

**Archaeological Data Recovery at Baranof Castle State  
Historic Site, Sitka, Alaska: Final Report of Investigations  
(ADOT&PF Project No. 71817/TEA-000-3[43])**

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A strategy to conserve the Castle Hill artifacts was developed through the collaboration of OHA with the Alaska State Museum (Brook Bowman, conservator) and Texas A&M University's Archaeological Preservation Research Laboratory (Dr. C. Wayne Smith, Director). John Middleton, a scholar of Russian-American material culture and nautical artifacts in general, spent several days examining the collection in our laboratory and was kind enough to write the forward to this volume. John's expertise, particularly with regard to clothing, resulted in the identification of several unique artifacts. We would also like to acknowledge the assistance of Dr. Glen Farris, California Department of Parks archaeologist, who provided us with data from the Fort Ross excavations. Katerina (Katya) Solovjova Wessels (National Park Service, Anchorage) translated text on some of the lead seals. Professor Kazuyoshi Ohtsuka and his associates from the Japanese National Museum of Ethnology visited our Anchorage laboratory on three occasions, assisting with the identification of Japanese coins and other Asian trade materials from Castle Hill. Alaska State Historian, Joan Antonson, assisted in the field during 1997-1998. Jo also kindly edited the final report, and provided useful comments on the final report, as well as many articles and documents produced in conjunction with the project. Archaeological Illustrator Sherry Bowden produced excellent drawings of some of the artifacts at no cost to the project. To the innumerable individuals from all of the above organizations who contributed their time

and efforts, to those inadvertently left out, and to the many thousands of visitors who expressed an interest in the site, we give our wholehearted thanks. Finally, I would like to acknowledge my wife, Patricia Browne and son, Christopher Cheney, who endured my obsession with the project over the last several years.

A list of field participants follows:

**1995**

Full-time Staff: Dave McMahan, Alan DePew

Volunteers: John Hallum, Robin Klanott, Michael Strunk, Liz Thomas, Sue Thorsen, Pat Bower, Kathy Brown

**1997**

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**1998**

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Volunteers: Dr. Lydia Black, Jan Criswell, Steve Henrikson, Steven King, Daniel Poulson, Pat Roppel, Steve Vastola

***Lab Analysts and Research Associates: 1998-2001***

Dave McMahan, Margan Grover, Renee Petruzelli, Daniel Thompson, Michael Strunk, Marc Haughaboo

## ABSTRACT

During the summers of 1995, 1997, and 1998, the Alaska Office of History and Archaeology conducted archaeological field investigations at Baranof Castle State Historic Site, commonly called Castle Hill. The work, funded by the Alaska Department of Transportation and Public Facilities (ADOT&PF) and the Federal Highway Administration (FHWA), was conducted in conjunction with proposed renovation of the state historical park. The archaeological investigations were progressively phased so that larger areas were opened with each successive field season. A total of 172 square meters were excavated to an average depth of about 50 centimeters, producing a collection of 19<sup>th</sup> century Russian-American artifacts that is unprecedented in size and diversity.

Archaeological work in 1995 consisted of subsurface testing of the proposed construction area to locate and evaluate buried deposits. During the 1997 field season, 52 one-meter squares were excavated adjacent to the proposed trail footprint on a natural terrace at the base of the hill. The discoveries in this area included structural posts and timbers, and a rich historic midden deposit. In 1998, an additional 103 one-meter squares were excavated along the existing and proposed park trails. This resulted in the discovery of at least four Russian period building ruins with associated artifacts. Also discovered during trail construction was a prehistoric shell midden deposit on the northeast slopes of the hill. A C-14 date for the base of the deposit of approximately 1,000 years ago lends credence to oral tradition of a long occupation at the site by Sitka Tlingit prior to the establishment of the Russian settlement.

The approximately 300,000 artifacts from the site have undergone varying levels of analysis by a staff of four archaeologists (McMahan, Grover, Petruzelli, and Thompson) in a series of temporary laboratories in Anchorage. Due to the size of the collection and limitations of funding, it was not possible to intensively analyze the entire collection. Therefore, artifacts from ten (of 172) units were intensively analyzed while the remainder of the collection underwent varying levels of documentation depending on functional and materials groupings. This report is intended to provide basic documentation required by the National Historic Preservation Act (NHPA) Section 106 consultation process and is not intended to address all research opportunities that the data may support.

