

St. Nicholas Russian Orthodox
Churches, Old Church
Eklutna
Alaska

HABS No. AK-94-A

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PHOTOGRAPHS
WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

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HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY

ST. NICHOLAS RUSSIAN ORTHODOX CHURCHES, OLD CHURCH

HABS No. AK-94-A

Location: Eklutna, Anchorage Borough, Alaska.

Present Owner: Alaska Diocese, Orthodox Church in America.

Present Occupant: None.

Present Use: Open to public at Eklutna Village Historical Park.

Significance: One of the older Russian Orthodox churches in Alaska, the Eklutna church features simple log construction and a straightforward form, with nave and sanctuary incorporated into one gable-roofed block.

PART I. HISTORICAL INFORMATION

A. Physical History:

1. Date of erection: 1897. In that year, the Indians moved from their old settlement at Knik, which was being overrun by American gold-seekers, to a new site, at first called New Knik. Fr. John Bortnofsky, the priest whose parish this was, noted in his diary:

Arriving in Old Knik, I found to my amazement that there was no chapel where one had stood. It had been dismantled and laid out for transfer to the new village.¹

Originally, the Kenaitsi intended to reconstruct the old chapel in New Knik and then at leisure, little by little, to build a new one. But I feared that the Kenaitsi "and then" would stretch to a very long time; I, therefore, felt it would be better to persuade them to start at once to build the new chapel. The Kenaitsi did not oppose this and after finishing their own dwellings, quickly took up work on the chapel. By the 20th of December the chapel was finished, the ikonostas was installed on the 21st; after a short blessing, the first Holy Liturgy was celebrated in the new chapel, with praises to God.²

Although there is some doubt about the exact location of these two Kniks, a survey conducted by U.S. Deputy Surveyor A. Lascy in 1904 clarifies the issue.

¹Diary of Fr. John Bortnofsky, 1897.

²Diary of Fr. John Bortnofsky, 1897.

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Lascy notes that Tract A, Knik, has a church "apparently but a few years old and in good condition."³ Tract B, Knik, located 10 miles west of Tract A, was deserted by the natives. "Everything that was movable from the church was taken to the church on Tract A. The foundation of the church is all that is left."⁴ Furthermore, an 1899 map drawn by Johnston and Herning indicates a church at the village of present-day Eklutna.⁵

2. Original plans and construction: Bortnofsky described the church in 1897:

The new chapel is an especially solid and commodious building; the walls are of trimmed logs on both sides. The boards for the floor, ceiling and roof were sawed by the villagers themselves. Except for nails and a pair of windows nothing more had to be purchased. The interior dimensions of the chapel are as follows: 30 feet in length, 20 feet wide, 8-1/2 feet high. The finishing work on the chapel was left until summer when the wood will be somewhat drier. They intend to build, not later than next winter, a porch with a simple bell and to cover the outside walls with boards.⁶

It is not known if the porch and belfry were built the next summer. A 1904 survey refers to measurements taken from the church tower,⁷ but a 1918 photograph shows the building without a porch or tower.⁸ The building was not covered with boards (i.e., clapboarded).

3. Alterations and additions: The open belfry and vestibule were either added or rebuilt after 1918.

In 1976-77, Mike Alex undertook a major restoration of the building. Concrete footings and new sill logs and joists were laid, then the old walls lowered onto them and the old flooring re-laid. Two cables were installed across the width of the building, one of them hidden by the iconostas, the other across the nave. The porch and belltower were entirely rebuilt.⁹

³Albert Lascy, "Field Notes of U.S. Survey No. 239," completed August 4, 1904, Surveyor General's Office, 383.

⁴Lascy, 388.

⁵Ann Chandonnet, On the Trail of Eklutna (Anchorage: User-Friendly Press, 1979), 25.

⁶Diary of Fr. John Bortnofsky, 1897.

⁷Lascy, 379.

⁸Bernardine Prince, The Alaska Railroad: In Pictures, 1914-1964 (Anchorage: Ken Wray's Print Shop, 1964), 251.

⁹Ann Chandonnet, "The Restoration of Saint Nicholas Church at Eklutna," Alaska (June 1978): 62.

PART II. ARCHITECTURAL INFORMATION

A. General Statement:

1. Architectural character: The hewn-log church incorporates nave and sanctuary in one gable-roofed block.
2. Condition of fabric: Fair.

