

Materials and projects: Mission schools and Native rights, court cases in 1885 and 1886

Many more links, documents, photos and videos related to Sheldon Jackson School and College history are at sjvoices.org

The relationship between mission education and Native rights is a complicated topic. We are starting to learn about the impact of boarding schools in Alaska. The Presbyterian mission school, that started in 1878, that became Sheldon Jackson School, received government funding in its early years. The school's goal was to put down Native language and culture, which the missionaries believed were harmful and would prevent survival or success of Native people.

Complicating this is that in the 1900s, Sitka's Sheldon Jackson School was a private school, that students had to apply to and had to pay tuition, and students who did stay and graduate in the 1940s and 50s nearly all have positive things to say about it.

In history books written in the 20th century, and into this century, there is a widespread assumption that missionaries were essential allies in the fight for Native rights. Were they? Or was this assumption based on the *belief* that Native people, unlike other people, who were automatically given citizenship, *needed* help?

These materials include two court cases and writings by missionary Sheldon Jackson--primary documents from 130 years ago, to investigate the portrayal of Native people at that time, and the impact of those portrayals, today.

Introduction:

Essay "The Origins of Sitka's Presbyterian Mission: Rights, Responsibilities, Race and Religion" by Rebecca Poulson at sitkaartblog.wordpress.com

<https://sitkaartblog.wordpress.com/2024/10/18/the-origins-of-sitkas-presbyterian-mission-rights-responsibilities-race-and-religion/>

This essay explores the relationship of the Presbyterian mission boarding school at Sitka to Native rights, and how the narrative that missionary Sheldon Jackson promoted, of Native people as not ready for citizenship, underlay over a century of racial bias that deprived Alaska Native people of rights. Also, that within this landscape, the school had a part in promoting those beliefs, and at the same time Native people used the skills and connections they developed at the school in fighting for rights.

The mission at Sitka started in 1878, and students started living at the school in 1881. In 1882 the mission moved to what is now the former Sheldon Jackson College campus. Parents voluntarily placed their children in the school, but had to agree to leave them there for 5 years.

Alaska only got civil government, after 17 years of basically no government at all, in 1884 with the Organic Act. Sitka was the seat of government. Sitka's first court session in 1885 had nine court cases challenging the mission.

Sheldon Jackson was an ambitious Presbyterian missionary who founded the Sitka school, raised the money for it, and used the school's success to raise even more money. He influenced Alaska's 1884

Organic Act, which included a grant of up to 640 acres for any “established mission.” He became Alaska's General Agent for Education, and had an office in Washington, D.C., and the federal government provided funds for mission schools. He had published a book about Alaska in 1880 *Alaska, and Missions on the North Pacific Coast* and had his own newspaper, the *Rocky Mountain Presbyterian*, later *Home Missions Monthly*.

The school had grown very rapidly in the early 1880s, from the first few boys asking to live at the school in 1881, then when their borrowed building burned down in January 1882, they built a very large building, on a prime waterfront location, near downtown Sitka in 1882. In 1883, a girls home in Wrangell relocated to Sitka and they built a second large building. The land had been claimed by former missionary John Brady, who gave it to the school, but, there was not technically any legal way to claim property, and there were other claims to the same piece of land.

In 1885, in the brand-new federal court at Sitka, that land claim was challenged in court **case 6, Anna Richter vs. John Brady and the Sitka Trading Post**, by the widow of a man who had another deed to the same land, as security for a loan he had made, but the judge decided against her.

Case 7, Schmakoff et al. vs. Sheldon Jackson challenged the right of the mission to exist. The people who brought the case included relatives of Mrs. Richter. Cases 16, 18, 19, 20, and 21, all U.S. vs. Sheldon Jackson, were against Sheldon Jackson personally for building a fence around the mission. Sheldon Jackson was forced to post bail to keep from going to jail.

