

~~Addendum to~~  
St. Michael's Cathedral  
Lincoln St.  
Sitka  
Alaska

HABS No. AK-1

HABS  
AK  
17-SITKA,  
1-

PHOTOGRAPH  
REDUCED COPIES OF MEASURED DRAWINGS

ADDENDUM  
FOLLOWS

Historic American Buildings Survey  
National Park Service  
Department of the Interior  
Washington, D.C. 20013-7127

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PHOTOGRAPHS  
WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

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HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY

Addendum to  
ST. MICHAEL'S RUSSIAN ORTHODOX CATHEDRAL

HABS No. AK-1

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AK,  
17-SITKA,  
1-

Note: Two pages of history were previously transmitted to the Library of Congress. Thus, this report begins with page 3.

Location: Lincoln and Matsoukoff streets, Sitka, Alaska.

Present Owner: Russian Orthodox Church in America.

Present Use: Cathedral; seat of Alaska Diocese.

Significance: The seat of the Russian Orthodox church in Alaska since the previous building was constructed here in the 1840s, St. Michael's Cathedral has an architectural presence that reflects its spiritual importance. This building is a reconstruction based on HABS drawings of the 1840s log church that burned in 1966. The reconstruction is a faithful one, maintaining the cruciform plan, domed silhouette, and modest interior brightened by a dazzling array of icons and golden treasures.

PART I. HISTORICAL INFORMATION

A. Physical History:

1. Date of erection: 1967-76. In 1976 the church was dedicated. In 1978 the south chapel was rededicated to St. Innocent.
2. Architect: Sergei Padukov of Toms River, New Jersey.
3. Builder: Shupp Construction of Sitka.
4. Original and subsequent owner: The Russian Orthodox Church in America.
5. Original plans and construction: This reconstruction of the previous cathedral on the site was based on HABS drawings that had been measured in 1942 and drawn in 1960-61. Concrete and steel structural materials are covered by wood siding on the exterior and sailcloth on the interior. The most noticeable deviation from the HABS drawings is the use of only four columns to support the dome as opposed to the eight found on the drawings.
6. Alterations and additions: The building has had no visible alterations since its construction.

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B. Previous Churches on the Site:

The first Russian Orthodox church in Sitka was built in 1816, just eight years after the Russian-American Company moved the capital of its territory from Kodiak to Sitka. It was a two-story octagonal building located south of the present site. It was replaced in 1834 by a new church building on the same site.

After Sitka was designated the seat of a new diocese governing all of North America, a cathedral was in order. The newly named Bishop Innocent returned to Sitka and designed the cathedral, which was built by the Russian-American Company. The exact date of this new church is in dispute, but the most likely date is 1848-50. Bishop Innocent reported, "The Novo-Arkhangelsk [Sitka] Cathedral, built by the Russian American Company, is becoming old and plans have been made to build a new one with funds of the same Company and according to the attached drawings. April 21, 1848, a stone foundation was laid for a new wooden cathedral on a new place. It is dedicated to the name of the same patron, Archstrateg Michael."<sup>1</sup> Other reports from Bishop Innocent note that the main altar was consecrated to Archangel Michael on May 18, 1850; the north chapel, to the Holy Theotokos of Kazan, October 14, 1850; and the south chapel, to the memory of John the Baptist and Alexander of Neva, December 15, 1850.<sup>2</sup> Others, particularly the church itself and the National Historic Landmark nomination form, maintain that the cornerstone was laid in 1844 and St. Michael's Cathedral was dedicated on November 20, 1848.

The hewn-log structure looked much as the cathedral does today, with a low cruciform plan topped with a large dome and fronted by a belltower. On the interior, the dome was supported by eight columns. According to historic photographs, the north chapel was at one time separated from the main nave by a glass-and-wood partition, but that did not appear on the HABS drawings.

The association of Bp. Innocent with the cathedral is significant. As Ioann Veniaminov he first came to Alaska as a missionary to Unalaska in 1824. Innocent was a well respected and particularly effective missionary; he had broad concerns and interests that ranged from ethnographic studies to vaccinations. After 1840 he guided other Alaskan missionaries with instructions to be kindly and not arrogant or overbearing toward their Native charges. He designed a church in Unalaska as well as this cathedral and its clock.

In 1962 the cathedral was designated a National Historic Landmark. On January 2, 1966, the cathedral burned to the ground in a fire that started in a neighboring building. Nearly

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<sup>1</sup>Report of Bishop Innokenty to the Holy Ruling Synod #271, May 4, 1848, cited in Documents Relative to the History of Alaska 1: 389.

<sup>2</sup>Reports of Bishop Innokenty to the Holy Ruling Synod #339, May 20, 1850, and #375, July 10, 1851, cited in Documents Relative to the History of Alaska 1: 389.

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all of the icons, as well as the royal doors and the chandelier, were saved. The rebuilding of the cathedral was linked to a resurgence of the Russian Orthodox faith in Alaska.

