Title: Archives of the Russian Orthodox Church in Alaska in the Library of Congress

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Published by: Russian Church in Alaska

Source: Fort Ross Conservancy Library

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Archives of the Russian Church in Alaska in the Library of Congress

V. Basanoff

Some years ago the Library of Congress acquired from Russian church officials in New York a collection of Russian manuscripts embodying Alaskan ecclesiastical archival material. This group of documents, carefully preserved in the vaults of the Library, has not been classified and has never been used by historians. The present writer was privileged to make an examination of the collection and feels that a survey of its contents will be of value to those interested in Russian history, in the history of the Russian colonies in America, and especially in the social and economic history of Alaska. The materials contain much specific and detailed information, which should offer a useful supplement to sources to be found in the Russian archives and in various collections throughout this country.

The archives, which consist of 136 packages, cover the period from 1762 to relatively recent times. Most of the documents are in a satisfactory state of preservation, though some parish books of record had been damaged by moisture before reaching the Library of Congress. Curiously enough, the oldest documents are in perfect condition, evidently because they were protected from dampness, and also because a better quality of paper and ink was used.

The greater share of the manuscripts belong to the nineteenth century. They are written generally in an ordinary cursive style, without many abbreviations, and present no difficulty

1 I am glad to express my gratitude to Mr. P. W. Ashby, Dr. T. P. Martin, Mr. M. A. Abert, and Mr. V. V. Vazee of the Library of Congress for the kindness with which they arranged my investigation. Sincere thanks are also due to my wife, my faithful laborator.
The reader. Documents of the first half of the reign of Alexander I, as well as those of the eighteenth century, have paleographic peculiarities and a slightly different vocabulary, including many words of foreign origin, mainly Latin and French embellishments so characteristic of that period.

The archives, as regards content, may be classified as follows:

1. So-called метрические записи, that is to say, records of baptisms, marriages, and burials, which correspond to vital statistics of parishes.
2. Иповаиения росписи, records of participation by parish people in their duties to the cult, or records of confessions and communions.
3. Клировые ведомости, annual accounts and reports to the bishop of the diocese, concerning the clergy. We find there what probably could be styled the cursus honorum of clergymen.
5. Reports of missionaries and documents dealing directly with the activity of missions and the evangelization of the Natives.
6. Accounts of ecclesiastical property, expense books, etc.
7. All other documents: letters, bills, receipts, diaries of private people, telegrams, etc.

Let us consider each of these groups.

Records of baptisms, marriages, and burials

This group of manuscripts is by far the most numerous, representing perhaps one third of the entire collection.

It is known that the churches in Russia, until the Revolution of 1917, kept detailed records. These records were of a chronological character and theoretically reflected solely the giving of the sacraments. As the sacraments correspond exactly to the phenomena of births, marriages, and deaths, the practical result was to preserve a fairly accurate account of vital statistics for the Orthodox population. The parish priests of other cults were
charged with the same duty for their respective spiritual flocks, so that from all these accounts it is possible to piece together with considerable ease and security a complete picture of vital statistics in Russia.

Such cannot be said in the case of Alaska. The Alaskan records under discussion, by their very nature, present the vital statistics only of the orthodox population. The native population not yet converted was outside their field. While the importance of the records as vital statistics is therefore limited, their usefulness is still considerable, and a wide variety of information may be obtained from them. The records were kept by responsible priests, so that we have an annual account for each parish in rubrics, as follows: number of people, number of births, number of marriages, number of deaths, number of those who confessed and participated in holy communion, number of those who were not at confession and communion, number of new converts.

The records mention the causes of deaths. The terminology, however, is neither uniform nor exact, and it would therefore be difficult to formulate conclusions concerning the conditions of mortality. Careful mention is made of names, place of origin, and social class of people who participated at sacrament, in whatever quality it may be, either as parents of the child to be baptised, or as godfather and godmother, or as bride and bridegroom, or as witnesses.

Let us give some samples.

"Pack II: Book of the Church of Archistrategos Michael of Diocese of Irkutsk situated in the Colony of the Russian American Company on the Island of Sitka in the port of Novo Archangelsk for the records of births, marriages, and deaths from November 20th, 1838, i.e., from the day of departure from Sitka of the Priest and Knight, Ioann Veniaminov. Kept

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3 I have no need to explain that my citations are of necessity provisional ones. After having surveyed the packets, one by one, I put a number, with a red pencil, on each of them. I shall designate the material by pack numbers and nature of documents. Until the collection is classified, this is the only possible method of citation. Translations of Russian text are in italics. I give as nearly as possible the Russian spelling of proper names.

