

The Alaska Purchase
Roger Pearson
Alaska Geographic Alliance
Institute of the North
935 W. Third Avenue
Anchorage, AK 99501
USA



(<http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.ndlpcoop/mfxtx.u00721>)

Overview:

The 1867 Treaty of Cession marked a significant departure of a European power from the North American continent. The purchase of Alaska was done under amicable circumstances rather than through conflict and war. Both Russia and the United States felt they gained from the Treaty. Using geography and history concepts, students examine the respective Russian and American rationales for agreeing to the sale. Role playing and formal presentations are used to demonstrate content knowledge and skill levels.

Grade Level:
High School

Goals for the Unit:

- Students will examine the political geography of the sale of Russian America
- Students will examine the Russian and American perspectives on the sale
- Students will use geography and history research methods to examine the nature of the sale of Alaska
- Students will demonstrate oral and written communications skills.
- Students will examine the continuing debate on the Russian-US boundary

Geography National Standards:

- Geography 1. Students will use maps and other geographic representations, tools, and technologies to acquire, process, and report information from a spatial perspective.
- Geography 17. Students will apply geography to interpret the past.

Historical Thinking Standards:

- Chronological Thinking
- Historical Comprehension
- Historical Analysis and Interpretation
- Historical Research Capabilities
- Historical Issues-Analysis and Decision-making

Geographic Skills:

- Asking geographic Questions
- Acquiring geographic information
- Organizing geographic information
- Analyzing geographic information
- Answering geographic questions

Technology Standards:

- A technology literate student should be able to:
use technology to explore ideas, solve problems, and derive meaning.

Writing and Speaking Standards:

- A student fluent in English is able to:
write and speak well to inform and to clarify thinking in a variety of formats, including technical communication;

Essential Questions:

Why did Russia want to sell Russian America to the United States?

Why did the United States want to purchase Alaska?
What did the treaty entail?
How did the US Senate and House respond to the Treaty proposal?
What did it mean for Alaska's Native population?

Vocabulary:

Boundaries
Cession
Continentality
Geopolitics
Great Circle Route
Intervening Opportunity
Manifest Destiny
Treaty

Time Required:

Approximately two weeks of regular class periods will be required for the research and presentations.

Materials Required:

- World Atlas
- Historical Atlas
- Globe
- Access to the Internet and Meeting of Frontiers web site
- Poster paper and/or Computer presentation

Developing and Presenting the Unit:

Introduction:

- Start with a discussion of the thought processes that go into the purchase and sale of a product. Note the complexity of factors involved in weighing a decision. A simple list does not distinguish between primary and secondary factors
- Review the US history of purchasing large areas of land, for example, Louisiana Purchase, Florida, Texas, Gadsden Purchase
- Explain the purpose and goals of the unit

Presenting the Unit:

The following project will investigate the pros and cons that the Russian and American governments considered on the issue of the sale of Alaska.

The approach in this project is to divide the class into teams which will investigate different perspectives. The teams may present their particular perspective in the form of a debate or as a straightforward presentation. There should be two Russian perspectives,

one supporting and one opposing the sale. Similarly, there should be two American perspectives, one supporting and one opposing the sale.

A fifth group might also be considered. Its purpose is to add additional depth to the issue of the sale. Its role will be elaborated below.

Russian Anti-Sale Considerations

- ✓ For some Russians the idea of giving up territory was hard to grasp, especially since during the 18th and 19th century colonization was so important to European countries. One person who held such views of holding onto territory was Prince Aleksandr Mikhailovich Gorchakov.

For a biography on Gorchakov, see:

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Alexander_Gorchakov

Nevertheless, Gorchakov was cautious and wanted to know the value of the Russian American Company. See:

<http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.mss/mtfms.i1019>



- ✓ Develop a map of the North Pacific Ocean region and show how Alaska could be seen as geostrategically important to Russia. (Hint: Continued role in North America, strategic importance of New Archangel and Unalaska along the Great Circle route from the US to Asia.)
- ✓ Baron Ferdinand Wrangel had served as a governor of Alaska and was quite familiar with the area's resources and potentials for Russia. Consider his arguments:
[http://international.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/r?intldl/mtftext:@field\(DOCID+@lit\(mtfmsi1017_1\)\)](http://international.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/r?intldl/mtftext:@field(DOCID+@lit(mtfmsi1017_1)))

For a biography of Wrangel, see:

<http://www.famousamericans.net/ferdinandpetrovitchwrangell/>

Russian Pro-Sale Considerations

- ✓ Nikolai Muraviev became Governor-General of Eastern Siberia in 1847. His view was that the Amur region was of considerable significance to Russia. This perspective provides a foundation for supporting the Amur region and not Russian America if defensive resources were limited—which they were. Muraviev noted the Amur region was important for four reasons: First, he believed that “... whoever controls the mouth of the Amur [River] will also control Siberia, at least as far as Baikal, and that control will be firm.” Second, the area of the mouth

of the Amur River was critical to “strengthening and securing possession of the Kamchatka Peninsula.” Third, the Amur River region was important to expanding trade with China. Fourth, the area would allow Russia to maintain a strong influence with China and reduce the influence of the English. (The Russian American Colonies, pp. 482-484.)

Also, note these important elements in the Russian development of the Amur region:

| | |
|---|------|
| Aigun Treaty (established modern Russia Far East boundaries | 1858 |
| Founding of Nikolaevsk-na-Amur | 1850 |
| Founding of Khabarovsk | 1858 |
| Founding of Vladivostok | 1860 |

During the Crimean War Petropavlov’sk came under attack from a British-French naval force (1854-56) as did New Archangel (1856). How might those incidents affect Russian perspectives on the future defense of Russian America?

