

Alaska's Heritage

CHAPTER 4-1: AMERICANS COME TO ALASKA

Americans continue period of great change

Great change for Alaska, begun with the arrival of Russians in the eighteenth century, continued with the arrival of Americans in the nineteenth century. A number of Americans flocked to Alaska and particularly to Sitka before and after the October 1867 transfer ceremonies. According to one source, more than 30 ships sailed from San Francisco to Alaska in July of 1867. Those aboard were eager to share in the supposed riches of Alaska. By November of 1867, there were about 115 American civilians in Sitka willing to sign a city government charter. Only a few Americans went to other places in Alaska such as Wrangell, Kodiak, Kenai, and the Yukon River valley, although interest in taking fish, fur-bearing mammals, and whales in Alaskan waters remained high. One historian has concluded that, in the years immediately after the 1867 transfer ceremonies, "Sitka was for all practical purposes the American frontier in Alaska."

Alaska purchase is part of general westward expansion

The United States purchase of Alaska was the final step in the country's steady expansion across the North American continent. In 1803, less than 15 years after George Washington became the first President of the United States, the new country bought 827,192 square miles of additional territory from France. Known as the Louisiana Purchase, the addition included lands from the Gulf of Mexico to what is now the northwestern United States.

In 1818, the United States agreed upon the 49th parallel as its boundary with Canada. In 1819, the United States bought Florida from Spain. In 1842, the U.S.-Canadian border was amended in a treaty. In 1848, the U.S.-Mexican war ended with the United States taking land that became the states of Texas, New Mexico, California, Utah, Nevada, Arizona, and parts of Colorado and Wyoming from Mexico. In 1854, the U.S. purchased additional southern territories in today's Arizona and New Mexico. As a result, by the time the United States purchased Russian interests in Alaska, the geographic area including what are known as the "Lower 48" states had come under United States control.

Americans come to Alaska for four reasons

The annexation of Alaska took the United States flag beyond those boundaries for the first time. Newspapers of the time gave four reasons why the United States bought Alaska. These were: (1) to maintain Russia's friendship (England's government had been sympathetic to the Confederacy during the recent American Civil War, France had sent troops and set up a dictator in Mexico during the same war, and Russia was a potential ally against either country); (2) to facilitate acquisition of British Columbia; (3) to derive economic benefit from Alaska's resources; and (4) to move closer to the markets of Asia.

Individual Americans, however, appear to have come to Alaska right after the 1867 purchase for three more personal reasons. Some came because the government sent them. Soldiers, sailors, and other government officials fell into this category. Some came because they wanted to earn livelihoods in trade and commerce. Merchants, traders, and smugglers fell into this category. Some came because they wanted to earn livelihoods exploiting Alaska's natural resources. Catchers and salters of fish, fur hunters, prospectors, and miners fell into this category.

The government sends soldiers, sailors, and officials

Most of the new territories acquired by the United States west of the Mississippi River had been occupied by Indian tribes. The tribes either were, or became, hostile to non-Natives. There were often good reasons for this. Because this hostility often resulted in outbreaks of violence the government classified most of the new territories as "Indian country." It turned them over to the United States Army to administer. In Alaska this was not necessary, but the government did what it was used to doing. It sent the army to take charge of Alaska.

Army officials presided over the October 18, 1867 transfer ceremonies at Sitka. Then the army sent troops to Sitka, Wrangell, Tongass Island, Kenai, Kodiak, and the Pribilof Islands. The posts on the Pribilof Islands and at Kenai, Kodiak, and Tongass Island were soon abandoned. It was not long until the troops also left Wrangell. By 1870, the only army garrison left in Alaska was at Sitka. In that year the army abolished its Military District of Alaska and placed the Sitka soldiers under the Military Department of Oregon. It had cost the army \$330,000 more annually to maintain its troops in Alaska than elsewhere. The army anticipated saving \$90,000 per year when it closed all of its Alaskan posts except the one at Sitka.

Kodiak, one of the settlements to which army troops went, was much smaller than Sitka. When troops arrived there in the spring of 1868 they found three Russians, one American, and about 390 Creoles living in 57 buildings. The American was probably Frederick Sargeant, sent to Alaska by Hutchinson, Kohl & Company to inventory, audit, and begin business with goods bought from the Russian-American Company. The troops built barracks and roads that first summer. With the 114 troops came Frederick Bischoff, a scientist employed by the Smithsonian Institution to collect natural history items. Ships from San Francisco began to arrive at Kodiak every two to three weeks, bringing with them mail and fresh fruit and vegetables. Little happened at Fort Kodiak. The post commander ordered civilians living nearby to clean up the filth in front of their houses. He also ordered them to keep their pigs out of the fort on pain of death (for the pigs. A widow's two pigs were shot before the order was countermanded. Kodiak's brief boom declined as troops were sent to Fort Kenai and to the Pribilof Islands. It collapsed completely in 1870 when Fort Kodiak was abandoned.

