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The First Alaska Day

October 18, 1867.

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E. J. WHITE, CHIEF OF BUREAU

~~ALASKA DAY, OCTOBER 18, 1867 - OCTOBER 18 1924.~~

The events leading to the purchase and the treaty between United States and Russia are very interesting to the student of history. The transfer of the territory reads like a romance. So much has been written and told in books and story by various writers that one sometimes wonders how much of this is true and how much is fiction. Quint It seems to me that the best method of telling the story is by quoting from the official reports of the various persons closely concerned in the transaction. One of the most interesting documents is a letter written by Mr. C.M. Clay, the American Ambassador at St. Petersburg, to ~~Mr.~~ Hon. William H. Seward, the Secretary of State. I quote the letter in full:

Legation of the United States

St. Petersburg, Russia, May 10, 1867.

Sir: Your despatch No. 241, April, 1867, enclosing me the treaty between Russia and America, ceding us all Russian America, was duly received.

I awaited the expression of European and Russian sentiments in reference thereto before answering you. I congratulate you upon this brilliant achievement which adds so vast a territory to our Union; whose ports, whose mines, whose waters, whose furs, whose fisheries are of untold value, and whose fields will produce many grains, even wheat, and become, hereafter in time, the seat of a hearty white population. I regard ^{it} as worth at least fifty millions of dollars; and, hereafter, the wonder will be that we got it at all. My attention was ^{first} called to this matter in 1863, when I came over the Atlantic with Hon. Robert J. Walker, upon whom I impressed the importance of our ownership of the western coast of the Pacific, in connection with the vast trade which was springing up with China and Japan and the Western islands. He told me that the Emperor Nicholas was willing to give us Russian America if we would close up our coast possessions to 54° 40'. But the slave interest, fearing this new accession of "free soil", yielded the point and let

England into the great ocean. Since then, in connection with the necessity of our owning one end of the European telegraph line, quite independent of England, I have talked with and urged the Russian authorities in a private way, to put the priveleges of the Hudson Bay company, sublet them by the Russian American Company, in our hands, with a view of having the natives friendly to us, and our telegraph line, &c., in case of war. And I trust I have added indirectly in this final cession, which, by your address and secrecy, took me with a most agreeable surprise. The Russians are very jealous of foreigners, and traditionally oposed to ceding territory, yet, in consequence of the good feeling everywhere prevailing in our favor, I regard this as popular. I have ^{heard} it said: "Well, we have sold to you too cheaply but it's all in the family;" and others look upon it with favor because we are to be near their eastern possessions, and as they regard us perpetual friends in hopes that it may ultimately lead to the expulsion from the great Pacific

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of nations whose power in the east is justly feared.

Mr. Bodisco has come with the treaty.

Believe me truly, my dear sir, your obedient servant,

C.M. CLAY.

Hon.
Neh. Wm. H. Seward,

Secretary of State.

I quote this letter in order to emphasize the friendly feeling existing between the two Governments and also as/^{it}points to some of the causes, why the Territory was sold.

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According to the speech of Senator Sumner on the floor of the U.S. Congress on the cession of Alaska, the idea of the Cession of Alaska began as far back as 1855 when the Russian Government was sounded on the subject. In 1860 the California interests through Senator Gwin and Mr. Appleton, Assistant Secretary of State, made unofficial proposals for the acquisition of the Territory. This proposal was made through the Russian minister at Washington who had communicated to his government. The Russian government through Prince Gorchakoff in a despatch which reached America early in summer of 1860 said that "the offer was not what might be expected; but that it merited mature reflection; that the minister of finance was about to inquire into the condition of these possessions, after which Russia would be in a condition to treat. The subject was submerged by the presidential election which was approaching, and then by the rebellion. After the close of the rebellion the subject was again brought to light. This time by the interests in Washington Territory who wanted

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and who

new facilities to obtain fish, fur and ice, sought the intervention of the national government. The legislature of Washington territory in the winter of 1866 adopted a memorial to the President of the United States in reference to the cod and other fisheries.

⌘ Shortly after another influence was felt. Senator Cole of California acting in behalf of certain persons in the state sought to obtain from the Russian government a licence or franchise to gather furs in a portion of its American possessions. The Russian minister at Washington, whom Mr. Cole saw repeatedly upon this subject was not authorized to act, and Mr. Cole after conference with the Department of State was induced to address Mr. Clay, minister of the United States at St. Petersburg, who laid the application before the Russian government.

⌘ Sometime had elapsed since the original attempt of Mr. Gwin, also a senator from California, and it is probable that the Russian government had obtained information which enabled it to see its way more clearly.

THINK ALASKA. TALK ALASKA. WRITE ALASKA. BE AN ALASKAN

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There is reason to believe, also, that the administration of the fur Company had not been entirely satisfactory, so that there were well-founded hesitations with regards to the renewal of its franchise. Meanwhile in October 1866, Mr. deStoeckl, who had long been the Russian minister of ~~our government~~ at Washington, and enjoyed in a high degree the confidence of our government, returned home from a leave of absence, promising his best exertions to promote good relations between the two countries. While he was at St. Petersburg the applications from United States were under consideration. As Mr. deStoeckl was leaving in February to return to his post, the Archduke Constantine, the brother and chief adviser to the Emperor, handed him a map with the lines in our treaty marked upon it, and told him he might treat for the cession. The minister arrived in Washington early in March. A negotiation was opened at once with our government. Final instructions were received by cable from St. Petersburg on the 29th of March, ~~and~~ ^{and} at four o'clock on the ^morning of the 30th of March this important treaty was signed by Mr. Seward

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on the part of the United States and Mr. deStoekl on the part of Russia. Few treaties have been conceived, initiated, prosecuted and completed in so simple a manner without protocols or despatches.

