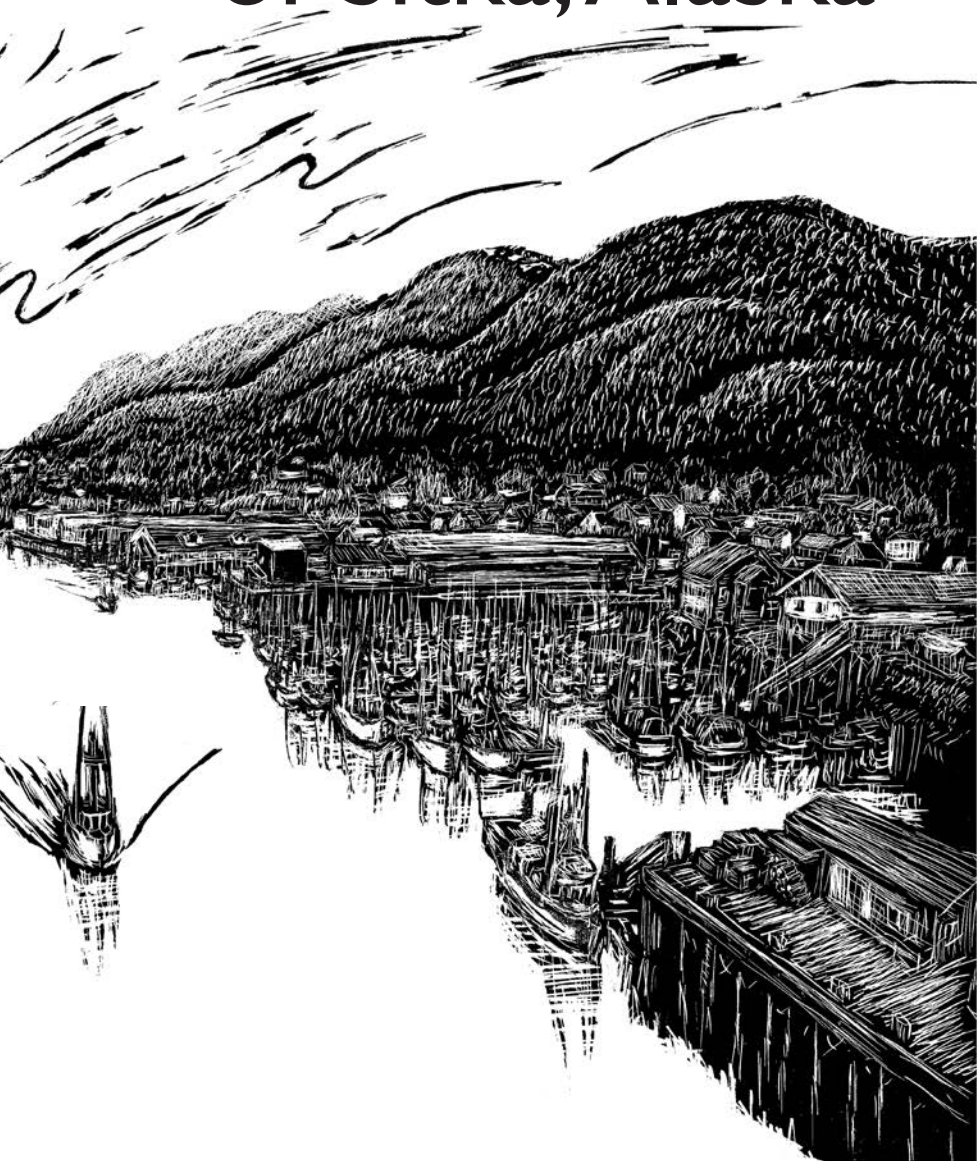


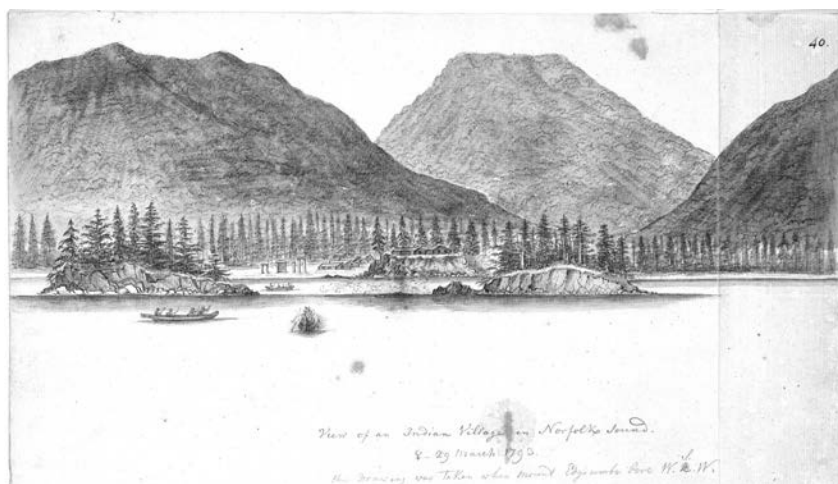
A Short History of Sitka, Alaska



by Rebecca Poulson and Cora Dow
Sitka Maritime Heritage Society

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Cover image “Sitka Channel” by Rebecca Poulson



Sitka, 1793 by Sigismund Bacstrom. Original at the Beineke Library at Yale University.

Indigenous America

“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.”

- Saankaláxt Ernestine Hayes¹

Sitka is in the heart of Lingít Aaní, the ancient homeland of the Lingít people.^a Lingít Aaní extends across most of Southeastern Alaska and into the Gulf of Alaska and the interior of what is now the Yukon Territory of Canada. The population of Southeastern Alaska 200 years ago was similar to what it is now, with around 55,000 Lingít and Haida people in 1805 compared to 72,000 residents now.²

Sitka’s maritime history goes back at least 10,000 years: In

a The English “L” uses the voice, but the Lingít “L” is voiceless. To make the sound, put your tongue in the same place as you would to say the English “L, then only breathe out. See Pronunciation Guide on page 4 for more.

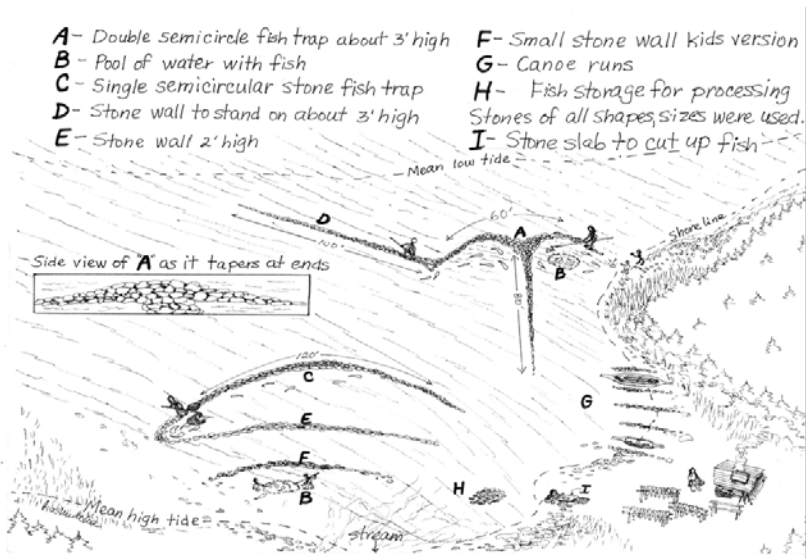
Southeast Alaska was covered with ice 26,000 to 18,000 years ago. Lingít history, and archaeology, tell that people were here long ago, even when most of the region was covered with ice, and returned when the ice retreated. Daanax.ils'eik Chuck Miller of the L'uknax.ádi Clan tells that the name L'úx, the volcano now called Mt. Edgecumbe, means "to flash" or "blinking." The first Lingít people came to Sitka by boat following the bright light of L'úx.³ Geologic research in the region dates the last eruption between 9,000 and 13,000 radiocarbon years ago.⁴

1996, 9,000-year-old human remains were found on Taan, or Prince of Wales Island. Found with the bones were stone tools from sources distant from that island, and chemical analysis showed this person ate a diet of marine foods; this person had access to some kind of boat.

Sitka's maritime history is Lingít history. Elegant vessels of the Northwest Coast, each crafted from a single tree, included the great ocean-going canoes, used for voyages of up to thousands of miles and for moving to summer settlements. Lingít woodworkers also crafted smaller canoes for hunting, fishing, and general transportation.

Lingít civilization developed sophisticated technology to efficiently harvest, preserve, store, and transport marine foods, including salmon, herring, sea plants, and marine mammals. For example, Pacific salmon spend their lives at sea then return to the

The picture on the first page shows Noow Tlein, or "Great Fort," or Castle Hill at the center. This was one of multiple settlements of Sheet'ká, named for its location on the outer side of the island of Shee. Kiks.ádi Clan Houses were on top of Noow Tlein⁶ and other Clan Houses faced onto a beach, now covered with fill. Other settlements of the Sheet'ká Kwaan (people of Sitka) were throughout Sitka Sound, the outer coast of Baranof and Chichagof Islands and Peril Strait. The canoe in the picture is a Head Canoe, a type soon replaced by canoes with an upswept bow.



Intertidal stone fish trap complex reconstruction near Klawock. Sketch by Wanda Culp. From "Traditional Knowledge and Harvesting of Salmon by HUNA and HINYAA TLINGIT" by Dr. Stephen Langdon.

One example of fishing technology is this intertidal stone fish trap, which was efficient and allowed for little waste. This type was constructed in slower moving water on tidal flats by piling stones on top of each other into circular shapes about knee high. When the salmon returned to their stream in the fall, at high tide these traps would be completely submerged and salmon could swim unimpeded. At low tide, some fish would be trapped while other fish backed out with the tide. Other types of harvest technology included spears, woven fish traps, and halibut hooks.

freshwater stream of their origin to spawn and die. They all arrive over a short period of time, and Sitka's wet climate is conducive to decay, so they require advanced technology for efficient harvest and safe preservation.

Lingit clans also conserved and enhanced populations not only of salmon, but also herring, clams, and other plants and animals by managing harvest, seeding eggs in new areas, and creating habitat, building and keeping resources at high levels for countless generations.

