

11 Most Endangered Places in America Nomination

Sitka Indian Village

Sitka, Alaska

Additional comments on location of endangered place (if applicable)

The endangered place is described in an historic district nomination drafted by Sitka Tribe of Alaska: It includes twenty five contributing buildings, eight burial sites and one ceremonial site (object) all associated with the period of significance within an eleven-acre Indian Village townsite along the coast of the Pacific Ocean situated just north of downtown Sitka. The Village is oriented towards the waterfront. The buildings that are contributing elements include nine clan houses, twelve homes, one boat shop, one industrial building, the remains of a birthing house, and a 1960s reconstruction of a Russian blockhouse. Burial and ceremonial sites, are important elements of the district, as they exemplify the historic significance of Sitka Indian Village.

Tell us about the endangered place - what is its history?

The history of this Village has inspired multiple dissertations, articles, and books on the complicated and tumultuous relationships between the indigenous and the Russian/British/American colonists. For instance, this place is a historic battlefield, where the Tlingit people had intense and bloody encounters with the Russian-American Company. It was also a place where trade was conducted when Russians realized their own survival depended on it in first decades of their settlement. Tlingit built their current village adjacent to the Russian fort in Sitka in the 1820s, only to have it razed to the ground by the US Government in an attempt to "clean up" the neighborhood after the Alaskan Purchase of 1867. The original one-story Tlingit clan houses used round logs as structural posts and cedar plank siding, and were left to naturally age. These buildings and the cultural life they allowed were not appreciated by military administrators in Sitka. They were razed and replaced with stick-framed houses. Unfortunately, in the decades following the Alaska purchase, more than one Southeast Alaska village was either lost to military bombardment, through cultural misunderstandings, or burned to the ground under the guise of housing improvement. Not surprisingly, the Village includes the National Landmark ANB (Alaska Native Brotherhood) Founders Hall, built in 1914 to fight for Native civil rights. In the Sitka Indian Village, late nineteenth-century Native craftsmen trained at the local vocational school in the western stick framing tradition erected 1 ½ and 2 ½ story clan houses with milled lumber, single-glazed windows, and clapboard siding. In the early 20th century dozens of clan houses lined the Sitka Channel shoulder to shoulder. The facades facing the water and nearly all maintain the symmetry found in the original clan houses. These houses were clan property, maintained and occupied by large families related through

the matrilineal clan structure. Before the US Government criminalized the cultural practices of the Tlingit people, in 1904 an assembly of clans was convened in the Sitka Village, called the Last Potlatch. It is estimated that 800-1000 people assembled to celebrate their heritage and at.ooow (sacred/ceremonial items) before they were eventually lost, stolen, or sold into private or public collections. Over time, many of the clan houses have also been lost. Over generations, especially under occupation, clan ho in use locations have shifted, but the mid-19th century location where the Sitka Indian Village still sits represents a connection to living cultural history embodied in elders, language, and art.

Why is this place still important today - to you, your community, and/or your organization?

Jerrick Hope-Lang, who is leading the effort to reconstruct the Point House clan house in the Village explains how a place and a person's identity are intertwined in Tlingit culture and therefore how important this particular place is. "My English name is Jerrick Hope-Lang. My Tlingit name is Luteén (frog you can't see). I am from the Raven Moiety/Kiks.adi clan (Raven/frog) and am a matrilineal descendant of X'aakà Hit (Point House). My people have resided in present day Sitka, or Sheet'ka (on the outside of Shee [Baranof island]) since time immemorial. Most notably, our people fought the Russian occupation in the Battle of Sitka in 1804. Although historic preservation is a new field to me, land rights and cultural preservation are ingrained in my DNA. I write to you as the current steward of our recently repatriated land. Although our cultural training is a lifetime of learning, I present myself in the context of this introduction as hít s'aatí "house master." Please bear in mind, we traditionally only speak of our own when talking about cultural history, but the overall network and fabric of our village will require me to step outside my Native role to encompass my entire indigenous community. I do so with a passion to shed light on the rich and vibrant makeup of the people who call the Sitka Indian Village home. With a team of architects (indigenous), tribal citizens,,and volunteers, we are working toward building a 21st century clan house in the Sheet'ká Indian Village in Sitka, Alaska. Our work in the village inspired discussions of the Sitka Indian Village being a perfect addition to the National Trust for Historic Places' 11 Most Endangered Places List. Inclusion on this list will bring attention to this incredibly special neighborhood. In one short year, we have effectively repatriated the Point House property, begun outreach to show why the Sitka Indian Village is worth reviving, and have recently secured a partnership/fiscal sponsorship with the Indigenous-led non-profit organization Native Movement. We hope these conversations and this nomination will inspire local entities to recognize the Village as significant on a local, state, and federal level. Urgently, this concern for the Sitka Indian Village is not unique, and we hope to consult with adjacent communities with similarly endangered historical architecture."

