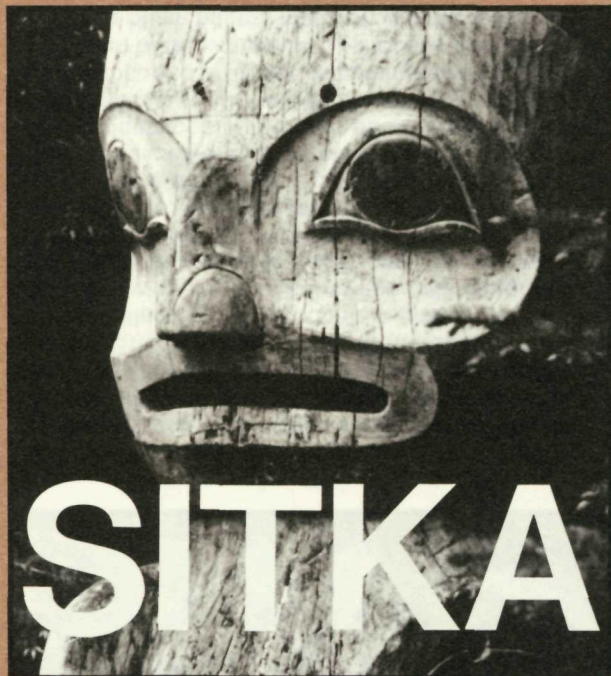


Sitka National Historical Park

The park, which is located in Alaska's southeastern panhandle, was established in 1910 and is administered by the National Park Service, U.S. Department of the Interior.

As the Nation's principal conservation agency, the Department of the Interior has responsibility for most of our nationally owned public lands and natural resources. This includes fostering the wisest use of our land and water resources, protecting our fish and wildlife, preserving the environmental and cultural values of our national parks and historical places, and providing for the enjoyment of life through outdoor recreation. The Department assesses our energy and mineral resources and works to assure that their development is in the best interests of all our people. The Department also has a major responsibility for American Indian reservation communities and for people who live in Island Territories under U.S. administration.

National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior



Sitka National Historical Park is a place of many dimensions. In its 40 hectares (100 acres), beach and forest combine to form a sanctuary which protects plant and wildlife, large and small, common and rare. The park is alive with history, too, encompassing within its past the site of the Battle of Sitka, and buildings of the Russian-American Co., for the town was Alaska's economic and cultural capital for half a century. Equally important, this unique area lives as a part of the community. It serves as a resource in teaching and learning by the people themselves. For the story of the park is the story of a people called Tlingit.

The Tlingit

One of Alaska's several native populations, the Tlingit long ago followed salmon streams and rivers that led down from the north like a complex series of paths. The Tlingit pushed southward toward the coast, and discovered an island-dotted wilderness of bounty and beauty. They settled on one of the larger islands, which they called "Shee," and a village grew up there. The place was Sitka.

Like other Tlingit communities, Sitka was completely independent, relying on the skills of its own families and village leaders. These skills were turned, before all else, to the location and gathering of food. Children picked blueberries and red huckleberries from the forest undergrowth, or dug for clams and gathered crabs in the tidal flats along Sitka Sound. The men hunted deer, brown bear, ducks, and geese with bow and arrow, and collected delicate herring eggs by placing young hemlock trees on the underwater floors of spawning grounds.



But the main supply of food lay in the fish. Salmon were trapped and hooked, black cod were caught with a simple line, and herring literally raked into dugout canoes with specially spiked paddles. Even larger seals and sea lions were sometimes harpooned, and the sea otter was hunted for its fine fur. The women cooked sea otter by roasting it on spits, by smoking and drying, or by boiling the meat in water heated with hot stones.

