

THE AMERICAN INTERPRETATION OF THE RUSSIAN COLONY AT FORT ROSS

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California State Parks employs a form of public presentation referred to today as *Interpretation* to explain its holdings to visitors to their Parks. As these holdings contain historic sites, buildings, and artifacts, their purpose is explained to the public by Park staff, either interpreters, guides, or rangers. California State Parks have numerous historic sites covering over 200 years of California's history, and containing several ethnic, national, and international perspectives. Among these, Native, Spanish, Mexican, Russian and American Anglo-Saxon predominate. The Russian Colonial settlement of Fort Ross has received considerable attention and resources from State Parks over its eighty year history, and the influence of the American perspective on Russian-American history at Fort Ross State Historic Park will be explored here.

Various fluctuations in Russian-Soviet and American relations throughout the twentieth century have affected the interpretation of Fort Ross. It may be more correct to say the absence of relations has had a strong effect on interpretation. Fort Ross became a State Historic Monument in 1928, ten years after the founding of the R.S.F.S.R. and six years after the creation of the Soviet Union, and this time frame has had a profound effect as to how Fort Ross has developed as a park and as a symbol of Russia's presence in California.

As a symbol Fort Ross had represented many different things to American visitors. Imperialist expansion, capitalist greed in the form of fur hunters driving the fur-bearing sea mammals, particularly the sea otter, to near extinction, and the worst form of colonial behavior to native peoples, and the subjugation of native Alaskans as a slave labour force at Fort Ross are but a few.

With the particularly poor relations between the U.S. and the U.S.S.R there were few defenders of the Russians in California, except for the Russian émigré population of San Francisco, expanded during the 1920's -

1940's by White émigrés from China and the Russian Far East. For these Russians Fort Ross was a symbol of the tenuous tie Russia once held in California, and the chapel the first imprint of orthodoxy in their adopted country. In 1937 Russian émigrés founded the Russian Historical Society in America, and began publishing articles about California's Russian Colony. Despite the efforts of a few Russian historians among this émigré population, the perception among Americans, aided by the cold-war relations between the U.S. and the U.S.S.R., remained that of a greedy Imperialist power bent upon the destruction of California's cute and lovable sea otters.

As a State Historic Monument the emphasis concerning Fort Ross was on preservation rather than restoration. When Fort Ross became a State monument in 1928 only four of the nine original buildings within the stockade remained. The fifth, the Official's Barracks, had been demolished in 1916 to provide timber for the restoration of the chapel and the blockhouses, which had collapsed in the earthquake of 1906. The chapel had remained in a collapsed condition for ten years. The blockhouses were not restored for twenty-four years. The remaining building, called the *Rotchev House* began to be repaired in 1925, and restored twenty years later to its Russian silhouette in 1945.

The 1916 restoration of the chapel began what I refer to as the American Interpretation of Fort Ross. The chapel has become since its first restoration the veritable symbol of Fort Ross itself, indeed a cultural icon of Russian America.

A new book published by the Fort Ross Interpretive Association includes many unpublished photographs from the 19th century and from early and more modern restoration attempts. One in particular, the earliest, taken in 1866 revealed an interesting aspect of an early restoration which has been interpreted as an original feature ever since- the unique board roofs on the chapel's bell tower and cupola. Long recognized as an anomaly in Russian church architecture- not to be found in either other Russian-American churches in Alaska or in Russia, these roofs have symbolized Fort Ross and her architecture for almost a century and a half.

The first restoration

The exact date of the first chapel restoration is unknown. The 1866 photograph, taken during the tenure of William O. Benitz, who purchased the property in 1847 in partnership with Ernest Rufus, reveals the extensive

changes that were made by the time the property was sold to Charles Fairfax in 1867. Every roof has been replaced with an American-style shingle roof, and not only have the coverings been replaced, but also the entire roof profiles altered and in almost every building, completely reconstructed. It would be almost impossible to believe that the chapel and blockhouses would have escaped the same reconstruction attempts, for even though it is not known what the block houses were used for, it is known that the old Russian chapel served the ranch as a storage shed and manger, at least in the latter part of the nineteenth century, and had a practical reason for being maintained. This style of American board-shingle roofing remained for the next 49 years.

