



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 Kline, Courtesy Alaska State Museum, Juneau

In 1741 Danish navigator Vitus Bering, in the service of the Russian Empire, 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 realize the value of Alaska's resources. Survivors of Capt. James Cook's last voyage put in at Canton, China, with hundreds of sea otter furs obtained in trade from Northwest Coast Indians.

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

colony's capital, and for a while it was the busiest port in the eastern North Pacific.

It was hardly news to the Tlingit and other natives who had lived here for thousands of years that southeastern Alaska abounded with valuable resources. Seafarers by nature, the Tlingit established the village of Shee Atika on the west coast of Baranof Island—facing the calm waters of Sitka

Sound. The ocean teemed with fish, their staple food. Cedar, hemlock, and spruce 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 Europeans. Eventually Tlingit, Russians, and

Aleuts, whom the Russians brought east to exploit their hunting skills, settled into a peaceful, though uneasy, life at Sitka. Together they endured a climate that was "always autumn" and "never rainless," according to one resident. Hunting, fishing, shipbuilding, and trading fueled native and European economies. In 1867 this community dissolved when the Tsar sold Russian America to the United States. Americans

flocked to their new territory seeking wealth. Sitka, short on gold, copper, and oil, never quite became a boomtown. Since the late 1800s, residents have seen industries come and go—fisheries, canneries, sawmills, a pulp mill, and a military base. Today tourism flourishes, and Sitkans continue their maritime tradition.

Touring the Town

Sitka has a colorful history. In the early 1800s it was the cultural and political hub of Russian America; after 1867 it became part of America's Old West. On a short walk around town you will see many sites that recall Sitka's past.

In Russian colonial times, a stockade separated New Archangel (today's Sitka) from the Tlingit village. The reconstructed blockhouse is similar to those in the original stockade. Nearby a Russian cemetery has memorials to the colonists.

or gold prospectors. The 1934 structure houses more than 100 residents. Seven miles up the coast near the Alaska State Ferry landing is the site of the 1799-1802 Russian settlement, Redoubt Saint Michael.

Sheldon Jackson Museum, one of Alaska's oldest, is near the National Park Service visitor center. It features exhibits on the history and culture of Alaska's native peoples—Eskimo, Aleut, Haida, Athabaskan, and Tlingit.



Mark Kelley

Saint Michael's Cathedral, a replica of the 1840s church destroyed by fire in 1966, is a reminder that the Russian Orthodox Church is an important presence here. Its bronze bells were recast from originals that melted in the fire's heat.

Castle Hill, part of the original Tlingit village Shee Atika, later became the site of Baranof's Castle. It was named for the colony's first chief manager and was the residence of Russian American Company officials. The transfer of Alaska from Russia to the United States took place on Castle Hill in 1867. From this promontory you may see Mount Edgecumbe, a 3,000-foot volcano that rises 15 miles to the west.

In 1913 the Pioneer Home became a refuge for aging "sourdoughs,"



A. W. Franzmann

(Above) Keeping solitary vigil over the Russian cemetery, this replica blockhouse calls to mind the formidable stockade that once surrounded the town.

(Left) Today, as in centuries past, Sitka is tied to the sea for transportation, communication, and livelihood.

About Your Visit

Visitor Center The best place to begin your visit is at the visitor center, just east of downtown. It has information, a film, exhibits, a bookstore, the Southeast Alaska Indian Cultural Center, and Totem Hall. It is open year-round.

Russian Bishop's House This 1843 building, at the corner of Lincoln and Monastery streets, has exhibits, re-furnished living quarters, and a chapel. It is open in summer during regular hours; in winter by appointment only.

Getting to the Park Sitka is on Baranof Island in 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 and Seattle.

There are accommodations for private boats and planes. If you do not bring a car on the ferry, you can tour Sitka by taxi, tour bus, or bicycle. The downtown area is not large. Most points of interest are within easy walking distance.

Lodging/Camping Downtown Sitka offers hotels, restaurants, and stores. There are two U.S. Forest Service campgrounds several miles in either direction outside Sitka. Campers should keep in mind that the weather, even in summer, is wet, windy, and often cold.

For More Information Sitka National Historical Park
103 Monastery Street
Sitka, AK 99835
907-747-0110
www.nps.gov/sitk



Seeing the Park

Alaska's oldest federally designated park was established in 1910 to commemorate the Battle of Sitka that took place on the point of land where the Indian River flows into Sitka Sound. A clearing marks the site of the Kiks.ádi

In 1905 Alaska's District Gov. John G. Brady brought a collection of totem poles to Sitka donated by native people from villages throughout southeast Alaska. The totem poles had been displayed at the 1904 Louisiana Purchase Expo-

The Bishop's personal quarters and the Chapel of the Annunciation are restored to their 1853 appearance when New Archangel was the pride of Russian America.



Tom Bean

fort, and the surrounding area is largely unchanged. With some imagination you can envision scenes of the last major conflict between the Russians and the natives of the Northwest Coast.



Tom Bean

(Above) The National Park Service visitor center, overlooking Sitka Sound, houses the Southeast Alaska Indian Cultural Center. Here you can watch native artists at work.

(Left) Modern Tlingit and Haida preserve their heritage in boldly carved cedar.

In town the park's story continues at the 1843 Russian Bishop's House, one of the few surviving examples of Russian colonial architecture in North America. Bishop Innocent (Ivan Veniaminov) was its first resident.

