“The Sponges Were Gold:” A History of Greek Immigration to Tarpon Springs

Summary
Between the last decade of the 19th century and the years immediately after World War I, the face of America changed as immigrants from southern and Eastern Europe and Asia left their homelands to seek a new life. In all, over 23 million people settled in the United States, and their descendants still live here today. Among the scores of different nationalities and cultures that came to America during this Great Wave of Immigration were Greeks. Thousands left their ancestral home to live in the New World, with many of them settling in Tarpon Springs, Florida.

Objectives
Students will:
1) identify the Greek presence in the failed attempt of settlement at New Smyrna in the 18th century;
2) understand the “push” and “pull” factors that led many Greeks to leave Europe for America;
3) explain the importance of the sponge industry to the economy of Tarpon Springs, as well as the contributions made by Greek immigrants to the industry;
4) discuss the attitudes toward Greeks displayed by white Americans, both before and after the Great Depression, and the effect that the Depression had on the economy of Tarpon Springs.

U.S. History Event
This lesson could be used to enhance your students’ understanding of the Age of Immigration, Industrialism, and the Great Depression.

Grade Level
Middle school or high school

Materials
Transparencies displaying the pictures (with links provided) included with this lesson and the preview question, overhead projector, “Greek sponge-diving cut-out (optional),” “Greek Tarpon Springs” reading excerpt (optional), “St. Nicholas Greek Orthodox Cathedral: A History” reading excerpt (optional), “The Epiphany Celebration of Tarpon Springs” reading excerpt (optional), list of notable Greek-Americans (optional)

Lesson Time
Depending on the number of included materials used with this lesson, this lesson could take anywhere from 20-25 minutes to an entire block period.
Lesson

Procedures
1) As students enter the room, have the description of the physical landscape of Greece written or typed on an overhead transparency (for a master copy of this transparency, go to the “Activities” section). Have students read the information, then answer the following question: “Given the information you just read about the physical landscape of Greece, what occupations would you conclude are filled by many Greeks?”

2) Allow your students several minutes to discuss their answers to this question. Lead them into an understanding that because of Greece’s rugged terrain, many Greeks have historically looked to the sea to provide for them, whether through fishing or sponging.

3) Explain to students that in this lesson, they will see how a large number of Greeks, as well as other peoples from eastern and southern Europe, immigrated to the United States almost a century ago. Unlike many of their European counterparts who went to work in America’s growing industrial system, though, hundreds of Greeks had the opportunity to keep the same occupation that they had held in Greece by working in the sponge industry or one of its related services in Tarpon Springs, Florida.

4) Lead your students through a discussion and visual discovery of Greek immigration to Florida since the 18th century. You may use the included notes to point out information you feel is important for your students’ knowledge. NOTE! The notes included below are not meant to be read as a script. Instead, they are provided for your benefit to give you as much information as you may need to effectively teach your class.

5) Click on the links provided with Pictures D-2-2 through D-2-5 to print and make transparencies for a visual discovery. When showing the pictures to your students, ask spiraling questions to ensure higher-level thinking among your students.

6) As you finish the visual discovery, you may wish to have your students read the enclosed excerpts about Tarpon Springs. Some discussion questions for the first reading excerpt, “Greek Tarpon Springs,” are included below:
   a. “No man was ever backward with his tongue,” at the coffee shop; what does this mean, given American attitudes toward immigrants over a century ago?
   b. List three ways that the Greeks of Tarpon Springs kept their culture. Be as specific as possible.
   c. How important was the coffee shop to Greek immigrant men? Why did women not go to the coffee shop, in your opinion?
   d. How were family relations different than the norm in the 21st century? How were they the same?
   e. What does Stoughton mean when she writes that second-generation Greeks “struggled with the problems of a double heritage?”

   *You may want to put students in mixed-ability pairs to read these excerpts and brainstorm answers to the response questions.

The First Greek Immigrants in Florida

• In 1763, France, Britain, and Spain signed the Treaty of Paris at the end of the French and Indian War. As part of the treaty, France gave up almost all of its land in North America and Spain gave up Florida in exchange for Havana, Spain’s busiest New World port that had been captured by the British. Florida was then divided into two territories: East Florida and West Florida. This time was known in Florida as the British Period. East Florida was bordered by the Apalachicola River, the Gulf of Mexico, and the Atlantic Ocean. The capital of East Florida was St.
Augustine. East Florida had good, fertile soil and was excellent for farming. In an attempt to bring settlers to East Florida, the British offered land grants to settlers who would come to farm and also defend the new British territory.

- **One Englishman who was the first to take advantage of his government's easy terms was Denys Rolle**, a Londoner inspired by James Oglethorpe's success in Georgia bringing debtors into that colony. Rolle brought in a collection of poor, unemployed, and petty criminal settlers to a large plantation on the St. John's River. Rollestown was an agricultural flop. Unlike Oglethorpe's handpicked colonists, Rolle discovered his urban workers could not adjust to the hard labor and inhospitable conditions of an isolated village in a harsh tropical wilderness.

- **Dr. Andrew Turnbull**, a Scottish-born physician, was the next to take advantage of this generous opportunity in 1767. Turnbull envisioned a large indigo and sugar plantation on the coast of British East Florida. Turnbull, however, was prepared to not make the same mistakes that had been made by Rolle several years before. Turnbull suggested that Florida would be an ideal spot for impoverished Greek, Italian, and Minorcan (from the tiny island of Minorca off the coast of Spain) peasants Turnbull had seen in his Mediterranean travels. Certainly the climate of Florida would be more suitable to them than Rolle's Englishmen.

