

Historical Tour of Sitka with Fr. Michael Oleksa

At Castle Hill — The Beginnings

We start our tour of Alaska's 250-year history on Castle Hill, at the end of Lincoln Street.

Here once stood a two story wooden building the locals called Baranov's Castle. Of course it was not really a castle at all, but the company manager's house in the days of Alexander Baranov, a controversial figure even to this day.



Alexander Baranov

Baranov was hired by Gregory Shelikov, the founder of the Russian American (fur trading) Company who had invaded Kodiak Island in the summer of 1784, massacring hundreds of Alutiiqs at the Battle of Refuge Rock (*For more information on this, see the National Geographic video/DVD "The Island of the Giant Bears"*). Returning to Russia, Shelikov lobbied for a commercial trade monopoly for his company, encompassing not only Alaska but Japan, Korea and the Philippines. Empress Catherine the Great rejected his request, gave him two ceremonial silver swords, pinned a medal on his chest and dismissed him. Shelikov hired Baranov to manage the Kodiak outpost, where he arrived in 1791. Baranov sought to expand the company's operations eastward and negotiated a lease for a trading post at what is now called "Old Sitka."

The Russians understood "discovery" by Europeans to mean "first option to buy" not ownership, and paid for land that they used or occupied, purchasing or renting it in

agreements with local tribes. Baranov was infuriated when the Tlingit of this region violated the arrangement, attacked the outpost in 1802 and killed most of its Aleut and Russian occupants. The Tlingit were urged and armed to do this by the British who wanted to gain control of Southeast Alaska and drive the Russians out. Baranov commandeered a Russian naval vessel, the Neva, and stormed back into Sitka in 1804. The Battle ground lies on the opposite end of Lincoln Street, at the Totem Park National Historic Site which we will visit later.

Here, on Castle Hill, in October 1867, the brief formal ceremony, transferring sovereignty (not ownership) of Alaska from the Russian to the US government, was conducted. The plan was for both parties to make very brief statements and then with honor guards in formation, cannon would be fired in salute as the Russian flag was lowered and the American flag raised.

The Russian battery on shore would fire a volley, and the American naval vessel in the harbor would answer, each echoing the salute of the other. The flag poles were local spruce, over 50 feet high. As the American flag was being raised, the Russian flag got caught and wrapped around the pole. As the attendant tried to free it, the flag began to tear. There was no way to halt the cannonade so some sailors tried to shimmy up the pole to untangle it, but about half way up, they ran out of energy and froze there. Finally a Tlingit rigged a boatswain's chair, a rope devise, and was hauled up to the Russian flag. The strong winds had whipped it around the pole and it was stuck fast.



The Russian American Company Flag

The spectators on the ground yelled instructions, telling him to cut the flag free and bring it down with himself, but instead he dropped it. The Russian flag fell, draping itself over the fixed bayonets of the local honor guard, at which point the Russian governor's wife fainted.

And that's how Alaska became American territory!

Every October 18, Sitkans gather at Castle Hill to re-enact the transfer ceremony, but of course, no one has ever redone it the way it really happened in 1867!

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The Cathedral of St. Michael

The Cathedral was designed and built by Bishop Innocent Veniaminov one of the most remarkable Alaskans who ever lived in Sitka--or any place else in the territory.



Born in 1797 in a small Siberian village as Ioan (John) Popov, he distinguished himself at school as mechanically gifted and highly intelligent. The Valedictorian of his seminary graduating class, he was awarded a new surname, Veniamin (Benjamin) in honor of the newly-deceased and highly respected local bishop. Ordained as an Orthodox priest in 1823, he volunteered (apparently without checking with his wife Katherine) to serve in Alaska and spent a decade in the Aleutian Islands, learning the Unangan Aleut language, devising an alphabet for it and composing as well as translating books into Aleut, then opening a school for the local children. Assisted by the local chief, Ivan Pankov, he produced a primer a catechism and a translation of the Gospel according to St. Matthew, and sent all these texts to Europe to be published. Traveling along the Aleutian Islands he studied the flora, fauna and meteorology of the region and wrote a book, "Notes on the Unalaska District."

Transferred to Sitka, he began studies of the Lingit language and culture and added this

description to his book as well. He sailed to Europe to supervise the publication of his translations, traveling through Hawaii, Australia, South Africa and the Canary Islands en route, only to learn upon his arrival in St. Petersburg that his wife Katherine had died in Siberia, where she had returned with their six children while he had been sailing half way around the world.