Additional details about the endangered site's local historic designation, if applicable.

. The Sitka Indian Village Historic District feels like a distinct neighborhood, as it has since the Russian and US Territorial eras. . . The Sitka Indian Village displays the history of the community through its unique lot sizes and the Tlingit architectural styles which are distinct from the entire community of Sitka. The non contributing structures in the Village today detract slightly from the historical nature of the Village, but do not detract from the overall sense of the Village. Many of the historical buildings in the Village are in need of rehabilitation, and current efforts are underway to have the four significant examples of clan houses restored. This project will only enhance the integrity of the Sitka Indian Village Historic District.

If historic designation is underway, please share more details.

Years ago the Sitka Tribe of Alaska (STA) drafted a nomination to include the Village as an historic district in the National Register of Historic Places. We are currently in talks to pick up where the nomination was left off. STA has expressed interest in moving forward.

How is the place endangered? Please expand on your answer in the LOI. Have there been any changes to the situation since the LOI was submitted?

The Village has been at the center of cultural conflicts that have endangered its integrity.

Expanding commercial waterfront development also threatens the residential use of the land. Western society and religious influences on Tlingit culture have contributed to the degradation of the Sitka Indian Village as soon as it was built in the Western style at the turn of the 20th century. Tlingit society is structured around a greater family unit called a clan, with sub-clans living in communal clan houses. The clan houses transcend the physicality of the structure and are integrated into the people's identity. Missionaries pressed for abandoning communal living in favor of smaller nuclear family units. Because it was no longer technically legal to practice the culture (clan gatherings, dancing, language, song) and the Tlingit were pressured to assimilate into American society, these large clan houses built to fit generations of inhabitants became increasingly obsolete. Also, the buildings were passed down following patrilineal western property law, taking the clan houses out of the clan's control. These clan houses had been not only the living quarters of the same clan family, but the formal gathering place of the clan, a purpose they continued to serve – sometimes clandestinely – even as multigenerational families no longer occupied the structures. Because the clans no longer “owned” their clan houses, however, costly repairs have fallen to property owners unwilling or unable to make the necessary repairs to the structures, in many cases leaving them unfit to serve as viable cultural centers. Many

clan houses have fallen into non-native ownership. Many have been lost to development. However, the current Sitka Indian Village has not been burned by the local or federal government, making it one of the most intact historic Southeast Alaska Native villages in existence. While imminently threatened, the Village is uniquely situated to provide a model for place-based cultural revitalization.

How can the endangered place be saved?

Broadly speaking, the Village could be revitalized if the effects of Western practices were confronted and decolonized, likely through public education, tourism, and historic preservation efforts. The village landscape and indigenous architecture are under imminent threat of being lost; however, the Tlingit living in Alaska today maintain the living culture of their ancestors. The process of cultural transmission is dedicated to and enabled by elders with intimate knowledge of our traditions, but elders are aging. In other words, we are talking about losing not just historical architecture, but the living historical knowledge that goes with these structures. The City and Borough of Sitka and other local non-profit groups have focused their preservation efforts in different directions, primarily toward Russian /English /American history. Without resources and education on the importance of preservation in the Village, the historic neighborhood could be lost. If the NTHP deems the Village worthy of nomination, it may attract donors, public involvement, and the attention of the local city/tribal government. This may also draw attention to the other Alaskan Native villages that are in need of preservation efforts. It is our deepest wish that the historic built fabric of the village is saved--there are several 1 ½ and 2 ½ story clan houses still standing that are in desperate need of historic preservation efforts. The architecture of the Tlingit people is underrepresented in past historic preservation efforts, both on a local and state level. A nomination will help us draw attention to our efforts to revitalize existing structures, and making them functional would go a long way toward revitalizing resilient indigenous cultures embedded in these structures. Although we wish to preserve the past, we also look towards the future and rebuilding as well.

