

## THE HISTORICAL AND ARCHITECTURAL SIGNIFICANCE OF ST. MICHAEL THE ARCHANGEL CATHEDRAL IN SITKA

### A IMPORTÂNCIA HISTÓRICA E ARQUITETÔNICA DA CATEDRAL DE SÃO MIGUEL ARCANJEL EM SITKA

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#### Abstract

This study examines the historical and architectural significance of the Cathedral of St. Michael the Archangel in Sitka, Alaska, constructed during the Russian missionary period. The objective is to analyze the cathedral's role as both a religious and cultural landmark, highlighting its function in the broader context of Russian-American relations, missionary activity, and heritage preservation. An interdisciplinary approach was applied, combining historical analysis, architectural typology, and cultural interpretation. Primary sources included Russian and U.S. archival records, Library of Congress documents, the National Register of Historic Places, and Orthodox Church publications. Field surveys, architectural drawings, and visual documentation from the Historic American Buildings Survey were also analyzed. The research demonstrated that the cathedral embodied a hybrid architectural identity, combining Russian ecclesiastical design with Finnish craftsmanship and North American influences. The study re-evaluates the construction chronology, confirming Bishop Innocent's key role in design and oversight. Post-fire reconstruction (1967–1976) successfully preserved the cathedral's external form, though reinforced concrete was introduced to enhance fire resistance. Stylistic analysis reveals a blend of Greco-Russian, Rococo, and classical elements, while the cathedral's cultural role extended beyond religion to education, diplomacy, and cross-cultural exchange. St. Michael the Archangel Cathedral remains a significant urban and cultural landmark, reflecting both Russian heritage abroad and shared Russian-American history.

**Keywords:** Russian America. Sitka. Missionary Architecture. Orthodox Church. Cultural Heritage.

#### Resumo

*Este estudo examina a importância histórica e arquitetônica da Catedral de São Miguel Arcanjo em Sitka, no Alasca, construída durante o período missionário russo. O objetivo é analisar o papel da catedral como marco religioso e cultural, destacando sua função no contexto mais amplo das relações russo-americanas, da atividade missionária e da preservação do patrimônio. Foi aplicada uma abordagem interdisciplinar, combinando análise histórica, tipologia arquitetônica e interpretação cultural. As fontes primárias incluíram registros de arquivos russos e norte-americanos, documentos da Biblioteca do Congresso, o Registro Nacional de Locais Históricos e publicações da Igreja Ortodoxa. Também foram analisados levantamentos de campo, desenhos arquitetônicos e documentação visual do Historic American Buildings Survey. A pesquisa demonstrou que a catedral incorporava uma identidade arquitetônica híbrida, combinando o projeto eclesiástico russo com o artesanato finlandês e influências norte-americanas. O estudo reavalia a cronologia da construção, confirmando o papel fundamental do Bispo Innocent no projeto e na supervisão. A reconstrução pós-incêndio (1967–1976) preservou com sucesso a forma externa da catedral, embora tenha sido introduzido concreto armado para aumentar a resistência ao fogo. A análise estilística revela uma mistura de elementos greco-russos, rococó e clássicos, enquanto o papel cultural da catedral se estendeu além da religião para a educação, a diplomacia e o intercâmbio intercultural. A Catedral de São Miguel Arcanjo continua sendo um marco urbano e cultural significativo, refletindo tanto a herança russa no exterior quanto a história compartilhada entre a Rússia e os Estados Unidos.*



*Palavras-chave:* América Russa. Sitka.  
Arquitetura Missionária. Igreja Ortodoxa.  
Patrimônio Cultural.

## 1 INTRODUCTION

The missionary period is generally considered to have begun with the spread of Orthodoxy and the appearance of churches on the North American continent in the late 18th century. This era left the greatest number of Orthodox churches on Alaskan territory—28 sites in total (23.1% of all missionary-period churches across the United States) [1, pp. 163–164]. The Cathedral of St. Michael the Archangel in Sitka was the largest religious structure, and the most significant in terms of status and architectural scale in Alaska until the 20th century.

The beginning of the missionary period is closely tied to the establishment of the first Russian settlements as bases for the commercial-industrial enterprise that, in 1799, was granted exclusive rights to hunting and trade in Alaska by Emperor Paul I and became known as the Russian-American Company [2, pp. 114–121].

