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RUSSIAN SHIPBUILDING IN THE AMERICAN COLONIES

In the harbor at St. Michael, Alaska, recently the old Russian ship *Politofsky* was torn to pieces for the copper spikes that held her sheathing to the timbers. She was the last of the fleet of vessels built by the Russian American Company on the old Northwest Coast of America.

The beginning of the ship-building in the Russian Possessions in America, or Our Colonies, as they often spoke of them in Russian records, goes back to the days of Baranof, the builder of the domain of the great fur company. Baranof had scarcely become acquainted with his station and the outlying regions where he was to gather the furs that made the existence of his post a possibility, before he was instructed to build a ship.

Shelikof, the organizer of the project of colonization, and the founder of the first Colony, wrote to him by the *Orel* in 1792: "We at present send you iron, tackle and sails for a ship, which with the help of Shields, you may build, and be profited by such a favorable opportunity. Of still two or three ships of different proportions you might place the foundation. * * To lay the tackle, to sew the sails, and to do the blacksmithing, train the Americans."¹

In the autumn of 1792, the Englishman Shields, or Shiltz, came from Okhotsk to Kodiak, for fulfilling the wish of Shelikof in the building of the first ship in the Colonies, arriving on the packetboat *Orel*.²

Baranof wrote to Shelikof, at Irkutsk, Siberia: "The remaining men in consideration of the completing of buildings and the carrying on of affairs, are insufficient, and from these the sick, incapable and old are not a few * * * and in addition to this to build a ship. And this, although all things necessary to that end are lacking. Of tar we have only a flask, of pitch three, of steel, not a pound, of nails, not one; and iron, very little for so large a vessel."

¹ *Historical Sketch of the Russian American Company*, St. Petersburg, 1861-1863, pp. 39-40, by P. Tikhmenef.

² Shields had been a lieutenant in an Ekaterinburg regiment, and on account of his knowledge of shipbuilding and navigation he had been taken into the service in the new colonies by Shelikof. *Zhizneopisanie Aleksandra Andreevicha Baranova*, (Life of Alexander Andreevich Baranof) written by Kiril Khlebnikof, Saint Petersburg, 1835, p. 18. He is spoken of as Yarof Schiltz in the Russian writings, and he made some of the first charts of the region from Bucarelli Bay, Prince of Wales Island, Alaska, to the northward, between 1793 and 1799. See *Guide to Materials for American History in Russian Archives*. By Frank A. Golder, Carnegie Institute, Wn. D. C., 1917, p. 118.

Nevertheless he proceeded with the assigned task with his usual energy and resourcefulness. It was laid out 66 feet on the keel. He says: "Iron is used in the place of steel, and the dry matter is got out with axes. * * * From my predecessor nearly nothing was left as you will see from the list * * * dimity for sails will be necessary, all that was brought we were compelled to use for sails for bidars, and for tents."³

The green timber of the forest was the only material at hand. The place selected for the shipyard was at Voskresenski Bay, an indenture in the south side of Kenai Peninsula, where the terminus of the Government Railway is located at the town of Seward. Some of the timber had to be brought from Greko Island in Prince William Sound. His forces, already insufficient, still diminished. Men were lost through different causes, two were killed by the Kolosh, the Indian people now called Thlingit, eight others were drowned in the sinking of a bidar. Loss in a short time totaled 18. Food supplies were short. The workmen were discontented, they clamored to be returned to Russia. There was but one blacksmith remaining. Baranof searched for iron ore, found it, but was unable to reduce it. Pitch and tar were made from the spruce, pieces of canvas for sails were collected from all over the colonies, whale oil was used for paint.

Baranof wrote: "Iron ochre ore from which paint is made, also other kinds, was discovered during the winter of 1793. I found it on Kodiak and Kenai Gulf, and assayed in small amounts but with little success, having no experience in that. Father Juvenal tried to show how to extract it in hand ovens and furnaces * * * There should be master workmen to establish furnaces and to handle rock.

"In selecting Chugach for building, and the place I did, I chose them as I said before, in order to build the ship beside the timber. The Lebedef Company occupied all other available places, flattery was necessary to avoid a quarrel, for we were not strong. * * * For food the natives were compelled to put traps in the streams and to set nets."⁴ The timber near the shores was small and other required great labor in dragging it to the ships.

Manufactured material had to be sent across Siberia, some 6000 miles, then transferred to sail vessels at Okhotsk, a miserable harbor at the mouth of a turbulent, shallow stream for a voyage of about 2500 miles to Voskresensky Harbor.