- Bolstered by a large 20,000-acre land grant, Turnbull recruited Greek farmers living under Turkish rule, promising them religious freedom and riches resulting from the production of indigo and sugar. Through his earlier Mediterranean travels as the British consul at Smyrna, on the Mediterranean coast of Turkey, Turnbull knew that these farmers already had experience in raising crops such as cotton, olives, indigo, and citrus. In exchange for passage to East Florida and a new life, the Greeks agreed to work as indentured servants on Turnbull’s plantation for a period of six years for highly-skilled workmen to eight years for others.

- Turnbull’s original plan was for a plantation worked by 500 Mediterranean farmers. Eventually, almost three times that amount of Greeks, Italians, Minorcans, and Corsicans were enlisted to help him settle an area on the eastern coast of Florida, just seventy miles south of St. Augustine. Of the impending endeavor, British East Florida governor James Grant said, “This is the largest importation of white inhabitants that ever was brought into America at a time.”

- After departing the Mediterranean Sea for Florida in April 1768, the colonists quickly encountered setbacks. A ship carrying supplies to the new colony of New Smyrna went down at sea. Almost 150 colonists died en route to Florida. Then, after arriving in St. Augustine several weeks later, the new colonists were forced to travel further south along the coast to an area known as “The Mosquitoes.” Upon arriving at their new home, the colonists found only mangrove swamps. The land had not been cleared, and supplies were scarce. After finally clearing the mangroves and building shelters, colonists were forced to work as slaves. The work was hard, the food was scarce, and disease borne by mosquitoes was rampant. In the first year of the colony at New Smyrna, over 450 additional colonists died. On more than one occasion, the colonists revolted, only to be put down brutally.

- The next few years were harsh as well. Colonists who did not appear to be working to their potential were beaten, confined in stocks, or chained to heavy iron balls. Some colonists were chained to logs in the indigo fields so that they would continue to work. Things grew even tenser when Turnbull refused to acknowledge the terms of the letters of indenture that his colonists had signed several years before. As the colonists went to Turnbull for their discharge and guaranteed fifty acres of land, they were imprisoned until they signed new indenture agreements. Eventually the rest of the colonists were too frightened to ask for their release. Despite all of this, New Smyrna was the most profitable indigo plantation in North America.

- In March 1777, three men asked for permission to go down to the beach and hunt for sea turtles. They were given consent and went to the beach, but instead turned north and went to St. Augustine, where they reported the abuses of Dr. Turnbull to British authorities. Then-Governor Patrick Tynon promised to protect the colonists’ rights, and eventually forced Turnbull to release the surviving servants due to the conditions of their settlement and because of the need for men to help protect Florida from American patriots during the beginning of the Revolutionary War.

- After almost a decade and over nine hundred deaths, most of the surviving colonists migrated to St. Augustine during May and June of 1777, where they settled and became part of the fabric of everyday life in the capital of British East Florida. Today, hundreds of descendants of the original Greek immigrants to Florida live in St. Augustine and the surrounding area.

**The Establishment of the Tarpon Springs Sponge Industry**

Picture D-2-3: Interior of a sponge-packing house, Tarpon Springs, FL

“What do you see in this picture? How many sponges do you think are in this room? Why would there be so many?”
These are naturally-occurring sponges. The Gulf waters of Florida are the only place in the United States where natural sponges can be harvested. There are four different varieties found in Florida waters: grass, yellow, wire, and sheepswool, the “Cadillac of all sponges.”

Sponges have had many different uses throughout history. Thousands of years ago, Greek soldiers used sponges harvested in the Aegean Sea to pad their helmets. They also used sponges instead of drinking cups when on campaigns. More recently, sponges have also been used for household cleaning, cosmetics, car washing, painting, pottery, and in the jewelry trade. In the last half of the 20th century, synthetic sponges have gradually replaced natural sponges, but you get what you pay for: synthetic sponges are cheaper, but germs that get inside the synthetic sponges stay there, decreasing the effective life of the sponge. Natural sponges actually get cleaner each time you use them because they channel out germs. A natural sponge cleaned once a week with baking soda will last for 1-3 years.

Nearly all of the sponge used in the United States was imported from Mediterranean islands until the mid-19th century. The American sponge industry began in the 1840s, when Key West fishermen noticed natural sponges that had washed up on shore after storms. Soon, a small fleet of sponge boats, called “hook boats,” was out gathering sponges from the Gulf waters surrounding the Keys for local use. In 1849, a large shipment of Key West sponges was sent to New York and was sold very quickly. Immediate expansion of the sponge industry began, and by 1890 Key West held a virtual monopoly on the American sponge trade. The sponge fleet of Key West employed over 1400 workers and boasted a fleet of 350 ships.

All sponges harvested in the Key West sponge industry, and in other outposts in the Bahamas, were taken by the “hook method.” Schooners towing three or four dinghies worked their way along the shore of the shallow Gulf for weeks at a time, stopping when they came to an area where sponges were abundant. The smaller “hook boats” were then sent out with two-man crews, with one man to handle the oars while another peered over the side through a glass-bottomed bucket (for a picture of a larger “hook boat” in action, go to http://www.gokalymnos.com/en-gokalymnos/images/spongga8.jpg). When the man holding the bucket saw sponges on the sea floor, he lowered a light 20-to-45-foot pole with a pronged hook (a sharp-pronged 4-or-5 toothed small rake-like tool) on the end, and pried them up. This method required very deft handling of the boat by the oarsman, and was often not very time-efficient; sometimes prolonged rough weather, or even tides and currents, would render the “hook boats” useless, as would murky water. When the “hook boat” was loaded with sponges, the dinghy would return to the schooner and dump the sponges on the deck. Then, the men of the ship would stamp and beat the sponges, then allow them to drain for several days.

