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NEWSLETTER

St. Augustine, FL ~ 2025

National Shrine Pilgrimage

The weekend began with a Friday evening reception hosted by Helen A. Carlos at the Renaissance Hotel. This was an opportunity for trustees from across the holy Archdiocese to welcome and congratulate the newly enthroned Metropolitan Sevastianos of Atlanta, who by virtue of his office, serves as President of the St. Photios Foundation, Inc.; and to honor Polexeni Maouris Hillier, the retiring Executive Director of St. Photios National Shrine.

His Eminence thanked Helen and her husband, Ron Hilliard, for bringing everyone together. "Less than a week ago, my Enthronement and then eye surgery, and now, this pilgrimage marking my first as president and sadly, Polly's last as director. Helen, you have picked up the mantle of your beloved mother, Eula, of blessed memory and more so. Thank you for your generosity."

Metropolitan Sevastianos, President of the St. Photios Foundation, opened the 43rd annual St. Photios Foundation meeting with prayer. Vice President Archon Anthony Megas thanked Helen A. Carlos and Susan Loutsion for chairing the weekend events.

New appointees were welcomed from the Direct Archdiocesan District: Rev. Fr. Nicholas Anctil and Sophia Maria Mantzouris; and Rev. Dn. Steve Sarigianis of the Detroit Metropolis. Megas thanked event photographer Dka. Theophani Sarigianis, for offering her time and talents this weekend.



HE Met. Sevastianos Celebrates Great Vespers in the Chapel of St. Photios, Assisted by Niko Megas



1st row: Rev. Dr. Nicholas Louh, Archon Anthony Megas, Polexeni Hillier, Metropolitan Sevastianos of Atlanta, Archon Carl Hollister, V. Rev. Maximos Politis, Elaine Zetes, Archon Harry T. Cavalaris. 2nd row: Rev. Dimitrios Moraitis, Maria Carantzas, Rev. Dn. Steven Sarigianis, Joanne Stavrakas, Susan Loutsion, Rev. Nicholas Anctil, Dn. Athanasios Kartsonis, Sophia Maria Mantzouris, Elaine Mekras Scurtis 3rd row: Nassim Elias, Archon Jimmy Frangis, Helen Carlos, Tom Lekas, Angelo Kliossis

The Trustees voted Joanne Stavrakas (Chicago Metropolis) to the position of 2nd Vice President and Evan Scurtis (Atlanta Metropolis) to the position of 3rd Vice President. 1st Vice President Archon Anthony Megas will continue to serve through December 2026.

Among other decisions, the trustees agreed to overlap the current and succeeding leadership through June 2025, with Polly overseeing the Shrine presence at the Metropolis of Atlanta Clergy Laity meeting, and coordinating the efforts for Greek Landing Day.

His Eminence Metropolitan Sevastianos of Atlanta celebrated the Great Hierarchical Vespers of the Presentation of Christ to the Temple in the

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Join us in welcoming incoming Executive Director of St. Photios Greek Orthodox National Shrine, Archon Carl R. Hollister



Mayor Nancy Sikes-Kline presents the Mayoral Proclamation for Greek Landing Day to Archon Carl Hollister, Executive Director of St. Photios National Shrine.

Known as Icarus, Carl, a proud Ikarian, was born near Cleveland, in the city of Willoughby, Ohio. He grew up playing sports (football, baseball, wrestling and track). He learned to love the outdoors, fishing, and hunting with his Papou, and best friend, George J. Space. He is the son of Demetria G. (Space) Hollister and Robert E. Hollister, and the eldest of three brothers: George and Christopher.

In high school, Carl excelled in football (team captain) and baseball. He went on to play college football for the Grove City College Wolverines, Grove City, Pennsylvania, where he graduated with a B.A. in Economics. Grove City still holds a special place for Carl, as that is where he met his bride, his love and life partner, Cynthia D. Pappas. Carl furthered his education at Webster University in Webster Groves, Missouri, earning an M.A. in Finance.

Carl is a retired U.S. Army Officer (Major) in the Army Reserves with 21 years active and reserve total service; 17 of those served in Special Operations, with tours of duty in Central America, the Balkans, and Central Asia. Carl trained at the US Army John F. Kennedy Special Warfare Center and School in Foreign Internal Defense and Unconventional Warfare (FID UW), where he specialized in Psychological Operations and Civil Military Operations. As commander of the Khost Provincial Reconstruction Team in Afghanistan, he was awarded the Bronze Star in 2005. He received noteworthy accolades in the Book "Counterinsurgency in Eastern Afghanistan 2004-2008" written by Robert Kemp of the U.S. State Department.

With over 25 years of experience in the securities industry, Carl currently serves as President and member of the board of directors for L.M. Kohn & Company, a regional S.E.C. Registered Investment Advisor and Broker/Dealer, serving the mass affluent market, small corporate, and non-profit client marketplace. The firm operates 60 branches and oversees \$4 billion in client assets under management. L.M. Kohn & Company is headquartered in Cincinnati, Ohio.

