

# Preserving and Sharing a Local History

## The Ascension Historical Society

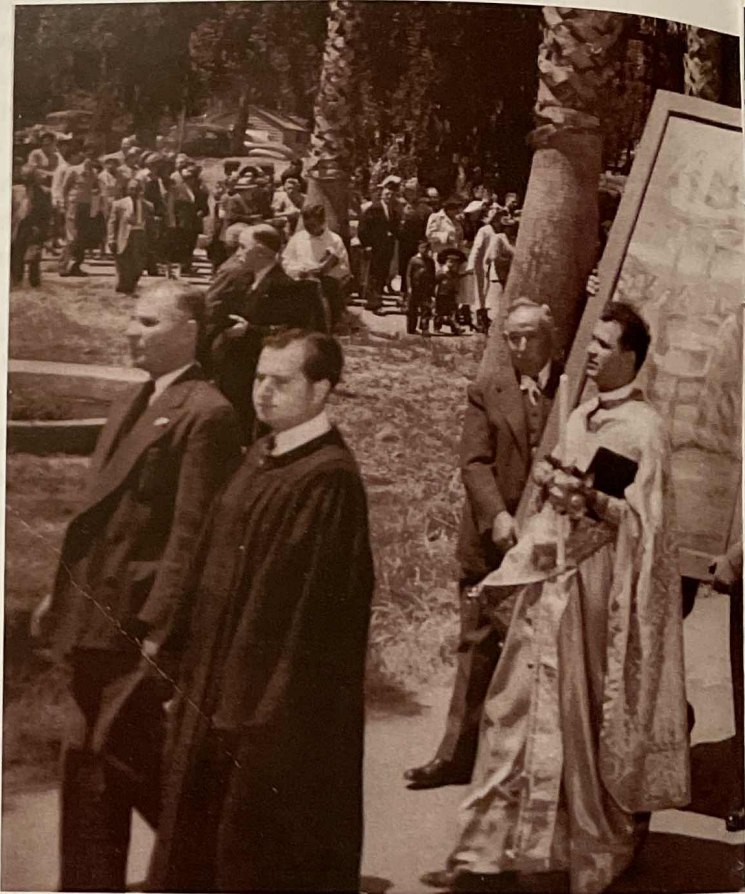
By Mary K. Mousalimas

**O**ur collective roots in this country are assuredly connected to our Orthodox faith because our history here is inextricably linked to our parishes. As soon as the earliest Greek immigrants had established themselves in this new land, they built churches. Those churches became the centers of their communities, where they shared a common language, worshipped together and socialized, and where their children were baptized and learned to read and write the Greek language. As the children of those immigrants matured, they established Sunday schools, youth groups, choirs and athletic teams.

A prime example is the Oakland, CA, Church of the Assumption, that is, the Dormition (*Koimisis*) of the Mother of God. It served as a gathering place in the lives of the early Greek settlers. They built a church with an architecture that reflected their heritage. Its Byzantine dome and neoclassical facade, as well as the solid construction, are of such interest that the building readily met the criteria to be registered as a historical landmark in both the State of California and at the national level.

### SAVING THE ORIGINAL CHURCH BUILDING

Greeks began to settle in the Oakland vicinity in the 1890s. When their numbers had increased sufficiently, they raised the money to both build their church on Oakland's Brush Street and support their clergy.<sup>1</sup> The Church of the Assumption was the only Greek Orthodox Church in the entire East Bay area until the mid-1940s. By 1960, having outgrown the original



facilities in downtown Oakland, the Hellenic community sold the church buildings in order to finance a new, larger church complex in the Oakland hills. The parish also renamed itself "Ascension." The California Department of Transportation eventually acquired the original property, and in 1976, it scheduled the demolition of the building because it stood directly in the path of two major highways.

California State Senator Nicholas C. Petris in Sacramento learned about the imminent demolition and alerted two women—my daughter Eugenia Ahlas and me. We met with individuals of the Department of Transportation, who told us that an "elder of the Greek community in Oakland" had already been contacted about the disposition but that he had dismissed it by saying, "Who wants that piece of junk?"

