

Pioneering Priests: Establishing the Greek Orthodox Faith in America
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This article first appeared in the May 2014 issue of the Orthodox Observer, the official publication of the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of America.

St. Basil Academy: From Dream to Reality

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June 21 is Commencement Day at St. Basil Academy, which this year celebrated its 70th anniversary in 2014. One of five institutions supported by the Archdiocese, the Academy is part of the remarkable legacy of Archbishop Athenagoras, who served eighteen years as head of the Church in the Western Hemisphere. On March 15, 1944, the estate of the late Jacob Ruppert (1867-1939), the former owner of the New York Yankees known for building Yankee Stadium, was purchased for the Archdiocese by Philoptochos. The Academy was established there and named after St. Basil, the eminent 4th-century Cappadocian theologian said to have started the tradition of inserting coins into bread as a way of distributing alms to the poor.

The seeds of what would later become St. Basil Academy had been sown thirteen years earlier. On June 6, 1931, not long after Archbishop Athenagoras arrived in America, the Archdiocese announced plans to purchase the 400-acre site and five buildings of the former Linwood College in Gastonia, North Carolina. This was to serve as the site for the first Greek Orthodox orphanage in America and for a seminary to replace the short-lived St. Athanasios Seminary of Astoria.

The Great Depression had made life difficult for families throughout this country. For immigrants and their families, it was a perilous time. Archbishop Athenagoras had served as Metropolitan of Corfu before coming to America and had coped with refugee and orphan emergencies resulting from the 1923 invasion of the islands by Italy. His Eminence saw the importance of having a home for children in need. It was also clear that the growing communities required the services of clergy and a seminary in America to train them. In Gastonia, His Eminence hoped to achieve both goals in one place.

Constantine and Stefano Stephano, wealthy Greek cigarette manufacturers from Philadelphia, donated \$12,500 to purchase the land. They were familiar with the location near the heart of tobacco country. The site had much to recommend it. The former college campus was set in the mountains near springs containing iron, sulphur, and other beneficial, healing mineral water. The plan was to establish a complex that included a seminary, orphanage, school, old-age home, and monastery. It was to be called Monastery St. Stephanos in honor of the first Christian martyr and in acknowledgement of the generous donors.

The dedication ceremony took place on September 18, 1932. About 3,000 people, including many leading Greek religious, government, media, and business

figures gathered to see Archbishop Athenagoras dedicate the facility and lay the cornerstone of the new chapel. Father Emilianos Paschalakis (1884-1951), who served the Holy Trinity parish in Charlotte, was president of the Monastery at the time.

The president of the Chamber of Commerce of Gastonia, population 17,000, exhorted the local populace to attend the dedication:

It is hardly possible to overestimate the importance and significance of this occasion. In the first place, we are going to have as our guests a number of men who are internationally known for their prominence in the Greek Orthodox Church, the political life of Greece, and also some noted American tobacco manufacturers and newspaper editors.... Every loyal citizen should make a special effort to impress these visitors with the fact that we appreciate the fine services of our local Greek citizens and that Gaston County is immensely proud of this new Greek development out at Linwood.

In spite of solid financial backing, however, the complex did not flourish. Perhaps the mountain location was too distant from the seat of the Archdiocese in Astoria. The Greek population was concentrated in industrial cities primarily in the Northeast. In 1935, after two years of operation, the complex in Gastonia closed. In 1937, Holy Cross Theological Seminary opened in Pomfret, Connecticut. Instead of creating a multi-institutional complex as at Gastonia, Archbishop Athenagoras opted for a Pomfret campus focused on a single institution.

In July 1941, after Greece entered World War II, there was a more urgent need for an orphanage and relocation center for orphaned children from Greece. The choice was either to settle them at Gastonia or to make a new start. Although the North Carolina site was kept under consideration, His Eminence continued to search for other closer sites.

In March 1944, the Archdiocese settled on the former Jacob Rupert estate as the site for an orphanage. At the time, the outcome of the war was still in doubt. Greece was occupied by Nazi Germans, and much of the attention of Greeks everywhere was on Greek War Relief and on securing victory in Europe and the Pacific. The picturesque, 400-acre site on the shores of the Hudson River overlooking West Point Academy was a bargain at \$55,000, but it took the proceeds from two years of Vasilopita celebrations for Philoptochos to purchase the land and make the dream a reality.

The establishment of this institution was a remarkable achievement. As needs have changed, it has served the Archdiocese in many different capacities: as orphanage, school for boys and girls, girls' school, women's junior college, teachers' college, and now a group home for children. With the assistance of the Orthodox faithful across the Archdiocese, Saint Basil Academy "provides love, shelter, food, education, protection and a home for her orphans, children of chronically ill or destitute parents or children from broken homes so they grow up to be healthy, wholesome, well-rounded Orthodox Christians, as well as productive members of society with vision and hope."