

Russia's Alaska Colony

More Russian Exploration in Alaska

The "discovery" of Alaska is usually dated from Bering's second expedition in 1741.

This is appropriate. The Alaska Native people at that time did not know the shape of North America or its relation to other continents. They did not have vessels capable of sailing great distances over the world's oceans and back to Alaska. In June 1741 Bering and his second-in-command, Aleksi Chirikov sailed in two ships from Kamchatka for North America. In mid July Chirikov sighted land southeast Alaska. Chirikov sent a boat ashore with a crew of eleven men to get fresh water and to look around. They did not come back. Six days later he sent a second boat with a crew of four to see what had happened to the first boat. This boat also vanished. A day later however, two boats paddled by Native people came out from where the Russian boats had gone. The Alaskans would not come very close to the St. Paul, and after shouting a message, they paddled back to where they had come from. No record exists of the fate of the Russian sailors who disappeared. Disappointed, Chirikov sailed back to Kamchatka.

In the meantime, Bering anchored off an island farther north, near Cape St. Elias. Georg Steller, the expedition's naturalist, spent a number of hours on the island and recorded observations of plants, crustaceans and sea shells, and detailed evidence of Native people and how they lived, even though he did not actually see any Native people. Natives apparently used the island for fishing and hunting sea mammals, but lived elsewhere.

Bering set sail for Kamchatka after only a day on the North American coast. He was low on supplies and his men were beginning to suffer from scurvy. Heading west they passed a number of islands, and anchored in the Shumagins, which they named for a sailor who died on board. From one of the islands two kayaks approached the ship and the Russians and Alaskans exchanged goods. The Natives invited the Russians ashore, and ten men ventured onto the island where they met with nine Aleuts. When the Russians prepared to leave the Aleuts tried to hold one back. He wrestled free and swam to the departing boat while the Russians fired their muskets into the air. The next day nine Aleuts paddled to the St. Peter and exchanged more goods. The following day the Russians sailed on. This was the first recorded, direct encounter between Europeans and Alaska Natives.

Bering's ship was ill-fated. Many of the crew had scurvy, and soon there were not enough healthy men to man the sails. On the 4th of November they sighted land and decided to run into a small bay. They hoped they were on the Kamchatka coast, but they were actually on an island that was 115 miles away. The ship ran aground in shallow water. Those who could carried the sick men ashore. Several days later a storm wrecked the vessel leaving them marooned. On December 8, 1741 Captain-Commander Bering died. Others died daily as they struggled against scurvy and the elements. Forty-five of the original crew of seventy-six survived the ordeal, and in the spring and summer built a small boat from the wreckage of their old vessel and sailed for Kamchatka. They arrived at Petropavlovsk in August.

Over the next one hundred years the Russians would learn a great deal about the geography of the North Pacific and Alaska. There would be over sixty Russian voyages to what they called Russian America before its sale to the United States in 1867. The explorers mapped the Bering Sea coast and some of the Arctic.

They gathered important data about the Native people, animals and plants, climate, the ebb and flow of the annual winter ice pack, and the resources of the sea and land, including marine and land fur-bearing mammals and minerals. Their knowledge contributed substantially to world geographical understanding, and to Alaska's important role in the north.

The Russians Use Alaska

Russia's interest in Alaska was due to the natural resources that could be turned into economic profit. For all the time the Russians were in Alaska, fur-bearing sea and land mammals were the main resource exploited. After 1741 wealthy Russian merchants put up money to pay experienced Siberian fur traders to voyage to various Aleutian islands in order to trade for pelts. The investors then traded most of the furs to the Chinese for a handsome profit; few of the fur trappers, however, became rich.

The traders took sea otter, black and other foxes, and fur seals. The fur traders did not hunt the animals; instead they forced Aleut hunters to do the work. Often the Russians took Aleut women and children as hostages while the hunters gathered pelts. While not all the encounters between the fur traders and the Natives were hostile, many were, and the Russians often brutalized Aleuts who resisted their demands. In addition, the Russians, like other Europeans wherever they encountered Native Americans, brought diseases not known to the Natives, who did not have or had lost traditional immunities. Throughout the Americas, and in Alaska, disease killed more Natives than any other single cause.

The voyages from Siberia to America were expensive. Investors worked to save costs and increase their profits by forming partnerships. Eventually two groups came to dominate. One group, led by Gregorii Shelikhov, established the first permanent Russian post in Alaska, on Kodiak Island in 1784. From there Shelikhov sent hunters into Cook Inlet and Prince William Sound. They traded with local Natives, sometimes in a friendly manner, sometimes not. Shelikhov's chief rival, Pavel Lebedev-Lastochkin, established several posts in Cook Inlet, at the mouths of the Kasilof and Kenai Rivers, on the west side of the inlet, and near the mouth of Eagle River. Eventually Shelikhov took over all of these posts.

