

The final conceptual design for the Japonski Island Boathouse renovation was presented by architect Tim Whiteley at a public meeting in Sitka on August 31.

The project has been funded with a grant from the U. S. Park Service Historic Preservation Fund, administered by the State of Alaska Office of History and Archaeology. Administration was provided by the City & Borough of Sitka. The Sitka Maritime Heritage Society organized public meetings and review.

Additional funding was from a Preservation Services grant from the National Trust for Historic Preservation to the Sitka Maritime Heritage Society.

The meeting August 31 was the last of three held as part of the design process. In addition, the SMHS gathered a committee comprised of representatives from fishing, historical, Native, and tourism segments of our community to review and comment on the design as it progressed.

In February of this year the initial meeting was held to gather ideas and to present the condition survey and needs identified by the SMHS. The architects used this information to draw three alternative designs for the facility, which were presented in the public meeting in May. Using comments from reviewers, the City and Borough of Sitka, and re-

search by the Sitka Maritime Heritage Society, the architects refined the alternatives presented in May into this final design.

The design is an important first step toward the goal of a working heritage center. Boat handling, repair, fishing heritage, subsistence and recreational traditions, the paths of American and world history, and the boats themselves will be preserved and experienced first hand in the proposed center. The old timers and old boats are disappearing, and it is time to preserve our heritage for future generations.

The complete design may be seen at the SMHS website, [www.sitkamaritime.org](http://www.sitkamaritime.org).

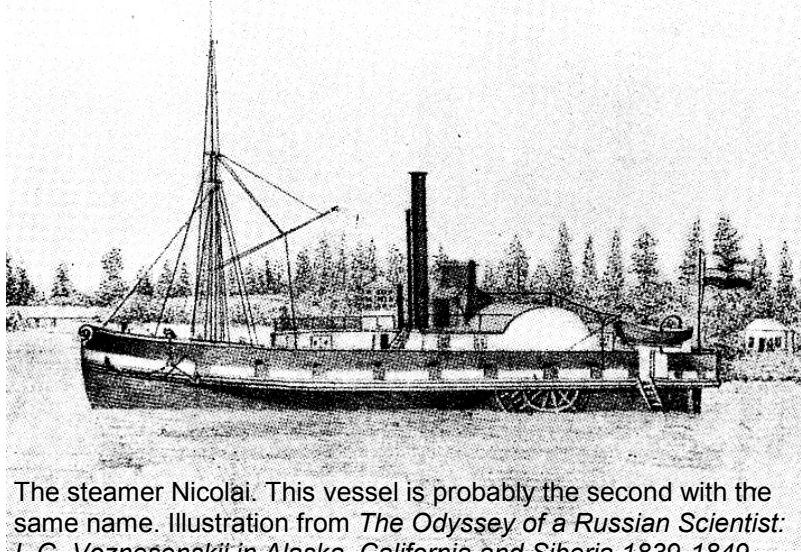
con't from front page

The design combines aspects of the alternatives presented in May. A small addition to the building will house new uses – a desk, gift sales, lobby and restroom. The marine ways and workshop will be used for their original purpose, boat repair, with access for viewing by the public. This will be the central exhibit and will also help preserve Sitka's classic fleet. The remaining wing will be dedicated to hands on, interactive displays on maritime history. A small detached building will have additional restrooms, an office and storage.



### What's Next?

The SMHS is already seeking funds for the building renovation, and fundraising through grants, events, and all memberships and donations will continue to be important. This winter the SMHS has a grant to clean up the building and site and make some repairs to the walls and roof. And, the SMHS will continue in its mission to preserve and share Sitka's maritime heritage, through such things as interviews and programs, while pursuing the goal of a working maritime heritage center.



The steamer Nicolai. This vessel is probably the second with the same name. Illustration from *The Odyssey of a Russian Scientist: I. G. Voznesenskii in Alaska, California and Siberia 1839-1849*. By A. I. Alekseev, The Limestone Press.

### Sitka's First Steamers

By

W. D. De Armond

It is well known that the Hudson's Bay Company's redoubtable *BEAVER* was the first steam-powered vessel to operate on the west coast of North America. The *BEAVER* of course was built in England (see the first quarter 2004 issue of this newsletter), and it is much less commonly known that the first steam vessels actually built on the west coast were constructed here in Sitka, not long after the *BEAVER* first arrived on the Columbia River in the spring of 1836.

