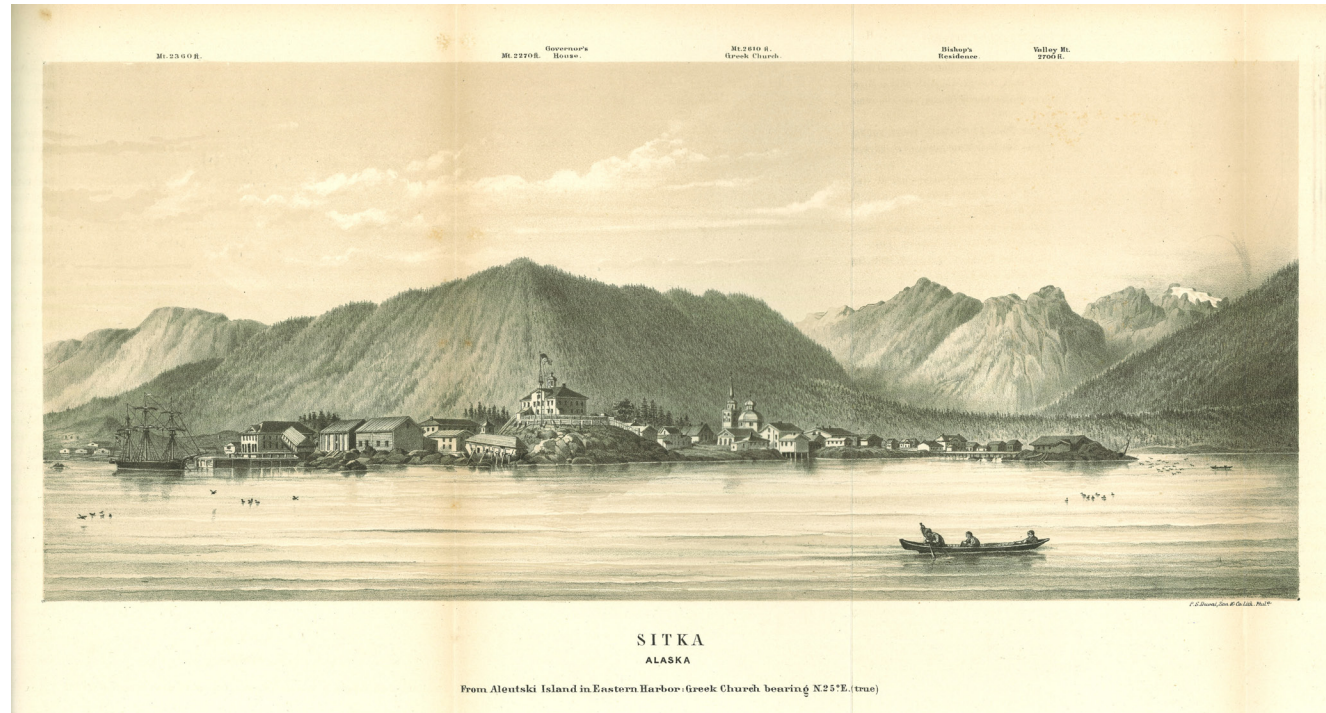


Sitka's First Decade Under the American Flag, 1867-1877

by Rebecca Poulson

1867 Sitka

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



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The Transfer

On the morning of October 18th, 1867, Sitka was Russian. In the afternoon, Sitka was American.

More than two hundred Army soldiers had arrived on a side-wheel steamship on October 9th, but they had to stay cooped up on the ship for more than a week, waiting for the officials to arrive. General Lovell H. Rousseau, representing the United States., and Captain Alexei Pestchouroff, representing the Russian Czar, arrived on a Navy steamship on the morning of October 18th. The trip from New York to Sitka took them more than a month and a half; the Transcontinental



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.*

Railroad was not completed until 1869, so they had to go by ship. The commissioners decided to conduct the ceremony, and transfer Alaska from one nation to the other, that very afternoon.

The American soldiers came on shore and went up to the top of Noow Tlein ("Large Fort," in Tlingit), or Castle Hill, where they lined up facing about 100 Russian soldiers, in front of the very large Russian Governor's house and offices. The ship captains, officers, some of the Americans who were already in Sitka, the Russian governor and other Russian officials, and Russian and Native people from the town also came.