ARCHON Carl is a dedicated member of the Greek Orthodox Church and the Order of AHEPA. He currently serves on the National Council for The Archons of the Ecumenical Patriarchate and as member of the of the Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew Foundation (EPBF), where he serves as the Audit Committee Chairman. He also serves on the Archdiocesan Council and was a trustee of the St. Photios Foundation. As a member of Saints Constantine & Helen Greek Orthodox Church in Middletown, Ohio, Carl served as a Parish Council President. He also has served as an advisor to the Metropolis of Detroit. For the Order of AHEPA, he is a Past Supreme President (2017-18) and currently serves on its board of directors. Carl also served as Chairman and CEO for the AHEPA National Housing Corporation (2019-2022), a nonprofit company with a portfolio of over 90 affordable independent and assisted senior living communities nationwide.

We look forward to Carl and his wife, Cynthia (Pappas), completing their move to St. Augustine the beginning of October. They are the proud parents of their daughter Alexandra.



Announcement of Transition at St. Photios National Shrine at the Metropolis of Atlanta Philoptochos Assembly the Biennial Metropolis Clergy Laity. Archon Carl Hollister, Rev. Fr. Michael Platanis, Irene Politis, President, and Polly Hillier



On August 7, 2024, Ted Sofianos presented this embroidered silk tapestry, *The Compassionate Woman*, in memory of his beloved father, Paul Fokion Sofianos. In 1923, Olga Papazologou was befriended by Paul's mother. A refugee from Smyrna, Asia Minor, she lived with the family for 52 years. They had taken Olga in while living in Lagonisi, Athens. She was 101 when she fell asleep in the Lord in 1975.

This embroidery, created by her grandmother in the late 19th century was the only object brought with Olga from her ancestral home. It was featured in the 2008 "Painted With A Needle" special exhibit at St. Photios Greek Orthodox National Shrine. God give rest to her soul.

The Family Registry Project at St. Photios Remembering William Gregory by Elizabeth Bisbikis

It is always with awe and pride that I recall the trials that our Greek parents and grandparents endured in their search for the American life. I saw in my father's life, William Gregory, the same determination and bravery that many Greek men and women faced.

His story began in the village of Semendra in Asia Minor, a small farming community which provided a livelihood for the Greeks and Turks who inhabited it. The relations between the two were harmonious.

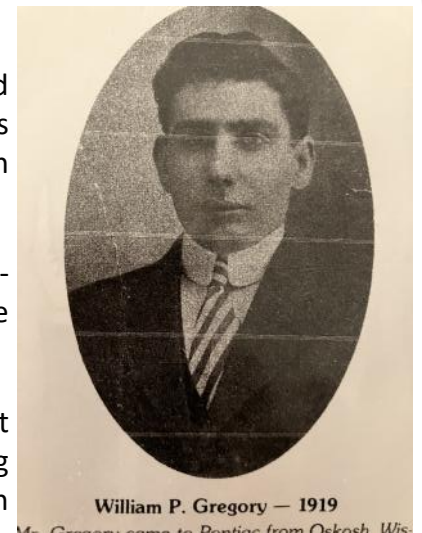
Prior to the onset of WWI, the Turkish government was forcing Greek men to enlist in their army which was the motivating factor for my father to make a life changing decision. He made plans for his immigration to America. In 1913 he passed through Ellis Island (his name is now etched in the Wall of Freedom, Ellis Island Museum).

His plans included travel to the cities where he knew his fellow-Semendrians had preceded him. He worked in restaurants in Oshkosh, Milwaukee, and Rockport. He then enlisted in the US Army in 1918 and was stationed in Vancouver, Washington for the duration of the war, whereupon he was interviewed and, in the courts of Portland, Oregon, became a citizen of the United States of America.

He ultimately settled in Pontiac, Michigan and became the owner of a grocery store; he remained in the retail business until his retirement. During this time, the family he left behind resettled in northern Greece due to the "exchange" of the Greeks from Turkey. My father made the trip to the new village and returned to the United States with his father, my grandfather, Father Gregorios Eliades, and other family members.

By 1928, my father was in the group of the founding fathers of St. George Greek Orthodox Church in Pontiac. He, along with other Semendrians and other Greek families in the area, initiated this endeavor and succeeded with my grandfather serving as the first priest.

My father and mother were married in 1930 and raised three children. By example, he taught us the merits of "good" character: live the Faith, never forget our roots, and love of country, the United States of America.



William P. Gregory — 1919

Dear Friends of St. Photios,

The annual newsletter is such an important archive for our national Shrine. I struggle every year to get it to the printer despite this being my 21st newsletter. I am easily distracted as I begin the ‘year in review.’ Writer’s block occurs, scrolling for photos that can be captioned is a challenge, the rough draft is sent off to be proofed, edits are inevitable and then finally, it gets to the printer. It is a bittersweet process as I struggle to “get it done” as I too will soon be done.

My hope is that as you read this newsletter you know how grateful I have been to witness my faith and culture in this sacred site. I have been nurtured and tempered these twenty years in ways that I could not have imagined. Friendships have been forged with so many of you; I am thankful for each of you.

Metropolitan Dimitrios of Xanthos opened the Shrine in 1982. He served as Executive Director for 19 years and trustee emeritus for 16 years. He will continue to offer his perspective and experience as Carl Hollister begins his first year as Executive Director. This seven-month long farewell has been an effective bridge between the present and the future.