Seeking to expand its hunting territories, the company took control of Sitka Island, which offered a more convenient harbor for developing trade, overcoming the resistance of the Indigenous population. Thus, in 1804, a fort was established [3, pp. 57–69]. In 1808, the settlement, named Novo-Arkhangelsk (now the city of Sitka), was granted not only town status but also designated as the capital of Russian America. This development created the conditions for building a new, large Orthodox church that would serve as the cathedral for all of Russian America. The new cathedral was dedicated to St. Michael the Archangel, replacing a small wooden church of the same name.

## 2 METHODS

The methodological foundation of this study is based on a comprehensive interdisciplinary approach that integrates elements of historical analysis, architectural typology, and cultural hermeneutics. The primary sources used include archival documents from both Russia and the United States, such as materials from the Library of

Congress, the National Register of Historic Places, and publications by the Russian Orthodox Church. Additional data were gathered from field surveys, photographs, architectural drawings, and descriptions produced within the framework of the Historic American Buildings Survey. The historical-comparative method enabled the identification of architectural features in the context of missionary activity and the urban development of Novo-Arkhangelsk as the capital of Russian America.

The analysis of architectural solutions and construction technologies was conducted with consideration of the cultural, political, and religious factors characteristic of the transnational domain of the Russian-American Company. The study also employed methods for reconstructing architectural chronology, correlating eyewitness accounts, ecclesiastical records, engineering documents, and visual materials. Special attention was given to issues of cultural continuity, post-1966 fire reconstruction, and the stylistic identity of the building. This approach not only clarified historical facts regarding the construction but also revealed the unique interplay between Russian, Finnish, and American building traditions.

### **3 RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

#### **3.1 Characteristics of the missionary period and the construction conditions of St. Michael the Archangel Cathedral**

The uniqueness of churches built during the missionary period reflected not only the challenging conditions of territorial development but also specific design approaches. Most churches, chapels, and other religious buildings were not created by professional architects but by the missionaries themselves, who tried to recreate familiar architectural forms in new environments [4, p. 49–50].

Although the first Russian settlement on Kodiak Island appeared in 1784, the construction of the island's first church began only ten years later, in September 1794, when an Orthodox mission arrived — a group of monks from Valaam Monastery (between 8 and 10 people) led by Archimandrite Ioasaph (Bolotov). Their goal was to baptize the native population of North America in accordance with the canons of the Russian Orthodox Church [5].

All churches of the missionary period were constructed from wood, with the exception of St. Michael the Archangel Cathedral in Novo-Arkhangelsk. Novo-Arkhangelsk, due to its strategically important location and convenient harbor, became the headquarters of the Russian-American Company, which had access to both administrative and financial resources. This allowed the city to develop rapidly, and by 1808, Novo-Arkhangelsk became the new administrative center — the capital of all of Russian America until 1867. Afterward, it was renamed Sitka and remained Alaska's main city until 1906, when the administrative functions were transferred to Juneau [6].

The first Church of St. Michael the Archangel was built in 1816, eight years after Novo-Arkhangelsk gained city status. It was a small octagonal building, located south of the site where the current cathedral stands [7, p. 15]. As the city's importance grew, it became necessary to build a new, more spacious church that would reflect its role as Alaska's capital. A central site was allocated for the new cathedral, prominently elevated above the surrounding buildings and visible from the shore and sea.

The tall cathedral served as both a spiritual and urban planning landmark, capping the main street that rose from the docks to the cathedral and was lined with the city's most important buildings. Notably, the main office of the Russian-American Company was situated to the right of the cathedral site, as the company took on the responsibility of funding and constructing the cathedral [7, pp. 13–14]. According to an imperial decree from 1821, the Russian-American Company was obliged to support the Russian Orthodox Church [8, pp. 6–12], a condition for successful business operations.

The construction of the cathedral was directly overseen by Adolf Karlovich Etolin, head of the Russian-American Company and governor of Russian America from 1840 to 1845. Researchers suggest that Etolin, a native of Swedish Finland in Russian service, personally invited skilled carpenters and builders from his homeland. Finnish craftsmen worked on the cathedral and other major company buildings for nearly two decades under successive governors [9, pp. 5–6]. This collaboration brought together Russian and Finnish construction techniques, resulting in structures architecturally and structurally unique for North America.

