

Holy Transfiguration of Our Lord
Russian Orthodox Church
Ninilchik
Kenai Peninsula Borough
Alaska

HABS No. AK-93

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PHOTOGRAPHS
WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

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

HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY

HOLY TRANSFIGURATION OF OUR LORD
RUSSIAN ORTHODOX CHURCH

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- Location: Ninilchik, Kenai Peninsula Borough, Alaska.
- Present Owner: Alaska Diocese, Orthodox Church in America.
- Present Occupant: Holy Transfiguration of Our Lord Russian Orthodox Church.
- Present Use: Church.
- Significance: One of only four Alaskan Russian Orthodox churches in a cruciform plan, the Holy Transfiguration of Our Lord Church was constructed in 1900-1901 of logs. The gable roof is crowned by an octagonal cupola and five onion domes.

PART I. HISTORICAL INFORMATION

A. Physical History:

1. Date of erection: 1900-01. The church was consecrated in 1901.
2. Architect, builder: Alexi Andreev Oskoloff was sent from Sitka to oversee construction of the church.¹
3. Original plans and construction: The church is one of only four Alaskan Russian Orthodox churches in a cruciform plan. Constructed of logs, neatly dovetailed at the corners, the church is crowned by an octagonal cupola, 6'-0" in diameter. The original tower was about 2' narrower than the present one. The belfry (which unlike the tower was frame, not log) had two round-arched openings on each side, topped by a pyramidal roof, attenuated onion dome, and three-bay cross.
4. Alteration and additions: The building was covered with siding sometime after 1916. Otherwise, the greatest changes have been to the belltower. The present belltower, which dates from sometime after 1916, is approximately 10'-0" square and wood-framed. Set on the pyramidal roof of the tower, the belfry, 5'-10" square on the interior, has two six-light windows on a side.

In the late 1980s, the front door was enlarged. New siding was applied to the exterior wall, under the porch.

¹Joseph P. Kreta, "National Register Nomination: Holy Transfiguration of Our Lord (Orthodox) Chapel," National Park Service, 1977.

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B. Previous Churches on the Site:

Ninilchik originated as a community for Russian and creole (part Russian, part Native) pensioners. In the early nineteenth century, Russians were ordered home at the conclusion of their service. In 1835, the Russian-American Company changed this policy, allowing pensioners (many of whom had married Native women) to remain in specific settlements. Ninilchik was subsequently established for this purpose.

The first church was built in 1846 when Ninilchik was founded. It was located down in the village, unlike the present church. No record of its appearance has survived. By the early 1880s, Ninilchik's population consisted of 53 creoles.² An 1895 church report noted that a church was "constructed in 1884 with an altar added in 1893."³ Fr. John Bortnofsky, the priest from Kenai, recorded his visits there in his 1896 travel journal, calling Ninilchik "the best in the Kenai parish. It resembles our Russian villages. One may say it even has a Russian smell. The natural environment is invigorating. The people are mostly of Russian origin: vigorous, tall, healthy, strong, white."⁴ By 1900 the village had a population of about 100.

PART II. ARCHITECTURAL INFORMATION

A. General Statement:

1. Architectural character: The log church is in a cruciform plan, unusual among Alaskan Russian Orthodox churches. At the crossing, an octagonal cupola sheds light into the nave. The roofline is further ornamented with five onion domes and crosses.
2. Condition of fabric: good.

B. Description of Exterior:

1. Over-all dimensions: The church, 26'-6" (at its widest point) x 48'-8", is in a cruciform plan, so that no log is longer than 14'.
2. Foundations: Not visible.

²Ivan Petroff, Report on the Population, Industries, and Resources of Alaska (Washington: GPO, 1884), 28.

³"Concerning the Russian Orthodox Mission in America," October 14, 1895, trans. Sister Victoria, Orthodox Alaska 6 (January 1977): 42.

⁴Bortnofsky travel journal, August 5, 1896, Documents Relative to the History of Alaska, 2: 74.

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3. Walls: Beveled siding, painted white with green trim. On the west front, under the porch roof, there is new, exposed wood siding.
4. Structural system: Horizontal log construction, dovetailed at the corners.
5. Porch: The gable-roofed porch on the front has a plywood floor.
6. Openings:
 - a. Doorways and doors: There is a single door, with "cross and bible" paneling.
 - b. Windows: All of the windows have six-over-six-light double-hung sash.
7. Roof:
 - a. Shape, covering: The gable roof is covered with new green metal.
 - b. Belltower: The square belltower on the front supports a pyramidal-roofed belfry, topped by an onion dome and three-bar cross.
 - c. Cupolas: At the crossing of the nave, there is an octagonal cupola with six-light windows on four sides shedding light into the nave. It is topped by an onion dome and cross. The church has a total of five onion domes and crosses, creating an interesting profile.

C. Description of Interior:

1. Floor plans: The nave is one open space, T-shaped in plan. On the west end there is a vestibule in the base of the belltower, and on the east end, behind the iconostas, the sanctuary.
2. Stairways: There is a one-step amvon with a semi-circular projection in the center.
3. Flooring: Wall-to-wall carpeting.
4. Wall and ceiling finish: plywood, painted white. In the vestibule, there is a wainscot of new paneling. On the east wall, the log wall is exposed, showing the ends of the previous vestibule, which was narrower.
5. Openings: The double doors between the nave and the vestibule are unpainted, and an apparently recent addition.
6. Decorative features: The iconostas is a plank wall with framing on the outside. The nine bays have segmental-arched openings. The icons include four big oils,

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and many smaller prints.

The octagonal cupola at the crossing of the nave has a flat ceiling and four windows. The ceiling in the center square of the nave slopes up slightly before the vertical rise of the cupola.

7. Bells: The bells are marked "W. T. GARRATT, 1898."
8. Mechanical equipment: Electricity and baseboard heat.

D. Site:

1. General setting and orientation: Surrounded by steep bluffs, Ninilchik is located on low lands, where the Ninilchik River empties into Cook Inlet. The church is located on the bluff to the north, and overlooks the village below. The church faces west, with the altar on the east end, as is traditional among Russian Orthodox churches.
2. Historic landscapes: The church is set within the fenced cemetery, with many well-maintained graves marked with three-bar crosses. To the east, outside of the fenced enclosure, is the non-Orthodox cemetery. A Russian school was also located up on the bluff, near the church, but it is no longer extant. Access to the church was via a steep winding path. Recently, a road from Sterling Highway has been constructed.

PART III. SOURCES OF INFORMATION

A. Early Views:

Once Upon the Kenai: Stories from the People. Comp. Kenai Historical Society. Kenai, 1984. Photographs on pages 6 and 25 show the church in 1915 and 1916, respectively.

B. Bibliography:

"Concerning the Orthodox Mission in America," October 14, 1895, trans. Sister Victoria, Orthodox Alaska 6 (January 1977): 36-46.

Documents Relative to the History of Alaska. Microfilm of typescript translation of Russian-language and other documents, including excerpts from the Alaskan Russian Church Archives in vols. 1 and 2, Library of Congress.

Kreta, Joseph P. "National Register Nomination: Holy Transfiguration of Our Lord (Orthodox) Chapel," National Park Service, 1977.

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

PART IV. PROJECT INFORMATION

Documentation of Holy Transfiguration 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 1990 by Steven M. Peterson, project director; Jet Lowe, photographer; and Alison K. Hoagland, historian, who prepared this report.

ADDENDUM TO
HOLY TRANSFIGURATION OF OUR LORD RUSSIAN ORTHODOX CHURCH
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