

The Greek Community of Tarpon Springs

Introduction: History and Current Life

In the late 19th century the sponge trade was Florida's most lucrative maritime business. By 1905 Greeks brought diving crews to Tarpon Springs, and the city became the world center of the industry. For Greeks in Tarpon Springs, life was similar to their home islands. Since so many settled here, most maintained their language, family structure, the Greek Orthodox religion, and foodways. The men continued working in the same occupations and using the same technology. By 1940 three-quarters of Tarpon Springs residents were of Greek heritage, and the city remained the largest world sponge producer until red tides devastated the beds in the 1940s. As the beds recovered, the sponge industry has resumed and exists today on a smaller scale.

Tarpon Springs has preserved its strong ethnic character and maritime heritage. Many former residents who moved north after the sponge blight have returned for retirement, joined by other Greek Americans and Greeks from Greece. Among 24,000 residents, the percentage with Greek heritage has shrunk to about 25% as many have moved to nearby communities for work or new homes. Yet Tarpon Springs is the center of a corridor from Sarasota to Brooksville that hosts such a large ethnic population that the Greek government recently established a consulate in nearby Tampa. While some major U.S. cities have a larger Greek population, no other city is more Greek in terms of the percentage with Greek heritage than Tarpon Springs.

Tarpon Springs' Greek atmosphere has long attracted tourists, including many Greek Americans seeking a sense of their homeland. On Dodecanese Blvd., boats dock to unload sponges or take visitors on cruises. Both residents and tourists frequent the restaurants and bakeries, music stores, clubs, and community events. Some businesses cater mainly to locals, such as Athens Street's modest ethnic markets, bakeries, and traditional coffee houses frequented by men passing time and drinking coffee. The town is an important resource for cultural events and products. For example, the annual Epiphany Festival is the largest in the U.S. The festivals produced by Florida's Greek Orthodox churches often rely on its large bakeries, and Greek bands from Tarpon Springs bands perform at events throughout the region.

Greek identity is expressed and reinforced through many everyday activities and special events. It is reflected in the built environment (cemeteries, public spaces, Greek Town, St. Nicholas Cathedral and St. Michael's chapel), boats, occupations (sponge and other maritime), music and dance in commercial establishments and community events, social organizations (AHEPA, Kalymnian Society, Prometheus Club), rites of passage such as baptism, marriage, and funerals; beliefs and customs such as naming traditions or interpretation of dreams; family values (residence patterns, property ownership); foodways; sacred and secular celebrations such as Easter or Greek Independence Day; and religious practice.

Suggested Activities

1. Have students find Tarpon Springs and Greece on a map.
2. Have students research the largest ethnic groups in their towns and why the groups settled there.