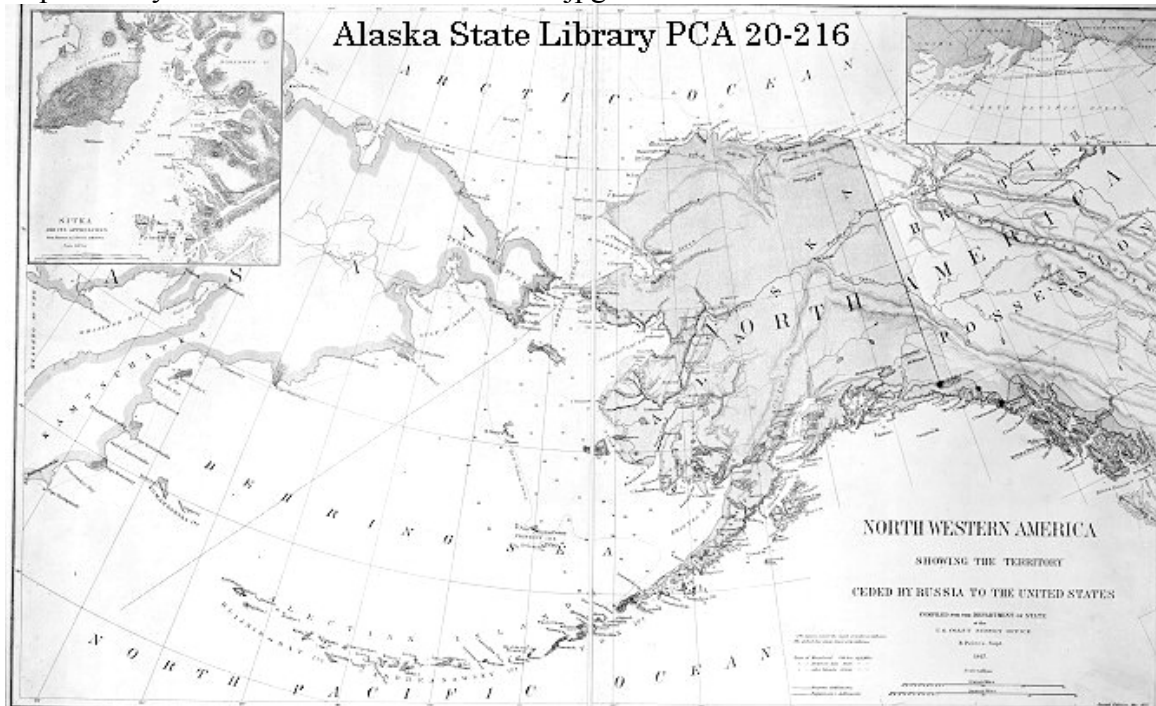


Government / The Making of Alaska

By Jennifer Houdek

THE ALASKA PURCHASE

<http://library.state.ak.us/hist/cent/020-0216.jpg>



Map of Territory (Alaska) ceded to the United States by Russia.] By: U.S. Coast Survey Office, 1867. Alaska State Library, Alaska Centennial Purchase Collection.



President Andrew Johnson and Secretary of State William H. Seward, lampooned as "King Andy" and "his man Billy," were laying in "a great stock of Russian ice in order to cool down the Congressional majority" in this political cartoon titled "PREPARING FOR THE HEATED TERM."

<http://library.state.ak.us/hist/cent/020-0181.jpg>



Signing the treaty of cession, March 30, 1867:

L to R: Robert S. Chew, Secretary of State William H. Seward, William Hunter, Mr. Bodisco, Russian Ambassador Baron de Stoeckl, Charles Sumner, Frank W. Seward.

Alaska State Library PCA 20-181

Print of the signing of treaty of cessation, March 30, 1867. From the painting by Emanuel Leutze showing the Alaska purchase. Shown left to right; Robert S. Chew; William. H. Seward (Secretary of State), William Hunter; Mr. Bodisco; Baron de (Eduard) Stoeckl (Russian Diplomat); Charles Sumner and Frederick W. Seward. Alaska State Library, Alaska Purchase Centennial Collection.

More about the Alaska Purchase:

The name *Alaska* is fitting for a state famed for its vast spaces, exquisite landscapes, and abundant natural resources. The name most likely came from the Aleut word *Alyeska*, meaning *the great land*. Yet as great as Alaska is, when the United States was pushing for the purchase of Russian Alaska in the late 1800s, it was a tough sell. Critics argued against spending millions on such a remote, barren region—especially as the United States was emerging from its own Civil War.

