Alaska's Heritage
CHAPTER 3-9: SPANISH, FRENCH, AND BRITISH CONTACTS WITH RUSSIAN AMERI

Spanish explorers reach Prince William Sound

As Russians spread a network of trading posts throughout Alaska, other European countries investigated North Pacific waters.

When the English threw the Spanish out of Florida in 1763, the latter renewed their interest in the North Pacific. This interest was stimulated by reports of Russian activity in that area sent to the Spanish king by his ambassador at Saint Petersburg.

In 1764 the Viceroy of Mexico, a Spanish colonial official, established settlements on the California coast where San Diego and Monterey are located today. Ten years later Spanish naval officer Juan Perez, sailing in the Santiago, went from San Bias on Mexico's west coast as far north as Southeast Alaska before turning back. Another Spanish explorer, Juan Francisco Bodega y Quadra, in the Sonora, went further north the next year and landed on Kruzof and Prince of Wales Islands. In 1779 the Spanish sent Ignacio de Arteaga y Brazan and Bodega y Quadra north in the Favorita and the Princesa. They visited Southeast Alaska, Prince William Sound, and Elizabeth Island off the western tip of the Kenai Peninsula before returning to Mexico.

Almost ten years later, Esteban Jose Martinez in the Princesa and Gonzalo Lope de Haro in the San Carlos sailed north to Prince William Sound. They claimed the area for Spain, but were alarmed by evidence of heavy Russian, English, and American trading in the area. Then the Spaniards sailed west, visiting Kodiak and the Trinity Islands before stopping at Unalaska to talk with the Russians. They learned there about Russian plans to occupy Nootka Sound, on the west coast of what is now Vancouver Island, and on his return to San Bias Martinez recommended that the Spanish occupy that area. In 1789 Martinez led an expedition to Nootka Sound and seized English fur-trading ships he found there. The next year Spanish Navy lieutenant Salvador Fidalgo sailed in the ship San Car/os into Prince William Sound and then went on to Cook Inlet.

In 1790, Alessandro Malaspina became the last explorer under the Spanish flag to visit Alaska. His round-the-world scientific voyage was diverted to Alaska by Spanish authorities who hoped that he would find a water route from Alaska's coast to the Mississippi River valley. With the ships Atrevida and Descubi'erta, Malaspina reached Yakutat in June of 1791.

This expedition followed the Nootka Convention of 1790 in which Spain gave up its interests in Nootka Sound to the British. That treaty marked the end of Spanish interest in Alaska. The brief period of that interest is commemorated by the names of geographic features, such as Malaspina Glacier and Bucareli Bay, that are named for Spanish explorers or the officials who sent them north. Two of Alaska's towns, Cordova and Valdez, draw their names from these early explorations.

French visit Yakutat and Lituya Bay

French, as well as Spanish, ships explored Alaskan waters. In 1786 French investigator Jean Francois de Galoup de la Perouse arrived at Lituya Bay in command of two ships. Members of the La Perouse expedition landed, made a detailed examination of the area, and claimed it for France. The French ships then headed south and were last seen near Australia in 1788. A record of their Alaska visit survives, however, because La Perouse sent one of his crew with maps and reports of discoveries back to France overland through Russia. A 1797 publication reported La Perouse's work in Alaska.

A glacier and a mountain named for La Perouse survive to commemorate this French activity in Alaska. It was the most significant French expedition to sail in Alaskan waters. Less important French expeditions to Alaska included Etienne Marchand who sailed in Alaskan waters in 1791, Camile de Roquefeuil who visited Sitka in 1817, and Abel A. du Petit-Thouars who passed through the Aleutian Islands and along the Southcentral and Southeast Alaska coast in the frigate Venus in 1836.

Cook begins British exploration of Alaska

British ships had entered the Pacific Ocean in the fate 1600s and early 1700s to explore and to prosecute wars against Spain. By the mid-1700s, voyages of exploration had come to predominate. British seafarer Captain James Cook already had made two world-wide voyages of exploration before his attention turned to the North Pacific Ocean. His first cruise had lasted from 1768 to 1771, his second from 1772 to 1775. In 1776 he began a third voyage to become familiar with areas of North America's Pacific Coast occupied by the Spanish and by the

Russians. He was also searching for the Northwest Passage and for a water route from the Pacific Ocean to the Mississippi River valley. Finding either route, it was thought, could eliminate long and dangerous trips around the tip of South America.

Cook left England in the ship Discovery, sailing in company with the Resolution. He sighted the Alaska coast in May of 1778, named Mount Edgecumbe near Sitka, and later landed on the south side of Kayak Island. He claimed the territory in the name of King George III of England. The British sailors also buried a bottle on the island. In the bottle were the names of their ships and the date. Cook's expedition continued north from Kayak Island to explore Prince William Sound and Cook Inlet. A boat crew from the Discoverv buried another bottle somewhere on Cook Inlet's Point Possession.

