



The Johannesburg City Heritage ‘blue plaque’ at the Holy Cathedral of Saints Constantine and Helen: proposed amendments

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Abstract

The concept of using Blue Plaques has always been to celebrate and commemorate the association between people and buildings such as churches. Many important buildings have been preserved in Johannesburg because of the use of Blue Plaques in raising awareness about the important historical figures who once lived in them and worshipped in them. While we should note that Blue Plaques do not offer any kind of special defense to buildings, but rather point to their historical and cultural importance and can assist in their preservation for posterity. The only Blue Plaque awarded to the Hellenic community at Johannesburg regrettably contains serious errors. These have been established through careful historical research for the purpose of replacing the set of two plaques on the Cathedral of Saints Constantine and Helen, with accurately researched corrected ones.

Keywords: Saints Constantine and Helen, Cathedral, Johannesburg, blue plaque, heritage.

Introduction

The aims and objectives of the Johannesburg Heritage Foundation are to guarantee that the valuable cultural heritage of Johannesburg is retained for forthcoming generations by increasing public consciousness of that heritage by creating occasions for people to become acquainted with this heritage and its special significance as stated in plaques. They identify noteworthy sites and motivate for the protection of such heritage through the application of the National Heritage Resources Act and additional measures in the town planning legislation. Marking important buildings with heritage plaques is thus an important function for them and future generations.

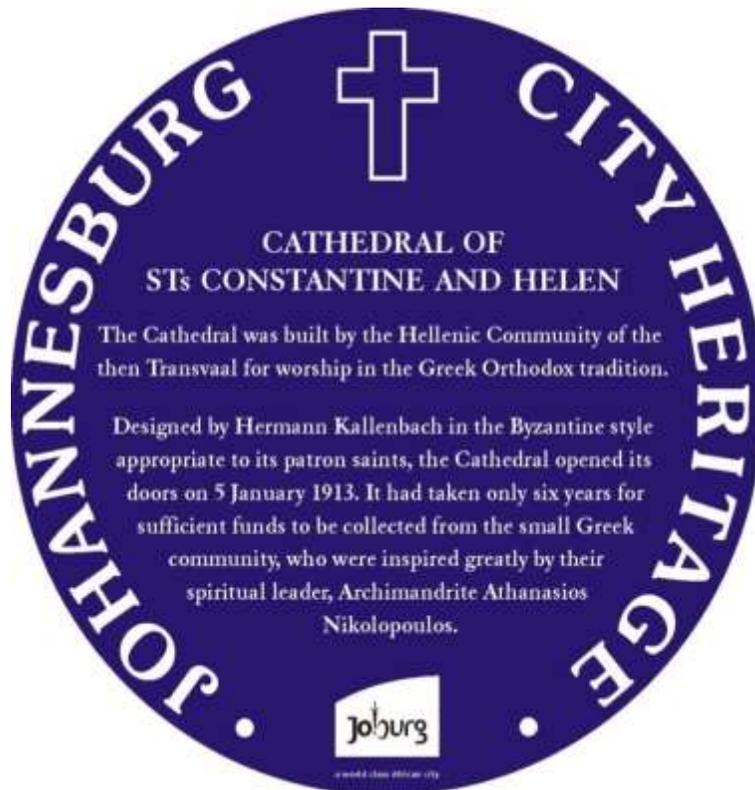
The City of Johannesburg also awards blue plaques to sites of particular merit. There are over 100 such blue plaques in the greater Johannesburg region,¹ only one of which has been awarded to the Hellenic community. This plaque, however, has eleven errors, the last of which is unforgivable (see no. 1 below).

A blue plaque is a powerful way to commemorate significant places and spaces. It is an invitation for people to discover more about a site and its history. The iconic look is round with white writing on a blue background. Blue plaques foster a sense of local pride and increase the emotional attachment of residents to their

¹ <http://www.jda.org.za/index.php/whatwedo/149-news-2014/april/1509-following-the-blue-plaques-into-joburg-s-past> (Retrieved October 28, 2016).



city. They help to educate communities and play a role in preserving significant sites for future generations. Blue plaques enliven our streets, squares and suburbs and make diverse heritage accessible to a wide audience at a relatively low cost.²



Present plaque wording³

CATHEDRAL OF STs CONSTANTINE AND HELEN

The Cathedral⁴ was built by the Hellenic Community⁵ of the then Transvaal⁶ for worship in the Greek Orthodox tradition.⁷

² www.blueplaques.co.za (Retrieved November 15, 2016).