Wrangell, once the location for a Russian redoubt and then for a Hudson's Bay Company fort, was no more populous than Kodiak at the beginning of Alaska's American era. On November 1, 1867, the United States Revenue Cutter Lincoln called there and found only two non-Natives guarding 500 miles of wire left from the abandoned Western Union Telegraph Expedition. Later that year, a United States customs officer was stationed there. Then, in 1868, U.S. Army troops arrived to begin building Fort Wrangell. Between 1868 and 1870, a stockaded post including a hospital, officers' quarters, barracks, and guardhouse was built at a cost of \$26,000. In 1870 the army abandoned Fort Wrangell, and in 1871 sold the \$26,000 complex to local trader William King Lear for about \$500. Three years later the army reopened Fort Wrangell, after gold was discovered in the Cassiar district, and kept troops at Wrangell until 1877.

Customs and revenue cutter service officials accompany army to Alaska

Although the United States Army was charged with administering Alaska during its early years, other departments of government also sent officials there. The Treasury Department sent customs collectors and revenue marine service (Coast Guard) vessels, officers, and crews to collect taxes and enforce laws against smuggling. The Navy Department sent warships, officers, and crews to support the army.

Even before the October 1867 transfer ceremonies, the Treasury Department appointed William Sumner Dodge as Special Treasury Agent and sent him to Alaska. Also in the summer of 1867, the revenue cutter Lincoln arrived at Sitka carrying a United States Coast Survey party headed by scientist George Davidson. The Lincoln then visited Kodiak and Unalaska. Its investigators produced over 300 pages of notes and reports. These were later used to support the argument favoring the appropriation of money for the Alaska purchase, then being considered by Congress. After passage of the July 1868 act that established Alaska as a customs district, the President appointed Hiram Ketchum, Jr., as first collector of customs for Alaska. Deputy collectors were sent to Tongass Island, Wrangell, Kodiak, and Unalaska. Revenue cutters also sailed in Alaskan waters in 1868 and 1869, mainly in Southeast and Southwest Alaska. Then in 1880, the Secretary of the Treasury directed annual patrols of Alaskan waters. The first ship to carry out such a voyage, the Thomas Corwin, began a 143-day cruise that took it into the Bering Sea in the summer of 1880.

Navy ships support the army, survey Alaskan waters

At the time of the Alaska purchase, the United States Navy's fleet was divided into two squadrons. One sailed in the Atlantic Ocean and one sailed in the Pacific Ocean. The Pacific squadron's purpose was to protect American interests in Pacific waters. These interests included trade along the isthmus of Panama, whaling and fishing fleets in the North Pacific, and the new District of Alaska. A navy ship, the U.S.S. Ossipee, had carried United States officials to the 1867 transfer ceremonies. Two other navy ships, the U.S.S. Resaca and the Jamestown, had also been there. Also in 1867, the Secretary of the Navy stated his intention to send one or more ships to Alaska to collect information on "its harbors, productions, fisheries, timber, and other resources."

After the transfer ceremonies in 1867, the Resaca and the Jamestown remained at Sitka for several months. The Resaca left for San Francisco in January 1868, carrying Princess Maksutov, wife of the last governor of Russian America. The Jamestown stayed at Sitka for nine months, leaving at the end of May 1868. In April 1868, the U.S.S. Saginaw arrived in Alaska and spent several months surveying Southeast Alaska waters. During its 1868 Alaska cruise, the Saginaw took General Jefferson C. Davis, commander of the army's Military District of Alaska, to visit Prince of Wales Island, Fort Wrangell, and Fort Tongass. Davis, whose troops were isolated in their garrisons without water transport, had asked within six months of taking command for an armed steamer. Davis repeated this request in his annual reports for 1868 and 1869. In 1869, the Saginaw returned to Alaska and the U.S.S. Mohican carried an astronomical surveying party through

Bering Strait into the arctic. In December 1869, the U.S.S. Cyane arrived at Sitka after being specially fitted out for Alaskan service. Also in 1869, the navy published a chart of Alaskan waters based on surveys made in previous years.

The soldiers, sailors, and officials often equaled in number or outnumbered the newly-arrived Americans whom they had been sent to serve. Although they often clashed with both Native and nonNative civilians, they provided much, of the stimulus for Alaska's young economy. It was from this economy that most of the new American civilians in Alaska hoped to make their fortunes.

Merchants, miners, smugglers, and traders investigate Alaska

The rise and decline of American military interest in Alaska paralleled a rise and decline of American civilian interest in Alaska.

American frontier towns of the nineteenth century were usually small and served as supply points for outlying farms, ranches, and mines. Some prophets had grand visions for Alaska as "The New England of the Pacific" due to its favorable geographic position for trade with Asia. Most of the Yankees who actually went to Alaska anticipated Sitka's development as a typical American frontier town. They saw a community that would thrive from commerce, mining, and its role as capital city of Alaska.

