

## **HISTORIC ALASKAN CHURCH GETTING NEW DOME AND CROSSES FOR 125TH ANNIVERSARY**



One of Alaska's most iconic Orthodox churches, the Church of the Assumption of the Virgin Mary in Kenai, is undergoing a two-month restoration in honor of its 125th anniversary.

When the work is done, the church, Alaska's oldest standing Orthodox church, built in 1895-1896, will be decked out with a new roof, a new dome, and new crosses. Construction began on Monday, reports the Peninsula Clarion.

The parish rector Fr. Peter Tobias celebrated a moleben for the beginning of the work on Monday. In addition to improving the church's exterior appearance, replacing the wooden crosses on the domes with new stainless steel crosses, the project will also stop the leaking that plagues the church.

\$170,000 has been provided for the project by various organizations, tourists, individuals, and Russian Orthodox Sacred Sites in Alaska (ROSSIA). Dorothy Gray, a 42-year-member of the Assumption parish, serves as treasurer for the organization

and project manager for the restoration.

Gray explained that the church, a National Historic Landmark, is undergoing restoration now thanks to the coronavirus pandemic that has made projects in harder to reach villages impossible at this time.



On the other hand, “We were planning a big anniversary celebration, but because of COVID-19, it’s been scaled down radically,” Gray said. There will be a small celebration in September or October, with an exhibition on the church opening at the Kenai Visitors and Cultural Center.

The church played an important historical role in the area, serving as the principal representative of Russian culture in southcentral Alaska from 1841 to present. It also served as “a major institution for the assimilation of western custom” for the local natives, and as an educational, religious, administrative, and judicial center

until well into the 20th century, according to the form that nominated the Orthodox buildings in Kenai as an historic landmark.

And the church continues to play a key role in Kenai today, Gray says, as a place of worship and a tourist attraction. “There’s easily 200 people through the church every day during a normal year in the summer,” though this summer is anything but normal thanks to the pandemic. The church is thus still trying to raise funds for the final part of the roofing project.

The church underwent restoration a few years ago, with the replacement of old timbers and walls. The bell tower was also restored and a fire suppression system installed.

According to the Diocese of Alaska of the Orthodox Church in America, the parish community was established in Kenai in 1845 and the first church was built in 1849. By 1859, there were already 1,432 newly-baptized Kenaitze Indians.

In 1887, a parish house was built, which today is the oldest standing building in the Cook Inlet region.

The present church was built in 1895 with a grant of \$400 from the Holy Synod of the Russian Orthodox Church. In 1906, the St. Nicholas Chapel was built on the site of the original church. The chapel still stands today, with services occasionally celebrated there.

The Assumption Church became a National Historic Landmark in 1970.

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