From Southcentral Alaska, Cook's ships sailed around the Alaska Peninsula and north to Bristol Bay and Norton Sound. Returning south, the British met Russian fur traders at Unalaska before heading along the Alaska coast to Icy Cape. From that point. Cook took his ships southwest to Hawaii. There, Hawaiians killed him on the beach during a February 1779 fight.

Cook's explorations contributed a great deal to the writing and mapping of Alaskan geography. As Cook himself noted after his conversations with the Russians at Unalaska, they knew little of the Alaska mainland at that time. His 1776 to 1779 voyage also resulted in an expanded Alaska fur trade, which had been previously limited to trade between Alaska Natives and Russians.

After Cook's death in Hawaii in 1779, his ships sailed north through Bering Strait before heading toward England. On the way to England, they stopped at the port of Macao on China's seacoast. Sea otter pelts the British sailors had traded from Indians on the Pacific Northwest Coast brought high prices from the Chinese. Taking their cue from this, British merchants on the China coast sent Captain James Hannah in the ship Sea Otter to Alaskan waters in 1785. He returned with 560 otter pelts that sold for 20,600 piastres or Spanish dollars, each worth about one U.S. dollar. This voyage started serious British competition in Alaska's maritime fur trade. By 1787 Gregorii Shelikhov was complaining to Russian officials that while one British ship had traded in Alaska in 1785, five more ships had come in 1786.

Vancouver charts Alaska coasts

George Vancouver, another British navy officer, expanded the knowledge obtained by Cook's Alaska visit. Vancouver arrived at Nootka Sound in 1792 with the ships Discovery and Chatham. His purpose was to take possession of the Nootka Sound outpost the Spanish were giving up. He did this in August of 1792. In 1793 he took his ships north and sighted land in the vicinity of Portland Canal. After exploring and naming that waterway, Vancouver took his ships even further north, reaching the Stikine River. Twelve months later Vancouver entered Cook Inlet. He found Russians camped near what is now Port Graham. Leaving there, the British explorers charted the Turnagain and Knik arms of Cook Inlet and also Prince William Sound. They then visited Yakutat and surveyed Lynn Canal before completing their exploration of Alaska in August of 1794. During their three years' work in Alaskan waters, the people of Vancouver's expedition had surveyed the entire "Inside Passage" from Puget Sound to Lynn Canal, as well as much of the outer coast, Prince William Sound, and Cook Inlet. In Southeast Alaska Vancouver named many of the principal waterways: Clarence Strait, Frederick Sound, Chatham Strait, Stephens Passage, and Lynn Canal. Vancouver's officers and crew explored all of these waterways, and many others, in detail in small boats. Vancouver's investigations led the British to conclude that there was no water passage from the Pacific Ocean into the Mississippi valley. For many years the charts prepared by Vancouver were the best navigation aids to Alaskan waters.

British also approach Alaska from the east

British law required that British traders who obtained furs in Alaska deal with the Chinese through the East India Company at Bombay. This cut into profits and discouraged British traders from becoming too active in the Northwest Coast maritime fur trade, but the British were also approaching Alaska overland from the east. Hudson's Bay Company fur traders had begun exploring Canada from the east in 1668. By 1793 one of them, Alexander Mackenzie, had reached Canada's Pacific coast near what is now Ocean Falls, British Columbia.

Hudson's Bay Company traders were soon obtaining some furs that Southeast Alaska's Tlingits might have traded to the Russians. The British traders were also pressing for access from their posts in interior western Canada to the sea. This would allow them to receive supplies by sea and to send cargos of pelts back to Britain by sea, much cheaper and easier methods of transport than long overland journeys to and from Atlantic seaports.

The Russians met this British challenge to the territory they claimed by establishing Fort St. Dionysius at the mouth of the Stikine River in 1833. The fort controlled access to the river, a natural route from interior Canada to the sea. Potential conflict in the area was resolved in 1839, however. In that year the Hudson's Bay Company leased the Alaska mainland from Portland Canal to Cape Spencer from the Russian-American Company. The British agreed to pay the Russians a yearly rent of 2,000 river otter skins and to sell food from British farms in the Columbia River area to the Russians.
In 1840, a British sidewheel ship, the Beaver, steamed into what is now Wrangell harbor to raise the Hudson's Bay Company flag over Fort St. Dionysius, which was renamed Fort Stikine. The Beaver was the first steam-powered vessel to operate in Alaskan waters. Fort Stikine became a major trading center for the Tlingits. They came in canoes to exchange furs for Hudson's Bay Company blankets, guns, gunpowder, and liquor. They were shrewd traders. They might exchange a pile of furs for a gun, then trade the same gun to Athabaskans for twice as large a pile of furs.