³ The Johannesburg City Heritage blue plaque is affixed on the right-hand side of the front door of the Cathedral of Saints Constantine and Helen in Wolmarans, cnr Nuggets Streets. There is a second plaque on the boundary for the general public (north-western corner of the Cathedral on Wolmarans Street): Flo Bird 30/10/2016 (e-mail) to writer.

⁴ When built in 1913, it was a church, not a cathedral.

⁵ Either Hellenic community (lower case c), or Hellenic Community of Johannesburg (upper case C) (hereafter HCJ).

⁶ Either Transvaal Colony or Transvaal Province, not just Transvaal.

⁷ *A tradition* in a theological context is 'a doctrine . . . without documentary evidence': Allen, R.E. (ed.). (1992). **The concise Oxford dictionary**, 8th edn, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1293; 'Orthodoxy is a religion based on Holy Scripture/Tradition – both oral and written – and the teachings of the Church Fathers': Rev. Prof. Dr Angelo Nicolaides, 7/11/2016 (e-mail) to writer. Prof. Nicolaides is a Professor at



Churches are very important physical symbols of the values, beliefs and aspirations of generations of South Africans of Hellenic descent, and they are also an important component of the Gauteng province's built heritage and were an important part of the foundation of cities such as Johannesburg. Churches such as the Cathedral of Saints Constantine and Helen, were frequently constructed through voluntary labour and Hellenic community-based fundraising, and they thus stand as testaments to the faith of the Hellenic community who were pioneers of the city of Johannesburg.

Designed by Hermann Kallenbach in the Byzantine style appropriate to its patron saints, the Cathedral⁸ opened its doors⁹ on 5 January 1913. It had taken only six¹⁰ years for sufficient funds to be collected from the small Greek community, who were¹¹ inspired greatly¹² by their spiritual leader, Archimandrite Athanasios Nicolopoulos.¹³

Summary of errors on blue plaque

1. Archimandrite Nicolopoulos had nothing to do with the Johannesburg Church before 1926; he it was who 'greatly inspired' the building of the *Pretoria* Greek church.
2. Nikolopoulos is the incorrect spelling; it should be Nicolopoulos.¹⁴
3. The Church did not 'open its doors on 5 January 1913'. That was the date on which the first foundations were laid.
4. The Church was not built by the Hellenic Community of the then Transvaal, but by the Hellenic Community of Johannesburg, which was its original name before 4/5/1939 (when it was changed to the Hellenic Community of Johannesburg and Witwatersrand¹⁵).

UNISA, and protopresbyter (father Evangelos) at the Greek Orthodox Church of St Andrew the First-Called in Krugersdorp.

⁸ S/be Church.

⁹ S/be 'had its foundations laid on': Nikolaïdes, 565. According to Achilles Chiotis, θεμελίου λίθου (genitive of foundation stone) means the 'first foundations'. *Foundation stone* in Greek is the equivalent of αναμνηστική πλάκα, memorial plaque.

¹⁰ S/be five: HCJ founded in 1908+5=1913.

¹¹ *Community* is a singular collective noun and therefore takes a singular verb; Prof. Kathy A. Munro is acknowledged for pointing this out: Munro, K.A. 28/10/2016 (e-mail) to writer.

¹² English usage suggests that adverbs qualify verbs by preceding them. When the plaque wording is corrected, 'greatly' should be discarded.

¹³ Unforgivable error! Nicolopoulos was the Archimandrite of the Greek church at Pretoria until 1923/6.

¹⁴ National Archives Repository, Transvaal Archives Bureau, Pretoria (hereafter NAR, TAB), MHG 7344/55: Estate File; See also Maria Katrakis South African Hellenic Archive, Pouroulion Building, SAHETI School (hereafter MKSAHA): Anon. (1950). **Constitution of the South African Hellenic Educational and Technical Institute**, [Johannesburg], 38.