When you are reading this, Allan and I will have begun our next chapter in New Zealand. My prayer is that you encourage one another to have a relationship with the Shrine. Visit, join the Friends program. Know the colonists’ story. I leave with pride that the memory of 500 Greeks, contracted under the British Indentured Servitude Act, survived to be part of the early immigration story of our great nation, pre-Revolutionary war. God give rest to their souls.

I am thankful to have reaped the benefits of attending our beloved school, HCHC. It was an honor to be the first fourth grade teacher of the William Spyropoulos Parochial Day School of St. Nicholas in Flushing. Afterward, I taught the K-2 grade levels at the afternoon Greek School of St. George in Kingston, NY for 20 years and now retiring having served 20 years at our precious St. Photios Greek Orthodox National Shrine.

I will look back on these years with a smile and pray you are able to do so when you think of me. Please pray for me as I pray for you! I wish you all well.

With gratitude, great respect and love, Polly

Polexeni Maouris Hillier

Student Field Trip Site

One of the joys of spring and fall is the wave of students led by teachers and chaperones into St. Augustine. Most are the fourth-graders on their annual field trip; for many it is their first time in America’s oldest city, learning in person about the former capital of the East Florida province.

I have had the honor of meeting the teachers who are true heroes. Among my favorites is Amber Messer, the third-grade teacher at the Veritas Classical School in St. Augustine. Her students are well prepped with riveting questions following the Shrine tour.

I am most grateful that our time finishes with the students’ recitation of the Lord’s Prayer in Latin. Scripture proudly articulated, they leave with us enriched by their presence.



Continued from page 1

Chapel of St. Photios, with the V. Rev. Father Maximos Politis, Rev. Dn. Athanasios Kartsonis, and chanters Archon Dr. Nick Loutsion and Thomas Lekas.

Master of Ceremonies Archon Nicholas J. Furriss thanked event benefactors and the members of the Pilgrimage committee for their good work. He then introduced Metropolitan Sevastianos, President of the Permanent Board of the St. Photios Foundation, and recognized all the guests; honoring the volunteers who have devoted time, talents, and resources to the first National Shrine of the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of America.

Members of the Federation of Church Musicians from Chicago, with choir members from Holy Trinity, Maitland, and St. John the Divine, Jacksonville, provided musical interludes throughout the evening. Following her keynote address, entitled “A Reflection,” VP Archon Anthony Megas presented outgoing Executive Director Polexeni Maouris Hillier a monetary gift in appreciation for her two decades of service. In honor of her love of teaching, he announced The Polexeni Maouris Hillier High School Scholarship that will be made available to high school seniors and college students. The third gift presented was an icon of “St. Polyxene within the Chapel of St. Photios,” written by the hand of Shrine iconographer Archon Hagiographos George K. Filippakis. In his closing remarks before the benediction, His Eminence Metropolitan Sevastianos of Atlanta thanked Helen Carlos and Susan Loutsion for chairing the event and for agreeing to chair the 2026 Pilgrimage banquet. He stated that that this is “a room full of love.”

The 43rd Annual St. Photios Foundation, Inc. Pilgrimage concluded on Sunday, February 2, following the Hierarchical Divine Liturgy at St. John the Divine in Jacksonville. Rev. Dr. Nicholas Louh, proistamenos, invited all to the Church banquet hall. Parish Council President Nassim Elias and Philoptochos President Effie Tsiongas-Lasoff, led the staff and community in providing a luncheon in honor of His Eminence’s first Archpastoral visit to St. John as its new shepherd, and in honor of outgoing Shrine Executive Director, Polly Hillier.

Father Nick presented an engraved Archiepiscopal Engolpion to His Eminence. Alexandra Loutsion produced a tribute video snapshot of Polly’s ministry at the Shrine. Mrs. Lasoff, on behalf of the Sts. Anargyroi Philoptochos, presented Polly with a byzantine cross created by Paul Angelopoulos, flowers from the children ,and a special cake depicting the Shrine and its environs. Polly addressed the community on behalf of herself and her husband Allan. She thanked them for being their Florida family for the past 20 years.

In his closing remarks, His Eminence thanked the community for their unsurpassed hospitality and praised Father Nicholas and the parishioners for their service and for fervently witnessing their faith. “You do not hide your light; Bravo!” The trustees, visiting musicians, friends, and honored guests echoed the sentiments of Metropolitan Sevastianos of Atlanta as they left for their homes near and far.



Metropolitan Sevastianos of Atlanta, President of the St. Photios Foundation with 2nd VP Joanne Stavarakas, her husband Dean and their son Symeon.



Fr. Nicholas G. Louh, Michael and Archon Anthony Megas, Archon George Filippakis, Honoree Polly Hillier, Metropolitan Sevastianos of Atlanta, Allan Hillier



NSD Chairpersons Susan Loutsion and Helen Carlos

Chapel Life & Light A Candle Ministry

During the year, the order of services for the Shrine are Services of Supplication to the Holy Theotokos (Paraklesis) on the third Wednesday of each month at 11:30 a.m. During Great Lent, the services are Great Compline on the third Thursday of the month, and ecclesiastical services held in February for the Feast of St. Photios, and in June for the Feast of St. Augustine (15) and Greek Landing Day. (26) Refer to the Shrine's Facebook page for updates.

The Chaplain is the recipient of hundreds of prayer requests each year. The V. Rev. Fr. Maximos Politis is the parish priest of Holy Trinity Greek Orthodox Church in St. Augustine and graciously serves as the chaplain of St. Photios Greek Orthodox Shrine. We asked Father to share his story with us.

