

Ukrainian Orthodox Church
of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary
716 Pacific Avenue



Year Built: 1911

Architectural Style: Appropriate to the Volyn and Bukovynia regions of the Ukraine

Notable Features: Gold domes crowned with Orthodox crosses

The original windows; the circular rose window, semi-circular window on the façade, and on the belfry

Traditional Iconostats and original wall paintings

Five bronze bells imported from Galizia, Ukraine in 1913

Description:

In spite of the rigidly enforced ‘melting pot’ philosophy towards ethnic minorities that prevailed in the early 1900’s, the Ukrainian Orthodox Catholic families of Fort William came together to fund a church which would supply them with a space to meet their spiritual needs and express their cultural and religious identity. On February 24th, 1911, six men who were mostly labourers signed an agreement and received land on which they could construct a church. Construction costs were shouldered by the approximately 300 members of the congregation, and the building was completed by 1912.

The new church, named Orthodox Ukrainian Church, ran into some difficulties in the first years of its existence. The congregation was without a regular priest until 1915, at which time it acquired a succession of Russian Orthodox priests. It wasn’t until 1924 that a Ukrainian priest finally arrived. Finances were also a constant struggle for the working-class congregation and when they were unable to pay taxes in 1915 the property was “encumbered and turned over to Reverend Archbishop Memolonsky of Chicago.”

Further difficult times ensued when, in 1936, a fire nearly destroyed the wooden structure. When faced with the option of restoring the building on its’ original site, or moving the church’s location, the members of the congregation were deeply divided. The younger generation was in favour of a move, although they were outnumbered by the older members when the issue was put to a vote. Construction on the new building was completed in 1937 on the exact location of the original.

At an annual meeting in 1950, church members decided to adopt the name of 'Ukrainian Greek Orthodox Church of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary in Fort William.'

Architecture:

The church was designed in a style appropriate to the Volyn and Bukovynia regions of the Ukrain. The decorative gold domes which are positioned on top of the church are characteristic of Ukrainian churches of these areas. Orthodox crosses are perched atop the domes. The exterior is further decorated with stained glass windows with simple patterns.

The interior of the church is intriguing and pleasant, especially the numerous paintings which adorn the light blue walls. The bells, imported from Galizia have been in the church since shortly after it was built. The two larger ones were bought by the parish while members bought the three smaller ones. Typical of Orthodox churches is the choir loft.

Two monuments adorn the grounds of the church. One is from 1918 and is a donation from Joan Kuryliuk.

The fire of 1936 wreaked extensive damage to the building, especially the roof which had to be entirely rebuilt. Upon reconstruction, the members of the church decided to alter the domes, but essentially left the belfry the same. The walls were at some point covered with imitation brick tar siding, although this was covered up in 1979 with the metal siding that is still there today. The stained glass windows were also added at this time.

Brief History of Ukrainian immigrants in Thunder Bay:

(from The Heritage Designation Recording Manual)

Turn of the century Fort William saw an influx of immigration "from the Hasburg domains of Austro-Hungary."¹ Following the sizable English and Scottish populations in this town, this broad grouping comprised the third largest immigrant cohort. Immigrants from the Ukraine came from two main areas – Bukovina and Galizia.² Those from Bukovina, or eastern parts of the country, were generally Orthodox Catholics, whereas the Galizians were, for the most part, Greek Catholics.

Many families from eastern Ukraine chose to settle together, and by 1909 there were approximately 175 Orthodox families living in the southeast end of Fort William.³ This group was comprised mainly of working class families of manual labourers who were employed on the railways, and docks; in bush-camps, local mines or the pulp industry. They worked to attain a certain degree of social security, purchase property, and

¹ A. Earnest Epp, *Thunder Bay from Rivalry to Unity* (Thunder Bay Historical Museum Society Inc., 1995) p. 186

² 75th Anniversary 1909-1984: *St. Mary's Ukrainian Orthodox Church (Domination of Holy Theotokos)*, (Lehto Printers: Thunder Bay, ON, 1984), no pagination

³ *ibid*

build homes. As time passed, these men and women began to feel the need to attend to their spiritual well being and to further maintain their culture and traditions.

The desire to meet religious needs was also mixed with feelings of isolation that Ukrainian immigrants felt. They were somewhat excluded from the dominant Anglo population of Fort William due to an unfamiliarity with the language and differences in “their cultural background, their customs and traditions; the way they dressed, what they ate, even their ‘funny’ slavic [sic] names.”⁴ Some members of the English population of Fort William have argued that “[r]eligious intolerance is not encouraged and the people are united in all endeavors to promote the development of the District.”⁵ However, they regarded it as a sign of success that Ukrainians were learning Canadian ways. W.W. Vickers, in reference to Ukrainians living in the east end, acknowledged that “[t]he children are rapidly becoming Canadianized under the teaching of the public schools and their aptitude in learning lessons enables them to educate their parents. The melting pot works overtime.”⁶

⁴ 75th Anniversary 1909-1984: *St. Mary's Ukrainian Orthodox Church (Domination of Holy Thetokos)*, (Lehto Printers: Thunder Bay, ON, 1984), no pagination

⁵ W.W. Vickers, “The Lakehead Cities of Thunder Bay (Fort William and Port Arthur),” *Thunder Bay Historical Society Papers and Records* (18th and 19th Annual Reports, 1926-27, 1927-28), p.104

⁶ *ibid.*, p.104-105