

Ascension Church of Our Lord at Karluk on Kodiak Island RossiAlaska.org

Property Description:

At the time that the church was nominated to the National Register for Historic Properties it was described as having highly features with a three-stage bell tower with an open belfry and an octagonal cupola over the nave. Painted white with lime-green roofs and light blue trim, the church is on a bluff, high above the river and the cannery that historically provided considerable employment for the community. The wood framed chapel has clapboard siding and three distinct building elements; sanctuary, nave and narthex with bell tower. The chapel has a gable roof and pedimented windows with crosses in the pediments. A large tent roofed octagonal cupola with two windows rises from the ridge of the nave. The interior is spacious and well lit thanks to the many windows and the octagonal cupola which is 17 feet in diameter. The paneled wainscot is painted bright green and the bead board wall siding is painted white. The nine-bay iconostasis has stylized pilasters and is divided vertically into three parts. The icons are oil painted on canvas. (Buildings of Alaska by Alison Hoagland.)

Property history:

The church is located on the far side of Kodiak Island and is the oldest existing Russian Orthodox church in Alaska. It is also one of the most professionally designed. The elaborate nature of this church may be attributed to the successful salmon cannery that had been located on the Karluk River below. The Karluk Packing Company began building homes for its native workers in the late 1800s and one of the workers asked to build a church instead of a house. The church was finished on June 11, 1888 and although the cannery closed in the 1930s, the church remained. In 1978 a substantial storm changed the course of the Karluk River forcing the village to relocate.

Fortunately, at that time, the church was spared having been situated on the hill overlooking the river. However, the river has changed again and the church is now in danger of sliding off into the river.

The Ascension of Our Lord Chapel was closed in 2006 following an inspection by The Native Village of Karluk Department of Fire and Emergency Services citing numerous violations of local ordinances that threatened the health, safety and welfare of the occupants. Recent visits by church officials have indicated that portions of the roof are failing and birds are living inside the church. The exposed location of this church and the notorious wind and weather associated with Kodiak Island will quickly destroy this church if not adequately protected in the near future.

Activities under way to save property:

2013: ROSSIA, Inc. has included Karluk's chapel in their grant requests to the State Legislature as well as a Tier 2 request to the Rasmuson Foundation. ROSSIA's first objective is to conduct a site visit with the appropriate professionals who can prepare a condition assessment report. This report will be the basis for future stabilization and preservation work. We anticipate immediate roof and foundation stabilization needs which will protect the church until interim or full preservation treatment can be realized.

2020: The church was likely situated inland from a cliff's edge, overlooking the sea, at the time it was built. The eroding cliff's edge is now almost directly adjacent to the church. If nothing is done the church will slide off the cliff in the next couple years. Currently a group is working with the Diocese to move the church inland a safe distance to save it from being lost by the Karluk River undercutting the building. It will be moved and then mothballed until final location is found for the church and then a full restoration.

2021: Update: A committee of 30 individuals and agencies have been working the past year to fund and move the church. It is hoped that the church will be moved early this summer.