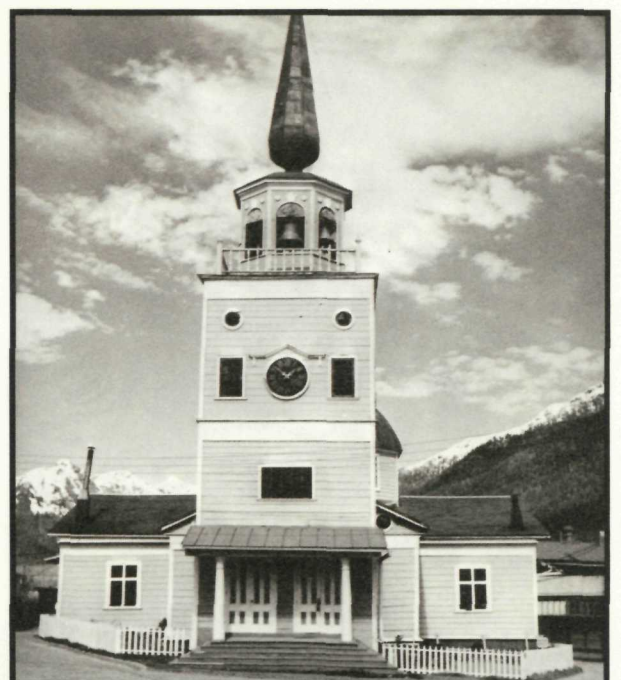
Such abundance from the land instilled in the Tlingit from their earliest years an awareness of their co-existence—and interdependence—with the environment around them. This gratitude expressed itself in the Tlingit's world view, a system of beliefs based upon kinship and communication with all living things. In a world where birds and fishes, animals and insects and men were not only equal but shared the same language and longings, the only differences were superficial ones of appearance and name. Along with Bear or Beaver or Eagle, the mischievous Raven might, like other beings, change into human form or emerge as an ancestral teacher and a heroic individual.

Because an identification with nature was so important to the Tlingit, children were taught early in life to recognize a spirit of nature within themselves. Being part of a matrilineal society, the Tlingit uncle—the mother's brother—passed these values on to his nephew, knowing that understanding leads to respect. And since all creatures could communicate with one another, the young learned to talk and relate to the objects of their natural world on expressly open and human terms.

Various symbols and art forms helped define these terms. Rituals, such as paddling canoes in time with the ocean's waves, took a place alongside ceremonies that were geared to the natural cycles of sun

and moon and season. Special wooden bowls were used to serve food on ceremonial occasions. Made from alder for ease of carving, and because it would not impart unpleasant flavors to the food, the bowls were richly carved with animal designs and inlaid with abalone shell. Sturdy spruce root baskets incorporated decorative strands of ferns and grasses. And Tlingit women took almost a year to produce an intricate Chilkat blanket from mountain goat wool, slowly weaving the symmetrical patterns of copper-blue and lichen-yellow.

The Tlingits' benevolent surroundings allowed them time for contemplation and creation. They used the plentiful wood around them not for shelter alone, but also for an ingenious architecture to embellish their large, rectangular, clan houses. Family and clan crests, carved on flat cedar panels, usually hung over the front door. Inside, house posts of Sitka spruce or western red cedar supported major roofing beams and showed where the various families lived. Besides these posts and crests, small wooden rattles offset wooden battle helmets and masks of Alaskan cedar. And finally, the Tlingit carved and used their famous towering totem poles for legends, stories, and family history.



The seemingly boundless wealth of the Tlingit contributed to one of the most unique and now legendary customs, the potlatch. The potlatch was many things to Tlingit society: celebration, competition, confirmation of status, and stimulation for the arts. A potlatch might be held on almost any occasion, such as the presentation of an heir, the conferring of crests and rights, the honoring of a dead chief, or a marriage. But always, the basic reason for the potlatch remained the serious measure of prestige.

The rules of such a rite were strictly followed. Only a high-ranking chief, a noble, or a clan leader could give a potlatch. When a potlatch was announced, it meant the individual had acquired great wealth and had decided to prove it in the hopes of increasing his prestige. The invitation was simple: You are invited. Come.

The guests at a potlatch served as witnesses to the particular event, while the host fed, housed, and entertained them sometimes for several weeks. On the final day, the host called the guests together and gave away much of his wealth, often even killing a valued slave or destroying a treasured heirloom. In the aftermath, the host could claim higher rank, a more prestigious rung on the social ladder. And he could expect to be invited to a future potlatch by his humbled guest.

On the whole, the potlatch, as peculiar as it may seem, lent a good deal of stability to Tlingit society. Through this custom, the social structure or hierarchy was acknowledged and could be peaceably changed. Distribution of goods on such a large but ceremonial scale substituted for a chaotic, unwieldy market place. Even the rivalry potlatch, during which participants purposefully destroyed property, served to channel and satisfy competitive or violent urges. But by the late 18th century, struggle and cooperation among the Tlingit came under the shadow of a new kind of struggle, a wholly different base for future cooperation.