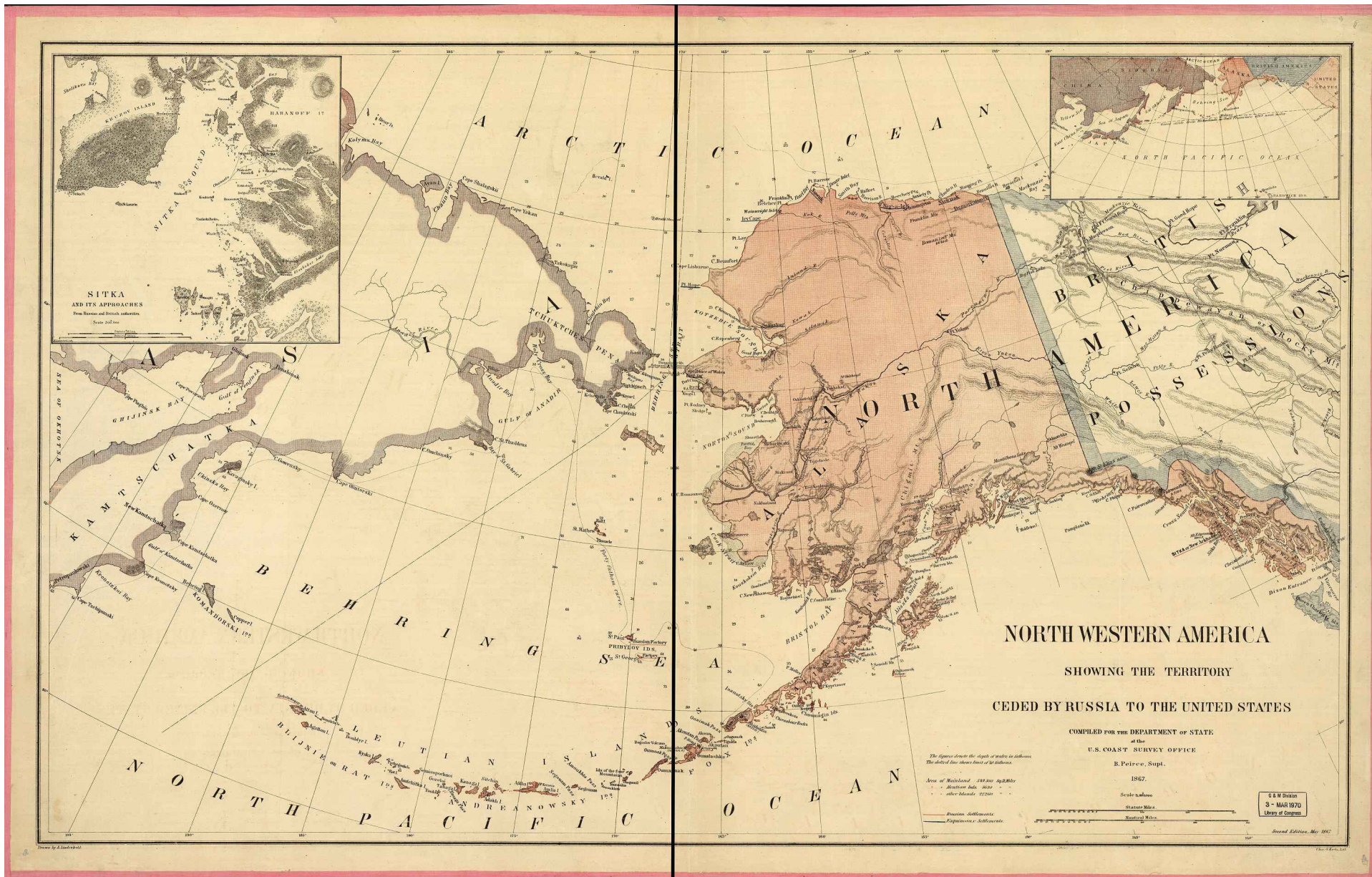
The Russian soldiers lowered their flag from the massive flag pole, while the Navy ships and the Russian cannons on shore fired salutes. As the Russian flag came down, it tangled in the crosstrees, and tore off. Russian soldiers tried to climb up to get it but couldn't do it. Eventually they tied a loop 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 our flag, with more cannon salutes firing. General Rousseau and Captain Pestchouroff each said a few words (which most people there couldn't hear), and 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. 1

An International Transaction

The Russian American Company ran the Alaska colonies for the Russian government. Sitka, or New Archangel, was the capital of the territory they claimed, which extended thousands of miles along Alaska's coast and up major rivers.

The Treaty of Cession between the nations of Russia and the United States had been signed in Washington, D.C. in the early morning of March 30, 1867. The treaty handed over Russian claims in Alaska to the United States, but what exactly those claims consisted of was not defined. Because Indigenous people never gave, sold, or lost their lands to the Russians, the Russians had no right to hand Indigenous lands - virtually all of the territory they claimed - over to the Americans. Tlingit leaders protested at the time, but the issue was not addressed until a hundred years later, in the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act of 1971.



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.

Sitka in 1867

A tall, ugly fence or stockade ran through the middle of Sitka, with three blockhouses for armed watchmen. On one side of the stockade, towards the west, was a settlement of large, solid, traditional houses, of around 1200 Tlingit people.

On the other side, nearly 900 people lived in the Russian town that straggled along one main road. About half of those people came from Russia, including 200 Russian soldiers. Most of the others had Native or Native and Russian heritage, most of them came originally from Kodiak Island or the Aleutians.

New Archangel, as the Russian town of Sitka was called, was owned and run by the Russian American Company. Residents bought their food and clothes from the company, they worked for the company, and lived in company houses.

Some American civilians came to Sitka in 1867, assuming that there would soon be thousands of Americans coming into Alaska to seek their fortunes in fishing, trade, logging, and especially gold mining.