Lingít Pronunciation Guide

In the Lingít writing system, each “letter,” which may be a single letter or a combination of letters, has only one sound, and vice versa. As a result, the Lingít alphabet contains letters that are not in English. Lingít is also a tonal language (like Chinese), so we use the acute accent (´) to mark which syllables have high tone. When letters are **underlined** (**g**, **k**, **x**), this indicates that the sound is made further back in the throat from where the velar consonants (g, k, x, k’, x’) are pronounced; the contact is made between the very back of the tongue and the uvula, the little flap dangling behind the roof of your mouth that can be seen when a person’s mouth is wide open. **Letters with ´ after them** (t’, k’, x’, etc.) are usually called “pinched” sounds, made by cutting off air flow in the throat by closing the vocal cords and then pushing out the air trapped between the vocal cords and the mouth by raising the Adam’s apple, after which the vocal cords are opened again.

A **period** in a word before a vowel means the vowel begins a new syllable and does not run together with the sound before it. Between consonants, it is used to divide consonants that would otherwise be read as a single “letter”; for example, “t.s” means the consonant “t” is followed by the consonant “s”, whereas “ts” is a single sound.

Lingít vowels can be long or short (a; aa). Below is a list of how to pronounce each one.

English Example

a was
aa Saab
e ten
ei vein
i hit
ee seek
u push
oo moon

Lingít Example

tás (thread)
taan (sea lion)
té (stone)
kakéin (wool, yarn)
hít (house)
séek (belt)
gút (dime)
dóosh (cat)

a	ch	j	s	ts'
aa	ch'	k	s'	w
e	d	k'	sh	x
ei	dl	<u>k</u>	t	x'
i	dz	<u>k</u> '	t'	<u>x</u>
ee	g	l	tl	<u>x</u> '
u	g	l'	tl'	y
oo	h	n	ts	.

This is the Lingít alphabet.

Information about the Lingít alphabet and pronunciation is adapted from Beginning Tlingit by Nora Marks Dauenhauer and Richard Dauenhauer, copyright Sealaska Heritage Institute, with additional material from Jeff Leer, Sealaska Heritage Institute.

*There are also individual letters that are pronounced differently than they are in English. **The English “L” uses the voice, but the Lingít “L” is voiceless.** To make the sound, put your tongue in the same place as you would to say the English “L”, then only breathe out. **The Lingít “x”** is made in the same place in the mouth as the English “k”, but while the “k” stops the air, “x” lets it flow. Put your tongue in position to pronounce “k”, but then lower the tongue slightly to make a passage for air to go through, then breathe out. The result is like Russian “x” or German “ch”. **The “x”** is an “x” made further back in the throat; it sounds like the voiceless counterpart to French or German “r”, as in French “trois” or German “trinken”.*

Lingít art and literature are world heritage treasures. Carved boxes, elegant baskets, carved monuments, formline design, ceremonial dance, music, proper names, place names, ceremonial speech, and every aspect of culture and identity are alive in a complex reciprocity with sustenance, place, history, geography and non-human inhabitants.

The hat pictured on the next page, L'ook S'áaxw, is at.oow (owned property) of the L'uknaḡ.ádi (Raven/Coho) Clan. It is over 300 years old and was carved in Aalséix (Dry Bay). L'ook S'aaxw represents the stories, history, and origins of the L'uknaḡ.ádi lineage, and their relationship to the coho salmon and to place. In the photograph the hat is worn by Kaads'aatí William Wells, who was L'uknaḡ.ádi (Raven/Coho) Clan from Kayaashkahít (Platform/Porch House).⁷

The Maritime Fur Trade

Trade was the economic engine of Northwest America. Products such as hooligan oil, Copper River copper, baskets, robes, and seal oil were traded by canoe from the Gulf of Alaska to California, to inland groups at Stikine, Chilkat and Taku, from there to Northeast Asia, and via the major North American trade routes including to a huge annual market at The Dalles on the Columbia River.⁸

This Indigenous Northwest Coast trade became global in the late 1700s with the Maritime Fur Trade, a sort of gold rush for sea otter furs. It began when British Captain Cook's expedition overwintered at Nootka Sound, on Vancouver Island in present day Canada. They traded for some sea otter fur clothing, and in 1779 made a huge profit selling the fur at Canton, China.⁹ Publication of Cook's journals in 1784 sparked an international rush to the Northwest Coast for the furs.¹⁰

The Northwest Coast trade suddenly became global, with participation by French, English, and American maritime traders. The newcomers purchased furs from Indigenous Northwest Coast traders in exchange for guns, steel, and textiles. They sold



Kaads'aatí William Wells wearing L'ook S'aaxw. Alaska State Library Historical Collections Sheldon Jackson College Collection.



North Americans valued sea otter for their meat and their rich fur, which they traded.¹¹ Sea otters are a kind of weasel, but spend their lives at sea. Unlike other marine mammals, they do not have a layer of fat under their skin, but are insulated from the cold ocean water with dense, soft fur, with 250,000 to one million hairs per square inch. This makes it the most luxurious

fur in the world. The herds on this coast became extremely valuable after sea otter populations were hunted out on the Asian coasts of the North Pacific.

the fur pelts in China for luxury goods like tea and porcelain, then sold those products in their home countries. Trade on this coast followed the Indigenous protocol, and profited both the Indigenous and the foreign traders.¹² Clans who owned rights to the Interior trade at major routes—the Stikine River and at Chilkat—became even more powerful, and trade stretched far into the interior, benefitting the entire region. Too often the foreign traders tried to get a bargain or “teach a lesson” resulting in violence, but overall, trade was civil as shrewd American and European traders met their match in shrewd and experienced Indigenous traders.¹³

The trade moved north from Nootka Sound as sea otter populations were overhunted, and Sitka became a center for trade in the 1790s.¹⁴ American ships, nearly all out of Boston, dominated trade during this time due to monopolies handicapping British traders.¹⁵ During the peak years of trade

Because every one of these hundreds of thousands of furs was purchased from Northwest Coast Native traders, the trade brought great wealth into the Northwest Coast economy. There was an explosion of art, on a plane with that of Greek art in the Classical Period. Indigenous people sold furs and also art, which is now in museums all over the world. Masterpieces of the period include the Whale House art, by the master carver Kadjisdu.áxch, now at Klukwan.

1790-1810, wars raging on the European continent further restricted European traders, who had to risk seizure by enemy ships.¹⁶ Americans alone sold an average of 14,000 sea otter pelts per year at Canton, China from 1805-1812.¹⁷

Like any 'gold rush,' the Northwest Coast sea otter trade soon declined. Over just two decades, increasing competition and fewer furs made the trade less profitable.

Smallpox

International trade also brought disease epidemics. In the 1770s the smallpox epidemic, affecting all of North America, was brought into the Northwest by a Spanish ship.²² Further outbreaks in 1795, 1802, and 1811, a devastating epidemic in 1836-37, and other diseases killed more than half the people originally in the region.²³ Each outbreak killed around one in three infected people, and many more suffered disabilities.²⁴ Smallpox was also deadly to Europeans and Americans, but those groups had

The story behind the picture on page 1 illustrates how Americans had an advantage over European traders. Sigismund Bacstrom drew the scene in 1793 from the deck of the English ship Three Brothers, which could have been seized at any time because they lacked permission from the British monopolies that controlled trade in the Pacific. Bacstrom later sailed to China on the Amelia, which was French, but sailed under the American flag because England and France were at war. She was eventually seized by the British HMS Lion.¹⁸

The sea otter trade was very important for the post-Revolutionary United States. Following independence from Britain, Americans had to replace the revenue lost due to British embargoes, and otter furs were one of the few things desired by Chinese markets.¹⁹ The Americans traded guns and other goods with Indigenous traders for furs, traded those furs in China for porcelain, silks, and tea, then made their biggest profit selling Chinese luxury goods back in the United States.²⁰ Profits from the sea otter trade helped build Boston and funded America's industrial revolution.²¹

access to inoculation. Also, over the centuries of North American colonization by Europeans and Euro-Americans, Native people were affected more severely because of the accumulated stress of repeated epidemics compounded by disruption of food supplies and society by the actions of colonists.

Russians

In the 1600s and early 1700s, Russian fur traders swept across Siberia. They hunted and trapped animals, and they also forcibly demanded “tribute,” or taxes to the Czar in the form of furs. In 1742, survivors of Russia’s Vitus Bering expedition, exploring the waters beyond Kamchatka, brought back sea otter fur and discovered the high prices Chinese traders would pay for them.²⁵ This sparked a rush as the Siberian fur industry expanded eastward, into the North Pacific and into the Aleutian Islands.

The Unangan people of the Aleutian Islands have a thriving, complex culture, and hunted marine mammals from kayaks, a pinnacle of maritime technology. When the first small Russian companies arrived they took advantage of Unangan skills and technology, and as in Siberia, took hostages and demanded furs as tribute to the Czar.

This first phase of Russian exploitation, 1740s-1770s, was brutal and violent as the Russian companies competed for short term profit. They committed atrocities including murder and rape, and Unangan people fought back. Unangan people and Russians committed mass casualties and atrocities, but the

Russians were all well-armed men, fighting people defending their families, with nowhere to escape to.²⁶

The second phase of Russian exploitation began in the 1780s, when most of the sea otter herds were gone from the Aleutians and the islands nearer Siberia, and there were only a few, large, companies left. One of the companies, led by Gregori Shelikov, brutally took over the Sugpiaq people of Kodiak to build the first permanent Russian fort in 1784. This was part of his vision of a New Russia, a permanent colonization, in America, on the model of New Spain or New England. Shelikov did not manage to get much support from his government for his vision.

In this phase, Russians forced Native people not only to hunt, but to provide food and equipment for the hunting expeditions and sustain the Russians themselves.²⁷ Forced labor was the basis of the Russian profit, just as slavery sustained the plantations of the American South. Preventing people from providing for their own needs, on top of devastating disease epidemics, dangerous work, and violence, caused starvation and death. The population of the Aleutians – people who had developed rich and unique technology and culture over thousands of years – fell to a fraction of what it had been.