In 1886, a wealthy Philadelphian named John King Cheyney traveled to the decade-old Florida community of Tarpon Springs to oversee his father’s business interests there. At the time, wealthy northerners who resided in Tarpon Springs only during the winter months mostly inhabited this small community on Florida’s Gulf Coast just north of Tampa Bay. Cheyney quickly realized that the annual tide of winter visitors and the community’s fledgling industries of lumber, fishing, and citrus did not provide a stable year-round income. Cheyney spent a great deal of time traveling around the Gulf, and he quickly found a new industry, which he felt would help the economic condition of Tarpon Springs: sponges.

By 1889, when Cheyney observed the sponge industry of Key West, the once-abundant sponge beds around the Keys were becoming depleted. Boats of the Key West sponge fleet were having success in a reported untouched nine thousand square-mile area of sponges just off the west coast of Florida, near Tarpon Springs. Cheyney quickly formed a sponge company; put up “crawls,” or square stake-fenced pens by the water’s edge in which sponges would cure for a week in the sun and surf; and developed his own sponge fleet.

In the century after Dr. Turnbull’s failed colony at New Smyrna in the 1770’s, many descendants of the surviving Greek settlers spread westward across northern Florida. Many attempted to make a living from the sea by fishing the waters of the Gulf or by operating sponge boats. Greek culture became so commonplace in northern and western Florida that no one really noticed when Pensacola elected the nation’s first mayor of Greek ancestry in 1887.

Cheyney’s sponge enterprise, the Anclote and Rock Island Sponge Company, was soon earning over $1 million a year, and moved the center of America’s sponge industry north from Key West to Tarpon Springs. Many sponge workers relocated to the new base of the sponge trade. Between 1890 to 1895, the population of Tarpon Springs increased by 42 percent, to 561 people.

In 1897, Cheyney hired John Cocoris, a Greek who had been working as a sponge buyer in Key West for a New York firm. Since Greeks had been sponging in the Mediterranean Sea for thousands of years, Cocoris soon convinced Cheyney to allow him to recruit Greeks to work as spongers. Greeks living near Gulf waters flocked to Tarpon Springs. The number increased when word spread to islands in the Mediterranean of the new American sponge industry. In Greece, the sponge industry was declining due to overfishing and an ever-increasing amount of workers. On the island of Kalymnos, which had long been the center of the Greek sponge industry, many young men had other reasons to leave: their home, and other islands of the Dodecanese, had been under Turkish rule since 1523, making these islands part of the Islamic Ottoman Empire. This arrangement was unacceptable to many Greek Orthodox Christians, who resisted for hundreds of years. Whether it was the pull of opportunity in America, or the push of persecution at home, hundreds of Greek men soon came to America.
New Ways Cause Tension

Picture D-2-4: Man removing sponge diver’s helmet as he boards boat with harvest of sponges
http://zerver.thpl.lib.fl.us/archive01/6353.jpg

“What do you see here? Based on evidence, where are these men? What do you think the man on the left in the foreground has been doing? Give evidence supporting your answer.”

• These Greek immigrants brought a new method of sponge-gathering with them. In the 1860’s, a revolution had occurred in the Kalymnos sponge industry: the diving suit. This consisted of a rubber suit with a bronze collar, to which a heavy bronze helmet was attached. The helmet was equipped with a valve for the air supply, which came through a rubber hose that was reinforced with steel wires, from a pump installed on the boat.

• Now, instead of utilizing old methods of hooking sponges in maximum water depths of 45-50 feet, or of divers holding their breaths and diving to the ocean floor to gather sponges, sponge gathering became much more efficient. No longer were sponge crews at the mercy of the weather or tides; divers could now dive to greater depths, where sponges were of higher quality, walk along the ocean floor, and stay down longer, harvesting many more sponges.

• John Cocoris had knowledge of this new diving suit, or skafandro, as the Greeks called it. After watching the slow “hook boats” of Cheyney’s Tarpon Springs fleet, he informed Cheyney that Greeks with diving suits were hauling in more than four times as many sponges in the same amount of time in the Mediterranean. Cheyney had Cocoris arrange to have a set of diving equipment and a crew of six come to Tarpon Springs. They arrived in 1905.

• Demosthenes Kavasilis and Stelios Bessis were the first two divers to wear the skafandro in American waters. After several minutes underwater, the divers were amazed at the bountiful harvest that they viewed under the surface. They returned to the deck excitedly stating that the floor of the Gulf was “like a garden of flowers or an orchard of fruit.” The experiment with diving equipment had worked; every ten minutes, the divers sent up baskets filled to the brim with large sheepswool sponges, the most sought-after in the world. The deep untouched sponge beds beckoned, extending for miles into the Gulf, but Cheyney only had two trained divers to gather them.

• An advertisement for sponge divers was immediately placed in several Greek newspapers. Nowhere was it read with more interest than in the Dodecanese—a cluster of a dozen rocky islands between Turkey and Greece in the eastern Mediterranean Sea. The people of the Dodecanese were Greek to the core, but had been forced to remain under Turkish rule when mainland Greece won its independence from Greece in 1825. The best sponge fishermen in the world were said to come from these islands, especially from Kalymnos, Symi, and Halki. But as poor sponge fishermen in a place where the industry was becoming oversaturated, the pull of better opportunities in America was enough for many to live their birthplace. Not only was there a wealth of unworked sponge beds in a place called Florida, but an American gentleman by the name of Cheyney would pay the travel expenses of the first men to go.