With a nomination, local governments could work together to save this cultural resource. The City of Sitka or the Sitka Tribe could submit a nomination to the National Register of Historic Places, opening up funding opportunities in the way of grants and tax credits. With the increasing amount of tourism via cruise ships, a corporate donor may join preservation efforts. A façade improvement sub-grant program could help private property owners to maintain their historic built fabric. A long-term goal is to see the properties not presently representing their clan houses be returned to the appropriate clans or greater Sitka Tribe so new clan houses can be built. In Tlingit society, the land on which a building is built holds the name of the house, not the building itself. If we could start rebuilding clan houses as places for gathering, storing the sacred clan objects, providing caretaker quarters for the house master, and overflow housing for clan events, we could strengthen the village's cultural fabric. A designation like this would mark a step toward broader decolonization, opening important

conversations about Western structures of land ownership, historical exclusion, and trauma. Indeed, Western historians have been slow to recognize the importance of this indigenous architecture and of the centrality of place to Tlingit culture, art, and governance. Put simply, the urgency of this nomination is a function of aging populations, that is, those who have living knowledge of how these cultural spaces function are over 80 years old, we need to preserve/restore the physical structures to ensure we don't lose knowledge. Revitalizing a place with a historical nomination will represent a landmark step in an ongoing and urgent process of cultural revitalization. We hope the Sitka Village makes the 11 Most Endangered List, it is one of the most intact Tlingit villages remaining in the Southeast Alaskan Panhandle, and this endangered neighborhood deserves the spotlight.

Have there been other steps taken to try to save the endangered place?

The Sitka Tribe has been interested in saving this endangered place for decades, but the issues tied to funding have been problematic. The short answer is, The Sitka Tribe began the process to put the Village on the National Register of Historic Places. The Baranof Island Housing Authority has also tried saving some of these clan houses. Unfortunately, their resources for building projects are typically tied to need-based grants, and either these clan houses have been purchased by non-indigenous people to use as residences or there are many inappropriate people on the deed, unable to come together in agreement. Who is responsible for funding the renovations? The greater clan, who is composed of dozens of individuals from different family units with different availability of private funding? The BIHA, who can help with HUD grants available to need based projects? If a HUD grant were to be applied to a clan house, the incomes of numerous peoples would be taken into account, disqualifying the project. To answer this question fully, we need to address the inherent difficulties with working on a site in the Sitka Indian Village because of the multiple deed holders on the property. When the current clan houses were built, the concept of a person or a clan owning a property didn't fit into thousands of years of tradition, the clan houses were originally large volumes of space built to house multi-generational living. The oldest male in the family was typically named house master, and responsible for the clan house, but western law (which didn't even allow Natives to have title to the land they lived on until the early 20th century) changed the dynamics of the clan house ownership immediately, without a hierarchy to the peoples on the deed. When the clans adhered to western property law, there was a switch from the Tlingit tradition of clan identity through the matrilineal line to the western tradition of property inheritance through the patrilineal line. After only a few generations, the Western property law put clan houses partially or completely out of clan hands, and into the names of children of the fathers on the deed.

