

# Sitka's First Decade Under the American Flag, 1867-1877

## *Fourth Grade Version*

by Rebecca Poulson

*1867 Sitka*

This is Sitka in 1867, from the first Alaskan *Coast Pilot*, the guidebook for mariners, published in 1869. These two images are based on drawings made in 1867 aboard the USRC *Lincoln*. Images courtesy of the NOAA Central Library and John Cloud.



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107 Jeff Davis St., Sitka, Alaska 99835  
907 747- 3448  
rebecca\_poulson@hotmail.com

## Russian America

Before 1867, Alaska was claimed by Russia. Russians called it Russian America. In those days, powerful nations such as Russia and the United States followed the Doctrine of Discovery, which said that whichever of them “discovered” a new land could have it, even if other people were already living there.

In 1867, Russia and the United States made a deal: the United States would pay Russia 7.2 million dollars, and the United States would get everything that Russia claimed in North America. “Russian America” became “Alaska.”



Sitka from Japonski Island, with the Governor's House - called Baranof's Castle by the Americans - in the center. Photo taken by Eadweard Muybridge in August, 1868. *Presbyterian Historical Society, Sheldon Jackson Collection*

## Sitka in 1867

The actual handover of Alaska from Russia to the United States happened in Sitka, on October 18<sup>th</sup>, 1867.

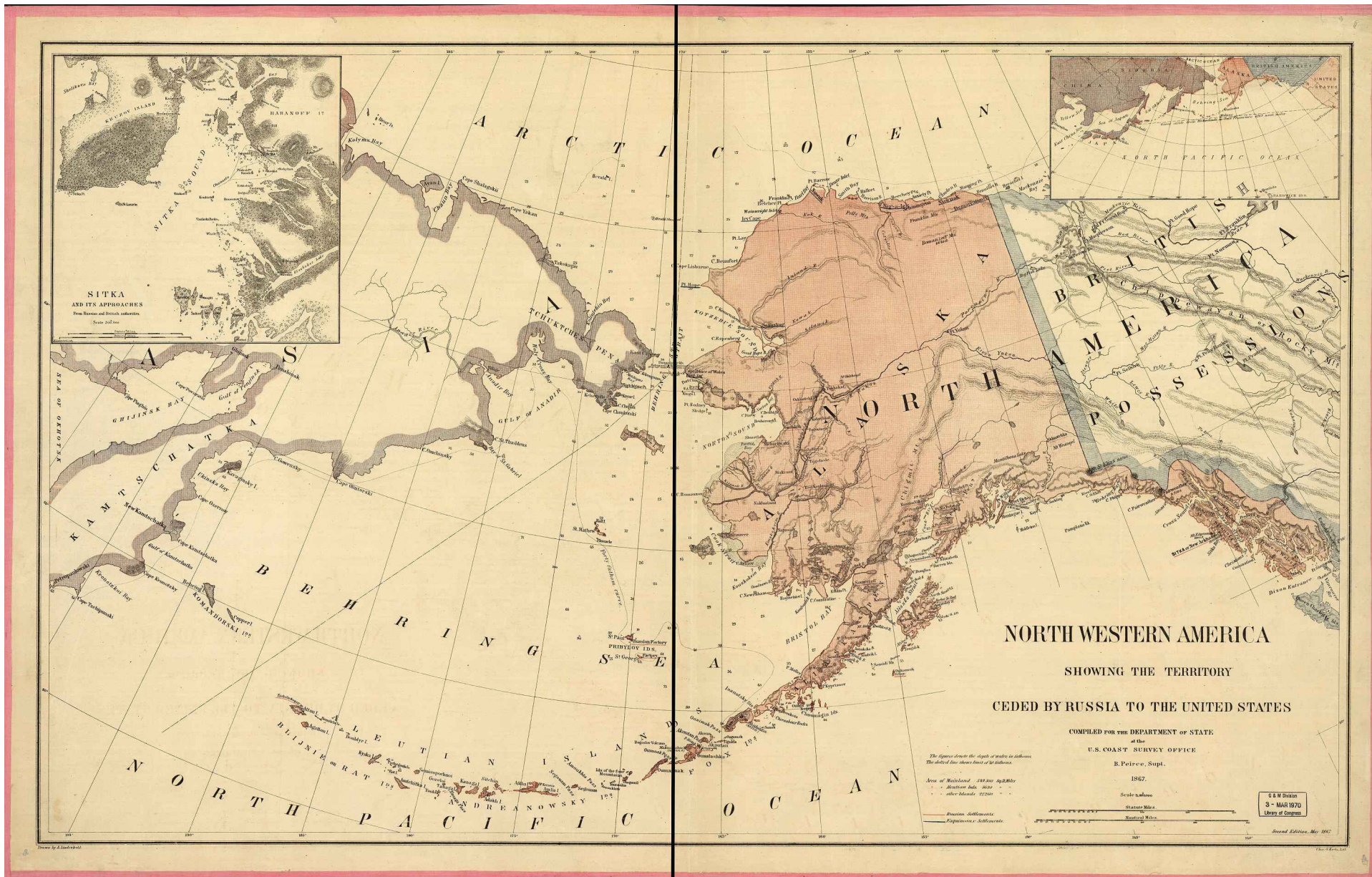
Around 900 people lived in New Archangel, which was the Russians' name for Sitka. Most of the people were born in Alaska, and most of them had Native heritage. The Russian American Company was a