• In the summer of 1905 over five hundred Greek men arrived in Tarpon Springs. Most were single, and those that were married left their families in their homeland. By the end of the next year, over 1,500 Greeks had migrated to Tarpon Springs. The effect of this influx of newcomers can also be seen in the total population; by the end of the decade, Tarpon Springs residents numbered 2,212. In 1925, the census reported 2,635 citizens, a 21% increase in just fifteen years. By 1911, there were over 250 sponging vessels in Tarpon Springs, and the local sponge industry and its related supply industries were soon clearing profits of over $3 million a year.

• Reaction to the newcomers from Eastern Europe was not positive in many ways. Among the winter residents in Tarpon Springs were many who detested foreigners and their alien customs, language, dress, and religion. Some left to find other winter arrangements. Almost overnight, Tarpon Springs had transformed from a sleepy hamlet on the Anclote River to a bustling port teeming with noise, populated by powerful dark foreigners with dark curly hair and mustaches who spoke a strange language.

• The Greeks also experienced culture shock. Accustomed to the noisy, colorful ports of the eastern Mediterranean, the Greek immigrants were taken aback at the coolness and deadpan flatness that they observed in Americans of the Victorian Age. There was no passion, no laughter; soon, mutual caution when dealing with the “others” became the rule. John Cocoris and John Cheyney did everything possible to make the newcomers feel welcome; they assigned them to boats, housed them, fed them, paid them, sent their letters and money drafts back to Greece. Despite these efforts, many Greeks began to wonder about the wiseness to leave their homeland to live in America…until they saw for themselves the sponge beds of the Gulf of Mexico. The sheer vastness of the sponges, virtually untouched, was something that had not been seen in their homeland for generations. There was not much talk of returning to Greece after the first sponge boats returned to port.
Bound together by language, occupation, and their position as strangers in a strange land, the Greeks formed a close-knit group. Most worked in the sponge industry, but others who came built a network of trades and crafts along the waterfront of Tarpon Springs: boat builders and sail makers; machine shops and copper helmet makers; and suppliers who sold anchors, chain, rope, lanterns, tools, paint, and canned food. Others opened restaurants, coffee houses, and grocery and candy stores.

The pioneer Greek immigrants had a hard life. They slept on their boats, in shacks, or in the "Old Diver's House," which opened in 1907 to house bachelors. The sponge beds proved to be fertile, and many of the Greeks sent back for their families as soon as they were established in their new home. All was not peaceful, however, as hostilities broke out between the "hookers" and the "divers." The "hookers," mostly native-born or Bahamian sponge-fishers that used the traditional hook methods and had long dominated the nation's sponge industry until Greek immigrants arrived in the beginning of the 20th century, felt threatened by the more efficient Greek divers. Rumors were spread that Greek divers were purposely trampling small sponges while walking along the floor of the Gulf in their heavy shoes. Many of the "hookers" harassed the diving boats, even burning some of them. The Greek immigrants and their bosses went to the courts and Congress, and new laws were passed to keep the peace. Sponge diving was forbidden in waters less than fifty feet deep and less than 9-12 miles into the Gulf. Greek spongers were also caught plying their trade inside the state's buffer zone. Though those caught breaking this law were punished, this bitter and violent rivalry continued. The wealthy blue-blooded families of Tarpon Springs watched with disdain as their winter vacation village turned into an ethnic enclave of Greeks. Some signs hanging in the windows of local shops and eateries proclaimed, "No n----- or Greeks allowed."

Despite the anti-Greek feelings of many residents of Tarpon Springs and the surrounding communities, the little town on the Gulf of Mexico became the world's leading sponge producer. The local economy prospered despite a few setbacks due to natural causes such as hurricanes and outbreaks of red tide. During the 1920's, Tarpon Springs experienced a period of great growth. A $125,000 hotel, the hundred-room Tarpon Inn, opened with much publicity. Two lumber mills that employed a large number of men shipped lumber to various points on the coast, and enabled the sponge industry to replenish its fleet of boats. Tarpon Springs also supported several machine shops, automobile repair garages, laundries, two bottling houses, two banks, and numerous other industries.

Though the hard-working Greek sponge divers were responsible for the boom experienced by their adopted city, they often were not able to partake in the good fortune. Sponge diving made for a very dangerous living. In an age before weather satellites or radio, sudden storms could appear and wreak havoc on sponge boats many miles away from the nearest port. Prolonged time underwater could and usually did lead to a case of decompression sickness, or "the bends," which is caused by small pockets of nitrogen that form in the blood while diving. Though modern divers know that it can be avoided by surfacing slowly, allowing the nitrogen to escape the body, early Greek sponge-divers did not have this knowledge. Each year, several divers died or suffered debilitating injuries as a result of "the bends" or of having their air supply accidentally cut off from above. The pressure of the surrounding water also caused many divers to lose their hearing at an early age.

For most Greek divers, the difficulties encountered on their weeks-long sponge gatherings were nothing compared to what awaited them when they returned to port. The economics of the sponge boat was something new to Americans. Because local banks and businessmen charged the mostly illiterate Greek boat captains exorbitantly high interest rates on their boats and supplies, the captains often had to pay double what they spent on credit. After a trip, the captains figured out expenses such as food and fuel, then paid the crew based on a share system after all expenses had been paid. The boat's captain, who doubled as the boat's owner, hired the crew, decided where to find sponge, and maintained order. He also worked as a crewmember, sometimes a diver, and for this he paid himself more than for just being the boss.

