

# THE ALASKA ASSOCIATION

OLD CITY HALL 524 WEST FOURTH AVENUE, SUITE 203, ANCHORAGE, ALASKA 99501

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## ST. JOSEPH'S CHURCH, NOME

By Russ Sackett

St. Joseph's church in Nome has been identified by AAHP as one of Alaska's "ten most endangered" historic structures. As well as its architectural merits, the church is one of the few remaining tangible reminders of Nome's gold rush days, which adds to its historic value.

Early in 1899, Nome's Catholic community began to express interest in the establishment of a local church. In response, the Prefect Apostolic of Alaska, Jean Baptiste Rene, visited Nome in August of that year, the first Jesuit to do so. Another priest, Joseph Treca visited Nome soon afterward in September 1899, and again in February of 1900.

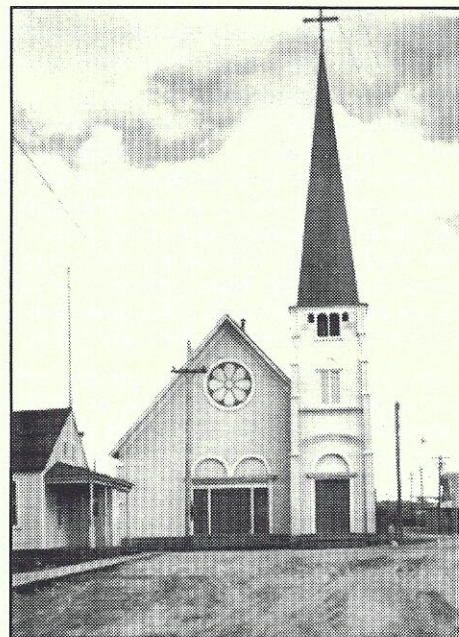
After his visit, Rene petitioned his superiors to send a priest and establish a Jesuit mission at Nome. (He also applied to the Sisters of Providence in Montreal to send sisters to Nome to establish a hospital and a school). In response, 41 year-old Aloysius Jacquet arrived in Nome on July 4, 1901. In August, he purchased property at Steadman and 4th. Presumably at about the same time, Jacquet retained a Seattle architect, J.B. Randell, to design a parish house and church for the new mission. Also in August, Jacquet ordered the pews, front panels and altar rails for the future church from the San Francisco Planing Mills.

In September 1901, Jacquet was joined by a second Jesuit priest, John Van der Pol, and work began on both the parish house and the church. Construction proceeded rapidly and, by September 17, the parish house was completed to a point where both priests could move in.

The speedy construction work apparently took its toll on Father Jacquet's mental health. On November 6, 1901, he was declared insane by the civil authorities, with Judge Wickersham presiding over the hearings. Jacquet was formally committed to the Oregon State Insane Asylum. However, it was not possible to travel to Oregon in winter, so a house in Nome was rented for Jacquet and two guards were hired to watch over him. This proved to be extremely expensive and Jacquet was transferred by dog sled to Holy Cross in late November and, shortly thereafter, to St. Michael where he remained until the spring of 1902. From there, he returned to Montreal where he died in March of 1922.

The unfortunate turn of events surrounding Jacquet's health proved disastrous for the new mission, not only financially but also because of the controversy associated with the handling of the affair. Some accounts put the cost to the mission of removing Jacquet at \$2,500. Also, Jacquet had overspent the amount of money available to build the new church. It would take a number of years for the mission to overcome these financial and image problems.

Inauguration ceremonies were held at St. Joseph's church on November 17, 1901. By then, the church was complete enough to be used for services, although a number of years passed before the interior was completed. Lafortune gave a price of \$1,500 for constructing the church, plus \$600 for the property. A review of the available figures, however, suggests that by the end of October



*St. Joseph's Church, 1910*

1981, this figure had more than doubled, with the cost by the time of inauguration probably even higher.

Christmas Mass in 1901 was the first time that St. Joseph's cross was illuminated. It was originally intended to have the cross illuminated only on special occasions. However, after seeing the cross lit, its benefits as a navigational aid became apparent and it was turned on permanently on January 17, 1902. The illuminated cross soon became known as the "white man's star" by the Eskimos. The cost of keeping the cross lit throughout the long, dark winter months was paid partly by the City of Nome and partly by contributions from local miners.