R After the ratification of the treaty, June 30, 1867 Commissioners for the formal transfer of the Territory were appointed: General Lovell H. Rousseau, representing the United States government and Captain Pestchoureff of the Russian Imperial Navy, representing the Russian government, and Captain Koskul, representing the Russian American Company.

W R The Commissioners sailed from New York on August 31, 1867, via the ^{*Isthmus of*} Panama Canal, reaching San Francisco, Cal. on September 22nd.

R On arriving at San Francisco Gen. Rousseau found the preparations for taking military possession of the new territory completed by Major Halleck, who had ships laden with supplies for the troops and transportation all ready for the troops themselves to Sitka.

KoP. Admiral Thatcher had also provided transportation for the Commissioners on the propeller man-of-war "Ossippee," captain Emmons, commanding.

The steamer "John L. Stevens" with Gen. Jeff. C. Davis and his Command of 275 men, rank and file, left San Francisco on the 25th of Sept., sailing direct for Sitka, which was reached on the 9th of October.

IP In accordance with the instructions from the headquarters, the troops were retained on the vessel until the arrival of the commissioners. However the animals were landed on a small island upon the arrival of the "Stevens" at Sitka. The "Ossippee" with Commissioners on board left San Francisco two days later than the "Stevens". The "Ossippee" was very slow boat, making about two knots an hour. The ship arrived at Esquimalt on the 4th of October. After taking on a supply of coal it left this port on the 6th. On a beautiful clear morning of October 18, the "Ossippee" reached Sitka at 11.00 o'clock.

The commissioners landed at once. The hour for the transfer was arranged to take place at 3.30 P.m. that afternoon. The various commanders present were notified: Gen. Jeff C. Davis, commanding the U.//S. troops, Captain Emmons of the U.S. ship "Ossippee"; Captain McDougall of the U.S. ship Jamestown; Captain Bradford of the U.S. ship "Resaca" as well as the officers of their respective commands, as also the Governor of the territory, the Prince Maksoutoff.

⊕ The Command of Gen. Davis, about two hundred and fifty strong, in full uniform, armed and handsomely equipped, were landed about three o'clock and ~~max~~ marched up to the top of eminence on which the governor's house stood and where the official transfer was to be made. At the same time, a company of ~~af~~ Russian soldiers were marched to the ground, and took their place upon the left of the flag staff from which the Russian flag was then floating. The command of ^{ls} Gen. Davis was formed under his direction on the right.

W.P. The United States flag to be raised on the occasion was in care of a color guard- a lieutenant, a sergeant and ten men of Gen. Davis's command.

R The officers named, as well as the officers under their command, the Prince Maksoutoff, and his wife, the princess Maksoutoff, together with many Russian and American citizens, and some of the Indian chiefs were present. It was arranged by Captain Pestchouroff and Gen Rousseau that, in firing the salutes on the exchange of the flags the United States would lead off, in accordance with the instruction from the Secretary of State, but that there should be alternate guns from the American and Russian batteries, thus giving the flag of each nation a double national salute; the national salute being thus answered in the moment it was given.

A The troops being promptly formed were brought to a present arms

at precisely three thirty, the signal given to the "Ossippee". (Lieut. Crossman, executive officer of the ship, and for the time in command), which was to fire the salute, and the ceremony was begun by lowering the Russian flag. As it began its descent down the flag-staff the battery of the "Ossippee", with large nine-inch guns, led off in the salute, peal after peal crashing and re-echoing in the gorges of the surrounding mountains, answered by the Russian water battery (a battery on the wharf), firing alternately. But the ceremony was interrupted by the catching of the Russian flag in the ropes attached to the flag-staff. The soldier who was lowering it, continuing to pull at it, tore off the the border by which it was attached, leaving the flag entwined tightly around the ropes. The flag staff was a native spruce, perhaps ninety feet in height. In an instant the Russian soldiers, taking different shrouds attached to the flag-staff, attempted to ascend to the flag, which having been

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whipped around the ropes by the wind, remained tight and fast. In a short time a boatswain's chair was made by knotting a rope to make a loop for a man to sit in and be pulled upward and another Russian soldier was quickly drawn up to the flag. On reaching it he detached it from the ropes, and not hearing the calls from captain Pestchouroff below to "bring it down", dropped it below, and in its descent it fell on the bayonets of the Russian soldiers. The United States flag (given to Gen. Rousseau by the direction of the secretary of State at Washington for that purpose) was then properly attached and began its ascent, hoisted by Gen Rousseau's son, George Lovell Rousseau. Again the the salutes were fired as before, the Russian water battery leading off. The flag was so hoisted that in the instant it reached its place the report of last big gun of the "Ossippee" reverberated from the mountains.

R The salute being completed, Captain Pestchouroff stepped up to Gen Rousseau and said: "General Rousseau, by the authority from his majesty, the Emperor

of Russia, I transfer to the United States the Territory of Alaska. " In as few words Gen. Rousseau acknowledged the acceptance of the transfer and the ceremony was at an end. Three cheers were then spontaneously given for the United States flag by the American citizens present.

PP The effect upon the Russian citizenry was not that of elation, but rather the feeling was ~~that~~ of sadness and gloom. However later, most of the Russians were rather happy in becoming American citizens.

~~Rev. A. P. Kashevaroff~~

Alaska
~~Curator Territorial Library and
Museum.~~