

Alaska's Heritage

CHAPTER 3-7: POLITICAL AND SOCIAL ORGANIZATION

The tsar was far away

The time that Alaska was part of Russian America can be divided into two periods of government. The first period was from 1741 until 1798. In these years, the Russian government limited its activity in Alaska. It encouraged various merchants to send parties to the new territory and sent expeditions to explore and report on conditions there. It also issued orders that were seldom observed so far away from the imperial capital at Saint Petersburg and received tribute or taxes in the form of furs taken from the Natives of Alaska.

Tsarina Catherine the Great wrote to the governor of Siberia in 1766, declaring the Natives of the Aleutian Islands and the Alaska Peninsula to be Russian subjects. She instructed the Russian fur-traders to treat their new fellow subjects well. After this, tax collectors accompanied Russian fur-hunters on their voyages to Alaska and the government licensed fur-hunting expeditions. Officials who accompanied the fur-hunters tried to prevent the hunters from mistreating the Natives they met. Often, however, fur hunters mistreated and enslaved the Natives they were able to overpower. Competing hunting parties fought with each other and with Natives who resisted them, and usually ignored warnings sent by government officials in Siberia and western Russia. The saying "God is high and the tsar far away," stressed Alaska's remoteness from the central concerns of the Russian empire.

The tsar creates a new company

Although the tsar came no nearer, Russian activity in Alaska came to be more closely controlled after 1799. In that year Tsar Paul I granted a single firm, the Russian-American Company, all rights to the fur trade and other resources of Alaska. The new company was a business similar to the Hudson's Bay Company and the East India Company that the British Empire used to conquer and trade in North America and in Asia. The new company was also a part of the Russian government.

The company's charter, or authorization to do business, made it an independent government department that answered only to the tsar or tsarina. The company's status as a commercial organization allowed it to make money and reward its stockholders. These included the tsars and tsarinas, their families, and many high government officials. Its commercial nature also decreased the chances that

the company's activities on Russia's eastern frontier would involve the Russian government in conflict with other nations. The company's status as a government organization, on the other hand, allowed it to draw on government money and resources for its projects.

The charter of the Russian-American Company awarded it use of all hunting grounds and settlements from 55 degrees North (about the latitude of today's Metlakatla) to Bering Strait and the right to establish new settlements to the north and south of these boundaries. The company could also "use and profit by everything which has been or shall be discovered in those latitudes, on the surface and in the interior of the earth, without competition from others." The company's charter directed it to:

1. use Natives rather than Russians in hunting;
2. survey America ethnographically, statistically, geographically, and prepare maps and charts;
3. assay ores, evaluate agricultural potential, and prepare reports on these subjects;
4. catalog books in the Kodiak library and supplement these;
5. report on crafts and the kinds of skilled workers and tools needed;
6. investigate the possibility of whale hunting.

Alexander Baranov heads company in Alaska

All Russians in Alaska united under the new company, directed in Alaska by Chief Manager Alexander Baranov. He made his headquarters at Kodiak.

The company headquarters, at first in the Siberian town of Irkutsk, soon moved to Saint Petersburg. A board of directors oversaw company affairs, but responsibility for management of the company in Alaska rested with the chief manager. In this capacity, Baranov guided growth of the colonies, oversaw the fur trade, selected sites for settlements, negotiated with Natives and with Euroamericans who intruded, and generally served as governor of Russian America.

Baranov served as chief manager from 1799 to 1818. He reported to the board of directors, who in turn reported at first to the tsar and later to various government departments. In 1808 Baranov moved the colonial capital from Kodiak

to Sitka. In 1817, Leontii A. Hagemeister, a Russian naval officer, arrived at Sitka. He brought with him a shipload of provisions and authority to replace Baranov if necessary. Baranov was 71 years old and ill. He had asked repeatedly to be relieved of his duties, so Hagemeister took control in January of 1818.

Baranov had to decide where to go after his retirement. His wife Anna, a Kenai Native, and their two children lived at Kodiak. He also had relatives living in Russia, but the idea of retiring to Boston where he had friends among the American ship captains with whom he had done business appealed to him. He even considered going to Hawaii. There he could end his days in the company of King Kamehameha, who had become a friend over the years through exchanges of gifts and news carried by ships' captains. Other Russians believed it would be unfitting for such a prominent person to end his days among foreigners. They strongly advised Baranov to return to Russia and he sailed there, only to die at sea on the way in 1819.

