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The Pathfinder of Alaska

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Sitka in Olden Days

The First Alaska Day—October 18, 1867

(By Rev. A. P. Kashevaroff, Curator of the Alaska Territorial Library and Museum)

(Reprint from the Alaska School Bulletin)



THE events leading to the purchase and the treaty between the United States and Russia are very interesting to the student of history. The transfer of the Territory reads like a romance. So much has been written and told in books and story by various writers that one sometimes wonders how much of this is true and how much is fiction.

According to the speech of Senator Sumner on the floor of the U. S. Congress on the cession of Alaska, the idea of the cession of Alaska began as far back as 1855 when the Russian government was sounded on the subject. In 1860 the California interests through Senator Gwin and Mr. Appleton, Assistant Secretary of State, made unofficial proposals for the acquisition of the Territory. This proposal was made through the Russian minister at Washington who had communicated it to his government. The Russian government, through Prince Gorchakoff in a dispatch which reached America early in the summer of 1869 said that "the offer was not what might be expected; but that it merited mature reflection; that the minister of finance was about to inquire into the condition of these possessions, after which Russia would be in a position to treat. The subject was submerged by the presidential election

which was approaching, and then by the rebellion. After the rebellion the subject was again brought to light. This time by the interests in Washington Territory who wanted new facilities to obtain fish, fur and ice, and who sought the intervention of the National Government. The legislature of Washington Territory in the winter of 1866 adopted a memorial to the President of the United States in reference to the cod and other fisheries.

Shortly after another influence was felt. Senator Cole of California acting in behalf of certain persons in the state sought to obtain from the Russian government a license or franchise to gather furs in a portion of its American possessions. The Russian minister at Washington, whom Mr. Cole saw repeatedly upon this subject, was not authorized to act, and Mr. Cole, after conference with the Department of State was induced to address Mr. Clay, minister of the United States at St. Petersburg, who laid the application before the Russian government.

Some time had elapsed since the original attempt of Mr. Gwin, also a senator from California, and it is probable that the Russian government had obtained information which enabled it to see its way more clearly. There is reason to believe, also, that the administration of the fur company had not been entirely satisfactory, so that there were well-founded

hesitations with regard to the renewal of its franchise. Meanwhile in October, 1866, Mr. de Stoekl, who had long been the Russian minister at Washington, and enjoyed in a high degree the confidence of our government, returned home from a leave of absence, promising his best exertions to promote good relations between the two countries. While he was at St. Petersburg the applications from the United States were under consideration. As Mr. de Stoekl was leaving in February to return to his post, the Archduke Constantine, the brother of the chief adviser of the Emperor, handed him a map with the lines in our treaty marked upon it, and told him he

representing the United States government, and Captain Pestchoureff of the Russian Imperial Navy, representing the Russian government, and Captain Koskul, representing the Russian American Company. The commissioners sailed from New York on August 31, 1867, via the Isthmus of Panama, reaching San Francisco, Calif., on September 22nd.

On arriving at San Francisco, Gen. Rousseau found the preparations for taking military possession of the new Territory completed by Major Halleck, who had ships laden with supplies for the troops and transportation all ready for the troops themselves to Sitka. Admiral Thatcher had also



Historic Old Blockhouse at Sitka

might treat for the cession. The minister arrived in Washington early in March. A negotiation was opened at once with our government. Final instructions were received by cable from St. Petersburg on the 29th of March, and at four o'clock in the morning of the 30th of March this important treaty was signed by Mr. Seward on the part of the United States and Mr. de Stoekl on the part of Russia. Few treaties have been conceived, initiated, prosecuted and completed in so simple a manner without protocols or dispatches.

After the ratification of the treaty, June 30, 1867, commissioners for the formal transfer of the Territory were appointed: General Lovell H. Rousseau,

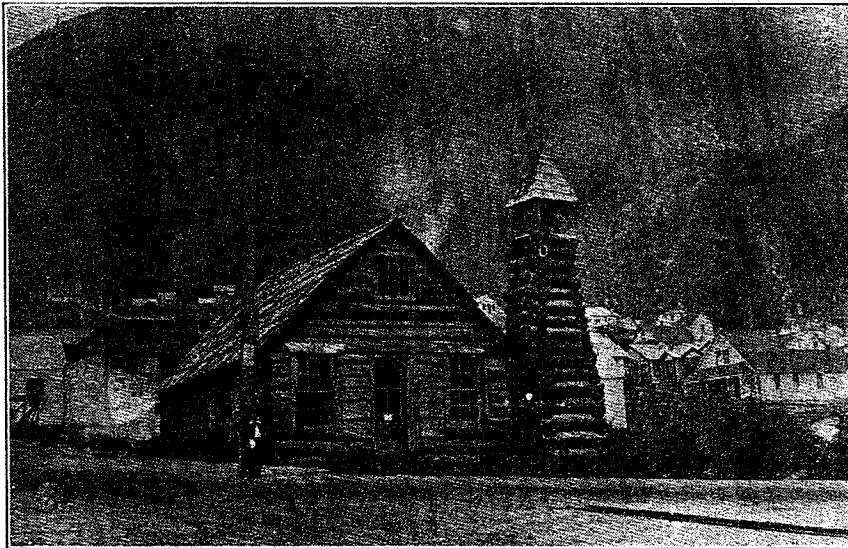
provided transportation for the commissioners on the propeller man-of-war "Ossipee," Captain Emmons commanding. The steamer "John L. Stevens," with General Jeff C. Davis and his command of 275 men, rank and file, left San Francisco on the 25th of September, sailing direct for Sitka, which was reached on the 9th of October.

