

THE BACKGROUND OF THE PURCHASE OF ALASKA

It is a common fault of mankind to ascribe to a great man *all* the credit of a victory, invention or other remarkable achievement; and thus Seward is given the whole credit for the purchase of Alaska.

Seward, himself, never claimed undue credit. He never said, "I did it." While neither he nor his spokesmen in Congress, Sumner and Banks, dwell for any great length on what transpired before Seward's connection with the purchase, they do hint that the subject was an old one, and had been up at least four times before.

The background of the purchase goes back to the days of Gray, who in 1790 was on the northwest coast in quest of furs. The credit for having made known this wonderful region is generally given to Cook who found it on his third voyage of 1776-1780. In his wake followed a swarm of traders. The Americans were second in point of time to engage in this new enterprise, but they soon became first in point of numbers, and with the dawn of the 19th century became a serious problem to the Russian who since 1741 had enjoyed the traffic alone. While the Russians remained to the north in the vicinity of the Aleutian Islands and Cook's Inlet the full effect of this competition was not met; but in 1799 they advanced to Baranof Island and built a fort to the north of the present Sitka, also called Sitka. The Russian soon discovered he was no match for the Boston trader. To him the fur trade was a business—something to be built up and kept up. To the Boston it was a speculative voyage, and he cared little what became of the Indian or of the business if he got his furs. Guns, ammunition and liquors were bartered without conscience, while downright fraud and even force were often employed if the furs could be got in no other way.

Sitka was built in the land of the Kolosh, a very savage people. As long as the Russians enjoyed the advantage of superior weapons they felt themselves secure in their fort but in 1802 the savages, armed with equal weapons, surprised the Russians, and wiped out the whole establishment. The Russians placed the blame of the calostrophy upon the Bostons, and laid a complaint before their government. As St. Petersburg was far away, and transportation slow and tardy, no echo of this charge reached American statesmen

until 1808; but in that year the Russian government, prompted by new complaints, retold the story of the Sitka massacre, and protested against the sale of guns and liquors to the Indian. The Tzar regarded the traffic as both illicit and clandestine, and proposed that the consequences of this practice be avoided by the restriction of this trade to the port of Kodiak, in Russian America. Also, that these restrictions be stipulated in a convention between the two powers.

The American reply, which for the same reasons did not come forth until 1810, took issue on the question of the legality of selling arms and ammunition to the Indian. If, said the note, the Indians in question are sovereign to Russia, then the United States is only bound to leave its citizens to the penalties of the Russian law; on the other hand, if the Indians are not sovereign to Russia, but constitute independent tribes, then the subjects of all nations may trade with them, unless it be in contraband in time of war.

The two powers never came to any constructive agreement over this matter, but the incident is important in that it marked the entry of the United States into the diplomacy of the Northwest Coast, an ill-defined region beginning somewhere south of the Columbia River and extending to as equally indefinite a place in the north. Part of this later became Old Oregon and part became Alaska, but it was one and the same then.

In 1811, John Jacob Astor built the first American settlement on the Northwest Coast, at Astoria. This post was lost to the United States during the war of 1812, but the sovereignty thereto was restored by the treaty of Ghent. This event marks the first recognition of American sovereignty in this region.

Four nations now had claims here.

The Spanish claim began at the equator and extended to at least the 60th parallel of north latitude, say Cooks Inlet. It had once been admitted by Russia, although that was now denied. It was marred by provisions of the treaty of Madrid, following the Nootka Sound Controversy.

England's claim was based on the discoveries of Drake, Cook, Vancouver and others, and extended from about San Francisco to the Arctic. Its continuity of direction was interrupted by the provisions of the treaty of Ghent.

The Russian claim was based on the discoveries of Bering and

others and an occupation of the country by the fur company, and extended as far south as the Columbia River.

The American claim had never been pushed prior to the treaty of Ghent; but after that event it grew like an avalanche. The voyage of Captain Gray, the trader, received full attention at this time, and a retroactive sovereignty, based upon his discovery of the Columbia River and the official character of his mission, was set up. The Louisiana purchase was made to include a generous slice of the Pacific Coast, while the track of Lewis and Clark only served the more to confirm the whole claim.

The adjudication of these claims was not improved by events immediately to come.

In 1818, the United States and England entered into a convention of joint-occupancy.