Alaska's price tag was \$7.2 million, roughly 2 cents an acre, however the deal also included the transfer of its trading rights and all public buildings, fortifications, barracks, and other properties within an already sizeable infrastructure. Not included in the sale were the Russian Orthodox churches, which would remain the property of the members. Looking back nearly fourteen decades, few would argue that the United States benefited greatly from the deal, even though it almost fell through. In 1867, the purchase treaty passed the required two-thirds vote in the House of Representatives by merely one vote.

The key proponent in the purchase was William H. Seward, who was appointed Secretary of State by President Abraham Lincoln and later served under President Andrew Johnson. Seward's name became linked with Alaska's during the debate in Congress and in the media, as the faraway land was mocked as *Seward's Icebox*, *Icebergia*, *Seward's Polar Bear Garden*, *Walrussia*, and perhaps the press favorite, *Seward's Folly*. Although the Senate approved the purchase in executive session, when

the treaty came to the House, certain representatives were strongly opposed. Nearly a century later, Ernest Gruening, a former Alaska territorial governor, and later Alaska's U.S. senator, retold of that debate during his address to the American Meteorological Society in 1962.

"Alaska was pictured on the floor of the House of Representatives and in a substantial section of the press as a frozen waste with a savage climate," Gruening said, "where little or nothing could grow, and where few could or would live."

Gruening quoted House members who referred to Alaska as an "inhospitable and barren waste" that would "never add a dollar to the wealth of our country or furnish any homes to our people." He named Missouri Rep. Benjamin F. Loan, who called Alaska "utterly worthless" and asserted that "to suppose that anyone would leave the United States . . . to seek a home . . . in the region of perpetual snow is simply to suppose such a person insane." The Minority Report of the House Committee on Foreign Relations offered this opinion: "[Alaska] has no capacity as an agricultural country" and "no value as a mineral country." Furthermore, the report added that Alaska's timber was "generally of poor quality and growing upon inaccessible mountains." Its fur trade was "of insignificant value, and will speedily come to an end." Fisheries: "of doubtful value." Climate: "unfit for the habitation of civilized men."

In the end, Alaska itself would prove them wrong.

LINKS:

Text of the Treaty with Russia (the Alaska Purchase):

www.bartleby.com/43/43.html

Mark Twain newspaper columns, including comments on "Walrussia":

www.twainquotes.com/18680121.html

www.twainquotes.com/18680122.html

HarpWeek cartoon and more about the political struggles surrounding the purchase debate:

Visit the library for more information:

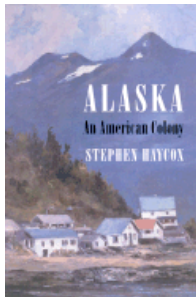
Alaska's libraries include audio, visual, and written material about the Alaska Purchase. Visit your local library or go online to see what's available in holdings all over the state. Take these simple steps:

1. Access **SLED** (State Library Electronic Doorway) at <http://sled.alaska.edu/library.html>.
2. Click on the listing for **ALNCat** (the Alaska Library Network Catalog) to view the Basic Search window.

Go to the Keyword field, and type in **ALASKA PURCHASE** or **RUSSIAN AMERICA**.

More Reading:

Gruening, Ernest. *An Alaskan Reader*. New York: Meredith Press, 1966.



Haycox, Stephen W. *Alaska: An American Colony*. Seattle, University of Washington Press, 2002.

James, James Alton. *The First Scientific Exploration of Russian America and the Purchase of Alaska*. Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University, 1942.

Jenson, Ronald J. *The Alaska Purchase and Russian-American Relations*. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1975.



Mangusso, Mary, co-editor. *An Alaska Anthology: Interpreting the Past*. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1996.

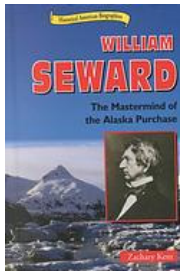
Naske, Claus-M., Herman E. Slotnick. *Alaska: A History of the 49th State*. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1987.

Seward, William H. *Alaska. Speech of William H. Seward at Sitka, August 12, 1869*. Washington, D.C.: Philp & Solomons, 1869.

For elementary and junior high school students:



Fremon, David K. *The Alaska Purchase in American History*. Berkeley Heights, N.J.: Enslow Publishers, 1999.



Kent, Zachary. *William Seward: The Mastermind of the Alaska Purchase*. Berkeley Heights, N.J.: Enslow Publishers, 2001.