The 1916 Restoration

In April 1906, the chapel collapsed as a result of the local effects of the San Francisco earthquake. The roof and two towers remained intact and sat on top of the remains of the destroyed chapel walls. In 1916, the State of California allocated \$ 3,000 for the restoration of the chapel, an historic site since 1906. The roof was raised and sat upon new walls and floors built from timbers taken from the official's quarters and the old warehouse. This reconstruction raised the floor of the chapel to allow for the shortness of the upright timbers, necessitating the addition of front steps and a porch which did not exist previously, and are absent from the 1880 photograph of the front of the chapel. To re-enforce the walls and joists, an extra post was added, and in an attempt to retain symmetry, an extra window was placed in the wall facing the courtyard. During this restoration a small window was added to the cupola, not apparent in earlier restorations. The roofing for the both the bell tower and the cupola attempted to follow more closely the lines of the framing beneath. A Latin rather than a Russian-Orthodox cross was placed atop the bell-tower in imitation of the cross that had been on the bell-tower prior to 1906, and remained there until 1939, when it was replaced with an up-side down orthodox cross, which remained until 1941 before being corrected. The crosses were simply fashioned to repeat the style of the make shift Latin cross that had been erected in the 19th century, perpetuating the image of the crude frontier existence that the State Park was preparing to interpret.

The 1955 Restoration

A third restoration was funded in 1955, to redress the errors of the 1916 restoration. The four windows were replaced with the three which existed

during the call Ranch period. The window frames remained those of the 1916 restoration, with 12 panes per window rather than the six shown in the 1880 photograph. The building was aligned to conform to the archeological evidence, but the floor elevation repeated that of the 1916 alteration.

The 1960 Restoration

For some reason all restorations of the chapel have repeated the board roofs from the mid-19th century. The illustrations in the new book show the various attempts at rebuilding the walls, adding or removing windows in 1916 and 1955, the removal of the Latin cross and the erection of the upside-down orthodox cross in 1939. All these attempts have understandably been based upon early photographic sources and have simply repeated the errors of earlier interpretations. One of the most interesting roofs was the rounded shingle of 1916. This interpretation led to a copy being made in New York for the World's Fair of 1939. The Chapel was referred to at that time as the first Orthodox house of worship in the United States. Older churches existed in Alaska, but Alaska did not become part of the United States until 1961. Another copy exists today at the Holy Assumption Convent in Calistoga, California, although this version has interestingly added some interpretations of its own, such as an entrance porch, consistent with orthodox practices, and red roofs on the building, belfry and cupola. The New York chapel also had a red-painted roof.

What is most fascinating about the 1866 photograph of Fort Ross is not that the chapel roof is the same, but that every roof on every building in the Fort has been replaced in the American style. What this may imply to modern viewers, is that the current interpretation now seen at Fort Ross is that of a ranch shed with crosses on it.

When the chapel underwent restoration in the early 1960's, the boards were removed from the 1955 repair and revealed the frames of the cupola, which were mistakenly referred to as "ship's knees" by an author writing about the restoration. This "ship's knees" theory conveniently led the author to the possibility that the builder may have been Vassily Grudinin, responsible for the ship building efforts at Fort Ross. This unfortunate interpretation overlooked the possibility that the frames were consistent with Russian "onion dome" cupolas, and an important opportunity was missed to restore the cupola and bell tower to the appearance Il'ya Vosnesensky had painted in 1841.

The 1973 reconstruction

In 1970 the chapel was burned to the ground by an arsonist. The fire destroyed all the original roof framing and the chance was lost forever to study the original building methods and what original wood and fastenings may have remained from earlier restoration attempts.

With participation from the Russian American communities in California and from local concerned citizen's groups, California State Parks rebuilt the chapel in 1970. Local carpenters were employed and local materials used. This reconstruction attempted to imitate original building techniques, even artificially treating machine-sawn surfaces with an adz to give them a hand-worked appearance. However, this technique either ignored awareness of Russian tools and woodworking practices, or simply strove to give the new building a hand-made look.

There was evidently little effort to study and record original building methods by State Parks prior to the chapel's destruction. These studies, called Historic Structure's Reports are employed by America's National Parks to ensure that if an historic site is damaged or lost, it can be restored to its original appearance through exhaustive recordation of building details. When State Parks rebuilt the Fort Ross chapel, it used for its basic source material the 1866 photograph of the Benitz ranch, with the American board roof, and possibly American window frames.

California State Parks employed many advisors for the 1973 chapel reconstruction from both the American and Russian-American communities. Only one advisor, Professor Nicholas Rokitiensky, was a professional Russian historian. Even with Prof. Rokitiensky's extensive contacts with Soviet scholars in Moscow, Leningrad and Tot'ma, not a single architectural historian was included among the advisors.

In the late 1970's Prof. Rokitiensky returned from Leningrad with the first colour reproduction of Vosnesensky's famous watercolour of Settlement Ross. Photographed secretly through a glass case at the Kunstkammera, this rather unfocused image was the first chance American scholars had to see first-hand a colour record of Fort Ross as it appeared in 1841. The colour of the photograph was also affected by the conditions Prof. Rokitiensky had to work under, and many details remained unclear and open to debate, especially the roofs and domes of the chapel. Finally, in 1994, through the assistance of the Anchorage Museum of History and Art, whose exhibit *Russian*

America: The Forgotten Frontier had included the Voznesensky watercolour, was a clear, accurate transparency of the picture obtained.