In 1819, Spain ceded all her rights north of 42 to the United States.

This left two powers holding jointly, but at variance with the exclusive claim of each, and flatly opposed to the pretensions of Russia, at least south of the parallel of 60 degrees.

In 1821 the Tzar, in compliance with a request of the Russian-American company (now reorganized on a military basis and entered upon its second charter) issued an imperial ukase aimed at the ubiquitous Boston, and the closely approaching Northwester of Montreal. This ukase settled the question of conflicting claim by decreeing that the country north of 51 belonged solely to the Tzar; and it handled the Boston and his kind by declaring the ocean for 100 Italian miles (115 statute miles) of the shore to be a closed sea.

Both Great Britain and the United States protested in practically the same terms. Each denied the principle of the closed sea, and each depreciated the claim of Russia south of Cook's Inlet, and upheld her own.

When the Tzar saw how his ukase was received he immediately invited the powers to send their ministers to St. Petersburg, that they might, with his own, adjudicate this matter. Both powers responded. The United States appointed Mr. Robert Middleton, Great Britain Sir Charles Bagot, to confer with Count de Nesselrode, of Russia.

Mr. Adams, Secretary of State, in his instructions to Mr. Middleton, outlined the position of the United States with regard to the

Northwest Coast. That portion of it south of 51 he regards as within the natural limits of the United States to come; but with regard to the country above it he shares the opinion of his day; it is a region by distance and character alone forever destined to remain the abode of the savage, the trapper and the trader. The entire Northwest Coast, therefore, he would divide into spheres of influence: Russia is to make no settlement south of 55; the United States none north of 51; while Great Britain is to make none north of 55 or south of 51. But for the purposes of trade with the Indians each is to have the right to traffic within the domain of the other, provided there is no establishment nearby.

This proposal for a time received serious consideration from Great Britain, although she ultimately rejected it. In stating her reasons she gave above all that she had from the beginning no intention to treat jointly since she felt it was not to her advantage to do so; but it is known that she imagined a growing collusion between Russia and America to reduce her claim to as small a compass as possible. At any rate all chances for a three-party joint agreement were destroyed, when on December 2, 1823, the president issued the Monroe Doctrine. Accordingly, each power proceeded to treat separately with Russia, and the outcome was the two treaties--the Russian-American of 1824, and the Russian-British of 1825.

These conventions reflect almost wholly the principles laid down in Mr. Adams' three-party proposal.

But the treaties are not alike, although frequently confounded by writers who invariably state that at this time the United States drew the present boundary line, at fifty-four, forty, and acknowledged the sovereignty of Russia above that parallel. This is not true. Both these items were stipulated in the British convention, but not in the American. Ours was almost wholly a trade agreement based upon Mr. Adams' former three-party proposal. We merely agreed not to build any establishment north of fifty-four, forty; but the question of a boundary was left untouched. It cannot be found in the treaty, which states:

"Article II. With a view of preventing the rights of navigation and of fishing exercised upon the Great Ocean by the citizens and subjects of the high contracting Powers from becoming the pretext for an illicit trade, it is agreed that the citizens of the United States shall not resort to any point where there is a Russian estab-

lishment, without the permission of the governor or commander; and that, reciprocally, the subjects of Russia shall not resort, without permission, to any establishment of the United States upon the Northwest coast.

“Art. III. It is moreover agreed that, hereafter, there shall not be formed by the citizens of the United States, or under the authority of the said States, any establishment upon the Northwest coast of America, nor in any of the islands adjacent, to the north of fifty-four degrees and forty minutes of north latitude; and that, in the same manner, there shall be none formed by Russian subjects, or under the authority of Russia south of that parallel.”

The convention with Great Britain specifically states that Alaska shall belong wholly to Russia, and the boundary line, minus certain alterations made in later years following a quibble over details, is the one in use to-day. British diplomacy was different from the American. It made too much of Russia's position of the “closed-sea.” England's diplomats felt that they must give Russia a vehicle for retracting the doctrine of the closed-sea, and they accordingly selected boundaries and territorial claims as the proper one. The United States had no such feeling. Hence the whole convention is practically a trade agreement, beginning with Article I which annuls the doctrine of the closed-sea in the Pacific Ocean, and follows with a recitation of other agreements in the mutual interest of the fur-traders of both nations; hence, also, it contains no “boundaries” or other declarations of sovereignty.