Shelikov brought Alexander Baranov out in 1791, when he was 44 years old, as a manager. By this time, Russians were running out of sea otters in Western Alaska. In 1794, the company launched the first hunting expedition to Southeast Alaska.²⁸ The hunting fleets of hundreds of Native hunters (Unangan from the Aleutian Islands, Alutiiq or Sugpiaq people from Kodiak and other islands, and Chugach people from the coastal Gulf) in baidarkas (kayaks) went out annually to hunt sea otter in Southeast Alaska as far south as Taan or Prince of Wales Island, a vast distance they then had to travel back under their own power.²⁹

Company manager Alexander Baranov wrote that Southeastern Alaska and the sea otters belonged to Russia, and that neither the Americans or British, and by extension the Lingít they were trading with, had any rights to them.³⁰ He negotiated

with the clan leader at Yakutat for a sea otter hunting base and colony in 1796, and that same year the first hunting expedition to the Sitka area took place.³¹ Between the years 1797 and 1821 Russians took an average of 3000 sea otters a year; most of those were from Southeastern Alaska.³²

In 1799, Alexander Baranov negotiated with Kiks.ádi leader Shk'awulyeil for a fort and sea otter hunting base at Gajaa Heen, later called Old Sitka or Starrigavan (Old Harbor), about seven miles north of present-day Sitka.³³ In the same year, Shelikov's company was granted a charter by the Czar to govern Alaska, and became the Russian-American Company.³⁴

Also in 1799, 115 hunters leaving Sitka to return to Kodiak died from paralytic shellfish poisoning from mussels, at a place now called Poison Cove. The year before, on their way back to Kodiak, 10-20 men had died in a storm at sea. Then the following year, in 1800, 64 men drowned in a single incident on a hunting trip out of Kodiak Island.³⁵

The relationship between the company and their hunters was laid bare in the winter of 1800-1801, when these disasters and other hardships led some Kodiak Island leaders to refuse to go on the 1801 hunt. This threatened the profits and the very existence of the Russian-American Company. Baranov and his second-in-command brutally crushed the revolt, and told them they would kill those who refused to go.³⁶ In 1801, the Russians took 4,000 otters.³⁷

In the early summer of 1802 a multi-clan Lingít alliance destroyed the Russians' fort at Sitka, the result of an accumulation of insults and abuses by the Russians. Another group killed most of the Russian Native hunters at Kuiu Island, east of Sitka.³⁸

1804

Because they were stretched thin, the Russians did not come back to Sitka until two years later, with some small ships and hundreds of Indigenous hunters. They met up in Sitka Sound with the Russian Navy frigate Neva, which had recently arrived in Alaska on an around-the-world Russian government expedition.

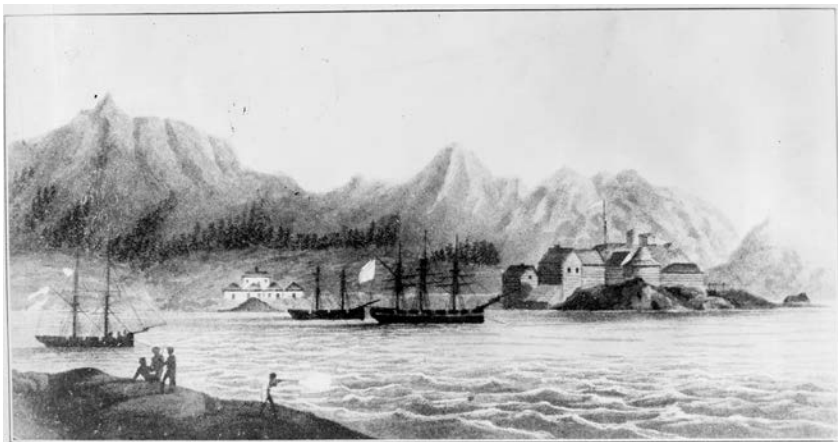
Hunters in baidarkas towed the Neva in front of Noow Tlein (Castle Hill), which had been evacuated by the Kiks.ádi in anticipation of the conflict. The Russians then occupied the site.³⁹

In preparation for the confrontation, the Kiks.ádi (now led by K'alyáan, the nephew of Shk'awulyeil) built a fort called Shís'gi Noow, or Sapling Fort, at the mouth of Kasdaa Héen or Indian River, just east of Noow Tlein. They sited and designed the fort to withstand naval bombardment: they sited it behind large shallows to keep ships from coming close, and laid it out so a ship could not get a square shot at a wall. They also angled the stout walls inward to deflect cannonballs.⁴⁰

On September 29, 1804 the Neva's longboat engaged in a firefight with a canoe coming toward the fort. In the islands in front of Sitka, the canoe's load of gunpowder exploded, killing young Kiks.ádi leaders.⁴¹ This tragedy was the turning point in the 1804 Battle.⁴²

The Neva next moved into position in front of Shís'gi Noow, probably to the east of the fort; archaeologists found cannonballs that may have overshot the fort on the upriver side of the fort's location.⁴³ Baranov led a disastrous assault, and twelve Russians and Alutiiq men were killed, and many were wounded including Baranov. The Kiks.ádi and their spouses and children made a strategic retreat, evacuating the fort with everyone but a few people, and walked overland to Peril Strait. From there they crossed the strait to Chaatlk'noow or Pt. Craven. This is called the Kiks.ádi Survival March.⁴⁴

Russians then built their own fort at Sitka on the site of Noow Tlein in 1804, and named it New Archangel after a town in Northern Russia, the area that most of the Siberians merchants came from. The governing Kiks.ádi clan leaders of Sitka made peace with the Russians in a ceremony in 1805 and granted them permission to stay at Noow Tlein. Lingít clans retained control of the region. The Russians did not have the ability to stay by force, but Lingít clans probably saw the benefit of the Russian enterprise in creating price competition with the other traders, and as a customer for food and other items.



The frigate Neva (center) at Sitka 1805. From Lisianski, Voyage Round the World in the Years 1803, 1804, 1805, and 1806.

Russians in Lingít America and the Decline of the Sea Otter Trade

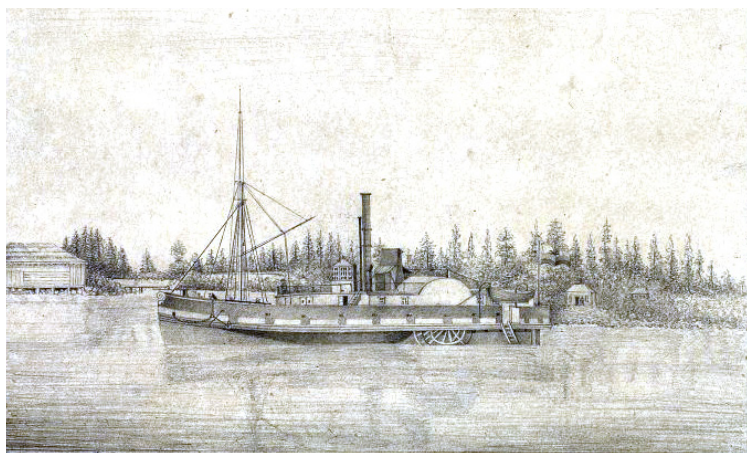
After the battle, Lingít people did not abandon Sitka Sound. Thousands of people gathered here in the spring to harvest herring eggs, and other settlements remained nearby. In those first years after the battle, Lingít men disrupted the Russians' sea otter hunts, the Russians were unable compete with the American traders to purchase furs, and they struggled with supply to the point of hunger and rebellion. Deals with American shipmasters helped them survive, but ships often sank and sea otters were disappearing from this area as they had elsewhere. Nevertheless, in 1808 the Russian-American Company moved their center of operations from Kodiak to Sitka.

From the start and all the way until 1867, Lingít clans continued to be in control in Southeastern Alaska, so the Russians had to pay attention to diplomacy. Sitka was no longer a significant source of profits. However, by staying in Sitka the Russians could claim possession to this coast vis a vis other European nations and the United States.

By 1828, Lingít clans including Kiks.ádi and Kaagwaantaan built a large village adjacent to the Russian settlement. The village, which is now called the Historic Indian Village, was made up

of clan houses, which are lineages as well as physical structures. Some clan houses from the 20th century that replaced the 19th century originals are still standing. Between the Village and the Russian settlement the Russians built a stockade, but they never had enough manpower or arms to meaningfully defend their colony against Lingít or against other Europeans.

Lingít people and the Russian colony had extensive economic, social, and political relations. Both groups participated in the international fur trade; for Lingít traders, the Russian outpost at Sitka was one more potential market in addition to the Americans and English who continued to trade in the region. In addition, Lingít leaders profited from supplying the Russians with tons of food including halibut, venison, potatoes and berries. They also sold artwork, other products, and labor



The steamship Nicholai, built in Sitka, in front of Japonski Island. Picture by Ilja Vosnsensky 1843 from the Museum of Anthropology and Ethnography, St. Petersburg, Russia.

The Russians had a shipyard and workshops at what is now Totem Square. They built at least 24 ships at Sitka, ranging from 38 feet to over 130 feet long. Shipbuilding never quite made economic sense because they had a small workforce and a huge backlog of maintenance and building projects. They had to saw their boards by hand until they had their first sawmill in 1833.

An American engineer named Muir or Moore came out in 1838 with an American-built steam engine for the first steamship built on the west coast, the Nicholai. The builder of the ship's hull was an Alaska Native man, Osip Netsvetov, a member of the "Creole" class. His brother Jacob Netsvetov was later canonized as a saint and is buried near the current blockhouse replica on the hill.

to the Russian settlement. Lingít men worked for the Russians in various capacities. Many Russians had relationships with or married Lingít women, so many people had heritage or relatives in both communities. While never comfortable or easy, Russian and Lingít people had complex and interdependent relationships.

Russian Sitka was a company town. Alaska Native people, mainly from the Aleutians and Kodiak, were the main workforce of the Russian American Company. Only 825 ethnic Russians were ever in Alaska at any one time, and fewer than 1000 Russians in Alaska over the entire period of colonization. The Russian American Company had to pay for every Russian worker they brought out to work in the colonies, so they created a new class called "Creole," the descendants of Russian fathers and Alaska Native women. The Company offered training and education in exchange for a period of work for the company, and also trained these people and other Indigenous people for church work.

In 1860, in the Lingít part of Sitka, the population was about 1000, still with much Kiks.ádi clan representation and now with a major Kaagwaantaan presence. On the Russian side, the population was also about 1000. Four hundred fifty-two were ethnic Russians, 505 were "Creole," and 64 were Native people, mainly from Kodiak Island and the Aleutians.⁴⁵ People of mixed ethnicity lived on both sides of the stockade. For context, Sitka was the residence of about three quarters of the Russians in Alaska, but just one quarter of the total "Creole" population, and a tiny fraction of the Native people associated with the company. Most of the company's workforce was at Kodiak and

the Aleutians. The company also operated trading posts on the mainland.⁴⁶

From 1808 to 1867, the Russian American Company built a cathedral, warehouses, housing, workshops, and a shipbuilding facility in Sitka. They built dozens of ships, including the first steamship built on the West Coast. They provided transportation, schools and medical care and supported retired employees and widows. From 1812-1841 operations included a colony in California, Fort Ross, that was supposed to supply Alaska with grain.