The Tlingits were well aware of the value of the goods. Often an experienced older woman kept track of prices, which changed with supply and demand, and had to approve each trade. Eulachon oil, for example, was a trade item much desired by Athabaskans to the east. The value of the oil would drop to almost nothing when unusually large runs of the small fish visited the coast.

The coastal Indians competed fiercely for trade. Each group wanted a trade monopoly in its own territory. The Hudson's Bay Company built another trading post on the Alaska mainland at Taku Harbor, northwest of Fort Stikine, in 1840. The company abandoned the post after three years, partly for lack of customers. The Taku Indians had kept other tribes from trading in the waters they controlled. Hudson's Bay Company also abandoned Fort Stikine in 1849. Thereafter the company did its trading in Alaskan waters from the decks of ships.

Hudson's Bay Company establishes interior Alaska post

Hundreds of miles inland from Fort Stikine, British traders built another post in Alaska-this time without the approval of the Russians. In 1845, Hudson's Bay Company chief trader John Bell set out westward from Fort McPherson in Canada. He reached the large, clear, southwest-flowing Porcupine River and went down it 460 miles to where it joined the muddy Yukon River. The next year, trader Alexander Hunter Murray retraced Bell's route. When he reached the point where

the rivers joined he built a trading post and named it for the Yukon River. Fort Yukon was the most isolated of all of the Hudson's Bay Company posts.

It was a bold move by the Hudson's Bay Company. By this time the 141st meridian had been set by treaty as the Russian territorial boundary and Fort Yukon was well west of that line. The new post benefitted Natives all along the Yukon River. Now there was competition for furs. Murray noted that as soon as the Russian-American Company learned of the British post, it lowered its prices for goods at Nulato.

...kettles knocked down from twenty to ten skins each, common guns to ten skins, above a pint of powder given for a measure, and beads and other things, above a half cheaper, and cloth which they cannot dispose of given for nothing.

The Fort Yukon post grew. There was a large log house for the commander, separate one-room cabins for workers, a storeroom, kitchen, and four blockhouses. Windows were of parchment, except in the commander's house where glass was used.

British seafarers look for the Northwest Passage

Even after the voyages of Cook and Vancouver, British seafarers continued to look for a Northwest Passage. The British king offered a prize of 20,000 pounds-about $100,000-for its discovery. In 1826 Sir John Franklin drew up an ambitious plan to send a fleet of ships north of Alaska and Canada through unexplored waters. One group would search from the east; the other from the west. Sir John himself led the eastern approach from the Atlantic Ocean. Captain Frederick W. Beechey of the British Royal Navy sailed H.M.S. Blossom on the westward leg through the Bering Sea. He hoped to join Franklin somewhere on the arctic coast.

The arctic ice pack stopped Beechey near Icy Cape. His crew took a boat from the Blossom through leads in the ice pack to Point Barrow. Ice forced Franklin to turn back to the Atlantic Ocean several hundred miles to the east of the waiting Blossom. Franklin had reached and named Prudhoe Bay.

Eleven years later Hudson's Bay Company traders Peter W. Dease and Thomas Simpson went down the Mackenzie River in Canada in an effort to complete Franklin's route. They, too, were stopped by arctic ice. Simpson did not give up. Walking wherever he could not make use of Eskimo boats and open leads/ he reached Point Barrow on August 4, 1837.

Franklin renewed his efforts to sail the Northwest Passage. Leaving England with crews totaling 134 people on two ships, the Erebus and the Terror, in 1845, he sailed from the Atlantic Ocean into arctic waters and was never seen again. When it was apparent the expedition was lost, Europe and America began a massive search. Many rescue vessels sailed into the Bering Sea looking for the missing expedition. Finally, Eskimo reports and discovered bodies proved that all members of the Franklin venture had died of starvation or exposure after their ships were locked in arctic ice. The bodies were found in Canada, far from Alaska. Although unsuccessful, the rescue voyages did add to knowledge of Northwest and Arctic Alaska and the people there.

British involvement with Russian America fell into three categories. The first category was maritime exploration for the purpose of finding a Northwest Passage or a water route from the Pacific Ocean to the Mississippi River valley. The second category was maritime fur trade for sea mammal pelts which British ships could trade in turn for Chinese goods desired in Europe. The third category was inland fur trade for land mammal furs that the Hudson's Bay Company could obtain at forts Stikine, Taku, or Yukon. All of these activities made Britain the second most active European nation in Alaska after Russia, but it remained for a former British colony to more directly influence Alaska's future.