Hearing this, we took the task upon ourselves, creating the Committee to Save the Brush Street Church. We petitioned the Oakland Landmarks Board to declare the building a landmark. The church building was listed as a historical landmark first by the City of Oakland and then by the State of California, and finally it was put on the National Register of Historical Landmarks in 1978. The Department of Transportation was



but that the lay leadership records prior to 1954 were missing: the proceedings of General Assemblies, the minutes of board of directors meetings, the parish bulletins, and the vital financial records. We presumed they had been removed for safekeeping. However, those primary source materials have not surfaced, and we believe they have been destroyed.

During our search for the missing records, we encountered an astonishing degree of indifference from many quarters: from clergy who had neither concern nor sensitivity for our early community histories; from second-generation laity who chose not to be reminded of their parents' and their own struggles; and from third- and fourth-generation younger people who were unaware of their rich legacy and who saw no merit in recalling the past. On too many occasions we were told, "Who cares?" This made us even more intent on preserving as much of the primary source material as we could, not only against the normal process of decay but also against neglect and wanton destruction.

### COLLECTIONS

With neither formal training nor expert mentoring, we combed through the following primary source materials:

- Public library city directories from the 1880s through the 1930s (documenting on file cards the names, spouses, children, addresses, and places of employment of the early Greeks)
- Old newspapers for relevant articles, especially the Greek newspaper *Kalifornia* (printed in San Francisco), which carried information about the Greeks from around the area and nation, and which ran advertising from Greek-owned businesses, published obituaries, and announced social events
- Our own personal memorabilia, from which we contributed church bulletins, announcements of social and artistic events, programs of dramatic performances, obituaries, newspaper articles, photographs, and early Greek-language schoolbooks as well as out-of-print early publications (we have quite a collection of valuable old books now)

We have amassed a paper trail and other artifacts, now filling an impressive 250 linear feet and seven filing cabinets. All of this is stored in the single classroom and in an overflowing closet.

Our archives also hold the following: recent lay leadership records; clergy records; records from Philoptochos, choirs, youth groups, dance groups, Sunday School and Greek School;

thereby obligated to relocate the building—to literally pick it up and move it to a new location!<sup>2</sup> The old church building is still a Christian place of worship today, although it is owned by a different church group.

### FORMATION AND DEVELOPMENT OF THE HISTORICAL SOCIETY

About a decade later, in 1989, realizing we were the last link with my parents' pioneer generation, I organized a few other individuals to form the Ascension Historical Committee (AHC). In January 2007, we changed our name from "committee" to "society" in order to reflect our growth. Now we are known as the Ascension Historical Society (AHS).

With the support of our parish priest, Rev. Fr. Tom Paris, our parish council honored the committee's requests in 1989 and gave us a furnished classroom in the church complex, a dead bolt lock, and a fireproof filing cabinet.

Soon after the committee's formation, while meeting weekly to discuss objectives and progress and to share our research, our members discovered that the community's ecclesiastical records of births, baptisms, marriages and funerals were intact,

immigration records, applications for American citizenship, and veteran records dating from the Spanish-American War; lists of businesses; volumes of hundreds of photographs (identified, documented and categorized); oral histories; obituaries; original workbooks and monographs; out-of-print publications, and more. We even have the original baptismal font from 1922, part of the iconostasis with the "All-Seeing Eye" from the original church building, as well as old icons. Recently, we had the Ascension Cathedral Monthly Bulletins from 1971 through 2000 bound in hardcover.

Over the years, we have mounted exhibits of photographs and artifacts for our parish in particular and for our city. In November 2007, we celebrated the ninetieth anniversary of the Greek community. More than five hundred visitors attended in four hours.

Throughout the years, we have invited guest speakers to deliver lectures on relevant topics, particularly to provide insights into aspects of our history or to provide advice about collection and preservation.

