

St. George Newsletter

July 2012

This year marks the 200th anniversary of Fort Ross, a Russian colony in California. A celebratory Liturgy will be held at the fort on August 25, 2012, presided over by metropolitan Hilarion of Volokolamsk, metropolitan Hilarion of the ROCOR, our own diocesan hierarchs, archbishop Kyrill and bishop Theodosy, and many other Orthodox clergy. This month's newsletter is dedicated to the history of Fort Ross.

The Saints of Fort Ross

Daniel J. Demers

One came by schooner, and then horseback. Two came by steam locomotive, and then stagecoach. Holy men on a mission—they came, they prayed and departed. Their presence at Fort Ross, Russian colony turned State Park, is exceptional. It is the only public park in America that has been graced by three saints. In a sense, Fort Ross is a kind of hallowed ground.

St. Innocent

Ioann Veniaminov, a 39 years old Russian Orthodox priest, departed Sitka, Alaska onboard a Russian schooner on July 1, 1836. Alaska was then a Russian colony. On the second day at sea, Veniaminov related in his journal, "we received a tailwind and the weather was good. The weather stayed with us all the way and was so favorable that we raced across a distance of 150 to 200 miles per day." Fifteen days later he disembarked at Bodega Bay and spent the next five hours on horseback riding at "a moderate gait." When he arrived at Fort Ross at 8 PM that July night, he had traveled 1,100 miles.

Veniaminov, who spent five weeks at the fort, was only the second Orthodox prelate to visit the colony since its founding in 1812. While there he celebrated liturgies and gave

communion, performed and blessed marriages, heard confessions, baptized and taught religion preparatory to the various mysteries. He blessed the stream and the fort. He liked Fort Ross, admitting "the healthful air, the pure blue sky, the geographical position and native vegetation struck and captivated" him. Although he was disappointed with the chapel which he found "rather plain."

He was an inquisitive man "full of scientific curiosity, observant, tireless and exact in collecting data." He was also a gifted linguist. He left Fort Ross by horse, traveling to San Francisco. He spent another two weeks in the Bay Area, visiting and befriending Catholic padres at five Franciscan missions (San Rafael, San Francisco's Mission Dolores, San Jose and Santa Clara.). It took 30 days to sail back to Sitka.

Back in Alaska he took the time to use his mechanical skills, building two small pipe organs which he donated to two of the California missions he had visited (San Jose and Santa Clara)— "a rare gesture of ecumenical goodwill for the time."

In 1841—the same year the Russians abandoned Fort Ross—Father Veniaminov was made Bishop of Kamchatka and the Kuril Islands of Russia and the Alaskan Aleutian Islands. As is the custom in the Russian Orthodox Church, he was given the monastic name of Innocent. In 1850 he was elevated to Archbishop and in 1869 was appointed Metropolitan of Moscow, the highest rank in the Russian Orthodox Church. He died in 1879 at the age of 82. He was canonized a saint in 1977.

Blessed Dabovich

Jovan Dabovich was born in San Francisco in

1863 to Serbian immigrant parents. He was ordained an Orthodox priest in 1892. He was the first American to be ordained an Orthodox priest. Upon monastic tonsure he took the name Sebastian. In 1897 the young priest accompanied his Bishop Nicholas Ziorov on a trip from San Francisco to Fort Ross. The trip included a ferry boat ride from San Francisco to Sausalito. There the clerics boarded a train which took them over the coastal range along Tomalas Bay and inland to Cazadero. From Cazadero they took a stagecoach up Fort Ross Road. The entire trek from San Francisco took about fifteen hours.

Bishop Ziorov has left us an accurate account of the trip and his impressions. They only spent a day and a night at the Fort. Like St. Innocent, he enjoyed the trip and surroundings; "Such air, such nature, an enchantment!" he wrote. He gasped when he caught his first sight of the fort: "It stands on a hillock as if in the (palm) of God's hand above the ocean."

