

The Indomitable Chapel
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The chapel at Fort Ross was called “rather plain” by a saint; it was fouled by the waste of goats, sheep, chickens and cattle, beaten and torn by the winds and rains and storms of the Pacific and splattered with graffiti by “Yankees.” Its church bell was sold to a San Francisco junkyard. The structure collapsed to the ground— a pile of rubble —demolished by the 1906 San Francisco earthquake. It was rebuilt. Then it burned to the ground and was rebuilt again. This “plain” house of God was never consecrated as a ‘real’ church; never had an ‘official’ saintly church name other than ‘chapel’; and, never had a pastor. Yet it stands today, nearly 200 years later, as the centerpiece of a historic state park—a testament to Tsarist Russia’s North American exploration, commerce and Orthodox faith.

The chapel, along with other antique structures, sits within a thirteen-foot tall redwood plank stockade. The palisade was designed to protect the Russians and their native Alaskan laborers from local Indian and Imperial Spanish soldiers. The distinct house of fellowship is surrounded by 19th century cannon and mortars. All of this is located on a breathtaking bluff overlooking the Pacific Ocean with groves of mighty redwoods as its backdrop. The Russians selected the location for reasons of defensive strategy—still, though the site is beautiful, majestic and inspiring. The invasions never came and the cannons were never fired in anger.

The settlement had come about when, in March 1812, the Russian sailing ship *Chirikov* anchored in the tiny cove fifteen miles north of Bodega Bay. The ship brought twenty-five Russian craftsmen and eighty native Alaskan laborers. Their purpose was to build a settlement. They called the settlement Fort Ross, loosely based on the Russian word (Россия) *Rossia*—meaning Russia. Put in historical perspective, as the fort was nearing completion in the summer of 1812, Napoleon Bonaparte’s 600,000-man French-led international army invaded Russia then ruled by Tsar Alexander I. The same month, in Washington, D.C., President James Madison asked for and received from Congress a declaration of war against Great Britain. California, the site of Fort Ross, was then a colony of Imperial Spain as was present day Nevada, Arizona, Texas and parts of New Mexico, Colorado, Utah and Wyoming.

Russian explorers had come to California to organize and develop farms to provide foodstuffs for their Alaskan colonies some 1,100 miles to the north. The harsh physical environment of the Alaskan landscape precluded settlers from growing sufficient food for the colony. As an

added bonus, a huge sea otter population was available for exploitation for the lucrative international fur trade. After twenty nine years of occupancy, the Russians abandoned the Fort in 1841. According to the historian Hubert Howe Bancroft they had taken 13,600 sea otters during their occupation—essentially depleting the species to near extinction. The Pacific had no more to give. Their agricultural endeavors never succeeded. Pesky gophers fed gluttonously on their crops—they harvested the planted rows faster and better than the Russians.

The small wooden chapel was built over the four year period 1824-1828 by the Fort's inhabitants. Bancroft's research revealed, "one of the officers was authorized by the bishop to baptize, marry and read the funeral service." He added he found no information "respecting a chaplain or regular chapel services." Russian-Alaskan pioneer, Father Ioann Veniaminov who would later be canonized as St. Innocent, spent five weeks at the Fort in 1836. His diaries reflect his impressions of the chapel built from money provided by "the officers and crew of the frigate *Kreiser* who donated a considerable sum toward the building" of the chapel. Finding the chapel "rather plain," he questioned 'just' how these funds were used. Innocent wrote "the entire interior decoration consists of two icons in silver frames." Without saying so directly, he clearly implies his belief that there were some financial shenanigans with the contributed funds. He added, "the answer is unknown." St. Innocent also noted the chapel "receives almost no income from its members or from those Russians who are occasional visitors." Since the chapel was located on lands "borrowed" from Spain and not owned by Mother Russia, the facility could not be consecrated as an official Russian Orthodox Church nor could it bear a holy name. It would always be just a "chapel."

The abandoned Fort was sold by the Russians to private landowners who turned the complex including the chapel into farm buildings. The chapel was converted into a barn for livestock. When visited some fifty years later by a Russian Orthodox bishop, he was revolted by the site of animal stalls inside the then "peeling, dark" chapel with "broken glass" in broken "window frames." The bishop was disgusted with graffiti scribbled on the walls by "visitors to the church." He wrote his "heart ached from pity and involuntary tears came to his eyes from the abomination of the desolation of a holy place."

In 1906 the Fort was acquired by the California State Park system. Two months later the infamous San Andreas Fault lurched beneath San Francisco and laterally along the California coast. Fort Ross, situated directly over the fault, was shaken and fell. The chapel collapsed. In 1917 the chapel was rebuilt, using wood from the original structure, as part of the overall on-going restoration of the historic site. Just as the restoration was completed, Russia's last monarch, Tsar Nicholas II, was deposed. He and his family were martyred the following year.

In 1969 the chapel was listed on the National Historic Landmark Registry as architecturally significant. A year later, it was engulfed in an accidental fire and burnt to the ground. The loss of the original workmanship and materials caused the chapel to be removed from the Registry—although the Fort in its entirety remains listed. In 1973, the chapel was rebuilt according to its original plans with slight modifications.

The chapel at Fort Ross lacks the majesty of the great basilicas, the beauty of the great cathedrals and the quaintness of ordinary neighborhood churches. This ugly duckling church has survived nearly two hundred years of verbal, environmental and physical abuse and still stands picturesquely on the scenic California north coast. It was built at a time when Old World civilization marveled with wonderment at the reports of adventure, riches and conquests of the New World. Brave men and women risked their lives exploring the new continent's mysteries. As they did so, they brought with them their religious faith and built

houses of worship—some great and big and majestic. Some, like the chapel at Fort Ross, were small and plain—but all had the same purpose. None, though, have evidenced the indomitable spirit of the “rather plain” Chapel at Fort Ross.

See: <http://www.fortrossstatepark.org/>