³ Letter, Baranof to Shelkof, July 24th, 1793. Tikh App. Pt. 2, p. 39. Appendix.

⁴ Letter, Baranof to Shelkof, App. Tikh. Hist. Rev. Op. cit. pt. 2, p. 77.

The unfailing energy and indomitable persistence of Baranof overcame all opposition and in September, 1794, the ship *Phoenix* was completed and sailed for Kodiak.⁵

The *Phoenix* is described as having three masts and two decks. It was doubtless made imposing in appearance in order to be classed as a ship, or a frigate. It was 73 feet in length, 23 feet beam, 13½ feet in depth, with a tonnage of 180 tons. In place of pitch and tar, spruce gum and hot sulphur was used, and ochre and whale oil for paint. The timbers were hewn with axes by Baranof's workmen, whose principal subsistence was the *yukalee* or salmon dried without salt. By such means was built the first vessel that slipped from the ways of the first shipyard in the Russian Colonies in America, in what is now Alaska.⁶

The *Delphin* and the *Olga*, two small boats of 35 to 40 feet in length were the next to be constructed, and they were built on Yelovie, or Spruce Island, in 1795, from the spruce timber of that place.⁷ The materials for construction had become little more plentiful, and the *Olga* was so poorly constructed that when Baranof made his first voyage in it, it leaked so badly that the pumps had to be kept continually going, and small bits of seaweed were brought up out of the hold. She was finally beached and repaired so that he used it for several years, navigating it himself, and going as far as Sitka on his explorations.⁸

These were the last boats built until after the settlement at Sitka, called New Archangel, was made.

Work on a boat at Old Sitka seems to have been begun soon after the founding of the fort, for among the damages inflicted on the Russians by the hostile Thlingit warriors when the post was captured was the burning of a vessel lying on the ways in process of construction.⁹

In 1803, the year following the disaster at Sitka, Baranof sailed in the cutter *Olga* to survey the scene, and especially to order the building of two boats, which he entrusted to his lieutenant, Ivan Kooskof, at Yakutat.¹⁰ These boats were to be ready for the expedi-

⁵ *Zhis.* p. 23. The name was probably taken from an English ship named *Fenix* as Baranof put it, that he met in Chugach Gulf, (Pr. Wm. Sound) in 1792. It is described as the brig *Fenis*, a trader belonging to Macao, under Portuguese colors, in a *New Vancouver Journal*, edited by Edmond S. Meany, Seattle, 1915. It appears as a British bark from Bengal, and is called "One of the mystery ships of the trade," in *Trading Vessels in Maritime Fur Trade*, by Judge F. W. Howay. Ottawa, 1930, p. 127.

⁶ *Tikh. Hist. Review*, part 1, p. 40.

⁷ *Zhis. Baranof*, p. 25.

⁸ *Dvukratnoe Putaschestvie iv Amerika*, (Two Voyages to America) 2 pts. by Khvostof and Davidof, St. Petersburg, 1810, pt. 1, p. 234.

⁹ *Zhizneopisanie*, p. 69; *Statement of Avrosim Plotnikof*, in *Tikh. Hist. Sketch*, App. pt. 2, p. 174, regarding the destruction of the port.

¹⁰ Ivan Alexandrovich Kooskof was a merchant of Tomsk who came as a *prikastchik* or clerk with Baranof, and who was named by him as his assistant soon after arrival. Later he was rewarded for distinguished service by a gold medal and the rank of Commercial Counsellor. *Zhizneopisanie*, p. 35.

tion of the following year, which was planned for the recovery of the lost ground at Sitka. Workmen and overseers were left for the accomplishment of this task.

On the return of Baranof on his way to Sitka in 1804, the two boats were completed and ready for use and to them were given the names *Yermak*, and *Rostislaf*. The first of these was 51 feet in length and had a measurement of 100 tons, the other was 41 feet in length and was of 85 tons burden. The iron for these was salvaged from the old cutter *Olga* which had become unseaworthy and was predestined to destruction. For rigging, the tackle of the *Olga* was supplemented and added to by a mixture of hemp with tree bark and whalebone.