The crew normally numbered six men and they were paid on shares; working for hourly wages was degrading for the fiercely individualistic Greeks. The share system molded them into a team. A typical diving boat's crew of six would typically divide all profits as follows: boat owner, 3 to 4 shares; each diver, 4 to 4 ½; engineer, 3 to 3 ½; life-line man, 2 to 2 ½; cook, 2; and deckhand, 1 ½ to 2 shares. In order to recruit a crew, the allotment of shares was negotiated. It was also customary for the crew to get an advance to carry their families over the weeks or months when the men were at sea. The captain arranged this platica, which he sometimes had to borrow at high interest. This could also become a source of friction between captain and crew; if the trip went well, everyone was pleased, but if it was a "broke trip," the captain had nothing to pay the crew. Also, some crewmen would choose to go with a captain after taking the offered platica from another.

The average man working on a sponge boat in 1933 earned forty-three cents a day to support their families. Many sponge divers were forced to seek temporary work elsewhere. Many turned to the citrus industry, which was an important employer in Tarpon Springs. The Tugwell and Wiseman cannery, which opened in 1929, processed over 1,000 cases of orange and grapefruit juice a day during its half-year season, and employed between 100 to 200 people.
The above picture is of the Tarpon Springs Sponge Exchange, the former nerve center of the United States sponge industry (in the 1970’s, it was remodeled into a series of shops and restaurants). It is now on the National Parks Service Register of Historic Sites and has been designated with a bronze historical marker by the State of Florida.

The Sponge Exchange was founded in 1907, when fifty local sponge buyers formed a non-profit corporation with one hundred shares and bought the property where the Sponge Exchange is located. This provided good docking facilities and locked storage for the catch of each boat, and a large open area for sales. The Exchange was maintained by a levy of one percent of each sale on the boat owner and one percent on the buyer; in addition, one-half of one percent was taken for support of the Greek Church.

No nonmember was allowed to buy sponges at the Sponge Exchange, and all of the local sponge boats used this place as their market. The boat crews would stand beside their catch, hesitant to show it too much before the bidding began. Crew members were also known to steal glances at the sponges of other crews. The buyers, meanwhile, would move from cell to cell, keeping their opinions to themselves. Finally, the auctioneer would blow a whistle. Each buyer would write a bid on a piece of paper and hand it to the auctioneer, who would then announce the high bid and destroy the rest.

This scene would repeat thousands of times as Tarpon Springs prospered in the teens and early 1920’s, becoming the world’s leading sponge producer. The city seemed somewhat immune to the problems faced by most of post-World War I America; Anglo-Americans, African-Americans, and Greeks worked together without serious incident. In 1919, the sponge fleet’s catch was valued at over $700,000. With a growing economy, and with the assistance of the concurrent Florida land boom, Tarpon Springs continued to grow. Even when a savage hurricane hit the area and severely damaged the sponge fleet in 1921, the city quickly recovered. The local economy prospered with each passing year until the beginnings of the Great Depression.

Tensions did arise with the land bust of 1926. Since the town’s earliest days, Tarpon Springs had African-American residents. Most of the men worked in the lumber mills; others worked in orange groves, maintained homes, or cut wood. The women worked as cooks and maids in some of the more affluent homes. African-Americans also worked in the sponge industry. They were hooking sponges in the Gulf long before the arrival of the Greeks, and after their arrival they worked side by side for a number of years. Some African-Americans even learned how to speak Greek and became divers. The Greeks were very tolerant at first, but gradually the African-Americans were squeezed out of the industry.

During the Great Depression, the African-American community of Tarpon Springs fared much worse than the white or Greek communities. The Greeks were very tight-knit in their professions, preferring to hire only others like them. Very little of the sponge profits trickled down to the African-American community. Though an impressive number of blacks were registered to vote when compared to similar-sized Southern communities (250 out of 637 African-Americans), they received very little help from the city. In 1933, at the height of the Depression, the Chamber of Commerce of Tarpon Springs asked the city commissioners to condemn and remove “a series of dilapidated, unsightly, and unsanitary shacks” occupied by many of the city’s own African-American families.

There was also strife between the more-established whites and the more-recent Greek arrivals. In November 1932, three Greek sponge fishermen charged with drunkenness and disorderly conduct were killed when the jail that housed them in Cedar Key burned. Evidence was soon found that gasoline had been poured on the old wooden jail building before the fire had been set. It was soon discovered that the judge who had ordered the men held in jail and a local police officer had stabbed and beaten the men and then burned down the jail. The Greek community was outraged. The murderers were later found guilty and sentenced to life imprisonment.

Tarpon Springs was still significantly better off than most other Florida settlements during the Great Depression. While most other industries around the nation suffered severe downturns, the sponge industry continued to grow, though not as sharply as in the preceding years. As one prominent Greek-American explained to the local Rotary Club in 1931, “Sponges and gold are the only two commodities whose price has not fallen in the last two years. Historian Gertrude K. Stoughton noted in her book Tarpon Springs, Florida: The Early Years that “For the Greek-speaking part of Tarpon Springs, sponge was gold. The sponge trade provided for …families in the midst of a horrible depression. Sponge-diving was the lifeline of the Greek community. It was estimated that one diver provided jobs for fifteen other men.”
• The federal government even did its part to keep the sponge industry thriving. Though President Roosevelt's National Recovery Administration (one of the many government bureaus created out of the New Deal) attempted to regulate the many-faceted sponge industry with standard hours and wages (which the Greek community vehemently protested), other federal agencies actually increased the industry’s profits. The federal post office even purchased five thousand sponges in 1938. As a post office spokesman said, “We have to keep the windows clean in 2,745 post offices across the country.” Congress also approved the dredging of the Anclote River, which deepened the narrow channel, enabling the sponge boats to travel the river freely, not just at high tide.

• Sponge prices declined through the first years of the Great Depression, but steadily increased from the summer of 1933, from sales of $420,481, to 1937, when over half a million pounds of sponges sold for almost $1.1 million. This extra money quickly circulated throughout the community through the Greek tradition of *philotimo*, or an independent open-heartedness. Community leaders immediately announced plans to build a new $100,000 Greek Orthodox church modeled after the Cathedral of St. Sophia in Constantinople. Plans were also developed to expand the overburdened Sponge Exchange from sixty to one hundred cells and to erect a new two-story office building.