Sitka did thrive immediately after the purchase. A dozen firms competed to empty Sitka's warehouses of goods stockpiled by the Russian-American Company. Ship after ship sailed for San Francisco laden with cargoes. A typical one carried 22,000 yards of cloth, 1,576 pairs of trousers, 2,522 sheepskin coats, 115 tea kettles, 117 copper kettles, 55 iron pots, 965 pounds of isinglass, 506 pounds of acid, and 764 pounds of copper wire. Other goods sent from Sitka to San Francisco included tons of sheet copper, barrels of copper spikes, sheet lead, iron in various forms, 696 old whipsaws, brass cannon, tools, grindstones, liquor, and exotic items such as pomade, leather-bound books, and silks. Vessel traffic at Sitka paid \$21,000 in customs duties between 1867 and 1869, but duties dropped to less than \$500 in 1870. Between October 1867 and August 1869, 71 ships arrived at Sitka from San Francisco, Victoria, and Hawaiian, Asian, and Russian ports to carry off accumulated Russian-American Company stores and equipment.

It took over a year to empty Sitka of Russian goods. During those months jobs were plentiful. Sitka merchants are estimated to have done about \$70,000 worth of business during the initial economic boom. At the end of that time, however, a slump occurred. Most of the Russians left. Some of the Russians returned to their homeland, but others migrated to California or British Columbia. They took with them the cash Americans had paid for their goods. Many Americans also left at the end of 1868 or in early 1869. A visitor to Sitka in May of 1868 reported about 50 American settlers, 250 American soldiers, and about 800 Creoles and Russians. In the years immediately following the transfer ceremonies, the nonNative population of Sitka declined from a peak of about nearly 1,000 to less than 400. Sitka's Native population, uncouned in 1888, was estimated to be 1,250 in 1870.

Sitka declines

An army officer who took a census of Sitka in 1870 believed that many people thought that "there might be something in it (Alaska), came, looked, and went away." His census showed a nearly 50 percent decrease in the number of nonNatives in Sitka since 1868. This disappointment with Alaska coincided with economic setbacks at San Francisco, chief entrepot for Alaska. An economic depression also occurred throughout the rest of the United States at this time. The decline at San Francisco particularly affected Alaska. Most companies in Alaska did business with San Francisco firms. Many firms closed remote outlets or pulled back representatives, some in Alaska.

In 1870, Sitka had several stores, butcher shops, a barber shop, a bakery, a sawmill, two breweries, and a number of saloons. An observer wrote in 1869: "Sitka is the dirtiest collection of log-huts on the Pacific slope." He reported that, looking from the harbor, one saw on the right buildings formerly belonging to the Russian American Company, beyond them residences, and finally the church and hospital. On the left was the Indian village of about 60 houses, past them an Indian graveyard. A stockade separated the Native and nonNative settlements. The Sitka Natives were never allowed into the American settlement after nightfall. The stockade was constantly guarded by army sentries and a battery of cannon was kept pointed toward the Indian village. There was only one road worthy of the name in town. Called Broadway, it petered out along the beach.

The fur trade was active, but declining. In 1868, the fur trade had produced about \$70,000. By 1870, it produced only about \$20,000. A typical fur-trading

vessel, the schooner Sweepstakes, left Sitka in August 1868 with trade goods consisting of molasses, clothing, salt, sugar, bread, and cloth. After two months of trading along Lynn Canal and Chatham Strait, the schooner returned with sable, mink, bear, wolverine, beaver, fox, wildcat, seal, and rabbit furs. Oil and 2,500 pounds of codfish was also taken. Some 28 fur-trading vessels sailed between San Francisco and Sitka in 1870. Although boosters had hoped that their town would become the center of an Alaska-wide fur trade, Sitka's fur profits came from coastal trade. Sitka was not on the route of the expanding fur trade between western Alaska and San Francisco.

Supplying the relatively large Native population with goods, fishing, and shipping were the other economic activities in Sitka. In 1868, Sitka traders sold or traded about \$50,000 worth of goods to their Native neighbors. A red salmon saltery that operated outside Sitka employed 12 seasonal workers, and each year produced between 1,000 to 1,500 barrels of salted salmon. Another saltery, on an island just offshore from Sitka, operated occasionally. Salted halibut was sometimes shipped south, too. Shipping, with its attendant employment of ships' officers, crews, and dockside workers was also an early boom industry at Sitka. Many vessels listing Sitka as their homeport were simply transferred from Russian registration. In July of 1868, the small harbor was home to four steamships and ten sailing vessels with an aggregate of 2,220 tons. No statistics have been found for 1870, but a few years after that, shipping tonnage registered at Sitka had declined to less than 200 tons.

A pattern is established for American occupation in Alaska

There were also Americans in other parts of Alaska. Whalers had continued their voyages into arctic waters even after the disastrous season of 1867. The Pribilof Islands were awash with killers of fur seals. Yankee traders began, in 1869, to set up business in posts along the Yukon River. These events are covered in more detail in later chapters, but on the whole, most Americans who came to Alaska went to Sitka. Of those, many became discouraged and departed by the end of 1870. By that time a pattern of American occupation in Alaska had been established. It consisted of a scattering of permanent government outposts such as forts and customs stations supported by navy and treasury department vessels, a small year-round civilian population, and annual visits by people in natural resource industries.

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