

Elevation of the Holy Cross
Russian Orthodox Church (OLD)
Russian Mission
Alaska

HABS No. AK-65A

HABS
AK
21-RUMIS,
1A-

PHOTOGRAPHS
WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

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

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HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY

ELEVATION OF THE HOLY CROSS RUSSIAN ORTHODOX CHURCH

HABS No. AK-65-A

- Location: Russian Mission, on the Yukon River, Alaska.
- Present Owner: Alaska Diocese, Orthodox Church in America.
- Present Occupant/
Use: Vacant.
- Significance: A number of historic Russian Orthodox churches survive in Alaska, built by Native congregations in traditional forms. Although vacant and deteriorating, the older church at Russian Mission expresses its interior spaces on the exterior. Nave, sanctuary, and narthex are clearly defined by different shapes and roof forms.

PART I. HISTORICAL INFORMATION

A. Physical History:

1. Date of erection: 1938-39.¹
2. Original plans and construction: The church was constructed in the same form, but on a different scale, as its predecessor, built in 1895. A pyramidal-roofed square nave, polygonal sanctuary, and belltower rising out of the roof of the narthex were characteristics of both churches. The successor to the 1938-39 church, built in 1973-1980, has the same elements.
3. Alterations and additions: None known.

B. Previous churches on the site:

Bishop Innocent selected Russian Mission -- called by the Russians Kvikhpak and by the Natives Ikogmiut -- as the site of a Russian Orthodox mission that would serve the region between the Russian-American Company posts on Norton Sound at St. Michael, and on Bristol Bay at Andraefsky (Nushagak). Because Russian Mission was not a Russian-American Company post, the company did not pay for construction of a church or support of a priest, as it did at its own posts.

Bishop Innocent sent Iakov Netsvetov, a creole (mixed Russian and Native) priest, along with four Aleut laborers to construct a church in 1849. Drawings sent at the time of construction show a square nave, topped by a pyramidal roof, cupola, and onion dome. Sanctuary and vestibule were gable-roofed, and the building was constructed of hewn

¹ Barbara Sweetland Smith, "Cathedral on the Yukon," Alaska Journal 12 (Spring 1982): 54.

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logs.² The list of tools needed for construction was:

2 large ripaws
4 carpenter axes
5 chisels
6 gimlets
1 small anvil
1 hammer
1 grinding stone
1000 nails
100 spikes
10 sheets of iron
200 bricks
4 pr. door hinges
10 pr. shutter hinges
100 window panes, 13-1/3" x 12"
paints, wallpaper, and cloth³

Fr. Iakov described some of the construction process. On March 19, 1851, "Everyone worked. Two were sawing, two clerics continued on their task of inserting the window frame logs, while I, together with the rest, began shingling the octagon. The snow and wind interfered with our work, but what is one to do? The work needs to be done!"⁴ On April 11, "The laborers prepared the lumber [shingles] while the clerics worked on the door frame logs."⁵ Later that year, on December 22, the church was consecrated.

In the 1880s, mission headquarters on the Yukon was moved from Russian Mission to St. Michael over the strenuous objections of Russian Mission's Aleut priest, Zachary Bel'kov.⁶ Father Zachary supervised construction of a new church at St. Michael in 1886, although he remained resident at Russian Mission. Consecrated in 1901, the church at St. Michael was similar in appearance to the one that would be built at Russian Mission, with a two-story nave, topped by a pyramidal roof and small cupola and onion dome, framed by a gable-roofed sanctuary and narthex. In about 1900, a three-story belltower was added in front of the narthex. The church is no longer extant.

² Alaskan Russian Church Archives, reel 151.

³ Documents Relative to the History of Alaska, 1: 374-375.

⁴ "Extracts from the Journals of Rev. Priest Iakov Netsvetov, 1845-63, Yukon District," trans. Lydia T. Black, Alaskan Missionary Spirituality, ed. Michael Oleksa (New York: Paulist Press, 1987), 213.

⁵ Oleksa, 214.

⁶ Documents Relative to the History of Alaska, 1: 382-3.

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In 1895, the small church at Russian Mission was replaced by a much grander one. Built by Father Zachary, the church was financed by him and his brother, Anisim, a merchant.⁷ Anisim Bel'kov also commissioned the iconostas, at a reported cost of \$1,000.

The church had a high, square nave with a large octagonal cupola rising out of its pyramidal roof. The sanctuary was semi-octagonal. The gable-roofed narthex supported the tall two-story belltower, which had a pyramidal roof, out of which rose the belfry. The building was finished with horizontal siding, and featured Chinese-type lintels over the windows and scalloping at all the cornices.

