

Transfer of Alaska to the United States

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## DOCUMENTS.

[The editor would be pleased to receive manuscript documents bearing on the history of the Pacific Northwest for publication in this department of the Washington Historical Quarterly.]

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### **Transfer of Alaska to the United States.**

As the preparations for the Alaska-Yukon-Pacific Exposition are being hurried forward, and as the plans for the unveiling of Richard E. Brooks's statue of Seward by which the people of Seattle seek to honor the statesman who brought about the purchase of Alaska are likewise nearing completion, new interest is being aroused in matters pertaining to the purchase and the final transfer of the Territory to the United States. The following official documents are found in House of Representatives, Executive Document, Number 125, Fortieth Congress, second session, pages 1 to 8, (Public Documents, Serial Number 1337). Copies were made for publication here by Ashmun N. Brown. The first one embodies the instructions from Secretary of State Seward to General Rousseau:

Department of State, Washington, Aug. 7, 1867.

General: You will herewith receive the warrant of the president, under the great seal of the United States, appointing you commissioner on behalf of this government, to receive from a similar officer appointed on behalf of the imperial government of Russia, the territory ceded by that government to the United States, pursuant to the treaty of the 30th of March last. You will consequently enter into communication with Captain Pestchoureff, the Russian commissioner, now here, and arrange with him in regard to proceeding, as soon as may be convenient, to the territory referred to, in order that your commission may be fulfilled.

On arriving at Sitka, the principal town in the ceded territory, you will receive from the Russian commissioner the formal transfer of that territory, under mutual salutes from artillery, in which the United States will take the lead.

Pursuant to the stipulations of the treaty, that transfer will include all forts and military posts, and public buildings, such as the governor's house and those used for government purposes; dockyards, barracks, hospitals and schools; all public lands, and

all ungranted lots of ground at Sitka and Kodiak. Private dwellings and warehouses, blacksmiths', joiners', coopers', tanners', and other similar shops, ice-houses, flour and saw-mills, and any small barracks on the island, are subject to the control of their owners, and are not to be included in the transfer to the United States.

The respective commissioners, after distinguishing between the property to be transferred to the United States and that to be retained by individuals, will draw up and sign full inventories of the same in duplicate. In order, however, that the said individual proprietors may retain their property as aforesaid, or if they should so prefer may dispose of the same, you will, upon the production of the proper documentary or other proof of ownership, furnish the said proprietors with a certificate of their right to hold the same.

In accordance with the stipulations of the treaty, the churches and chapels in the ceded territory will continue to be the property of the members of the Greco-Russian church. Any house and lots which may have been granted to those churches will also remain their property.

As it is understood that the Russian American company possess, in that quarter, large stores of furs, provisions and other goods, now at Sitka, Kodiak and elsewhere on the main land and on the island, it is proper that that company should have a reasonable time to collect, sell or export that property. For that purpose the company may leave in the territory an agent or agents for the purpose of closing their business. No taxes will be levied on the property of the company now in the territory until Congress shall otherwise direct.

It is expected that, in the transaction of the important business hereby entrusted to you, it will be borne in mind that, in making the cession of the territory referred to, his Imperial Majesty the Emperor of all the Russias has been actuated by a desire of giving a signal proof of that friendship for the United States which has characterized his own reign and that of his illustrious predecessors. It is hoped, therefore, that all your intercourse with the Russian commissioner will be friendly, courteous and frank.

This department understands from the president that, upon the conclusion of the business with the Russian commissioner, you will have command in the territory, to be exercised under the orders of the war department.

I am, general, your obedient servant,

WILLIAM H. SEWARD.

Brigadier General Lovell H. Rousseau.

**GENREAL ROUSSEAU'S REPORT.**

Headquarters Department of the Columbia.  
Portland, Oregon, December 5, 1867.

Sir:—I have the honor to report that, on the receipt from you of my appointment by the President as United States commissioner to receive the formal transfer of the territory of Alaska, and also your instructions touching that transfer, I repaired at once to New York to make the necessary preparation to sail on the 21st of August, but on reaching that city I found it impossible to get off on that day.

I sought and obtained at once an interview with Baron Stoeckl, the Russian minister, and Captain Pestchoureff, of the Russian imperial navy, and Captain Koskul, representing the Russian American company; and it was arranged that we should sail from New York on the 31st of August, and we accordingly sailed on that day, via Panama, reaching San Francisco, California, on the 22d of September. As we entered the harbor of San Francisco, the batteries of the forts fired a salute.

On reaching San Francisco, we found the preparations for taking military possession of the new territory completed by Major General Halleck, who had ships laden with supplies for the troops, and transportation all ready for the troops themselves to Sitka.