Initially, the Kodiak Islanders resisted Shelikhov's invasion into their territory. But Shelikhov had superior arms and thoroughly defeated the Natives. Later, he attempted to improve relations with them exchanging gifts and trading with them on fair terms.

In 1799 the Russian government established a single, government sponsored company to continue the exploitation of Alaska resources. Though Shelikhov had died in 1795, his

widow, Natalia, held his company together and it became the nucleus of the new business. The government gave it the right of monopoly, so no other Russian individual or company was permitted to operate in Alaska. The new company, called the Russian American Company, directed all Russian commercial activity in America from 1799 until the government sold Russian America to the United States in 1867.

A board of directors in St. Petersburg set the policies for the R-A Company, but a Chief Manager in the colony of Alaska ran the actual operations. The Chief Manager was also the Governor of the colony. In commercial matters he functioned as a manager; but in diplomatic and civil matters, he functioned as a governor. The first Chief Manager was Aleksandr Andreevich Baranov.

Russia Gets some Competition from Spain

Because European countries were in competition with each other for the world's resources, it was inevitable that Russia would have rivals for control of Alaska. Portugal and Spain had been the first countries to send ships from Europe to search for new lands. Not long after Columbus's first voyage to America the two countries agreed to a treaty giving themselves any and all new lands. On the basis of Columbus's and other Spaniards' voyages, Spain claimed nearly all of South and North America.

Soon, however, England and France challenged the Spanish claim in North America. The Spanish were unable to prevent either country from establishing colonies on the east coast of the continent. The Spanish took their earlier claim quite seriously, and when they learned in 1768 that the Russians were establishing hunting camps on the Alaska Peninsula, they quickly planned and set forth a series of maritime expeditions along the North American western coast. They led seven voyages between 1774 and 1792.

In the end, Spain decided that it was over-extended in America, and settled for California, establishing a boundary with the U. S. along 42 degrees N. latitude, the current Oregon/California border.

The English - and Captain Cook - Step In

England was Russia's other serious in the North Pacific. In the last half of the 18th century the English were the world's most formidable sea power. The British Admiralty (the Royal Navy) sent seven expeditions around the world. By far England's most accomplished navigator was Captain James Cook, who circumnavigated the globe twice. Cook found and mapped many Pacific islands, including Hawaii. He learned how to treat scurvy, even though he did not know what caused it. He tested the first clock that would keep working during a long sea voyage, thereby making it possible for mariners to compute longitude - the distance they were east and west from land.

In 1776 the Admiralty called Cook out of retirement and sent him on a third voyage, this time to the Pacific Northwest Coast. He was directed to find the Northwest Passage, a water route through North America, that geographers hoped would provide an alternative

to sailing around South America to get from the Atlantic to the Pacific oceans. Searches on the Atlantic side of the continent had found no such route, so Cook was sent to look along the Pacific coast.

Ultimately, that voyage would turn tragic. Cook was killed by Hawaiian Islanders when a fight erupted during his second visit there. Earlier Cook's two ships had sailed along the North American coast from the latitude of present-day Oregon to Prince William Sound and Cook Inlet, on to Unalaska, and along the Alaskan coast through the Bering Strait and finally north to the edge of the ice pack. Cook did not find the Northwest Passage; it wasn't there.

Cook provided the first charts of the North American coastline from California to the Arctic, a remarkable achievement. At last everyone knew the shape of North America.

During this age of exploration it was common for captains to make a formal "act of possession" when they found lands that no other country had already claimed. When Cook left England he knew the Spanish were planning another voyage to the Northwest Coast, so he made his first claim north of where he thought the Spanish might have reached. He made his claim in Cook Inlet, across the head of Turnagain Arm from present-day Anchorage. Today that point of land on the Kenai Peninsula is named Point Possession.

The Natives of Cook Inlet, the Dene Athabaskan people, traded fur pelts with Cook's crews for knives and needles. Cook sent a boat to the shore where one of his lieutenants buried an earthen bottle with parchment inside, claiming all of the land drained by the waters of Cook Inlet for England. The bottle has never been found.

Cook did not ask the Dene if he might claim their land for England. He assumed the Natives were not capable of understanding the concept of property. He also assumed the Natives would accept European sovereignty over their land, willingly, or by force if necessary. The Europeans believed that the Natives would be grateful for new European technologies and ideas, especially the idea of Christianity.