The Russians did not have the upper hand and had to carefully negotiate and pay attention to diplomatic relations with Lingít leaders. When a Russian governor allowed relations to deteriorate



View up Lincoln Street, with St. Michael's Russian Orthodox Cathedral, built 1848. Photo by Eadweard Muybridge, 1868. Presbyterian Historical Society Sheldon Jackson Collection.

The Russian Orthodox Cathedral in the center of downtown is a replica, but looks almost identical to the original which burned down in 1966. Most Company workers, Native and Russian alike, belonged to the Russian Orthodox Church. The church tried to convert Lingít people, especially leaders, but had limited success. They generally excluded them from worship in the main church; the separate Lingít church, built into the stockade, is marked by a monument next to the blockhouse replica.

Some Russian buildings still stand today. The Russian Bishop's house on Lincoln Street was built in 1843 when Sitka became the center for the Russian church in North America and Kamchatka. One half of another building, at 206 Lincoln St., was built as apartments for Russian managers.

in the early 1850s, company directors censured and removed him. His neglect of diplomacy led to an attack on the fort in 1855, in which five or six Russians were killed and dozens wounded.⁴⁷ Instead of retribution as Americans and British did at the time, Russians worked to reestablish good relations. The Russian authorities recognized the Indigenous justice system—which is based on reciprocity and compensation, rather than punishment—and regularly paid Native clans for injury done by Russians, even when accidental.⁴⁸

Changes in the Pacific Northwest in the 1850s

By the 1850s thousands of British and American settlers, miners and speculators poured into the Pacific Northwest. The Salish Sea became the economic center of the region. In the 1840s Lingít traders sold their sea otter pelts to the Russians, but after 1851 they took furs and other goods the 600 miles to the newly established Fort Victoria. In the mid-1850s, thousands of “Northern Indians” —Heiltsuk, Haida, Tsimshian, and Lingít people—gathered there each year.⁴⁹ Lingít leaders traveled to the United States shores of the Salish Sea as well, to trade, to work, and to interact in every way with the new settlers, as well as with

Indigenous people from other tribes. The rush of settlers into the area, however, was accompanied by an effort by Britain and the United States to force Native people off their lands. The British Navy enforced “gunboat diplomacy” on coastal tribes, in which resistance was punished with disproportionate force. The United States was equally violent as the military and settlers forcibly removed all Native people in what is now Washington State from their land and onto reservations.

The relatively weak Russian occupation in Alaska made Alaska a relative haven of Native control. This changed dramatically with U.S. occupation.

The Transfer

Sea otter populations in Southeast Alaska were mostly gone by the 1820s, and even though the Russian American Company implemented conservation in Western Alaska, profits shrank.⁵⁰ Supply was always a challenge, as was manpower as they tried and repeatedly failed to diversify and find new ways to make a profit, and their expenses grew.⁵¹ By the 1860s the Russian American Company, still dependent on furs, most procured by forced labor, was losing money.⁵² Some shareholders were concerned that American gold-seekers would swarm into Alaska as they had into the American West. The Russians could not defend their claims against such an influx, or in case of military attack by the British. These were all factors in their decision to cede their claims in 1867.⁵³

The Treaty of Cession, signed on March 30, 1867, transferred what Russia “possessed” in North America to the United States in exchange for \$7.2 million, but what exactly their possessions consisted of was not defined. Lingít leaders granted the Russians the right to operate at Sitka in the Peace Ceremony in 1805, but everything the Russians claimed to possess they held only by the Doctrine of Discovery, the policy originating in Europe in the 1400s that declared that lands could be claimed by whatever Christian sovereign nation claimed them first; it assumes that Indigenous Peoples have no rights to their lands.

The Ice Trade was one profitable venture at the end of the Russian occupation. It began in the 1850s with ice cut on Swan Lake that they sold to Gold Rush-era California. The American-Russian company was formed, and Russian and American ships loaded ice at Sitka and later at Kodiak. Zenobia Rock in Eastern Channel is named for one of the American ice ships that discovered it the hard way in 1855. The ice trade and the fur seals of the Pribilof Islands were some of the Russian-American Company's most important assets that they turned over to the United States in 1867.

The actual transfer of Russia's claims in Alaska to the United States took place on October 18th, 1867, on the afternoon of the day the official representatives arrived. Two hundred seventy-six soldiers and officers under General Jefferson C. Davis had arrived on a chartered steamship a week earlier, and they came ashore for the brief ceremony on Noow Tlein or Castle Hill. Lingít people, the actual owners of Southeastern Alaska, were not invited and witnessed the ceremony below the hill in canoes.⁵⁴

The Treaty of Cession offered citizenship to Russians and to people of mixed ethnicity who lived among them, but excluded Alaska's Native people as "uncivilized tribes." At the time Alaska became part of the United States, Native Americans were not citizens; they could not vote and were not allowed to buy land, and were forcefully dispossessed of land and resources they had possessed for countless generations.

Right after the transfer, Kiks.ádi Clan leader Mikael Koox'xáan refused to take down a Russian flag in front of his house.⁵⁵ Lingít leaders, probably including Koox'xáan, protested that they allowed the Russians to stay here, but did not give them the right to transfer Lingít territory. When Lingít leaders from other places met with the American put in charge of Alaska, General Davis, to invite trade, they told him that they did not recognize American claims. In turn, General Davis told them they had no choice. In a report for Congress, he wrote that they were unaware of the Doctrine of Discovery.⁵⁶

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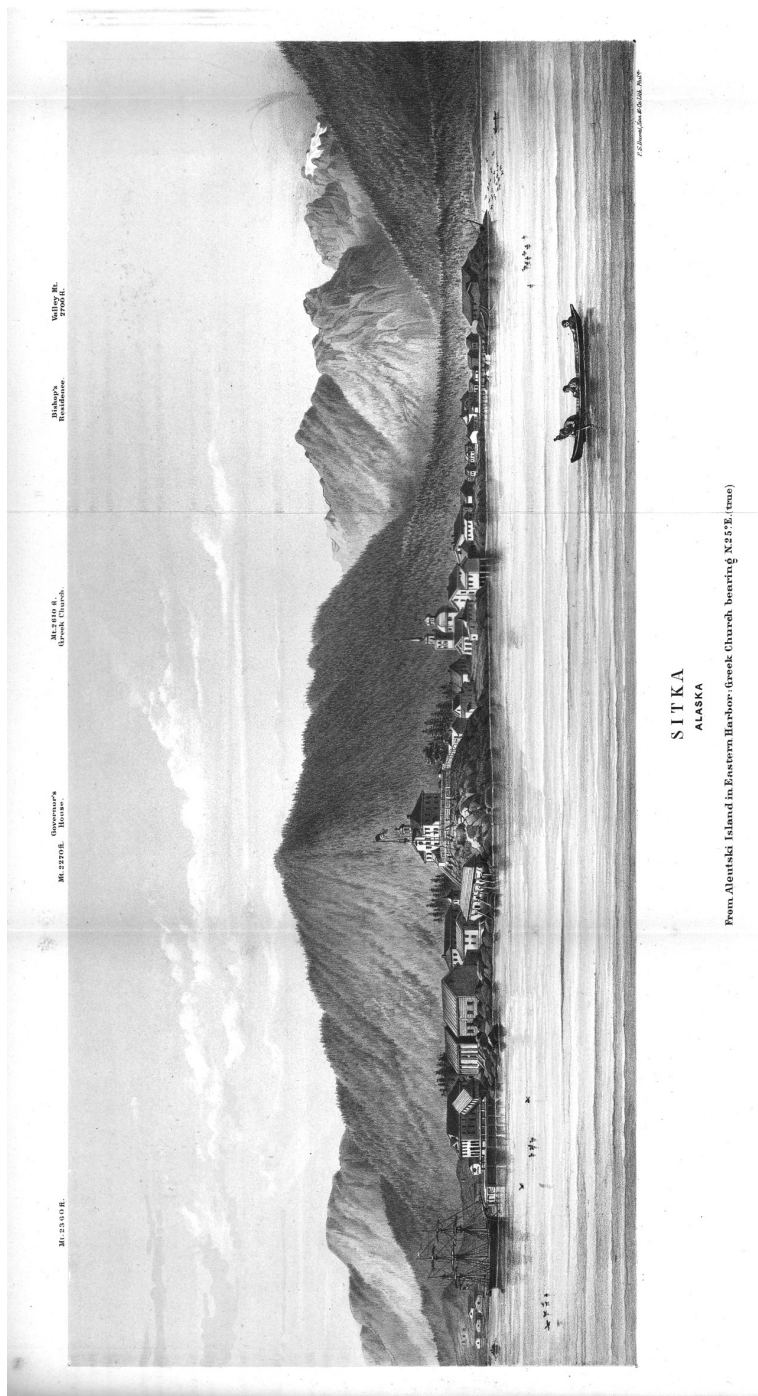


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SITKA ALASKA

From the anchorage in the Western Harbor.

Two views of Sitka in 1867, from the Coast Pilot of Alaska, the guidebook for mariners, published by the United States Coast Survey in 1869. These images are from drawings made in 1867 aboard the USRC Lincoln. Images courtesy of the NOAA Central Library and John Cloud.



SITKA ALASKA

From Aleutski Island in Eastern Harbor (Greek Church bearing N 25° E true)

Sitka, 1867-1877

Almost overnight Sitka went from a sleepy Russian company town to a wide-open American colonial frontier fort, with hundreds of Army soldiers, as well as scores of American civilians hoping to get in on the beginning of a rush. They expected thousands of Americans would soon arrive in Alaska, the way they had repeatedly flooded into the colonial frontier of the contiguous United States. There was a flurry of economic activity as the Russian-American Company assets were sold off and loaded onto ships. Like the Russians, the Americans guarded the stockade separating the two communities and enforced a curfew, but during the day Native and non-Native people went freely back and forth.⁵⁷ Some of the Americans wrote for newspapers about the buildings crafted of hewn logs, how 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 came from the east, across the date line. 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 often did, something every American observer noted.