The most important court case was Case number **9, Anna Vine vs Sheldon Jackson**. The judge decided that students could not be held against the will of the parents.

Sheldon Jackson then published a book, *A Statement of Facts Concerning the Difficulties at Sitka, Alaska in 1885*, in which he gave his version of the legal cases, and many statements from missionaries and supporters. It includes the court case **Schmakoff et al. v. Sheldon Jackson et al.**

Through Jackson's influence in Washington, D.C., the Judge, District Attorney and Marshall were replaced. The new court, in 1886 decided that the mission *could* hold a child even when he and the parents had changed their mind. That case is called *In re Can ah Couqua*, the name of the mother. *Con-ca-bac* was the name of her son, who was about eight years old. The court documents include a letter by the boy asking to be allowed to go home.

Materials and Projects:

Anna Vine v. Sheldon Jackson 1885

This court case was decided in favor of the family and against the mission. read through the charges and documents, and the judge's decision.

- Find how Native people are described or portrayed, and relate that portrayal to the judge's decision.

A summary of Anna Vine:

<https://petitioningforfreedom.unl.edu/cases/item/hc.case.ak.003>

The actual **court documents for cases 9 and 10**, which were about the same girl, a 13-year-old named Taik, Teague, or Emma Hamilton. In case 9, Anna Vine was a guardian asking for release of the girl, and case 10 was the same request, by the girl's parents.

Anna Vine v. Sheldon Jackson, Hitch- sah- See and Don- ah- Clah v Sheldon Jackson et al. Cases 9 and 10, 1885

<https://drive.google.com/file/d/1ZASeCVHCmzvDN4RiCTVbrnimSClqZFYU/view?usp=sharing>

Sheldon Jackson's book *A Statement of Facts Concerning the Difficulties at Sitka, Alaska, in 1885*

Read Sheldon Jackson's *A Statement of Facts Concerning the Difficulties at Sitka, Alaska, in 1885*, pages 1-14. He gives his version of the legal cases and many statements from missionaries and supporters. It includes the court case **Schmakoff et al. v. Sheldon Jackson et al.**

<https://archive.org/details/statementoffacts00jack/page/10/mode/2up>

- What is his portrayal of Sitka's Native people and their communities?
 - What is his portrayal of Sitka's "Creole," or Russian, citizens? These people had both Russian and - - -
 - Native heritage, and had been granted citizenship in the Alaska Treaty of Cession.
 - How does he portray the motives of the officials who were against the mission?
 - Read the letters in the Appendix of that book from missionaries A. J. Davis, Eugene Willard, or A. E. Austin, and compare their portrayals of Native people to that of Sheldon Jackson.
- Summarize Sheldon Jackson's arguments for why the school should have been allowed to hold children after the parents had changed their minds.

In re Can ah Couquay, case 32 1886

In 1886 another court case by a family asking to get their child back was decided against the family, and for the mission, saying they could keep a student even if the parents wanted him back. Read through the charges and documents, and the judge's decision.

- Find how Native people are described or portrayed, and relate that portrayal to the judge's decision.

A **summary** of the case:

<https://petitioningforfreedom.unl.edu/cases/item/hc.case.ak.0002>

The original **court documents**:

In re Can ah Couquay, case 32 1886 https://drive.google.com/file/d/1DYCJoIq7CwWkZuk8kH_g-QgEOBeEfDpP/view?usp=sharing

The **decision** in the case:

Decision, Can-ah-couqua, 1887 https://drive.google.com/file/d/1bRdY46ctBNEoEeqIP-V5_CyfTZkHfv11/view?usp=sharing

(Links to all these documents from 1885 and 1886 court cases concerning the Presbyterian mission at Sitka, and a legal article on Tlingit rights in this period, also at sitkaartblog:

<https://sitkaartblog.wordpress.com/2024/11/13/links-to-documents-from-1885-and-1886-court-cases-concerning-the-presbyterian-mission-at-sitka/>)