



# Sitka Lutheran Church celebrates its 150th year: The Finnish legacy in Russian Alaska

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The first Lutheran service, held on August 23, 1840, inaugurated an interim Church in the Green Room in what was known as "Baranov's Castle", the residence of the Governors of the Russian American Company. Governor Arvid Adolph Etholén, a Lutheran, Finnish citizen, and a veteran of the Alaska waters, had in 1839 been appointed to that post. At the time, Sitka, then known as New Archangelsk, had among its cosmopolitan population some 150 Lutherans who served the Russian American Company as clerks, carpenters, shipwrights, doctors, sea captains, sailors, hunters, and officers of both high and low rank. The majority of them were Finnish citizens from the Grand Duchy of Finland, with a few Swedes, and some Germans from Balticum. Governor Etholén felt the transient Lutheran community needed stability and its own religious and moral leadership. The founding of a Lutheran Church, he believed, with a pastor who understood their culture and spoke their own languages would provide that.

The first pastor, Uno Cygnaeus, dispatched from Finland as were his two successors, Gabriel Plathan and Georg Gustaf Winter, conducted services on alternating Sundays in Swedish and Finnish, and in German if the month had a fifth Sunday. Pastor Cygnaeus, after he returned to Finland, gained fame as the "Father of Finland's Public Education".

On August 24, 1843, having surmounted strong non-Lutheran community opposition, the first Lutheran Church building in

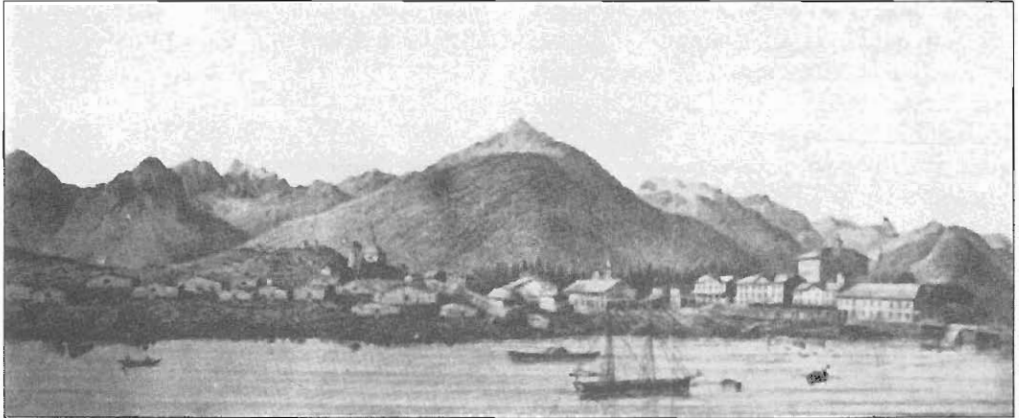
Sitka was joyously consecrated. Pastor Cygnaeus writes in a letter home that the church was filled to capacity, with no standing room left vacant.

After 1867, following the sale of Russian Alaska to the United States, the practice of dispatching Lutheran pastors from Finland ceased. At the time of the sale, the land on which the Lutheran Church stood was formally deeded to the Lutheran Congregation in perpetuity by the Russian Government. This was indeed a unique situation.

By the time of the transfer, most of the Lutherans had returned home to Europe. Without past missionary rights for the church and without a permanent pastor, the congregation dwindled to a minimum. By 1888 the building, in bad repair and looted, was condemned by the city and ordered demolished. The original pipe organ brought from Dorpat expressly for the church was on safe-keeping "loan" in the Sheldon Jackson Museum, as were many of the chancel furnishings. These items have been recently returned. Among them is one of two original wood and gilded wreath-like circular ceiling chandeliers. The church's large, beautiful and historically significant altar painting, depicting the Transfiguration, had similarly been "loaned" for temporary safekeeping to the neighboring Saint Michael's Russian Orthodox Cathedral. The painting, still in Saint Michael's Cathedral, can be viewed above the iconostasis. The historic painting partially covers a window in the cupola. The artist, Berndt Abraham Godenhjelm,

(born March 31, 1799 on Gröndal Manor, Mäntyharju, Finland; died in Helsinki, Finland, December 14, 1881), nobleman, painter, art teacher, lawyer, was Finnish. He painted several similar altar paintings with the same subject matter, varying them little. They can still be viewed where they

adorn Lutheran Church altars in several communities in Finland. Godenhjelm's work is also well represented in the Finnish National Gallery of Fine Arts, (Ateneum). Berndt Abraham Godenhjelm is, and was then considered, one of Finland's foremost painters of his time.



Sitka in 1869, during time of military occupation. The large building of Arvid Adolf Etholén, in which Uno Cygnaeus held the first Lutheran service in Alaska. (Photo Shop Studio, Sitka, Alaska)

On August 25, 1940, after a long struggle, the congregation was re-established with assistance from the United Lutheran Church. The second Church, larger, in Mission style and very similar in design and appearance to the Sitka Pioneer's Home, was dedicated on March 1, 1942. It was built with a large lower level. Here the congregation operated a Servicemen's Center which provided "a home away from home" for thousands of military personnel during World War II. Later, as a "Fisherman's Center", it served the fishing fleet in much the same way. For twenty-five years the building served the congregation and the community until it was destroyed by the "Big Fire" of January 2, 1966, a fire that devastated most of down-

town Sitka. The concrete walls of the church have been credited with saving the town from further devastation.

The present building on the same historic site, the third church facility providing continuity in Sitka, was dedicated on October 31, 1967, the 450th anniversary of the Lutheran Reformation. With a large worship space, a fellowship hall downstairs, and classrooms, it now serves a congregation consisting of some 200 persons. Now part of the Alaska Synod of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) the building, located at 224 Lincoln Street, stands on the same historic lot, its home for the past 150 years. Pastor Michael L. Meier and his wife Toni have served the church for the past nine years.