In accordance with instructions from the headquarters, the troops were retained on the vessel until the arrival of the commissioners. However, the animals were landed on a small island upon the arrival of the "Stevens" at Sitka. The "Ossipee" with commissioners on board, left San Francisco two days later than the "Stevens." The "Ossipee"

was a very slow boat, making about two knots an hour. The ship arrived at Esquimalt on the 4th of October. After taking on a supply of coal it left this port on the 6th. On a beautiful clear morning of October 18, the "Ossippee" reached Sitka at 11:00 o'clock. The commissioners landed at once. The hour for the transfer was arranged to take place at 3:30 p. m. that afternoon. The various commanders present were notified: General Jeff C. Davis, commanding the U. S. troops, Captain Emmons, of the U. S. ship "Ossippee;" Captain McDougall, of the U. S. ship "Jamestown;" Captain Bradford, of the U. S. ship "Resaca," as well as the officers of their respective commands, as also the governor of the Territory, the Prince Maksoutoff.

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 the governor's house stood and where the official 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

to the "Ossippee," (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 "Ossippee," 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 (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 tightly entwined around the ropes. The flag-staff was a native spruce, 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. In a short time a boatswain's chair was made by knotting a rope to make a loop for a man to sit in and be pulled upwards and another Russian soldier was



Historic Old Landmark at Sitka

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 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 of the Indian chiefs were present. It was arranged by Captain Pestchouroff and General Rousseau that, in firing the salutes on the exchange of the flags the United States would lead off, in accordance with the instructions from the Secretary of State, but 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 brought to a present arms at precisely 3:30, the signal given

quickly drawn up to the flag. On reaching it he detached it from the ropes, and not hearing the calls from Captain Pestchouroff 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, (given to Gen. Rousseau by the direction of the Secretary of State at Washington for that purpose) was then properly attached and began its ascent, hoisted by General Rousseau's son, George Lovell Rousseau. 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 gun of the "Ossippee" reverberated from the mountains.

The salute being completed, Captain Pestchouroff stepped up to General Rousseau and said: "General Rousseau, by the authority from his majesty, the Emperor of Russia, I transfer to the United States the Territory of Alaska." In a few words General Rousseau acknowledged the acceptance of the trans-

(Continued on Page 20)

THE FIRST ALASKA DAY
(Continued from page 3)

fer and the ceremony was at an end. Three cheers were then spontaneously given for the United States flag by the American citizens present.

The effect upon the Russian citizenry was not that of elation, but rather the feeling was of sadness and gloom. However, later, most of the Russians were rather happy in becoming American citizens.

AN EXPERIENCE ON BERING SEA
(Continued from page 6)

penses of the case the money was pooled and divided four ways, each getting an equal share.

Some four years later George Greenwood was drowned within one hundred yards of where the "North Coast" landed near Solomon.

For more than a year the Wrangell Commercial Club has been beseeching the U. S. Department of Agriculture with letters petitioning a road survey from Wrangell to Shoemaker Bay, a distance of four or five miles. A road to Shoemaker bay would open up a section of land which is admirably adapted to farming and truck gardening, but which is being held back for lack of a road. The Shoemaker Bay region includes more than 1,000 acres of government land that could easily be cleared; it is well watered, well drained with two permanent streams. The tract is well sheltered from northerly winds and is surely a most desirable location for a small farming settlement. Today J. W. Pritchett, secretary of the Commercial Club, received a cablegram from District Forester Chas. H. Flory which reads as follows:

"Secretary Agriculture has approved road location survey to Shoemaker Bay. Expect work will be done this fall."

Earl C. Jameson, well known former Alaska newspaper man, is now residing in his former home in Huntington, West Virginia. He is in the newspaper game there.

A strike of considerable interest was made recently on the property of the American Mining & Milling Company near Hyder. A blind lead, ten feet in thickness was struck in the 1400-foot Fish Creek tunnel which carried good values.

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CAPT. GEO. A. HOWE
(Continued from page 16)

in Capt. A. E. Lathrop's boat, the "Perry."

Capt. Howe then left the Glenn party and returned to his old station at Eklutna, where he had a trading post. Captain Howe is now a resident of Anchorage, where he is employed by the Alaska Railroad. Although well along in years he is very active and takes a big interest in the workings of Igloo No. 15, of which he is a member. Recently he presented an old miner's map to the Igloo. The map is made on fine linen cloth and can be folded into a very small parcel. It bears the legend, "Miner's Map of the Upper Yukon River, by Stitt & Wilson, 1887." It is a very rare relic. It has been framed and hung in the Pioneer Hall at Anchorage

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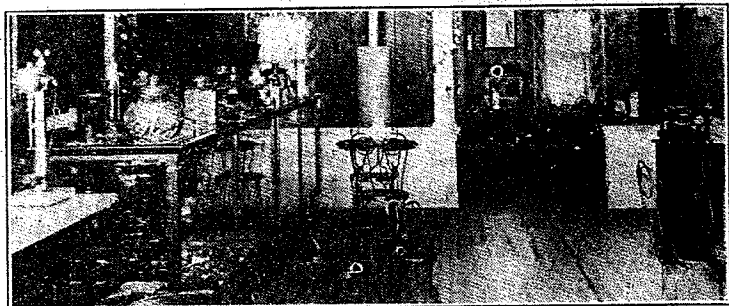
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