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We are thus quite possibly four people, as V social class could be f with the record of ba the illegitimate child, the such a record within the daughter is ment native woman. The fat origin, as there is no m His profession is stat province, in the hear arevchianin, that is to f of Tumen.

It is clear that a th belonged the early geographical distribution should find on this si Yaroslavl during the rather primitive province. The majority of the

Pack xxv, Dioxo di re aion of a clergyman who, was obliged to m various pictures of more
by the priest of this church, Andrei Sizoi. In the “Part First of births” under 1841, we find

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Male</th>
<th>Female</th>
<th>Name and Parentage</th>
<th>Date of Baptism</th>
<th>Godfather</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td>September 23rd, 1838, was born from Nicolai Ponomarev of the province of Yaroslavl, county of Danilovsk, yamshchik 3 of Ukhorevskiy yam 8 and from creole 4 girl Maria, daughter of Vasil Burdukovsky an illegitimate son Ivan</td>
<td>Sept. 26</td>
<td>Mieschchianin of Tiumen, Alexei Stepanov Ivanov</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

We are thus quite satisfactorily informed about three, possibly four people, as Vasil Burdukovsky’s place of origin and social class could be found in an earlier book in connection with the record of baptism of his daughter, now mother of the illegitimate child, just baptized Ivan. That there should be such a record within the archives is clear from the fact that his daughter is mentioned as a creole, that is, born from a native woman. The father of the child is apparently of peasant origin, as there is no mention of his belonging to another class. His profession is stated too; his place of origin, Yaroslavl province, in the heart of Great Russia. The godfather is a mieschchianin, that is to say of the petty bourgeoisie, of the City of Tiumen.

It is clear that a thorough study of these records may give us a complete and exact picture of the social strata to which belonged the early colonists, as well as of their former geographical distribution. It is a rather striking feature that we should find on this side of the Pacific a peasant post driver from Yaroslavl during a period when the means of transport were rather primitive and travel highly expensive.6

The majority of the colonists were peasants and representa-

3 Yamshchik – postboy, driver of a post carriage; yam – post or mail unit with station and transport organization, before railroads.

4 Creole is used in the archives, instead of mestiz, for people born from Russian fathers and native mothers.

6 Cf. Pack xvi, Dielo o diache Illarione Chernykh, where we find the account of travel expenses of a clergyman who, in order to be consecrated priest and move to his new parish, was obliged to make a trip of about 8,000 miles. These documents give us very curious pictures of mores on the other side of the Pacific.
tives of the petty bourgeoisie, sometimes merchants, and only exceptionally people of the personal or hereditary nobility. It is, however, characteristic of a new society that its social strata are not always determined by the classes to which the newcomers belonged in the old country. In Alaska, well-to-do merchants, and officers of the Russian American Company were the leading element, and people of the lowest degree in the social hierarchy of the mother country sometimes became socially prominent in the colony. Let us give a picture of the social life in Fort Ross, California, in 1841.

Baptisms were generally the occasion of social parties in Russia, especially among the lower classes. It was also the custom to choose as godfather and godmother the most prominent and important people available in order to secure the child further support on the part of his spiritual parents. In this way, godparents usually belonged to a higher social strata, and in a small colony where everybody knew everybody we should consequently find in the rubric of spiritual parents only socially prominent people. The same book, in the section of baptisms and holyunction, Fort Ross division, July and August, 1841, reads as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Baptised</th>
<th>Anointed</th>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Godfather and Godmother</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Oct. 9, 1841</td>
<td>July 9, 1841</td>
<td>Vasili, son of peasant Orlov from Arkangelk and of his lawful wife a creole woman</td>
<td>Creole Y. S. Osokhlov and Serf girl of the nobleman Rostov Alexander Gavrilov, Agafia Ivanova</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oct. 9, 1841</td>
<td>July 9, 1841</td>
<td>Paraskeva, daughter of Elm Orlov and of his lawful wife Pelageya</td>
<td>Creole J. A. Osokhlov and Serf girl, etc., Agafia Ivanova</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>July 9, 1841</td>
<td>July 9, 1841</td>
<td>Matrena, daughter of the Aleutian from the Island Kodiak, Philip Pashuka, and of his lawful wife Aleutian woman Anna</td>
<td>Creole J. A. Osokhlov and Serf girl, etc., Agafia Ivanova</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>July 9, 1841</td>
<td>July 9, 1841</td>
<td>Zakhar, son of creole Yanov and of his lawful wife a creole woman</td>
<td>Pupil of the Company creole Zakhar Petrov Chichev and Serf girl Agafia Ivanova</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

