

Materials and ideas for using them, for Alaska 1867-1877 and Alaska Native rights

Introduction

The Treaty of Cession between Russia and the United States, in which Russia handed over all its claims in Alaska to the United States, was signed in March 1867, and the actual transfer of those claims took place October 18, 1867 at Sitka.

From that point until Alaska's Organic Act was passed in 1884, 17 years, Alaska was a possession of the United States, with almost no law, and no civil government. Alaska was administered by the U.S. Army until 1877, then by the Treasury Department (the US Revenue Service, which became today's U.S. Coast Guard) with assistance from the U.S. Navy, until 1884.

Why didn't Alaska get laws, or civil government, for so long? What was the status of Alaska's Native people during this time? What was the impact of this period on Alaskans, the vast majority of whom were Alaska Native people?

The **Treaty of Cession** gave U.S. citizenship to any Russians or Europeans in Alaska who wanted to stay, and to people who lived with, and like, the Russians. Most of the Russians who stayed in Alaska after the Treaty had Alaska Native heritage. But everyone else in Alaska were called "uncivilized tribes" and did not receive U.S. citizenship.

The other right not mentioned in the Treaty was the preexisting **possession of all the lands in Alaska by Native people**. Russia claimed Alaska per the Doctrine of Discovery, which says that whichever Christian, sovereign nation claims a place first, gets it. The Doctrine of Discovery does not recognize the ownership of lands (outside Europe) by the people who were already there, and already own it.

Essay about the 1867-1877 period, *Sitka's Lost Decade*, by Rebecca Poulson:

An essay about the 1867-1877 period is at <https://sitkaartblog.wordpress.com/2017/10/18/sitkas-lost-decade-1867-1877/> that gives some of the history of this period.

Links to many documents and books are at <https://sitkaartblog.wordpress.com/2020/10/06/lost-decade-1867-1877-historical-materials/>

Activities

The Treaty of Cession

<https://guides.loc.gov/alaska-treaty>

- Read the Treaty of Cession, and look at what it says about Alaska Native people, and the ownership of Alaska by Native people.

Photo pairs:

<https://sitkaartblog.wordpress.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/photo-pairs.pdf>

Look closely at the old photos and the new ones and see what you can tell about Sitka from what is shown.

Compare the two, see what is different and what is the same.

What are questions you have about what is shown in those photos. How do you think the photographer (Eadweard Muybridge) decided what to take pictures of? What would you like to have seen, that is not pictured?

What is surprising to you (if anything) about these pictures relative to what things look like today?

You can use the photos in the narrative (<https://sitkaartblog.wordpress.com/2017/10/18/sitkas-lost-decade-1867-1877/>), too, for study. The pictures of Sitka from the Coast Pilot are incredibly detailed.

Map of Alaska 1867

You could compare the **1867 map of Alaska**

<https://vilda.alaska.edu/digital/collection/cdmg21/id/2984/rec/12> with a contemporary map, and compare what towns are marked on each.

What communities are no longer inhabited today?

What places are on the modern map, but not on the 1867 map?

What does the map tell you about the priorities of the people making the map?

What might it tell you about who was living in Alaska at that time, or the basis of the economy, that led to people living in those places?

Make a list of some of the differences you see, for example the relative numbers of communities by rivers and the coast, then and now.

General Jeff Davis's report, 1870

https://drive.google.com/file/d/1-m8u0J_Jglkc-OP-u9hvFl0y5n9Dt3r_/view

Summarize his attitude toward Alaska Native Peoples. What does he seem to believe is the best policy toward Alaska Native people? What does he say about the Tlingit insistence on recognition of their ownership of southeast Alaska?

What attitudes, if any, survive today?

Account of the Transfer

Read one of the journalist **accounts of the Transfer**, such as the one in the *Alta California* newspaper (transcribed here <https://drive.google.com/file/d/1J1luXZYEnyTAvNZBmdq9mafDv29gPirf/view>). You can skip most of it and go right to the part describing Sitka and the Transfer.

What does he say about the Tlingit people of Sitka?

(Other accounts are also linked from <https://sitkaartblog.wordpress.com/2020/10/06/lost-decade-1867-1877-historical-materials/>. Read any of these, and summarize what it says about attitudes toward Tlingit people, and what this implies for their rights.)

Seward's Speech at Sitka, 1869

After reading **Seward's speech**, https://drive.google.com/file/d/1k3cK0i_IM2FFXAeEc6UTALjXdm-IFqcO/view

summarize his view of Alaska Native people. Seward was the critical figure behind the United States acquiring Alaska. He was also a key figure in fighting slavery, the issue the Civil War was fought over.

Do you think it's appropriate to have a statue of him in front of the state Capitol? Is there material you would add, to the monument, if so?

Meeting Between Governor John Green Brady of Alaska and a Group of Tlingit Chiefs Juneau, December 14 1898

In 1898, Tlingit leaders met with Alaska governor John G. Brady. Brady originally came to Alaska in 1878 as a missionary. This was three decades after Alaska became part of the United States. The original typescript is here <https://vilda.alaska.edu/digital/collection/cdmg22/id/114>

and a text version here <https://library.alaska.gov/hist/fulltext/ASL-MF-Ar5-Roll5-F65.html>

Summarize the points made by the Tlingit leaders. What were they asking for? What can you say about the style of the speeches? Then, read Governor Brady's speech to them. What was his response to their requests? What beliefs is he expressing about Native people, their history, and what he believes in regard to their rights?