¹⁵ Hellenic Community of Johannesburg and Witwatersrand Archives, Hellenic Cultural Centre, Wolmarans Street, Johannesburg (hereafter HCJ&WA): handwritten amendment on Memorandum of Association of the Hellenic Community of Johannesburg, rubber-stamped 21 May 1918; See also the Constitution dated Johannesburg 1963; Cf. NAR, TAB: see, e.g., handwritten Amendment No. 16521 on Crown Grant No. G. 35/21, which mentions that in terms of Act 26 of 1926, the name was changed to 'The Hellenic Community of Johannesburg and Witwatersrand'. Title Deed F5791/36 dated 12/6/1936 specifies 'The Hellenic



5. It did not take six years 'for sufficient funds to be collected', but only five years: the HCJ was founded on 17/5/1908¹⁶ and the church built in 1913.
6. It was not a Cathedral when built in 1913, but a Church. With the establishment of a Metropolitanate (Archbishopric) in 1927, only then was it considered to be a Cathedral.
7. Transvaal is misleading; there was a Transvaal Colony before 1910 and a Transvaal Province after 1910. Which of the two is meant?
8. Greek Orthodoxy is not a 'tradition' but a combination¹⁷ of religion and tradition!¹⁸
9. 'The Cathedral opened' should be 'The Church opened'.
10. 'Greatly inspired' is indeed applicable to Nicolopoulos not, however, to Sarikas and Alexiou, who were the first Archimandrites of the church: although 'inspired', on its own, would be a fitting tribute to the latter two ecclesiastics.
11. There are three grammatical errors:
 - 11.1 Community is a singular collective noun and therefore takes a singular verb: 'the small Greek community who was inspired'.
 - 11.2 Hellenic community (lower case c) of the then Transvaal; and
 - 11.3 Adverbs qualify verbs, therefore 'greatly inspired' (instead of 'inspired greatly'), unless American English is used.

Sources

As at time of writing, there are only seven known sources that give an accurate history of the early years of the church: title deeds, building plans, contemporary newspapers, contemporary periodicals, doctoral theses,¹⁹ a biography and especially the 1923 book, **Directory of Hellenic Communities in Southern Africa** (in Greek), authored and published in Johannesburg by K.G. Nikolaïdes, who held a doctorate in law and journalism²⁰ from the University of Athens and who was the founding editor of the first Greek newspaper in South Africa, **Nea Hellas**,²¹ in November 1913.²²

Unfortunately no contemporary newspapers are available, only **Nea Hellas** from 1918 onwards. These latter bi-weekly and weekly tabloids, however, make no mention of the founding of the Church.²³

Errors

Community of Johannesburg'; Title Deed F3429/1942 dated 4/5/1942 mentions 'The Hellenic Community of Johannesburg and Witwatersrand'.

¹⁶ HCJ&WA: see HCJ and HCJ&W constitutions.

¹⁷ Prof. Mantzaris is acknowledged for suggesting this apt word.

¹⁸ Telephone interview of Extraordinary Professor Evangelos Mantzaris at Sea Point, on 22/11/2016. This compares with Professor Nikolaïdes's statement; see *supra*.

¹⁹ Van der Waal, G.-M. (1987). **From Mining Camp to Metropolis**. Jhb: CVR Publications for HSRC, 119. The book is based on the author's doctoral thesis (Randse Afrikaanse Universiteit (RAU)).

²⁰ Nikolaïdes, title page.

²¹ Nikolaïdes, 91 (part II), 568.

²² Nikolaïdes, 567.

²³ As confirmed by Achilles Chiotis, who carefully paged through all available issues of *Nea Hellas* in the MKSAHA. Mr Chiotis is also a Greek language tutor.



It is insufficient merely to refer to the above-named seven sources and then simply to document their information: a wider appreciation of our compatriots' or congeners' (ομογενείς) history is necessary. Thus, it should not be written – as stated in **Wikipedia** – that Saint Helen was the *wife* of Saint Constantine (she was in fact his mother).²⁴ Furthermore, unsigned articles should not be quoted and neither, for that matter, signed articles that are devoid of references to accurately stated sources.

One example of a signed article (without references) is from one who became headmaster of a Hellenic private college in Johannesburg, earned a baccalaureate degree through UNISA, for many years was a cantor at the Cathedral and a long-time devotee of the Hellenic Community of Johannesburg and Witwatersrand until his death in 2014. He wrote a one-page article, titled «Πληροφορίες» (Information), about the Johannesburg church, yet most of the history he gives refers to the Pretoria church! One of only two pieces of information regarding the Johannesburg church is in his opening sentence, in which he mentions that Sarikas arrived in 1906; Nikolaïdes gives 1908²⁵ as the year. The author, however, in his second piece about the church, does recount one delightful anecdote related to him by the unforgettable Πάτερ Κύριλλος (Father Cyril),²⁶ who was an uncle to father Evangelos Nicolaides of the Krugersdorp parish, and who ministered at the Cathedral during the late 1940s to c. 1960s. Because of the standing²⁷ of this author, parts of his article appear on the blue plaque and are repeated in the history of the Cathedral by Achilles Chiotis, **Holy Cathedral of Saints Constantine and Helen Johannesburg 100 Years of Orthodoxy**, published in Johannesburg in 2012.