The Army troops brought drunken crime and mayhem to Sitka, by officers and enlisted men alike (the Russian American Company had strictly controlled alcohol available to their employees and in trade). In May 1869 enlisted men even robbed the cathedral.⁵⁸ Crime ebbed and flowed through the decade, but in the six months between October 1868 to March 1869, a year after the Transfer, there was an average of 26 military offenders a day in the guard house.⁵⁹ The Russian America Company paid the fare for anyone who wanted to leave, and more than 500 Russians did.⁶⁰

The Americans arrived with a stereotype of all Native people as "savages," whose life in nature was supposedly so easy that they were passive, lazy, and improvident. They described Lingít people, according to stereotype, as shrewd and greedy, dangerous, treacherous, simple-minded and untrustworthy, even though

Before the transfer the American soldiers came on shore and lined up facing about 100 Russian soldiers in front of the massive Russian Governor's house and offices on top of Noow Tlein. The ship captains, officers, some of the newly-arrived American miners, merchants and speculators, the Russian governor and other Russian officials, and Russian and Native people from the Russian settlement also witnessed the event. Russian soldiers lowered their flag from the massive flagpole 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 could not do it, and eventually they tied a loop in the flag halyard 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' bayonets below him. The Americans raised their flag, with more cannon salutes firing. General Rousseau and Captain Pestchouroff each said a few words (which most people there could not hear), and Alaska was officially part of the United States. The ceremonial transfer ignored Sitka's Lingít leaders.

their own experiences and observations showed otherwise. This stereotype was part of the Euro-American belief that removal of Native tribes, to make way for mining and settlement by Euro-Americans, was justified and necessary.

Removals of Indigenous people by the United States government and by settlers in the mid-19th century sometimes explicitly, sometimes unintentionally, amounted to genocide: an effort to destroy an entire ethnic group. The conflicts around the removals, the Indian Wars, became increasingly violent at the end of the Civil War, around the time Alaska was added to the United States.

The American military, unlike the Russians, did not have to respect Lingít strength; they relied instead on overwhelming force.⁶¹ Lingít law requires compensation for an injury or death,

even if it is accidental. Before 1867 Native people, Russians and other foreign traders throughout the region recognized Indigenous law, although, like any law, it was not always followed. American law, by contrast, requires arrest, trial and punishment for intentionally killing or harming another person.

The Army was not afraid of the Lingít population, but they believed it was necessary to preemptively put down “insolence” by Lingít leaders and to assert the authority of the United States.⁶² Violent conflicts arose when the United States refused to recognize the Lingít justice system and imposed the American one instead with disproportionate force.

In early 1869, an Army sentry mistakenly killed men leaving Sitka by canoe. Relatives of the men, from Kake, went to see General Davis about compensation, which had been the custom with the Russians, but he repeatedly refused to see them. These relatives then killed two Euro-Americans unconnected with the conflict who were camping at Admiralty Island, as compensation for their relatives’ deaths. This led to the “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. They also burned poisoned stored food and burned canoes, belongings, and even graves.⁶³ The Kake incident was repeated at Wrangell later in 1869, when soldiers killed two Lingít men after one of them assaulted a woman at the fort. When the men’s father retaliated by killing a white merchant, the Army shelled the village of Kaachxan.áak’w. When he gave himself up, the Army publicly hanged him.⁶⁴

A dozen years after the Kake War, in 1882, the U.S. Revenue Cutter Corwin destroyed most of the village of Angoon, over a demand by Angoon Lingít residents for compensation from a whaling company for an accidental death.⁶⁵

This illustrates the dramatic shift in power in the region. The power of the United States, together with the stereotype of Natives, meant that the Americans ignored Lingít demands for justice, even when it was compatible with the American justice system. The Americans did, however, put people in jail regardless

of whether they were Native or not, and later in 1869, when a constable shot and killed a Lingít youth, General Davis jailed him, and paid the family, which was an example of using Lingít justice.⁶⁶

In 1868 the Army established a total of five posts in Alaska to control what they assumed would be an influx of Euro-Americans into Alaska. So few came, however, that the Army closed all but Sitka in 1870.⁶⁷ A city government faltered and finally failed due to lack of funds.⁶⁸ Sitka's non-Native population fell.⁶⁹

There were a few reasons for Alaska not getting the rush of Euro-American immigration that was the usual pattern in other parts of the West. One was that so much land was already available to them in the contiguous United States because of the mass removal of the Indigenous people onto reservations. The other reason was timing: a national recession. The main industry of the region for Native and non-Native people was still the fur trade. Besides the problem of over-hunting, the market had collapsed due to new fashions and technology, and to the post-Civil War Long Depression of the 1870s, which extended to Europe as well.

Native traders were affected by the collapse of the fur trade, and were also being pushed out of what trade there was left by the incoming Americans. During the Cassiar gold rush in 1872, the military forced the Stikine River (Wrangell) clans to relinquish their Stikine River trade monopoly. American traders also displaced the Lingít traders who used to sell goods within Southeastern Alaska. Control of the Chilkat and Chilkoot (Skagway and Haines areas) trade was weakened in the late 1870s, when the military forced leaders to allow miners through. Lingít control of the routes was later completely destroyed in the 1898 Klondike Gold Rush.

In the 1870 census, the population of Sitka included about 1250 Lingít people, but on the other side of the stockade, other than the Army there were only 390 persons, down from the 900 or so at the time of the Transfer. About 250 of these people had

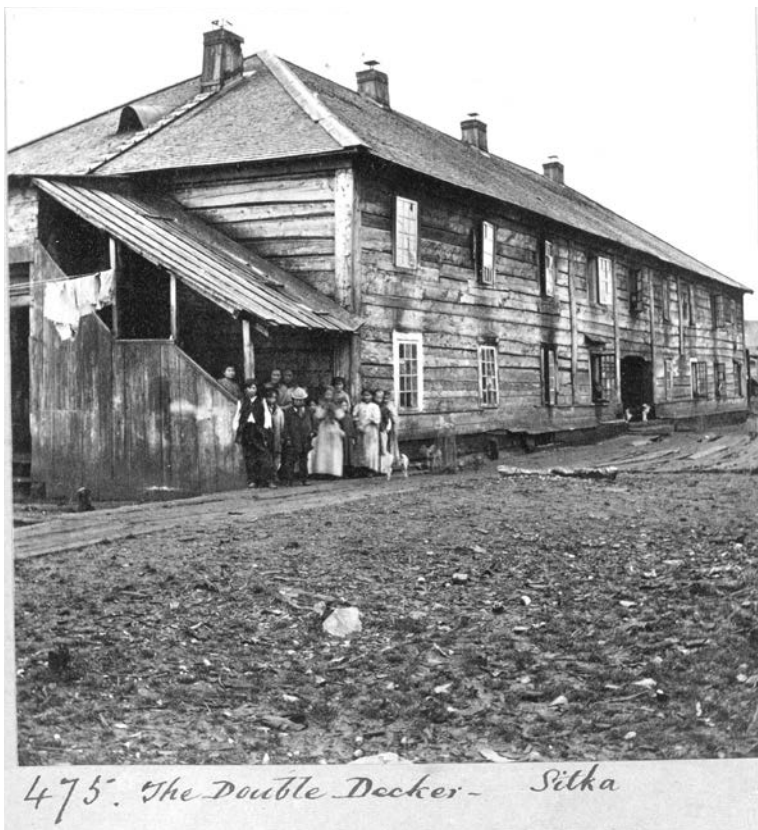


Photo by Eadweard Muybridge 1868. From the Presbyterian Historical Society Sheldon Jackson Collection.

This building was The Double Decker, held in trust by Sitka's Collector of Customs for the destitute Russians who lived there. It was between Lincoln Street and what is now Seward Street, about where the Service Transfer building is (across from the White Elephant shop). This view is looking south, toward the church.⁷²

Famous photographer Eadweard Muybridge traveled to Sitka in 1868 with a military expedition, during which he made the first photographs of Alaska widely seen by the public. Many of them are stereo views, meant to be viewed through a stereoscope to appear three dimensional.⁷³



A “retake” of Muybridge’s image of the Double Decker, from approximately the same viewpoint, made in 2017 by James Poulson.

been born in Alaska, 21 of them in Russia. Most of the Russians who stayed were the Alaska Native people the Russian authorities called “Creole.” After the Transfer⁷⁰ these “Creole” people were usually called, and called themselves, Russians.⁷¹ These Russians had depended on the Russian American Company for employment and for support when they retired. In 1870-71 the Army had to give rations to nearly half of the Russians in Sitka to prevent starvation.⁷⁴

Sitka After 1877

The only U.S. law in the Army period (1867-1877) was the 1868 Treasury Act, which established the Customs Service in Alaska. The Army had the responsibility of governing, but without legal authority; there were so few Euro-American immigrants that Congress ignored Alaska. Civil government would have been expensive; as it was, the costs of supporting the Army and the Customs Service, and the monthly steamer, cost more the government got back from customs. And, America was in a depression.

In 1877 the Army pulled out of Sitka. From early on it was not

clear what the Army's role was in Alaska. They were confined to an island, Army commanders did not believe they needed to be here, and they were not allowed to arrest civilians or otherwise control the liquor trade. The U.S. government was cutting back on the size of the military, and they wanted all available men for the Nez Perce War. Additionally, the cabins that were used as officer housing burned down that February.

When the Army left, Sitka Lingít people took apart the stockade. Lingít relatives compelled one Sitka merchant to pay compensation for a death according to Lingít law.⁷⁶

Alaska was left to the Treasury Department, which in Sitka consisted of a Collector of Customs. Revenue cutters policed Alaska but were mostly occupied with the fur seal trade in western Alaska. Alcohol imports were banned, but there was no law to control imports of molasses to distill it, 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.⁷⁷

In early 1879 the Kiks.ádi Clan leader K'alyáan asked for compensation and wages owed for the deaths of five clan members working for a whaler. The Euro-American settlers and Russians in Sitka sent to Victoria for a British warship for protection, and the British warship HMS *Osprey* responded, which led to the U.S. government stationing a U.S. Navy ship at Sitka. From then until 1884, the Navy was in charge of Alaska.

By the end of the 1870s, however, the national economy picked up, and gold strikes and salmon fisheries brought more Euro-Americans and commercial investment to Alaska. Alaska's first canneries were built at Gajaa Heen or Old Sitka and at Klawock in 1878. Increasing numbers of tourists and travel writers came to Alaska in the late 1870s, and the Pacific Steamship Line had the first tourist cruise to Glacier Bay in 1882. What brought Alaska the most attention, population, and crime, was gold mining. A big strike in 1880 at what is now Juneau put Alaska on the map.

