

Russina Bishop's House
Lincoln and Monastery Streets
Sitka
Alaska

HABS No. AK-64

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17-SITKA,
2-

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HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY

RUSSIAN BISHOP'S HOUSE

HABS No. AK-64

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AK
17-SITKA,
2-

- Location: Lincoln and Monastery streets, Sitka, Alaska.
- Present Owner: U.S. government. Administered by Sitka National Historical Park.
- Present Use: Museum.
- Significance: The Russian Bishop's House is one of only three buildings constructed during the Russian period that remain in Alaska. The log construction, low hipped roof, and stairways in end galleries are all hallmarks of Russian American buildings. This building served as the home of the Russian Orthodox bishop of Alaska, as well as a school, seminary, and orphanage.

PART I. HISTORICAL INFORMATION

A. Physical History:

1. Date of erection: 1841-43.
2. Architect, builder: The bishop's house was built by the Russian-American Company, which probably designed it as well. At the time of construction, the Russian-American Company was headed by a Finn, Adolph Etolin, who brought Finnish shipbuilders with him to the colony. Expert with log construction, they may have been responsible for the construction of this building.
3. Original and subsequent owners: The Russian-American Company built the house for the Bishop's use. When the Russian government transferred Alaska to the United States in 1867, the Russian-American Company gave this building to the Russian Orthodox church. The church owned it until 1973, when it sold it to the U.S. government.
4. Original and subsequent uses: The building's primary use has been as the residence of the bishop of Alaska; the first floor has served as both school and orphanage, as well as a number of other functions. Originally, the building housed a seminary and an ecclesiastical school for Russian and creole (mixed blood) children. Bp. Innocent took the seminary with him when he transferred to Siberia in 1858. The school continued until 1929. By the turn of the century two rooms on the first floor that originally served as classrooms became bedrooms for orphaned boys. The seminary returned in 1906, and operated here for a few years. In 1929 the first floor was converted into three apartments. The large southwest room, created by the removal of an interior wall during the 1887 alterations, served as a community meeting room and, in 1936, the town's library. In 1949 a gift shop was located here, and the west window was made into a door. The first-floor apartments closed in 1967.

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The bishop of Alaska made his home on the second floor until 1872, when the seat of the diocese moved to San Francisco. At that time, priests moved into the second-floor quarters. In 1904 an auxiliary diocese was created with a seat in Sitka, so the bishop returned and re-occupied the residential quarters. The bishop left the building in 1969. The Chapel of the Annunciation, located in the southwest corner of the second floor, opened when the building did in 1843.

Today the building serves as a house museum, administered and interpreted by the staff of the Sitka National Historical Park. The first floor is devoted to exhibit space, while the second floor is furnished to reflect Bp. Innocent's occupation. The chapel continues to serve as a chapel, and is tended by a warden from St. Michael's Cathedral.

5. Original plans and construction: The original plans and a perspective, in the possession of Sitka National Historical Park, were used in the restoration, so the current configuration is original. The church furnishings in the chapel came from the chapel at Fort Ross, California, when that Russian-American Company post was abandoned in 1842.
6. Alterations and additions: The first major remodelling took place in 1887. Sitka builder Peter Callsen signed a contract on December 29, 1886. Most noticeably, the galleries were taken down and replaced with smaller ones that came under the slope of the hip roof. The weatherboards on the front were removed, and the building was weatherboarded on all sides. The iron roof was replaced with shingles. The foundation logs were replaced and gutters were installed. On the interior, doors were changed and two waterclosets built. The canvas on the ceilings and walls was cleaned, and the exterior painted.

By 1967, the building had a metal roof and an entrance porch at the southwest entrance.

During the National Park Service restoration from 1976 to 1985, the 1887 galleries were removed and the present ones built. Much of the front wall was replaced. The building was thoroughly renovated. During the work, the chapel was deconsecrated, then reconsecrated when the work was completed.

