

## PROLOGUE

### The Founding and Organization of the Greek Orthodox Churches of Reading, PA (I 890-1914)

The present edifice of Sts. Constantine and Helen Greek Orthodox Church at 1001 East Wyomissing Boulevard represents the end of a long and interesting story that began more than 100 years ago by a handful of Greek immigrants who had settled in the Reading area. As news of their successes and accomplishments were received by friends, relatives, and fellow villagers in Greece, many others decided to join this group as they pursued the American dream in seeking a better life..

The first family that settled in Reading from Greece was the Hollis Family-William, Milton, Themis, and Despina. They arrived here from Mytilene, located on the island of Lesbos, circa 1890. Although the Hollis Family began their new life with a small candy making business that they operated from their home, they soon flourished into the largest manufacturer of confectionery in eastern Pennsylvania by 1910. This achievement brought many other young men from the same area as well as from close-by villages in Asia Minor, Aivali and Smyrna. Due to this influx of people in the early 1900's, their descendants are still the largest group of Greek-Americans in this area.

Around the turn-of-the-century, George Thomas arrived in Reading from a mountain area in Greece called Mani. These fiercely independent people are well-known for their continuous stand against the Turks during the entire 400 years of the Turkish occupation. George returned to Mani in 1903 to marry a girl from his village. He brought his new wife and his 13 year-old nephew back to Reading. It was his grocery store that soon became the unofficial Post Office for the Greek immigrants. He also provided these newly-arrived people with food and other products that they were familiar with from their homeland. Again, as news of George's success became known in Mani, many others followed him to Reading. These descendants number in the hundreds today.

Near Mani there is a village called Vlahokerasia, from where a young man came to make his way in America. His name was Constantine Mantis, later known as "Papa Mantis". He, along with some other young men, opened the famous Crystal Restaurant which became a landmark in Reading for over 50 years. Today, there are several families in Reading whose ancestors also came from Vlahokerasia.

The fourth area of Greece represented in Reading today came here as a group from the Island of Kos and the area of Aretsou near Constantinople, Turkey. Although some of these young men found work in New York, most were still searching for jobs. It was one of them, a graduate of the Baxter School in Smyrna who saw an advertisement that a company in Lititz, Pennsylvania was looking for workers for its Animal Trap Company. Almost the entire group left New York and went to Lititz where they all found work in the factory. Now that these men finally found some job security, they began to see a need to fulfill themselves spiritually. They agreed to form an organization called Konstantinos Paleologos, named after the last emperor of the Byzantine Empire. Their principle aim was to locate a priest who would be able to occasionally minister to them. Since George Thomas still had the only place for these immigrants to get word from Greece or to purchase familiar products, these men would routinely travel to Reading. In 1909, when this group had the misfortune of being laid off from the factory in Lititz, they happened to notice a sign in front of the Berkshire Knitting Mills stating. "Boys and Girls Wanted". Most of this original group moved to Reading where work was now available. (Some chose to relocate in Lancaster.) The Reading contingency brought with them their newly-formed organization and the treasury. Their descendants are the second largest group of Greek-Americans in Reading today.

It was George Thomas who brought a priest here from Philadelphia to baptize his daughter on May 20, 1908. This priest was convinced to remain here to celebrate the first Divine Liturgy in Reading, on May 28, 1908 in the home of Costas Lambros at 28 Lemon Street. Although now hopeful of starting a church here in Reading, their meager finances prohibited them from pursuing the idea.

## OUR FIRST CHURCH

Lemon & Chestnut Streets  
(1914-1946)



On May 21, 1911, fifty-four men met and agreed to form the "Greek Orthodox Community of St. Constantine". They elected Constantine Mantis president, and from the treasury that was first initiated in Lititz, PA the balance of \$54.25 was turned over to the newly established organization. Their first order of business was to rent a hall at 735 Penn Street to enable them to hold Divine Liturgy there whenever a priest was available. They began with four icons and a "Synapsi" (a book of condensed Orthodox services) which they received from the Lititz group. Due to the lack of a regular priest, further progress was brought to another stand-still until June 7, 1913. On that date, a general meeting was held at 625 Penn Street where a committee was appointed to formally establish a church. A week later the first elections were held and the first Parish Council was elected with Dr. Milton Hollis as president and George Thomas as treasurer.

