



By the mid-19th century, Russian fur traders, Aleut hunters, and Tlingit workers had built Sitka into the thriving hub of the Northwest Coast.

Ron Klein: Courtesy Alaska State Museum, Juneau

In 1741 Danish navigator Vitus Bering, in the service of the Russian crown, made a discovery that sent Siberian hunter-traders sailing far across the North Pacific. His spectacular find was the Alaskan coast. Not until 1779 did the rest of Europe find out just how valuable the land's resources were. The survivors of Captain James Cook's last voyage put in at Canton with a few hundred sea otter furs obtained in trade from Northwest Coast Indians.

The wealthy Chinese, accustomed to dealing with Russian traders who knew the value of the luxurious pelts, offered a price that astounded the British sailors. Word spread quickly, precipitating a flood of commercial ships to Alaskan waters. All along, the Russians had been hard at work building a wilderness empire that extended from the Aleutian Islands to Fort Ross, an outpost north of San Francisco. Sitka became the Russian colony's capital in 1808, and for a time

thereafter was the busiest port in the eastern North Pacific.

That southeastern Alaska abounded with valuable resources was hardly news to the Tlingit people, natives of the panhandle's mountainous, densely forested islands. Sitka's Tlingit clans had inhabited their island for centuries. Seafarers by nature, they established a village called Shee Atika—meaning "people on the outside of Shee"

(Baranof Island)—facing the calm waters of Sitka Sound. The ocean teemed with fish, the staple food; cedar and hemlock forests provided material for clothing, houses, canoes, and weapons. When the Russians challenged their claim to land and water they called their own, the Tlingit retaliated with force. Their fierce determination failed in the long run to halt the Europeans. Eventually Tlingit, Russians, and Aleuts, whom the Russians brought south to ex-

plot their hunting skill, settled into a peaceful, though uneasy, life at Sitka. Together they endured an inhospitable climate that was "always autumn" and "never rainless," according to one resident. Hunting, fishing, shipbuilding, and trading fueled native and European economies alike.

Finally, in 1867, this community dissolved when the Tsar sold Russian America to the United States. Americans flocked to their exotic new

territory seeking wealth. Sitka, short on gold, copper, and oil, never quite became a boomtown. Since the late 19th century, residents have seen various industries come and go—fisheries, canneries, sawmills, a pulp mill, and a military base. Today, Sitkans carry on their maritime tradition at the historic Pacific Ocean harbor.

The Town

Cultural and political hub of Russian America in the early 19th century and part of America's Old West after 1867, Sitka possesses a colorful history. Even on a short walk around town, visitors will come across many sites that recall the city's past.

One of Alaska's oldest museums is located in town near the NPS visitor center. The Sheldon Jackson Museum features exhibits on the history and culture of Alaska's native peoples—Eskimo, Aleut, Haida, Athabaskan, as well as Tlingit.

St. Michael's Cathedral, rebuilt as a replica of the



Mark Kelley

1840s church destroyed by fire in 1966, is a reminder that the Orthodox Church is still an important presence in many parts of Alaska. The bronze bells in the spire were recast from originals that were melted by the fire's intense heat. In Russian colonial times,

a stockade separated New Archangel from the adjacent Tlingit ranche. A blockhouse similar to those in the original stockade has been reconstructed in town. Nearby is a small cemetery displaying memorials to the Russians who made their home in the colony.



A. W. Franzmann

Castle Hill was originally the Tlingit village Shee Atika, and later the site of "Baranov's Castle," named after the colony's first chief manager and residence of high-ranking Russian-American Company officials. Today, this promontory provides an elevated spot from which to view the surroundings, including Mount Edgecumbe, a 3,000-foot volcano rising 15 miles to the west.

In 1913, Sitka's Pioneer Home became a refuge for aging "sourdoughs," or gold prospectors. The present structure, dating from 1934, houses more than 100 residents.

Seven miles up the coast from Sitka, near the Alaska State Ferry landing, is the site of the destroyed Russian settlement, Redoubt St. Michael. Shuttle busses transport sightseers and ferry passengers to town.

(Left) Today as in centuries past, Sitka is tied to the sea for transportation, communication, and livelihood. (Above) Keeping solitary vigil over the Russian cemetery, this replica blockhouse calls to mind the formidable stockade that once surrounded the town.

About Your Visit

Sitka National Historical Park has two separate units. The main unit lies to the east of downtown. Visitors are encouraged to stop first at the visitor center, open year-round from 8 a.m. to 5 p.m., with extended summer hours. The other unit, the Russian Bishop's House, is

located at the corner of Lincoln and Monastery Streets. This building is open during regular summer hours and in winter by appointment only.

Administration
Sitka National Historical Park is administered by the National Park Service,

U.S. Department of the Interior. Contact: Superintendent, 106 Metlakatla Street, Sitka, AK 99835, or call (907) 747-6281.

Access
Sitka occupies a natural harbor on Baranof Island, one of the mountainous, forest-covered dots of

land that form Alaska's panhandle. No roads reach Sitka from the mainland; visitors arrive by cruise ship, Alaska State Ferry, chartered plane, or regularly scheduled flights from Anchorage or Seattle. There are also accommodations for private boats and planes.