B. Historical Context:

With a monopoly in Alaska granted by the Russian government, the Russian-American Company was the agent for the development and exploitation of Alaska. The government stipulated that the company support the activities of the Russian Orthodox church, and to that end the company built a number of churches throughout the territory. Founded in Kodiak, the Russian Orthodox church in Alaska expanded to Sitka, the capital of the colony, in 1816. The company built a church in Sitka at that time, and replaced it in 1834. In 1840 the church created a diocese of Kamchatka, the Kurile and Aleutian Islands (i.e.,

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Alaska), with its seat in Sitka. The next year, the Russian-American Company built this building to house the newly appointed bishop and his staff.

The new bishop was Bp. Innocent, who was canonized in 1977. Arriving in Alaska as a priest named Ioann Veniaminov in 1824, the future bishop worked as a missionary among the Aleuts in Unalaska. He was a rare man, translating the Bible into the native dialect, undertaking ethnographic studies during his travels, advocating vaccinations, and building a church and a clock. In 1834 Veniaminov was assigned to Sitka, and four years later recalled to Russia. There he was promoted to bishop, and he returned to Sitka in 1841. During his tenure he greatly expanded the number of churches and chapels throughout Alaska, established a seminary in this building to train native clergy, and undertook construction of St. Michael's Cathedral in Sitka. Innocent was recalled to Russia in 1858 and named archbishop. In 1868 he was named Metropolitan of the church. His broad intellectual range, his tolerant attitudes toward the Natives, and his effectiveness as a missionary make him one of the extraordinary personalities of the Russian period in Alaska.

PART II. ARCHITECTURAL INFORMATION

A. General Statement:

1. Architectural character: The two-story log house presents a broad face to the street, lengthened by galleries at each end. Crowned by a hip roof, the building has little architectural refinement, but is exceedingly practical for its environment.

Entry is through the unheated gallery at each end, which serves as a passageway and airlock. Ventilation in the building is accomplished through *fortochkas* -- brass tubes through the walls. The windows were rarely opened. Exceptionally high thresholds discouraged drafts. A layer of sand between floors served as insulation, while the 9" thick exterior walls provided their own insulation. Cylindrical metal stoves heated the first floor. On the second floor, heating was through brick Russian stoves, which were closed off after the fire was lit to retain heat and radiate it gradually.

2. Condition of fabric: The National Park Service has restored the building to the 1842-53 period. About 70 percent of the building is original fabric. The front wall was replaced up to the second-floor window sills, and the rear wall up to the first-floor window sills. The galleries were completely rebuilt.

B. Description of Exterior:

1. Overall dimensions: The two-story building measures approximately 63' (nine-bay front) x 42', with lower, two-story galleries on each end. The Russian measurement of a sazhen, equal to 7', defines each bay.

2. Foundations: Stone.
 3. Walls: The walls were originally horizontal log (Sitka spruce). The front wall was sided with weatherboards. The front (south) wall was replaced by horizontal planks, 3" thick; three planks, half-lapped, are bolted together to form the original 9" thickness of the log wall. The rear (north) wall is horizontal logs. The log walls were originally joined with a double lap joint. During the reconstruction, this was replaced with a simple lap joint, bolted. The walls are painted yellow ochre.
 4. Structural system: The log and horizontal plank walls are load-bearing. The galleries are framed with heavy timber. The roof is constructed with a queen post truss. The original mortise-and-tenon joints have been replaced with metal brackets.
 5. Galleries: There is a shed-roofed two-story gallery at each end. The 14'-wide galleries are covered with board-and-batten siding and have doors at the first-floor level. The west gallery has a band of windows at the second-floor level, shedding light not only into the gallery but also into the adjacent chapel. The east gallery has no windows, but is painted to resemble the windows on the west to preserve the symmetry. The galleries are reached by a short flight of wood steps.
 6. Chimneys: Two brick chimneys.
 7. Openings:
 - a. Doorways and doors: The double doors into the west gallery are vertical planks with strap hinges, topped with a five-light transom window. A similar doorway is painted onto the east gallery to preserve the symmetry. Other doorways are single-leaf.
 - b. Windows and shutters: The first-floor windows are four-light casements topped by two-light transom windows, while the second-floor windows are six-light casements topped by two-light transom windows. All windows are double-paned, as they were originally. There are louvered shutters on the first-floor front of the building, plank shutters on the first-floor rear.
 8. Roof: The hip roof is covered with standing-scam metal, painted red. There are single brackets at the cornice between bays.
- C. Description of Interior:
1. Floor plans: The building is divided longitudinally without a center hall. Rooms open into each other. Circulation between floors is via the stairways in the galleries; the east one was for service and the west one for more formal use. The first floor, originally the seminary, is currently devoted to exhibits. Removed partitions are denoted by black lines on the floor. The second floor was the

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bishop's residence and today is furnished to reflect Veniaminov's residency. The Chapel of the Annunciation is located in the southwest corner.