To assume that a person given control over an asset that didn't belong to that clan will turn it over to the rightful clan is also flawed, because the Tlingit ways of multi-generational living, practicing their customs and speaking their language were all outlawed. The United States government repressed the culture in the attempt to absorb

the Tlingit peoples into a hostile neighboring country through a campaign of assimilation. The people thought these houses could not be used as clan houses again. The Alaskan Native people were not removed into reservations as the Indigenous of the lower 48, often they built their modern villages in close proximity to the colonizing settlements to benefit from commerce and trade and they continue to live in the same communities with the descendants of settlers. Their children were sent to Mission schools, often educated up to an 8th grade education, and told the old ways were to be left in the past. Thousands of years of tradition were criminalized. Unless they took jobs in white businesses, they were cut out of the booming economy primarily surrounding resource extraction. To assume all indigenous people have the same goals is inherently flawed as well, many decided assimilation was key to their survival, and told their children to forget the old ways. It is only in the last few decades that the criminalization of Tlingit culture dissipated, so it is only now we can talk about saving this endangered place.

Who is leading the effort to save this place?

There are many different entities interested in saving this place, including the Sitka Tribe, the City and Borough of Sitka, and the clans represented in the Sitka including the Kiks.adi, Luk.nax.adi, Kaagwaantaan, Kookhittan, Chookaneidi, Koosk'eidi, Wooshkeetaan, X'as'ahittan, T'akdeintaan and X'at'ka.aayi. Recently, attention to the village conditions and the importance of clan houses has been led by Jerrick Hope-Lang of the Kiks.adi, who hopes to rebuild a clan house after the land was returned into his clan's hands. We have started talks with the Sitka Tribe on continuing the nomination process for the Village to the National Register of Historic Places. We have received a letter of support from the City and Borough of Sitka's Historic Preservation Commission. While facing a vacuum of federal, state and local resources being put into saving this place, Mr. Hope-Lang has taken the initiative to start a non-profit dedicated toward the preservation of existing built fabric and reconstruction of the traditional clan house in the Sitka Indian Village, called the Katlian Collective.

If this place is selected for the 11 Most Endangered list, how would the endangered designation be promoted?

Through social media, newsletters, newspaper articles, and radio interviews. We would approach Senator Lisa Murkowski to promote it on her social media. We would contact our state SHPO office to include it in their newsletters, and the local/state Historic Preservation groups. As for the local/regional/state/national press- the Daily Sitka Sentinel, KTOO, Juneau Empire, Alaska Public Media and Indian Country Today. Also, local radio stations KCAW, KTOO and KINY in Sitka and Juneau.

Who are the decision-makers -- people, groups, politicians, or others who have the most influence over whether this place is saved?

Clan houses used to be the decision makers. As described by Dr. Rosita Worl “The clan house is the center of traditional Lingit identity. A Lingit is born into a clan house and our body goes to the clan house for the final-time when we leave this world. A clan house is the place for ceremony, it is where the authority for decision-making derives, it is the foundation of Lingit government. The clan house is utilized in child rearing and the teaching of clan history and tradition. It holds the songs and the crests of the clan. It is the house of respect for the opposite moiety. The clan house is a community gathering place and a shelter for those who are traveling or in need. In the words of a Point House member “it is integral to every part of traditional Lingit life”. (Dr, Rosita Worl- Principles of Tlingit Property Law and case studies of cultural objects. Juneau: National Park Service, 1994)

Point House Revitalization Project has its own advisory board, endowed by Native Movement, an indigenous-run 501c3. We are starting our own non-profit centered around indigenous property management with the goal of establishing collectively owned lands in “perpetuity”. As we develop our bylaws and develop the mechanism to create our own non-profit, we recognize the need for balance. Our board consists of members from both moieties (Raven and Eagle), which looks at decolonizing the western systems of land ownership and property management. We hope by addressing some of the problems of Western Land Law, we can offer mediation and advice to people who are seeking guidance for historic Native properties for the future. We realize in order for some immediate change, we need to learn to navigate western systems and merge Tlingit ideology of collective ownership into new formats. We have met with Senator Lisa Murkowski, have partnered with University of Alaska, and have support from Tribal Governments in both Juneau and Sitka. Our project is meant to instill pride in those in the neighborhood by demonstrating the great value their homes and stories have, and to create a framework to pass them on to the next generation. In doing so, we hope to influence our state and its politicians of the importance of Indigenous placemaking. We also hope that by placing value on these sacred spaces, our State Historic Preservation Office will take a more indepth look at their preservation systems, and how they don’t meet indigenous people where they are, and have never met them before. Alaska’s history is rooted in Native culture and their spaces, since time immemorial.