Ziorov and Dabovich were disappointed with the condition of the chapel and cemetery, both of which had degraded significantly in the nearly fifty years since the colony was abandoned by the Russians. The chapel, in disrepair, had been turned into a barn for animals. When they visited the cemetery they saw further disrepair with "only insignificant remains," the unkempt graves. Dabovich "emotionally" performed an Orthodox religious rite over the cemetery graves — "with difficulty he pronounced the prayers." Ziorov expressed anger at "the desolating sacrilege in a holy place".

Dabovich wrote in the Fort Ross Hotel Register, "I have had the honor to visit this place and pray in the old cemetery yonder on the hill." He laments that he couldn't pray in the chapel "which is now a house of cattle."

Dabovich had a interesting religious career after his visit to Fort Ross. He spent time in Minnesota, returned to San Francisco and organized the first Serbian Orthodox church in Jackson, California. Later he spent time in Alaska, Chicago and New Jersey. In 1914 he became a chaplain in the Serbian Army and

after World War I served the remainder of his life in Yugoslavia. He died there in 1940 at the age of 77. In 2007 his remains were unearthed in Serbia and brought back to California. They were reinterred at St. Sava Church in Jackson. He is currently being considered for Canonization as a Saint in the Orthodox Church. If and when "sainted," he will be the first American so honored in the Russian Orthodox Church.

St. Tikhon

Basil Belavin was born in Russia in 1865. He was ordained a Russian Orthodox priest in 1891, taking the name Tikhon. He was consecrated a bishop in 1897. In 1898 he was promoted to head the Orthodox Church in North America. Well liked, he was made an honorary citizen of the United States in 1900.

Bishop Tikhon visited Fort Ross in 1905 with Father Theodore Pashkovsky. The duo was pleasantly surprised to find the Chapel had been returned to a religious theme. Father Pashkovsky commented on "the cleanness of the chapel." "Gone was "the desolation of a holy place", as Bishop Nikolai had commented only eight years before. The improvements had resulted from the acquisition of the Fort by the State of California.

Like Bishop Nicholas and Father Dabovich, Bishop Tikhon and Father Pashkovsky spent the night at the Fort Ross Hotel and returned to San Francisco the following day.

He was reassigned to Russia in 1907 and in 1913 was assigned to the Bishopric of Lithuania. On 1917 on the eve of the Russian revolution he was elected to be Metropolitan of the Russian Orthodox Church. As the church's Patriot he was the highest ranking cleric of the church. During his tenure he witnessed the Great Russian Civil War and rise of the Communist Party which repressed the Church. The Soviets confiscated Church property and persecuted and imprisoned thousands of the clergy. Thousands of churches were forcibly closed by the Soviet government. Bishop Tikhon himself was imprisoned for over a year.

He died in Russia in 1925 at the age of 60. He was canonized a saint in 1989 (in 1981 by the Russian Orthodox Church Outside of Russia – Editor).

They Walked the Walk

In retrospect St. Innocent, Blessed Dabovich and St. Tikhon had their trips to Fort Ross in common with their sainthood. They all took the time to record their observations for posterity. Since 1900, hundreds of Orthodox clerics and thousands of believers have visited the “rather plain” chapel perched on the promontory overlooking the mighty Pacific. The distinctive chapel has been repaired and rebuilt. The cemetery has been studied by scholars and partially reclaimed. In 1897, Bishop Ziorov observed that looking back from the cemetery towards the Fort was “a charming picture.” He enjoyed the murmuring brook and open field “covered with a motley rug of green and flowers and the setting sun with slanted rays that gilded the ocean, the Fort, the forest and us.” Amazingly, things haven’t really changed much since then.

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On the Spiritual Significance of Fort Ross

priest Serge Sveshnikov

A great deal has been written and said about the possible closing of Fort Ross on the Pacific Coast of California to the public, and about the cultural and historical significance of this southernmost Russian 19th-century settlement on the North American continent. Indeed, Fort Ross was and continues to be a symbol of the Russian presence on the West Coast of North America, and it played a key role in the history of the Russian exploration of Alaska and the Pacific coast of Oregon and northern California. But for an Orthodox Christian, the history of the Ross settlement is first of all tied to the history of the spreading of Orthodoxy in the United

States, which for us has become a second home.