These Americans had never seen anything like Sitka. The buildings were well-crafted of hewn logs; the people spoke Russian, followed Russian customs and wore Russian clothes, and followed the Russian Orthodox faith. Another oddity was that the Russians were a day ahead, because they had come from the east, across the date line. The Americans admired the interior of St. Michael's cathedral, but many of the log buildings in Sitka were rotting. The streets turned to mud when it rained, which it does a lot in October, something else every American observer noted. The Americans thought the town was interesting, but in general they weren't impressed.

The Tlingit People

When Europeans started coming to North America, more than 500 years ago, they accidentally brought deadly diseases that Indigenous people had no immunity to. Epidemics killed most of the people in North America. The Tlingit people weren't affected until around 1775, when a smallpox epidemic struck the Northwest Coast. Another smallpox outbreak hit in 1802, then a devastating epidemic hit in 1836-37, and another one in 1862. Each time about one in three people affected died,



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

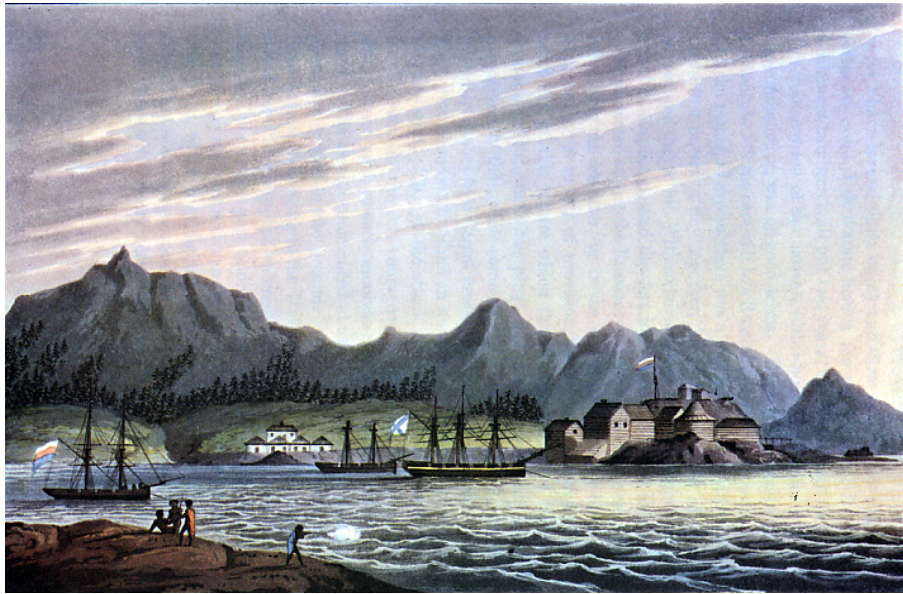
and more people suffered disabilities. Some entire villages had to be abandoned.²

The deaths and social and political disruption from epidemics were a major reason Europeans were able to defeat Native tribes, across North and South America. European societies were also organized to raise large amounts of money for war and conquest. The process of European settlers taking over North America is called colonization. Europeans and Euro-Americans believed that their technology, beliefs and customs were the best, and did not see that Indigenous systems were just as complex. They believed that Indigenous societies were simple and "primitive." They were not aware of the impact of the epidemics, and assumed that their ease in taking over was due to their own superiority. The notion that non-European societies are simple and primitive was prevalent into the 20th century.

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.”³

For example, harvesting and preserving salmon takes sophisticated technology and social coordination. Salmon return over a short period of time, and if you don't preserve it correctly, it rots. Besides feeding a large population, the Tlingit managed fish returns with a strict system of ownership. They traded products like halibut, herring eggs and art in the Indigenous trade networks that extended into what is now the Yukon and to California.⁴



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*. Urey Lisiansky, *A Voyage Round the World, in the Years 1803, 4, 5 and 6*.

The Tlingit People and the Fur Trade

In the mid-1780s European and American traders began coming to the Northwest Coast to trade for sea otter furs, which were worth an enormous amount of money in China.⁵

Sitka was the favorite port for these maritime fur traders in the 1790s.⁶ About the same time, the Russians started coming down to southeastern Alaska, and to Sitka; they asserted that all the sea otter in southeastern

Alaska belonged to them. The Russians had already wiped out sea otter in western Alaska.⁷

The Russians negotiated with the Tlingit people who controlled Sitka, the Kiks.ádi Clan, to build a fur hunting base and fort at Old Sitka in 1799. A multi-clan alliance destroyed this fort in 1802. ⁸ Two years later, in 1804, the Russians came back and fought the Kiks.ádi and their allies at the Battle of Sitka, at Kaasda Héen, or Indian River. Due to various factors, the Kiks.ádi retreated, and made peace with the Russians in 1805, but only gave the Russians rights to the fort of Sitka, and nothing else.⁹ The Russians soon gave up trying to do their own hunting in Southeast Alaska, and instead purchased furs from the Tlingit traders.