Admiral Thatcher, also, had provided transportation for the commissioners on the propeller man-of-war *Ossipee*, Captain Emons commanding. Returning the admiral's call, visiting him on board his flagship *Pensacola*, the commissioners received a salute of her batteries.

Hastening in preparation, we took our departure for Sitka on the morning of the 27th of September.

When we set sail, we intended to go directly by the open sea to New Archangel, but after three or four days, during which the sea was very rough, with little or no wind, and making very slow progress, we concluded to go by way of Victoria and the straits, thus taking the inland passage. The troops and supplies had preceded us a day or two from San Francisco, and as they could not land at Sitka before we reached there, it was thought best to take the inland route in order to insure our arrival at the latter place certainly within a reasonable time. This we could not do in the open sea, as it was quite rough, and what wind we had or expected to have in October and till the middle of November was from the northwest (a head wind for us).

Our ship was very slow, and with a head wind or rough sea made not more than two or three knots an hour. The winds in the Northern Pacific from May to November inclusive, are from the northwest generally, and the balance of the year from the southwest. Besides, I suffered greatly from sea-sickness, followed by what I feared was congestive chills, and sought to avoid this suffering by taking the inland passage.

We reached Esquimalt, Vancouver's Island, on the night of the 4th of October, took in a supply of coal, and steamed for Sitka on the morning of the 6th. After a pleasant passage, taking it altogether, we cast anchor in the harbor of New Archangel on the 18th of October, at eleven o'clock a. m., where we found the troops and supplies had preceded us several days. The day was bright and beautiful. We landed immediately, and fixed the hour of three and a half o'clock that day for the transfer, of which General Jeff C. Davis, commanding the troops there; Captain Emmons, United States ship *Ossipee*; Captain McDougall, United States ship *Jamestown*; Captain Bradford, United States ship *Resaca*, and the officers of their respective commands, as also the governor of the territory, the Prince Maksoutoff, were notified and invited to be present.

The command of General Davis, about two hundred and fifty strong, in full uniform, armed and handsomely equipped, were landed about three o'clock, and marched up to the top of the eminence on which stands the governor's house, where the transfer was to be made. At the same time a company of Russian soldiers were marched to the ground, and took their place upon the left of the flag-staff, from which the Russian flag was then floating. The command of General Davis was formed under his direction on the right. The United States flag to be raised on the occasion was in care of a color guard—a lieutenant, a sergeant and ten men of General Davis' command. The officers above named, as well as the officers under their command, the Prince Maksoutoff, and his wife, the Princess Maksoutoff, together with many Russian and American citizens, and some Indians were present. The formation of the ground, however, was such as to preclude any considerable demonstration.

It was arranged by Captain Pestchoureff and myself that, in firing the salutes on the exchange of flags, the United States should lead off, in accordance with your instructions, but that there should be alternate guns from the American and Russian batteries, thus giving the flag of each nation a double national salute; the national salute being thus answered in the moment it was given. The troops being promptly formed, were, at precisely half past three o'clock, brought to a present arms, the signal given to the *Ossipee* (Lieutenant Crossman, executive officer of the ship, and for the time in command), which was to fire the salute, and the ceremony was begun by lowering the Russian flag. As it began its descent down the flag staff the battery of the *Ossipee*, with large nine-inch guns, led off in the salute, peal after peal crashing and re-echoing in the gorges of the surrounding mountains, answered by the Russian water battery (a battery on the wharf) firing alternately. But the ceremony was interrupted by the catching of the Russian flag in the ropes attached to the flag staff. The soldier who was lowering it, continuing to pull at it, tore off the border by which it was attached, leaving the flag entwined tightly around the ropes. The flag staff was a native pine, perhaps ninety feet in height. In an instant the

Russian soldiers, taking different shrouds attached to the flag staff, attempted to ascend to the flag, which, having been whipped around the ropes by the wind, remained tight and fast. At first (being sailors as well as soldiers) they made rapid progress, but laboring hard they soon became tired, and when half way up scarcely moved at all and finally came to a standstill. There was a dilemma, but in a moment a "boatswain's chair," so-called, was made by knotting a rope to make a loop for a man to sit in and be pulled upward, and another Russian soldier was quickly drawn up to the flag. On reaching it he detached it from the ropes, and not hearing the calls from Captain Pestchoureff below to "bring it down," dropped it below, and in its descent it fell on the bayonets of the Russian soldiers.

The United States flag (the one given to me for that purpose, by your direction, at Washington) was then properly attached and began its ascent, hoisted by my private secretary, George Lovell Rousseau, and again the salutes were fired as before, the Russian water battery leading off. The flag was so hoisted that in the instant it reached its place the report of the last big gun of the Ossipee reverberated from the mountains around. The salutes being completed, Captain Pestchoureff stepped up to me and said: "General Rousseau, by authority from his Majesty, the Emperor of Russia, I transfer to the United States the Territory of Alaska," and in a few words I acknowledged the acceptance of the transfer, and the ceremony was at an end. Three cheers were then spontaneously given for the United States flag by the American citizens present, although this was no part of the programme, and on some accounts I regretted that it occurred.