On the neighboring hill a small chapel was constructed in 1897. Financed by Anisim Bel'kov, the chapel commemorated the centennial of Bishop Innocent's birth, and the memory of Innocent, Nikolai (recent bishop), Iakov (Netsvetov), and Zakhary Bel'kov (who would die two years later).⁸

PART II. ARCHITECTURAL INFORMATION

A. General Statement:

1. Architectural character: The square, pyramidal-roofed nave is framed by a semi-hexagonal sanctuary on the east and a gable-roofed narthex on the west, out of which rises a belltower.
2. Condition of fabric: deteriorating.

B. Description of Exterior:

1. Over-all dimensions: The nave is square, about 20'-9" on a side. On the east end is the semi-hexagonal sanctuary. On the west end is a 20'-9" x 9'-0" narthex, out of which rises the belltower, and a 13'-5" x 6'-7" porch on front of that.
2. Foundations: The foundations are presumably sill logs on the ground, but the berm conceals them.
3. Walls: The walls are hewn logs, dovetailed at the corners. The narthex is covered with flush boards.
4. Structural system: The structure is log, except for the narthex and belltower, which are wood-framed.

⁷ Smith, 54.

⁸ Smith, 53-54.

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5. Porch: The front porch is enclosed on the sides by re-used doors. At the front corners are chamfered columns. The porch has a plank floor and a plank gable roof.
 6. Openings:
 - a. Doorways and doors: Double doors set in plain frames.
 - b. Windows: There are 12-light fixed-sash windows.
 7. Roof:
 - a. Shape, covering: There is a pyramidal roof over the nave, with a small cross-gable towards the sanctuary, which is covered by a polygonal roof. The narthex has a gable roof. All are covered with corrugated metal.
 - b. Belltower: There is a two-story hip-roofed belltower rising out of the narthex.
 - c. Cupolas: There are three small, attenuated onion domes, which probably supported crosses.
- C. Description of Interior:
1. Floor plans: The nave is one open space. The narthex, to the west, has a closet in the north side. The sanctuary is east of the nave, behind the iconostas, which has been removed.
 2. Stairways: There is a one-step amvon with a semi-circular projection in the front.
 3. Flooring: Linoleum on tongue-and-groove boards.
 4. Wall and ceiling finish: The walls are covered with oilcloth, with a board serving as a chair rail. The board ceiling is hipped, with a flat square in the center. Icons were hung on the slanted planes of the ceiling.
 5. Doorways: Between the nave and the narthex is a double door with four lights and two panels.
 6. Special decorative features: The iconostas has been removed. It had been built for the previous church, and did not properly fit in this church, so the end bays were angled slightly.

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D. Site:

1. General setting and orientation: Surrounded by a fenced graveyard, the building is set on a hill, overlooking the village and river below. The building faces west, with the altar on the east, as is traditional among Russian Orthodox churches.
2. Historic landscape design: The previous church was built across a ravine on a neighboring hill, which is also the site of the succeeding church.
3. New church: Father Gabriel Gabrieloff, a native of the village, began construction on a new church in 1973; it was dedicated in 1980 (HABS No. AK-65-B). The wood-framed building is covered with plywood, painted reddish-brown with green trim. The nave is covered with a cross-hip roof, except for the semi-octagonal sanctuary, which is covered with an awkward gable roof. The vestibule has a gable roof. Over the nave is an octagonal cupola with windows that shed light into the nave. It is crowned by a metal onion dome; there is an additional onion dome over the sanctuary.

The interior is finished with plywood wainscot, T1-11 walls, and linoleum flooring. The nine-bay iconostas is the most dramatic element. Painted off-white with gold molding, it holds icons in a late nineteenth-century style. The iconostas does not quite fill the width of the nave. The octagonal dome, rising toward the lights in the cupola, is decorated with icons hung on the sides. There is a separate belltower, an openwork structure.

PART III. SOURCES OF INFORMATION

A. Architectural Drawings:

Architectural drawings, dated 1849, of the first church at Russian Mission, are found on reel 151 of the Alaskan Russian Church Archives. They include a plan and four elevations.

B. Early Views:

Photograph of second church, ca. 1900. From the Museum of History and Industry, Seattle. Print included with the National Historic Landmark nomination for St. Michael's Cathedral, filed in the History Division, National Park Service, Washington, DC.

The Smith article, cited below, contains this and several additional historic photographs and drawings.

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C. Bibliography:

Alaskan Russian Church Archives, Library of Congress.

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

"Extracts from the Journals of Rev. Priest Iakov Netsvetov, 1845-63, Yukon District." trans. Lydia Black. Alaska Missionary Spirituality. ed. Michael Oleksa. New York: Paulist Press, 1987.

Smith, Barbara Sweetland. "Cathedral on the Yukon." Alaska Journal 12 (Spring 1982): 4-6ff.

PART IV. PROJECT INFORMATION

Documentation of the Elevation of the Holy Cross 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.