B. Description of Exterior:

1. Over-all dimensions: The church measures 19'-1" x 30'-4", although the logs are lapped in the middle of the long walls.
2. Foundations: Sill logs.
3. Walls: Hewn logs, laid horizontally. At the front corners, the notching is a rough, extended dovetail. At the back corners, the notching is covered by vertical boards. The logs are lap-jointed in the middle of the log walls.
4. Structural system: Logs, reinforced with a tie rod.
5. Porch: The shed-roofed porch on the west, enclosed on two sides with half-logs laid horizontally, measures 8'-7" x 8'-2". Out of its roof rises a tall open belfry. The roof is wood-shingled and the floor is planked.
6. Openings:
 - a. Doorways and doors: There is a plank door on the west.
 - b. Windows: There are two windows on the south side, one on the north. They all have six-over-six-light sash.
7. Roof:
 - a. Shape, covering: The gable roof is covered with wood shingles.
 - b. Belltower: The belfry rising out of the porch roof has an open log frame and a pyramidal wood-shingled roof.

C. Description of Interior:

1. Floor plans: The nave is one open space, separated from the sanctuary on the east by the iconostas.

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2. Stairways: There is a two-step amvon.
3. Flooring: Wide planks cover the floor.
4. Wall and ceiling finish: The walls have a wainscot of wide planks, laid vertically and painted dark blue. Above is a red chairrail and a white canvas wallcovering.
5. Decorative features: The iconostas is a little narrower than the church, and appears to have been moved. It is divided into seven bays, and features panels below and above the icons. There is a wooden chandelier.

D. Site:

1. General setting and orientation: The church is set in a picket-fenced enclosure with the graveyard and several other buildings, now known as Eklutna Village Historical Park. The building faces west, with the altar on the east, as is traditional among Russian Orthodox churches.
2. Historic landscape design: The graveyard has Alaska's largest collection of spirit houses, gravemarkers that represent an odd collusion of Tanaina and Russian Orthodox belief systems. The spirit houses are wooden, gable-roofed structures over graves, with different ornament on the ridgelines. They are painted bright colors, signifying clan and family associations. Fences around them, Orthodox crosses, and their eastern orientation are Russian Orthodox conventions.
3. Other buildings:
 - a. New church (HABS No. AK-94-B): Mike Alex, the village chief, constructed a new church, just south of the old one, in 1954-1962. Its dimensions are close to the old one: 18'-2" x 30'-10", with a 10'-3" x 8'-4" vestibule. Like the old one, it has a gable roof, but unlike the old one, it is wood-framed, with novelty siding painted white with royal blue trim. The vestibule has a slightly recessed doorway, and on top of its gable roof is a belltower supporting a belfry and onion dome.
 - b. Shrines: North of the old church, the small, rustic log Shrine to the Theotokos was constructed in 1979. A slightly larger shrine, constructed of plywood, was built southeast of the new church.
 - c. Visitors Center: The visitors center, south of the new church, was built in the 1920s as the railroad section house in Girdwood and moved to this site in 1990. Its fenestration has been changed, but it still features a broad hipped roof.

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PART III. SOURCES OF INFORMATION

A. Early Views:

Prince, Bernardine. The Alaska Railroad: In Pictures, 1914-1964. Anchorage: Ken Wray's Print Shop, 1964. Page 251 has photographs taken in 1918 of both the exterior and the interior. The exterior photograph is reproduced in Chandonnet, On the Trail, page 48.

Wallace, Fern A. The Flame of the Candle. Chilliwack, B.C.: SS. Kyril and Methody Society, 1974. Plate 122 shows the church with the belfry, but before restoration.

B. Bibliography:

Bortnofsky, Fr. John. Diary. 1897.

Chandonnet, Ann. On the Trail of Eklutna. Anchorage: User-Friendly Press, 1979, 1985.

Chandonnet, Ann. "The Restoration of Saint Nicholas Church at Eklutna." Alaska (June 1978): 61-63.

Hanable, William S. "National Register Nomination: Old St. Nicholas Russian Orthodox Church." National Park Service, 1971.

Lascy, Albert. "Field Notes of U.S. Survey No. 239." Completed August 4, 1904. Surveyor General's Office.

PART IV. PROJECT INFORMATION

Documentation of St. Nicholas 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
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PHOTOGRAPHS

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