On July 16, 1903, Bellarmine Lafortune arrived in Nome to assist Van der Pol and, for the next forty-odd years, he devoted his energies to working with the region's Eskimos. Lafortune's arrival had a positive impact on the mission, which was still suffering from the earlier scandals associated with Jacquet and was still burdened with debt. He soon began to win the respect of the Nome populace and Jacquet began to fade into distant memory. The burden of debt, however, was not so easily overcome.

During Nome's early years, clubs of various types were popular as a means of social interaction and of distributing funds to worthy causes. On October 13, 1903, Van der Pol and Lafortune began the Miners' Home Club, open to Catholics and non-Catholics alike. By January 14, 1904, club membership had grown to 310. Money raised from social events sponsored by the Miners' Home Club was used to purchase coal to heat St. Joseph's and also to begin decorating the church's interior. Other Nome clubs at the time, including the Arctic Brotherhood, Polar Union and the Pioneers of Alaska, also contributed money toward heating and decorating the church.

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# FOR HISTORIC PRESERVATION

Lafortune's success in working with the Eskimos was reflected in an increase in the Native congregation and a separate Eskimo church was built in 1905. This smaller structure was located immediately north of St. Joseph's and served both as a church and school for local Eskimos.

Nome's population reached a peak of about 30,000 by mid-summer of 1900, but it declined rapidly thereafter. By the fall of 1900, the city's population had dropped to 12,488 and it continued to fall in following years. By 1910, Nome's population had fallen to 2,600 and, by the time of the 1920 Census, it had sunk even further to 852.

When St. Joseph's was established in 1901, the rapid decline in Nome's population was not foreseen. The Jesuits had believed that Nome would continue to be large and stable enough to provide the necessary financial support for a monumental church. However, as the white population decreased, so did the congregation's ability to support the church's operating and maintenance requirements. Services for whites began to be held in the converted Miner's Reading Room in the parish house, although the Eskimo Church remained in use until World War II. (During the War, it was moved to the center of town and converted for use as a USO).

By 1944, through lack of maintenance and use, the spire of St. Joseph's became unsafe and it was removed. In 1945, a new church was built where the school once stood and St. Joseph's was sold to the United States Smelting, Refining and Mining Company (USSR&M). St. Joseph's was moved during 1946 to its present location within the USSR&M complex. However, the interior furnishings were either too large for other churches in Alaska at the time or were in too poor a condition to save. As a result, church statues were taken to the beach, where they were broken up by bulldozers, and the remaining items were taken to the city dump.

Since moving the church to its present location, USSR&M and its successor, the Alaska Gold Company, have used the structure as a warehouse. Although it is not in its original location or in its original use, the old St. Joseph's church continues to be regarded as a monument by Nome residents. It stands as testimony to the dreams and expectations of early Nome, as well as a representation of the community's early history.

Designed in the Gothic style by the Seattle architect, J.B. Randell, St. Joseph's was the one monumental piece of architecture in the Nome region. Today, it is the only church building of its type which has survived to the present from the pre-1930 era.

In terms of physical dimensions, the church is 40 feet wide and 60 feet long, with the length originally being oriented in a north/south direction. Standing 40 feet high (from the finished floor to the top of roof ridge line), the church has a steep gabled roof with 15-foot high side walls. A two story 40-foot high bell tower is built 8 feet into the church's southeast corner. Originally, a 48 foot octagonal spire sat on top of the bell tower and was topped by an 8 by 6 foot illuminated cross. A sanctuary and two storage rooms originally protruded from the north wall of the church, while an enclosed



St. Joseph's Catholic Church today.

corridor connecting the parish house to the center of the west elevation of the church was a later addition.

Today, St. Joseph's future is in question. In its present capacity as a warehouse, it no longer receives the maintenance that it requires. Furthermore, it now sits on a temporary foundation that, over time, has become unstable in places and may soon threaten the structural integrity of the church. Interest has been expressed in saving the building. However, a lack of necessary funds and an absence of a clear plan for its adaptive use have resulted in the building continuing to be used as a warehouse.

## KENNICOTT UPDATE

By Janet McCabe

This spring, both the State Legislature and the Governor approved an appropriation of \$200,000 for emergency stabilization of the historic Kennicott Mine. Friends of Kennicott is arranging to use those funds this year to help stabilize key parts of the complex.

