table III.

³ *Annual Report of the Commissioner-General of Immigration, 1908*, p. 102.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 110.

⁵ Charles K. Tuckerman, at one time United States minister to Greece, said of them in his book, *The Greeks of Today* (N.Y., 1872) that family ties are very strong and as a consequence the people chaste, and added, p. 349, "I am persuaded that no city in the world of forty or fifty thousand inhabitants can boast fewer invitations to sensual vice than does Athens."

⁶ James P. Mahaffy, *Parables and Studies in Greece* (London, 1892), p. 23.

⁷ *Op. cit.*

⁸ The *Economic Journal*, 1908, commenting on a lecture on the Greek census of 1907 given by Professor A. M. Andreades, of the University of Athens, quotes that in that year the proportion of men to women was 100 to 92 (p. 309). This was much larger formerly, the proportion having been reduced because, as Professor Andreades pointed out in "A Review of the Greek Census" in the *Economic Journal*, March, 1909, 97 per cent of the immigrants were men, and "this deprived Greece of the privilege of being the country that maintained the largest proportion of men" (p. 152).

⁹ *Economic Journal*, June, 1908, p. 309. Quotation from a lecture by Professor A. W. Andreades, of the University of Athens.

¹⁰ The following table giving rents paid indicates the same difference between these two groups.

¹¹ *Annual Report of the Commissioner-General of Immigration, 1908*, p. 130.

¹² *Annual Report of the Commissioner-General of Immigration, 1909*, p. 129.