All the hunting pressure meant that by 1820 the sea otter were pretty much hunted out on the Northwest Coast, just as they had been in Western Alaska.¹⁰ After the sea otter were hunted out, the fur trade continued in other kinds of furs. The international fur trade was the main industry throughout the Northwest Coast in the 1800s. Tlingit traders were selling most of their furs to the Russians until 1851, when they started taking most of their furs and other products nearly a thousand miles by canoe to Victoria, where they got better goods than the Russians could offer.¹¹

Most of the profit in the Indigenous side of the fur trade went to the Indigenous traders. Native producers hunted or trapped the animals, and traded furs directly with European and American traders, or, more commonly, to Native traders, who then traded canoe-loads of furs and other products with Europeans and Americans, for goods including manufactured items such as guns and cloth.

Certain Tlingit clans controlled routes to the interior, with exclusive trading rights with interior tribes. The clans who owned the trade rights at the Stikine River (Wrangell) and the Chilkat (Haines area) were wealthy and important players in the region.

These clans defended their rights against the giant Hudson's Bay Company, which was aggressively expanding at the time, by forcing them to abandon trading posts up the Stikine River in 1838, at Taku in 1842, and on the Yukon above Chilkat in 1852.¹²

In the 1850s and 1860s, thousands of American and British settlers, traders and miners came to what are now British Columbia and

Washington State. Tlingit people traveled all the way to Puget Sound to trade furs, but also to work, and to interact with the white settlers, and with other tribes. In the mid-1850s, 2,000 to 6,000 “Northern Indians,” including Heiltsuk, Haida, Tsimshian, and Tlingit people gathered each year at Fort Victoria.¹³

The Russians

There were only around 900 Russians, ever, in Alaska, but Russia claimed ownership of all of it, most of which they had never even seen, and was already claimed and occupied by Indigenous societies. Europeans and Euro-Americans at the time believed they were superior, and so they believed it was appropriate to claim lands and to subjugate Native Americans to benefit themselves.

Russians first came to Alaska in the mid-1740s, discovering the lucrative Chinese market for sea otter pelts forty years before the English and Americans did.¹⁴ The Russians had a different system for getting the furs: instead of buying furs from the Natives, the Russians forced Native people to hunt sea mammals for them. The Russians did compensate hunters per animal, and eventually stopped compelling them to hunt, but the system was extremely destructive to Native people and to their societies.

Russians also forced Natives to provide food and equipment for the hunting expeditions, and to provide food for the Russians. Violence,¹⁵ epidemics, taking people away from their families for years at a time, and accidents and deaths while hunting caused the population of the Aleutians to drop from at least 12,200 when the Russians arrived, to 3,850 in 1779.

The biggest Russian fur trading companies consolidated as the Russian American Company in 1799, and the Russian Czar awarded them authority to colonize North America.¹⁶

By the 1790s the Russians were running out of sea otter in the Gulf of Alaska, and moving into southeastern Alaska, where European and American traders were already buying sea otter furs from coastal Native people. The Russians came with hundreds of Unangan and Alutiiq hunters, who traveled to southeastern Alaska by baidarkas (kayaks) all the way from Kodiak Island.¹⁷

In 1799, 115 Native hunters working for the Russians died from paralytic



Lincoln Street, by Eadweard Muybridge 1868 *Presbyterian Historical Society, Sheldon Jackson Collection*

shellfish poisoning from mussels at what is now called Poison Cove, in Peril Strait near Sitka. In spite of this tragedy, they took 1800 furs that season.¹⁸ The year before, on their way back to Kodiak, 10 to 20 men died in a storm at sea. In 1800, they took 2000 sea otter, but 64 hunters drowned in a single incident on a hunting trip out of Kodiak Island.¹⁹ That winter of 1800-1801, back on Kodiak Island, some of the surviving Alutiiq (Kodiak Island Native) leaders refused to go on the next year's hunt. Resistance was brutally crushed by fur hunting company leader Baranof and his second-in-command, who punished and threatened to kill anyone who refused to go.²⁰ In 1801 the hunters took 4000 sea otter,

just in the Sitka area.

As described above, Russians built a second fort, this one at the present site of Sitka, in 1804, and made a peace with the Tlingit clans in 1805.

The Russian American Company depended on the fur trade. After the valuable sea otter were hunted out, their profits shrank. The Russian American Company tried to diversify, but were not successful, and their expenses grew. By the time Russia sold to the United States, they were not making money; this was one reason the Russians sold out.²²

Another reason they sold was because of the tens of thousands of American settlers and gold miners moving into the west, in addition to



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*



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

growing numbers of American whalers, fishermen and traders in Alaska: many Russians believed that it was a matter of time before Americans swarmed in and took Alaska from them.

Other reasons for selling included the impossibility of defending Alaska militarily, and their desire to consolidate Russian expansion and settlement on the Asian mainland, instead of overseas in North America.

The Russian American Company built forts and trading posts, explored major rivers, and established a colony in California, Fort Ross, between 1812 and 1841. At Sitka they built a cathedral, warehouses and homes, and had all kinds of workshops, even a shipbuilding facility, and built dozens of ships.

In spite of these accomplishments, they never had enough manpower or resources to control southeastern Alaska.²³ They depended on Tlingit people for much of their fresh food and for labor, and many Russians (the Russians who came to Alaska were almost all men) had Tlingit wives.