Is there a timeline for decisions to be made about the future of the endangered place? Please explain the urgency of the threat and list any key dates.

As mentioned before, timing for this project couldn’t be more crucial. In 2021, one of the contributing clan houses (DaGinaa Hit) collapsed. A birthing house directly across the street has partially collapsed. From a historic preservation perspective, this is a tragedy. Other wood framed clan houses need immediate attention to remediate water penetration, and protect the historic fabric. We must also address the issue of our aging population. In a community centered around elder culture and

transference of knowledge, our culture bearers are leaving us at alarming rates. A lack of active clan houses prevents that transference of knowledge. Even funerary customs have been affected as deceased clan members can no longer lay in state in clan houses following Tlingit protocol. In short, timing is crucial. This project needs to be addressed this year. With this revival of spaces, comes the revival of culture. We aren't simply saving houses, we are saving cultural practices. The revival of spaces is the revitalization of the culture.

Are there any groups, individuals, or organizations who oppose saving this place? Why do they oppose it?

At this time, we have not come across any groups, individuals or organizations who oppose saving this place. The importance of indigenous architecture should be highlighted in Sitka and this leads to difficult conversations. An enormous amount of time, money and resources have been put into the preservation of architecture built by colonizing entities for the subjugation and assimilation of the Tlingit people, from the Russian Bishop's house to the Sheldon Jackson School. We hope that groups and individuals will see this disparity and understand that systemic racism and the community's lack of interest has led to this nomination in the first place.

Is there any ongoing legal action around the threat (that you are aware of), or do you think future legal action is likely?

We are unaware of any ongoing legal action around the threat.

Who owns the endangered place?

As discussed earlier, many properties in the village have complex titles. Collectively, Tlingit people whose clans had homes are in this region. In our instance for the Point House Jerrick Hope-Lang is the caretaker of the land. Most owners, if not all, have agreed that an endangered place listing is best for the homes and are willing to participate.

How do the property owner(s) feel about their site being nominated for the endangered list?

With the lack of information about historic preservation, especially when it pertains to the indigenous community, many initial responses are centered around misinformation. A common misconception is that once there is historic designation, you can't fix or modify your building without paying historic architects to make repairs for your building, or that it can't ever be changed. With public outreach, coaching, one-on-one consultation, I have been able to advise the homeowners of the benefits of National Trust's designation, and that community input will be taken if a nomination to register the neighborhood with the NPS is made. We have met with the local tribal government about a nomination, and have garnered support from community members whose

homes would be represented in the nomination. We have support from Sitka's Historic Preservation Commission as well. With the National Trust's nomination, we could work with the tribe to complete the NHD nomination for the Sitka Indian Village. The owner of one of the oldest contributing buildings in the Village has been open to the designation and in the past has accepted help in repairing the house.

Besides the property owner(s), who are the other key stakeholders for this property?

At a local level, STA, BIHA, The City and Borough of Sitka, UAS Southeast, Tlingit and Haida Central Council, and the Katlian Collective. At a global level, the entire Tlingit population care about this place. There are few Tlingit villages that have survived bombardment, western inheritance conundrums, systemic racism, land grabs by white citizens, destruction of historic fabric by neighboring businesses interested in the waterfront property, and economic woes.

Websites:

<https://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2015/feb/1/sitka-clan-house-gets-family-repairs/>,

<https://www.kcaw.org/2021/09/05/street-closed-after-historic-clan-house-slumps-threatens-to-slide-into-roadway/>,

<https://www.ktoo.org/2021/09/08/collapsing-sitka-clan-house-culture-history/>,

<https://www.nativeamericacalling.com/friday-september-23-2022-saving-the-tingit-clan-houses/>,

<https://www.ktoo.org/2022/08/31/return-to-point-house-land-in-sitka-key-to-revitalizing-tingit-clan-culture/>, <https://www.kcaw.org/2022/08/31/196502/>