

A "DISCOVERY"

The wealth-driven Russian fur traders relied on Alaska Native labor, yet a difference in cultural beliefs led to conflicts with the local Tlingit.

A CLAIM AND THE PURSUIT OF WEALTH

RUSSIAN FUR TRADERS

After Captain Vitus Bering's 1741 "discovery" asserted Russia's claim on Alaska in the eyes of Europe, Russian merchants and fur traders explored Alaska's coast looking for valuable furbearers. In 1799, a government charter created the Russian-American Company (RAC). The RAC was granted a monopoly over fur trading in exchange for solidifying Russia's claim to Alaska.

THE NATIVE LIFELINE

The RAC coerced many Natives from western Alaska to the central gulf of Alaska, to hunt for them. With assistance from these Native hunters, the RAC successfully exploited the large populations of sea otters for their luxurious pelts until few were left. Through the service of these Aleuts, Alutiiq, and Chugach, they also acquired the resources necessary to survive Alaska's long winters when ships failed to arrive with necessary supplies from Russia. The success of the RAC was largely due to Alaska Native labor.



Aleut fisherman in rain gear
Courtesy of Alaska State Library
Gavril Andreevich Sarychev, 1763-1831
ASL-P82-284

CLASHING CULTURES

This area near Sitka was a strategic location for a Russian settlement—an outpost here would strengthen Russia's claims in Alaska and sea otters were abundant. However, the RAC and the Tlingit held contrasting beliefs about land and resource ownership. As RAC employees settled here, tensions escalated between these disparate cultures, setting the stage for conflict.

*"Russian wisdom started industries,
scattering free people over the seas,
to come to know new places,
and to seek out profits
for the Fatherland's benefit and monarchial honor.*

*Lured here by honor and glory
we're united here in brotherly friendship.
we shall create
and further take
American land that is useful to Russia."*

The Song of Baranov, 1799
(As quoted in Dauenhauer et al.
Apostol Unglaenik: The Gates of Sitka 1802 and 1804.
Sealaska Heritage Institute, 2008, pp. 131)