By that time, the Russian American Company, headquartered at Sitka, was making plans for a steamship of its own, to be built here in the company shipyard, located at what is now Totem Square at the junction of Katlian and Lincoln Streets. In part, the motive for the RAC to enter the steamship era was the same as that of the HBC, that is, to have a vessel capable of making trading voyages among the islands of the region, tricky navigating for sailing vessels. Perhaps more urgently, the Russians wanted a steam tug to bring sailing vessels in and out of the harbor at Sitka, through the many hazards of the Sound, and to do other towing duties close to home. The RAC did a lot of logging, and rafting logs into town by oar and sail power was a tiresome business.

The RAC ordered a steam engine and boiler and associated machinery from a broker in Boston, Massachusetts, which were brought round the Horn to Sitka by sailing

*Steamers con't*  
vessel early in 1838. In June of that year construction started on the steamer, to be named *NIKOLAI I*, for the Tsar of the time. She was to be slightly larger than the *BEAVER*, with a length of 132 feet on deck, 120 feet on the keel, 20-foot beam (40 feet over the paddle boxes) and a depth of nine feet. She apparently was built mostly of yellow cedar, which the Russians called "cypress". Unlike the *BEAVER*, the *NIKOLAI I* was designed and built with a substantial deckhouse. The Russian steamer was launched in early 1839 and put straight to work.

Her engine, which was to have a much longer history than did the *NIKOLAI I* herself, was of the cross-head or "steeple" type, a low-pressure machine much used at the time, and simpler than the twin side-lever engines in the *BEAVER*. The vertical cylinder had a bore of 30 inches and a stroke of seven feet. The piston rod drove a crosshead, a heavy steel bar several feet long which ran up and down in a pair of guides; these were in an inverted-V shape, giving rise to the "steeple" designation. From the crosshead, connecting rods ran down on either side of the cylinder to cranks on the paddle shaft, which ran directly beneath the cylinder. The engine was rated at 60 horsepower; this does not seem like much for a vessel of probably 200 tons or more, but steam engine horsepower are calculated

differently from the ratings of internal combustion engines, and a 60-hp steam engine would have a great deal more pulling power than a modern 60-hp outboard.

The *NIKOLAI I* seems to have given generally good service for more than a dozen years, though evidently navigating the open ocean was not her strong point; she had to turn back on a planned voyage to Kodiak and did not venture such a trip again.

Much of the vessel's success was credited by the Russians to an American machinist named (probably) Moore who came round the Horn with the engine to install it, and stayed on in Sitka, working for the RAC, for several years. Soon after the *NIKOLAI I* was launched, he built a smaller steamer with an eight-horsepower engine, which he fabricated himself in Sitka, along with the boiler and other machinery, and named for himself. The name transliterates back from the Cyrillic as *MUR*, which could possibly be Muir rather than Moore, though his name is generally accepted to be the latter.

*continued page 4*

#### **Board of Directors**

Rebecca Poulson, Pres.  
Jan Steinbright, V.P.  
Kathy Kyle, Secretary  
Mike Litman, Treasurer  
Anne Pollnow  
Pat Hughes  
Joe D'Arienzo

#### **Lease**

The City and Borough of Sitka has agreed to accept the Japonski Island Boathouse property from the State of Alaska Department of Natural Resources, and to lease the property to the SMHS. It is now looking like late October at the earliest for the transfer and lease to be complete, so that the SMHS can begin the clean up and repairs funded by the current grants from the federal Historic Preservation Fund and the Alaska Association for Historic Preservation.

#### **Contractor needed**

The SMHS is still seeking a carpenter to act as construction supervisor, to lead the repair and clean up work at the boathouse. Most of the work will take place next spring, though some should take place this winter. The construction supervisor will lead volunteers in most of the work. The Scope of Services is posted at the SMHS website, [www.sitkamaritime.org](http://www.sitkamaritime.org).

#### **Painting Restored, History Shared at Lutheran Church October 17**

As part of the rededication of a restored altar painting at the Sitka Lutheran Church, the church is sponsoring a program on Sharing Our History. The SMHS and other historical organizations will tell about what they do. The program is at 2 p.m. on Sunday, October 17.

steamers

He also built two still-smaller steam vessels of two horsepower each, one for the use of the RAC Chief Manager, the other for himself. Not much is known about the *MUR* (which was soon sold to a California man and became the first steam vessel to operate on the inland waters of that territory) or the two smaller steamers, not even whether they were paddle- or screw-propelled.

