

St. Nicholas Russian Orthodox Church
Seldovia
Kenai Peninsula Borough
Alaska

HABS No. AK-66

HABS
AK
9-SELD,
1-

PHOTOGRAPHS
WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

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

HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY
ST. NICHOLAS RUSSIAN ORTHODOX CHURCH

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- Location: Seldovia, Kenai Peninsula Borough, Alaska.
- Present Owner: Alaska Diocese, Orthodox Church in America.
- Present Occupant: St. Nicholas Russian Orthodox Chapel.
- Present Use: Church.
- Significance: A number of historic Russian Orthodox churches survive in Alaska, built by Native congregations in traditional forms. One of the older ones, the church in Seldovia features a square cupola over the nave and a two-story belltower and octagonal belfry.

PART I. HISTORICAL INFORMATION

A. Physical History:

1. Date of erection: 1891. An 1895 church account reported that it was built in 1891.¹
2. Original plans and construction: The 1895 church account noted that the church was built "of planks," meaning wood-framed, and had space for 100 people.² Mr. Schmidt, the storekeeper of the Northern Alaska Trading Co., donated a 76-pound bell in 1895.³
3. Alterations and additions: The western third of the nave was added before 1909, and the belltower moved to accommodate it.

In 1981, extensive renovations were undertaken by architects Richard Perkins and Sam Combs. The building received a new concrete foundation, new roof, insulation blown into the walls, and paint according to the original scheme.

B. Previous Churches on the Site:

None known.

¹ "Concerning the Orthodox Mission in America," October 14, 1895, trans. Sister Victoria, Orthodox Alaska 6 (January 1977): 42.

² Ibid.

³ Documents Relative to the History of Alaska, 1: 344, 2: 74.

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PART II. ARCHITECTURAL INFORMATION

A. General Statement:

1. Architectural character: The rectangular church has a two-story belltower and belfry on the west end, and a square cupola over the nave.
2. Condition of fabric: good.

B. Description of Exterior:

1. Over-all dimensions: The rectangular church measures 21'-2" x 37'-11", with an 8'-7" x 8'-2" belltower on the front.
2. Foundations: concrete.
3. Walls: The walls are covered with wide novelty siding, except for the belltower, which is covered with a narrower, beveled siding.
4. Structural system: wood frame.
5. Stoops: plank.
6. Openings:
 - a. Doorways and doors: Entry is through a vertical-plank single door.
 - b. Windows: The windows have six-over-six-light sash in plain surrounds.
7. Roof:
 - a. Shape, covering: The gable roof is covered with wood shingles.
 - b. Tower: There is a two-story belltower with a pyramidal roof. The octagonal belfry has bells hung in the round-arched openings. It is covered with a pyramidal roof, topped by a stylized onion dome and cross.
 - c. Cupola: There is a square cupola over the nave, with windows on north and south sides. It is topped by a pyramidal roof, stylized onion dome, and cross.

C. Description of Interior:

1. Floor plans: The nave is one open space, broken only by two small columns (5-1/2" x 7-3/4") at the western edge of the cupola. On the west end of the nave, in the

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base of the belltower, is the vestibule, and on the east, behind the iconostas, is the sanctuary.

2. Stairways: There is a one-step amvon with a slight curve in the center.
3. Flooring: wall-to-wall carpeting.
4. Wall and ceiling finish: The walls are covered with horizontal planks, 5" wide. The planks on the back third of the nave and on the back (west) wall are narrower, 3" wide. The walls are painted gray with light blue trim and yellow highlights. There is a large quarter-round molding at the cornice. The ceiling is sheetrock, painted blue. The vestibule is finished with unpainted horizontal planks.
5. Openings: There are four-panel double doors between the vestibule and the nave.
6. Decorative features: The seven-bay iconostas rises to the ceiling. Old oil paintings are set in flat-arched frames. New icons are hung above.
7. Bells: The three bells in the belfry are marked "W. T. GARRATT" with dates of 1894 and 1896.
8. Mechanical equipment: The building has electricity.

D. Site:

The church is located near the harbor, on a bluff overlooking the town. The church faces west, with the sanctuary on the east, as is traditional among Russian Orthodox churches. The building was originally surrounded by a picket fence, now an anchor fence filled with white plastic.

PART III. SOURCES OF INFORMATION

A. Early Views:

1907 photograph of the Native village, with the church in the distance. The cupola and tower are as at present, but it is not clear if the nave has been extended. P. S. Hunt photograph from the Alaska Museum of History and Art, reproduced in Klein (see below), 38. Also at University of Alaska Fairbanks, Selid-Bassoc collection, 64-92-456.

1909 photograph of church; nave has three windows and appears to have been extended. Photograph by D. F. Higgins of the U.S. Geological Survey, reproduced in Klein, 35.

Undated photograph, long view of church after extension. Mary Whalen collection, University of Alaska Fairbanks, 75-84-201.

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Early 1900s photograph of interior. Case and Draper photograph from the Alaska Museum of History and Art, reproduced in Klein, 35.

B. Bibliography:

Barcus, Gwen. "Old Orthodox Church gets a new life." Anchorage Daily News September 14, 1891.

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

Klein, Janet. A History of Kachemak Bay: The Country, the Communities. Homer: Homer Society of Natural History, 1987.

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

HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY
National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior
1849 C Street NW
Washington, DC 20240-0001