The information from Πληροφορίες seems again to have been repeated in another article giving a supposed history of this cathedral;²⁸ it was written by an outgoing president of the Hellenic Community of Johannesburg and Witwatersrand, presumably as his farewell speech, and given to be typed by a university lecturer.²⁹ It was then thought to be an excerpt of the lecturer's Master's dissertation and therefore taken as gospel.³⁰ The latter article is unsigned and neither references nor sources are mentioned.

²⁴ https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Greek_Orthodox_Church,_Joubert_Park (Retrieved October 28, 2016).

²⁵ Telephone interview of Prof. Mantzaris at Sea Point on 22/11/2016: Mantzaris gives the date as Nov. 1907 as established from an interview with Sarikas's nephew. Sarikas originally arrived in Johannesburg as a trader; Mantzaris, E. (2012). Nicodemos Sarikas: a pioneer Greek Orthodox missionary in Africa, **Ekklesiastikos Pharos** 794 (New Series 23), 308.

²⁶ 'Someone approached Uncle John in Johannesburg, who in years gone by had been wealthy and was now deaf, to make a contribution, "Uncle John, donate 50 pounds for the church" he asked him in his one ear. Uncle John replied, "I cannot hear well, say it in the other ear!" Another told him in his other ear, "Uncle John, give us 100 pounds for the church". To which Uncle John, "Say it in the first ear, it's cheaper!"

²⁷ Achilles Chiotis is acknowledged for providing a copy of Πληροφορίες by Vasileos Tragellis (1930-2014), the original of which is with the MKSAHA.

²⁸ Anon., A concise survey of the history of the Cathedral of Saints Constantine and Helen community [sic] of Johannesburg (in Greek), n.p., n.d.

²⁹ Telephone interview -anonymous 25/10/2016 in South Africa.

³⁰ Interview of Costas Carastavrakis on 25/10/2016 at the HCJ&WA. Mr Carastavrakis has been president of the HCJ&W since May 2013.



Possible origin of errors

It would be reassuring to assume that the mistake that crept in may have been from Nikolaïdes, page 90 (part II), who wrote that, 'Athanasios Nicolopoulos from 1911 was the permanent priest at the church of the Pretoria Community and *after some time* (από τίνος χρόνου; own italics) was the same [priest] at the Johannesburg Church'. This may have been interpreted as Nicolopoulos having been the permanent Johannesburg priest from 1911 onwards and having 'inspired greatly' the Johannesburg Hellenic community to build their church: see wording on blue plaque above.

But on page 565, Nikolaïdes mentions that Archimandrite Athanasios Alexiou in 1911, became the permanent priest at the Johannesburg church. Finally, on pages 566 and 91 (part II), Nikolaïdes states that *recently* (ἄρτι διορισθεῖς and μέχρι πρό ολίγου χρόνου, resp.), i.e. recently to 1923 when his book was published, Nicolopoulos was appointed permanent priest at the 'Johannesburg Hellenic Church'. And in a full-page biography of Nicolopoulos, which appears on page 2 of *Nea Hellas* dated 25/1/1952, it is stated that the Holy Synod of Greece transferred Nicolopoulos from Pretoria to Johannesburg in 1923. At that time the Hellenic Community of Pretoria had sent him to visit Greeks in southern African countries – sans salary! – to thank them for their donations that had been used build the Pretoria church. He arrived in Johannesburg only in 1926.³¹

It is suggested that the wording on the blue plaque should therefore be changed as below:

Suggested new wording (Note: Superscripts not to appear on plaque!)

CATHEDRAL OF STs CONSTANTINE AND HELEN

The Greek Orthodox Church became a Cathedral on the ordination of Metropolitan Isidoros in 1927.³² It was built by the Hellenic Community of Johannesburg, founded in May 1908.

Designed by Hermann Kallenbach³³ in the Byzantine architectural style,³⁴ the Church opened its doors in about July 1913.³⁵ The first spiritual fathers of this small community were Archimandrites

³¹ National Library of South Africa, Pretoria: Commemoration of 40 years (1911-1951) in South Africa of Archimandrite Athanasios P. Nicolopoulos, *Nea Hellas*, 25/1/1952, 2.