469. Lincoln Street - Sitka  
Lincoln Street, by Eadweard Muybridge, 1868 *Presbyterian Historical Society, Sheldon Jackson Collection*

fur trading company, that also ruled Russian America. The Russian American Company owned and ran New Archangel, which was their headquarters. The company owned nearly all the property, and was the only employer. People had to buy their food and clothes from the company. The company also provided schools, they supported the Russian Orthodox church, and they took care of employees who could not work any more.

A tall wooden wall, or stockade, divided New Archangel from a large Tlingit village. The wall had blockhouses, or log watchtowers, with cannons pointed at the Tlingit houses. About 1200 people lived in the Tlingit settlement. Both communities depended on the fur trade.



Northwestern America showing the territory ceded by Russia to the United States 1867  
 On this map, the places underlined in red are the Russian settlements. The other places are Native settlements. This map was prepared by the US Coast and Geodetic Survey for Congress in 1867. This image from the Library of Congress at [www.loc.gov](http://www.loc.gov).

## The Transfer Ceremony

The Alaska Treaty of Cession was signed on March 30, 1867. The official commissioners set out from New York City in August. It took them more than a month and a half to get to Sitka. General Lovell H. Rousseau, representing the United States, and Captain Alexei Pestchouff, representing the Russian Czar, arrived at Sitka aboard a Navy warship on October 18<sup>th</sup>, 1867. They decided to do the ceremony that very afternoon.

About 200 American soldiers were already at Sitka, waiting aboard a ship. They came on shore and went up the hill to line up in front of the



465. Indian Village Sitka

Indian Village Sitka from Japonski Island. Note the Civil War-style uniforms of the soldiers, standing on Japonski Island in this photo by Eadweard Muybridge in 1868. *Presbyterian Historical Society, Sheldon Jackson Collection*



473 Custom House - Sitka

This is a view of Lincoln Street looking toward the water. Castle Hill/Noow Tlein is just out of sight on the left. The building on the right is where Sitka's city offices are today (the old Post Office). Eadweard Muybridge 1868 *Bancroft Library Lone Mountain College Collection*

Russian governor's house, facing about 100 Russian soldiers. The hill is known as Noow Tlein, or Large Fort, from when it was a Tlingit Kiks.ádi Clan fort, or Castle Hill, named for the Russian governor's large house, that looked like a castle to the Americans.

The Russian soldiers lowered the Russian flag from the massive flag pole, while the Navy ships in the harbor, and the Russian cannons on shore, fired salutes. As the Russian flag came down, it got tangled and tore off. Russian soldiers tried to climb up to get it, but couldn't do it. Eventually they tied a loop in the flag halliard and pulled a Russian soldier up to free the flag, but he dropped it instead of bringing it down, and it landed

on the soldiers' bayonettes below him. The Americans raised the United States flag, with more cannons firing salutes. General Rousseau and Captain Pestchouroff each said a few words (which most people there couldn't hear). Alaska was officially part of the United States. Some of the Russian women cried, but the Americans there gave three cheers. Tlingit people witnessed the ceremony from canoes in the channel.



Sitka in 1793 from an English vessel. From John F. Henry, *Early Maritime Artists of the Pacific Northwest Coast, 1741-1841*.

