

Nativity of Our Lord
Russian Orthodox Church
Ouzinkie
Spruce Island
Alaska

HABS NO. AK-56

HABS
AK.
12-OUZI,
1-

PHOTOGRAPHS
WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

Historic American Buildings Survey
National Park Service
Washington, D.C. 20013-7127

HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY
NATIVITY OF OUR LORD RUSSIAN ORTHODOX CHURCH

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Location: Ouzinkie, Spruce Island, near Kodiak Island, Alaska.

Present Owner: Orthodox Church in America.

Present Occupant: Nativity of Our Lord Chapel.

Present Use: Chapel.

Significance: A number of historic Russian Orthodox churches survive in Alaska, built by Native congregations in traditional forms. Although its belltower has been removed and its nave extended, this 1906 church retains its essential elements -- gable-roofed nave, sanctuary, and vestibule.

PART I. HISTORICAL SIGNIFICANCE

A. Physical History:

1. Date of erection: 1906.¹
2. Builder: The church was built by villagers Vassily Pestrikoff and his sons Ilarion, Peter and Nicholas; Albert Torsen; Nicolai and John Katelnikoff; Feodor Squartsoff; and Abraham Gregorioff.²
3. Original plans and construction: The church had three main elements: nave, sanctuary, and belltower rising from the narthex. The nave was close to square in plan, measuring approximately 18' x 21' on the interior, and two bays long. The nave had a gable roof, with an octagonal cupola surmounted by an onion dome. The sanctuary also had a gable roof. The square belltower was slightly smaller in plan than the narthex; at the third level, the belfry was even smaller. There was also a one-story open porch.
4. Alterations and additions: In 1939-40, major alterations were made to the church. The second and third levels of the belltower were moved to the ground, in front of the church, to form an entry/gatehouse. The nave was extended westward, increasing its length. A new vestibule was added to the west front.

The expansion of the church reflected the general prosperity of the village, which had two canneries and a population of 200 in the early 1930s. Russian was still

¹ Jennie Chernikoff stated that she was born the day the cupola was put on the church, in 1906. Interview, July 1, 1989.

² Father Yakov Parsells, "The Ouzinkie/Russian Orthodox Church: An Historical Sketch," Orthodox Alaska 7 (July 1978): 52.

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spoken by a majority of the people.³

B. Previous Churches on the Site:

Father Herman attracted both Aleuts and retired employees of the Russian-American Company to his settlement at Monk's Lagoon, on the other side of Spruce Island, in the early nineteenth century. After his death in 1837, and a plague twelve years later, the remaining villagers moved to this side of Spruce Island, and founded the village of Ouzinkie. Their first church, a low, gable-roofed structure of logs, was built in 1849 or 1855 just to the north of the present church.⁴ A church account written in 1895 said that a church was built "through the zeal of the parishioners" in 1876 (either a new church was built at that time, or the account was erroneous), and that it was "of log construction and small dimensions with neither iconostas nor porch."⁵ Ouzinkie was a small village, with a population in the early 1880s of only 45 creoles.⁶ By the time the new church was constructed, the old one had had its nave extended and a vestibule added.⁷

PART II. ARCHITECTURAL INFORMATION

A. General Statement:

1. Architectural character: The church is arranged in the standard separate elements of sanctuary, nave, and vestibule. The nave was elongated in a 1939-40 alteration.
2. Condition of fabric: Good, although the roof needs some repairs.

B. Description of Exterior:

1. Over-all dimensions: The church measures 19'-10" x 57'-3". The nave measures 19'-10" x 35'-5", the sanctuary 15'-2" x 11'-8", and the vestibule 12'-3" x 10'-1".
2. Foundations: The foundations are posts, enclosed on the perimeter by plywood.

³ Orah Dee Clark, "Ouzinkie of Elvoi Ostrof," The Stroller's Weekly (Juneau, Alaska), April 1, 1932, in Orah Dee Clark Collection, University of Alaska Fairbanks.

⁴ Parsells, 52.

⁵ "Concerning the Orthodox Mission in America," October 14, 1895, translated by Sisier Victoria, Orthodox Alaska 6 (January 1977): 39.

⁶ Ivan Petroff, Report on the Population, Industries, and Resources of Alaska (Washington: GPO, 1884), 28.