Had Mr. Adams' principles been adopted in their entirety no future difficulties would have been anticipated, but this was not the case. Mr. Adams had held out for the right to trade on the unoccupied places in perpetuity, but as this was a sore point with the Russians, since it hit the very object of the ukase—the elimination of the Boston trader, a compromise on this one point was therefore effected, as follows:

“Article IV. It is, nevertheless, understood that during a term of ten years, counting from the signature of the present convention, the ships of both Powers, or which belong to their citizens or subjects respectively, may reciprocally frequent, without any hindrance whatever, the interior seas, gulfs, harbors, and creeks, upon the coast mentioned in the preceding article, for the purpose of fishing and trading with the natives of the country.”

This ten-year clause expired on the 17th of April, 1834. The Russians attached much importance to it, since it fulfilled hopes of "exclusive trade" held since 1799. The British convention had one year to go.

On the precise day the American treaty was to expire trouble began anew. It chanced that two American traders, Captains Snow and Allen, by name, were then in Sitka, and when interrogated about their future plans stated their intention to visit the nearby coast (above fifty-four forty) to trade. The governor, Baron Wrangell, forbade them to do so, on the ground that the ten years were now up, and that the privilege of trading, in consequence, was no longer open to the Americans. Messrs. Snow and Allen refused absolutely to listen to the governor on this point, contending that any such prohibition would have to come from their own government; and they went about their business. Baron Wrangell then appealed to the department of state at Washington, and even went so far as to publish a proclamation in the *Congressional Globe*.

This was the first time in ten years that any trouble had come from this quarter. President Van Buren, after reviewing the matter, came to the conclusion that the ten-year agreement had been a good one, productive of mutual benefit, and urged that it be renewed. Mr. Dallas was now Secretary of State, and Mr. Wilkins minister to Russia. Count de Nesselrode was still connected with the department of foreign affairs. In 1835, Mr. Wilkins took up the matter and proposed that the article be renewed by a convention, and he handed Nesselrode such a one already for his signature.

Nesselrode hesitated. He alleged that inasmuch as the Russian American Company had embarked its capital upon a monopoly from the emperor it was impossible to disregard its wishes; and that he must postpone an answer until the arrival next season of its governor.

Wrangell arrived in the summer of 1836, and was immediately closeted with Count Nesselrode, but his opinion was already known to be unfavorable.

In the meantime another incident occurred. In the fall of 1836, the American brig, *Loriot*, Captain Blinn, master, was turned back at Forrester's Island, by Russian men-of-war. He immediately returned to his starting place in the Sandwich Islands and lodged with the American consul both a complaint and a claim,

alleging that he had the right to land on the unoccupied places to trade by virtue of Article I, even though the ten years had expired.

This incident gave the American officials a chance to file a claim which Nesselrode was obliged to answer. His answer was unfavorable. The right to trade on the unoccupied places as set down in Article I, he said, was conditional to Article IV which limits the privilege to the space of ten years, and when Mr. Blinn was turned back the ten years had expired.

Mr. Dallas' reply, which had now been in process of evolution for several years, is remarkable for its construction of the whole treaty of 1824—a construction quite in keeping with the phraseology therein, and one which emphasizes more than anything else the fact that the convention of 1824 was above all a trading agreement, and not a declaration of the sovereign claims of the respective powers. He says:

"The undersigned submits that in no sense can the fourth article be understood as implying an acknowledgment, on the part of the United States, of the right of Russia to the possession of the coast above the latitude of 54 40 north. It must, of course, be taken in connection with the other articles, and they have, in fact, no reference whatever to the question of the right of possession of the unoccupied parts. To prevent future collision it was agreed that no new establishment should be formed by the respective parties to the north or south of the parallel mentioned; but the question of the right of possession beyond the existing establishments, as it stood previous to, or at the time of, the convention, was left untouched.

"By agreeing not to form new establishments north of latitude 50 40 the United States made no acknowledgment of the right of Russia to the territory above that line. If such an admission had been made Russia, by the same construction of the article referred to, must have equally acknowledged the right of the United States to the territory south of the parallel. But that Russia did not so understand the article is conclusively proved by her having entered into a similar agreement in her subsequent treaty of 1825, with Great Britain, and having, in that instrument, acknowledged the right of possession of the same territory by Great Britain. The United States can only be considered inferentially as having acknowledged the right of Russia to acquire, above the designated meridian, by actual occupation, a just claim to unoccupied lands.