A lot with four houses on it was located at Lemon and Chestnut Streets. With the approval of the membership, the lot was purchased and two of the houses were demolished to prepare for the building of this first church. George Gerhart was selected as the architect and C.S. Schlegel Co. was selected as the builder. The Reading Eagle on October 12, 1913 reported that the church would be built using "hydraulic facing brick and stone" and it would be 30 feet wide and 64 feet deep. The article referred to the building as "one of the most imposing in the city". Construction began as scheduled, however, finances were difficult and Dr. Hollis had to advance the project \$500 to pay urgent bills. But this first edifice was successfully constructed. The first services were held in the newly-completed church on March 29, 1914.

Finally, this first edifice used as a Greek Orthodox Church in Reading, PA went into full service and was used continuously until it was sold in 1946. As the community grew, this original building became increasingly small. Many of our "old timers" reported that on Holy Friday and Easter there were more people outside the church with their lit candles than could fit inside the church. The community began

searching for a larger church. However, with the Great Depression affecting the nation, we see that it took some time before the bigger church could become a reality.

## OUR SECOND CHURCH

Eighth and Court Streets  
(1946-1970)

(As a point of interest, this building was erected as the Salem Church by the Evangelical Assn. And it was their house of worship until 1913 when it was transformed into a Jewish Synagogue. In 1929 there was a report that the Jewish Synagogue at Eighth & Court Streets may be for sale. However, when contact was made, they found the price to be \$40,000, which was much more than the church could then afford. So plans to pursue a new location were dropped for the time being.)

By January of 1945, it came to the attention of the Parish Council that the Veterans Firemen Association, located next to the Lemon and Chestnut Street church, was looking to expand and would be interested in buying the church property. The Parish Council appointed a committee to contact Keshar Zion Synagogue officers to see if they were still interested in selling the property at Eighth & Court Streets. On May 13, 1945, the general assembly voted 102-2 to sell the church building for \$20,000 and to purchase the synagogue for \$22,500. The local Ahepa chapter offered to pay for a new Icon Screen built by the Reading Cabinet Works for \$1,850.00 The choir director was authorized to search for a new church organ.

Settlement was made on November 11, 1945 for both properties. The Parish Council contracted the iconographer, Triantafilou, to paint all the icons for the iconscreen. Eight large icons as well as twelve small icons on the top of the Icon Screen were donated by the parishioners. While the iconographer was still in Reading, it was decided to paint large icons on the walls of the church's interior. However, a dilemma occurred because of the expense of these larger icons. Luckily, a parishioner advanced all the money for these and was reimbursed for some of the icons as more donors became available.

A new chandelier was necessary for this larger church since the ones from the previous church were too small. As always, financing the purchase of this expensive addition was a problem. Fortunately, a contact was made about the availability of a lovely chandelier hanging in an old theater in St. Louis. As recorded in the minutes, the actual price of this large piece was \$3,000. However, the church was able to purchase it for \$1,500. (When our current church was built, the chandelier was fully refurbished and was brought to the new building. Today it can still be admired and appreciated as a valuable addition to the church.



S.S. CONSTANTINE & HELENE  
GREEK ORTHODOX CHURCH  
Reading, Pa.

Hanging in the vestibule of the present church is a lovely but small chandelier that was in both of the previous churches. Other original chandeliers are found over the choir loft and in the chapel.