- Availability and location of research materials
- Procedures for cataloguing retrieved archival materials
- Archival storage and care of artifacts
- Genesis and fruition of both existing and newly formed local history groups
- Urgency and importance for preserving our community histories, with specific instances of materials discarded and other instances of "accidental discoveries"
- Fundamentals of conducting oral histories, with materials for novice and experienced interviewers
- Prosopography (investigation of the common background characteristics of a historical group)
- Technical terms of the historian's paradigm
- History methodology, including outlines for organizing the research of community histories
- Critical problems nationwide and how to overcome them



## SYMPOSIA AND WORKSHOPS

Having experienced the loss of so many valuable records, we felt the urgency of informing others about the importance of safeguarding their own community history sources. At the same time, we recognized the need to provide instruction for neophyte preservationists such as ourselves.

### REGIONAL SYMPOSIA

On February 20, 1998, we held the first-ever symposium for the "Preservation of Our History: Past, Present, and Future."<sup>3</sup> It was convened by the Ascension Historical Committee (as we were then known) of Oakland, California; the Hellenic Cultural Association of Salt Lake City, Utah; and the Patriarch Athenagoras Orthodox Institute of Berkeley, California. Later, two more symposia were convened: Phoenix, Arizona, 1999; and Stockton, California, 2001. These symposia included the following topics:

### PROCEDURES FOR THE PRESERVATION OF PARISH HISTORY

With the support and encouragement of His Eminence Metropolitan Anthony of San Francisco, of blessed memory, we presented our concerns and provided direction on a national level through workshops entitled "Procedures for the Preservation of Parish History" at the Clergy-Laity Congress in Los Angeles (2002).<sup>4</sup> Encouragingly, the participants represented sixty-four cities from twenty states.

Furthermore, a "Resolution for the Preservation of Community Histories," presented by our committee to the San Francisco Metropolis Assembly earlier that same year, was sent from our metropolis to the Clergy-Laity Congress as a nationwide proposal.<sup>5</sup> The congress adopted the resolution that recommended that every parish should create a historical preservation committee to collect, itemize and store carefully any and all items pertaining to the history of the founders, their

descendents, and successive generations of communicants. Wherever possible, these historic objects should be stored in a specific, dedicated area in the community facilities.

### SYMPOSIA FOR THE HISTORICAL SOCIETIES OF THE METROPOLIS OF SAN FRANCISCO

At the suggestion of His Eminence Metropolitan Gerasimos of San Francisco in 2005, a "Symposium for the Historical Societies of the Metropolis of San Francisco" was convened at Oakland's Ascension Cathedral complex in April 2006 by the Metropolis of San Francisco, the Ascension Historical Committee of Oakland, and the Holy Trinity Historical Society of San Francisco.

As a result, new local groups have been formed and more local symposia are being organized. For instance, one participant became so enthused that she convinced the St. Barbara Parish in Santa Barbara, California, to form the St. Barbara Hellenic Cultural Museum.

These symposia are now being held annually. The Holy

individual family histories, historians seeking contacts and data, and history students looking for resources.

### GREEK INDEPENDENCE DAY ANNUAL RUN AND OTHER ACTIVITIES

Our historical society has celebrated Greek Independence Day since 1994 with a 10K/5K run and 5K walk around the shores of Oakland's scenic Lake Merritt. We do this to celebrate the American and Greek traditions of democracy, freedom and athletic excellence and to raise funds for our committee.

Through the years, we have organized various other events to promote our community history. For instance, we organized Founders Day commemorations from 1994 to 1996. Each one consisted of a memorial service for the departed founders of our community as well as an *artoklasia* (blessing of loaves) service for our Ascension Historical Committee. Members of the West Oakland Senior Altar Boys Association (senior citizens who had served as altar boys in their youth) served again in the Divine Liturgy. There, invited speakers addressed issues about



Trinity Historical Society of San Francisco convened a 2007 symposium, and one is scheduled for May 2008.

