



## Ambassadors for Alaska



The stately totem poles of Sitka National Historical Park appear so solidly rooted in place it is hard to imagine a time when they were not part of the surrounding forest. Their history however, tells a very different story; one that begins in the coastal villages of southeast Alaska and ends, after traveling more than 6,000 miles by revenue cutter, steamship and rail, in Alaska's first National Park.

Acquired from Russia in 1867, the vast territory some referred to as "Seward's Folly" was actually rich with resources and far from the frozen wasteland some imagined. Alaska was long on acreage but short on population. How to generate interest in Alaska and attract the settlers who could help shape it into a state?

That question was on the mind of Alaska's Governor, John Green Brady, when he was asked to create an exhibit publicizing Alaska for the Louisiana Purchase Exposition to be held in St Louis in 1904. His answer involved one of Alaska's most recognizable features: the towering totem poles carved by the Native peoples of southeast Alaska. In Brady's mind, a display of totem poles would draw people to the Alaska exhibit. Once there, they would learn about the "real" Alaska through displays of Alaska's raw materials, agricultural products and unique curiosities. Brady hoped visitors would form a new impression of Alaska: that of a place ready for tourism, settlement and development.

### An Era of Change

Governor Brady's Alaska was quite different from the Alaska that existed before the Russians came. Native populations had been cut in half by epidemic disease and cultural traditions were rapidly changing. Towns, the new economic and social centers, were drawing population away from villages. Concerned that traditional art appeared to be disappearing from sparsely populated coastal villages, Brady conceived the idea of collecting totem poles and bringing them to a place where they could be preserved and people, including tourists, could view them. His idea took a step toward reality in 1901 when Chief Saanaheit of Kasaan donated a totem pole, four houseposts and a canoe for the government park in Sitka.

Between 1903 and 1904, Brady toured southern southeast Alaska's Tlingit and Haida villages by ship, asking leaders to donate poles and other objects specifically for the exposition. After several voyages, he was promised poles from the villages of Old Kasaan, Howkan, Koianglas, Sukkwan, Tuxekan, and Klinkwan. It was especially remarkable that Brady was given the poles as gifts because at least one professional collector had tried to purchase poles from these same villages and been refused. Trusting in Brady and looking to the future, these leaders chose to share their cultural heritage with the world, even if it meant parting with it.

### Meet Me at the Fair

In spring of 1904, fifteen Tlingit and Haida totem poles, two dismantled Haida houses, a canoe and other items were delivered to the St. Louis fairgrounds. Brady had arranged for five Native men to accompany the exhibit and help repair and install the poles. John Baranovich of Kasaan and Chief Yeal-tat-see from the Klawock area, both totem pole donors, were among them. Brady arrived in April, in time for the fair's opening.

The Louisiana Purchase Exposition was a truly spectacular cultural event. Massive "palaces" were devoted to amazing technological advances like the electric lighting, the wireless telegraph and the automobile. Although exploitive by today's standards, anthropological exhibits of indigenous peoples drew huge crowds. The elaborate fairgrounds covered more than 1,200 acres. An astonishing 18 to 19 million people visited the fair between April and December of 1904. For most of them, it was an experience they would never forget.

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## Meet Me at the Fair

Brady's totem poles were displayed at either end of the white colonial building that housed the rest of the Alaska exhibit, arranged around the reconstructed houses and canoe. One pole that was too damaged for the exhibit was loaned to an Alaska-themed activity known as the "Esquimaux Village" on "The Pike," the variety section of the fair.

At the close of the exposition, the remaining poles were transported on to the smaller Lewis and Clark Centennial Exposition in Portland for an exhibit there in 1905. Between June and October, 1,588,000 visitors toured the 400 acre fairgrounds along the Willamette River. Accompanying an Alaska exhibit inside the Government building, the totem poles and canoe were aligned along the shores of a man-made lake on the fairgrounds.

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## The Poles Return

When the Portland fair closed, the poles began another long journey, this time home to Alaska. They reached Sitka in January of 1906 where Brady's concept of a totem pole park would be realized. The poles were repaired by skilled local craftsmen, most of them Native graduates of the nearby Presbyterian mission school. The arrangement of the poles was orchestrated by local photographer E.W. Merrill. Sources indicate that in aligning the poles along the seaside path, Merrill intended to preserve some of the feeling of a traditional village. By March, Brady's vision of a collection of totem poles preserved in Sitka's popular park was complete.



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## 100 Years Later

The totem pole collection visitors see along park trails today has changed since it was first placed there in 1906. Over the years, caretakers patched, painted and finally re-carved the poles. Although many of the original poles are gone their stories live on - along with the opportunity for visitors to discover them along the quiet wooded paths of the park. Perhaps the most remarkable thing about the poles is that they continue to fulfill their purpose. Just as the original donors intended, the preservation and display of these objects has become a lasting memorial to their cultural heritage. Just as Governor Brady intended when he began his efforts to preserve and display Alaska's totem poles more than 100 years ago, the totem poles of Sitka National Historical Park remain powerful symbols that draw people to Alaska and provide a tangible link to the past.