

# Russian Bishop's House

Sitka National Historical Park  
National Park Service  
U.S. Department of the Interior



## A Russian Empire in North America:

Although the Bering-Chirikov expedition first arrived in Alaska in 1741, it was between 1799 and 1867 that the Russian imperial government, through the Russian American Company, maintained colonies in Alaska devoted to a lucrative fur trade. At times this empire extended as far as California and Hawaii, but its principal colony was New Archangel, known today as Sitka, Alaska.

Sitka's story is one of exchange between cultures, economies, educational systems, technologies, and ideologies. Here, the cultural heritage of the Tlingit interacted with the traditions of the Russians and the Aleuts, Finns, and others who accompanied them. Ships from many countries brought trade goods and ideas from Europe, Asia, and the Americas, adding to the mix. In time, geographic, diplomatic, and economic factors led Russia to abandon the Alaska colonies. The sale of Alaska to the United States in 1867 marked the end of Russian America, but not of the multicultural interactions that still shape us today.

In many ways, the Russian Orthodox Church is the most enduring legacy of this little-known chapter in United States history. The tsar who authorized the Russian American Company's monopoly in Alaska clearly intended the church to be a part of Russian America. The Company was required to support the church's missionary efforts, bringing permanent cultural change to Alaska's Natives.

Although the fur trade eventually dwindled and the Russian American Company managers returned to Russia, the Russian Orthodox Church continues to thrive in Alaska today. The Russian Bishop's House is a tangible reminder of the role that the Russian Orthodox Church played in Russian America and the history of Alaska.



School children and clergy with a model of Saint Michael's Cathedral outside the Russian Bishop's House ca. 1900.

## Bishop Innocent:

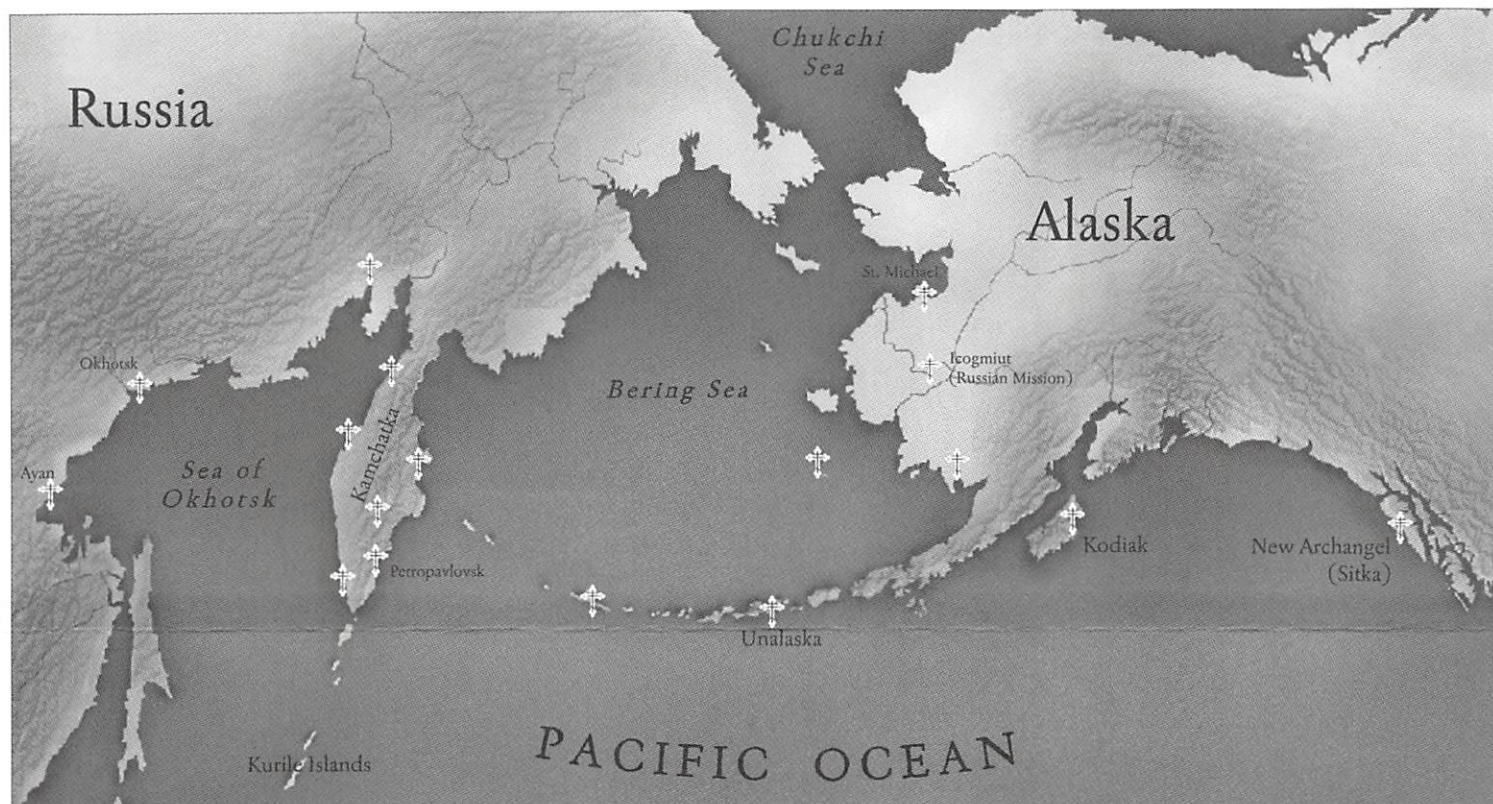
In 1841, Bishop Innocent arrived in Sitka to assume leadership of a vast new diocese that included both Alaska and Kamchatka. As the center of authority for the Orthodox Church in Russian America, he had the power to shape the church's presence. He also had a strong interest in Native cultures. Under his direction, these came together in an approach to missionary work that incorporated Native language and clergy.