Until that actual occupation be taken, the first article of the convention recognizes the American right to navigate, fish, and trade, as prior to its negotiation."

So far as can be ascertained the United States never admitted the complete sovereignty of Russia to the country above fifty-four. A few more notes were exchanged at this time when the matter was dropped. Occasionally an echo of it is heard thereafter in semi-official proclamations of the state department notifying traders that the article had expired. The Russians never yielded and the Americans appear to have acquiesced; but no retraction of the above position has ever appeared in the published diplomacy of the United States. All reference to the incident appears to have been avoided, and Sumner, who dwells to a great length on the Russian title at the time of purchase makes no mention of it. Nor does he refer to the treaty of 1824. Possibly he did not care to cloud the title at a time when Seward was offering a price for the country. But the correspondence thereon is not hidden in the archives. It was long since published in the serial documents.

One ray of light, if light it can be called, is thrown upon the subject by Representative Nathaniel C. Banks, chairman of the committee on foreign relations, in 1868. Speaking on the subject of the purchase of Alaska at the time, he said: "Once during Polk's administration the matter was discussed, but terminated without any formal offer or refusal. The offer, however, was made twice, once in Mr. Van Buren's administration, and once in Mr. Buchanan's administration."

For the purpose of this discussion I have assumed the authenticity of the Bank's testimony and the validity of the offer. As a witness Mr. Banks gives every evidence of reliability. His word went unchallenged at the time, while those portions of it which can be checked against other evidence agree exactly. His testimony is further substantiated by that of Mr. Myers, given at the same time and place. Mr. Myers claims he got his information from the State Department.

It is not difficult to see why Mr. Van Buren dropped the article 4 controversy, but it is difficult to see why he made the offer of purchase. If Mr. Adams' view still held—that the northwest coast was without the pale of civilization and useful only for trading—Alaska was well nigh worthless, now. The sea-otter had been

hunted in these parts all to well. Natural decrease in animals to be taken together with the entry of a new competitor, the mighty Hudson Bay Company, to take them, had left the good old days only a memory. Mr. Van Buren would have gained but a trifle had he won the controversy.

Viewed from another angle, however, the United States did have use for Alaska. The Oregon Question was now coming to the fore. Years before, in 1818, and in 1828, this matter seemed settled, but events were now moving with amazing rapidity. Americans were pouring into Old Oregon and demanding the abrogation of the agreement of joint-occupancy and the formation of a commonwealth upon the Pacific.

The desire to freeze out the Britisher from the coast below fifty-four, forty was soon magnified into a desire to own the coast above. Says Cassius M. Clay, minister to Russia, at the time of the purchase.

“My attention was first called to this matter in 1863, when I came over the Atlantic with the 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.”

This story has been fairly well received, although it is depreciated by Golder, who claims he found no record of it in the Russian archives. It has many versions.

Says Mr. Banks, on the floor of Congress, July 1, 1868: “Once during Polk’s administration the matter was discussed, but terminated without any formal offer or refusal.”

Says Representative Myers, on the same date. “Yes, ‘fifty-four forty or fight,’ was the cry; and what for. Simply to adjoin this terrible land from which my colleague shrinks with a coldness beyond that of the climate he depicts—a territory for which we had under Van Buren and Polk twice offered five millions and been refused. If the gentleman looks to the State Department he will find the evidence.”

And Representative Benjamin F. Butler. “If we are to pay for

her friendship the amount, I desire to give her the \$7,200,000 and let her keep Alaska. I have no doubt that at any time within the last twenty years we could have had Alaska for the asking—I have heard it so stated in the cabinets of two presidents—provided we would have taken it as a gift. But no man, except one insane enough to buy the earthquakes of St. Thomas or the ice fields of Greenland, could be forced to agree to any other terms for its acquisition to the country.”

F. W. Seward, in his *Reminiscences*, carries the “purchase” back to Polk: “Even as early as during the Oregon Debate in 1846-7, the suggestion had been made that by insisting on the boundary line of 54 degrees 40 minutes, and obtaining a cession from the Emperor Nicholas, the United States might own the whole Pacific Coast up to the Arctic Circle. But the slave-holding interest, then dominant in the Federal councils, wanted Southern, not Northern extension. The project was scouted as impracticable, and the line of 54 degrees 40 minutes was given up.”