2. Stairways: Each gallery contains a stairway.
3. Flooring: Wide planks. Sand was used as insulation between floors.
4. Wall and ceiling finish: The log walls are painted. On the first floor there is a wainscot painted gray with speckles. On the second floor, the walls are papered. Most interior walls are log; those that are board are not full height. The ceiling planks are painted. Some ceilings are covered with sailcloth. The coverings of some walls and ceilings have been peeled away to show the construction.
5. Doorways and doors: The doorways have high thresholds and no doors.
6. Chapel of the Annunciation: The chapel has a wooden, wallpapered iconostas, nearly as high as the ceiling, separating the nave from the sanctuary. Like all iconostases, it is covered with icons and pierced by three doors. In front of it is a two-step amvon with turned balustrade. The floor is bare and there is no seating. Behind the iconostas, the altar is richly furnished.
7. Mechanical equipment: The building was originally equipped with metal cylindrical stoves on the first floor and brick Russian stoves on the second. The only survivor was the one in the chapel; other brick stoves have been reconstructed. The building is fully electrified and dehumidified.

D. Site:

1. General setting: The building faces south onto Lincoln Street behind a lawn with two spruce trees. Across Lincoln Street is the recreational harbor.
2. Historic landscape design: A garden was in front, with field or forests behind the building. A description of the building written in 1899 noted, "In front of the main facade of the church [Chapel of the Annunciation], two mighty cedars lift their magestic peads [peaks], ever whispering their mysterious hreams [dreams] to each other. They were planted by the same hand which planted the spiritual tree of Orthodoxy in the land -- that of Bishop Innocentius."¹
3. Outbuildings: Two outbuildings remain from the nineteenth century.
 - a. School: Just east of the Russian Bishop's House is a school (HABS No. AK-64-A), a two-story wood-frame building measuring approximately 18' x 32'. The gable-roofed building has its end to the street and a door on the

¹Russian Orthodox American Messenger 3 (June 1-13, 1899): 298, cited in Documents Relative to the History of Alaska 5: 28-35.

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west side; there is an enclosed stairway on the rear (north). The school was built in 1897 to accommodate kindergarten and girls' classes. In 1922 the school ceased to be Russian Orthodox and became a public school. To make it more public, the original entrance on the west was closed and a doorway added on the east. By the 1960s the building served as rental housing. The National Park Service restored the exterior of the building in the 1980s; the interior is not open to the public.

- b. Priest's House: On the west side of Monastery Street is the Priest's House, also known as House 105 (HABS No. AK-64-B). The one-and-a-half-story wood-frame building measures approximately 26' x 28'. The plan had a center stairway with two rooms on each side. There was a wood shed in the rear yard. The church contracted with Peter Callsen to build three houses for rental purposes in April 1887. This house was located on lot 105 north of the Bishop's House on the east side of Monastery Street. In 1936 the church sold that lot to the city, and sometime after that the building was moved to its present site. The National Park Service has restored the exterior; the interior is not open to the public.

PART III. SOURCES OF INFORMATION

Most of the information in this report is drawn from the Joaquin Estus, "National Register of Historic Places Nomination: Russian Bishop's House" (National Park Service, 1983). The site is a National Historic Landmark.