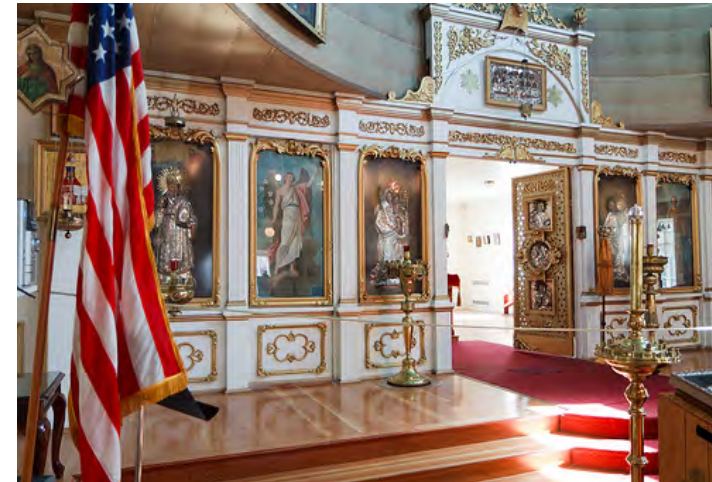
His immediate impulse was to abandon his publication project and reunite with his children but the Tsar, Nicholas I, had heard of this famous missionary and ethnographer and summoned him to the Winter Palace. There the Emperor expressed his condolences but insisted that Father Ioan return instead to Alaska, and now as bishop for the new diocese. He was tonsured a monk and given the new name Innocent, after the famous missionary bishop in Siberia who had learned the native languages there and opened schools for Siberian Native children two hundred years earlier.

Now as Bishop Innocent Veniaminov, he returned to Sitka where work on his residence and school building, the Russian Bishop's House (still standing on Lincoln Street) was underway. There he designed and supervised the construction of St. Michael the Archangel Cathedral, and built the clock in the bell tower himself.



The original cathedral was lost along with a half dozen other structures in January 1966, when a fire swept through downtown Sitka. Fortunately the Cathedral was the last structure to burn and this gave hundreds of townspeople time to rescue nearly all its icons, chalices, and furnishings. Only one icon, in fact, was lost in the chaos and calamity of that day. Rebuilt

according to Veniaminov's plans as an exact replica, the new cathedral is also fire proof, built first of concrete and then covered with the wooden facing on the exterior.



The interior is typical of Orthodox Christian churches anywhere: a large outer entry, the Narthex, which represents the natural world, the main interior space, the Nave, filled with icons portraying biblical scenes and events in sacred history, and the Altar, the sanctuary at the Eastern end, representing the Kingdom of God, "to come" but already present on earth. The flame shaped domes atop the church represent not onions or carrots or any other vegetable, but the tongues of fire, flame-shaped domes indicating that here the Presence of the Holy has descended, come to earth to bless, purify and sanctify this world.

The iconostas or icon-screen separates the Nave from the Altar. Everywhere, in any Orthodox church in the world, whether in Greece, Bulgaria, Romania, Georgia, Yugoslavia, Ukraine or Russia, the arrangement will be universally the same: central doors leading directly to the Altar Table or Throne, on which appear icons, first of the Archangel Gabriel and the Virgin Mary. This scene, from the Gospel of Luke, depicts the angel greeting the virgin and announcing to her that she will have a son, that God's plan for her life is that she become the mother of Emmanuel, God with Us. She at first resists and debates, having had, as already engaged to her fiancé, other plans, but she eventually accepts God's will. The message of the Doors is that this is what each person must do: discover the Will of God for their life and then accomplish it, with His help. The other icons on the Royal Doors are those of the four evangelists: most of us will not have angels come to tell us what God's plan for our life is. We will have discern it by studying the Gospel and applying the message to our lives.

On the north side of the Royal Doors (through which the King of Glory enters) is an icon of the infant Christ in his mother's arms, and on the south side, Christ as King. These indicate that God became Man 2000 and more years ago (on the left) and will come again as Judge at the End of time (on the right) and we stand, as it were, in between. Over the doors is the scene of the Last or Mystical Supper. It is in the Communion, the Eucharist that believers now are united to the Lord who came two millennia ago and will come again glory at some future time.



The most famous icon in St. Michael's Cathedral, Our Lady of Sitka, sometimes called the "Sitka Madonna" is enshrined in the northern chapel (to the left). Painted by a famous Russian portraitist, the icon is said to have been the vehicle by which people have been cured of various ailments and diseases, a "miracle-working" icon. The south chapel, dedicated to St. Innocent Veniaminov after his canonization in 1977, contains icons of St. Innocent Veniaminov, who later was transferred to Yakutsk, Siberia, where he learned the Sakha or Yakut language, published books and opened schools until his election as Metropolitan/Archbishop of Moscow in 1868. He ended his earthly life in March 1879 as one of the leading figures of 19th century Russian Orthodoxy. Not bad for a peasant boy from a remote village who had only the equivalent of a high school diploma!