By 1852 the hull of the *NIKOLAI I* was in bad shape, beyond repair, and she was scrapped; the engine, boiler and other machinery were salvaged and used in a new vessel, named *IMPERATOR NIKOLAI I*, apparently pretty much a copy of her predecessor, launched in 1853. The new vessel served well until the late fall of 1861 when, on a trading voyage from Sitka to Kake in heavy weather, she ran onto a rock in Chatham Strait – still called Russian Reef in her honor – and was a total loss. However, her crew survived, and much of her cargo and her machinery were salvaged. The engine and boiler were returned to Sitka, overhauled, and eventually powered the famous *POLITKOF-SKII* (one of the few vessels associated with Sitka which can truly be called “legendary”, even if most of the legends have little basis in fact). The old machinery served the *POLLY* well until she cut down into a barge in 1896. By that time

the engine was approaching 60 years old, and was very likely the oldest operating marine engine anywhere in the West, but apparently it was scrapped.

---

### Alaska Day Chowder

The SMHS will once again offer coffee and tea, cookies, and, for the first time, authentic fish chowder. The booth will be at the Crescent Harbor work shelter on Alaska Day, October 18th, which is a Monday this year. There will also be t-shirts for sale, brochures, and members to talk to about the SMHS and activities.



### Alaska Day Parade

The SMHS plans to participate in the Alaska Day Parade this year. The theme this year is "Gathering to Feast." The SMHS float will be on the theme of "Break Time," also known as "Mug Up" - that important occasion of passing on our oral tradition over coffee and donuts. The parade begins at 2 pm, and goes from Swan Lake down Lake Street and Lincoln Street to end at Totem Square.

### SMHS Website

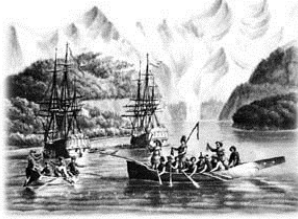
The SMHS now has a website, at [www.sitkamaritime.org](http://www.sitkamaritime.org). It is still a work in progress, but more is posted all the time. The newsletter will be available there, and members now have the option of having a link emailed to them, rather than having a paper newsletter come in the mail. Just email, call or mail in your preference with your membership renewal.

### Historic Sites Tour October 9

The National Park Service is again sponsoring a Historic Sites Tour for the Alaska Day holiday. This year it will begin at the Bishop's House at 9:30 a.m. The theme this year is "Community." The SMHS will escort participants between the Pioneer Home and the old Post Office (now the City Office Building), and will talk for ten minutes or so about the Japonski Island communities during and after



*Sitka Maritime Heritage Society*



*Lituya Bay 1786*

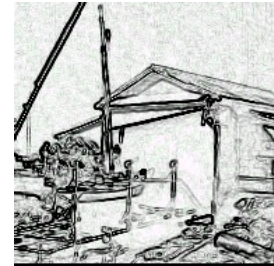
The popular SMHS t-shirts feature a design La Perouse's ships at Lituya with local canoes alongside. They come in pigment-dyed teal green, Atlantic blue or merlot with long or short sleeves. The shirts are \$20 for the short sleeve shirts and \$25 for long sleeve. Support the SMHS by purchasing one and proudly wearing it. Call 747- 3448 or buy one at the 4th of July rowing and kayak races, noon at UAS ramp.

**Please help make the  
Sitka Maritime Heritage Center a reality**

As a member, you will receive our quarterly newsletter so you will be informed of our progress on the museum and other activities.

Membership is for one year and is renewable. We are a non-profit corporation with 501 (c)(3) status so your membership donation is tax deductible with the limits of the law.

**Yes, I would like to join the  
Sitka Maritime Heritage Society.**



**Name** \_\_\_\_\_

**Address** \_\_\_\_\_

**Phone:** (    ) \_\_\_\_\_

**Email:** \_\_\_\_\_

**I would like to receive my newsletter by email**

**regular mail**

- ◇ \$15 Students & elders
- ◇ \$30 Crew member
- ◇ \$40 Entire Crew (family)
- ◇ \$50 Mate
- ◇ \$100 Navigator



- ◇ \$250 Captain
- ◇ \$500 Pilot
- ◇ \$1000 Old Salt
- ◇ Other: \_\_\_\_\_

If you would like to become a supporting member of the Sitka Maritime Heritage Society, please fill out this form and return it, along with your check, to:

**Sitka Maritime Heritage Society**  
P.O. Box 2153  
Sitka, AK 99835



Sitka Maritime Heritage Society  
P.O. Box 2153  
Sitka, AK 99835