(The Icon Screen built for the Eighth & Court Street church was also brought to the current church. It should be noted that the moving company was adamant about not moving such a valuable and delicate piece. A group of involved parishioners decided to handle this predicament themselves by first removing all the icons and numbering them. The Icon Screen was then carefully cut into several pieces, as it was transported using a parishioners truck. It was then re-assembled and the icons were re-installed. It remained in use until 1988. All the large icons were also removed and brought to the present church. Some were able to be installed, however, the iconography did not match the Byzantine iconography that was being ensconced in the new church from time to time. These larger icons were eventually removed and put into storage because time had made them too brittle to be used. When the Icon Screen was replaced in 1988, all icons-from the old Icon Screen were placed in the Sunday School rooms in the present building.)

## OUR PRESENT CHURCH

1001 East Wyomissing Boulevard  
(Since 1970)

Even though the decision to buy the church at Eighth and Court Streets was almost unanimous, which was quite an accomplishment at that time, it was not long before the general consensus became that the church building itself was inadequate. The circular stairway was extremely difficult to use during the traditional processions for Good Friday and Easter. Funerals also presented problems due to the unusual stairway. The building was very old and always in need of constant repair. As the community continued to grow, with great numbers of children born to returning veterans, Sunday school and Greek School classrooms were in demand. The first floor of the church was used for this purpose by installing curtains as dividers. The first discussion for a new church actually took place on May 20, 1951. When a special General Assembly was called "to discuss the feasibility of a new church". The motion to proceed was defeated 29-21. On November 2, 1952, another general assembly was held "to authorize the Parish Council to contact real estate agents to purchase land on which to build our future church, community school, and parish home". When the authority was given, the Board considered several sites and the president had an architect draw a beautiful plan for a new church. However, as the president's term expired, so did the plans for the project.

In 1957, a planning committee was set up to "plan for the future needs of the community". They considered the pressing need for an adequate Sunday school, so they recommended that the building next to the church be purchased and remodeled to accommodate the school. The Anixithiria or Grand Opening

of the Annex was celebrated in May of 1958. A small mortgage was taken out to pay for the addition, but was completely paid off in one year. Once again, thoughts were given for a new church. In December of 1960, the Parish Council and the planning committee met to authorize plans for a new church. However, the general assembly did not agree. The following year another general assembly was called to authorize a committee to "plan, finance, and proceed with all arrangements for a new church building". On December 10, 1961, the committee recommended that the parish purchase the two adjoining lots at 1001 East Wyomissing Boulevard. A drive was quickly inaugurated to raise funds for the building of the new church.

However, now began a very distressing period for the community. A number of parishioners, including many past presidents of the Parish Councils, as well as many officers of the Philoptochos Society, believed that since so many of the members of the parish lived in the city or did not drive a car, the need for a church centrally located in the city was a necessity. This group challenged the decision of the general assembly. Although meetings and discussions were constantly held, no agreements could be reached. The Bishop and the Archbishop were asked to intervene, but with no success.

(in 1968, the faction that wanted the church to remain in the city purchased an existing church building and established a new parish in the downtown area at 5th and Elm Streets, which is currently known as St. Matthews.)

The Parish Council and the Building Committee decided to proceed with the plans to erect the new church with the specifications to make it large enough to accommodate the entire parish. Although beautiful plans were presented and studied, some of the original intent had to be amended due to the financial problem of not having the entire parish participating in the building of the new church. Ground breaking ceremonies were held on June 9, 1968, with Martin & Dethoff as architects and C.H. Schlegel, the successor company to the one who built the first church, as general contractor. The Anniversary or Grand Opening of the church was held on February 7, 1970. In May of 1970, His Eminence Archbishop Iakovos visited the parish to lay the cornerstone in the southeast corner of the new church during a weekend of elaborate celebrations.

Although the community was delighted with their beautiful and spacious new church, finances became a major concern. There was now a very large mortgage and expenses were much higher than anticipated, with income lower than expected. The initiating of the now famous Greek Food Bazaar in 1970, allowed for the much needed revenue, and this attraction continues to grow each year. In the mid-seventies, an area adjoining the church property became available. It was purchased to enlarge the existing parking lot and to provide for the future needs of the church.