The Tlingit

"People on the Outside of Shee"

Tlingit Indians developed practical ways of surviving on these islands centuries before Russians attempted to settle the chilly, rain-drenched Alaskan panhandle. The Tlingit relied on the ocean for most of their food, supplemented by a variety of berries and game animals. In canoes up to 60 feet long carved from cedar trunks, they fished for cod, halibut, and herring, plucking them from the water with spears and hooks. In summer they stretched traps across shallow, rocky rivers for salmon swimming upstream, the prize catch. They dried the surplus and stored it for winter.

Each Tlingit clan had exclusive fishing areas; infringement by others was grounds for war or retribution. Each group 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 not found on their part of the coast.

Tlingit Indians enjoyed a rich cultural life. Sociable people, they gathered for all kinds of occasions, including weddings, births, and deaths, and they danced before setting out on fishing and trading expeditions. Winter, with its long hours of darkness, was the traditional season for the most impressive ceremony—the potlatch. The host of a potlatch invited guests to his home, often for days at a time and gave away his many possessions one by one. Such hospitality left the host impoverished but greatly elevated in social rank.

The Tlingit established many villages along the panhandle, including Shee Atika, which meant "people on the

outside of Shee" (Baranof Island). To the Russians who arrived at Shee Atika (Sitka) in 1799, Tlingit survival skills and their access to a bountiful fur supply were valuable. To the Tlingit, with a recently acquired desire for goods such as tobacco, sugar, and firearms, the Russians could have been convenient trading partners. But relations between the Russian-American Company and Tlingit Kiks.ádi clan went from bad to worse. The Kiks.ádi soon realized that submission to the Russians meant providing free labor to the company and allegiance to the Tsar. The Kiks.ádi, who did not want anyone meddling in their affairs, barely



Oregon Historical Society

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 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 displays crests significant to its own tradition.

tolerated Russian presence. In 1802 hostile suspicion turned to violence when Tlingit warriors attacked Redoubt Saint Michael, a Russian outpost several miles northwest of Shee Atika, killing nearly all the Aleuts and Russians at the settlement.

The Russians returned in late September 1804 and demanded that the Kiks.ádi surrender their village. Anticipating such a move, the Tlingit withdrew to a wooden fort east of town. On October 1 the Russian gunboat *Neva* and three other ships bombed the Tlingit fort, but 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. Low on flints and gunpowder, the Tlingit had left quietly at 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 Kiks.ádi lived in the village, 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 cannons were always trained on the village, and the Russian stockade was closely guarded. The 1804 Battle of Sitka was the end of open Tlingit resistance, but the Russians were safe only so long as they were vigilant.

A blacksmith's hammer tied to his wrist, raven-helmeted K'alyaan led Tlingit warriors against Russians and Aleuts during the 1804 Battle of Sitka. At first the Kiks.ádi repulsed the attackers

The Russians

"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—the Russian-American Company—was operating quietly and successfully on America's Northwest Coast. Alexander Baranov, the first chief manager, headed a lucrative fur enterprise while expanding Imperial Russia's territory as far down the Pacific coast as Spanish and British forces would tolerate. Baranov's quest took him from his first headquarters on Kodiak Island southeast to the Tlingit village of Shee Atika, which, in 1804, the Russians replaced with their own settlement, New Archangel (*Novo Archangelsk*), later called Sitka.

Baranov faced tough problems during the colony's infancy. Especially trying was the shortage of reliable workers. Aleut natives, virtually forced into slavery, labored under the *promyshlenniki*, brutal, illiterate Siberian fur hunters. An assassination plot against Baranov, raids by exiled Tlingit, and long hazardous supply lines from the Russian homeland added to his woes. What saved Baranov's company were the abundant fur seal and sea otter pelts—thick, silky, unsurpassed in quality—that commanded princely sums in China. Four years after its founding, New Archangel

"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.



Imperial crest of the Romanov Dynasty.



Stratton Library Collection: Sheldon Jackson College, Sitka

Beloved Bishop Innocent (Father Ivan Veniaminov) (top left) was a clergyman, teacher, linguist, and scientist during his 16 years at Sitka. His dedication earned him Russian Orthodoxy's highest ecclesiastical post, Metropolitan of Moscow.

Priests taught academic fundamentals and practical arts such as beekeeping. The Russian Orthodox Church owned the Bishop's House (above) for more than a century after the company left in 1867. It served as a school, residence, and place of worship.

became the capital of Russian America and a busy port for merchant vessels from all over the world. In 1817 Baranov boasted that the Russian-American Company was the most important fur dealer in the world, even more profitable than its rival, the Hudson's Bay Company. By the mid-1830s Sitka's population had reached 1,300. Most people lived in damp, crowded quarters and ate meager rations. Company officials

ensconced themselves in "Baranov's Castle," furnished St. Petersburg-style with a grand piano, fine paintings, and silver samovars. Russian Orthodox clergy under the patronage of the Tsar also resided in the colony. The clergy, beneficiaries of company labor and company money, built schools and chapels to spread the Orthodox faith and Russian culture. Prominent on the Sitka skyline was Saint Michael's Cathedral, dedicated in 1848. A work of art itself, the cathedral 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," although the glitter was surface-deep and out of reach to most.

As Sitka grew in size and population, overhunting greatly diminished the number of sea otters and fur seals in the North Pacific. By the 1850s, despite last minute attempts at conservation, the company town that once owed its existence to the fur trade depended instead on a shipyard, sawmills, fish saltery, and an ice-exporting business. The remote colony held less interest for the Russian government. Figuring that the United States—or worse yet, Great Britain—would eventually take over Russian America, the Tsar decided to sell. In 1867, for \$7.2 million, Russia ended its 126-year-old North American enterprise.

NPS/Louis S. Glanzman