The Russians had no choice but to maintain good relations with the Tlingit leadership. A Russian governor allowed relations to deteriorate in the early 1850s, which led to a Tlingit attack on the fort in 1855, and five or six Russians were killed and dozens wounded.²⁴ Instead of retaliating against the Tlingit, Russian authorities blamed the governor, and worked

to make peace. Russians paid Natives for injury done by Russians, even if it was accidental.²⁵ The Russians depended on diplomacy, not force, to stay in southeastern Alaska.

The Americans

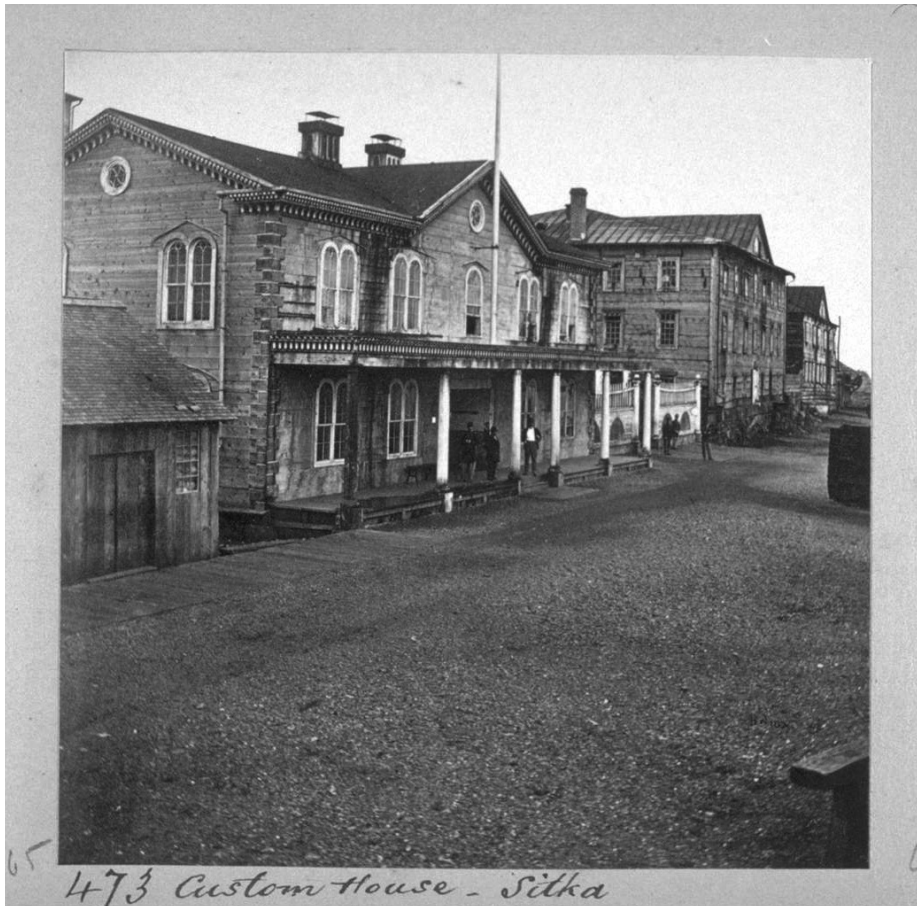
The United States' expansion across North America was driven by the doctrine of Manifest Destiny. Manifest means obvious or apparent; Americans saw their rapid expansion across North America as proof they were destined to take the whole thing.

Native people in the United States were forced onto reservations, in what we now call ethnic cleansing. Actions by the United States government and by settlers sometimes intentionally, sometimes unintentionally, amounted to genocide, or an effort to destroy an entire ethnic group. The conflicts around the removals, the Indian Wars, were becoming increasingly violent right at the time Alaska was added to the United States.

At the time Alaska became part of the United States, Native people were not citizens, so they couldn't vote. They were not allowed to buy land, and they did not even have the right to the land and resources they already possessed, and had improved and defended over generations. When Native Americans resisted or retaliated, the military tried to punish Native individuals, then, if they could not, they would punish the entire group. The American military, unlike the Russians, did not have to respect Tlingit strength; they relied on overwhelming force.²⁶

A few of the Americans in Sitka in 1867 wrote about their experiences. They all have a stereotype of the Tlingit as "savages." One component of the stereotype of Native Americans is that they don't have to work to get food, and so they are passive and lazy. Americans in Sitka stated this even though they could see that the Tlingit people were selling food, as well as furs and elegant art products, did work for the Americans, and had obviously figured out how to thrive in this challenging environment. American observers saw what they expected to see.

Americans described the Tlingit according to the stereotype of Native Americans, as shrewd and greedy, dangerous, treacherous, savage and untrustworthy – even though their own experiences and interactions often contradicted this portrayal, and of course non-Natives were just as likely to manifest these qualities.



The building on the left is where the City offices are (the old Post Office). This Russian building burned down in 1934, when it was still in use as a federal courthouse and jail. Eadweard Muybridge 1868 *Bancroft Library Lone Mountain College Collection*

The core of the stereotype of Native people is that their culture is so primitive that it can't withstand contact with Euro-American culture - in particular, exposure to alcohol. Tlingit people did not have a lot of money, and some abused alcohol. Instead of recognizing that Tlingit people were being pushed to the margins of the economy, and that alcohol abuse was no more prevalent with Natives than with anyone else, the Americans decided Native culture was bad.