• **Today:** Contemporary Florida society has heavy accents of Greek religion and culture. There are Greek Orthodox churches in at least thirty of Florida’s cities, and the number of Greek Orthodox parishes is still growing. The current Greek population of Florida is still concentrated in the Tampa Bay area, Jacksonville-St. Augustine, Pensacola, with more recent growth around Miami-Ft. Lauderdale area. It has been estimated that the number of people with Greek ancestry in Florida number over 150,000. Tarpon Springs still maintains its reputation as the largest natural sponge market in the world with an annual revenue of over $5 million. The sponge fleet, though modernized, still seeks out sponges in the Gulf of Mexico, from the Straits of Florida between the Keys and Cuba north to Apalachicola, in depths varying from thirty to 150 feet and reaching fifty miles from shore.
Activities

Picture D-2-1 (PREVIEW activity)
(photo from http://www.olymbos.org/album/geography/greece.jpg)

About 75% of Greece is mountainous and only about 25% of the land is arable. About 20% of Greece is made up of islands. Most of the people in Greece live along the coast, or along rivers and harbors.

* Given the information you just read about the physical landscape of Greece, what occupations would you conclude are filled by many Greeks?

**Directions:** Cut out the pictures and "clothe" the diver with the diving suit. Then, place the pictures in a lifelike ocean setting in your notebook. Finally, label the parts with the correct names and descriptions.

**“Tarpon Springs Gold,”** four different varieties grow in the waters of the Gulf of Mexico in an area that stretches from the Keys to Apalachicola.

This tool is used to pry sponges from their base on the sea floor. The sponges are then beaten and dried in order to remove any living material.

Invention first used by Greek divers in the 1860’s, this enabled sponge fishermen to descend to deeper waters, where higher-quality sponges grow.

This allows the sponge diver to view the ocean floor in all directions, finding the best sponges for market.

This “lifeline” allows the sponge diver to stay underwater for hours, increasing his efficiency and profits.

Sponges are kept in this until it is full; then the diver tugs sends it up to the boat by placing it on a hook and tugging a line. A new one is then sent down.
Greek Tarpon Springs during the early years was like a Mediterranean port. "Greek Town" fanned out behind the Sponge Exchange; the small white houses facing on brick streets were wood instead of stone, but the blue trim was there, and thrifty gardens with herbs and vegetables.

The natural setting made Greeks feel at home—the blue-green sea, the beaches and the palms and pines, the oranges and lemons and the sun. The spectral Spanish moss was strange, and the salt marshes with croaking frogs—but there were enough sponges in the sea to last forever, and that meant a good life.

Families of the sponge men came pouring in—the black-shawled mothers, the ample, cheerful wives, a wealth of children, and also the in-laws and godparents whom the Greeks consider part of every family. Some men sent for picture brides, the wedding being arranged by families, as was done in any case.

The Greek language was heard everywhere—among the men who talked explosive politics, the women calling children, the sponge men at their work, the fathers leading family prayers at night. The shops were Greek—the baker, butcher, grocer, cobbler. The neighbors buying eggs and lemons talked in Greek.

The church bells sounded like the bells of home. The first year, all the men had met and set up the basic self-governing organization of the Greeks—the parish structure called the Greek Community. The second year a priest was called and a small church was built. Traditional religious festivals were held, with incense, flowers, and candles.

The blue and white flags flew on Greek independence day, but when the children learned at school that America too had such a celebration, both were observed. The men at port would gather at the coffee shops, smoking their water pipes hour after hour, and drinking rivers of black coffee. A man could get a meal, play cards, hear news, and talk—no Greek was ever backward with his tongue. This was a man’s small, comfortable kingdom where no woman came. A man could rub his worry beads in peace.

Often music would come lilting out, as someone played the lyre, the clarinet, zither, violin, or mandolin. Sometimes bouzoukhi music got men to their feet, doing the leaping, twirling dances of their homeland. They sang old tunes, spirited or mournful, or made up new topical ditties sharp with wit.

Rough men, perhaps, these working spongers—but there is a quality called philotimo that every self-respecting Greek must have. It is a kind of honorable pride, an independent open-heartedness. Business is business, but a mean, conniving spirit is no part of the Greek self-image—pallikari, the bold young divers used to call each other, walking proudly as bullfighters and wearing bright silk shirts. The word goes back to what the ancients called a hero. It is possible to be a hero and a shrewd bargainer at the same time.

As was considered proper, women stayed at home. With a breathtaking beauty in their youth, they married young, were well dowered, and had large families. They were expert in the household arts; their homes were spotless, and their cooking legendary. The husband ruled the house and the family life was strict, but softened by affection. Daughters were sheltered, and husbands must be found for them; weddings, celebrated with much pomp in church, called forth an outburst of festivity. Divorce was extremely rare.

As in all seamen’s towns, tension would mount in storms or when the fleet was due. A good catch meant brisk business on the sponge docks, and for the families, a happy spending spree. The required amount of debt-paying took place, of course, and sponge men bargained for the next trip's platica. The Greek Town isolation could not last. America was all around the Greeks and drew them in. The postman trudged the streets and knew their names, the doctors came, and so did tax bills. Greek-speaking children learned English in the public school, and soon could translate for their parents. Top levels of the business communities worked well together. In both the Greek-American Bank and the Sponge Exchange Bank, business was done in English but the directors and staff were both American and Greek.

