Any of the popular images circulated today about life in America during the 1930s and early '40s were supplied by photographers who worked for the U.S. Farm Security Administration. In seeking to portray social conditions and the activities of government during the New Deal, the collection stands as a major contribution to America's visual heritage.

The photographs, approximately 270,000 of them, were taken between 1935 and 1943, and are now housed in the Library of Congress in Washington. Under the direction of Roy Stryker, the FSA set high standards and hired outstanding photographers, including Walker Evans, Dorothea Lange and Ben Shahn. They became especially well known for their depictions of such
Depression-era themes as poverty in Appalachia, the Dust Bowl, and migrant labor camps in the Southwest. Some of the photos appeared in magazines of the time and gained instant popularity; they remain famous for their documentation of America’s social problems.

Less known, and much less frequently published at that time or since, is the FSA record of industrial America in the years leading up to World War II. The agency sent photographers Jack Delano, Arthur Rothstein, Ben Shahn and John Vachon to Pennsylvania coal and steel communities in 1937, 1938 and 1941. While not directed to focus on immigrants, all four saw the artistic and social-historical potential of recording the life of ethnic groups in these communities. During one such trip to Western Pennsylvania, Delano, Rothstein and Vachon photographed “Greek Town” in Aliquippa and in nearby Ambridge.

Greek communities developed early this century in the two towns along with other ethnic neighborhoods, especially those of immigrants and their descendants from Southern and Eastern Europe. Within these communities, the coffee house served a vital function as a social and political center for ethnic males, who had been attracted primarily by the prospects for employment in the area’s steel mills.

Huge factories producing steel and related products were developed and expanded in the late 19th and 20th centuries. The first blast furnace came to Aliquippa in 1909, and was developed into a 7-mile stretch of steel mills along the Ohio River that employed 14,800 workers at its peak. Jones & Laughlin Steel owned the mill, the houses, and the company store — the Pittsburgh Mercantile Co. J & L sent agents to Europe in search of cheap labor; once these people were brought to Aliquippa, J & L encouraged them to live among others of similar ethnic stock in what appeared to many outsiders to be residential ghettos.

Across the river, the American Bridge Co. developed its community called, descriptively, Ambridge. Its mills fabricated steel for some of the world’s longest bridges and tallest skyscrapers. American Bridge employed more than 3,000 laborers at its height of production. Although the company didn’t segregate the housing of its workers by ethnic group, incoming immigrants were prone to selecting such neighborhoods on their own, as a buffer against the
foreignness or hostility of others. In both communities, as in other industrial towns, the Serbians, Croatians, Slovaks, Polish, Ukrainians, Italians, Armenians, Lebanese, Irish, Scots, blacks and Greeks all had their own neighborhoods, or at least distinct parts of a neighborhood. Anglo-Saxon managers typically lived on top of the highest hills.

While some Greeks were recruited directly from the homeland, many came to the area by a process of chain immigration. A large number first worked in the coal mines of Pennsylvania and West Virginia before eventually securing steadier employment in the steel industry. The immigrants came from such places as Chios, Kalymnos, Ikaria and Rhodes; the largest number were Rhodian.

The first immigrants were men. As they established communities they founded churches and sent back to Greece for wives. Holy Trinity Greek Orthodox Church in Ambridge was founded in 1916, followed by the Church of the Assumption in Aliquippa in 1918. In both communities the early Greeks lived in or near downtown, and Greek-owned businesses developed to serve the needs of Greeks and non-Greeks. As soon as many of the immigrants were financially able to go into business for themselves, they did so. Greeks became independent business owners at a disproportionately high rate in both communities, reflecting a pattern common across North America.

During the years that Greek districts flourished, from the 1930s through the 1950s, Ambridge boasted two Greek coffee houses (kafenia) and several Greek restaurants, and Aliquippa had three kafenia and two restaurants. There were also candy stores, shoe shine parlors and shoe repair shops, luncheonettes, news agencies, and other Greek-owned establishments.