Above are two women weaving baskets in the early years of this century. At right is a Tlingit man photographed probably at the last potlatch in 1904 by E. W. Merrill, a well-known local photographer and naturalist. He probably took the picture of the two women as well. At far right is St. Michael's Russian-Orthodox Cathedral.

The Coming of the Russians

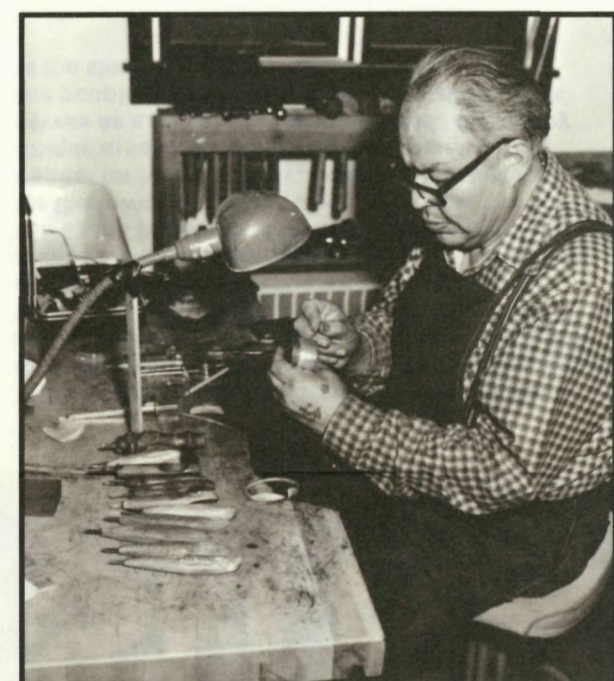
From the first, when Vitus Bering sighted the Alaskan coast in 1741 and claimed it for the Empress Elizabeth, Russia took a deep interest in the land. After 40 years of sending out trading expeditions, the Russians established a permanent settlement on Kodiak Island and began to export rich pelts of otter, beaver, marten, and mink. At the same time that Hudson's Bay Co. managed the fur trade in British North America, and John Jacob Astor established the American Fur Co. in the United States, the powerful Russian-American Co.—managed by a determined Alexander Baranof—prepared to consolidate its share of the fur trade.

Baranof founded a new headquarters, St. Michael, further south of Kodiak Island to benefit from a different hunting territory and to better counteract British and American influences. When the Tlingit destroyed St. Michael in 1802, Baranof paused to plan. Two years later, he and 1,000 men along with the battleship *Neva* confronted the Tlingit fort about 13 kilometers (8 miles) from the site of St. Michael. The critical confrontation took place at what is now Sitka National Historical Park.

Upon the approach of the Russians, more than 700 Tlingit warriors and their families gathered in their large, palisaded fort. Heavy brush piled around the walls served as camouflage, and the wide shallow tideland of Sitka Sound held the *Neva* out of effective firing range. After a few skirmishes and a 6-day siege, the Tlingit ran out of ammunition and strategically withdrew. The Russians landed, burned the fort, and began to build a new town. This "Battle of Sitka" in 1804 marked the northwest coast's natives last major resistance to the coming of the white man.

Under Baranof's unique blend of kindness and stubbornness, cajoling and driving and bluffing, Sitka—known then as "New Archangel"—grew quickly to become an international crossroads of commerce and culture. One Russian visitor, special emissary Nicholas Resanof, wrote of Baranof as "an original. . . His name is heard on the whole western coast, down to California. The Bostonians esteem him and respect him, and the savage tribes in their dread of him, offer their friendship from the most distant regions." Indeed, Fort Ross and other hunting stations in California provided the Company with a wide-ranging sea otter operation.

Succeeding managers continued to expand the wealth and control of the Russian-American Co. Besides the central fort and barracks, warehouses stored thousands of furs which today would be worth many millions of dollars. Piles of sealskins, marten, fox, bear, wolf, and otter pelts, were stacked alongside tons of ivory from the walrus herds. An arsenal contained 1,000 muskets plus hundreds of pistols. Great shelters housed ice that was bound for San Francisco at the price of \$25 per ton. Cargo-laden ships left for the Yukon, the Pacific Islands, China. Along the wharf, Sitka's workers constructed the first steamship built on the northern Pacific shore.