PART II. ARCHITECTURAL INFORMATION

A. General Statement:

1. Architectural character: The cathedral is in the form of a low cruciform, with low gable roof, topped by a high dome and fronted by a tall square belltower. Two shapes of onion domes crown these taller features. On the interior, the low ceiling of the nave contrasts with the abrupt rise of the dramatic, lit dome, just as the plain cloth-covered walls contrast with the splendor of the iconostas.
2. Condition of fabric: good.

B. Description of Exterior:

1. Overall dimensions: The church is in the form of a Greek cross. The front measures 31'-0" flanked by 17'-6" wings; the side elevation measures 43'-8" with 17'-6" wings. There is an 18'-0" x 18'-0" belltower on the center of the front. (Note: these measurements are taken from the HABS drawings, not the building as reconstructed.)
2. Foundations: Concrete, covered with vertical boards.
3. Walls: The walls are covered with beaded clapboards and are painted gray with white trim.
4. Structural system, framing: The structural system is concrete and steel. The interior walls are sheetrock.
5. Porches: On the west front is a shed-roofed portico with two Doric columns. Shed-roofed door hoods shelter the doors from the north and south chapels. The south chapel door is apparently ornamental, as there are no stairs to the ground; the north chapel door is at grade.
6. Chimneys: There is a brick chimney in the north transept.
7. Openings:
  - a. Doorways and doors: On the west front are two sets of double doors, each leaf with four panels. The double doors from the chapels are plank with strap hinges.

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- b. Windows and shutters: Most of the first-floor windows are casement, with eight lights in each leaf, topped by an eight-light transom window. There are twenty-light windows in the drum of the dome. The six-light windows in the lantern are blind.

8. Roof:

- a. Shape, covering: There is a cross-gable roof covered with asphalt shingles.
- b. Cornice, eaves: The plain frieze and simple moldings at the cornice continue across the gable ends.
- c. Dome: There is a large dome, 28'-0" in interior diameter, with an eight-sided drum, a 12'-0" high dome, an eight-sided lantern, onion dome, and cross. The dome and onion dome are clad in standing-seam copper.
- d. Belltower: The belltower on the center of the front has doors at the first level, a horizontal window at the second level, and a clock face flanked by windows below small bull's-eye windows at the third level. (The third-level windows are false.) Above this is a balustrade and the octagonal belfry, which is 13'-0" across. The belfry has a bell in each round-arched opening. It is topped by an attenuated onion dome and a cross.

C. Description of Interior:

- 1. Floor plans: The main iconostas and altar in the center are flanked by side chapels, open to the main nave. The north chapel is dedicated to Our Lady of Kazan. The south chapel was dedicated in 1978 to Bishop Innocent. Three iconostases separate the naves from the sanctuaries. There is a warden's desk in the southwest corner. There is a choir loft in the drum of the dome.
- 2. Stairways: There is a stairway in the belltower.
- 3. Flooring: Linoleum covers tongue-and-groove boards in the vestibule and main nave. The boards are exposed in the side chapels.
- 4. Wall and ceiling finish: There is a wainscot of narrow vertical beaded boards. The walls and ceiling are covered with sailcloth, except for the dome, which is painted boards. The vestibule is finished with dry wall.
- 5. Doorways and doors: There are three-panel double doors between the vestibule and the nave. The iconostases are pierced by several doors; the deacons doors in the side chapels are perpendicular to the iconostas.

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6. Decorative features: Four columns of painted wood support the dome. The previous building had eight columns at the time it was recorded. The main iconostas is particularly elaborate, painted white with gold trim and holding icons covered with silver rizas. The royal doors are silver, painted gold, and are particularly elaborate. The side chapels are much plainer by comparison, but the church is filled with a stunning array of icons and furnishings. Several exhibit cases have a number of historical items and other treasures are displayed around the church.

D. Site:

1. General setting and orientation: The cathedral sits in the middle of Lincoln Street, with traffic parting around it. The building faces southwest, but for simplicity in this report has been described as if it faced west.
2. Historic landscape design: The building has always been in the middle of the street.

PART III. SOURCES OF INFORMATION

The main source of information for this report has been Barbara Sweetland Smith, "National Register Nomination: Cathedral of St. Michael the Archangel" (National Park Service, 1985). The building has been declared a National Historic Landmark, and the landmark files located in the History Division, National Park Service, Washington, DC, were also consulted.

PART IV. PROJECT INFORMATION

Documentation of St. Michael's Cathedral was undertaken by the Historic American Buildings Survey/Historic American Engineering Record (HABS/HAER), a division of the National Park Service, the state of Alaska, and the Icon Preservation Task Force. The project was executed under the general direction of Robert J. Kapsch, chief of HABS/HAER, and Boyd Evison, Alaska Regional Director, National Park Service. Recording was carried out during summer 1989 by Steven M. Peterson, project director; Jet Lowe, photographer; and Alison K. Hoagland, historian, who prepared this report.

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U.S. Department of the Interior  
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