The Europeans Fight over Alaska

The clash between competing European nations on the Northwest Coast often disrupted Native culture. Baranov's return to Southeast Alaska in 1804 serves as an example of the clashes that occurred.

A Russian tsar had sent naval ships to America to help defend Russia's claim to the archipelago. The ship waiting to help Baranov, the Neva, shelled the Tlingit post. Realizing they could not hang on, the Indians fled over the mountains. Eventually the Tlingit returned to the area and worked out an agreement with the Russians. The Russians taught the Indians how to grow potatoes, and the Tlingit then traded potatoes and deer meat to the Russians. In fact, the Russians came to depend on food supplied by the Tlingit, for the journey from Russia was long and expensive, and often supplies did not

arrive. Without the food supplied by the Tlingit and the labor supplied by the Aleuts, the Russians would not have been successful in colonizing Alaska.

The original charter for the R-A Company was for twenty years. When the government renewed it, the Russian Navy took charge of the colony. From 1818 on, the Chief Manager/Governor of Russian America was a Russian naval officer.

Baranov served the Company from 1799 until 1818. During his tenure he directed Russian hunters throughout the Aleutian Islands, around Kodiak Island, in Cook Inlet and Prince William Sound, and in the Alexander Archipelago. He established a Russian post in California, Ft. Ross, on the coast north of San Francisco. The Russians operated Ft. Ross until 1841 when they sold it to a California settler.

The naval governors of Russian America served terms of five years. From 1818 to 1867 they expanded the colony northward along the Bering Sea coast, and up the Yukon River five hundred miles to the village of Nulato. Russian explorers recorded detailed knowledge about North America, as the governors and government agents tried to develop various resources besides furs. It is interesting that at no time during the life of the colony were there more than 833 Russians in all of Alaska. The Russians attempted to hunt whales fishery and mine coal. They conducted a mineral survey of the Kenai Peninsula and reported finding small amounts of gold. They traded for land mammal furs with the Athabaskans along the Yukon River. The furs were the only resource that returned any significant profit for the Company. By the 1850s, some Russian leaders were raising questions about the viability of their American colony.

The Sale of Russian America

Between 1854 and 1856 Russia fought the Crimean War with England and other European nations for access to world maritime commerce. Russia lost the war. In 1855 and 1856 British and French warships attacked and took the town of Petropavlovsk on the east coast of Kamchatka. This raised a question about the security of Russian America. If the Russians could not successfully protect Petropavlovsk against an invading force, would they be able to protect Sitka or Kodiak, or any of the other places in Russian America?

By the middle of the 1850s the Russians had gathered information on all of Alaska's known resources. They had failed in their attempt to hunt whales, and mine coal on the Kenai Peninsula, and they had not found enough gold to warrant major mining development. They had gone far up the Yukon River in search of new fur bearers, and faced a dwindling supply. They relied on Aleut labor. In Southeast Alaska they were dependent on the Tlingits for food supplies. In addition, the Tlingit remained powerful, and attempted several times to attack them.

In St. Petersburg, the tsar and his advisors began to discuss how they might better supply Russian's American colony, defend it from foreign conquest, and protect it from Indian attacks. These discussions eventually led them to consider whether or not Russian

America was a liability. Several advisors pointed out that the fur resources of the Amur River basin in China were unexploited, and that area was easier to defend and cheaper to supply. The tsar and his council decided that the best course of action was to sell Russian America and concentrate on Asia. When that information became public, the United States quickly indicated an interest in the region.

The final sale had to wait until after the end of the American Civil War. In 1867 Russia and the United States reached an agreement, and the American Secretary of State William H. Seward and Russian envoy Eduard de Stoeckl signed a treaty of purchase that was ratified by both the Russian and the United States Senates. The transfer ceremony took place at Sitka on October 18, 1867.

The Tlingit and Haida Indians protested the sale. They had not sold their land to the Russians, but the Russians sold it to the U.S. as if they had bought it. There was little the Indians could do except voice their displeasure. Years later, however, the Tlingit and Haida Indians sued in U.S. federal court, claiming ownership of the lands in 1867. The court agreed and arranged for the Indians to be paid some compensation.

For Russia, the decision to abandon its American colony was a practical one. Alaska was no longer as profitable as it had been, and the challenge of defending the colony against potential enemies was formidable if not impossible. With the sale to the United States, an important chapter in the European colonization of the Americas came to a close.

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