⁷ Parsells, photograph on p. 54.

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3. Walls: Clapboards cover most of the nave and the sanctuary. The narthex and the west third of the nave are covered with novelty siding. All the walls are painted white with green trim.
4. Structural system, framing: light wood frame, presumably. The 11" thickness of the walls suggests log construction, but the structure was not accessible for inspection.
5. Porches: There is a shed-roofed porch across the front, consisting of a plank floor, 4" x 4" posts, and a wood-shingled roof.
6. Chimneys: There is a cinderblock chimney rising from the nave.
7. Openings:
 - a. Doorways and doors: The main entrance has double doors of five rectangular panels, set in a plain surround.
 - b. Windows: The windows have six-over-six-light double-hung sash, set in plain frames.
8. Roof:
 - a. Shape, covering: The gable roofs are covered with wood shingles, painted green.
 - b. Cupola: The octagonal cupola rising from the nave has a pyramidal roof of wood shingles painted green, surmounted by an onion dome. The walls of the cupola are clad in novelty siding, and there are six-light windows on the north and south sides.

C. Description of Interior:

1. Floor plans: Each element of the church -- the nave, sanctuary and vestibule -- is an open space. In the nave, the amvon is raised two steps.
2. Flooring: The flooring in the nave is tongue-and-groove boards mostly covered with carpet. The flooring in the vestibule is covered with linoleum.
3. Wall and ceiling finish: The walls of the nave are plywood. Below the molded chair rail, the wainscoting is vertical beaded boards, wider in the east two-thirds of the nave than in the west third. The ceiling is wide beaded boards in the east two-thirds of the nave, and narrower beaded boards, similar to the wainscot, in the west third.

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4. Doorways and doors: The double doors between the vestibule and the nave have five rectangular panels.
5. Decorative features: The iconostas, which is divided into seven parts horizontally, is painted white with gold trim. The moldings of panels, both above and below the icons, are painted gold.

The octagonal cupola, which rises through the roof and is lit by windows, has sides of beaded boards and a flat ceiling of wider boards.

6. Mechanical equipment: There is an oil-fired furnace in the nave. Electricity extends to the exterior of the building, but the interior is lit by candles.

D. Site:

1. General setting and orientation: The building faces southwest, but for simplicity in this report the church has been treated as if it faced west, with the sanctuary on the east end. The church is set on a hillside overlooking the harbor, with graves in the churchyard on three sides of the church.
2. Landscape features: The entry/gatehouse consists of the second and third levels of the former belltower. The wood-frame structure, approximately 8' square, has a plywood exterior and is divided into two levels. The first has large segmental-arched openings on two sides so that people may pass through. The second level, where the bells hung, has round-arched openings on four sides. The pyramidal roof is covered with wood shingles. The churchyard is fenced with posts and turkey wire, and there is a picket gate.
3. Outbuildings: Approximately 50 yards to the north is the church house, a one-story wood-frame house clad in novelty siding. The gable roof is covered with wood shingles painted green. A lean-to addition on the rear, an offset one on the front, and a long one on the east side indicate that there have been many changes.

PART III. SOURCES OF INFORMATION

A. Early Views:

Photograph of the church shortly after construction, showing the previous church still standing on the north, in Parsells article cited below, page 54.

Photograph of church before alteration, from behind looking out over village, 74-175-65, Amelia Elkinton Collection, Box 1, Folder 20, Archives, University of Alaska Fairbanks.

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B. Interviews:

Chernikoff, Mike, warden. Interviewed by author, July 1, 1989.

Chernikoff, Jennie Tolson. Interviewed by author, July 1, 1989.

C. Bibliography:

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Davis, Nancy Yaw. "The Role of the Russian Orthodox Church in Five Pacific Eskimo Villages as Revealed by the Earthquake," The Great Alaskan Earthquake of 1964: Human Ecology (Washington: National Academy of Sciences, 1970), 125-146.

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Petroff, Ivan. Report on the Population, Industries, and Resources of Alaska. Washington: GPO, 1884.

PART IV. PROJECT INFORMATION

Documentation of the Nativity of Our Lord Russian Orthodox Church 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; Jean Swearingen, curator; John Lowe III, photographer; and Alison K. Hoagland, historian, who prepared this report.

ADDENDUM TO
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