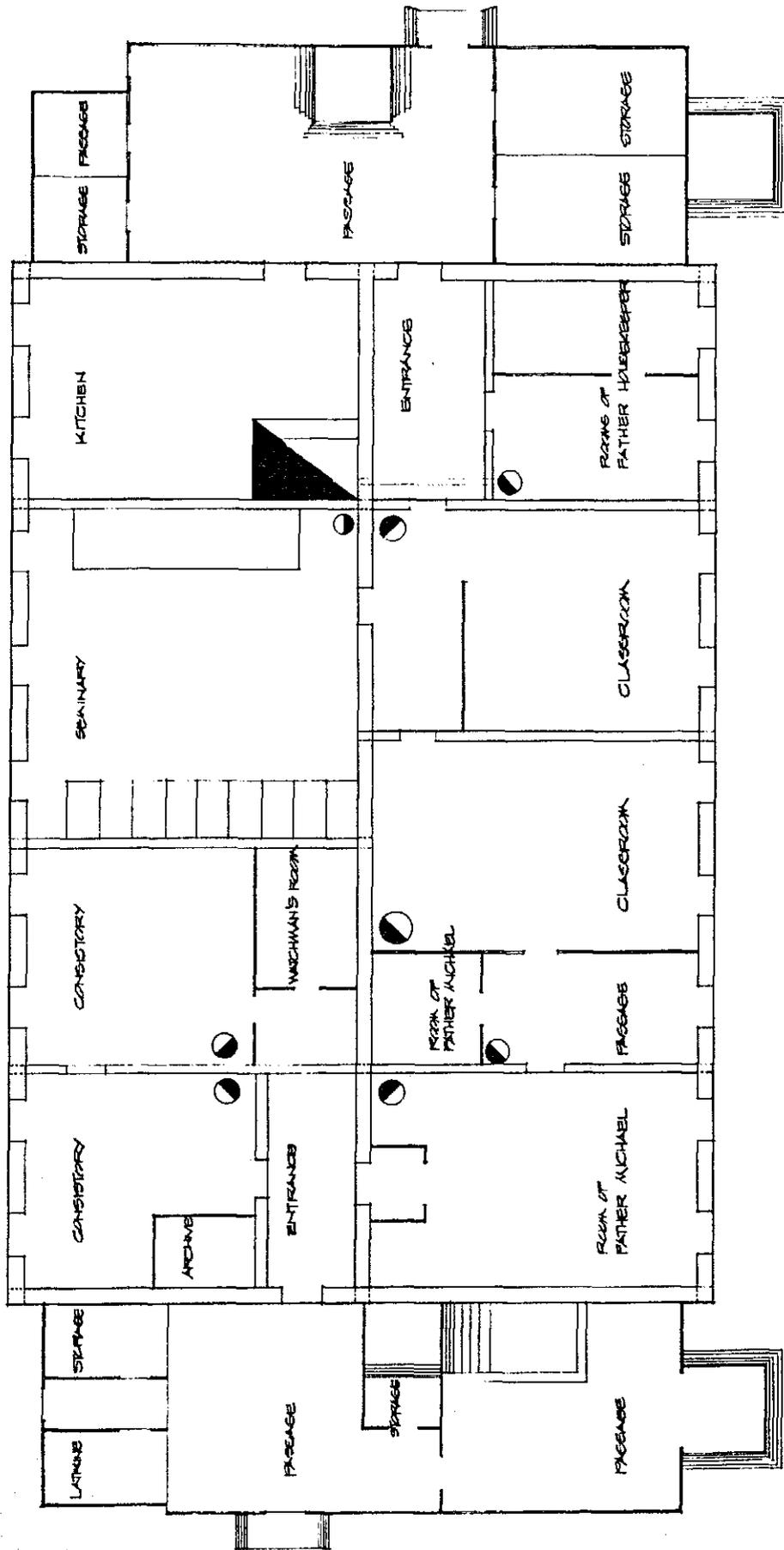
Also consulted were the Alaska Russian Church Archives in the Library of Congress, reel 214, especially for information on the 1887 alterations. The Historic Structure Report cited in the National Register nomination contains a great deal of information. Randy Conrad of the Denver Service Center supplied additional information regarding the corner notching. Barbara Sweetland Smith's "National Register Nomination: Cathedral of St. Michael the Archangel" (National Park Service, 1985) contains a thorough account of the Russian Orthodox church in Sitka.

PART IV. PROJECT INFORMATION

Documentation of the Russian Bishop's House 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. Kapseh, 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.

PART V. SUPPLEMENTAL INFORMATION

Included here are floor plans from the Historic Structure Report prepared by the Denver Service Center of the National Park Service in 1980.

