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Lost Palaces of St. Petersburg

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Introduction

St. Petersburg, the glittering vision of Peter the Great, has long stood as a city of paradoxes—a place where imperial ambition, artistic brilliance, and turbulent history intersect on the banks of the Neva. Founded in 1703 as a defiant statement against Russia's medieval traditions, this northern capital quickly became synonymous with grandeur: its golden spires, sweeping avenues, and palatial embankments writing a bold new chapter in the story of Russia. Yet beneath the city's celebrated vistas lies an even more evocative tale—the story of its lost palaces, the hidden and vanished homes of emperors and nobles whose lives once animated these now-shadowed halls.

It is easy, gazing upon the shimmering facades of the restored Winter Palace or the exuberance of Peterhof's fountains, to forget that St. Petersburg is also a city of memories and absences. For every preserved or painstakingly rebuilt monument, there stood others—often just as magnificent—that have disappeared with barely a trace. Some were swept away by the tides of revolution, their treasures looted or dispersed to the winds. Others fell victim to the devastations of war, razed by bombs or dynamited out of spite. Many more eroded quietly into obscurity, their walls hidden behind utilitarian facades or swallowed by new construction, their names erased from common memory.

This book invites you to wander the invisible and the forgotten. Here, you will journey from the ambitions of Peter the Great's first wooden residence to the awe-inspiring Baroque palaces of Empress Elizabeth, from the riotous splendor of 18th-century ballrooms to the somber hush of ruined halls scarred by revolution and siege. Drawing upon rare archival images, forgotten memoirs, and the firsthand insights of scholars and local guides, we will raise the curtain on a world where history and myth tangle: where secret passages still run beneath city blocks, where the memory of the Amber Room haunts collectors and curators, and where faded murals hide beneath layers of Soviet paint.

In these pages, architectural plans and travelers' accounts are set beside chilling wartime testimonies, tales of everyday resilience, and the whispered gossip of salon society. You will meet preservationists who chase after crumbling cornices and explorers who sneak behind locked doors to document the last traces of noble life. More than a chronicle of vanished buildings, this book aspires to uncover the very spirit of St. Petersburg—a restless spirit, shaped by the interplay of splendor and destruction, reverence and forgetting.

For those who walk the city today, much can still be found—if one knows where to look. Some former palaces have swapped crystal chandeliers for chalkboards, echoing

now with the chatter of students. Others stand as silent witnesses in overgrown courtyards, their façades hidden but their stories persistent. In the final chapters, you will discover how these shadows of the past still shape the living city, providing adventurers and dreamers with pathways to connection and rediscovery.

Lost Palaces of St. Petersburg is for lovers of forgotten places, for seekers of mystery and meaning, for those who believe that to preserve a building is also to rescue a memory from oblivion. Through unraveling its lost grandeur and secret histories, may we find new reasons to cherish—and fight for—the soul of Russia's imperial city.

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CHAPTER ONE: The Vision of Peter: Founding a City of Palaces

In the early years of the 18th century, Tsar Peter I, later known as Peter the Great, harbored a grand ambition: to forge a new capital for Russia, one that would fling open a "window to Europe" and propel his empire into the modern age. This was no small undertaking, given Russia's deeply ingrained traditions and its historical focus on Moscow. But Peter was a man of relentless will, a monarch who believed in the power of direct action and audacious vision. His new city, St. Petersburg, was to be a defiant architectural statement, a testament to his determination to modernize Russia and embrace European culture.

The chosen site for this nascent metropolis was a swampy, inhospitable delta at the mouth of the Neva River, leading into the Gulf of Finland. In May 1703, Peter himself laid the foundation stone for the Peter and Paul Fortress on Zayachy (Hare) Island, a strategic move that secured the recently conquered Ingrian land from Sweden during the Great Northern War. This fortress, initially also named Sankt-Piter-burkh, became the nascent city's first building, a foundational brick and stone structure in an otherwise desolate landscape.

Peter's initial dwelling in this nascent city was far from palatial. Just days after the city's founding, a small wooden cabin, measuring a mere 60 square meters, was constructed for the Tsar by soldiers of the Semyonovsky Regiment. This humble abode, combining elements of traditional Russian *izba* and Peter's favored Dutch Baroque, served as his residence between 1703 and 1708. Though modest, the cabin's wooden walls were painted with red oil to imitate brickwork, a symbolic gesture reflecting Peter's desire for a city built of stone, much like those he admired in Europe. This small structure, known as the Cabin of Peter the Great, still stands today, preserved within a protective brick pavilion.

