

## **Greektown Traditional Cultural Property District in Tarpon Springs, Florida**

Tina Bucuvalas, November 2014

On June 2, 2014, the National Park Service added the Tarpon Springs Greektown Historic District in Pinellas County to the National Register of Historic Places—the state's first Traditional Cultural Property listing—and arguably one of the nation's first TCP districts.

Tarpon Springs' Greektown District, measuring 140 acres and with 296 contributing buildings, sites, and structures (including a dozen sponge boats), preserves a strong ethnic and maritime character. Greektown is the epitome of a Greek American traditional cultural property. Since 1905—when Greeks first arrived in large numbers—it has been significant for its tenacious continuity of traditional culture, extensive Greek infrastructure, and as the only Greek American community based on the sponge industry. In Tarpon Springs, tourism—the city's economic engine—is primarily cultural tourism focusing on its Greek heritage and the sponge industry.

### **The TCP Nomination Process**

I spent November 2013 through January 2014 working on the NR nomination in order to submit it to Florida's Bureau of Historic Preservation for review by Florida's National Register Review Board before SHPO Barbara Mattick's retirement at the end of February.

I presented information about the nomination for approval of the nomination by district residents, the City's Historic Preservation Board, and City Commissioners in early December. A crucial element was the boards' agreement that since the district would be nominated on the basis of traditional culture rather than historic buildings and since traditional culture evolves, district property owners would not be subject to the restrictive municipal historic building codes.

But there was no real model for a TCP district. There had been some single or multiple building nominations—but nothing approaching the number of resources in this district.

The process had really begun with a telephone conference between the NR's Paul Lusignan and Paul Loether, Laurie Sommers, Barbara Mattick, and I in July 2013—during which we covered eligibility and procedural issues. When I finally began the project, I simply did my best to answer the questions—but with frequent and probably annoying questions to Mattick and Lusignan about documenting culture within an application oriented towards building style. Many times, we were hammering out what the appropriate response should be.

Specifically, I had to determine district boundaries, document the history and continuation of traditional culture, and relate the culture to practices at specific sites in a residential and commercial district with about 400 resources. I formed a small working group of residents or people who were raised in the district to pinpoint the current boundaries. Several walked the entire district with me—during which they described the its history, movement of people within it, changes in boundaries, lives and deaths of residents, and structures no longer existing. They even identified a previously

undocumented type of structure unknown outside the district: divers' cottages, known colloquially as *skylla spitia* (dog houses).

Having lived and worked in the district for five years, I already knew a great deal about and had documented the history, culture, specific individuals, and places where cultural phenomena occurred. So I just needed to write a short ethnography, provide visual documentation, and relate the narrative and images to particular sites. As per the NR, I provided minimal documentation about the standard architectural styles in the district since the TCP was not architecturally based. However, I did discuss local vernacular architecture with emphasis on culturally specific adaptations (like sponge warehouses) or inclusions (e.g., St. Nicholas Greek Orthodox Church built like a modified St. Sofia in Istanbul).

Having been in numerous homes and businesses, I knew what basic cultural phenomena existed but I needed to establish that at least 70% of district residents practiced traditional culture. We all agreed that with hundreds of structures and owners, it was impossible to visit every one; instead we made the assumption based on ethnographic research that most Greek residents engaged in some forms of traditional culture. The easiest way to determine ownership, and thus often residence, was to investigate county property records—which indicated that about three-quarters of the owners were Greek. I combined these records with verbal and visual information to determine whether structures were contributing.

SHPO Mattick worked closely with me to ensure that the nomination fulfilled state and national technical requirements. We discussed local traditional culture in order to agree upon the information included and the processes used to arrive at that information.

On February 21, Florida's National Register Review Board meeting in Tallahassee I presented the nomination. The meeting was attended by several Bureau of Historic Preservation staff who were interested in learning more about the TCP district. Paul Loether from the NR attended by phone. The Board's reaction was favorable, and the Greektown District was quickly deemed eligible.

After the review and Mattick's retirement, BHP's Desiree Estabrook worked with me to complete the nomination. I established the district map and geographical coordinates using the US Geological Survey website, then provided this information to Carl Shiver at the Bureau for the creation of the CAD map. The nomination was submitted through the BHP in May and approved in June.