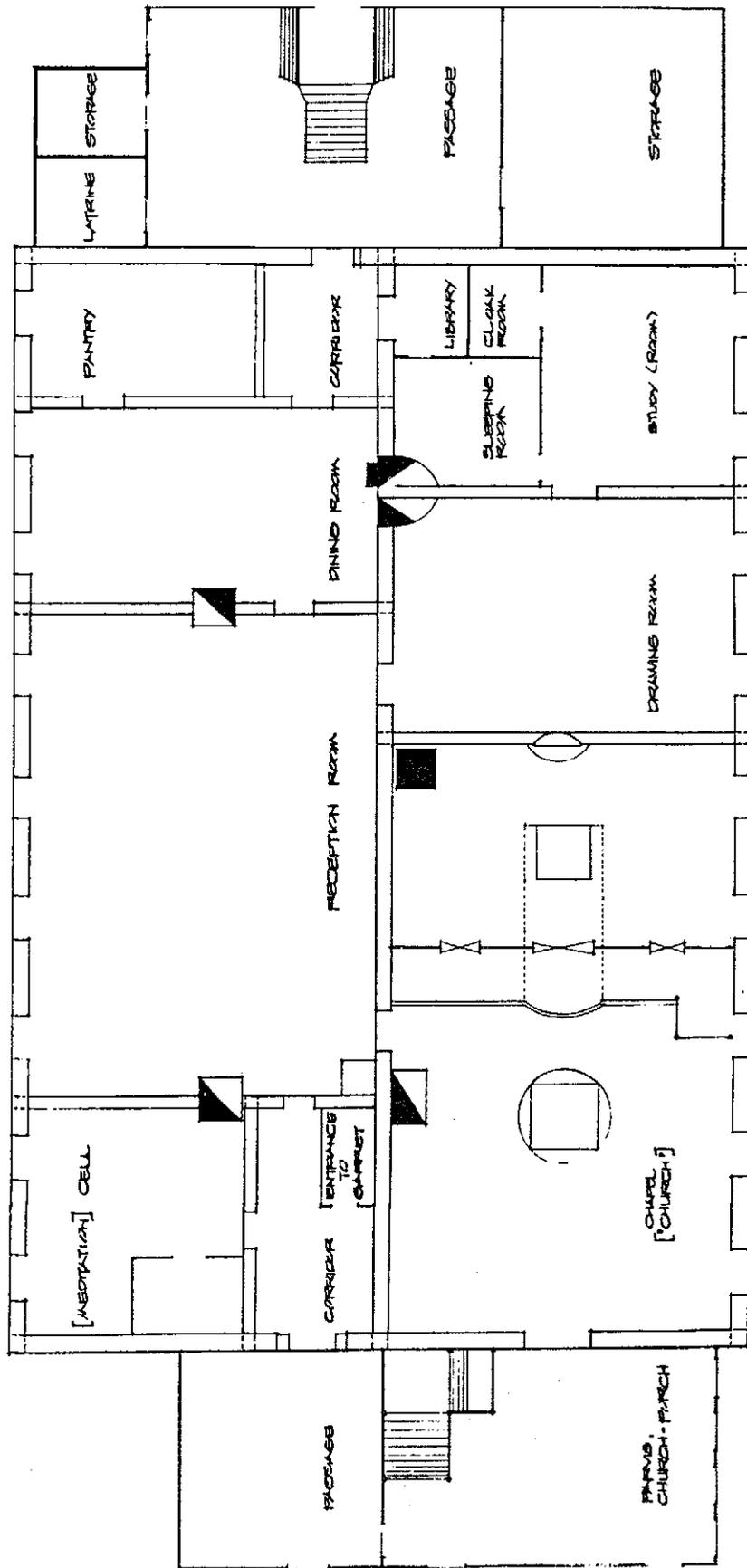


HISTORIC PLAN - ca. 1843

FIRST FLOOR

DRAWN AT SCALE: 1/4" = 1'-0"





HISTORIC PLAN - ca. 1843
SECOND FLOOR



ADDENDUM TO
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Lincoln and Monastery Streets
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Sitka County
Alaska

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REDUCED COPIES OF MEASURED DRAWINGS

FIELD RECORDS

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