### WEB SITE

The Ascension Historical Committee and the Hellenic Cultural Association of Salt Lake City, Utah, launched the Preservation of American Hellenic History Web site ([www.pahh.com](http://www.pahh.com)) in March 2002 to address our concerns for communication and dissemination of information among local history groups. Currently, the Web site describes twenty-three separate regional preservation groups, and it has grown beyond its original aims through (a) a compilation of lists of resources for history research and (b) the publication of original memoirs online.

Interested persons have come to us through the Web site from all over the world—those seeking advice about forming regional groups, those sharing their own insights into our mutual history, others searching for insights into their

our history and its preservation. We also took the opportunity to display photographs from our archives.

For our third Founders Day commemoration in 1996, we honored those in their ninetieth decade of age. During a luncheon, each honoree was introduced and presented with a commemorative program. This particular event highlighted the dedication and sacrifices made by their generation in establishing our community.

We have also honored our veterans, both men and women, of all of the military services of the United States and its allied countries. In November 2000, we sponsored a memorial service and an exhibit of archival photographs of veterans from the Civil War to the present. Our second Veterans Commemoration took place in November 2002, which was preceded by an appeal for veterans' records. During this second event, we displayed the Soldier Statue sculpted by artist Andrew Saffas, which was destined to be erected in 2005 in Greece.<sup>6</sup>

### Regular Meetings

Today, the Ascension Historical Society has forty-five members. We meet monthly to review our work and assess our plans. Our Wednesday Workshop Crew meets throughout the year to organize, identify, document and store our collections. This crew is comprised of a few dedicated members who volunteer a monthly aggregate of more than two hundred hours of work.

### INTO THE FUTURE

Currently, we are concentrating on digitizing our collections. We have begun with our volumes of photographs, identifying and encoding each one with location, date, names and so on, and organizing them into categories of events. Once in the databases, the information will be readily available for future research.

We also plan to initiate an intern program for students who (we hope) may continue and develop our work, taking it to new levels of accomplishment.

Looking to the future, we are facing some problems. Although many people in our community enjoy our exhibits and events, and although the younger people are glad to participate in them, we are having trouble recruiting younger people to become members of the history society.

Moreover, we are having difficulty persuading our parish leaders about the importance of preserving and displaying our archival material. Despite endorsements from metropolitans, Clergy-Laity assemblies and congresses, and clergy, our collections remain peripheral in the cathedral complex; their security is tenuous. Our burgeoning archives are packed into a single classroom. Presently, we do not have any prospect for a more adequate home for our collection.

Certain questions arise as we look to the future. Who will continue our work? Who will safeguard the collections? Will they need to be dispersed, to resurface later in private collections? Although we want to keep our collections in our community, will we have to disperse them into various city and state archives in order to assure their preservation?

### OPTIMISM IN CONCLUSION

We are optimistic, nevertheless. Whenever we review our progress, we see how much has been achieved in the face of seemingly insurmountable obstacles. Two women obliged the State of California to stop work on a highway in order to lift a whole church building and move it to safety. One of them organized a few people into a history committee, which has since developed to enrich our community life with

so many activities and symposia, workshops, and a Web site with national and some international influence. A humble Wednesday Work Crew has been collecting, documenting and developing our history archives to overflowing. So much really has been achieved by the initiative of just a very few dedicated individuals. It is true that passion is contagious, and I feel certain that individuals will emerge with the knowledge and passion to continue the work we have begun.

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*Mary Mousalimas is a founding member of the Ascension Historical Society and lives in Oakland, CA.*

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1. The first resident Greek Orthodox priest arrived in San Francisco in May 1903. Greeks living in Oakland would travel to him by ferry across the San Francisco Bay. Before then, there is some documentary evidence of Greeks in the area going from time to time to the Russian Orthodox Church in San Francisco for sacraments such as Holy Matrimony. By 1914, Greeks were celebrating the Divine Liturgy with Syrians and Lebanese in a rented hall in Oakland. A Greek Orthodox priest would visit to officiate at their invitation and their expense. On February 16, 1917, the "Hellenic Community of Oakland and Vicinity" was formally chartered with the State of California so that the Greek settlers could collect funds for a local Greek Orthodox Church. Within four years, they had constructed the church. It was consecrated on May 21, 1921. This is the church that has been saved as a national landmark. The history indicates the loyalty of the Greek settlers to their ancestral faith and the importance of their local church for them.