Sitka, 1867-1877

One Kiks.ádi Clan leader, Mikael Kooxx'aan, initially refused to take down the Russian flag in front of his house, next to the stockade. Tlingit leaders, including Kooxx'aan, complained to the Americans that even though they had allowed the Russians to stay in their territory, they did not intend the Russians to give it to anybody who happened to come along. Other Tlingit leaders throughout southeastern Alaska told American General Jeff Davis the same thing, that they did not recognize the American claims to Alaska.²⁷ Americans, however, went by the Doctrine of Discovery, in which lands belonged to whoever first "discovered" them on behalf of a European nation or of the United States; for them, Indigenous people had no rights to their lands.

When the steamer *John L. Stephens* came in to port, Tlingit people came out to sell them fresh food. Tlingit individuals sold food, cut firewood, and did work for the Americans, though not as much as they had for the Russians. There was a curfew, but during the day Tlingit individuals were free to come through the stockade and work, buy or sell food or other items, or to sit and observe.

Right after the transfer there was economic activity as the Russian American Company goods and ships were sold off, and Americans even formed a city government in December 1867.

Crime and mayhem were a problem from the very beginning of American rule. The Russian American Company had strictly controlled alcohol, but after October 1867 it was available, and there were hundreds of young soldiers and officers to consume it. General Jeff Davis was known for being one of the Union Army's most competent generals, but he had also once murdered a fellow officer during the Civil War, over an insult.

From October 1868 to March 1869, the second winter after the Transfer,



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

there was an average of 26 military prisoners a day in the jail. In May of 1869, soldiers even robbed St. Michael's Cathedral

The Russian American Company paid the fare for anyone who wanted to leave after the transfer, and more than 500 Russians did, most for Russia and some for San Francisco.

In 1868 the Army established a total of six Army posts, at Sitka, Tongass, Wrangell, Kenai, Kodiak, and Unalaska, part of preparing for the expected influx of Americans. So few Americans came to Alaska, however, that all of posts except Sitka closed by 1870.

The city government faltered and finally failed in 1870, due to lack of



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

funds. Sitka's population fell even more.

The Army was supposed to be temporary, which was the usual pattern in the American West, where forts were quickly followed by Euro-American settlement. California, Oregon, Nevada and Nebraska had so much settlement that they were already states in 1867. But in Alaska, the rush of immigration was much slower to appear.

A little over one year after the Transfer, by early 1869, and until 1877 when the Army pulled out, the government was virtually the only economic activity in Sitka. Sitka's economy was so bad that in 1870 the Army was giving rations to nearly half of the Russians in Sitka, to prevent starvation. These people used to depend on the Russian American Company, but after the Transfer, most of them had no way to make a living.

In the 1870 census, the population of Sitka still included about 1200 Tlingit people, but on the other side of the stockade, other than the Army, there were only 390 persons, down from the 900 before the Transfer. Two hundred and fifty of these people were born in Alaska, and 21 had been born in Russia.

Most of these Russians who had been born in Alaska were people the

Russian American Company called "Creole," descended from Russian fathers and Alaska Native mothers. After the Transfer, the "Creoles" were usually just called Russians.

Why didn't Alaska get the rush of Euro-American immigrants like in other parts of the West? One reason was that Native Americans in the contiguous United States had been forced off their lands and onto reservations, so that their lands and resources were now available to Euro-Americans.

In addition, it was expensive to get to Alaska, and the only industry in southeastern Alaska, the fur trade, was in a slump. This was in part due to over hunting, but even more due to a national recession, the Long Depression of the 1870s, which extended to Europe as well.

And finally, there was no United States law in Alaska. Indigenous legal systems were ignored by the Americans, and the only federal law was the 1868 Treasury Act, which allowed the Customs Service to operate in Alaska. Buying and selling land was illegal. There was so little economic activity, and so few American citizens here, that Congress ignored Alaska. Establishing civil government would have been expensive; as it was, the costs of supporting the Army and the Customs Service, and paying for a monthly steamer by the US Postal Service, cost more than what the government got back from customs (taxes on goods). And, America was in a depression, and, Congress still had to pay for the Civil War.

The Army was frustrated with being responsible for governing Alaska, with no legal, or practical, way to do it. Their biggest problem was alcohol. When they banned importation, there was a rise in distilling, with molasses imported by the barrel.

Even though he did not have legal authority to do it, the Army commander in the mid-1870s restricted molasses sales, and destroyed stills, but he was frustrated by being limited to the area right around Sitka. When he arrested and sent alcohol sellers to Portland for trial, the court decided the Army did not have authority to jail civilians and threw out the case.