## The Tlingit People

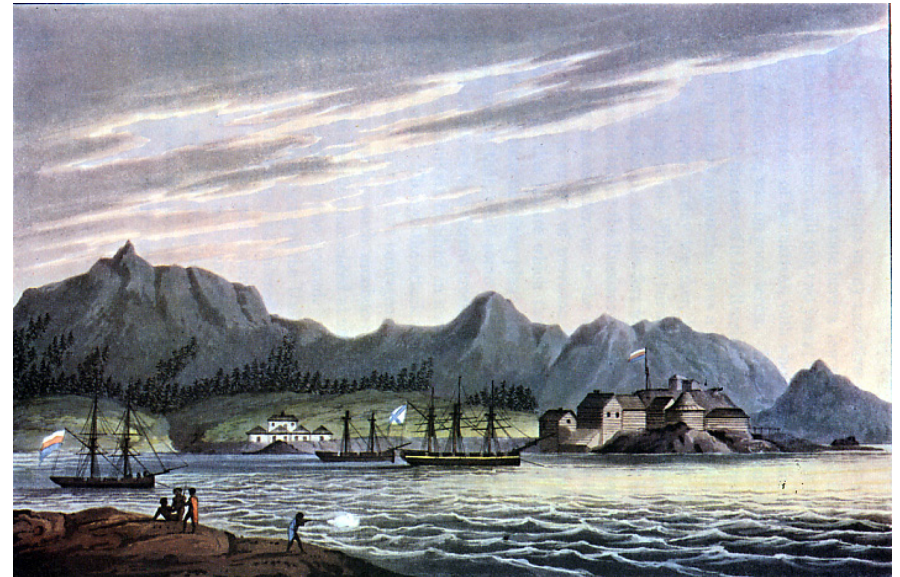
Europeans began colonizing North America more than 500 years ago. They accidentally brought deadly diseases that killed most of the Indigenous people in North America. Europeans did not know that the epidemics - and the way European societies had enormous resources for war and conquest - gave them an advantage. They assumed that they took over so easily because they were better. Europeans and Euro-Americans believed that their technology, beliefs and customs were the best, and believed that Indigenous societies are simple and “primitive.” This stereotype lasted a long time.

Alaska State Writer Laureate Ernestine Hayes has pointed out that “we must always remember that before colonial contact, Native cultures

possessed vigorous legal systems, effective educational systems, efficient health systems, elaborate social orders, elegant philosophical and intellectual insights, sophisticated kinship systems, complex languages, profitable trade systems—every social institution needed for a culture to flourish for thousands of years.”<sup>1</sup> In other words, Indigenous societies were not primitive at all.

For example, salmon are only available for a short period of time, and the climate in southeast Alaska is very wet. How do you catch a lot of fish, and keep it from rotting? Tlingit people had created the social organization and technology to efficiently harvest and preserve large quantities of salmon. Tlingit people also knew how to conserve salmon and herring runs to keep them coming back year after year.

European traders and explorers began coming to the Northwest Coast in the 1700s, most intensively in the late 1700s to buy sea otter skins from coastal Native people. Unfortunately, international trade brought smallpox epidemics to the coastal peoples in 1775, 1802, 1836-37 and in 1862. Each time about one in three people affected died, and more people suffered disabilities. Some entire villages had to be abandoned.



Picture of Sitka 1805 (Russian fort) This is the Russian fort of New Archangel, on the site of the Tlingit Kiks.ádi fort Noow Tlein, in 1805, drawn by an artist on the Russian Navy ship *Neva*. From Urey Lisiansky, *A Voyage Round the World, in the Years 1803, 4, 5 and 6*.



St. Michael's Cathedral, photograph made by Eadweard Muybridge in 1868. The church in Sitka now is a replica, completed in 1976. *Presbyterian Historical Society, Sheldon Jackson Collection.*

## The Russians

How did the Russians get to Sitka? Back in the 1740s, Russian fur traders started coming to Alaska for sea otter furs, that were immensely valuable in trade with China. They invaded the Aleutian Islands, and they started forcing the Indigenous people to do the hunting for them, and to get food for the Russians. The Russians also brought new diseases. So many people in the Aleutians died from violence, diseases, and starvation, that the Native population dropped from at least 12,200 when the Russians arrived, to 3,850 in 1779.

Over the next 50 years Russians took over Kodiak Island and built forts

on the mainland, and they hunted out most of the sea otters in the region. That is when the Russians started to look at southeastern Alaska, where there were still lots of sea otter.

