

# Seward's So-called Folly

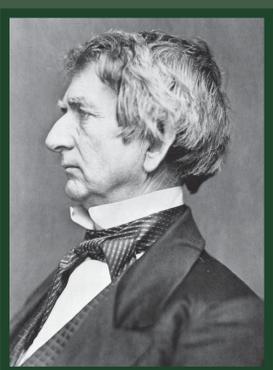
NORTH WESTERN A

With all that was known about Alaska, why was the misnomer "Seward's Folly" so persistent?

William H. Seward  
1801-1872

A former governor and two-term senator from New York, William H. Seward was among the most prominent American politicians of the Civil War era. In his capacity as Secretary of State in the 1860s, he was a singular advocate for the purchase of Alaska, which he favored as part of a general policy of American expansionism.

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## Terms of Agreement

Czar Alexander II and President Andrew Johnson authorized Russian diplomat, Eduard de Stoeckl and U.S. Secretary of State William H. Seward to negotiate the terms of cession. De Stoeckl received approval to sell Alaska on March 30, 1867. He went to Seward's home and they finalized the seven-article treaty that very evening. The treaty addressed boundaries and property and detailed the transfer process. It also said the "...inhabitants of the ceded territory...with the exception of uncivilized native tribes...shall be admitted to the enjoyment of all rights, advantages and immunities of citizens of the United States." When some Natives heard about the treaty, they said Alaska was not Russia's to sell.

Baron de Stoeckl  
1814-1869

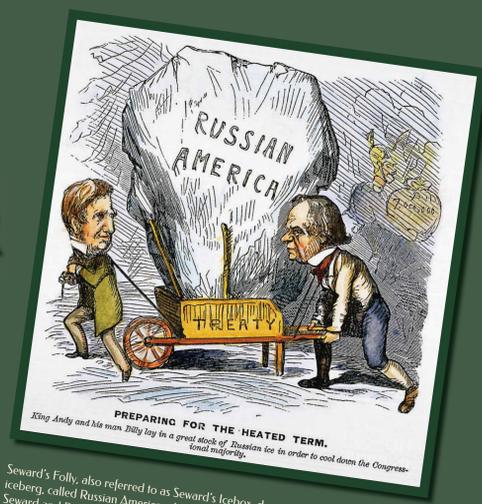
An urbane and witty diplomat, Edouard de Stoeckl, served as the Russian ambassador to the United States for fifteen years. His close relations with several American politicians, particularly William H. Seward, assured him a key role in advising both Aleksandr Gorchakov and Tsar Aleksandr II on the sale of Alaska.

Courtesy of Library of Congress, LC Prints & Photographs Division.



## Walrus-sia—Seward's Icebox

Despite newspaper cartoons poking fun at Seward for purchasing a land of ice and snow, the 1867 Alaska Treaty of Cession was widely supported. The Senate ratified the treaty by a vote of 37-2 just 10 days after de Stoeckl and Seward met. It was the cost of \$7.2 million to which some objected. As the *Boston Herald* reported on April 11, 1867 "As to the price, there can be but one opinion—it is *big cheap*."



Seward's Folly, also referred to as Seward's Icebox, depicted here, features a giant iceberg, called Russian American, being pushed and pulled along by William Seward and President Johnson. It is supported and moved by the wheelbarrow entitled "Treaty." The body of \$7,000,000 is fading away with the Russian Tsar. Illustration in Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper, Vol. 24, No. 602 (1867 Apr 20), p. 80.

## Winter Wonderland

Far from the frozen wasteland that many purported it to be, Alaska was teeming with resources ripe for the picking. However, average Americans were not yet privy to this information. To prompt Congress to appropriate funds to pay Russia, Seward launched an educational campaign garnering favorable editorials in newspapers around the country. Finally, in July 1868, Congress appropriated the money, but the U.S. had already taken possession of Alaska.



Although the ceremonial transfer took place on October 18, 1867, the check was issued 10 months after the event. Courtesy of Alaska State Library, ASL 960-2004

### 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

## 150<sup>th</sup> Anniversary

# Alaska Treaty of Cession 1867~2017