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The Russian Bishop's House

The "Russian Bishop" for whom this structure was originally built, St. Innocent Veniaminov, actually lived only in the upstairs eastern side of this rather imposing dwelling. The entire downstairs were classrooms and dormitory space for what was called the "All Colonial School" where, in a six year curriculum, Alaska Native students were trained to become leaders in Russian American' society. Graduates were accountants ship builders, nurses, navigators, cartographers, musicians, artists, and missionaries. The classes included several years in various Alaska Native languages. Some twentieth century alumni could read, write and speak as many as four: Russian, English, Lingit and Aleut.



Today the lower floors house a museum of items from the Russian era of Alaska's history, the upstairs, Veniaminov's desk, some chairs we believe he himself made, and a chapel, where the seminarians gathered for worship daily, the oldest Orthodox church in North America, still used occasionally for various celebrations and holidays, dedicated to the Annunciation, the Feast day nine-months before Christmas, on which the Church commemorates the "announcing" to the Virgin Mary of God's Plan for her life. The 19th century art in the chapel reflects the predominant "Italian Renaissance" style that Peter the Great, in his effort modernize and "westernize" Russia imposed on the country a century before.

The National Park Service provides an excellent tour of the building, and we are confident that they will offer any additional information, as the students might request it.

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Totem Park

The Sitka Battlefield site is contained within a larger park in which Haida Totem poles have been enshrined for a century. The Haida are a neighboring tribe who live mostly in Canada. Alaska's Haidaburg is the one Haida community in the state. These totem poles were collected and sent to the International Exposition in St. Louis but never returned to their original owners. Apparently the federal sponsors ran out of funds and got the poles only as far as Sitka, where they have remained ever since. Because they are not Tlingit totems, no local residents know the meaning of their design or the story behind their origins. Nevertheless, a walk through the park allows visitors to admire the beautiful northwest coast artwork as they move toward the site where the Tlingit built their fort and the Russian American Company's Aleuts landed on the beach to attack it.



The Tlingit Battle Helmet worn in the Battle of Sitka

In the aftermath of the 1802 catastrophe, Baranov himself returned to lead the counter attack on the Tlingit fort and was wounded in the battle. A Tlingit woman, married earlier to a Russian at Old Sitka served as an interpreter for her people, but badly misunderstood the meaning of the truce flag that Baranov raised after the battle, seeking to negotiate

with the leaders in the fort. She misunderstood the white flag to mean "They are going to wipe us out as clean as snow." This so concerned the defenders that they secretly abandoned the fort and went into exile more than 70 miles away, on the opposite side of the island. This retreat was costly, many elders and children perished on the way north.

A full account, based on Tlingit oral tradition and Russian as well as American and British archives, has been researched by Richard and Nora Dauenhauer and Dr. Lydia Black, and a remarkable play, in three languages, Russian English and Tlingit has been written by Juneau playwright Dave Hunsaker and performed by Perseverance Theatre there in 2009.

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The Block House and Russian Cemetery

On the far end of Lincoln Street, behind the Pioneer (retirement) home, there stands a replica of one of the several Russian blockhouses that once defended Sitka from attack. There, in the 1830s and 1840s, stood a chapel in which the Tlingits who had been baptized worshipped in their own language, led by priests of both Russian and Alaska Native backgrounds. The most famous of these was Father Jacob Netsvetov.



A Russian Primer penned by Fr. Jacob Netsvetov



Netsvetov was born in 1802 on St. George Island, the son of a Russian father and an Atkan (Unangan) Aleut mother. Bilingual and bi-cultural, he went to Irkutsk to attend seminary, married a Russian wife and returned to serve the church at Atka for 20 years. Mastering Ioan Veniaminov's writing system for Unangan Aleut he opened his own school and traveled also along the entire Aleutian Archipelago as far as the Kurile Islands, just north of Hokaido, Japan.

His life however was tragic. His wife died after being sent to Sitka for treatment, his house burned down and his adopted son also died within a year of each other. He requested permission to retire, and in principle, his bishop, by this time Innocent Veniaminov, agreed. But the mission needed someone to establish a mission post in the Yukon Kuskokwim Delta and Netsvetov was instead transferred there.

He learned Yup'ik Eskimo and spent another 18 years, ministering in the region. Taken up river by Athabaskan Indians, he baptized hundreds of them near Shageluk where they had gathered at their own initiative to hear his stories. He is remembered in this area as the one who brought peace to warring tribes, delivering to them the rather contradictory message, "Love your enemies" and reconciling formerly hostile tribes.

As his health began to fail, Netsvetov at last retired to Sitka, where he served the Tlingit chapel. He located his wife's grave and erected a memorial stone plaque over it, but when he himself died, and was buried "by the doors of the chapel" no such permanent marker was erected. We do not know exactly where within the cemetery this remarkable saintly Aleut is buried, but there is now a memorial to him on the grounds, so that he would not be forgotten. His wife's grave lies further up Marine Street, marked by a white Russian-style three-barred cross with the stone inscription still over it.



Replica Blockhouse near the Memorial to St. Jacob Netsvetov on the site of the Tlingit chapel.