Canneries and gold mines hired Native workers, but those

industries seized Native land and resources. Native leaders continued to petition authorities but requests for compensation for land and resources were not recognized. Native people were not citizens, and even their rights to their homes, safety, and personal property were not always protected.

Missionaries

It was in this context that Native leaders continued to petition authorities for missions and schools, citing the example of the model Christian Tsimshian community of Metlakatla, founded in 1862 near what is now Prince Rupert in British Columbia.⁷⁸ They had their own sawmill and frame houses (instead of the older style timber clan houses), as well as a cannery and an enormous church.⁷⁹ This town was famous all over the coast, with authorities for “civilizing” Native people and avoiding conflict, and with Native people for being owned and controlled by Native people, at a time when they were rapidly losing lands, rights, and resources to British settlers.⁸⁰

In 1877 the ambitious Presbyterian missionary Sheldon Jackson sent a missionary teacher to Wrangell, then in 1878 sent a missionary and a teacher to Sitka. Sitka’s mission and school closed later that same year, but reopened in 1880.

Presbyterian missionaries believed, like most other Euro-Americans at the time, that it was Native people’s own culture, language, and society that prevented Native people from succeeding or even surviving. They did not see the real, harmful impacts of racial bias that were actually holding them back and which contributed to high rates of premature death.⁸¹ Based on this belief, Presbyterian missionaries required converts to completely give up all their culture and language. Missionaries and other educators punished children for speaking their language and actively discouraged Native culture and activities.⁸² In spite of the impression given by missionary photographs, Presbyterian Lingít people kept speaking Lingít and continued to maintain and rely on their culture, society, and clan ties. But, many did not teach their children the language, fearing it would hold them back.

Some Lingít leaders sent their children to the Sitka Presbyterian school. One early student, Aak'wtatseen Rudolph Walton, was a young leader-to-be in the Kiks.ádi clan, and another early student, Kaads'aatí William Wells, was to be a L'uknax.ádi clan leader.⁸³ In 1881 some of these boys asked to live at the school, and after the school building burned down in January 1882 they assisted the missionaries in constructing a large school building at what is now the Sheldon Jackson School National Historic Landmark.⁸⁴ The Sitka mission saw initial success because of the support of certain Lingít leaders and the preparation, motivation, and drive of those first students.

Organic Act

Congress granted Alaska its first government of any kind in the 1884 Organic Act, 17 years after Alaska became part of the United States. Sheldon Jackson had influence because of the success of the Sitka mission; the act privileged the Protestant missions, and Jackson became Alaska's General Agent of Education. However, Alaska's first government officials, members of the Russian Orthodox Church, and many Lingít people opposed the mission in some of the very first lawsuits in Alaska's brand new court system. These were over the mission's land claim (160 acres claimed by a businessman and donated to the mission), and over the practice of compelling parents to indenture their children to the school for five years in order to attend, which the plaintiffs argued amounted to slavery. In 1886, a Lingít mother sued the government over not being allowed to take her child out of the mission school. The first federal judge decided in her favor, but through the influence of Sheldon Jackson, that judge was soon replaced. The next judge was a supporter of the mission, and decided that a Native mother did not have the right to take her child because he believed the school was superior to Native home life.⁸⁵

In the Russian American Company days before 1867, few Lingít people joined the Russian Orthodox Church.⁸⁶ In the 1880s, however, the Russian Orthodox Church in Sitka grew dramatically with Lingít members, starting with important

leaders. In the American era, this church accommodated Lingít society and culture and did not insist people give up their culture and language the way the Presbyterians could and did.⁸⁷

In 1888 some former students of the Presbyterian mission founded a model Christian Native community called the Cottages, on mission land next to what is now the Sitka National Historical Park. The park is the site of Shís’gi Noow, where the Battle of 1804 had been fought 80 years earlier and some founding matriarchs were direct descendants of Kiks.ádi leader K’alyáan.

Even when Lingít people “put away” their culture, discrimination continued. In 1906 Lingít graduate Rudolph Walton went to court so that his daughters and others could attend Sitka’s “white” school after the “native” school closed, in what is known as the Davis Case. Not only did the judge rule against him, but Sitka’s (non-Native) voters almost unanimously reelected the school board member who fought to keep the children out.⁸⁸

1904 was a major koo.eex’, the “Last Potlatch” held with the sanction of Presbyterian Governor John Brady, hosted by the Kaagwaantaan Clan Wolf houses in the center of the Village. Art commissioned for this event can be seen at the Sitka National Historical Park and at the Alaska State Museum in Juneau.

Canneries

In the late 1880s, canneries began taking over salmon streams, and after WWI, canneries and commercial fishing constituted a significant portion of Sitka’s economy. American policy is that fisheries are common property; as a result, Indigenous ownership was not recognized and fisheries were often overexploited.

Every American fishery in Southeast Alaska was previously a Lingít fishery. At Sit’kú or Sitkhoh Bay on Chichagof Island north of Sitka there was a stand-off in 1890 when the Lingít owners demanded payment for use of the fishery. The U.S. Navy gunboat *Pinta* responded. The Navy commander, Lt. Robert E. Coontz,

told them that force would not work and encouraged them to come to Sitka for a judicial settlement, which never came. American authorities said it was unfortunate that canneries took food from Native people, but they did not see any alternative to wide open industrial exploitation.⁸⁹

Native people worked in the canneries alongside people from China, the Philippines, Japan, other countries, and the Lower 48, but wages were of less value than ownership of the fishery.

In Southeastern Alaska the primary methods for catching salmon for canning were the fish trap and purse seining. Early seining (catching fish with a net towed around a school of fish) was done by hand, using large, flat-bottomed rowboats supplied by the canneries. Soon after the turn of the century, engines were introduced on seiners on Puget Sound, which revolutionized the fishery by making it possible for individual fishermen to operate their own boats. According to Herman Kitka, in 1914 Tom Sanders Jr. fished a motorized seiner, the *Comet*, that had been brought up from Puget Sound. He outfished everybody, and soon all the seiners had engines.⁹⁰ Many of these gas seiners used out of Sitka were built here.

Boatbuilding and Peter Simpson

Peter Simpson, known as the “Father of the Land Claims,” was also largely responsible for the start of Sitka’s boatbuilding industry.⁹¹ Simpson was from Metlakatla, British Columbia. In 1887 that community emigrated to found New Metlakatla (now called Metlakatla) in southern Southeastern Alaska. In 1888 Sheldon Jackson brought Simpson and 31 other boys to his Sitka training school, where Simpson trained as a steam engineer.

In the fall of 1892, when Peter Simpson was about 21, he and other Metlakatlan graduates founded the town Port Gravina, near Ketchikan, and started Hamilton, Simpson, and Company, a sawmill. The all-Native company eventually had a fishing operation, ran a tug, owned a large store, a carpenter shop, and rental cottages. The town burned down in 1904 and was never rebuilt. Simpson’s granddaughter, Isabella Brady, explained that

as Natives, Simpson and the others could not get title to the land to rebuild. She said that this was the source of Simpson's lifelong fight for land claims.⁹²

By 1906, Simpson, back in Sitka, began a boatbuilding operation at the Cottages.⁹³ Other men who were also associated with the Cottages worked with him there.

Fishing and boatbuilding were important activities in Sitka from the teens through the 1950s with the growth of the salmon canning industry. Alaska Native men dominated boat building in Sitka; all were mainly fishermen, and boatbuilding was a side or winter activity. Alaska Native men built at least 50 documented vessels (over five net tons, or about 35 feet long) here between 1909 and 1960.⁹⁴ In addition to Simpson's shop, there were shops in the Village and on Harbor Island. The most prolific builders were Peter Simpson, Frank Kitka, George Howard and his sons, and Andrew Hope.

Others also built boats here; most were immigrants from Scandinavia, the U.K. or northern Europe. Some boats were built in shops, but many others were built by the owner in improvised shops or even out in the open.

Founding of the ANB

The Alaska Native Brotherhood, the nation's first Native civil rights organization, was founded in 1912 to work for citizenship, civil rights including education, and mainly for recognition of aboriginal land claims. Most of the founders, who included Peter Simpson, had connections to the Sitka mission or to the Russian Orthodox church, and most were fishermen or boatbuilders. The first ANB building was built in 1914 on Sitka's waterfront where it is still standing. The Alaska Native Sisterhood formed about the same time and was formally named in 1926.⁹⁵ Their early focus was education and fundraising for the ANB. In 1915 Alaska's Territorial Legislature passed an act allowing Native people to become citizens if they could prove they had "severed all tribal relationships." Citizenship for all Native Americans was not granted until 1924.