Fort Ross was settled by Russian Orthodox entrepreneurs and natives of Alaska who were illumined by the light of the faith of Christ through the efforts of Valaam missionaries. One of those missionaries was St. Herman, whose memory we celebrate on December 25 (civil calendar). Today, some 90 Orthodox parishes in Alaska and nearly twenty thousand parishioners —almost all of them Alaskan Natives—attest to the efforts of the holy missionaries and to God’s blessings on their labors.

St. Herman never visited the Ross settlement, but his spiritual children, who endearingly called him *apa* or “grandfather,” did. Kayakers and hunters departed from Alaska south along the Pacific coast of Canada, Oregon, and California. Martyr Peter the Aleut took one of these kayaks toward the Ross settlement in 1815. We have no direct evidence that St. Peter was at the Ross settlement, but it would be unlikely that a kayak expedition of the Russian-American Company did not stop at a settlement owned by the company, near which the expedition hunted, and not far from where the members of this expedition were seized by Spanish soldiers. In the iconography of St. Peter, there are even depictions of the saint with Fort Ross in the background. The site of the martyrdom and burial of St. Peter the Aleut is, by some accounts, Mission Dolores in San Francisco, but one of his fellow hunters was able to escape, returned to the Ross settlement, and from there went back to Alaska, where he told what had happened.

The Ross settlement was at first just a supply depot for Russian-American merchants, but a few years after it was established, the colonists decided to build a chapel with their own funds. The chapel was completed in 1825 and consecrated in the name of St. Nicholas the Miracle-Worker. There was never a permanent priest for the chapel, and readers’ services were performed by the colonists themselves. Despite all the hardships they endured, they wished to pray together, and found the time to do so. With time, an Orthodox cemetery was formed near

the settlement, where even today, prayers are made for the peaceful repose of the first Orthodox Christian Californians.

In 1836, Fr. Ioann Veniaminov, the future Metropolitan Innokentii of Moscow, spent three months at the Ross settlement, observing the life of the colonists, and noting the spirit of true Christian love and mutual help among the Russians, Alaskan Natives, and local Kashaya Indians, some of whom had already converted to Orthodox Christianity. Fr. Ioann not only conducted divine services during his time at Ross, but also blessed the waters of the nearby stream.

In 1841, the Russian-American Company abandoned the Ross settlement and sold its movable property. For a time, the connection between Ross and Russia was severed, but the living bond between Orthodoxy in America and the Russian Orthodox Church was not. Even our Russian Patriarch-Confessor Tikhon (Bellavin) was a citizen of the United States—he became a U.S. citizen when he served as the Archbishop of New York and North America in 1901-1907. Traveling between San Francisco and Alaska, the hierarch sailed past the Ross settlement more than once, and in 1905, the future Russian Patriarch visited Ross and served a memorial service for its founders. It was during Archbishop Tikhon's rule on American soil in 1903, that the Ross settlement was purchased and given to the State of California as a historical monument. Although that very year an earthquake seriously damaged the structures, by 1916 the buildings were restored, and since 1925, the Divine Liturgy has been celebrated every year in the settlement's chapel.

For the last several decades, Russian Orthodox hierarchs, clergymen, and laypersons living in the United States, as well as Americans who have converted to Orthodox Christianity have undertaken pilgrimages to the Ross settlement to celebrate the Divine Liturgy and pray on the graves of the first Russian Orthodox Californians. Among the hierarchs who prayed in the wooden chapel of this historic site were the blessed peace-makers, His Holiness

Patriarch Alexy II and His Eminence Metropolitan Laurus.

One would hope that the national monument of Fort Ross will survive California's budget crisis and will once again be renovated by the government, which has already done this more than once in the past, and will be open to visitors. But the Ross settlement is not only a monument of "their" history, but also of our own spiritual legacy. That is why we too must do what we can to preserve this monument, as well as the memories of our holy martyrs, saints, hierarchs and righteous Christians, by whose prayers and labors the holy Orthodox Faith established itself and spread throughout North America.

St. George Russian Orthodox Mission
1544 W 7800 S
West Jordan, UT
stgeorgelslc.org
stgeoslc@yahoo.com