³² MKSAHA, *Nea Hellas*, 22/12/1927. Achilles Chiotis is acknowledged for providing this photocopy.

³³ MKSAHA: Plans attached to article titled: A brief history of the building of the Church of Saints Constantine and Helene [*sic*] (hereafter Church plans). Notable is the title deed that accompanies this file: it was found only in 1997 by Attorney Solon Phitidis 'in the Deeds Office Archives which are not located in the same building as the Deeds Office': Solon Phitidis to Costa Phitidis, 29/7/1997.

³⁴ MKSAHA: Church plans; Nikolaïdes, 565; Van der Waal, 119.

³⁵ MKSAHA: Church plans: Application for Approval of Plans: the date 24/7/13 appears as the 'Finished' date; Johannesburg Heritage Foundation Research Centre, Holy Family College (Parktown Convent), Oxford Road, Parktown: file of Cathedral of Saints Constantine and Helen: The first Orthodox Greek Church (St. Constantine) *The African Architect*, Vol. III, no. 2, 1/7/1913 shows, 'The dome in course of construction' with the remainder of the church shown completed. The photo, which would have been taken prior to 1/7/1913, shows the dome nearly complete. It would not have taken many more days to finish the dome for the church doors to open.



Nicodemus Sarikas³⁶ (1907³⁷-1910³⁸) and Athanasios Alexiou (from 1911).³⁹ [71 words including title]

Epilogue

The above wording on the blue plaque was confirmed with the Rev. Prof. Dr Angelo Nicolaides on 9 November 2016, who had made some valuable suggestions that are included in the suggested new wording.

The above research material was arrived at independently and agrees with the researches of the doyen of the history of Greeks in South Africa,⁴⁰ Dr Evangelos Mantzaris, formerly a senior lecturer in Sociology at the University of Durban-Westville and presently (2016) Extraordinary Professor at the School of Public Leadership, University of Stellenbosch (Bellville Campus).

Indeed, Mantzaris wrote:

The *spark* [writer's italics] needed for such a venture was supplied by Archimandrite Nicodemus Sarikas.⁴¹

Conclusion

Given that a plaque's inscription sets out its reason for being, and explains why it has been affixed to a church, the inscription must be accurate since it tells you a little more about the importance and history of that site, and why it is indeed worthy of the recognition it receives. Where errors are made, these reflect badly on those responsible for the plaque and create a 'false history', thus misleading the public about the accurate historic information and associations of the plaque. Ensuring facts is thus an accurate and vital part of the process of carrying out historical research relating to communities and how they shaped cities.

The above article will be submitted to the Hellenic Community of Johannesburg and Witwatersrand and, upon their approval, they will be asked to provide a letter for the writer to

³⁶ Nikolaïdes, 104, 565, 6 (part II).

³⁷ Nikolaïdes, 565 states that 'shortly after' the founding of the HCJ, Sarikas was appointed a priest. Dr Mantzaris, however, stated that Sarikas arrived in November 1907 and immediately started his services; see *supra*.

³⁸ Nikolaïdes, 6 (part II); But on page 104 it is stated that he 'left before 15 years', i.e. 1923-15=1908.

³⁹ Nikolaïdes, 565.

⁴⁰ Mantzaris, E.A. (1994). The Greek Orthodox Church in the Transvaal, 39-40 (and elsewhere 34-35), in [A history of the Greeks in South Africa 1850-1990 (3vv) (unpublished typescript)]. N.p. The title and date of the unpublished typescript appear in Mantzaris, E.A. (2001). Greek Orthodoxy in South Africa: a historical periodisation, *Ekklesiastikos Pharos* 83 (New Series 12), 216. Dr Mantzaris, a senior lecturer at Durban-Westville University, documented his voluminous research mainly from primary sources. Mr P. Manikas, a former chairman of the Federation of Hellenic Communities of South Africa, is acknowledged for giving all three volumes to the author.

⁴¹ Mantzaris, Greek Orthodox Church, 39 (and 34).



submit to the Johannesburg Heritage Foundation requesting them to commission one set of new blue plaques to replace the old set containing correct information.

People of Hellenic origin and their building commemorated such as the Cathedral of Saints Constantine and Helen have had a highly significant impact on the life or development of Johannesburg as an African city, and their achievement had national significance and should thus be correctly remembered.