With other areas of concern now solved, attention was now focused on the interior of the church. In the early eighties, several Byzantine icons painted by Constantine Yiouisis were installed on the walls of the church. This began the process of turning the interior of the church into a true Byzantine style edifice. In 1988, the decision was made to replace the Iconscreen, which had been brought from the church at Eighth and Court Streets. The eminent Byzantine architect Steven Papadatos was consulted. He suggested a series of arches be constructed to cover the original laminated wooden columns. The end of these arches would mark the appropriate location of the new Iconscreen. This major renovation necessitated great expenditures, which was handled through a line of credit from a local bank to be repaid as money became available. By the spring of 1989, all the renovations were completed and the new Iconscreen, manufactured by Kostantinos Pylarinos was installed with all new icons painted by George Filpakis.

Due to the gracious generosity of various parishioners, many enhancements have been made to the grand interior. A stained glass window was installed in the front of the Altar over the old icon of the Platytera.

Then the decision was made to proceed with iconography throughout the interior of the church. After interviewing several iconographers and considering their proposals and offers, the decision was made to award the contract to Kostas Skordelis who had done extensive work in several churches on the Island of Mytilene prior to emigrating to the United States. Under the same contract, Mr. Skordelis was to paint and install 24 icons in the interior of St. Demetrios Church, Wildwood, NJ during the spring and summer months and paint icons in our church the rest of the year until both projects were completed. He started with the magnificent large icon of the Ascension over the Altar and continued until all the icons were painted and installed.

In 1995, a dedicated family offered to donate and construct a chapel on the left side of the front of the church as was originally planned. After authorization was given, Steven Papadatos was again consulted to do the project. He designed an arched ceiling and an Icon Screen to beautifully compliment the main Icon Screen without any distractions. To balance the total appearance, the right side of the front of the church was similarly done. The Wildwood Ahepa Weekend donated this area. Kostas Pylarinos was again asked to build the two new Icon Screens, a new altar table, a new oblation table, and a new chanter's stand for the chapel. The completed chapel was dedicated to Ypapanti, Presentation of Christ, and services were first held there on Christmas Eve, 1996.

In early 1999, the Parish Council formed a committee to look into the future of our Church and determine its needs. Christ G. Kraras and Frank Petrakis were appointed Co-Chairmen of the committee that consisted of over 30 parishioners. Meetings were held weekly and many ideas were presented and discussed.

It was agreed that the most urgent needs were more classrooms, more storage space, an elevator, a larger social hall, and more kitchen space. After many meetings and after many ideas were presented, the committee was ready to make a report to a special General Assembly held on June 27, 1999. Plans were presented for a new social hall to be constructed on the western end of the Church building. In addition, the existing hall was to be divided into classrooms, and a new spacious and well-equipped kitchen was to be in the new building as well as sufficient storage space. Of course, an elevator and facilities for the handicapped were to be added. The report also stated that the construction would not begin until at least \$250,000 was pledged to be paid in three years. Enthusiasm was very high, and in a few weeks Spiro Lecatsas, Chairman of the Fundraising Sub-committee, reported that over \$700,000 had been pledged and many pledges were partly or fully paid already. A second General Assembly in May, 2000 authorized unanimously to make the project even bigger and better, and to also address other needs of the Church including the dire need of a new roof. Construction started right after the Sunday school year ended in May. The new social hall, kitchen, and classrooms were all ready in time for the new church year, which began on September 17, 2000. It would appear that the church is now complete. However, as in all churches, there is always more work to be done to keep the House of the Lord beautiful and practical. With the intercession of the patron Saints Constantine and Helen, we pray that our Great Lord, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit will guide us to bigger things in praise of His name.

-October 2000

Gust C. Kraras