I was born in Thessaloniki, Greece, and raised in a deeply religious environment. Coming from a lineage of engineers—my father, grandfather, and many before them—it seemed almost a matter of natural progression, or to borrow Darwinian terms, “natural selection,” that I would follow in their footsteps.

After completing my secondary education in 1979, I began my studies at a Technical College. Excelling academically, I ranked among the top two students and was awarded a scholarship to continue my education in the Department of Mechanical Engineering at the Aristotle University of Thessaloniki. Over the next five years, I devoted myself to my engineering studies.

However, while still a student, I felt a profound calling to monastic life and, eventually, the priesthood. Upon graduating from the Engineering School, I was ordained as a deacon and later as a priest and Archimandrite. Around this time in 1987, I also successfully passed the entrance exams to study at the Theology School of Aristotle University. Concurrently, I pursued studies in Byzantine Music. After completing my theology degree, I returned to the Engineering Department to earn a Master of Science, focusing on the application of high technology in the preservation and restoration of works of art and icons.



I spent 30 years in monastic life in Thessaloniki, including eight years in the monastic community of Mount Athos. Later, due to personal circumstances, I felt God's calling to move to the United States. Initially, I resided in New York, but for the past five years, I have been blessed to serve in St. Augustine, Florida. Here, I am honored to serve the Holy Metropolis of Atlanta as the parish priest of Holy Trinity Church and Chaplain of the St. Photios National Shrine. I feel deeply grateful to God for the path He has set before me and for the opportunity to serve others.

St. Photios Greek Orthodox National Shrine

St. Photios Greek Orthodox National Shrine is located in the Colonial Quarter of St. Augustine, FL. It is a sacred and historical site built in memory of the 500 Greeks who came to America with the Turnbull expedition in 1768. The chapel has a reliquary with the bone fragments of 18 saints of the early Church in the narthex and the relics of 3 female saints in the altar. The chapel and museum occupy the historic Avero House – a 2-story structure that was built in the 1740's, razed and then reconstructed. In 1982, the Shrine opened with a clear mission to actively witness Orthodox Christianity, share the Hellenic culture and honor the memory of all immigrants who came to America in quest of a new life.



Very Rev. Maximos Politis in the St. Photios Chapel



Lecturer Archon Maestor Elias Damianakis

Indiction

The St. Photios Greek Orthodox National Shrine observed the Feast of the Indiction and the ecclesiastical new year with services and a lecture on September 1.

Metropolitan Dimitros of Xanthos, assisted by the V. Rev. Joseph Samaan, chanted the hymns and then read the Encyclical of His All-Holiness Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew.

Polexeni Hillier welcomed guests to the program, thanking Angela Damianakis, LCSW, and the OIKOU.org, for underwriting the costs of the Second Annual Indiction Lecture Series. She introduced Archon Elias Damianakis whose topic "Ecological Asceticism" sparked great discussion and reflection. He explored the intersection of Orthodox Christian spirituality and environmental stewardship, a concept famously advocated by His All Holiness.

The keynote address followed the luncheon, provided by Angela Lekos.

Through engaging storytelling, Damianakis referenced the Book of Genesis, the Psalms, and the Church Fathers, reminding attendees of humanity's divine responsibility to care for creation: "At the heart of ecological asceticism is the Orthodox belief in the sanctity of creation. The world is not merely material but imbued with the divine presence, reflecting God's glory."

His message encouraged the audience to embrace simplicity, moderation, and responsibility in interacting with the environment, drawing parallels between the spiritual disciplines of fasting and environmental stewardship.

The lecture resonated deeply with the audience, sparking an enthusiastic question-and-answer session that enriched the discussion further. In addition, the event drew a steady stream of pilgrims and tourists, enhancing the Shrine's lively and welcoming atmosphere in the heart of historic St. Augustine on St. George Street.



Andrew and Angela Lekos

St. Photios National Shrine Church Supplies

National Shrine Church Supplies (NSCS) was established to help the St. Photios National Shrine become a self-sustaining institution of the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of America by accessing high quality ecclesiastical products for churches throughout America, at competitive prices.

NSCS offers a greater selection of candle sizes and types at the best price available. All proceeds from purchases aid in maintaining this sacred and historic National Shrine. Visit our online store at: <https://stphotios.org/shop/>. You can also place an order, with Shrine Manager, Gina Bingman, Monday through Friday, 8:30 – 3:00 at 904-829-8205 or by emailing her at churchsupplies@stphotios.com.

Order your Epiphany Icon holy water bottles today and receive a 5% discount (excludes shipping) on your total order if you do so prior to September 30, 2025. Thank you for your continued support of the St. Photios Greek Orthodox National Shrine.



50 Women Attend Philoptochos NE Florida Retreat

On Saturday, January 18, Father Alexander Kamilaris welcomed congregants to St. Demetrios Church in Daytona Beach after services celebrating the Feast of St. Athanasios the Great saying, “This is reminiscent of gatherings recounted in the Book of Acts, where the faithful came from afar to witness together as one. May the retreat be a blessing for us all.”