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**FOREWARD**

by John Middleton<sup>1</sup>

One of the most exciting aspects for those who love history is the opportunity to see one's perceptions change as new evidence is revealed to dispel conclusions that have become a mainstay of accepted beliefs. The *Castle Hill Archeological Project* offers us exactly that opportunity; to reconsider our perceptions of daily life in Russian America, and perhaps confront prejudices we have held about the tenuous nature of Russia's hold over her American Colonies.

What preliminary inspection of the multitude of artifacts recovered indicates is that the material culture of New Archangel was much richer than previously imagined. By richer I do not mean wealthier, rather more abundant and diverse. The identification of parts of children's toys, pieces of model ships, such luxury items as numerous parts of samovars and an unimagined wealth of *Russian* ceramic and pottery pieces from some of Russia's finest factories indicates a material culture far more established than had been assumed. The great revelation to me at least, was the very Russian nature of the majority of the finds. So many of the studies on Russian-America emphasize the poor supply routes from Russia and the dependence of the colonies on foreign (particularly from England and the U.S.) goods to make up the meager materials the colonies relied on.

Other archeological sites in Russian America have produced European artifacts in abundance, however the assumptions have always been that the majority of these items were imported on western European and American ships, and reflected goods produced by those countries or by countries trading with them. Now, with the artifacts from Castle Hill, there are pieces identified as clearly being of Russian origin. While this does not diminish the trade the Russian colonies carried on with both Native and European traders, it does add a richer dimension to the culture and society of New Archangel, and by association, to the other colonial centers in both Alaska and California.

Of major importance is the ability of archeologists and students of material culture to compare and contrast the artifacts from Castle Hill with finds from the other sites in Russian America. With so many pieces in such good states of preservation, it affords a reference base for the further identification of fragments in other collections.

The most fascinating aspect, as always, is the window to the past these artifacts offer to the lives the colonists led in a society that after a century and a half we are only beginning to appreciate and understand.

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<sup>1</sup> Editor's note: John Middleton, O.F., is a foreign member of the Russian Academy of Science. He is an authority on historic Russian material culture, particularly naval and maritime aspects. His publications include a volume on the clothing of colonial Russian America.

## EDITOR'S PREFACE

The Castle Hill Archaeological Project has been one of those odysseys every archaeologist aspires for. With universal support from the community of Sitka, and under the watchful eye of the media, we produced an enormous data set that has already inspired new insights in the interpretation of life in Russian-America. This was accomplished not in the bug-infested camps to which Alaskan archaeologists are accustomed, but in the comfort and scenery of one of the most picturesque settings in the state. The richness of the site and a chance to share our findings with others have outweighed frustrations in acquiring the facilities, time, and money to complete the project (refer Appendix 4.3). Our discoveries were the focus of media attention that included coverage by the Associated Press, National Public Radio, Alaska Statewide Television Network, commercial travel videos, and articles in several magazines. Another measure of success, however, is the project's endorsement in U.S. Department of Transportation guides and videos as an exemplary transportation enhancement project. This is largely due to our cooperative relationship with the contractor, John McGraw, and the positive exposure generated for the Alaska Department of Transportation (NTEC 1999:24-25). The exciting, albeit unanticipated, discovery of architectural ruins and organic-rich midden deposits elevated recovery costs beyond original estimates. Through partnering, volunteer labor, analytic sampling, and in-house conservation, however, we were able to complete the project for less than half the cost of similar projects. The resulting collection presents a tremendous research opportunity for graduate students. Three of the authors (Grover, Petruzelli, Thompson) hope to use components of the collection in their studies at the University of Alaska Anchorage.

On a personal note, the project provided a "real world" educational challenge in addressing a multi-faceted set of problems. Despite my involvement with numerous archaeological projects over the last three decades, none has been as complex or challenging as Castle Hill. Under the tutelage of generous experts in a variety of disciplines, my staff and I were given the opportunity to explore the complex material culture, mental templates, and world views of early 19<sup>th</sup> century Sitka. To this end, all of us have sharpened our skills in analytic techniques and the interpretation of various facets of Russian-American material culture. There are many key areas of analysis in which time did not allow me to be as directly involved as I would have liked. I am forever grateful to my competent crew and co-authors for their hard work in these areas.

Dave McMahan

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