Naval officers serve as chief managers

Hagemeister was the first of 13 Russian naval officers who served as chief manager. Baron Ferdinand Wrangell was one of the more notable of the chief managers who followed Hagemeister. At age 35 Wrangell was already an experienced arctic and nautical explorer when appointed to the chief manager's post in 1829. After receiving the appointment he made a farewell visit to his home town in Russia. While there, he met, courted, and married 19-year old Elizabeth Rossilion. They married on May 31, 1829, and left shortly thereafter for Sitka. They traveled overland through Russia to reach the Pacific coast. The journey lasted over a year and on the way their first child was born. Baroness Wrangell became the first chief manager's wife to go to Alaska.

When he took charge at Sitka, Wrangell tightened administration of Russian-American Company affairs in Alaska. He recognized Father Veniaminov, then at Unalaska, as an especially effective priest and asked for his transfer to Sitka. Wrangell concentrated ship-building at Sitka under the Creole Osip Netsvetov, who had learned the art at Saint Petersburg. He also had the Pacific coast's first sawmill erected at Sitka in 1833. Wrangell's earlier interest in exploration continued and during his administration much new information about Alaska's geography was collected. Fort Saint Michael to the north and Fort Saint Dionysius to the south were established. Schools and hospitals, that had been established at Sitka, Kodiak, Unalaska, and Atka between 1817 and 1821, were

also improved during Wrangell's time as chief manager.

Mrs. Wrangell also influenced events in Alaska. Her moral influence caused many informal alliances to become marriages. Her guidance gave new energy to the social activities that made life more tolerable for the Russians in their isolated colonial outpost. Her work with the sick earned her the respect and admiration of all Sitkans, including Tlingit chiefs Annahootz, Hootz, and Naushketl who praised her extravagantly.

Wrangell turned over the chief manager's job to Ivan Kupreianov in 1835. He and Mrs. Wrangell returned to Russia, where he became a director of the Russian-American Company. He rose to the rank of rear admiral in the Russian Navy and held important posts in the government. His interest in Alaska continued and he published a significant study on Russian America. In 1854 Wrangell was appointed adjutant-general and full admiral, two of the highest possible ranks in the Russian military service. He retired in 1864 but remained active, energetically opposing the 1867 sale of Russian interests in Alaska to the United States. He died in 1870.

Managers oversee districts and fur-trading stations

Below the chief managers and their staffs at Sitka, the Russian-American Company was organized into districts. In 1828, just before Wrangell took over as chief manager, the districts included the Kurile Islands (those islands near the Kamchatka Peninsula), Atka (Commander Islands east to Unalaska), Unalaska (that island close to the Alaska Peninsula and including the Pribilof Islands), Kodiak (Semidi Islands east through Prince William Sound and north to Bristol Bay), Northern (Yukon River vicinity and Norton Sound), Sitka (Cape Saint Elias and south), and Ross (Fort Ross in California and its outposts). The districts were overseen by managers who supervised the employees who ran the individual fur-trading stations. These stations included forts and outlying posts.

Semen Lukin was one of the better post managers. He was the Creole son of one of the Russians killed at Yakutat in 1805. The Tlingits captured him there, but Semen was eventually released and was brought up in Baranov's family. Beginning in 1819, Lukin worked for the Russian-American Company at New Alexandrovsk, at the mouth of the Nushagak River, as an interpreter. He later served at both outlying posts and as the person in charge of a fort. He interpreted for the 1830 Vasilli'ev exploration of the Nushagak River.

In 1839 Lukin was in charge of a one-person station on the Kuskokwim River known as Lukin's Post. When Fort Kolmakov was built along the river, Lukin became the first manager. His fellow workers and the Natives with whom he traded respected him highly. Many Kuskokwim Natives went to him for advice. They felt welcome to come to visit and trade at any time, day or night. If people arrived at meal time, Lukin included them at the table. Lieutenant Zagoskin wrote admiringly of Lukin in 1842. "At Ft. St. Michael the manager is a grand gentleman; here (Kolmakov) he is a sort of big brother, and first among the workmen."