Supplies were an ever-present problem, for communication with Russia was subject to the whims of weather, an important factor in the North Pacific. Baranof and his successors dealt out of necessity with the British, Americans, and the Spaniards. Yet hunters killed deer and mountain goats locally, and a giant trap near Sitka Sound annually caught 60,000 fish. Although residents had to depend on foreign traders, they did not have to sacrifice quality. Virginia tobacco, salt beef from England, and Flemish linens for the dining table could be found in most Sitka homes. Five schools educated the young; the best students continued their education back home in St. Petersburg. A flour mill, a tannery, a blacksmith shop, and a bakery supplemented the luxuries of a steam bath, a museum, teahouses and a library. In 1836, a plush hill top mansion was built and locally referred to as Baranof Castle. A decade later, the town erected the ornate, domed, Russian-Orthodox Cathedral of St. Michael and looked to it as the spiritual and cultural center of the town. Traders and travelers around the world justly called Sitka "the Paris of the Pacific."

By the mid-1800s, mistrust between the Tlingit and Russian populations had lessened. Tlingit families rebuilt their homes and even provided game for their neighbors. When, at the prodding of Secretary of State William Henry Seward, the United States in 1867 purchased Alaska from Russia for \$7,200,000, the old 1804 battle site became a place of relaxation and occasional festivity. In 1890, it was proclaimed a public park, and 20 years later President William Howard Taft responded favorably to petitions by bringing the land under Federal control.

As the Tlingit experienced more and more of western culture—churches and schools and jobs—they adopted more of its ways. The Tlingit people merged ever more closely with the Russian and American,

taking up occupations in carpentry and heavy machinery, business and the professions. Yet along with this assimilation came a growing awareness of their own Tlingit heritage. Today, in the park's visitor center, the Indian Cultural Center attempts to continue that heritage. Begun in 1968 and operated as a nonprofit service organization, the program reaches Sitka's community through speaking engagements, craft demonstrations, and classroom workshops. Tlingit teachers demonstrate silverwork, beadwork, and wood carving. Youngsters and interested adults learn in an atmosphere of living history and refer to the park's building as simply "the center." The park area is also used for environmental education, thus introducing children to their cultural and natural environment and helping them to develop an understanding and fellowship with this world that their ancestors knew.

— Jim Stokely

A Visit to Sitka

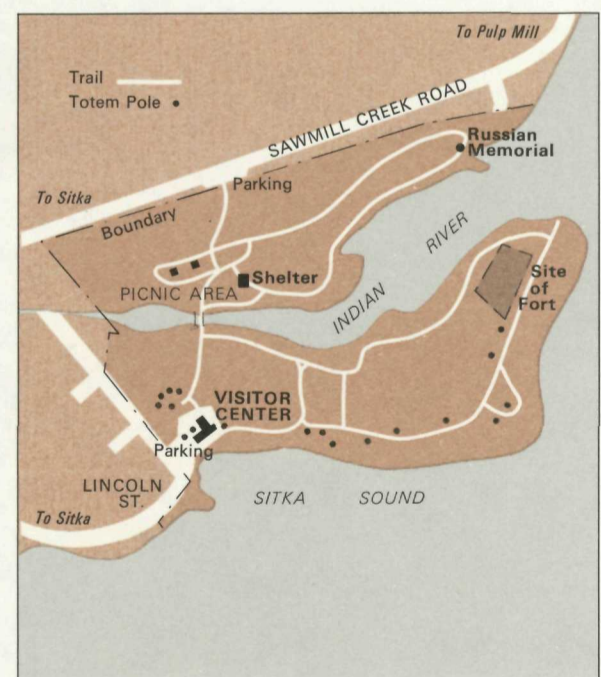
Sitka National Historical Park rewards the visitor with a wide variety of attractions. Almost 3 kilometers (2 miles) of walkways thread the spruce-hemlock forest and weave among ferns, deerheart, devil's club, and berry bush. Alexander Baranof himself used to stroll along a path which is now lined with stately trees and elegant totem poles. Picnic facilities offer fireplaces, tables, and a shelter. At the visitor center, talks and an audio-visual program complement the activity at the Indian Cultural Center and the valuable exhibits of Tlingit and Russian artifacts. There is no admission charge. The park is open daily except January 1, Thanksgiving, and December 25.

The park is within easy walking distance of downtown Sitka, where hotel accommodations, restaurants, taxi service, rental cars, and tour buses are available. Historical landmarks dot this area. Reconstructed St. Michael's Cathedral displays priceless icons, robes, and other reminders of the Russian colonization. Castle Hill is the site at which, on October 18, 1867, the American flag replaced the Russian flag and symbolized a new era for Alaska. The Russian mission is the oldest existing Russian-built structure in the State, dating back to 1842 as an early seminary and residence for bishop and pupils alike.