“Ring in the New Year with One Good Thought” featured interactive talks from Edna King, author of One Good Thought, and Director of the Metropolis of Atlanta Family Life Ministry, Paula Marchman Lekas. Polly Hillier, retreat facilitator and Executive Director of St. Photios National Shrine thanked the St. Photios Foundation for underwriting the costs, Father Alex for providing spiritual wisdom from the beginning to the day’s end and Rev. Dr. Athanasios (Al) Demos who generously gave permission to copy and share his work, “The Triodion, the most complete preparation for the comprehensive celebration of the Feast of Easter.”

This pamphlet is a map with nuances and disciplines during that time of year when one most deeply engages in the liturgical cycle. “One Good Thought” is a 9-chapter book of wisdom and beautiful photography seeking eternal perspectives in a temporary world.



Retreat Leaders Edna King and Paula Marchman



The Wall of Tribute Ministry of St. Photios Greek Orthodox National Shrine by Chuck Koukoulis, Ministry Chair

This program was chaired by my father, Archon Angelo Koukoulis, for 15 years. He believed that the names on this special donor wall represent the respect we hold for the memory of our early ancestors. People who subscribe to this witness their Orthodox Christian faith and their support in honoring the memory of the first Greek colonists. He wanted the world to be able to visit the museum and be able to have a place to light a candle and say a prayer. He never understood why every parish did not know about this opportunity to be included, and, if they did, why they did not jump at the chance to add their parish to the list. He believed people just needed to learn about it and, once they did, they would participate.



The Metropolitan of Pittsburgh is listed, our parish of St. Spyridon in Clarksburg, WV is listed, my parents are listed, my sister and her family are listed, and I am listed. *All separately and all proudly.*

Are you on this special donor wall? If not, I urge you to join the list of subscribers for 2025. The inscriptions will be etched the third week of January, 2026. Thank you to the Papanickolas family of Massachusetts who are adding their family members; the Loutsions of Pennsylvania who are honoring Paulette Poulos and Polly Hillier; Mrs. Karen Stamatiades of Georgia for honoring her grandchildren; Ms. Dina Theodosakis of New York who is honoring her parents; and Ms. Faklis from Illinois who is commemorating her uncle.

The Wall of Tribute is a public recognition of remembrance and honor. It is offered by the St. Photios Foundation with gratitude for all those large donations received from within a community so proud of the Orthodox faith and early Greek immigration history.

A Reflection by V. Rev. Father Maximos

The Church teaches that where there is pride, selfishness, vanity, or a desire for praise, the Grace of God is absent. On the contrary, as the Apostle James teaches, God grants grace to the humble (James 4:6). With this in mind and avoiding every thought that drives away the Grace of God, let us reflect on a simple yet profoundly blessed incident.

It was April 10, and I was to celebrate the Great Compline and the 20-year memorial of the former Archbishop of America, Iakovos, at the Shrine of Saint Photios. As soon as I concluded the service, I noticed a lady near the chapel. I thought to welcome her and engage in conversation—who knew what might be on her heart? She opened up to me: “My sister-in-law is in the final stage of a severe illness. I cannot simply tell her that 'everything will be fine.'”

Instead, I try to inspire her to be unafraid of what is to come and to trust in the Lord. I pray constantly for her. Even in the middle of the night, if I wake—whether at 3 a.m. or any hour—I take my Rosary and pray. This is what I ask of you as well,” she concluded. I sat with her for at least half an hour. In the end, we exchanged a fraternal farewell.

Several days later, I received an envelope from a company that plants trees in the Holy Land upon request. Inside, the company informed me that this lady had arranged for a tree to be planted in my name. Along with it was a handwritten note: “Dear Fr. Maximos, God led me to you at the Shrine and moved me to seek guidance and prayer for my sister-in-law, Maria, who is in her final stages. Thank you for sharing your story with me. I will never forget you. I am truly grateful.”

And I, as I believe all of us are, am grateful—grateful to this lady and to God, who orchestrates such encounters. Though not Orthodox herself, she humbly sought solace in an Orthodox Shrine, seeking support and prayer for her sister-in-law, Maria. With humility, let us glorify the Lord and follow her example, praying for Maria and those who are suffering: “Lord have mercy.”



St. Photios Chapel

Lighting a Candle for You on Behalf of Your Loved Ones

There are many sacred sites in our Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of America. A visit to the cathedrals and churches, shrines and monasteries, is an edifying experience for the worshiping pilgrim. Upon arriving at one of these sites, an Orthodox Christian enters the narthex, offers gratitude to God with the sign of the Cross, makes an offering, and lights a candle. At that moment, as the candle pierces the darkness of the world outside, supplicants often focus their prayers to God on behalf of their loved ones.

One of the most difficult aspects of ‘sheltering in place’ during the pandemic was being absent from our home parish. Safety protocols necessitated attending services virtually. The opportunity to light a candle virtually began with many parishes calling this their “Light A Candle” program.

The Light A Candle program at the St. Photios National Shrine began on February 27, 1982, when at the Dedication of the Shrine, hundreds of candles were lit, illuminating the entrance to the Shrine Chapel on behalf of those in whose memory the Shrine was dedicated. Hundreds of people continue to participate in this program annually and thousands of prayers have been offered up for our ancestors and our families.

The St. Photios Shrine has been called the “*kandili*” (vigil light) of our Church in America. As the *kandili* stands vigil before the icons of the Saints, so the National Shrine stands in testimony and honor of all immigrants who came to the New World seeking a better life for themselves and their children.