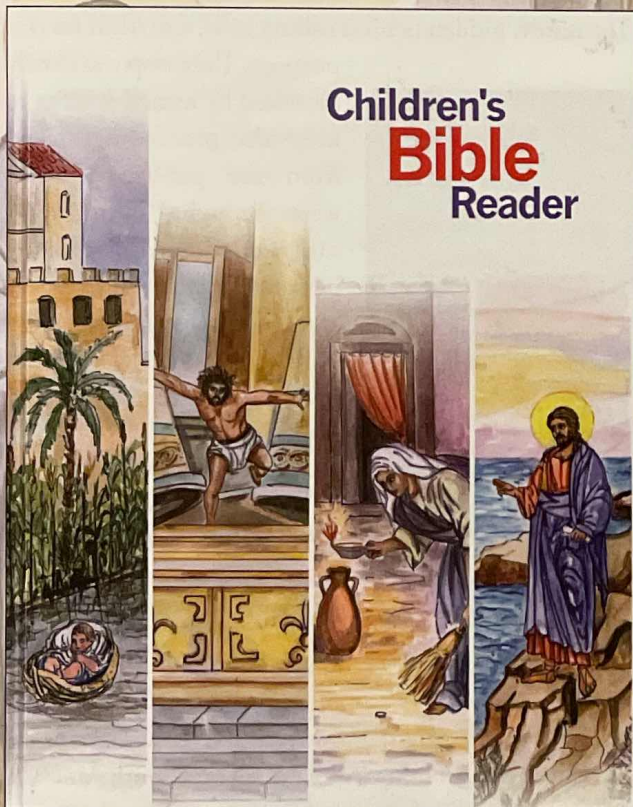
2. For documentation about the landmark status, see Historic American Buildings Survey, "Greek Orthodox Church of the Assumption, 920 Bush Street, Oakland, Alameda County, CA," survey no. HABS CA-2055, Library of Congress, Prints and Photograph Division, Washington, DC (1978-79), available at <http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.pnp/hhh.ca0012>

3. The proceedings of the first symposium, "Preservation of Our History: Past, Present, and Future," are published as Mary Kumarelas Mousalimas, and the Ascension Historical Committee, eds., "A Case Study in Greek-American Orthodoxy: The Ascension Cathedral of Oakland, California," *The Greek Orthodox Theological Review* 45, no. 1-4 (2000): 345-425.

4. Ascension Historical Committee, ed., "Procedures for the Preservation of Parish Histories," 36th Biennial Clergy-Laity Congress Workshops, Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of America, July 1-2, 2002: Reports On-line (PAHH, 2002), available at [www.pahh.com/symposia/workshops2002/contents.html](http://www.pahh.com/symposia/workshops2002/contents.html)

5. "San Francisco Diocese Resolution, February 4, 2002, to be sent as a Proposal to the Archdiocese for the Preservation of Community Histories," available at [www.pahh.com/news/000.html](http://www.pahh.com/news/000.html)

6. See Christos Malaspinas, "The Greek Battalion's Valor Cited as Statue Is Unveiled," *The National Herald* (June 4, 2005; reprint PAHH, 2005), available at [www.pahh.com/remembrance/reprints/soldier-monument.html](http://www.pahh.com/remembrance/reprints/soldier-monument.html). Also see Andrew S. Mousalimas, "The Greek / American Operational Groups' Valor Cited as Statue is Unveiled in Athens, Greece" (PAHH.com, 2005), addendum in "Greek / American Operational Group Office of Strategic Services (OSS): Memoirs of World War 2" (PAHH.com, 2004), available at [www.pahh.com/oss/addendum/indexx.html](http://www.pahh.com/oss/addendum/indexx.html)



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