Once in Sitka, those who have not brought cars on the ferry can travel by taxi, tour bus, or bicycle. The downtown area is not very large; most points of interest are within walking distance of one another.

Lodging
Visitors will find a selec-

tion of hotels and restaurants in downtown Sitka. There are also two U.S. Forest Service campgrounds several miles in either direction outside town. Campers should keep in mind that the weather, even in summer, is wet, windy, and often cold.

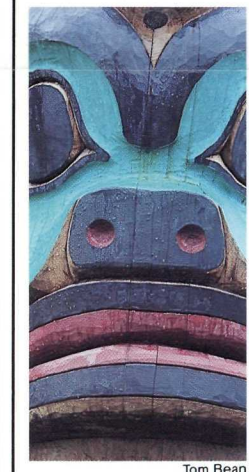


The Park

Alaska's oldest federally designated park was established in 1910 to commemorate the Battle of Sitka, which took place on the point of land where Indian River flows into Sitka Sound. All that remains of the Kiksadi fort is its outline, marked by posts, but the sur-

brought a sizable collection of totem poles to Sitka in 1905. These histories carved in cedar were rounded up from villages throughout southeastern Alaska for the Louisiana Purchase Exposition of 1904. None of the originals came from Sitka, though this art

is first resident. Inside are several exhibit rooms, as well as the Bishop's personal quarters and the Chapel of the Annunciation, both restored to their appearance in 1853, when New Archangel was the pride of Russian America.



Tom Bean

roundings are largely unchanged. With a little imagination, one can conjure up scenes of the last major conflict between Europeans and natives of the Northwest Coast.

Alaska's District Governor John G. Brady



Tom Bean

form is very much a part of Tlingit tradition. Many poles exhibited along the park's two miles of wooded pathways are copies of deteriorating originals now in storage. The visitor center houses the Southeast Alaska Indian Cultural Center, where visitors can watch native artists at work.

Back in town, the park's story continues at the Russian Bishop's House, one of the few surviving examples of Russian colonial architecture in North America. The structure dates from the 1840s; Bishop Ivan Veniaminov, who later became St. Innocent, was

“The People on the Outside of Shee”

Centuries before Russians first attempted to settle the chilly, rain-drenched Alaskan panhandle, the Tlingit natives had developed practical ways of surviving on these islands. Since they lacked farmland, and because the variety of berries and game animals was not enough to feed their population, the Tlingit turned to the ocean for most of their food. In canoes up to 60 feet long, carved from cedar trunks, they searched out cod, halibut, and herring, plucking them from the water with spears and hooks. In summer they stretched traps across the shallow, rocky rivers to collect the prize catch, salmon, swimming upstream. The surplus was dried and stored for winter.

Each Tlingit clan had exclusive fishing waters; infringement by others was grounds for war or, at least, retribution. Each group likewise followed its own trade routes along the coast and to the interior where skillful bargainers met with other tribes, Athabaskans in particular. The Tlingit exchanged dried fish, otter furs, and highly valued Chilkat robes for caribou skins, fox furs, jade, and copper—items they could not obtain on their part of the coast.

The Tlingit enjoyed a rich cultural life. A sociable people, they gathered for all kinds of occasions; they celebrated births and weddings, mourned deaths, and danced before long fishing and trading expeditions. Winter, with its long hours of darkness, was the traditional season for the most impressive ceremony, a display of conspicuous consumption in reverse known as a *potlatch*. The host of a *potlatch* invited guests to his home, often for days at a time, and doled out his many possessions one by one. Such hospitality left the giver impoverished but greatly elevated in social rank.

Their congeniality did not extend to everyone. To the Russians who arrived at Sitka in 1799 the

natives' survival skills and their access to a bountiful fur supply would have been valuable. The Tlingit, with a recently acquired desire for such European goods as tobacco, sugar, and firearms, might have found convenient trading partners in the Russians. But relations between the Russian-American Company and the Tlingit Kiksadi clan quickly went from bad to worse. Aware that the price of submission was allegiance to the Tsar, free labor for the company, and Russian interference in their affairs, the Kiksadi barely tolerated Russian presence. Hostile suspicion turned to outright violence in 1802 when Tlingit warriors attacked Redoubt St. Michael, a Russian out-



Dense forests and rugged topography made land travel on the Northwest Coast difficult. By burning, steaming, and carving the wood, Tlingit builders fashioned canoes from cedar trunks. These sturdy

boats could transport people and cargo over rough waters, enabling the natives to fish and to trade extensively.



Fringed, fur-trimmed, and colored vermilion, blue-green, yellow, and black, the ceremonial dress for the Tlingit includes Chilkat robes, carved masks, and stylized weapons. Designs vary from village to village; each clan depicts animals significant to its own tradition.

post several miles northwest of Shee Atika, killing nearly all the Aleuts and Russians at the settlement.

