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

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Published by: Russian Church in Alaska

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## Archives of the Russian Church in Alaska in the Library of Congress<sup>1</sup>

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

<sup>1</sup> I am glad to express my gratitude to Mr. F. W. Ashley, Dr. T. P. Martin, Mr. M. A. Albert, and Mr. V. V. Parma 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.

ARCHIVES OF THE RUSSIAN CHURCH

Documents of the first half of the century, as well as those of the eighteenth century, show geographic peculiarities and a slight dialect, including many words of foreign origin and French embellishments so characteristic of the period.

The archives, as regards content, may be classified into several groups, the so-called *metricheskiia zapisi*, that is, records of marriages, and burials, which cover the activity of parishes.

*Spovednyia rospisi*, records of participants in their duties to the cult, or records of confessions.

*Skrovnyia vedomosti*, annual accounts of the diocese, concerning the clergy, which probably could be styled the *cursus honorum*.

Various documents concerning ecclesiastical missions. Reports of missionaries and documents concerning the activity of missions and the evangelization of the interior.

Accounts of ecclesiastical property, estates, etc. All other documents: letters, bills, reports, etc. 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 important, representing perhaps one third of the entire collection. It is known that the churches in Russia, until 1917, kept detailed records. These records have an official character and theoretically reflect the sacramental character of the sacraments. As the sacraments correspond to the phenomena of births, marriages, and deaths, it was necessary to preserve a fairly accurate account of the activities of the orthodox population. The parish priests

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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 *metricheskiia zapisi*, that is to say, records of baptisms, marriages, and burials, which correspond to vital statistics of parishes.

2. *Ispovednyiia rospisi*, records of participation by parish people in their duties to the cult, or records of confessions and communions.

3. *Klirovyia viedomosti*, 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.

4. Various documents concerning ecclesiastical jurisdiction.

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 confessional 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:<sup>2</sup> *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*

<sup>2</sup> I have no need to explain that my citations are of necessity provisory 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.

by the priest of this ch  
of births" under 1841,

MALE	FEMALE	NAME
		September
		Nicolai Pono
		Yaroslavl, co
		chik <sup>3</sup> of UK
		creole <sup>4</sup> girl
		Burdukovsky

We are thus quite s  
sibly four people, as V  
social class could be f  
with the record of ba  
the illegitimate child,  
be such a record withi  
his daughter is menti  
native woman. The fat  
origin, as there is no m  
His profession is stat  
province, in the hear  
meshchianin, that is to  
of Tiumen.

It is clear that a th  
as a complete and ex  
belonged the early co  
graphical distribution  
should find on this si  
than Yaroslavl durin  
were rather primitive

The majority of the

<sup>3</sup> Yamschik - postboy, drive  
and transport organization, be  
<sup>4</sup> Creole is used in the arc  
and native mothers.

<sup>5</sup> Pack XVII, Dielo o dis  
expenses of a clergyma  
was obliged to m  
pictures of more

by the priest of this church, *Andrei Sizoi*. In the "Part First of births" under 1841, we find

MALE	FEMALE	NAME AND PARENTAGE	DATE OF BAPTISM	GODFATHER
x		September 23rd, 1838, was born from Nicolai Ponomarev of the province of Yaroslavl, county of Danilovsk, <i>yamshchik</i> <sup>3</sup> of Ukhorevsky <i>yam</i> <sup>3</sup> and from creole <sup>4</sup> girl Maria, daughter of Vasili Burdukovsky an illegitimate son Ivan	Sept. 26	Mieshchianin of Tiumen, Alexei Stepanov Ivanov

We are thus quite satisfactorily informed about three, possibly four people, as Vasili 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 *mieshchianin*, 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.<sup>5</sup>

The majority of the colonists were peasants and representa-

<sup>3</sup> *Yamshchik* - postboy, driver of a post carriage; *yam* - post or mail unit with station and transport organization, before railroads.

<sup>4</sup> *Creole* is used in the archives, instead of *metis*, for people born from Russian fathers and native mothers.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. Pack xvii, Dielo o diachke 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 holy unction, Fort Ross division, July and August, 1841, reads as follows:

BAPTISED	ANOINTED	NAME	GODFATHER AND GODMOTHER
Oct. 9, 1840	July 9, 1841	Vasili, son of peasant Orlov from Arkangelak and of his lawful wife a creole woman	Creole Y. S. Oskholkov and Serf girl of the nobleman Rotchev Alexander Gavrilov, Agafia Ivanova
Oct. 9, 1840	July 9, 1841	Paraskeva, daughter of Efim Orlov and of his lawful wife Pelagucia	Creole J. A. Oskholkov and Serf girl, etc., Agafia Ivanova
	July 9, 1841	Matrena, daughter of the Aleutian from the Island Kodiak, Philip Pazhuka, and of his lawful wife Aleutian woman Anna	Creole J. A. Oskholkov and Serf girl, etc., Agafia Ivanova
	July 9, 1841	Zakhar, son of creole Yanov and of his lawful wife a creole woman	Pupil of the Company creole Zakhar Petrov Chichinev and Serf girl Agafia Ivanova

July 9, 1841	July 9, 1841	Anna, illegitimate daughter of the serf man Rotchev Ivanova
Aug. 12, 1841	Aug. 12, 1841	Alexander, son of the daughter, etc.
Aug. 12, 1841	Aug. 12, 1841	Athanasius, pupil of the Company creole Zakhar Petrov Chichinev and of his lawful wife Agafia Ivanova

What kind of conclusion can be drawn from these records?

Let us examine the two last baptisms. They show what striking features. The baptisms were performed three years after the holy unction cannot, all things considered, be regarded as a thing to be ashamed of, but apparently after April 10, 1841, when the baptism took place, certainly in a very honourable place among the spiritual parents of the child. Let us now pass to the social parties the godmother was a nobleman from the prominent role of "godmothers" (godmother as paragon) of the Company Chichinev, apparently in the service of the Russian American Company. The daughter becomes the godmother herself, who is the son of the Company creole Zakhar Petrov Chichinev and Serf girl Agafia Ivanova. It seems that he came from Moscow with his serf girl, and with the fine manners and the influence of the Company, he rose to the top rank in the social hierarchy. These observations are

Dec. 6, 1838	July 9, 1841	Anna, illegitimate daughter of the serf girl of the nobleman Rotchev, etc., Agafia Ivanova	Pupil of the Company creole Zakhar Petrov Chichinev . . .
Apr. 10, 1841	Aug. 12, 1841	Alexandra, illegitimate daughter, etc.	Pupil of the Company, etc., Chichinev . . .
July 5, 1841	Aug. 12, 1841	Athanasia, daughter of the pupil of the Company creole Zakhar Petrov Chichinev and of his lawful wife	Moscow nobleman's Alexander Rotchev son Constantine and sub-lieutenant's of the body of navy pilots Alexander Kashevarov Seraphima Alexcieva

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, Jr., came 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

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.

*Kli:*

Books which contain short *curricula vitae* of are in a bad condition. I two groups and with so cious account of the cor a small number of them to be justified.

There were two group Russia. To this group b bishop of the diocese hi for evangelization of the black clergy or monks. B not be but newcomers, no therefore no local traditi celibacy prevented the i activity, hence, was alwa lifetime.

Another group was th in the Alaskan soil. Insi cation of a kind of her ology of the records is s onal record of 1883, St. s the names of those y communion: first, t ey, children and gra e of the former priest n) Nicolai Petrov Kas ashchaia. The son, li e *cursus honorum* of h r of precedence has s the formation of he thorough study of the tribution to the socio cates.