The Russians believed that the sea otter of Southeastern Alaska belonged to them. Southeastern Alaska, however, was controlled by the Tlingit people, who sold sea otter skins to American, English and other traders coming by ship.

The Russians had hundreds of Native hunters working for them, who traveled by kayak to southeastern Alaska all the way from Kodiak and beyond. The hunting voyages were very dangerous. Three years in a row, dozens of hunters died in accidents. In 1801 leaders of some of the crews



Photo of Tlingit people by Eadweard Muybridge *Presbyterian Historical Society, Sheldon Jackson Collection*

announced that they would not go hunting the next season. The Russian leaders, including Alexander Baranov, threatened to kill them if they refused, so they had to go.

Sitka was owned by the Kiks.ádi Clan of the Tlingit. They allowed the Russians to build a fort called Archangel St. Michael at Old Sitka, seven miles north of Sitka, in 1799. After disagreements and insults, the Kiks.ádi and other clans, including clans from other places, destroyed the Russian fort and killed most of the Russians and their workers in 1802.

Two years later, the Russians came back. This time they had a warship, the *Neva*, to help fight the Battle of Sitka at Kaasdahéen, or Indian River. The defending Kiks.ádi lost young leaders and a canoe of gunpowder in an accident. The Kiks.ádi and their allies made a strategic retreat, and made a peace deal in 1805. They allowed the Russians to stay at Sitka but only let them have the settlement site, nothing else.

The sea otter were soon gone in southeastern Alaska, just as they had been hunted out in other places. After that the regional economy depended on other furs, that were not as valuable.

Tlingit traders traded with the Russians and also with the British in what is now Canada. The Tlingit traders traded for furs from other



Sitka's Tlingit Village late 1870s *Presbyterian Historical Society, Sheldon Jackson Collection*

Indigenous peoples in the interior. The Tlingit clans who owned the trade routes to the interior at Chilkat (Haines area) and at Stikeen (Wrangell area) were powerful and known throughout the region.

The Russians had to respect Tlingit leaders in order to stay in Sitka. In 1855, after a disagreement, Tlingit people attacked New Archangel, and several Russians were killed in the fighting. The Russians and Tlingit made peace again.



*H.C.P. Parade Ground - Sitka*

The Parade Ground by Eadweard Muybridge, 1868. These buildings are near where the Pioneer Home is today. There is a replica blockhouse in the location of the blockhouse on the left in the picture. *Bancroft Library Lone Mountain College Collection*

## The Americans

In 1867 Americans believed in Manifest Destiny. Manifest means obvious. Americans were taking over North America so quickly, they

believed it was proof that it was their destiny to have it all. The United States was a great democracy, and growing rapidly in population, territory, and wealth.

The Indian Wars that raged in the West from 1864 to 1890 were conflicts over the United States forcing Native people off their lands and onto reservations. Americans considered Native people “savages,” who had no rights.

When Americans came to Sitka, they considered Tlingit people savages. Russians who stayed could become citizens, but Native people could not. Tlingit leaders protested that they still owned their land, but their claim was not recognized by the American authorities.



475 The Double Decker - Sitka  
The Double Decker by Eadweard Muybridge, 1868. Over 100 people were listed as living in this building in the 1870 census. Bancroft Library Lone Mountain College Collection

Tlingit law requires compensation, or payment, for an injury or death, even if it is accidental. In American law, if you hurt or kill someone, you are punished. The Army wanted the Tlingit people to submit to American authority, so they ignored Tlingit law, and instead enforced American law.

In 1869, an Army soldier killed some Tlingit men by mistake, so the men's relatives asked for compensation. The Army General, Jeff Davis, refused. The relatives killed two Euro-Americans who were camping at what is now called Murder Cove on Admiralty Island.

In response, General Davis and the Navy ship *USS Saginaw* attacked the Kake villages in the “Kake War.” They shot at and burned to the ground all but one of the 29 large clan houses. Later in 1869 a similar thing happened at Wrangell, when soldiers killed a Tlingit man. When the victims' father retaliated by killing an American merchant, the Army shelled the village of *Kaachxan.áak'w*. The violent attacks demonstrated that the Americans were much more powerful than the Russians had been.

### Sitka, the Long Depression, and the U.S. Army

The Army ruled Alaska from 1867 to 1877, but they had no boats, and there was almost no law for them to enforce. They did have a jail, and arrested Native and non-Native civilians, as well as soldiers and officers. Nearly all the crime had to do with alcohol.