The early days of St. Petersburg were characterized by immense hardship and relentless labor. Thousands of state and royal serfs were conscripted from across Russia and compelled to work on the ambitious project. They toiled under harsh conditions, many succumbing to disease and exposure in the unforgiving marshland. It's often said that St. Petersburg was built as much upon the bones of these serfs as upon stone, a grim testament to the human cost of Peter's vision.

To ensure a rapid pace of construction and to funnel skilled labor to his new capital, Peter issued a decree in 1714 banning stone construction anywhere else in Russia except St. Petersburg. This audacious mandate effectively forced stonemasons and

bricklayers to relocate to the new capital, ensuring a steady supply of expertise for the grand building projects Peter envisioned. This ban remained in effect until 1741, long after Peter's death.

One of the earliest and most significant palaces to rise from the marshy ground was Peter the Great's Summer Palace. Planned in 1710 and completed between 1710 and 1714, this two-story stone building, designed by the Swiss-Italian architect Domenico Trezzini, stood in the northeast corner of the Summer Garden. Compared to later imperial residences, it was a modest structure, reminiscent of Dutch burgher houses, reflecting Peter's preference for functional elegance over excessive opulence. The palace was adorned with bas-reliefs by German sculptor Andreas Schlüter, depicting scenes from ancient myths and Russia's victories in the Great Northern War, underscoring Russia's emerging maritime power. Peter and his second wife, Catherine I, resided in the palace during the summer months, entertaining foreign guests. The Summer Palace was notably one of the first buildings in St. Petersburg to have piped water and a water-centric sewage system.

Further afield, Peter the Great also began to develop imperial estates outside the immediate city center, most notably Peterhof. Conceived as a direct rival to Louis XIV's Palace of Versailles, Peterhof was envisioned as a grand complex of palaces and gardens. Construction at Peterhof began in 1714, with the Monplaisir Palace, based on Peter's own sketches, being one of the first structures. This seaside palace, where Peter could observe Kronstadt Island and St. Petersburg, housed hundreds of paintings he brought from Europe. While the Grand Palace at Peterhof was officially opened in 1723, its full grandeur would only be realized through later expansions by subsequent rulers.

Meanwhile, within St. Petersburg itself, other significant residences began to emerge. The first stone palace in the city, still preserved, was completed in 1714 for Prince Aleksandr Danilovich Menshikov, the city's first governor. The Menshikov Palace on Vasilyevsky Island was a grand residence that saw the involvement of numerous Western European architects and craftsmen, including Trezzini. Peter the Great reportedly established his court and received foreign diplomats at Menshikov's opulent residence, setting a high standard for aristocratic living in the new capital.

The Winter Palace, the most iconic of St. Petersburg's palaces, also had humble beginnings. The first royal residence on its site was a log cabin built in 1704. This was replaced by a larger stone house, known as the First Winter Palace, designed by Domenico Trezzini and completed between 1711 and 1712. This early structure was more a practical residence than the lavish imperial home it would later become. Over the next 150 years, the Winter Palace would be continuously revised and expanded, eventually becoming the magnificent green-and-white edifice designed by Bartolomeo Rastrelli, which we recognize today.

The vision of Peter the Great was not merely about constructing buildings; it was about laying the foundation for a new way of life. He compelled noble families, often reluctantly, to move to the new capital from Moscow. He also introduced social reforms, such as requiring noblewomen to appear at social functions and hold salons in the French style, a stark contrast to the traditional seclusion of women in the *terem*. This push for Westernization, manifested in bricks, stone, and social etiquette, fundamentally reshaped Russian society.

As the city grew, the characteristic architectural style of Petrine St. Petersburg, later known as Petrine Baroque, began to solidify. This style, influenced by Flemish Renaissance architecture, combined functionality with a burgeoning sense of grandeur. Examples like the Summer Palace of Peter the Great, the Menshikov Palace, and even the Kunstkamera, the first museum in Russia, showcased this distinct architectural identity. These early palaces, though often modest by later standards, were crucial in defining the urban fabric and the palatial legacy of St. Petersburg.

The early 18th century saw the slow but steady transformation of a swamp into a city, driven by the iron will of Peter the Great. While many of the grander palaces would emerge in later reigns, the groundwork for St. Petersburg's future as a city of imperial splendor was laid during these foundational years. The first residences, whether Peter's humble cabin or the more substantial stone homes of his trusted associates, were more than just buildings; they were symbols of a new era, markers in the sand of Russia's dramatic shift towards the West.

Even as early as 1712, St. Petersburg had developed sufficiently for Peter to confidently declare it his new imperial capital, a decision that cemented its future and relegated Moscow to a secondary role. The transfer of the royal family and government offices from Moscow underscored the definitive nature of this shift. The stage was set for an architectural flourishing, a period where the ambitions of the Romanovs would be etched in stone and gilded with gold, creating a city that would one day rival the great capitals of Europe.

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