Wood was used as the main construction material: the core structure was a log frame, with both the interior and exterior clad in planed tongue-and-groove boards and battens, a typical North American practice. The roof and the domes of the nave and bell

tower were also initially wooden. The bells were cast in the workshops of Novo-Arkhangelsk (Sitka).

St. Michael's Cathedral remained the largest religious building in Alaska until the early 20th century. The cathedral's architect was Father Innocent (Ivan Veniaminov), who in 1840 became the first bishop of Alaska, Kamchatka, and the Kuril Islands. Some sources indicate that the cathedral's cornerstone was laid in 1844, with the cathedral and bell tower consecrated on November 20, 1848 [10]. However, according to Bishop Innocent's report to the Holy Synod in St. Petersburg, the actual cornerstone was laid on April 21, 1848—four years later than previously thought. The altar was consecrated on May 18, 1850, even before construction was officially completed. Later, two chapels with their own altars were added and consecrated: the northern chapel dedicated to the Kazan Icon of the Mother of God, and the southern chapel in honor of John the Baptist and St. Alexander Nevsky [11].

The cathedral became not only the religious center and seat of the Alaskan diocese, but also a foundation for educational initiatives (seminary opening, school and orphanage construction, the creation of alphabets for Indigenous languages, and the preservation of local traditions) and for healthcare development. The importance of St. Michael's Cathedral and the entire Orthodox mission was recognized by American historians and linguists. It is no coincidence that the Library of Congress curators in the U.S. dedicated exhibitions and publications to the cathedral's history as a multifaceted cultural center and focal point of the Russian Orthodox mission [12, pp. 57–58].

### *3.1.1 Restoration of St. Michael the Archangel Cathedral*

St. Michael the Archangel Cathedral has survived to the present day and is located in the business center of Sitka on Lincoln Street, tightly surrounded by office buildings, cafes, a museum, a Lutheran church, and residential houses from various historical periods ranging from two to seven stories tall. However, the current cathedral is largely a reconstruction following a devastating fire in 1966.

In 1962, the cathedral was granted the status of a U.S. National Historic Landmark, and the Historic American Buildings Survey (HABS) conducted measurements and produced architectural drawings. These materials became the

foundation for the cathedral's reconstruction after the 1966 fire, which not only damaged the cathedral but also destroyed most of the wooden structures in the historic center, including several buildings dating back to the Russian America period. The restoration, carried out between 1967 and 1976, was led by Sergei Padukov, an American architect of Russian origin, invited from Toms River, New Jersey. While developing the restoration project for what was originally a fully wooden structure, Padukov decided to use reinforced concrete elements to enhance the building's durability and fire resistance [13, p. 19].

Despite the use of a different construction system and a new structural column layout in the nave's center, the architect managed to preserve the building's original appearance at its core. This example of reconstruction was endorsed by the HABS team. During the restoration, modern siding was applied to the facades, and red-brown roofing material, resembling the original, was used on the roofs.

Many icons and religious artifacts from the early 19th century—donated by merchants and officials of the Russian imperial administration and brought from St. Petersburg specifically for the cathedral—were saved during the fire, including the central chandelier (panikadilo). These items were returned to the restored cathedral and now serve as its adornment [13; 14]. The large and small domes above the nave and bell tower were rebuilt in metal and painted dark green to match the original design. The bells were newly cast to replace the ones lost in the fire. The cathedral and bell tower exteriors were painted blue with white accents on cornices, details, doors, and window frames.

### *3.1.2 Architectural layout of St. Michael the Archangel Cathedral*

The floor plan of the cathedral is shaped as a Greek cross, measuring 20.5 by 29.2 meters. The nave, oriented from the narthex to the northeast based on the urban layout, ends in an altar without an apse. The four arms of the nave and transept are covered by gabled roofs, forming triangular pediments on the facades. The center of the nave—the *katholikon*—unifies the arms of the plan and roofs, and is crowned with a large octagonal drum featuring rectangular windows and a spherical dome. Atop the main dome is another small octagonal drum topped with an onion-shaped dome. All facade windows are rectangular with multiple panes.