WWI in Southeast Alaska

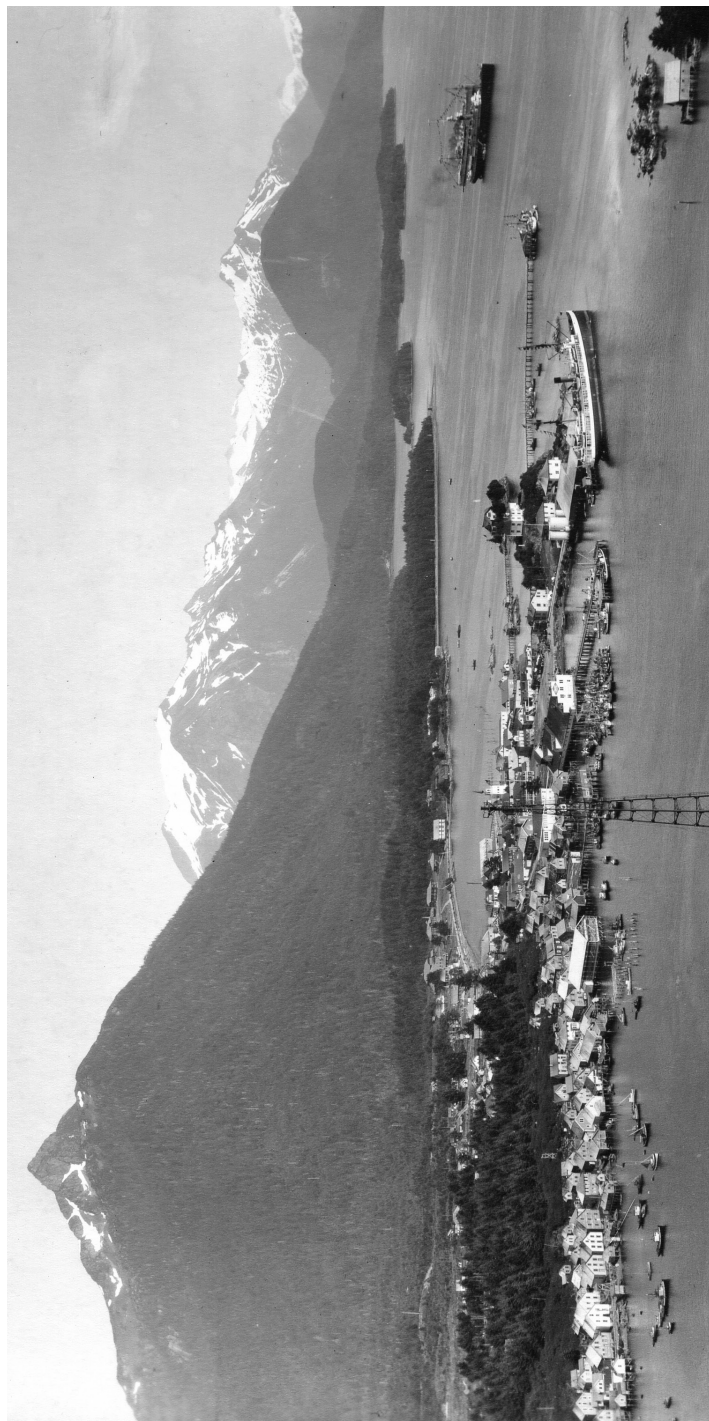
World War I was very good for the canned salmon industry because the government bought large quantities of canned salmon; 14 canneries started in Southeastern Alaska in 1918, including two canneries in Sitka. One of those is still standing, housing the Fisherman's Quay on Katlian Street. A few years later the government dumped its inventory and many canneries failed. Still, production continued and canned salmon production peaked in 1936.

While in other parts of Alaska boats and labor – including the fishermen – were brought in from outside, in the Sitka area the seine boat crews and part of the cannery crews were Alaska Native people. This was a tradition for much of the 20th century of Sitka Native families packing up and spending the summer at the canneries north of Sitka. Men fished, and women worked in the canneries, children helped out but also had time to play. Families combined the trip with traditional food harvest and preparation, such as planting potatoes at family garden sites on the way up, to harvest on the way home.

Trolling

Another commercial fishery, trolling, came about when refrigeration was introduced to Alaska fisheries after the turn of the century. A troller catches fish with a hook and line pulled slowly through the water behind the boat. In Sitka Native people trolled, but most trollers were European immigrants or from the Lower 48. Commercial trolling began in Southeast Alaska around 1905, with rowboats, in southern Southeast.

Around 1913, trollers found rich king salmon grounds at the southern end of Baranof Island, and fish buyers gathered at Port Alexander. As many as a thousand fishing boats filled the harbor. At its peak Port Alexander had “three floating salteries . . . a church, six general stores, six restaurants, three bakeries, a meat shop, two barber shops and three pool rooms.”⁹⁶ Troll fish in the early years were king salmon, “mild-cured,”—brined



Sitka from radio tower on Japonski Island, 1928. Lower left is Sitka's Historic Indian Village. Next to it is downtown Sitka, and following the shoreline past the Crescent, the large buildings of the Sheldon Jackson School. The Cottages settlement is beyond that, adjacent to the wooded Sitka National Historical Park. The Alaska Native Brotherhood Hall was built in 1914, and enlarged and remodeled in 1928. Photo Shop Studio Collection, Sitka Historical Museum.

and chilled, in large barrels called tierces, which weighed over 1,000 pounds loaded—and shipped south under refrigeration for smoking as lox. Until the Second World War hand trollers fished by hand from rowboats or even carved canoes. As salmon runs were depleted, the fishing grounds moved up the coast, so that Sitka was popular in the 1920s, and the outer coast of Chichagof and Yacobi were hot in the 1940s. Trolling peaked in the 1920s or 1930s, by which point an estimated 1500 boats were fishing for king salmon in Southeast Alaska. The huge runs of giant king salmon were damaged by overfishing and by development, especially dams, on the Columbia river system.

Refrigeration also enabled the growth of the halibut fishery. Before refrigeration fish had to be heavily salted. Norwegian Americans dominated the fishery, traveling up from Puget Sound on purpose-built halibut schooners. In the early days they caught fish from dories, but with the advent of gas engines into the fisheries around 1905, the halibut schooners could set gear directly from the mother boat. The early teens saw a boom in the fishery that came with the construction of cold storage plants in Alaska. Sitka investors built a cold storage plant in Sitka in 1912. It was located approximately where the Totem Square Inn is now, and burned down in 1974.

Herring Reduction Plants

Even after Alaska became a Territory in 1912, Alaska's fisheries were federally managed. Weak federal oversight led to permanent damage done by the herring reduction industry. Salmon canneries, mild-cure stations and even whaling stations were turned into herring plants. In the early years they processed herring for food, but in the 20s and 30s the processing plants were used for "reduction," in which mass quantities of herring caught by huge seine boats (owned by the processing company) were boiled down for oil. The remains were sold as fertilizer. This caused the collapse of herring stocks in the late 1930s, which had predictably devastating consequences on all fisheries because herring are a major food for salmon, halibut, and other predators. The last herring reduction plant in Southeastern Alaska was

at Washington Bay across Chatham Strait on Kuiu Island, and operated until 1966.

Civil Rights and Education

The ANB and ANS continued to fight for rights throughout the 1930s and 40s. The Central Council of Tlingit and Haida Indian Tribes of Alaska was created in 1935 in order to pursue land claims. Their efforts resulted in a court settlement in 1959, and laid the groundwork for the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act in 1971. Elizabeth Peratrovich, at the time Grand Camp President of the ANS, was influential in the Territorial Legislature passing the 1945 Anti-Discrimination Act. There is now a holiday in Alaska named for her, on the date the legislation passed.

Sitka's primary schools were not integrated until 1942. Native children attended the BIA elementary school, now the site of the Sheet'ká Kwaan Naa Kahidi. Schools disparaged and suppressed Native culture and tradition and punished children for speaking their Native language. Sitka High School was not integrated until 1949. Before this time, Native young people wanting a high school education had to go to a Native boarding school. In Sitka the Presbyterian Sheldon Jackson High School was a private school, or youth could go to the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) Mt. Edgecumbe High School, which started in 1946, to the Wrangell Institute, or to boarding high schools elsewhere in Alaska or in the Lower 48. Authorities also took Alaska Native children, some of them very young, from their families to boarding schools against their will. This abuse of power, harmful in itself, led to abuse at those schools.⁹⁷ The callous treatment and predation experienced by many children at those schools has consequences still felt today.

Education for Alaska Native children reflected the belief that Native culture, language and traditions are incompatible with modern life, and so have to be given up if a child is to succeed. Authorities were blind to the harm done by racial bias and the educational policies based on it, and instead believed Native people were handicapped by their own language and culture. Parents didn't teach their children the language, believing it



Launching of the Sheldon Jackson School mission boat Princeton Hall from the Howard Boat Shop December 4, 1941. Sitka Fine Arts Camp Collection

would hold their children back. While the boarding schools were the only chance for a high school diploma and the jobs that came with it, the price was the loss of heritage and language across generations. In response to this crisis, Lingít leaders Kaal.átk' Charlie Joseph, Yeidikook'áa Isabella Brady, and others started the Sitka Native Education Program in the 1970s. Today, this

program and others are celebrating and connecting youth and adults through culture, history, and language.

World War II

In the 1930s Sitka was chosen as a site for a strategic defense base for the North Pacific against the threat posed by Japan. The only defenses for the North Pacific during the war were at Sitka, Kodiak Island, and Dutch Harbor. In 1937 the first Navy seaplanes were stationed here, and in 1939 the Navy began building a Naval Operating Base for PBY “Flying Boats,” long-range amphibious reconnaissance aircraft. After Japan attacked and occupied Attu and Kiska Island, Sitka was mainly important as a waypoint for PBY planes on their way to the Aleutians.

The military blasted and connected islands in front of Sitka for Coastal Defense installations, to defend the Naval Air Station from attack by ship. Three batteries of 6-inch guns would Sitka Sound against enemy vessels, each with two base end stations, with searchlights and connected with communications cables, for aiming the guns. Remnants of these defenses remain, especially on the Causeway, on the other side of Sitka’s airport.

WWII transformed Sitka. The military infrastructure

In the 1930s and 40s, men associated with the Sheldon Jackson School built two seiners, the SJS and the SJS II, for the school. They also built the 63-foot mission boat the Princeton Hall, in the Howard Brothers shop on Katlian Street, now the site of the Seafood Producers Coop. Builders included George Howard, at whose shop it was built, Andrew Hope, school instructors and students, who helped build the boat as their vocational training. The Princeton Hall was launched December 4 1941, just days before Pearl Harbor. The U.S. Navy requisitioned the vessel, painted her gray, and mounted a machine gun on her deck. After World War II, the boat was returned to the school. The school later sold the boat, which was restored, and the history preserved, by the late William and Kathy Ruddy.



Sitka from Verstovia in 1940 (above) and 1948 (below). Photo Shop Studio photo, Sitka Public Library Hardcastle Collection.



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Japonski Island Boathouse (right of center) during WWII. Taken from the top of a gravel conveyor, similar to a view from the bridge today. Sitka Historical Society Johnson Collection.

The Navy built a boat repair shop and haul out, that they called a boathouse, in 1941. The fleet of boats for both the Army and Navy had to be repaired at the tiny marine ways which was probably originally intended to be winter storage and for light maintenance, but the Navy added on a shop and storage wing and made do. They also had a tidal grid and a floating dry dock, but the facilities were inadequate for the over 40 shipwrights employed by the Navy and the nearly 60 vessels that required repair and maintenance. It was to be replaced by a larger facility, but before it could be built Sitka was no longer important in the war effort.

The building is still here, part of the Sitka Naval Operating Base and U.S. Coast Defense National Historic Landmark, and is being restored by the Sitka Maritime Heritage Society as a maritime heritage center.

Other buildings in this National Historic Landmark include

two hangars built for maintaining the PBVs with an apron in front of them the size of a carrier deck, with tie downs for aircraft and ramps for bringing the seaplanes onto land. On the hill above the hangars are the Navy Communications Building, Recreation Building, Mess Hall, and Barracks. University of Alaska Southeast, Sitka campus occupies one of the hangars, and the state-run Mt. Edgecumbe High School has the other hangar and the buildings on the hill above.