Submit the names of those you wish to honor or be remembered and let us light a candle for you.

257th Anniversary of Greek Landing Day Marks End of an Era and Introduction of New Executive



V. Rev. Maximos Politis, Rev. Gregory Stamkopoulos, Dn. Athanasios Kartsonis, Metropolitan Dimitrios of Xanthos

On Thursday, June 26, 2025 in the narthex of the Chapel of St. Photios, Metropolitan Dimitrios of Xanthos, V. Rev. Maximos Politis, Rev. Fr. Gregory Stamkopoulos, Rev. Dn. Athanasios Kartsonis, and event chair, Thomas Lekas, president of the parish council of Holy Trinity Greek Orthodox Church in St. Augustine, led the annual commemoration of the souls of the 500 Greeks who came to America in 1768 under the British Indentured Servitude Act.

Archbishop Elpidophoros of America sent heartfelt greetings marking the courage of the valiant immigrants, and expressed gratitude to Poxeni Maouris Hillier for being a faithful steward to their legacy over the past two decades. Mayor Nancy Sikes-Kline presented the City of St. Augustine Greek Landing Day Proclamation to Archon Carl R. Hollister, the new Executive Director of St. Photios Greek Orthodox National Shrine.

The faithful proceeded to the Tolomato Cemetery for the blessing of the graves by the Orthodox clergy and V. Rev. Timothy Lindenfelser, Bishop's Chancellor for Canonical Affairs of the Catholic Diocese of St. Augustine. Red carnations were left on the vault of Lucy Darling, the daughter of Ioannis Ioannopolis.

Led by evzone Mark Lasoff, the assembly proceeded to the Ioannis Ioannopolis sculpture in the Garden of Educators of the Oldest Wooden Schoolhouse. Mrs. Stella Kokolis spoke of the placement of the statue and the new plaque citing those responsible for the bust that was created by Demetrios Talaganis in 2019. She introduced Father Gregory Stamkopoulos, Director of Greek Education for the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of America. Stunning bouquets of flowers were presented to Mrs. Kokolis and Mrs. Hillier on behalf of Elaine Fraser, owner of the Oldest Wooden Schoolhouse.



Stella Kokolis, benefactor of the statue of Ioannis Ioannopolis in the Garden of Educators at the Oldest Wooden Schoolhouse

All returned to the Shrine where a formal reception, hosted by members of the Sts. Anargyroi Philoptochos Chapter of St. John the Divine Greek Orthodox Church in Jacksonville was held.



The Greek Landing Day Proclamation was entered into the City Commissioners' Meeting minutes followed by a Special Recognition of Hillier's service to the City of St. Augustine.

Paula Marchman Lekas and the ladies of the Kimisis Tis Theotokou Philoptochos Chapter, and members of Holy Trinity Greek Orthodox Church in St. Augustine hosted the Greek Landing Day Banquet.

Archon Anthony Megas, 1st VP of the St. Photios Foundation served as the master of ceremonies, introducing the dais after the invocation was offered by Metropolitan Dimitrios, assisted by Dn. Kartsonis. Greetings were read from Shrine President Metropolitan Sevastianos of Atlanta, Supreme President of AHEPA Archon Savas Tsivicos, and President of the National Philoptochos Society, Debbie George.

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Clergy and Choir after the Divine Liturgy

Lekas, and his brother, Tom, became key contacts. Jacksonville's St. John the Divine Church and choir were also most helpful, lending their organ and encouraging many members to join our choir. The Trakas family graciously handled the expenses for Chris and organist Jim Bostaph and provided meals for the singers. Polly Hillier repeatedly identified the local resources we needed.



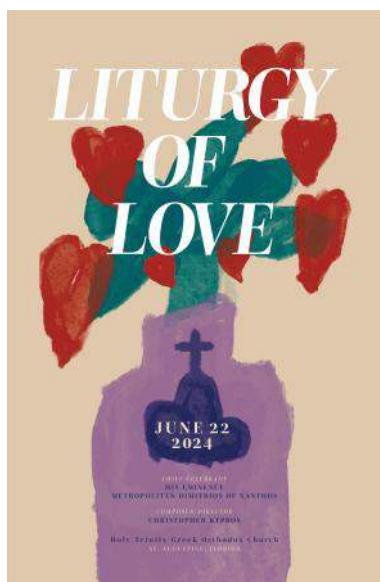
Amra Mesfin presents the poster to Chris Kypros and her grandfather, His Eminence

Joanna and I became close friends without having met in person, as we worked together nonstop, always with prayer and faith in the Holy Spirit's guidance. We assembled a choir of 43 singers from 12 Orthodox churches across 6 states. Chris helped the singers prepare from afar, sharing sheet music and synthesized recordings for practicing each voice part. He and Metropolitan Dimitrios met by phone to review the new melodies for the liturgical dialogue between Celebrant and choir.

We wanted to offer a unique keepsake to His Eminence and Chris, and asked for help from Metropolitan Dimitrios' son, David Mesfin, a gifted professional artist. We felt especially blessed when David's talented young daughter, Amra, painted an image of heart-shaped flowers that vividly conveyed love, gratitude, and the spirit of new life in the Church. Then David worked with us to turn the painting into a beautiful event poster.