First priority will be given to several particularly vulnerable parts of the mill building, the dominant 14-story structure which used gravity to help process the ore. The company store, the manager's office and the meat house will also receive some much needed roofing and stabilization.

Kennicott was named as one of AAHP's "ten most endangered" properties in 1991 and State funding for stabilization work was a key objective of AAHP's Legislative Committee.

## NEW BOARD MEMBERS NEEDED

AAHP currently has two vacancies on its Board of Directors and there will be additional vacancies in November when AAHP holds its annual elections. If you are interested in serving on AAHP's Board of Directors, please contact Russell Sackett, acting chairman of the Nominating Committee, at P.O. Box 241474, Anchorage, AK 99524 or call him at 762-2633 (W) or 344-9038 (H).

### AAHP EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE 1991

#### OFFICERS:

Executive Director:.....Bill Coghill  
 President:.....Rolfe Buzzell  
 Vice President:.....(Vacant)  
 Secretary:.....(Vacant)  
 Treasurer:.....Frank Norris

#### COMMITTEE CHAIRPERSONS:

Education:.....Peg Stout  
 Fund Raising:.....Mike Jungreis  
 Legislation:.....Janet McCabe  
 Membership:.....Jack Sinclair  
 Nominating: (acting).....Russ Sackett  
 Projects & Issues:.....Russ Sackett  
 Public Relations:.....Greg Curney

*The Alaska Association for Historic Preservation (AAHP) was founded in 1981 as a private, statewide, non-profit corporation dedicated to the preservation of Alaska's prehistoric and historic resources through education, promotion and advocacy. Preservation of the built environment provides a vital link and visible reminder of the past, emphasizing the continuity and diversity of Alaska.*

# ALASKA'S ENDANGERED HISTORIC STRUCTURES

By Russ Sackett

Recognizing the importance of historic structures in documenting, illustrating and preserving our history and heritage, the Alaska Association for Historic Preservation (AAHP) has identified ten of the State's most endangered historic properties. By developing this list, AAHP is attempting to heighten public awareness and to draw attention to the possible loss of a vital element of our past.

The following historic properties are considered endangered because of neglect, erosion, a lack of preservation funds and/or development pressures. No attempt was made to rank them, either in terms of those considered to be the most endangered or in terms of their relative historical significance. The list below is in alphabetical order.

- **Building 29, also known as the Tilson Building (Sitka)**
- **Chapel of St. Nicholas and Holy Assumption Orthodox Church (Kenai)**
- **Eagle Historic District (Eagle)**
- **Episcopal Mission Church (Arctic Village)**
- **Fairbanks Exploration Company Complex (Fairbanks)**
- **Fourth Avenue Theater (Anchorage)**
- **Holy Ascension Orthodox Church (Unalaska)**
- **Kennicott Mine Complex (near McCarthy)**
- **The sternwheeler riverboat "Nenana" (Fairbanks)**
- **St. Joseph's Catholic Church (Nome)**

Although only ten structures were listed by AAHP in 1991, many others throughout the State were identified as having some level of endangerment. A preliminary list of endangered structures was developed by AAHP's Projects and Issues Committee, based on the personal knowledge of individual Committee members and input from AAHP's Board of Directors and Board of Advisors. To develop the final list, the AAHP Board of Directors and Projects and Issues Committee members identified their individual choices from the preliminary list. After tabulation of the results, the 1991 "ten most endangered" list was derived.

In the coming year, AAHP's Projects and Issues Committee will be following the status of the ten properties it has identified as the most endangered. To the extent that it is possible, AAHP intends to provide assistance to these properties and to keep AAHP members aware of their condition through feature articles in this and succeeding newsletters. Kenai's Orthodox Chapel of St. Nicholas was featured in our May 1991 issue. This issue features St. Joseph's Catholic Church in Nome.

AAHP plans to update its "ten most endangered" list annually. The list will be announced during National Historic Preservation Week in mid-May. If you have any suggestions to make regarding structures which you feel should or should not be included on this list, please write to us. We welcome your comments.

## AAHP AND AHPI TO CO-HOST RECEPTION FOR LOCAL PRESERVATION COMMISSIONS

Representatives of local historic preservation commissions from nine Alaska communities will be attending a two day training workshop in Anchorage on September 17-18. The workshop is sponsored by the State Office of History and Archaeology and the U.S. National Park Service.

