



Archeology Program

National Park Service
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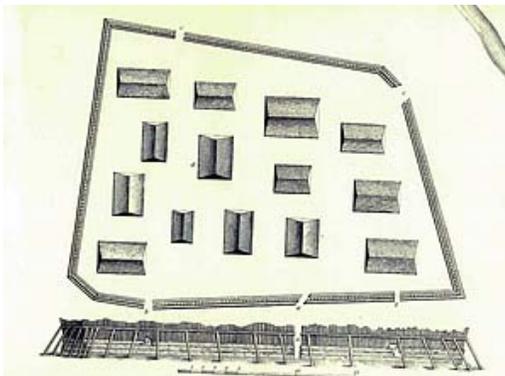
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Sitka National Historical Park Survey

During its first comprehensive inventory for archeological resources, Sitka National Historical Park in Alaska discovered the location of the Tlingit fort built to prepare for battle with the Russian colonists. Materials from the Battle of Sitka in 1804 include several cannon balls and musket balls. The inventory team used metal detectors and other geophysical methods in addition to other survey techniques to identify the fort site and areas that will receive further investigation.



“The fort was an irregular square, its longest side looking toward the sea.” Drawing by Lisiansky.

Russian efforts to establish a colony in North America have left an indelible impression on the community of Sitka, Alaska. Between 1741 and 1867, the Russian Imperial Government colonized Alaska with a focus on economic enterprise. Colonization efforts were carried out first by independent Siberian fur traders known as *promyshlenniki*. Fur traders' success led to the charter, in 1799, of the Russian American Company, a commercial fur company that was granted a far-reaching monopoly in Alaska. For 68 years, the Russian American Company expanded and developed imperial Russia's colonial interests in North America. This empire briefly extended as far as California and Hawaii, but the principle colony was Novo Archangel'sk, known today as Sitka.

Sitka National Historical Park, located near the community of Sitka, is the only park in the National Park System that focuses on the story of colonial Russian America. It preserves the site of the 1804 Battle of Sitka, fought between the Russians and the *Kiks.ádi* Tlingit.

The Battle of 1804

The Battle of Sitka is one chapter in the story of *Kiks.ádi* Tlingit resistance to Russian colonization. In 1802, Tlingit warriors successfully attacked the Russian fort at Starrigavin Bay. Killing or driving off the inhabitants of the fort, they destroyed the buildings and a ship that was being built. Survivors fled to Kodiak Island, and notified Alexandr Baranov, Chief Manager of the Shelikof-Golikov Company (a fore-runner of the Russian American Company) of the attack.

Anticipating retaliation, the *Kiks.ádi* constructed a unique, palisaded fort known as *Shish'k'i Noow* (Green Wood or Sapling Fort), at the mouth of Indian River. According to Urey Lisiansky, Captain of the Russian ship *Neva*, “The fort was an irregular square, its longest side looking toward the sea. It was constructed of wood, so thick and strong, that the shot from my guns could not penetrate it at the short distance of a cable's length.”

The fort was attacked by Russian forces and a naval escort, led by Baranov, in early October 1804. Although the *Kiks.ádi*, led by *K'alyaan*, repulsed a ground attack, the defenders concluded that ammunition and reinforcements were inadequate to hold the fort in the face of extensive cannon fire from the Russian ships, including the 350 ton *Neva* [1]. Under cover of darkness, the *Kiks.ádi* withdrew from the fort and the island, and established a new settlement at Peril Strait.

2004 Commemoration of the Battle of Sitka

The story of the Battle of 1804 and the losses suffered by its participants are of extreme importance to the *Kiks.ádi* clan and the Tlingit community. In 2004, members of Tlingit clans held a grief ceremony and a reconciliation potlatch at Sitka National Historical Park to mark the bicentennial of the Battle of Sitka.

The grief ceremony was held at a grassy clearing within the park that was identified as the approximate location of the fort that the *Kiks.ádi* built in anticipation of the battle. The only structure now present on the site is a traditionally carved totem pole raised in 1999 in honor of *K'alyaan*, the *Kiks.ádi* warrior who led the clan in the 1804 battle. Eagle and Raven clan members, seated opposite each other according to principles of Tlingit society, witnessed the display of important Eagle and Raven clan property, *at.oow*, including *K'alyaan's* Raven helmet (loaned by the Sheldon Jackson Museum) and the blacksmith hammer he carried into battle [2].

At the start of the ceremony, a heavy ermine robe was placed on the shoulders of Ms. Irina Afrosina, a descendent of Baranov through his wife, an Alaska Native, and Baranov's

representative on this day; and she was seated with the Raven clan. The mood was somber and reflective as the *Kiks.ádi* participants, dressed in traditional regalia and with subtle blackened tears or lines on their faces sang mourning songs. One by one, other clans from Sitka and surrounding communities came forward to speak or sing, making it clear that the effects of the battle reached deeply into the Tlingit community. Toward the end of the ceremony, the children of the opposite clans were called forward to remove the black marks from the faces of the *Kiks.ádi* clan, symbolizing the end of grief. After the ceremony the community was welcomed at the park visitor center for a meal and presentations.