Finally, reunion week arrived. Now Joanna and I met and teamed up in person! The choir rehearsed from Thursday evening through Saturday morning, which also happened to be Chris' birthday. As the rehearsal ended, the singers surprised their beloved conductor with a joyous rendition of "Happy Birthday," arranged to fit his own music!

That Saturday afternoon (the day before Pentecost), June 22, 2024, Holy Trinity was overflowing with clergy, choir, over 100 members of the Trakas family, parishioners, and guests. Along with His Eminence and Fr. Maximos, visiting clergy included Fr. Kwame Labi, Fr. Martin Ritsi, Fr. Nicholas Louh, Fr. Stephanos Ritsi, and Dn. Athanasios Kartsonis. Metropolitan Dimitrios' brother, Archon Jonathan Couchell, read the Epistle, and his sister, Fanya Paouris, sang in the choir. From prayerful hymns at a near-whisper to a powerful "Praise the Lord" that raised the rafters, the music moved singers, celebrants, and congregation alike. After the Liturgy, little Amra presented the posters, to the delight of her grandfather and Chris. From then until November, Joanna and I edited the audio recording and created a two-CD album, available from mekotsonis@gmail.com, for all those who wish to hear this memorable Liturgy.



Commemorative Poster by Amra and David Mesfin (granddaughter and son of His Eminence)



Family reunion graphic by Victoria Trakas

As a choir singer and officer of a regional choir federation, I knew Chris Kypros’ moving and beautiful compositions, including a recent arrangement of the Divine Liturgy, the *Liturgy of Love*, that had not yet been sung. I was already searching for an opportunity to debut the work but now redoubled my efforts. When sending out emails, I added the idea of celebrating this Liturgy in Florida with Metropolitan Dimitrios. One day, my outreach got a “nibble.”

A complete stranger, Joanna Trakas Cavalaris responded enthusiastically. In June, her large extended family would be holding a reunion in St. Augustine. The very musical Trakas clan had long held Chris Kypros in high regard. In fact, His Eminence himself was a family member. Why not sing the *Liturgy of Love* to accompany the Divine Liturgy at the reunion? We could assemble a choir and invite Chris to conduct.

Joanna and I decided to try to make this happen! His Eminence and Chris both offered strong support. The Holy Trinity Greek Orthodox Church parish in St. Augustine and their priest, the V. Rev. Fr. Maximos Politis, welcomed us warmly. Their president and Protopsaltis, Nick

St. Photios Shrine and the Liturgy of Love

by Miriam Kotsonis with thanks to
Joanna Trakas Cavalaris

This is a story of how a blessed visit to the St. Photios Shrine nurtured two friendships and a remarkable music debut. One friendship, between two creative and spiritual men, spans four decades; the other, between two determined and musical women, grew from intense teamwork on an inspiring project.

In late 2023, my husband John and I visited the Shrine for the first time. Upon meeting Polly Hillier, I asked her a question involving Metropolitan Dimitrios of Xanthos. In a flash, Polly handed me her phone, with His Eminence on the line! We had an animated conversation about church music, including the liturgical compositions of the Orthodox composer, Christopher (“Chris”) Kypros. I learned that His Eminence and Chris were longtime friends despite infrequent meetings. Before leaving the Shrine, John and I prayed and gave thanks to God for blessing this pilgrimage.



The conductor and choir in action

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St. Photios Gift Shop and Book Store



Find unique gift items, icons, and books on Orthodox Christianity and Greek American history at the St. Photios Gift Shop and Book Store.

The Saint Photios Greek Orthodox National Shrine is a living memorial to the first Greek settlers on the American continent and to all the Greek Orthodox pioneers whose love of freedom and desire for a better life for themselves and their children brought them to this New World. Called “*The Jewel of St. George Street*,” the St. Photios Chapel should not be missed by any visitor. The St. Photios Greek Orthodox National Shrine is located in historic downtown St. Augustine, Florida on St. George Street.

Dinner was underwritten and prepared by the Triantafyllopoulos family of the Athenian Owl in Jacksonville, FL.

V. Rev. Maximos Politis offered insight on the holiday and introduced the keynote speaker, Mrs. Hillier. Without missing a single guest, she shared a Shrine memory regarding everyone in attendance, from the wisdom and insight of Metropolitan Dimitrios, the steadfast support through the years of the Hon. Ramelle Petroglou, former mayor of St. Augustine, and the Shrine Founder families, representatives from the three area churches, Flagler College, community institutions, government agencies, and AHEPA family members. She introduced Carl Hollister whom Archbishop Elpidophoros entrusts the Shrine as her successor and his wife, Cynthia. She quoted her husband Allan who said, “Carl, Polly would not be leaving St. Photios unless she knew the Shrine would be in good hands.”

With confidence in the integrity that the Hollisters will afford the Shrine, and the unsurpassed talents and skills of the Shrine Manager, Mrs. Gina Bingman, Hillier will step away on July 11th.

Metropolitan Dimitrios, assisted by Carl Hollister, presented the St. Photios medal to two individuals.