Senator Charles Sumner in his *Speech* is the first to mention the Polk connection. The story was evidently current at this time. “I am not able to say when the idea of this cession first took shape. I have heard that it was as long ago as the Administration of Mr. Polk.”

However much one is inclined to depreciate this data on the ground that it cannot be corroborated by papers in the Russian archives, one must agree that there was a desire on the part of American statesmen to secure Alaska at this time. The matter may never have been the subject of a state paper, but it was certainly the subject of much verbal discussion, and many independent witnesses have knowledge of it.

With the settlement of the Oregon Question by the division of the Oregon Country the acquisition of Alaska is no longer desired. Our interest in Alaska at this time is at its lowest ebb. We do not want it for territorial purposes; it has little value for fur-trading purposes. A new demand for Alaska must be created.

There are two more movements for Alaska prior to the purchase.

The first occurred in 1855 and is wholly a Russian movement. It has been described in great detail by Golder. The incident, briefly related is this:

At the outbreak of the Crimean War the Russian-American Company, fearful lest England would seize the colonies, devised a fictitious sale to a San Francisco concern known as the American Russian Company. The contract with blank spaces for filling in the date, etc., was sent to the Russian legation at Washington, D. C., for approval; but before any understanding had been reached, the two fur companies came to an agreement and induced their different governments to respect each other's possessions in the north-west coast.

Some news of this leaked out and many persons thought the United States was about to buy Alaska; but the matter never became a state item and the offer was never made.

In 1859, Senator Gwin, of California, came forth with a semi-official offer of purchase for five million dollars. His offer has never been thoroughly understood. It is known, that he represented several private interests in California, including Joe Lane McDonald, Louis Goldstone, the American Russian Company, and probably others, who were were trying to buy the country outright, in order that they might obtain privileges which their government had never secured by treaty. This movement, though genuine, never had the backing even of the commonwealths on the Pacific; it was secretive, and had it been widely advertised would have brought forth the same opposition that was later marshalled against the Alaska Commercial Company who secured the fur-seal monopoly. It must, however, be regarded as the fore-runner of that economic advance which is identified with the history of Alaska during the eighties; and which Seward predicted, but at this time it was premature.

The last and final movement for Alaska, according to F. W. Seward, Sumner and President Johnson, began shortly after the commencement of the Civil War. It has been tersely described by F. W. Seward in his *Reminiscences*. He says:

"Soon after this came our great Civil War. During its continuance my father, as Secretary of State, had found the Government laboring under great disadvantages for the lack of advanced naval outposts in the West Indies and in the North Pacific. So, at the close of hostilities, he commenced his endeavors to obtain such a foothold in each quarter."

It would appear, then, from the foregoing, that American state

policy toward Alaska is quite in keeping with American state policy toward the Northwest Coast in general. From 1790 to 1840, or thereabouts, this region, as so much land, country or territory had very little value. It had worth only in so far as it was a vantage ground for the taking of furs, and for this reason the treaty of 1824 is wholly a trading agreement. After 1840—possibly before—fur-trading suffered a decline, and state demands for trading rights north of fifty-four are not so vehement—certainly less so than in 1821. After 1840 our attitude changes, and the slogan is, "All of Oregon, or None!" "Fifty-Four, Forty or Fight!" Alaska now assumes added importance and political significance. How nice it would be to own the entire Pacific Coast to the Arctic. With the settlement of the Oregon Question, by dividing the Oregon Country, Alaska loses this significance, and its acquisition is not seriously contemplated until the Civil War, when it is desired as a base for naval stations in the Pacific, and purchased for that purpose.

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* The principal authorities used in this paper are as follows. For the treaty of 1821 and prior, *American State Papers, Foreign Relations*, vol. V; *Fur-seal Arbitration, 1893*. For the reopening of this convention, *U. S. Pub. Docs.*, serial 338, doc. 1. The Clay version of the Walker Story is contained in Seward's report, *U. S. Pub. Docs.*, serial 1339. The other versions are from the *Congressional Globe*. The fictitious bill of sale is from Golder, "The Purchase of Alaska," *American Historical Review*, XXV, 411. The life of Joseph Lane McDonald is the subject of a paper by the writer in the *Washington Historical Quarterly*, April, 1921.