

ALASKA

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Alaska is the largest state in the United States, equal to one-fifth of the country's continental land mass. Situated in the extreme northwestern region of North America, it is separated from Russian Asia by the Bering Strait (51 miles or 82 kilometers long). Commonly nicknamed "The Last Frontier" or "Land of the Midnight Sun," the state's official name derives from an Aleut word meaning "great land" or "that which the sea breaks against." Alaska is replete with high-walled fjords and majestic mountains, with slow-moving glaciers and still-active volcanoes. The state is also home to Eskimos, Aleut and Athabaskan Indians, as well as about 14,000 Tlingit, Tshimshian and Haida people---comprising about 16 percent of the Alaskan population. (*Eskimo* is used for Alaskan natives, while *Inuit* is used for Eskimos living in Canada.) Inupiat and Yupik are the two main Eskimo groups. While the Inupiat speak Inupiaq and reside in the north and northwest parts of Alaska, the Yupik speak Yupik and live in the south and southwest. Juneau is the state's capital, but Anchorage is the largest city.

The Alaskan mainland and the Aleutian Islands were first discovered in 1741 by Alexei Chirikov (a Russian naval captain) and Vitus Bering (a Dane working for the Russians). Tsar Peter the Great (1672-1725) prompted the explorers, eager to gain the fur trade of Alaska and the markets of China. Hence, for half a century thereafter, intrepid frontiersmen and fur traders (*promyshlenniki*) ranged from the

Kurile Islands to southeastern Alaska, often exploiting native seafaring skills to mine the rich supply of sea otter and seal pelts for the lucrative China trade. In 1784, one of these brave adventurers, Grigorii Shelekhov (1747-1795), established the first colony in Alaska, encouraged by the Tsarina Catherine the Great (1729-1796).

Missionaries soon followed the traders, beginning in 1794, aiming to convert souls to Christianity. The beneficial role of the Russian missions in Alaska is only beginning to be fully appreciated. Undoubtedly, some Russian imperialists used the missionary enterprise as an instrument in their own endeavors. However, as recently discovered documents in the U.S. Library of Congress show, the selfless work of some Russian Orthodox priests, such as Metropolitan Innokenty Veniaminov (1797-1879), not only promoted harmonious relations between Russians and Alaskans, but preserved the culture and languages of the Native Alaskans.

Diplomatic relations between Russia and the United States, which began in 1808, were relatively cordial in the early 1800s. They were unhampered by the Monroe Doctrine, which warned that the American continent was no territory for future European colonization. Tsar Alexander I admired the American republic and agreed in April 1824 to restrict Russia's claims on the America continent to Alaska. American statesmen had attempted several times between 1834 and 1867 to purchase Alaska from Russia. On March 23, 1867, the expansionist-minded Secretary of State William H. Seward met with Russian minister to Washington Baron Edouard de Stoeckl and agreed on a price of \$7,200,000. This translated into about 2.5 cents per acre for 586,400 square miles of territory, twice the size of

Texas. Overextended geographically, the Russians were happy at the time to release the burden. However, the discovery of gold in 1896 and of the largest oil field in North America (near Prudhoe Bay) in 1968, may have caused second thoughts.

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