During the years Lukin managed the Kuskokwim post it profited. He pursued the fur trade with energy. The fort manager at St. Michael even complained to company officials that Lukin was taking furs that should have gone there. When Lukin died in 1856, vigorous Russian fur-trading in the Kuskokwim area ended.

Second charter provides more direction

In 1821 Tsar Alexander I authorized the Russian-American Company to do business in Alaska for another 20 years. The renewed charter restated many of the privileges granted earlier. It directed that the general manager of the Russian-American Company in Alaska should be a naval officer. This second charter provided more information about the status of company employees and Native groups, and relations with ships of other nations. It also gave Russians in the army and in the civil service the opportunity to work for the Russian-American Company while maintaining their status as soldiers or civil servants. Navy officers had received this privilege in 1802. The government paid one-half of the salaries of employees in this category and the company paid the other half. Seventy paragraphs of rules and regulations accompanied the 1821 charter.

Tsar Nicholas I renewed the company's charter in 1844 with revisions that remained in effect until 1867. Employees of the company were now considered government employees. They wore the uniform of the government finance department. Rules and regulations supplementing the 1844 charter discussed employees' rights, the company's financial affairs, and Alaska Natives' rights and privileges. Natives under Russian control were considered citizens of the Russian empire.

Social classes distinguish Russians in Alaska

Except for occasional explorers and travelers, priests, naval officers, merchants, skilled and ordinary workers in Alaska were on the Russian-American Company payroll. The Russians thought of themselves as comprising three groups. The "distinguished" group included the navy officers, army officers, ships' captains, and other high officials. The "semi-distinguished" group included low-level administrators such as trading post managers and technicians such as navigators. The third group included laborers, sailors, and soldiers.

Chief managers normally served in Alaska for five years. Other Russians came to Alaska as temporary residents for a maximum of seven years. As permanent legal residents of mainland Russia, they continued to pay taxes in their home provinces. Many employees, however, married Native women, had children, and did not return to Russia. When a number of these people became too old or ill to be active workers in the fur trade the government dealt with them by establishing a class of "colonial citizens." The people in this class could remain in Alaska permanently. Although not fit enough to participate directly in the fur trade they were given tools and seeds. With these they were expected to contribute to the company's needs by producing food.

Creoles comprised a major portion of the Russian-American Company's Alaska work force. Although the government considered Creoles Russian citizens, it excused them from many obligations required of people who lived in mainland Russia. They were exempted from serving in the military and from paying taxes. They could work for the company if they chose, or live as Natives.

Russians classify Native groups

The Russians classified Alaska Natives into dependent, not wholly independent, and independent tribes. The Natives were free of taxes and military service. Each year half of the dependent Natives males between the ages of 18 and 50 could be required to hunt furs. Furs taken could be sold only to the Russian-American Company. When not on business for the company, dependent Natives could not leave the vicinity of their villages or traditional fishing grounds without permission from company officials. The company classified Aleuts and Koniags as dependent, coastal Tanaina Athabaskans and Eskimos of Southcentral Alaska as not wholly independent, and interior Athabaskans,

northern Eskimos, and all Tlingits and Haidas as wholly independent.

The Russians had defeated the Aleuts and Kodiak Eskimos by meeting them in battles, preventing them from starting further battles by taking many hostages, and seizing all of their boats. They asserted their control over the coastal Athabaskans and Eskimos of Southcentral Alaska by maintaining forts among them. They maintained only occasional trading relationships with the interior Athabaskans and northern Eskimos. The Tlingits and Haidas of Southeast Alaska both traded and fought with the Russians. Apart from the initial eighteenth century efforts of the Aleuts and Alutiiq Eskimos to repulse the Russians, only the Southeast Alaska Natives made organized efforts to fight the Russians as in the attacks at Sitka in 1802 and at Yakutat in 1805.

The Russians never returned to Yakutat, but the Tlingits returned to Sitka only after 20 years. From then until 1867 the Russians and Tlingits maintained an uneasy truce that was often violated. Only the Russians' strength at Sitka kept the Tlingits from driving them away. Even in 1855, when Sitka had been reinforced by 100 Russian soldiers, the Tlingits attempted an attack. The Russians succeeded in repulsing the Natives, but Tlingit-Russian relations remained uneasy until 1867 when the Russians withdrew from Alaska.

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