The fur trade was not very profitable in the 1870s. Overhunting meant fewer furs, and the Long Depression in the United States meant prices were low. For the Tlingit traders it was even worse, because American traders came in and took over the business. Americans even forced the clans who controlled the Chilkat and Stikkeen trade routes to let anyone use them.

Most of the Russians in Sitka went back to Russia or to other places. The population on their side of the fence went from about 900 people to about 300. Most of those who stayed had been born in Alaska, and had Alaska Native ancestry as well as Russian. These people were left without a way to survive after the company pulled out, and the Army had to give them food so they would not starve.

When the Army left in 1877, Tlingit people immediately began to take down the wall between the two towns. For two years Alaska was under



the rule of the Treasury Department, and revenue cutter ships were the only law enforcement. Then in 1879, the Sitka Kiks.ádi leader wanted compensation for the deaths of some men killed while working for a whaling company, but didn't get it. The non-Native people of Sitka said they were afraid he would attack them, and they asked for protection. A British Navy ship came, but soon the USS *Jamestown* arrived, and the Navy took over ruling Alaska until 1884.



Sitka downtown 1870s *Presbyterian Historical Society, Sheldon Jackson Collection*

## Economic Development

In the 1880s the salmon canning, tourism, and mining industries got going in southeastern Alaska. Even though there were jobs for Native people, those industries also took away Native lands without paying for them. Authorities did not believe Native people had any rights to land and resources. A cannery could take over a salmon stream without paying the clans who owned it. The canneries did not even have to leave enough salmon for the Tlingit people to eat.

## Missionaries

Some Tlingit leaders asked for Christian missions, based on famous Tsimshian missions in Canada. Those missions taught English reading and writing and built new, modern houses, churches, schools, and sawmills and other plants.

Presbyterians started a mission at Sitka in 1878. But, missionaries believed that Native people were “heathens,” and that their language, social system and culture were not good. Tlingit people had to give up



Rudolph Walton, or Kawootk', Kiks.ádi Clan leader and a Founder of the Alaska Native Brotherhood, may be the boy second from the left in the front in the picture, below, of the boys of the Presbyterian school, in 1883. *Presbyterian Historical Society, Sheldon Jackson Collection*



their language and culture if they wanted to go to school. Some Tlingit people did this.

Even if they gave up their language and culture, Tlingit people still faced discrimination, and were not even citizens. This meant that many Tlingit people, especially children, died from diseases.

### **The Shelling of Angoon**

In 1882, the Revenue Cutter *Corwin* destroyed most of the village of Angoon, over a protest by some Angoon Tlingit people demanding payment from a whaling company for an accidental death. This time some important Americans spoke against the destruction - but Angoon residents still had to wait a hundred years for an apology.

### **The 1884 Organic Act**

Finally, after seventeen years, Alaska got some civil government when Congress passed Alaska's Organic Act. Under this Act, missionaries got money from the government for schools. In order to go to the Presbyterian school, a child's parents had to sign an indenture promising to leave the child in the school for five years. In 1886, a Tlingit mother sued over not being allowed to take her child out of the mission school. The judge decided that the mother did not have the right to take her child, because he believed the school was better than Native life.

This attitude by the government and the missionaries was probably one reason why many Tlingit people joined the Russian Orthodox Church in the late 1880s.

### **Legacy of 1867-1877**

Racial discrimination made everything harder for Indigenous people. Authorities selectively denied Native people rights that other people had. This contributed to deaths, which devastated families. Alaska Natives were not citizens until 1924. Native and non-Native children had to go to separate schools in Sitka until 1949. Native claims to land and resources were not recognized until 1971.

What can people today learn from this history? One lesson might be to appreciate other cultures, and to treat people as individuals, instead of judging them based on things like their ethnicity or religion. People in Sitka have been living together for a long time and are good at living and working and playing together. Learning more about each other and



View of Sitka from Castle cupola in 1886. *Presbyterian Historical Society, Sheldon Jackson Collection*

our past can help us appreciate each other and understand our common goals, so we can work together to make a brighter future.

1 Hayes, Ernestine. "APK Summer Lectures 2017: Ernestine Hayes Talk 08 04 2017". Filmed August 2017. Youtube video, 45:46. Posted August 2017. [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rk6M6\\_sEhdw](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rk6M6_sEhdw).