This image of Settlement Ross, reproduced through the courtesy of the Kunstkammera and the Fort Ross Interpretive Association, shows the chapel with a green dome and bell tower, and a red roof. It is quite a different image compared to what the visitor to Fort Ross is told is an accurate reproduction. The chapel in the watercolour is much more consistent with orthodox churches found in Alaska and Russia, for with close inspection one can even discern the slight curve of an onion-dome topped by a small sphere beneath the cross, consistent with the framing uncovered in 1960. The red painted metal roofs also compare to examples in both Alaska and Russia. Traces of red ochre paint and nail holes consistent with metal sheet roofs have been found on the roof boards of the block-house from St. Michael's redoubt on display at the Anchorage Museum, built at the same time as buildings at Fort Ross. Descriptions of Sitka during the Russian-American period mention the roofs of the more important buildings being covered in metal. Why then, does this chapel, arguably the most important interpretive element at Fort Ross State Historic Park, retain the appearance of an American-period storage shed?

The answers may lie with the concept of interpretation itself. Although Fort Ross is a State Historic Park, it has no historian on staff. The specialists now consulted are either Archeologists, General Historians, Rangers, who are primarily concerned with administration and law enforcement, or park interpretive specialists, who at Fort Ross have been drawn from the park aides, employees concerned primarily with fee collecting and maintenance duties.

The park staff, rangers and interpretive specialists are supposed to interpret information to the visitors based upon the guidelines of the California State Parks. Because there is no historian at Fort Ross, there is no direct supervision except for the rangers in guaranteeing accuracy of information, and no specialist on Russian-American history within State Parks to verify questions that arise on interpretation.

The chapel again, is a case in point. Because of California State Park's understandably Americo-centric viewpoint, interpretation at Fort Ross has always been viewed through American eyes. There is not a single Russian-speaking staff member who can access primary documentation or carry on original research. Despite an upsurge in awareness of Russian-America's

history, the great preponderance of translated literature remains centered on the late 18th and early 19th centuries. The period of the most activity at Fort Ross, the 1830's, remains sketchy at best, and although State Parks had directed its general plan that this was the period to interpret, the park staff has chosen instead to represent the early 1820's, giving the visitors the impression of the mutual distrust of two armed aggressors on the California frontier, Mexico and Russia. This current public presentation was created because of the publication of the 1820's journals of Kiril Khlebnikov's journeys to California, translated by the Rasmussen Library of the University of Alaska. The visit of Father Payeras provides a dramatic opportunity to represent Russian-Mexican rivalries in California while ignoring the almost thirty years of peaceful coexistence and trade between the two countries. Also ignored of course, is the chapel and what is called the Rotchev House. Rotchev did not arrive in California until 1835, and his enlightened administration of Russian California was one of the main reasons California State Parks chose the 1830's as its period of interpretation in the first place.

The chapel was not yet built in 1822 when Payeras visited, so any question as to why the current chapel bears little resemblance to the Voznesensky watercolour is conveniently avoided. Also conveniently avoided is Voznesensky himself, for that would require interpreting Russia's considerable contribution to science in California, and would not neatly fit in to the portrayal of Russia as a territorial usurper on Mexico's frontier.

Given the history of the chapel's various restorations during this century this question may continue to be avoided long into the next century. In the beginning of this century the roof sat upon collapsed walls for ten years before it was raised off the ground. The errors of this restoration remained for forty years before they were corrected. There may be little impetus to change the chapel's appearance, for it at present conforms to the impression of the rough frontier existence of a western Fort surrounded by hostile forces, whose main concern is defense rather than commerce, and whose cannons are more prominent than its ploughs. With out a metal roof to protect its boards, and a copper cupola to proclaim its permanence, the weather beaten chapel as well as the other rough wood houses within the Fort, gives the impression of the temporary tenancy of the Russians in California, who, like all other nationalities, would be swept away by a tidal wave of American immigrants, and whose history in this State would become a footnote to their achievements.

Even the dead left in the cemetery at Fort Ross have come to conform to this sense of impermanence, with crudely fashioned new crosses marking their graves. Called a *Cemetery restoration* by State Parks, this newly interpreted feature more closely resembles a battlefield grave-site than a colony's cemetery, and has done nothing to restore the various monuments recorded and described by early visitors to the site.