First, to Mrs. Stella Kokolis, president of the Pan Greek American Teachers Federation, for her decade of Shrine promotion within the Greek education



Presentation of the Memorial Brick to the Hilliers Allan Hillier, Kaliroi Parris, Toulia Zotos, Polly Hillier, Thomas Lekas and Paula Marchman Lekas

system, and for providing the statue of Ioannis Ioannopolis in the Garden of Educators at the Oldest Wooden Schoolhouse. The second to trustee emeritus Archon Manuel Tissura, who served over 25 years on the St. Photios Foundation, raised over \$100,000 and designed the Hierarchs Exhibit in the Creed Room of the Shrine Museum.

The evening ended with the parish of Holy Trinity presenting a memorial brick honoring the service of Allan and Polly Hillier. This brick will be installed in the parish courtyard.



Metropolitan Dimitrios of Xanthos with Polly Hillier



Archons Manuel Tissura and Carl Hollister with Michelle Frangis

THE MINORCANS

The Minorcans of St. Augustine are a culturally rich community with roots in Spanish, Catalan, Italian, and Greek traditions. Despite their significant role in American history, their story largely goes untold, confined to local awareness in St. Johns County, Florida. This oversight is amplified by the absence of Minorcan history from educational curricula and the haunting fact that the graves of 964 Minorcans in New Smyrna Beach have never been found. Their story is not just a local curiosity; it serves as a lens to explore the distinctions between indentured servitude and enslavement, providing a more nuanced understanding of Florida’s multicultural history.

After nine years of toiling in Dr. Andrew Turnbull’s New Smyrna colony, the Minorcans took a perilous 70-mile journey to St. Augustine in 1777 where they were granted their freedom. Their legacy endures through a multitude of descendants and at a number of sites in St. Augustine. On March 15, Father John Tetley of the Catholic Cathedral Basilica and V. Rev. Father Maximos Politis, Chaplain of the St. Photios National Shrine, commemorated the Greeks, Minorcans, Italians and Corsicans who ventured to the New World in 1768.

The 2025-26 Friends Initiative

For 20 years, Archon Dr. Steve Poulos of blessed memory chaired the Shrine Friends Membership program. In 2002 there were 225 contributors; in 2024, there were 79 contributors. As a trustee of the St. Photios Foundation, I am a Friend of St. Photios. I ask you to join me in witnessing this commitment to Hellenic American values and culture as the Shrine witnesses our one true Faith to thousands of visitors every year. Please renew your Friends' membership and encourage others to join.

St. Photios Greek Orthodox National Shrine is a memorial to a moment in history within the sanctuary that received the survivors of the New Smyrna colony in 1777. Archbishop Iakovos of blessed memory viewed the Avero House as a new beginning for those surviving Greeks in America. He established the Shrine mission: "to witness Orthodox Christian faith, honor the memory of the 500 Greek colonists, and to keep alive for generations to come, our Hellenic identity."

Father Panteleimon Dalianis narrates the *Friends Video Promotion* on the Shrine website, www.stphotios.org. Please view it and declare your support by making a donation and committing to an annual Friends donation. For those 79 people who have continued to be steadfast ambassadors of this national institution, thank you.

Respectfully, with love in Christ,

Joanne Stavrakas

Joanne Stavrakas, Chairman
Friends of St. Photios Shrine



Barbara Fourtinakis, Cynthia Popomaronis, Denise Chilis, Connie Tsakiris, and Georgette Calomeris



Tina and Plutarch Vamvakis visit the Shrine with friends
Ann, George, Mark and Helen



Kixie Cosmo and Elizabeth Bisbikis



Friend, Trustee Emeritus and Shrine
Architect Archon Ted Pappas
with son Mark Pappas



Teala Johnson and Family



John and Correna Panagiotou and Miriam
and John Kotsonis

Collaborations



Meeting Payson Tildon at the
I-95 Florida Showcase

Many opportunities occurred over the past 20 years for the Shrine by joining forces with individuals, parishes, metropolises, church related institutions and organizations and others, not affiliated with the Church, but who are integral to the community.

Gratefully, the Florida tourism board invited the St. Photios National Shrine to be a pop up at their "Visit Florida 2024 Showcase". It is there I met Payson Tilda, the Ximenez-Fatio House museum director. We scheduled three Spring one-hour presentations in her museum garden that highlighted the faith and culture of the "Greek Minorcans."

April is the annual New Smyrna History Museum's Heritage Day. The six hour day hosts hundreds of people, with many of us taking a moment to visit the Odyssey AHEPA memorial in nearby Riverside Park. On Mother's Day in May, a study on the Avero family in the Avero House in the Colonial Quarter was offered, winding up the annual St. Augustine History Fest, 2025.



Susan Johnson
of WFOY Radio

It has been an honor to be interviewed by Susan Johnson on WFOY and Rick Rumpel of 904Now; to be added to content by YouTube creators Russell and Carey Armstrong, Matt Whitman and students from Flagler College; to cooperate with educators from 4th grade to university level; and to partner with the Oldest Wooden Schoolhouse, the Minorcan Experience, and the Tolomato Cemetery, to bring 'a full picture' to our colonists' stories.



The Minorcan Experience at the New Smyrna
Museum Heritage Day



Shrine Visitors



OCMC Visit with Bishop Chrysostomos
of Bukoba



Writer Director of Here's Yianni film, Christina
Eliopoulos with leading actress Julia Ormond,
Metropolitan Dimitrios of Xanthos, Fr. Paul
and Pres. Mayernick



Missionaries making a pilgrimage