

Russian Remains: Alaska Once Dominated by Another World Power

When the United States purchased Alaska from Russia in 1867, \$7.2 million seemed like an enormous price tag for 586,412 square miles of what many considered nothing but frozen wasteland. Today, that amount seems like a bargain as Alaska has proven to be a state rich in gold, oil, timber, minerals and incredible natural beauty.

Nonetheless, the influence of Russian ownership and early expeditions to Alaska left a strong imprint on the people of contemporary Alaska. Be it spiritual, cultural or architectural, Russia's impact on Alaska is still evident today.

Russia's interest in Alaska began with Vitus Bering's expedition in 1741. Bering and his crew reached what is now Kayak Island, but the ship wrecked and Bering and much of his crew perished. Those who stayed through the winter and survived the disastrous event brought home luxurious sea otter skins that spurred a rush to Alaska by other Russian explorers. Grigori Shelekhov was one such entrepreneur, who in 1784 founded the first permanent settlement in Alaska on Kodiak Island and sent Alexander Baranov to manage his business interest, the Russian American Company.

Kodiak Island was the first place in Alaska that the Russians settled, first in secluded Three Saints Bay and later in the present-day city of Kodiak. A walking tour of the city can include the museum, Holy Resurrection Russian Orthodox Church and the Saint Innocent Veniaminov Research Institute Museum. There is also a yearly event celebrating the canonization of one of the Russian priests, Saint Herman, in an area outside of town called Monk's Lagoon.



"I don't think people expect us to have so much Russian history," said Alice Ryser of the Baranov Museum in Kodiak. "Even our Russian visitors are surprised. But you can see (the influence) everywhere. ... Even the street names around here are Russian." Today, Kodiak still looks the part of a Russian settlement.

"The building that we're in is the oldest Russian log structure in North America, and it was a warehouse for Baranov and the Russian American Company," Ryser continued. "It was built in 1808, and there are other remnants from that time, too, that show how much the Russians were here."

As the Russians became involved with the sea otter skin industry, they inevitably clashed with Alaska Natives who had lived in Alaska for thousands of years. The Natives saw the Russian influx as an intrusion on their lives and livelihoods. That hostility later led to several confrontations between Russian explorers and Alaska Natives. One such battle occurred on the Kenai Peninsula, following the arrival in 1786 of Russian fur traders, who settled the area by 1791.

There were parts of Russian culture that did take hold with Alaska's indigenous people: when Russian Orthodox priests arrived along with the settlers, they introduced Alaska Natives to Christianity and Russian churches began to multiply.

But cultural tension mounted, and in 1797 a battle for the Kenai erupted between the Dena'ina Athabaskans and the Lebedev Company, the fur trading company based on the Kenai. More than 100 Russians, Dena'ina and other Natives were killed. Because the Russians didn't stay long on the Kenai, it's easy to write off the importance of this blip in history. But it could have turned out differently had the Dena'ina people not resisted the Russians' presence.

"This is the only place (in Alaska) where the Native presence defeated the Russian presence," said Ricky Gease executive director of the Kenai Visitors and Cultural Center.



Today, Kenai Peninsula towns like Ninilchik and Kenai have wonderfully scenic oniondomed churches and an active community of Russian Orthodox believers. Old Town Kenai, the site of the original Russian settlement, is a nice place to learn more. Gease said daily walking tours of the area are available, as are interpretive programs at the nearby cultural center.

From the Kenai Peninsula, Russian fur traders eventually moved east. By 1796, they arrived in Yakutat and later settled in Sitka, which became the Russian capital. The Tlingit Indians living in the area knew that submission to the Russians meant allegiance to their czar and slave labor to the fur trade company. The 1802 battle between the Tlingits and the Russians killed nearly all of the Russians and their Aleut slaves.

Undaunted by the battle, the Russian American Co.'s Baranov arrived ready to fight in 1804. For six days he fought the Tlingits, this time overpowering them. The Russians named their newly acquired land New Archangel. The island on which Sitka is located, Baranof Island, is named for Alexander Baranof.



Sitka is one of the best places to learn about Russia's influence on Alaska. Just take a walk around the city. Sitkan Jane Eidler arranges a fascinating 90-minute historic walking tour of downtown Sitka, which takes in some of Russia's most notable influences: enjoy lofty views of the surrounding islands and ocean from Castle Hill (where, incidentally, control over Alaska was officially transferred to the United States in 1867); see a recreated Russian blockhouse; visit the old Russian cemetery and the Lutheran cemetery where Russian Princess Maksoutoff is buried; check out Saint Michael's Russian Orthodox Cathedral; visit the Russian Bishop's House, which is part of Sitka National Historical Park; you'll also see many historic houses that bear the stamp of Russian influence.

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