What kind of conclusion can these records bring? Let us examine the two lists. What striking features. The three year period between the first and last baptisms immediately brings to mind the restriction of the baptism to the born free nobility, as was the case in the mother country. In the three-year period between April 10, 1841, and July 9, 1841, events took place, certainly of considerable social importance, and it is also observable that there is not a single person of the lower strata of society in these records.
What kind of conclusions may be made on the ground of these records?

Let us examine the two left columns. We observe there somewhat striking features. The holy unction which generally follows baptisms immediately is delayed from four months to three years. As the baptism may be performed by anyone and the holy unction cannot, all these children to be anointed were obliged to wait till the next visit of the priest. He arrived apparently after April 10, 1841. Then a series of happy social events took place, certainly with several parties where the most honourable place among the guests belonged to the godparents of the child. Let us now pass to the right column. In almost all these parties the godmother is a certain serf girl, personal property of a nobleman from Moscow. This person, desired for the prominent role of godmother, appears sometimes as "kuma" (godmother as partner of godfather) of the pupil of the Company Chichinev, apparently a socially prominent man in the service of the Russian American Company, whose daughter becomes the goddaughter of the nobleman Rotchev himself, who is the son of the owner of our society leader serf girl, Agafia Ivanova. It seems then, that Rotchev, having come from Moscow with his serf concubine, and that her acquaintance with the fine manners of the high life of the remote capital, and the influence of her semi-official position raised her to the top rank in the social scale.

Some observations are necessary on the American period

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Event</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>July 9, 1841</td>
<td>Anna, illegitimate daughter of the serf girl of the nobleman Rotchev, etc., Agafia Ivanova</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aug. 12, 1841</td>
<td>Pupil of the Company creole Zakhar Petrov Chichinev...</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aug. 12, 1841</td>
<td>Pupil of the Company, etc., Chichinev...</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>July 5, 1841</td>
<td>Athanasia, daughter of the pupil of the Company creole Zakhar Petrov Chichinev and of his lawful wife</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aug. 12, 1841</td>
<td>Moscow nobleman's Alexander Rotchev son Constantine and sub-lieutenant's of the body of navy pilots Alexander Kashevarov Seraphima Alexeeva</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
of Alaska. Mr. Andrews in his attractive book *Story of Alaska*, quite recently published, tells us that during the first two decades, the people in Alaska lived without law; they could not, for example, get married, or raise lawful families, no officer who could celebrate marriages being in the territory. However, one should take into consideration the fact that the orthodox population did not suffer at all from this state of affairs. Parish priests performed their duties as before, celebrated marriages, recorded baptisms and consequently births, so that even American citizens of another denomination, when they chose their wives among the orthodox population, could celebrate their marriage in the orthodox church (which admits mixed marriages); and being so recorded, the marriage was legal everywhere. In the archives we find evidence of marriages of this kind. Furthermore, among other names of Russian spelling mentioned in the records of the early eighties as those of active members of St. Paul parish on Kodiak Island, there appears that of Joseph Rodgers, *alias* Osip Rodgers. From some later documents it appears that he was one of the church trustees (Pack IV, Divorce of Helen Fendrik), and that he was really an American (Pack XIV, Record of marriage of Julius Fendrik and Helen Fendrik). The case of Joseph Rodgers may be an exceptional one. It would be very interesting to know exactly what was the part played by the Alaskan orthodox churches in the society of the transitional period. So much for the first of these groups of the Russian church manuscripts.

**Confessional records**

The observations on the first group as regards careful recording of place of origin, social class, etc., are generally valid for this group as well. The information found here supplements that in other manuscripts. Perhaps the most interesting data given are the explanations of absences from confession, explanations which constitute evidence as to conditions of transportation, etc.