A council was held with the natives at which the wood of the dismantled *Olga* was burned to the accompaniment of salvos of artillery and rifles concealed in the vicinity, as a token of re-establishment measures. It was agreed to pardon the hostile acts of 1802, including the attacks on the party of Kooskof at Akoi, following the Sitka massacre.¹¹

A shipyard was established at Sitka after the founding of the post at the new site, in the curve of the shore north of the Kekoor on which the building known as the Baranof Castle was placed, and on the ground now known as the Barracks square. The first boat to be constructed on these ways was the tender *Avos* ordered by Rebanof on his visit in 1805.

The loss of the *Phoenix* in 1799, with all on board, including the English shipbuilder Shields, left no skilled constructor. Two of the Russians, one left from the *Neva*, the other from Okhotsk, laid the keel of the *Avos* in 1805. Owing to the many obstacles, sickness by scurvy, the shortage of workmen, and the stormy weather, the work went slowly. "Northwest John"—Captain John DeWolf—in his notes on the Voyage of the *Juno*, says that the last of June the next year it was still on the stocks and it did not appear, from the rate at which the work was progressing, that she would be in sailing order before August.¹²

Better progress was made than anticipated, however, for the boat was put in the water, and named, in June, 1806, and it sailed soon after the *Juno* went to Okhotsk with Rezanof, on his return voyage on July 27th.¹³

This little craft, on her return from the ill-fated expedition

¹¹ Tikhemenef, p. 106, Vol. 1.

¹² *Tales of an Old Sea Port*, by Wilfred Harold Munro, Princeton, 1917, p. 142.

¹³ *Materialui dlya Istorii Russkikh Zasselenii* (Material for History of the Russian Settlements) pt. 3, p. 12.

against Japan and the Kuril Islands, in 1808, was broken on the rocks in what was known as the Bay of Islands, so called by Captain Cook in 1778, now known as Salisbury Sound.¹⁴

The need for ships was still pressing in the Colonies, notwithstanding the purchase of the *Juno* from Captain DeWolfe. Consequently Baranof entered into an agreement in 1806 with an American shipbuilder named Lincoln who entered the service of the Company and continued until 1809.

The brig *Sitka* was the first boat to be constructed, and Lincoln received the sum of 2000 rubles for his services. It was launched March 4, 1807, and by the chronicler it was designated as a beautiful boat, but unfortunately it was lost on the first voyage to Asia, going on a bar at the mouth of the Kamchatka River.¹⁵

The retimbering of the old ship *Alexander Nevski* in the yards was followed by the laying of the keel of the ship *Otkrietie* in June, 1807. She was of 300 tons burden, and she slid from the ways on the 16th of July, 1808, for which the reward of the builder was 2500 rubles. In the same year, Lincoln began the brig *Chirikof*.¹⁶

After Lincoln left the service of the Company in 1809, ship construction received little attention for several years. One of the promishleniks, named Mookin, did some work but with poor success. The need for ships was filled by the purchase, first, of the English ship *Myrtle*, from Captain Barber, in 1807, which was renamed as the *Kodiak*. Later the American ship *Atahualpa*, and the East India brig *Lady* were bought, followed by others that came into the port at Sitka in 1813 and following years consequent on the war of 1812, which was a hard blow on the Yankee traders in the fur trade on the Northwest Coast.¹⁷

With the founding of the Colony at Ross, on the Russian River, in California, in 1812, shipbuilding was shifted to that place owing to the quantity of oak timber found there. The schooner *Rumiantzof* was begun in 1816, and finished two years later, with a tonnage of 160 tons. The work was carried on by the promishlenik Grudin, who worked under Lincoln as a carpenter at Sitka. This was followed by the brig *Buldakof* in 1819, of 200 tons, which was finished and sheathed with copper in 1820. Two years later the keel was laid for the brig *Volga* and it was completed the next year, of 200 tons measurement. The last ship constructed there was the *Kiachta*, about 200 tons burden, which was begun in 1823.

14 *Zhizneopisanie*, p. 127.

15 *Materialui*, pt. 3, p. 12; *Zhizneopisanie*, p. 114; Wreck recorded, *Id.* p. 118.

16 *Materialui*, pt. 3, pp. 12-13.

17 *Zhiz.* pp. 117; 155; 153.

American Trading & Transportation Company's station at St. Michael, called Healy, where she afterwards sank at her moorings. Years afterwards the *Popular Mechanics Magazine* had her listed as a phantom ship, floating in the Arctic Ocean, sheathed in ice. As a matter of fact her planking was torn away to secure the copper spikes, hand made by the Russian smiths, which were sold as souvenirs. She found her last resting place in a harbor of Alaska, very appropriately, although more than a thousand miles from where she began her varied career.