Bishop Innocent in 1840

Bishop Innocent was well equipped for his Alaskan post. He was a veteran frontier traveler with previous experience in Sitka and the Aleutian Islands, a skilled craftsman, a gifted educator, and a versatile intellectual with a talent for languages. With his inspiration, the house became a center of learning and culture in Russian America. Modern researchers continue to rely on his careful observations about Alaska, especially those regarding Alaskan Native culture in the first decades after European settlement.

Bishop Innocent's position in the church continued to rise after his time in New Archangel. This man who began his career as priest Ioann Veniaminov was eventually appointed Metropolitan of Moscow and Kolomna, the highest office in the Russian Church. Nearly 100 years after his death in 1879, he was glorified as a saint in the Russian Orthodox Church.



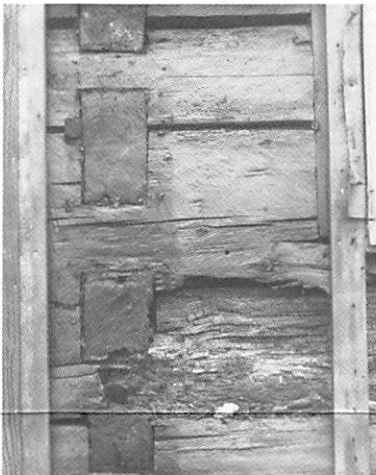
From the Russian Bishop's House, Bishop Innocent oversaw an extensive diocese that encompassed much of the North Pacific rim. Orthodox crosses on the map mark some of the many churches he visited and administered.

## An Ecclesiastical Palace:

Completed in 1843, the Russian Bishop's House was part of a "Golden Age" in Russian America when industry, construction, and the Orthodox Church were in full flower. It was built as a residence for Bishop Innocent and was the center from which he oversaw his far-reaching diocese. The upper floor included a public reception area, the bishop's private quarters, and chapel. The lower floor of the house served as the church offices; a school for Creole, Aleut, and Tlingit children; and a seminary where Native clergy were trained.

As befit Bishop Innocent's role in Russian American society, his house was one of the most refined in the colonies. Built by the Russian American Company, the house was a symbol of the strength and viability of the church in Russian America. The bishop himself described it as an "ecclesiastical palace."

The structure is a prime example of Russian wooden architecture, characterized by



tightly-fitted squared-log buildings that were sturdy and weatherproof, with interior walls that could be painted or papered to achieve a refined interior finish. Within are items from around the world, including icons and fine furnishings from Russia, earthenware from England, mineral water bottles from Germany, and tea from China.

Features that make the house well suited to a cold climate include gravel, sand, and sawdust insulation; a floor plan that minimizes heat loss between rooms and floors; and the use of glued paper to seal seams and cracks in the walls. Finnish shipwrights employed by the Russian American Company were among the craftsmen who built the house. Evidence of their distinctive approach to timber construction is well preserved in the 70% of the original structure that remains today.

## The House Restored:



The Russian Bishop's House before restoration

The house continued in the hands of the Orthodox Church after the 1867 sale of Alaska and many original furnishings remain. By the 1960s, maintenance needs finally overwhelmed the church's ability to keep the 125 year-old structure intact. In 1972, the U.S. Congress authorized the purchase and restoration of the house by the National Park Service, setting the stage for a more than fifteen-year project to restore the house to its 1853 appearance.

The restoration was an international collaboration, combining the knowledge and expertise of sources in the Soviet



Union, American specialists in architecture and historic furnishings, and local craftsmen. The work proceeded in stages, beginning with the stabilization of the fragile structure with log scaffolding that lifted and supported the building from within until exterior walls were restored. Meanwhile National Park Service specialists worked to match the rich and vibrant fabrics, paint, wallpaper, and furniture that preserve the authentic setting.

State-of-the-art climate control systems were added to ensure ongoing protection and preservation. The restoration was complete in 1988. A highlight for many visitors is the beautiful Chapel of the Annunciation, still in use today.

The Russian Bishop's House continues to be a place where visitors can experience and participate in the kind of cultural exchange that typifies not only Sitka's history, but the broader heritage of the United States. Tours of the house are offered regularly in the summer or by appointment in the winter. For more information call (907) 747-0110 or visit the park website at [www.nps.gov/sitk](http://www.nps.gov/sitk).