~1867~
Alaska Treaty of Cession

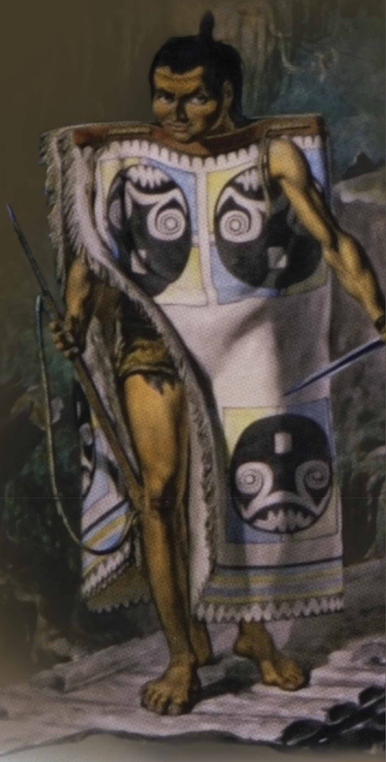
When the Treaty of Cession was signed in 1867, Alaska, with its valuable resources, strategic location, and diverse people, was more than an outline on a map.

Transforming Tide

The 1700s were a time of great changes for the indigenous people who lived in what is now known as Alaska. High prices for sea otter pelts in China caused Russians, British, French, Spanish, and Americans to flock to the North Pacific, hunting and trading with Native people for this "soft gold." Soon, Russia claimed Alaska, establishing outposts to bolster their claim and limit competition. In 1824 and 1825, two international treaties gave credence to Russia's claim. But all neglected the claims of the Native people.

Give and Take

The Native people eagerly traded with the newcomers, but resisted the establishment of Russian settlements. However, through this contact they acquired devastating diseases and were introduced to alcohol. Nevertheless, the Russians had guns and established a number of trading posts. By the 1820s, the Russians' relentless pursuit of pelts nearly decimated sea otters, reducing revenue.



Watercolor, 1818: Tlingit Leader in Battle Dress from Baranow Island by Ивáн Váxanof
Courtesy of Scientific Research Museum of the Russian Academy of Art
Scan from Anchorage Museum at Rasmuson Center

Succeed or Cede

The Russians tried to find alternatives to the fur trade. Despite the abundant fisheries, timber, minerals, whale oil, and ice, they realized that their North American colony cost far more than they produced in revenue. By the late 1850s, Russian diplomat Eduard de Stoeckl approached U.S. government officials in Washington D.C. about ceding the land. The American Civil War stole the spotlight and caused discussions to temporarily cease. de Stoeckl resumed negotiations after the war with U.S. Secretary of State William H. Seward.

Background: New Archangel (Sitka) on Baranof Island in the 1840s
Oil on Canvas by Maguire von Wright
Courtesy of Sitka Pictures Collection, Office of History and Archaeology

Flag: 1806 design of the Russian American Company has been submitted for approval
Courtesy of CC BY-SA 3.0

Timeline:

March 30, 1867	April 9, 1867	June 20, 1867	October 18, 1867	July 27, 1868	July 27, 1868	August 1, 1868	August 15, 1868
Seward and de Stoeckl negotiate Treaty of Cession	U.S. Senate ratifies treaty	Russia and U.S. exchange ratifications	Ceremonial transfer of territory at Sitka	Congress appropriates $7.2 million to complete purchase	Congress passes Customs Act for Alaska	U.S. Treasury issues check	Russia cashes check

150th Anniversary
Alaska Treaty of Cession
1867~2017