Economic Changes for Tlingit people

American traders aggressively displaced Tlingit traders operating in southeast Alaska.²⁸ It was not traders, but prospectors, however, who

broke the valuable Tlingit control of the Stikine and Chilkat trade routes. The control of the Stikine River (Wrangell) clans was broken in the 1872 Cassiar gold rush. (Tlingit control of the Chilkat and Chilkoot (Skagway and Haines areas) routes was weakened in the late 1870s, then destroyed by the 1898 Klondike Gold Rush.) Tlingit traders were hit by low fur prices, but also by being squeezed out of business by the Americans.

Political change for Tlingit with the Transfer

Tlingit law requires compensation for an injury or death, even if it is accidental. Classically this was a life for a life, of equal status. Usually, though, especially in dealings with non-Natives, it was in material compensation, like blankets.

In American law, if you kill someone, you are arrested and put on trial. Punishment, not compensation, is how crime is addressed in the American system.

The United States at this time was powerful and growing rapidly in population and wealth. The Army was never afraid of the Tlingit, but they believed it was necessary to put down “insolence,” to demonstrate the overwhelming authority of the United States. Often Native people did not receive justice even according to American laws. Most of the violent conflicts, however, were over the refusal of the United States to recognize the Tlingit justice system.

In early 1869, an Army sentry killed men leaving Sitka by canoe. Relatives of the men, from Kake, went to see General Davis about compensation, but he repeatedly refused to see them. These relatives then killed two Euro-Americans, unconnected with the conflict, who were camping at what is now called Murder Cove on Admiralty Island.

This led to the so-called “Kake War” in 1869, when the USS *Saginaw* shelled three villages and burned all the houses but one to the ground, a total of 28 clan houses, many of them 30 or 40 feet square.²⁹

The Kake incident was repeated at Wrangell, later in 1869, when soldiers killed two Tlingit men, after one of them assaulted a woman at the fort. When the victims’ father retaliated by killing a white merchant, the Army shelled the village of Kaachxan.áak’w, then when he gave himself up, hanged him.³⁰

This illustrates a dramatic change in power for the Tlingit. The large imbalance of power, together with the stereotype of Natives as savages,



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

meant that the Americans often ignored Tlingit demands for justice, even when it was compatible with American law.

The Americans sometimes did treat the Natives fairly. Later in 1869, when an Army policeman shot and killed a Tlingit youth, General Davis paid the family, to prevent a white person being killed. The Army also put criminals in jail regardless of whether they were Native or not.

Sitka After 1877

The Army pulled out of Alaska in 1877 for many reasons. They couldn't enforce U.S. law, because it was not defined. They were confined to Sitka, and they were not allowed to arrest civilians.

Also, the U.S. government was strapped for money, and was cutting back on the size of the military, at the same time they needed all available men for the Nez Perce War. When the Army pulled out of Sitka in June, 1877, Sitka Tlingit people immediately began to take apart the stockade. They also compelled one Sitka merchant to pay compensation for a death.

Alaska was left to the Treasury Department, which in Sitka consisted of a Collector of Customs. Alcohol imports were banned, but there was no

law to control molasses or to allow destruction of stills, even if there had been a police force to do it. From August to November 1878, Portland merchants shipped 4,889 gallons of molasses to Sitka.³¹

In 1879, the non-Native Sitkans sent to Victoria for a British warship for protection, claiming they feared a Tlingit attack. The Kiks.ádi Clan leader was demanding compensation, and wages owed, after the deaths of five clan members working for a whaler, and made threats when authorities did not do anything about it. The HMS *Osprey* responded, and the incident shamed the government into stationing a U.S. Navy ship at Sitka.

In 1879, Commander Lester Beardslee of the USS *Jamestown* found 360 U.S. citizens living at Sitka, of whom 34 had been born in the United States.

Increasing Economic Activity

By the end of the 1870s, the national economic depression was over and gold strikes and the salmon fisheries brought in more people and outside investment to Alaska. The first canneries were built at Old Sitka and at Klawock, in 1878.

More visitors, and writers, started to come to Alaska in the late 1870s, and the Pacific Steamship Line had the first tourist cruise to Glacier Bay in 1882.

What brought Alaska attention, population, and crime, was gold mining. A large strike in 1880 at what is now Juneau put Alaska on the map.

Canneries and gold mines hired Native workers, but, backed by the government, those industries seized Native land and resources. Native people could not do anything about it; they still were not citizens, and their rights to land and resources were not recognized. Even their rights to their homes and personal property were not always protected.

Missionaries

A gold strike on the Cassiar River in the early 1870s brought people from all over the region to Wrangell, looking for work. Those people included Tsimshian Christians, from northern British Columbia, who held Christian services. A soldier at the Army fort (which had reopened, because of the gold rush) wrote a letter to his commander, pleading for more missionaries, to continue their work. Presbyterian missionary

Sheldon Jackson had the soldier's letter published in the Chicago Tribune, to get support for missions in Alaska.

Sheldon Jackson brought a missionary to Wrangell, where she started a



Rudolph Walton may be the boy second from the left in the front in the picture of the boys of the Presbyterian school, in 1883. *Presbyterian Historical Society, Sheldon Jackson Collection*



girls' home. In 1878 he sent a young missionary and a teacher to Sitka, where they started a day school, although it closed later that same year.