Captain Pestchoureff, the governor and myself, on the Monday following, went to work to distinguish between the public and private buildings in the town of New Archangel, and giving certificates to private individual owners of property there.

I found that by the charter of the Russian American company it had authority to vest its employes, occupants of land in the territory, the title thereto. This was on condition, however, that the possession of the Indians should not be interfered with. Acting under this charter, the company, from the first caused dwellings to be erected for the use of its employes on lots of ground set apart for that purpose. The title in fee to such premises was often vested in the employe in possession, when he had faithfully served out his term with the company; or having died before it ended, and having a widow or children in the Territory, the title was frequently vested in them. This was one mode adopted by the company of taking care of its employes, when, by old age or other disability, they were unable to maintain themselves, and of their widows or children after their death. So the employe generally occupied such dwelling while he lived, and at his death it passed to his widow or children, if any in the territory; and if none, then it reverted to the company. The term of service of these employes was somewhat

similar to an apprenticeship in our law. It was fixed by the charter at five years, the company paying certain wages, which were small, and furnishing the necessary supplies, and presenting a bonus, named in the contract, to the employe at the end of the term of service. In some instances, not many, the employes brought with them their wives from Russia, but far more frequently they were unmarried men and intermarried with Indian women in the territory.

By a provision of the charter, or by rule of the company, to which it conformed in all cases as to a law, an old and disabled employe, while he lived in the territory, and his widow and children after his death (so long as the children were unable to maintain themselves) were considered the wards of the company, to whom it regularly paid a yearly pension.

Finding in its charter this authority of the company to vest title to land in its employes, and that very many of the dwellings erected by the company were occupied by its employes, or their widows and children, who claimed the property in fee, the commissioners called on the governor, Prince Maksoutoff, to define and certify to the interests of each individual thus occupying such dwellings and lots, in order that we might distinguish between those who owned the property in fee and those who claimed a less interest, and in compliance with your instructions give certificates to the claimants accordingly.

The inventories respectively marked C and D (forming part of the protocol) which are forwarded with this report, will show, in part, the action of the governor in the premises; for the rest he gave a certificate stating the interest of each occupant in the premises occupied, on the back of which the commissioners placed their approval, and it was left to be delivered to the occupant. In order to be accurate, and to prevent disputes hereafter about the title to houses and lots, we made a map of New Archangel (forwarded with this report) on which every house and dwelling in town is located and numbered, and as between the claimant and the United States, the title to it defined and settled in the inventories. This was thought necessary in order to give in accordance with your instructions to each man of property who desired to dispose of it, a certificate of title.

The town of New Archangel was built in the main by the Russian American Company, and except the dwellings transferred by them to their employes, and the public buildings transferred to the United States, is owned by that company still; yet it has but a possessory interest in the land, as it only had permission to erect buildings upon it; for although it had authority to vest the title of lands in its employes, it had no power to vest such title in itself. The commissioners left the matter as they found it, and the company in possession of its buildings.

The harbor is not a very secure one, as it is rather exposed, and the bottom is too rocky to allow the anchors to hold well. On that account the Russian American Company has placed in it buoys and chain cables, to which the ships lying at anchor might

be fastened in aid of the anchorage. These cables etc., were the private property of the company, but as the harbor was not at all safe without them, and as we had several ships passing the winter there, I expressed a wish to the Russian commissioner that they might remain as they were for the present, to which he consented. As commissioner I had no authority to purchase the articles, but I requested Captain Pestchouroff and Governor Maksoutoff to name a price for which they might be bought. Ten thousand dollars was accordingly named, as will appear by the note of Captain Pestchouroff, which I forward herewith. I know very little of the value of buoys and chains, but think the price demanded is not unreasonable.

All the buildings in anywise used for public purposes were delivered to the United States commissioner, taken possession of and turned over to General Davis, as were also the public archives of the territory; and in a spirit of liberality the wharf and several valuable warehouses belonging to the Russian American company were included in the transfer by the Russian commissioner. Both the wharf and the warehouses were very much needed by our people.

We could not visit Kodiak, or any other point in the new territory, as the season in which we might expect stormy weather was rapidly approaching.

For the further action of the commissioners, in the execution of their commission, your attention is respectfully called to the protocol, map and inventories accompanying this report. With this report and accompanying papers, I return to you the United States flag used on the occasion of the transfer of the territory.