Ironically in a State with the world's seventh largest economy, and a budget surplus of billions, the main problem facing Fort Ross at present in its efforts to preserve and restore what remains of Russian California, is money. There is no funding to provide an historian to this historic park, and little to do other than provide the most basic of maintenance to the existing buildings, even to the newer reconstruction's, now showing decay despite or perhaps because of modern construction methods. The wooden orthodox crosses made from split fence rails marking the cemetery were a financial, rather than a research solution. They were accepted from a Boy Scout Troop who offered to provide them at no cost to State Parks. The research for the crosses was provided by the examples on top of the chapel, boards hammered together to imitate the makeshift Latin cross of the 19th century.

The only original building from the Russian-America period in California, called the Rotchev House, has only recently through the efforts of the Russian Committee of FRIA, had a comprehensive Historic Structure's Report prepared as a theses for a graduate student project. The report found numerous areas of concern to the structure, and the building, which has remained empty for the past fifteen years, and is likely to do so for another ten, sits embarrassingly within the Fort almost abandoned, pools of water forming along the floors after each rain. A controversial plan to replace the windows in the building with a style more representative of the late 19th century was again, accepted by State Parks for financial reasons. Despite objections of FRIA's Russian Committee, the author of the historic structures report, and a Moscow architectural historian who this time was asked to consult with FRIA, the State decided to install the windows that were already made by the maintenance staff, despite their not being able to provide any research material on their construction, and because it would cost too much to do them over accurately.

Conclusion

Fort Ross in this century has had a long history of numerous well wishers who have worked hard to bring the Russian period in California's History

back to life. The Park administrators, scholars, and volunteers have contributed much to our understanding of the colony's place in the multi-cultural mix that California hopes to present as a positive aspect of the State's legacy. These well wishers have been encouraged by State Parks with various levels of participation: citizen's committees, advisory groups, and cooperating associations. While on occasion members may be very qualified experts in various fields, such as history, linguistics, archeology, and anthropology, and have come from both the Russian-American and American academic and business communities, there has never been any architectural historian involved in any meaningful capacity in the decision-making process of building interpretation.

Soviet scholars in this century have likewise been left out of this process, although having often generously offered their advice on many occasions. The one time recently when at last a Russian architectural historian was consulted on an important restoration detail, his advice was ignored in favour of the Park's maintenance and interpretive staff's opinion on the accuracy of window replacement.

This sense of either limited or non-cooperation with Russian scholars in the decision-making process has led to the predominantly American perspective of this Russian Colony. As seen in the various chapel restorations, mistakes could have been rectified twenty years ago with the chapel reconstruction with the participation of Russian architectural historians. State Parks can not be held fully responsible for this omission, for in the cold-war atmosphere of the 1970's little was being done with efforts to fully open archives to American scholars, and American suspicion of Soviet scholarship was re-enforced by the White émigré community who supplied advisors to various Fort Ross committees. With the general atmosphere of suspicion of all things Russian, the promotion of a Russian Park in California has always been a quietly controversial topic within State Parks.

With the 1990's, all that should have changed. Even at the beginning of this decade, Soviet participation in Russian-American research had blossomed in unprecedented fashion. Russian scholars and citizens have visited Fort Ross in increasing numbers, diplomats and politicians make it a point to stop there in their travels around America. Even elements of the Russia Military visit this place as pilgrims might seek out a shrine. Why with all this interest does the Rotchev house sit empty and almost abandoned, and

why does the chapel still resemble American ranch storage shed with crosses on its roof?

The answer is twofold: lack of money and lack of inspired leadership. During the 1980's State Parks had an inspired leader, William Penn Mott, who oversaw the creation of citizen's advisory groups and the eventual restoration of the Fort compound and the re-construction of several of it's buildings. By the latter part of the decade, lack of money halted the complete restoration of the Fort's compound, and the subsequent disbanding of the advisory committee and the Parks dissolution and discouragement of other volunteer involvement limited citizen participation to a mere fund-raising element of the Park. The change in focus of the period interpreted to the 1820's has also diminished interest in the chapel and the Rotchev House.

Now that funds have become available in a limited amount to repair the reconstructed houses and replace windows in the Rotchev House, it can only be hoped that a closer inspection of the general state of the house will be considered for further funding, as decay threatens this last structure of the Russian Colonial period in California. The chapel also it is hoped will bear closer scrutiny. The future at Fort Ross is not promising, with the lack of leadership displayed over the last decade. With the history of chapel restorations as evidence of the time required to right mistakes, let us hope that by the 200th anniversary of the founding of Fort Ross in 2012, interpretation at Fort Ross will begin to consider the Russian perspective of a Russian colony, and at very least, restore the chapel to its Russian appearance.