From the earliest days of American occupation, Tlingit leaders were asking for schools, and their requests intensified in the late 1870s.³²

Tlingit people had strong trading and cultural ties with the Tsimshian people, so knew all about the missions in British Columbia. Back in 1856, Anglican missionary William Duncan had gone to the Hudson's Bay Company's Port Simpson, now Lax-Kw'alaams, just south of the border with the United States. Duncan and Tsimshian Christians built their own town at Metlakatla, near Prince Rupert, in 1862. They soon had a sawmill and new frame houses (instead of the older style clan houses).³³

In 1874 a Methodist missionary, Thomas Crosby, arrived at Port Simpson, at the invitation of Tsimshian people who had converted to Christianity at Victoria, and were already spreading Christianity on their own. Crosby and the Tsimshian Christians established churches and



School No 1. Sitka.
(White and Creole)

The "white" school, probably in the 1880s. Presbyterian Historical Society, Sheldon Jackson Collection

schools in the villages, at the request of the residents.³⁴

The major mission sites had sawmills, and there was even a cannery at Metlakatla, and an enormous church. Metlakatla was famous, and was admired by authorities for "civilizing" the Native people.

The desire for missions by the Tlingit people, since it was based on the model of William Duncan, could have been driven in part by an effort to get sawmills and other economic development of their own, and new, prestigious, frame-style houses.³⁵

This is not to say that the Tsimshian or Tlingit were requesting missions just for the material benefits, but wanting to help their children to succeed was probably part of the appeal of Protestant Christianity.

The Sitka Native school restarted in 1880. One early student, Rudolph Walton, or Kawootk', was to become a leader in the Kiks.ádi clan, and another early student, Kaads'aatí, William Wells, was a Looknax adi clan heir.³⁶ Some of the boys asked to live at the school. After the school building burned down in January 1882, these young men and the missionaries built their own large school building, dismantling an abandoned cannery at Old Sitka, boating it seven miles and hauling it up the beach.³⁷

The Sitka mission saw success because of the early support of certain Tlingit leaders, and the dedication and drive of the first students.

Protestant Christianity demanded transformation both inwardly and outwardly. Even the best-intentioned people of the era believed that Native culture and language was the problem that prevented Native people from succeeding.³⁸ Presbyterian Tlingit people kept speaking Tlingit and continued some customs, but they were deliberately putting away culture and language in order to make a better life for their children. In spite of the sacrifice that the Tlingit Presbyterians made, they were still subject to racial bias by authorities, had less money, and suffered much higher mortality from diseases than did non-Natives.

The Shelling of Angoon

In 1882, the Revenue Cutter *Corwin* destroyed most of the village of Angoon, over a protest by Angoon Tlingit demanding compensation from a whaling company for an accidental death of a leader. In contrast to the shelling of Kake in 1869, which received little attention, the



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

destruction of Angoon was condemned in Congress and in American newspapers. In spite of the recognition of the brutality of the act, Angoon residents did not receive an apology until a century later.

The 1884 Organic Act

The 1884 Organic Act was Alaska's first government of any kind, even though Alaska had been part of the United States for 17 years. By 1884, America had changed dramatically from what it had been in 1867. In the late 1870s, Americans saw the seemingly-limitless frontier ending. The Long Depression was over, and the United States went back to fast economic and population growth.

The success of Sheldon Jackson's mission in Sitka brought him influence in how the Organic Act was written, and he was made General Agent for Education in Alaska. The Act provided for education for Alaskans "without reference to race." In practice, racism led to separate schools for Natives and non-Natives, but all teachers were hired by the government until 1905.

Sheldon Jackson's success met resistance in Sitka, by the first government officials and by members of the Russian Orthodox Church. In 1886, a Tlingit mother sued the mission over not being allowed to take her child

out of the school. In order to send their children to the school, parents had to sign a five-year indenture, which the plaintiffs argued amounted to slavery. The judge decided that a Native mother did not have the right to take her child, because he believed the school was so much superior to Native life.³⁹ In the Russian American Company days, not very many Tlingit people joined the Russian Orthodox church.⁴⁰ By the late 1880s, the Russian Orthodox Church in Sitka grew rapidly with Native converts, perhaps because this church respected Native control more than the Presbyterian church did.⁴¹

Legacy of 1867-1877

The stereotype, and the consequent treatment, of Native people from 150 years ago left a harsh legacy. Alaska Natives were not citizens until 1924. Schools were not integrated in Sitka until 1949, and Native rights to land and resources were not recognized until 1971.

The result of that stereotype – the denial of justice and opportunities in housing, commerce, employment and education, and being regarded as inferior - is economic marginalization. This, in turn, contributed to a horrific level of early death. Most Tlingit people, into the 1950s, lost multiple family members to diseases like tuberculosis, influenza, and measles. Losses like this can lead to post-traumatic stress syndrome. These are some of the obstacles Native people have had to deal with in the past century and a half, that most non-Natives did not.

In addition to the physical obstacles, the stereotype itself persists. It's important to learn about our history, to see how what people did long ago shapes us today. In particular, we need to learn about how Native stereotypes and racial bias have played out in our history. Understanding our past is a step toward understanding the present, and making a better future.

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