In your instructions, both written and verbal, you were somewhat particular to impress me with your desire that all the intercourse between the Russian and American commissioners should be liberal, frank and courteous; and I am pleased to say that from the meeting of Captain Pestchouroff and myself in your office till we parted, after our work was ended, all our communication and association with each other, personal and official, were of the friendliest character, and just such as I am sure you desired.

I found the Governor, Prince Maksoutoff and Captain Koskul, both representing the Russian American Company, equally kind and courteous with Captain Pestchouroff.

I saw very little of the new territory, and I regret that I could not see more. I cannot, therefore, say much about it which you do not already know. The speech of Mr. Sumner in the United States Senate on the ratification of the treaty ceding the territory of Alaska is very accurate in all its details, so far as I am able to judge. Indeed, I thought its accuracy very remarkable in the description it contained of the climate, the people, resources, etc., of the new territory, as he assumed to know nothing personally about it.

The people of Sitka seemed to be quiet, orderly and law-abiding; of the Russian proper there were about 500 on the island.

If kindly treated by our people, most of them will remain as citizens of the United States. Many of them have already made their election to remain under the stipulations of the treaty by which the territory was ceded to our government. Generally they were satisfied with the transfer of the territory, as were also most of the Indians. The latter received from the Americans since the transfer exorbitant prices for fish and game and whatever they had to sell, and were generally pleased with the change. A Kolloisian chief, however, angrily remarked, "True, we allowed the Russians to possess the island, but we did not intend to any and every fellow that may come along."

At New Archangel the climate is not cold, but it rains a great deal. Mr. Sumner was right when he said the climate was about the same as that of Washington City in temperature.

The valley of New Archangel is almost surrounded by high mountains, is very low and marshy, and does not afford a fair test of the adaptation of the territory to agricultural purposes. But I noticed vegetables growing in the gardens there, such as cabbages, turnips, potatoes, beets, etc., and that the beds or hills upon which they grew were considerably elevated to avoid the moisture caused by the constant rains. The potatoes were small, but both they and the beets were of the finest flavor. I was told that the climate of Kodiak and of the Aleutian Islands generally, as well as of the main land, was colder and dryer than that of Sitka, and that vegetation of various kinds could be grown there.

I saw fine hogs and sheep at Sitka that were raised on the island. I ate of both, and found them of the finest quality. I saw cows there, also, in good condition, which gave excellent milk.

The fisheries on the coast, as Mr. Sumner asserts, are, as I was informed by those who knew, very fine, and from which any quantity of fish may be taken—salmon, trout, cod and other kinds.

The forests are immense, and the timber, pine, etc., of a fine quality.

We remained a week at Sitka. It required that time to complete the transfer in the manner before stated. We steamed out of the harbor just at night, into the open sea, on Saturday, the 26th of November, for Cape Decision, seventy-five miles distant, where we could enter the straits, and by the inland passage return by the same route we took in going to Sitka. But before we reached the cape we encountered a storm, the severest known on the coast by any one now there. It lasted about twenty hours, and we very narrowly escaped being lost, nothing but the strength of our ship, and the efficiency of the crew, under Providence, saving us. In the midst of the gale, the tiller or rudder ropes, parted, all of our life-boats were swept away, and all of the fires under the boilers, save two, extinguished, with three feet of water in the wardroom and nearly as much on the main deck. The storm being ended, we put back to Sitka to repair damages. About thirty-five sailors were injured in the storm. In a few

days afterwards, with better luck, we reached Cape Decision, and came on through the straits to Victoria.

A steamer of ordinary size and power can go from Victoria to New Archangel by way of the straits, except about ten or fifteen miles; this by running up the straits to a point ten or fifteen miles beyond the town, thence entering the open sea and running back into the harbor. The passage is a safe one, and amidst scenery as grand and beautiful as there is in the world. The mountains, covered with forests, rise almost perpendicularly out of the water to a height of one to three thousand feet, and from the very tops of which gush out foaming waterfalls. In grandeur and sublimity there is nothing like it on this continent.

I have no doubt this passage—about 840 miles from Victoria to Sitka—will form a part of the great highway from the United States to the latter place, as it is both safe and delightfully pleasant. The waters are very deep, and anchorages not numerous, but enough. Along the shores are safe land-locked little bays and harbors, formed by notches in the mountain sides, where vessels of any size can anchor in quiet and safety.

Hoping that the president and yourself will be satisfied with my efforts to discharge the duty assigned me, in accordance with instructions given for my guidance, and that the new territory may prove as valuable an acquisition to our country as you would desire it, I have the honor to be, your obedient servant,

LOVELL H. ROUSSEAU,  
United States Commissioner and Brig. Gen., U. S. A.

Hon. William H. Seward,  
Secretary of State.