In defiance of the difficulties of transportation, twice as far as from New York to Seattle, across the Siberian steppes, then sailing a stormy northern ocean nearly as far as from London to New York, bringing men, materials, and foodstuffs to the new posts, they found time to build boats, the first in the Territory. They pioneered in construction of steam craft, in the first steam vessel built on the Northwest Coast and the first to ply on the rivers of California.

In 1849, the year of the coming of the Argonauts to California, the *Nautical Magazine* of June of that year, published the following comments, written by a correspondent, Mr. A. J. Findley:

"At this moment they are building a new steamer, destined, I think, for Mr. Liedesdorf, of California. The workmanship appears good and solid; everything for her is made on the spot, for which purpose they have foundries, boiler makers, coopers, turners and all the other 'ers' requisite for such an undertaking. The boiler is almost complete and is made of copper. They have also their tool makers, workers in tin and brass, chart engravers, sawyers, and saw-mills, for all of which occupations suitable establishments have been made." (Quoted by Sheldon Jackson in Bureau of Education Report for 1894, p. 1476.)

The writer is somewhat erratic in some of his minor statements, but in the main facts he is substantially correct. The Russian American Company maintained by far the greatest shipbuilding plant in the Northwest for many years, the only one in fact, and in their Colonies in America they launched from their ways some 22 vessels during the time they held the vast territory now comprising Alaska.

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The tug *Muir* of 8 h. p., 37 feet long, 9 feet beam, a sidewheel boat, was built completely, with engines and boilers constructed at Sitka, in 1839. Governor Simpson says there were also two small steam propelled boats of two h. p. each built there. The *Muir* was named for the engineer and builder who had trained the creoles as workmen and had charge of the foundries and ships, as well as acting engineer on the steamer. In 1847 this boat was sold to one Liedesdorf of San Francisco, California, and was sent to her destination on board the Russian ship *Naslyednik* in October of that year. It ran on the river to Sacramento, was renamed as the *Sitka*, and was the first steam vessel to navigate the inland waters of California.²³

The steamer *Baranof* was built in 1847, to replace the *Muir*, and was of 12 h. p. She was rebuilt in 1860, to the dimensions of 67 feet in length, with width of 11 feet, and was named for the first chief manager of the Company. After the transfer to the United States of the Territory of Alaska, she was sold American and renamed the *Rose*. Under this name she was used for many years under the flag of the U. S.²⁴

The last shipbuilding under the Russian regime in their Colonies in America was the steamer *Politofsky*, in 1863, unless the *Baranof* was a new boat in 1867. She was built at Sitka, of Yellow cedar as all the steamers of the Company are said to have been built. She was of 255 tons burden, and she was sold to United States ownership after the transfer of the Territory. Her record is a story in itself and she is one of the outstanding historical vessels of the Northwest Coast.

Her boilers are said to have been made of copper, and it is told that they alone were worth more than was paid by Captain Kohl for the whole ship when purchased from the Russian Company. There is little doubt but that her machinery and boilers were the identical ones bought of the House of Bordman, in Boston, in 1835, and brought around the Horn for the Russian steamer *Nikolai I*, and which were salvaged at the time of her wreck in 1861.²⁵

At the beginning of the Klondike rush to the gold fields the *Politofsky* made its last voyage, and anchored in front of the North

²³ Report of General Manager Russ. Am. Co., 1847; *History of California*, vol. 5, p. 576, by Bancroft.

²⁴ See Report of Chief Manager Russ. Am. Co. for 1861; *Id.* for 1849, p. 50, also Leter, Gov. John G. Brady, of Alaska, in Andrews Collection. Rev. A. P. Kashevarof, Territorial Librarian, and historical authority on Alaska, states in a letter that some records state that the *Rose* was built in 1867, and that the Russians called it the *Baranof*. There is a question whether the *Rose* was a new boat or was the old *Baranof* rebuilt. Lewis & Dryden's *Marine History of the N. W.* discusses the *Rose*, saying she was built at Sitka this year (1867), but under the picture of the vessel is stated: "Steamer *Rose*, formerly the *Baranof*, first steamer built in Alaska." In a footnote it continues: "Built at Sitka in 1862." The records seem to conflict.

²⁵ *Historical Sketch, R. A. Co.* pt. 1, p. 330; Report Chief Mgr. R. A. Co., 1861, p. 30.

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