Sitka can be reached by commercial airline direct from Seattle, Juneau, and Anchorage, and is a port of call on the Alaska Marine Highway System.

Do not allow your visit to be spoiled by an accident. Efforts have been made to provide for your safety, but there are still hazards which require your alertness and vigilance. Exercise common sense and caution.



The map above will help you find your way around the park. In case of confusion or questions about the area, please ask any of the uniformed interpreters for help. They will be happy to aid you.

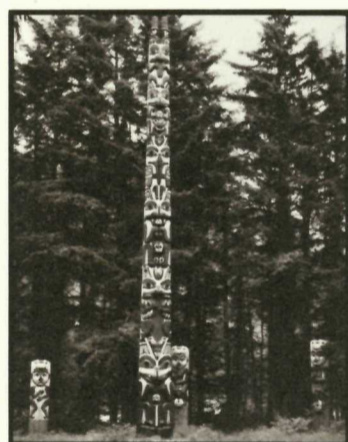
For additional information about the area, write to Sitka National Historical Park, Box 738, Sitka, AK 99835. For information about the Indian Cultural Center, write to the Director, Southeast Alaska Indian Cultural Center, Box 944, Sitka AK 99835.

Totem Poles

The totem pole is a trademark of the Northwest Coast Indians. Standing up to 24 meters (80 feet) tall, this stately cedar monument served many purposes in Tlingit society and prompted a multitude of celebrations. Totem pole figures and designs recorded valuable legends, family histories, and past events. The heraldic pole bore a family's crest and demonstrated its social standing. A wedding pole illustrated a marriage by using such crests to show the union between the groom and his bride's family. Other totem poles memorialized the dead, or ridiculed a bad debtor until his debts were paid. And the large, ornate potlatch poles proclaimed, increased, and sometimes established a group's wealth, power, or prestige.

The craftsmen for these carved treasures were indeed a select group. Besides training as formal apprentices and slowly acquiring skill and artistry, those who shaped the totems had to thoroughly know the genealogy and mythology of their clans and people. Upon mastering their craft, members of this artisan elite were commissioned, and paid large fees, to carry out their specialized, time-consuming work. Paints were extremely difficult to produce; copper mixed with clay gave a bluish-green color, and shades of red, brown, and yellow came from the iron ore ochre, but hues of white and black necessitated baking clam shells and burning limestone, or experimenting with mixtures of charcoal, manganese, and graphite.

A pole's individual symbols, or totems, represented the natural relatives of a family or clan and were considered



The activities of the Indian Cultural Center keep alive Tlingit crafts that might otherwise be lost. Among the programs are, clockwise, totem pole carving, beadwork, and metal carving. Carving a totem pole is a lengthy task and is done infrequently. This pole dates from 1971. Directly above is the fog woman totem pole.

personal property. Taken together, these familiar totems—such as bear, frog, woodworm, raven, or beaver—recalled significant stories and happenings. Whenever a particularly important totem pole was erected by a community, its tale was elaborately told through drama, singing, and the dance.

"Crane People Pole," one of the totem poles in Sitka National Historical Park, refers to no less than 4 legends. The owl at the top suggests the story of a woman who was turned into an owl for her selfishness and her unkindness toward her mother-in-law. Below the owl is a young man, and below him a giant frog. The boy killed the frog and released his wife's family, the Crane People, from an ancient curse, thus allowing them to enjoy the fish and game he had caught.

Next on the "Crane People Pole" comes raven, and then a long, single-finned whale. Raven was perhaps the most important of all the totems. It was he who created man and the light of day, and he who arranged the waters into lake and river and stream. One day, he jumped into the mouth of a whale and goaded it to shore, where it died. Raven sang and danced, causing nearby villagers to cut a hole in the side of the whale and let him out. In gratitude, he gave the whale to the village and prompted a feast.

At the base of the pole is the thunderbird, whose beating wings caused thunder in the air. This bird is a part of the culture of Indians in British Columbia. Its image has traveled north as a part of the general trade in ideas and beliefs. The thunderbird was a powerful spirit resembling a giant eagle; lightning flashed from its eyes and sharply curved beak. A symbol of large importance, the thunderbird watered the earth and gave life to growing plants.

With its many significant features and purposes, the totem pole is a pillar of Tlingit culture.