In social life, the first event that brought Greeks and Americans together was the christening party held for Stamatina, daughter of John and Anna Cocoris, and the first Greek child born in Tarpon Springs. Americans were among the guests. After the Greek Orthodox priest performed the ceremony, there was a feast—with all the delicacies of local fare plus imported wines and choice confections ordered from New York. Then came Greek dancing, and the Cocorises proved such irresistible hosts that the Americans found themselves joining the swaying lines and dancing, too. This was an important first step on the long road to mutual understanding and esteem.

Much of the effort was put forth by second-generation Greeks. They would obey their parents in their choice of work and they would marry as their parents planned, with some exceptions. They would graduate from the American schools, but go to the Greek church school, too. They worked in sponge, but put the new gasoline engines on their boats, bought cars, ran businesses; they also moved from Greek Town into the "fruit salad" section—the part of town where streets bore names like Orange, Lemon, Pineapple, and Banana.

They stayed in sponging as long as it was possible, went into the American army in two wars, and …struggled with the problems of a double heritage. They spoke Greek in their homes, and belonged to the island social societies of their parents, and went to the islands to visit when they could.

The third generation is now on the stage. They speak less Greek and act more American. The Greek homeland for them is not a memory, but its history is a source of pride.
The Greek people started to emigrate to Tarpon Springs in the year 1906 to work in the newly established sponge industry that was founded here in 1905. They came mostly from the Dodecanese Islands in the Aegean Sea. With them they brought their families, their customs, traditions, and above all the faith of their fathers. Devout people that they were, their first concern was to establish a church in their adopted country to worship in their own way.

That following year, a sea faring man by the name of Nicholas Peppas, who was then in Canada, heard of this mass migration to Tarpon Springs and without hesitation, came to live with his countrymen. It was he who was the backbone of the organizing and building the original St. Nicholas Church.

The Greek Community then under Nicholas Peppas leadership, purchased the original property from John K. Cheyney in the year 1907 for approximately $1,500. The St. Nicholas Greek Orthodox Community was incorporated and chartered in 1908. They then built a frame Church with a seating capacity of 250 for approximately $15,000.

The years passed, the sponge industry grew and so did the Greek population of Tarpon Springs. The church that was built in 1907 was not adequate to serve the needs of an estimated 2,700 Greek Orthodox Christians in the year 1935. To add to the urgency of a new Church, fires and physical elements took their toll, thus making the needs greater.

An investigating committee was appointed to study the possibilities of a new church and, at a special general assembly of the Greek community, the committee's report being favorable, there was a unanimous vote for the new church. Immediately, they contracted a famed architect of Byzantine architecture, P. Pipinos, to draw plans for a replica of the famed cathedral of Christianity - St. Sophia in Constantinople. Unfortunately, the architect died in the meantime and the Eugene Brothers of Chicago, of equal repute with the former, were contacted to carry on with the plans and undertake the construction. The problem that now faced the Community was how to raise $200,000, which was the cost of the new church. They had a treasury of only $20,000, which was hardly enough to start a project of such proportions. The people of Tarpon Springs, though, are as generous as they are devout. The Greek sponge fishermen then decided a plan whereby they would donate their best catches to St. Nicholas and the Greek sponge buyers in turn would bid exaggerated prices for St. Nicholas sponges.

In this way, and by other means, the money was soon and easily raised. To add to these donations, various individuals and organizations contributed all the furniture, murals, icons and sacramental vessels. All the marble used in the new church is of genuine Greek marble that was on exhibition at the New York World's Fair. This expensive marble was obtained just for the cost of shipping from Athens to New York to Tarpon Springs.

Many people worked hard for the church. Others gave generously. Everyone looked forward to the day that the new church would be completed and dedicated. That day came in January of 1943 when then-Archbishop Athengoras of Constantinople, late patriarch of all Greek Orthodox churches worldwide, came here to dedicate one of the finest and most beautiful decorated Orthodox churches in our country. This was a great day for the emigrants who came here in 1906.

**Picture D-2-6:** St. Nicholas Greek Orthodox Cathedral of Tarpon Springs, Florida. How is this church different from other churches you have seen? How is it the same?

In Tarpon Springs, Epiphany on January 6 is truly a celebration of life in this unique community on the Gulf of Mexico. Schools close so that students can join family, friends, and as many as 25,000 visitors at an array of events. This day-long Greek Orthodox celebration includes a morning service at St. Nicholas Cathedral, the release of a white dove of peace, the ritual dive in Spring Bayou for a cross, followed by Greek foods, music, and dancing.

Greek men, primarily from the Dodecanese Islands, have been diving for sponges in the waters near Tarpon Springs since 1905. The men were recruited to continue this traditional occupation when it was discovered that Florida's waters provided the only U.S. habitat for natural sponges. The divers gradually brought their families and their strong religious beliefs to Florida. The sponge industry has endured, and Tarpon Springs preserves its strong Greek heritage.

Greek-American male youths have braved the chilly January waters of Spring Bayou since 1920 in hopes of capturing the coveted Epiphany Cross. Although there are similar events in Greece, Epiphany observances in Tarpon Springs have exceeded the fame of all others. One reason is the fortuitous location of the church near Spring Bayou. Epiphany commemorates the baptism of Jesus in the River Jordan. The day begins with a Divine Liturgy, then a liturgy procession makes its way to the bayou. After the archbishop blesses the waters, praying for calm seas and the safety of sailors, he casts a white cross into the waters, and a young woman releases a dove. The dive for the cross is the highlight of the Epiphany events. Locals believe that retrieving the cross will ensure a year of good luck and blessing. About fifty boys, between ages 16 and 18, dive. Each Epiphany cross is made from a single piece of wood. Local teacher Bill Paskalaks has made the crosses for decades. When a young man finds the cross, he is greeted with wild cheers of delight and the procession carries him back to the church, where a short service is held to bless the diver. A celebration is then held in the park nearby.

