

## LEADERSHIP LESSONS FROM OUR ANCESTORS

*By Antigoni Ladd*

Have you ever thought of moving across the country, or even living abroad? Did you wonder how much courage it would take to pack your worldly goods, leave your home, and strike out on your own to live in a place you never visited?

For many of us, such leaps of faith were the basis for our ancestors coming to America. They left home to live in a new culture, learn a new language, and take up new careers.



The Amprazes brothers in Trikala, Greece, about 1904, before brothers Tom (standing, right) and Harry (seated, right) left for America.

Recently a group of Greek-Americans in my home town of Westminster, Maryland began a project to find out why our ancestors settled in this small town. Since, for most of us, that means a look back at least two generations, the research has been hard, but rewarding. Here are some of the stories we have found.

One family, which had a successful business growing and shipping olives, lost a ship with a full cargo in a storm at sea. To recover the loss, two of the three grown sons agreed to go to America in the 1890s to earn money to rebuild the family business. Landing in Baltimore, they found work and learned a new business--making candy. While they thrived in their new work, they disliked living in a big city, so they sought out a smaller town, finally settling on Westminster, just 35 miles northwest of Baltimore. Thus the Samios family from the island of Kythira settled in Westminster. These risk-takers passed on their drive and creativity to future generations, who, in turn, launched a variety of businesses, from restaurants to retail stores to far-flung franchise operations.

My father's ancestors, the Amprazes family from north central Greece, joined a flood of immigrants in the early 1900s, drawn to the booming industries in Manchester, New Hampshire. They quickly found work in the largest cotton mill in the world (4,000 looms). The first in our family to arrive was Tom Amprazes in 1904, and a year

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later his younger brother Harry joined him, accompanied by 16 other young men from the same home town.

Manchester, NH soon developed a large Greek community, and there my maternal grandparents met (though they had come from two different regions of Greece). George and Mary Fekas were young, worked hard, had strong family values, but also were fired up to build their fortunes in America. When George and Mary Fekas married, they moved to Georgia (and later Virginia), where they had friends in other Greek communities. They began by working in the restaurants of friends, but saved enough money to begin their own business in Charlottesville, Virginia.

The Greek immigrants we have been researching, shared some common qualities. They worked incredibly long hours, tackling any job. Men, women, and children--all worked and contributed. They scrupulously saved, sending money back to Greece, while saving enough to start their own businesses. These entrepreneurs also moved from town to town, as jobs opened or businesses became available. Not limited to a single field, they learned to block hats and shine shoes, to cook and wash dishes, to buy and sell real estate. When war came, they served in World Wars I and II. The story of my ancestors followed that pattern, as they built their fortunes, gave back to their adopted country, and raised new generations to be hard-working and responsible citizens.

Today, I teach leadership--teambuilding, working with limited resources, how to motivate people, how to focus on a vision of the future. These same leadership traits were modeled by my ancestors. Their courage in building new lives, their risk-taking, hard work and commitment to a better future are examples that I learned as a child, not in a classroom, but by observing, and hopefully copying.

My hometown's ancestry project will continue to turn up interesting stories, I am sure. For one, I have learned my own leadership lessons and a new-found respect for my ancestors.

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