Most writers on Greece and Greeks in North America stress the significance of the coffee house in Greek social structure. It was the most important institution in Greek villages, serving as an educational agency for young men, and as a male sanctuary. In the immigrant communities, the coffee house was equal to home and the homeland, and provided men a venue for discussing every matter of importance to them, from the building of a new church to Greek and American political matters to gossip about the community. It often was the first place the male
immigrant went upon arrival in a new town. In Ambridge, the two kafenia attracted politically liberal and conservative patrons respectively. In Aliquippa, coffee houses extended along Kiehl Avenue in Greek Town, and a social structure developed around them, with the more established older men frequenting the first, younger men the second, and the newest immigrants the third. After World War II, the last remaining strongholds of first-generation male ethnic community life were the kafenia, which finally closed in the 1960s. Even more devastating, not only to the ethnic communities but to the entire local and regional economy, was the demise of the American steel industry. "Steel was my whole life," a retired Greek roller told me. "I never would have believed it if you had told me the mill would close its doors."

But that's exactly what happened. From 1979 to 1985, 240,000 American jobs were lost in the industry, and 30 million tons of raw steel capacity was scrapped. From 1982 to 1985, the industry piled up $6.5 billion in red ink. In 1985, LTV Steel, which had bought Jones & Laughlin, closed down most of its Aliquippa works, eliminating 1,300 jobs and leaving only 700 workers where once 15,000 toiled. Since then, Aliquippa's population has shrunk from 26,000 to 13,000, and the decline continues. The police and fire departments have been cut in half. Several schools and many houses were abandoned. Once-thriving Franklin Avenue, the town's main street, has deteriorated badly. Except for the library, post office, police department and a few businesses, most of the downtown structures are burned out or boarded up.

Greek Town and other immigrant neighborhoods in both communities are gone. Where the Ambridge kafenia and restaurants once flourished, the state employment office now attracts dispirited job seekers. Part of Aliquippa's Greek Town was razed decades ago to make way for a new elevated highway. Most of the former Greek businesses are boarded up, and the Greek Plan has been mainly a black neighborhood for three decades. Holy Trinity Greek Orthodox Church was sold in 1982 to an African-American congregation; it is now St. Mary's Coptic Orthodox Church. As Greeks moved out of their first area of settlement, they re-established, in 1959, the Church of the Assumption, up the hill near the most prosperous end of town.

Many of the Greek steel workers with seniority
took early retirement when the mills closed, got decent pensions, and moved to Hopewell and Sheffield townships on the hills out of town, or to Florida or Arizona. Like musician Henry Mancini, Mike Ditka (coach of pro football’s Chicago Bears) and ex-pro quarterback Joe Namath — all white ethnic Aliquippa natives — almost all of the second- and third-generation Greek-Americans are gone, having found educational opportunities and jobs elsewhere. A handful of old-timers remains, hanging on to failing downtown businesses and wondering what has happened since the time steel was king, people had money to spend, and Greek Town flourished.

1 Examples are Dorothea Lange’s “Migrant Mother,” Russel Lee’s “Hands,” and Arthur Rothstein’s “Dust Bowl.”

2 Writers on Greek immigration history use the term “Greek Town” to refer to a business area and residential neighborhood dominated by people of Greek ancestry. Up to the 1940s and ’50s, many communities across America had Greek Towns. The largest in the United States was in Chicago.

3 James Kiriazis, personal communication, 1990.

4 This premium on personal independence through self-employment is discussed in virtually every study of Greeks in America. See especially Theodore Saloutos, Greeks in the United States (Cambridge, 1964), and Charles C. Moskos, Greek Americans: Struggle and Success (New Brunswick, 1989), and G. James Patterson, “Greek and Romanian Immigrants as Hyphenated Americans: Towards a Theory of White Ethnicity,” in New Directions in Greek American Studies (New York, 1991).


6 Phillip Pappas, personal communication, 1990.

above: a Greek-owned luncheonette, Aliquippa, July 1938.
right: Greek steel worker in a coffee house, Aliquippa, July 1938.
clockwise: men outside a Greek coffee house, Ambridge, July 1958; Greek Orthodox Church of the Assumption, Aliquippa, August 1990; once-thriving Franklin Avenue, Aliquippa, August 1990; abandoned LTV steel mill (formerly Jones & Laughlin), Aliquippa, August 1990; window in the home of an unemployed steel worker, Ambridge, January 1941. (contemporary photos by author)
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