Late in September 1804, the Russians returned and demanded that the Kiksadi surrender their village. Having anticipated such a move, the Indians withdrew to a solid wooden fort east of their village. On October 1 the Russian gunboat *Neva* and three other ships commenced bombardment of the fort. They did little damage. The Russians and Aleuts stormed the fort and were bloodily repulsed. Thus began a six-day siege of the Tlingit stronghold. On the seventh day, advancing to the fort, the Russians found it abandoned. Out of flints and gunpowder, the Indians had exited silently by night. The Russians lost no time building a fortified town, this time on the very spot where Shee Atika had stood.

In 1821 the Russians invited the Tlingit back to Sitka. They intended to profit from the Indians' hunting expertise and, more importantly, to put an end to the occasional Indian raiding. For the duration of Russian occupation, the Kiksadi lived in the *ranch*, an area just outside the stockaded town. They supplied the colonists with furs and food while the Russians introduced them to their culture through education and religion. But cannon were always trained on the *ranch*, and the Russian stockade was closely guarded. Though the 1804 Battle of Sitka was the end of open Tlingit resistance, the Russians were safe only so long as they were vigilant.

Blacksmith's hammer tied to his wrist, raven-helmeted Katlian led Tlingit warriors against Russians and Aleuts during the 1804 Battle of Sitka. The Kiksadi succeeded in repulsing the attackers at

“The Paris of the Pacific”

While the Hudson's Bay Company was trading blankets for beaver skins and building a British empire in the Canadian north, another colonial corporation was operating more quietly but no less successfully on America's Northwest Coast. The first chief manager of the Russian-American Company, Alexander Baranov, headed a lucrative fur enterprise while maneuvering to expand Imperial Russia's territory as far down the Pacific coast as the Spanish and British would tolerate. Baranov's quest carried him from his first headquarters at Kodiak Island southeast to the Tlingit village of Shee Atika, which the Russians replaced with their own settlement, New Archangel (Sitka), in 1804.

Baranov faced tough problems during the colony's infancy. Perhaps most trying was the shortage of reliable manpower. Aleut natives, forced into virtual slavery, labored under *promyshlenniki*, the brutal, illiterate Siberian fur hunters. Adding to Baranov's woes were an assassination plot against him, raids by the exiled Tlingit, and lengthy, hazardous supply lines from the homeland. What saved Baranov's company was the abundance of fur seal and sea otter pelts—thick, silky, unsurpassed in quality—which commanded princely sums in China. Four years after its founding, New Archangel was the capital of Russian America and a port of call for merchant vessels from all over the world. In 1817, two years before his death, Baranov could boast that the Russian-American Company was the most important fur dealer in the world, more profitable at the time than its venerable rival, the Hudson's Bay Company.

By the mid-1830s Sitka's population had reached 1,300. Most inhabitants lived in crowded, damp quarters, subsisting on meager rations. Top company officials ensconced themselves in “Baranov's Castle,” furnished St. Petersburg-style with a

grand piano, fine paintings, and silver samovars. Also residing in the colony, under the patronage of the Tsar himself, was the clergy of the Russian Orthodox Church. Willing beneficiaries of company labor and company money, they built schools and chapels to spread the Byzantine faith—and Russian culture. Prominent on the Sitka skyline was St. Michael's Cathedral, dedicated in 1848. A work of art itself, the church housed valuable gilded icons and displayed a wrought-iron clock handmade by Alaska's first resident Bishop, Ivan Veniaminov. The city's opulence earned it distinction, in one writer's words, as the “Paris of the Pacific,” though the glitter was surface-deep and out of reach to most.

Imperial crests, symbols of the Romanov Dynasty, were buried along the coast to proclaim sovereignty over the Alaska wilderness.



Stratton Library Collection; Sheldon Jackson College, Sitka



Besides the academic fundamentals, Russian priests taught practical arts such as beekeeping. For over a century after the company's departure in 1867, the Bishop's house remained a possession of the Orthodox Church, functioning as school, residence, and place of worship. (Top left) Beloved Father Ivan Veniaminov, Bishop Innocent, was a clergyman, teacher, physician, and



David Gelotte, Alaska State Museum, Juneau

scientist during his 16 years at Sitka. His dedication earned him Russian Orthodoxy's highest ecclesiastical post, Metropolitan of Moscow. (Top right) Considered “Lord of Alaska,” Alexander Baranov, son of a Kargopol shopkeeper, wrested Sitka from Tlingit control and managed the prosperous Russian-American Company for its first two decades.

As Sitka grew in size and population, over-hunting greatly diminished the number of sea otters and fur seals in North Pacific. Despite eleventh-hour attempts at conservation, the company town that once owed its existence to the fur trade depended by the 1850s on its shipyard, sawmills, fish saltery, and a prosperous ice-exporting business. The remote colony held less and less interest for the Russian government, distracted by troubles close to home. Figuring that the United States—or worse yet, Great Britain—would take over Russian America eventually, the Tsar made up his mind to sell. In 1867, for \$7.2 million, Russia ended its 126-year-old New World enterprise. No longer a bastion of Russian imperialism, Sitka soon would lure a new breed of fortune seeker.

Louis S. Glanzman