The Army base was on Alice and Charcoal Islands, and eventually on a 1 ½ mile Causeway connecting to the battery at Makhnati Island. The Causeway portion of the Landmark is now the Fort Rousseau Causeway State Historical Park.

brought an influx of contractors and military personnel even before the war started, bringing jobs and money to Sitka, as well as alcohol and crime.

BIA School and Mt. Edgecumbe

After the war, thanks in part to lobbying by the ANB, the military installations were repurposed into a Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) high school and a Public Health Service tuberculosis sanitarium for Alaska Natives, to meet the enormous need for treatment in Alaska. This and other federal facilities on Japonski Island comprised the community of Mt. Edgecumbe, that even had its own post office. A generation of Sitkans grew

Tuberculosis has long been present in Alaska, but became an epidemic among Alaska's Native communities in the late 1800s. Discrimination against Native people was a factor.

The scale of loss is nearly incomprehensible: in 1932, the rate of death of Alaska Native people from tuberculosis alone was nearly twice that from all causes today. Most of the deaths were of people under the age of 30. One in four deaths was of an infant. New drugs ended the tuberculosis epidemic in the late 1950s, but the devastating impact of these deaths is still felt today.



Relaunching the Shore Boat Arrowhead after shipwright Bob Modrell and his Mount Edgecumbe High School boatbuilding students added the superstructure in the 1950s. Photo from the Modrell Family Collection.

up here on “the Island.” The 1950 census counted 1,985 people in Sitka, and another 1,362 in Mt. Edgecumbe.

Master boat builder Robert Modrell first came to Sitka to teach boatbuilding at Mt. Edgecumbe High School. He then managed the federal boat shop on the Island, and maintained the Shore Boats, ferries between the federal community of Mt. Edgecumbe and the town of Sitka. The Shore Boats were replaced by the O’Connell Bridge in 1972.

Fish Traps and Statehood

Alaska became a Territory in 1912. The federal government managed fisheries, with the goal of conservation of the fisheries, but very little enforcement power over the powerful cannery interests. Overfishing in the 1930s and 40s caused a crash in salmon populations. A policy of efficiency encouraged cannery-owned fish traps. Alaskan fishermen opposed these for two reasons: one was that they could quickly overfish a stream, destroying the fishery. The other was jobs: fish traps meant the canneries had no need to buy salmon from fishermen. Under federal management, big canning companies had a lot of sway with federal regulators.

The ANB took a leading role in fighting for statehood so the state could manage its own resources. When statehood was accomplished in 1959, the Alaska State Legislature immediately banned fish traps.

Pulp Mill

In 1959, the Japanese-owned Alaska Lumber and Pulp mill was built in Sitka (7 miles east of town) and was Sitka's main private employer until it closed in 1993. Sitka became a mill town, but fishing, education, and health care rounded out Sitka economy and culture. The population of Sitka town in 1960 was 3,237, with another 1,884 people across the channel at Mt. Edgecumbe.

Southeastern Alaska is nearly contiguous with the Tongass National Forest. The Sitka pulp mill and one in Ketchikan had 50-year timber contracts, which even at the time were seen by some as excessive. In Southeastern Alaska trees grow very slowly compared to rates in Oregon or Washington; it takes a century or more before a forest can be cut again. The big old growth trees that are valuable to the industry comprise only a small portion of the forest, and are also the richest habitat for salmon and other creatures. The Forest Service ended the pulp mill contracts in the 1990s because they were unsustainable and would have done permanent damage to fish and wildlife populations. This led to the closure of Sitka's pulp mill in 1993.

Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act (ANCSA)

Lingít and Haida leaders worked tirelessly to gain recognition of their preexisting ownership rights to this region and to get compensation for fish streams and other land and resources taken by the federal government when it created the Tongass National Forest. In the 1960s, after Alaska became a state, the new state started making its land selections and tried to clear the way for the Alaska Pipeline. Native leaders like Lingít lawyer Shgúndi William Paul and members of the ANB and the newly created Alaska Federation of Natives appealed to national leaders and groups and managed to halt the process until Indigenous ownership and compensation for Alaska could be settled.



Americorp Volunteer Rebecca Fritz and Aaron Bean, natural resource specialist at Sitka Tribe of Alaska, unload branches covered with herring roe at the Fisherman's Quay in 2012. Photo by James Poulson, Daily Sitka Sentinel.

The Treaty of Cession of 100 years earlier was a live issue because it left unclear what the Russian “possessions” were that were transferred to the United States. This led to court cases in which Native civil rights leaders and organizations fought for recognition of land claims. In 1968, the Central Council of Lingít and Haida Indian Tribes of Alaska settled a court case for \$7.5 million after the court found that the creation of the Tongass National Forest constituted a taking of land from Lingít and Haida people. In 1971, Congress passed the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act (ANCSA), which created regional Native corporations with Native people as shareholders. These corporations are now a major political and economic force. ANCSA in turn led to the 1980 Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act (ANILCA) which withdrew 157 million acres of land for conservation and other protection.

Overfishing of herring in Territorial days for the herring reduction plants caused great environmental damage because this species is critical to the populations of many other fish and mammals. The destruction of herring fisheries also caused extensive cultural harm. Herring were and continue to be vitally important to Lingít people. Every spring, weighted hemlock tree branches are placed around Sitka to collect herring eggs. Traditions, regalia, artwork and narratives like the Kiks.ádi stories surrounding Yaaw Teiyi (Herring Rock) link history, clans, and this place in deeply meaningful ways.

Under state management herring stocks have continued to decline. The Alaskan herring sac roe fishery (for herring roe, a traditional food in Japan) began in Sitka in 1969, after the herring stocks in Japan collapsed. In this fishery, herring are caught just before they spawn and the roe sacs are stripped from the mature female herring. The other sac roe herring fisheries in Southeast Alaska collapsed and are closed due to depleted stocks. The market for herring sac roe is going down over time, but the Sitka sac roe fishery continues to be perpetrated.

The history of collapse of every other commercial herring egg fishery, recent alarming changes in where and when herring spawn, and the critical importance of this species to other fish and animals and to Lingít culture are behind efforts by Sitkans and others for more conservative management, and to limit or end the commercial herring sac roe fishery.

The main assets of the ANCSA corporations were land and natural resources. Southeast Alaska Native corporations had to log those lands in order to generate funds for shareholders and for investment. Under state law clearcuts can be much larger than allowed on the National Forest. The highest return came from exporting logs in the round.

Longline Gold Rush, IFQs

After halibut stocks were fished down in the early 20th century, they were allowed to rebuild in the 1960s and 70s. The fishery reopened at about the same time as the 1979 Magnuson-Stevens Act restricted foreign vessels from inside 200 miles off shore. Japanese longliners had been fishing for black cod, or sablefish, which has a strong market in Japan. In the 1980s, longlining for halibut and black cod, highly lucrative fisheries with strong markets, was wide open to anyone who wished to participate. To keep participants from overfishing, the fishery was regulated by shortening the seasons, with openings as short as 24 hours.

This led to a race to catch as much fish as possible in round-the-clock fisheries, and to damage of the product because it was all unloaded at the same time, creating enormous strain on processors. It also led to loss of vessels and of lives, when fishermen went out in vessels that were not seaworthy, or when a fishing opening coincided with dangerous weather.

Individual Fishing Quotas or IFQs were introduced in 1995. The program gave fishermen a quota based on their catches in the mid-1980s. This remains controversial because while it saves lives and results in higher quality products, the program denied quotas to crews and privatized the resource. Quotas can be bought and sold, but are classed by the size of boat. Another restriction is that the owner of the quota must physically be on the boat when fishing so quotas can't be consolidated by corporations or banks, which has happened in other parts of the world.

Pulp Mill Closes

When the pulp mill closed in 1993, people here feared that Sitka would decline. By then, however, tourism was on the rise with visits from cruise ships, and the Native-run nonprofit Southeast Alaska Regional Health Consortium or SEARHC, which had taken over the Public Health Service hospital on Mt. Edgecumbe, had greatly expanded its operations. The U.S. Coast Guard Air Station relocated to Sitka from Annette Island in 1977, bringing Coast Guard families. Sitka's small community college

became University of Alaska Southeast, Sitka Campus, and moved to Japonski Island into one of the former aircraft hangars from WWII. Sitka's population (including Mt. Edgecumbe) jumped from 4,254 in 1970 to 7,803 in 1980, and peaked at about 9,000 in 2007; in 2022 Sitka's population is about 8,500.

Most today see the value of the forest as habitat for salmon and other wildlife, and for tourism, as worth more than its value as large-scale clear cuts for export as round logs and pulp.

Commercial fishing remains a strong component of Sitka's economy. Charter fishing also saw big growth through the 1990s. Alaska's commercial fisheries, unlike most of those around the globe, are notably well managed and take place in an intact and healthy natural environment. (Fish farms, which are banned in Alaska, have a large, negative environmental impact because of unsustainably sourced feed fish, the use of antibiotics, and the concentration of waste.) Bottom trawlers are banned in Southeastern Alaska. Sitka's fisheries are all on sustainably managed wild fish, caught by independent small-boat fishermen.

Cruise ship passenger numbers peaked in ---- at about ----. Sitkans voted not to have a cruise ship dock downtown, which limits numbers because passengers have to come to shore by small boat. A private cruise ship dock opened five miles north of town in 2013, and cruise passenger numbers went from ---- in 2012 to ---- in 2022. They are projected to be over 500,000 in 2023, challenging Sitka's infrastructure and identity.

Another part of Sitka's economy is culture and education. After the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) closed the Mt. Edgecumbe High School in the early 1980s, the State of Alaska reopened it as a boarding high school for youth from small villages and towns. The Sitka Tribe of Alaska introduces the public to Lingít culture at the Sheet'ká Kwaan Naa Kahidi, on the site of the old BIA elementary school. Sheldon Jackson College, the successor to Sheldon Jackson High School, closed in 2007 and the campus is now home to organizations including the Sitka Music Festival, the Sitka Fine Arts Camp, the Sitka Sound Science Center, and the Sheldon Jackson Museum.

If you have comments, corrections, or suggestions, please contact the Sitka Maritime Heritage Society at sitkamaritime.org, by emailing sitkamaritime@gmail.com, or mailing us at P. O. Box 2153 Sitka, Alaska 99835.

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