AAHP and Anchorage Historic Properties, Inc. (AHPI) are jointly hosting a reception for local historic commission members and staff, as well as National Park Service trainers. The reception will be held on September 17th at 6 PM in the Old City Hall. All AAHP members are invited to attend the reception. It is a good chance to meet other people from around the State who are working on local preservation issues.

## MEMBERSHIP

Membership runs from January 1 through December 31. Dues are payable by December 31 of preceeding year.

Benefits include subscription to the quarterly AAHP newsletter \* workshops & seminars \* annual meeting \* historic preservation advocacy.

<input type="checkbox"/> Student .....	\$ 10.00	<input type="checkbox"/> Contributor .....	\$ 50.00
<input type="checkbox"/> Individual .....	\$ 15.00	<input type="checkbox"/> Friend .....	\$ 100.00
<input type="checkbox"/> Family .....	\$ 25.00	<input type="checkbox"/> Sponsor .....	\$ 250.00
<input type="checkbox"/> Non-Profit .....	\$ 25.00	<input type="checkbox"/> Benefactor .....	\$ 500.00 & above

*(federal, state, and municipal agencies included)*

Donations to AAHP are tax deductible, as allowable under IRS regulations.

\$\_\_\_\_\_ is enclosed. Also, I would be glad to participate in AAHP activities in the following areas:

- |                                       |   |  |
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| <input type="checkbox"/> Education    | <input type="checkbox"/> Public Relations | <input type="checkbox"/> Projects & Issues |

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ADDRESS \_\_\_\_\_

Please Return To: The Alaska Association for Historic Preservation  
Old City Hall, 524 West fourth Ave., Suite 203  
Anchorage, Alaska 99501  
Attention: Treasurer

**AAHP ANNUAL PICNIC - KENAI -  
SUNDAY, AUGUST 25TH  
PLUS BOARD MEETING AND TOUR**

**PICNIC STARTS AT NOON  
AT THE PARK IN DOWNTOWN KENAI**

(North of Kenai Mall, off Main Street Loop)

**POTLUCK**

AAHP WILL SUPPLY THE MEAT AND DRINKS  
COME ONE AND ALL • BRING FRIENDS \* FAMILY \* KIDS

Kenai celebrates its 200th anniversary in 1991 and becomes a Bicentennial city. The first Russian fur traders arrived at Kenai between August 20 and August 31 in 1791. Our picnic/meeting/tour splits this time period with the 25th of August, so we will be marking almost the exact date of the first non-Alaskan settlers. (Of course, long before the Russians arrived, the Kenaitze Indians had founded a bustling community at the mouth of the Kenai River).

You will learn more by attending this important gathering of AAHP and friends. But, a couple of facts. The U.S. military established a fort at the present site of Fort Kenay in 1868. In 1894, the Holy Assumption Orthodox Church was authorized and was dedicated in 1896. In 1906, the nearby Orthodox Chapel of St. Nicholas was erected.

The AAHP picnic is planned to start at noon. Afterwards, we will hold a short but informative Board meeting, to be followed by a tour. This will include a tour of the old Alaska Commercial Building with Bob Cowan. (The Alaska Commercial Company bought the assets of the Russian American Company, including the post at Kenai, in 1868). We will also be given a tour of Fort Kenay, the Old Town Gallery, Moose Meat John's cabin, the Holy Assumption Orthodox Church and nearby Chapel, plus other points of historic interest.

Jack Sinclair of our Board is working with Mary Ford, Emily DeForest, Bob Cowan, Roger Meeks (President of the Kenai Historical Society), the Kenai Bicentennial Office and others to put together what promises to be a memorable occasion. Board members, AAHP members and friends are urged to attend. Let's make it an enjoyable Sunday.

Contacts:

**Kenai area** - Jack Sinclair, telephone 262-5581 (W); 262-7817 (H).

**Anchorage** - Bill Coghill, telephone 333-4746.



**PLEASE NOTE:**

If you have renewed your AAHP membership, a "91" will appear after your name on the mailing label for this newsletter. If a smaller number or no number appears after your name, this means that your membership has expired. Please check the number after your name and renew your membership today if it is not current.



**THE ALASKA ASSOCIATION**  
Old City Hall 524 West 4th Avenue, Suite 203  
Anchorage, Alaska 99501  
**FOR HISTORIC PRESERVATION**

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