Picture D-2-7: A statue beside the cathedral commemorates the Epiphany dives of past years. (http://www.tarponspringsnotebook.com/servlets/Page/2004)

Picture D-2-8: Greek-American teenage boys aged 16-18 wait for the Archbishop to bless the waters of Spring Bayou. http://www.tarponspringsnotebook.com/servlets/Page/2103

Picture D-2-9: the Archbishop throws the Epiphany cross into the chilly January waters of Spring Bayou, and a few minutes later...... http://www.tarponspringsnotebook.com/servlets/Page/2104?JServSessionIdtarpon=jm

(Picture D-2-10) …one lucky teenager comes to the surface with the cross. http://www.tarponspringsnotebook.com/servlets/Page/2105?JServSessionIdtarpon=jmld2y18sp
**Other Activities**

1.) Pair students (or have them work individually) to research a famous Greek-American (list is below). Have your students pick their Greek-American personality randomly (you may want to cut the names out and place them in a box, or write each one on an index card and have students pick them as they walk in the door).

2.) Pick two out-going, somewhat dramatic students to perform an Act-It-Out of Picture D-2-3 during your lecture. Have them stand in front of the projected image of the picture and assume the actions of the two men in the picture. Then “interview” them by asking them several questions, such as “Why did you move to America? Have you been successful? What are some the dangers of working in the sponge industry?”

3.) Arrange a field trip to Tarpon Springs! See the Central Florida Clearinghouse, or call or email Scott Fields (863/680-3002; randall.fields@polk-fl.net) at Florida Southern College for information on different attractions in Tarpon Springs.

**Notable Greek-Americans**

- Telly Savalas
- Michael Chiklis
- Michael Dukakis
- Olympia Dukakis
- George Stephanopoulos
- Pete Sampras
- Nia Vardalos
- Jennifer Aniston
- Melina Kanakaredes
- Tina Fey
- Al Campanis
- Alex Karras
- Peter Angelos
- Ted Leonsis
- Johnny Unitas
- Bob Costas
- Billy Zane
- John Stamos
- Milt Pappas
- Alex Spanos
- George Tenet
- Spiro Agnew
- Mike Bilirakis
Assessment

1. The Englishman who resolved to recruit Greeks and other Mediterranean peoples to work on an indigo plantation at New Smyrna was _______________________.
   a. Denys Rolle      b. James Grant      c. Patrick Tony       d. Andrew Turnbull

2. Though the indigo plantation failed, over a century later hundreds of Greeks were again drawn to Florida because of the ____________ industry.
   a. citrus    b. sponge     c. cattle    d. shipping

3. True or false. Because of the welcoming attitude of most white residents of Tarpon Springs, the new Greek residents were made to like a valuable part of the community.

4. Using a Venn diagram, compare and contrast the experiences of Greek immigrants in Tarpon Springs in the early 1900’s with the experiences of other immigrants to America from 1890 to 1920.

5. Describe the effect that the Great Depression had on the sponge industry in Tarpon Springs.

6. What contributions did Greeks make to the sponge industry in Florida? Were these contributions welcomed by others?

7. What were some of the dangers that sponge divers had to constantly contend with?

8. Compared to immigrants in other parts of the country, how do you think the whites of Tarpon Springs treated Greeks? If you could give a grade to the residents of Tarpon Springs for their behavior and attitudes toward the Greeks living among them, with “A” being the highest and “F” as the lowest, how would you grade them?
Resources

http://freepages.genealogy.rootsweb.com/~pudig/Minorcans.html
http://web.classics.ufl.edu/CGS/florida_hellenism.htm
http://www.dangly.com/nassaucounty/People/minorcan.htm
http://www.floridahistory.org/floridians/british.htm
http://www.divingheritage.com/keywestkern.htm
http://www.divingheritage.com/greecekern2.htm
http://www.kalymnos-isl.gr/webweaver/info/sponge/index.html
http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/flwpahm/html/ffgroups.html -traditional Greek music
http://dhr.dos.state.fl.us/bhp/markers/markers.cfm?ID=pinellas
http://www.dfw.com/mltdfw/living/5571038.htm
http://ipac.hcplc.org/ipac20/ipac.jsp?session=10600U4H5900D.7326&menu=search&aspect=Quick+Search&npp=50&ipp=20&profile=dial&ri=&term=tarpon+springs&index=BTW&aspect=Quick+Search&limit=CAL01+%3D+PA%3F&sort=#focusfocus -Burgert Bros. Photo Collection at the Hillsborough County Public Library
http://pasco.tbo.com/pasco/MGAO2BFNIED.html
http://www.ahepafamily.org/d5/Tarpon_Springs.html
http://www.flheritage.com/magazine/fall99/epiphany.html
http://www.flheritage.com/magazine/fall99/smyrna.html
http://chnm.gmu.edu/greekam/immigration.html -Greek immigration info from the Center for History and New Media at George Mason University
http://www.kidport.com/RefLib/WorldGeography/Greece/Greece.htm
http://kids.fiskars.com/images/diver_dressup.gif -Sponge diver cut-outs
http://www.loc.gov/bicentennial/propage/FL/fl-09_h_bilirakis4.html -Epiphany in Tarpon Springs
http://www.pbassociates.net/tarpon_springs.html -pictures of Tarpon Springs
http://www.tarponspringsnotebook.com/servlets/Home -Tarpon Springs information
http://www.divinghelmets.com/pages/history.html -History of Tarpon Springs sponge industry

Books and Periodicals