Inside, the dome is open and supported by four reinforced concrete columns painted white to imitate wood. A traditional panikadilo descends from the top of the dome. Before the 1966 fire, the dome was also open but supported by eight wooden columns painted to resemble marble. During reconstruction, the lost wooden supports were replaced with four reinforced concrete columns positioned at their historical locations. These design changes, proposed by the architect and altering the cathedral's interior appearance, were deemed acceptable and approved by the HABS committee.

The 12-meter bell tower, square in plan, is directly adjacent to the cathedral's northwest facade. On the upper part of each side of the tower are two false rectangular windows with round clocks featuring Roman numerals mounted between them—based on sketches by Bishop Innocent (Ivan Veniaminov). After the fire, these lost clocks were also reconstructed [13, p. 17; 15, p. 10].

The bell tower is topped with an octagonal belfry featuring bells and arched openings, contrasting with the rectangular windows of the cathedral and the large drum. The belfry is crowned by a two-tiered dome—the lower, broader segment topped by a taller, spire-like element. Despite the structural complexity, these parts were recreated with high precision, and new bells were cast to replace those lost.

### **3.2 Stylistic features of the exterior and interior of St. Michael the Archangel Cathedral**

St. Michael the Archangel Cathedral is notable not only for its spatial and architectural layout but also for its stylistic character. As an example of Russian ecclesiastical architecture, the cathedral is based on a Greco-Russian cruciform plan. However, its appearance incorporates various architectural styles—elements of classical architecture combined with features of early 19th-century Russo-Italian Rococo. The interior of the cathedral is equally eclectic, integrating components from different architectural and artistic movements, reflecting the settlers' aspiration to express their ideals through the city's main religious building. The interior is richly decorated, especially in contrast with the modest interiors of most other churches of the same period. The single-tier iconostasis is made of wood and painted white. Six principal icons in the local row, depicting St. Michael the Archangel, St. Nicholas the Wonderworker, Christ

the Savior, and the Virgin Mary, are framed in gilded wooden frames. The carved royal doors, covered in gold paint, are traditionally adorned with six icons dedicated to the four Evangelists, the Annunciation, and the Virgin Mary. On the interior drum of the dome, below the windows, biblical-themed paintings are displayed—an uncommon feature for Orthodox church decoration.

In the northern part of the transept, in accordance with the original design, the chapel with an altar dedicated to the Kazan Icon of the Mother of God has been restored. This icon, measuring 36 x 17-1/2 inches (92 x 45 cm) and encased in a finely crafted silver riza, is known as the "Sitka Mother of God" and is attributed to the artist Vladimir Borovikovsky [16]. The icon was donated to the cathedral in 1850 by hunters and industrialists of the Russian-American Company upon the completion of the cathedral's construction.

The chapel in the southern part of the transept, which before the fire had been dedicated to John the Baptist and St. Alexander Nevsky, was rededicated in 1978 in honor of St. Innocent, commemorating Innocent Veniaminov, who was canonized by the Orthodox Church in 1977. As the first Orthodox bishop of Alaska and later archbishop, Innocent played a significant role in securing and developing the territory of Russian America. He was the architect not only of St. Michael the Archangel Cathedral but also of other churches and ecclesiastical buildings constructed during the missionary period of Alaska's colonization [17].

#### 4 CONCLUSION

St. Michael the Archangel Cathedral in Sitka was the largest building in Alaska until the early 20th century and the most significant in terms of religious importance for Orthodox America. To this day, it remains a prominent urban landmark despite the dense development in the city center. As one of the few surviving structures from the period of Russian America, the cathedral is listed on the U.S. National Historic Landmarks registry and enjoys protected status.

The cathedral's distinctiveness is reflected in both its architectural appearance and interior decoration, combining several historical architectural styles. As a representative

example of Russian Orthodox architecture, St. Michael's Cathedral in Sitka integrates Russian, Finnish, and North American construction techniques in its structural design.

Thus, St. Michael the Archangel Cathedral in Sitka holds historical and architectural value for both the United States and Russia. It stands as a part of Russian cultural history outside the homeland and offers the opportunity to view Russian architecture within a shared historical context.

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