A very different mood marked the reconciliation potlatch, *koo.eex*, the next day. As with the grief ceremony, people were seated according to their Raven or Eagle affiliation, with special areas reserved for clan leaders and Aleut guests. Objects testifying to clan history and identity were displayed at either end of the room. Starting at noon, the event continued through the night with a constantly changing program of presentations. Some of the presentations were serious, including speeches, a naming ceremony, the return of a ceremonial hat, and a formal peace ceremony marked by a symbolic release of eagle down. Other activities were lively and uplifting, including recognition of elders and community leaders, prayers and reminiscences, gift giving, two separate meals, and dance performances.

The community relations that were reinforced during the commemoration activities facilitated interest in the archeological survey. Concerns about cultural sensitivity and communication during the fieldwork were addressed with the help of two cultural liaisons: Steve Johnson, Jr., appointed by the *Kiks.ádi* clan, and Jessica Perkins, Tribal Resource Protection manager, appointed by the Sitka Tribe of Alaska. Meetings with both organizations were held during the first field season.

Identification of Park Cultural Resources

In 2005, the park began its first comprehensive survey of archeological cultural resources within the boundary of the park. Decades of multidisciplinary research, including a limited archaeological excavation in 1958, historical and collections research, a remote sensing survey, and Tlingit traditional knowledge, had left many questions unanswered, including the specific location of *Shish'k'i Noow*, the palisaded fort. Based on the historical, cultural and archaeological significance of the site and the lack of documentation needed for management of archeological cultural resources, an archeological survey was a high priority for the park. The goal of the four-year project is to provide information about the full range of sites in the park, with special interest in locations and structures associated with the 1804 battle. The survey is funded through the NPS Systemwide Archeological Inventory Program (SAIP).

An archeological survey has been a high priority for SITK since Chief of Resources Gene Griffin was hired by the park in the early 1990s. Griffin enlisted the NPS Midwest Archeological Center in Lincoln, NE, to conduct the project. Bill Hunt directed the project. Doug Scott directed the metal detecting team, assisted by archaeologists Charles Haecker (NPS, Santa Fe) and Chris Adams (USDA Forest Service, Albuquerque). Steve DeVore directed the geophysical aspects of the survey, employing ground-penetrating radar, a gradiometer, and magnetometer. Project volunteer Melissa Connor, also of Lincoln Nebraska, was responsible for GPS data. Four local students were hired to assist with the project. Several local volunteers also assisted.

Survey Results

In spite of thick ground vegetation and days of heavy rain that posed a challenge to the metal detecting and geomagnetic equipment (Sitka lies within Alaska's temperate coastal rainforest and receives nearly 100 inches of annual precipitation), the first field season exceeded expectations. Recovered cultural material, including one, two and twelve pound cannon balls and a number of musket balls, suggests that the general area previously identified as the fort site is the actual location of *Shish'k'i Noow*.

The preliminary geophysical data for the fort site revealed a number of anomalies but none clearly pointing to the expected fort structure, which is described in *Kiks.ádi* oral history and illustrated in a scale drawing based on the observations of a Russian participant in the battle. The anomalies may prove to be the result of known ground disturbance to the site, or post-battle activity. The latter possibility is supported by a variety of iron artifacts from the fort site area, which appear consistent with Russian homesteads, thought to have been built in the 1850s. Shovel testing also produced two possible flakes in the fort site vicinity, the first indication of a potential prehistoric component at the site.



Chris Adams and Charlie Haecker use metal detectors to survey one of the park's few cleared areas. The totem pole in the background was erected in 1999 to honor K'alyaan, the leader of the *Kiks.ádi* forces in the 1804 battle. (Photo by Doug Scott)

In addition to the findings at the fort site, the survey has identified areas of archeological interest throughout the park. These include an area of charcoal and ash concentration (radiocarbon dating pending); a potentially Russian-era hand painted ceramic fragment found near stones that may be associated with a former structure; and metal objects that may have been used in Native fish processing, an activity that is consistent with Tlingit oral history of the area.

More details will become available as this interesting project continues. The second and third year of the project will consist of additional survey, site documentation and analysis. Plans for the second season also include a series of forums to allow project archaeologists and tribal elders to informally discuss battle history and project progress. The final year will focus on analysis and preparation of the final report. Artifacts and samples will be taken to MWAC for analysis but returned to Sitka National Historical Park following conclusion of the project.



Cannon ball recovered from area near *Shish'k'i Noow*. (Photo by Bill Hunt)

Learn more about [Sitka National Historical Park](#).

References

Lisiansky, Urey Voyage Round the World in the Years 1803, 1804, 1805 and 1806, Bibliotheca Australiana #42, Da Capo Press, New York, 1968.

Notes

[1] A memorial established by the Russians for the sailors and midshipman who died during the battle and a collection of totem poles brought to the park in 1906 are also part of the park's enabling legislation. The 1843 Russian Bishop's House was added to the park in 1972. Since 1969, the park has also been home to the Southeast Alaska Indian Cultural Center, one of Alaska's oldest Native arts and cultural organizations.

[2] The hammer, which was once in the park's collection, was repatriated to the Kiks.adi. clan in 2003. Since that time, the clan has chosen to leave the hammer in the care of the park.

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Last updated: 08/11/2020 22:22:49

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