- ✓ The Crimean War occurred in the European portion of Russia where most of the Russian population was located. How might these factors have influenced thinking regarding the sale of Alaska?
- ✓ The geographical concepts of “Intervening Opportunity” and “continentality” are expressed, although not explicitly stated, in the arguments of Muraviev. Use maps to illustrate how these concepts are part of their arguments.
- ✓ (Hints: [a] Show the approximate distance between St. Petersburg and New Archangel and note the difficulty in travel. [b] Use an atlas to show the comparison of environmental features comparing the Amur region with Alaska. Note the milder environment, river transportation into Russia, and the proximity of Asian countries.) Also, consider this: Did Russia see itself as primarily a continental or a maritime power or both? How did Russian-America fit into each of the concepts?

- ✓ The key individual in making the decision whether or not to sell Alaska the United States was Alexander II, Emperor of Russia. What were his perspectives?

(http://international.loc.gov/intldl/mtfhtml/mfak/-mfaksale_gkey.html)



- ✓ Grand Duke Konstantine Nicolaevich was a reformer and strong advocate of the sale. See:

[http://international.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/r?intldl/mtftext:@field-\(DOCID+@lit\(mtfmsi1016_1\)\)](http://international.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/r?intldl/mtftext:@field-(DOCID+@lit(mtfmsi1016_1)))



and

[http://international.loc.gov/
cgi-bin/query/r?intldl/mtftext:@field\(DOCID+
@lit\(mtfmsi1018_1\)\)](http://international.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/r?intldl/mtftext:@field(DOCID+@lit(mtfmsi1018_1)))

American Anti-Purchase Considerations

- ✓ While the Senate is responsible for approving international treaties, the House is responsible for initiating legislation for funding. Thus, it was necessary for the House to approve the payment of the \$7,200,000 for Alaska. Rep. C. Delano spoke against the Treaty of Cession:

A Century of Lawmaking for a New Nation: U.S. Congressional Documents and Debates, 1774 – 1875
(<http://memory.loc.gov/llcg/083/0900/09320452.tif>)

- ✓ Cartoons and special names can have a powerful influence on public opinion. One of the most influential cartoonists in the U.S. was Thomas Nast. His cartoon and its title are still well-known today as opposing the US purchase of Alaska: “Seward’s Folly”. Use his cartoons and other phrases to illustrate how the purchase of Alaska was opposed.

See: Thomas Nast, “The Big Thing”:

[http://www.harperweek.com/09Cartoon/BrowseByDateCartoon.asp?Month=April&
Date=20](http://www.harperweek.com/09Cartoon/BrowseByDateCartoon.asp?Month=April&Date=20)

Other derisive names: Icebergia, Polaria, Seward’s Icebox, Walrussia, and Johnson’s Polar Bear Garden.

Teacher resource on cartoon:

www.archives.gov/education/lessons/worksheets/cartoon.html

- ✓ Develop a map of Alaska’s place in the world that argues against its acquisition by the U.S. (Hints: [a] Note the great distance of Alaska from Washington, D.C., [b] Note its physical and political isolation from the continental U.S., [c] Note the lack of transportation across the U.S. West in 1867.)

American Pro-Purchase Considerations

- ✓ The strongest advocate for the US purchase of Alaska was Secretary of State William Seward.

<http://international.loc.gov/intldl/mtfhtml/mfak/>




mfaksale_gkey.html

His speech in the Senate was quite long and detailed. It includes an explanation as to why the area should be called “Alaska” and an assessment of the area’s resource potential.

<http://www.hti.umich.edu/cgi/t/text/text-idx?c=moa;idno=AAZ9604>

- ✓ The following political leaders also favored the purchase of Alaska: Charles Sumner (Massachusetts), Nathaniel Banks (Massachusetts), Thaddeus Stevens (Pennsylvania), and of course, President Andrew Johnson.
See: http://international.loc.gov/intldl/mtfhtml/mfak/mfaksale_gkey.html
- ✓ Develop a map of Alaska in the world illustrating its great value to the U.S. (Hints: [a] Consider Alaska as completing another element of U.S. “Manifest Destiny,” [b] Alaska’s position in the North Pacific and its location along the Great Circle routes to Asia.

The Situation Surrounding the Sale/Purchase of Alaska

- ✓ The Treasury Warrant for \$7.2 million. How was this figure determined? What was the cost per acre? Per square kilometer? Why did it take so long for the U.S. to pay Russia for Alaska?
<http://international.loc.gov/intldl/mtfhtml/mfak/mfaksale.html>
- 
- ✓ What differences are there between the U.S. and the Russian copies of the Treaty of Cession?
<http://international.loc.gov/intldl/mtfhtml/mfak/mfaksale.html>
 - ✓ Read the Treaty of Cession from the perspective of an Alaska Native. What is said about their status under the Treaty? From an Alaska Native perspective, is there any validity to a “sale” of Alaska between Russia and the United States?
 - ✓ Analyze a map of Russian America in 1867. How much of Alaska has been settled (use place names on the map and the number of features displayed) by the Russians? See:
Lewis, J.F. Map of Russian America or Alaska Territory. 1867.

[http://international.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/r?intldl/mtfront:@OR\(@field\(NUMBER+@band\(g4370+mf000029\)\)\)](http://international.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/r?intldl/mtfront:@OR(@field(NUMBER+@band(g4370+mf000029))))

OR

Northwestern America Showing The Territory Ceded By Russia To The United States Compiled For The Department of State at the U.S. Coast Survey Office. B. Peirce, Supt. Second Edition, May 1867. Drawn by A. Lindenkohl. Chas. G. Krebs, Lith. (<http://www.davidrumsey.com/maps12.html>)

- ✓ Examine Emanuel Leutze's painting of the signing of the Treaty of Cession. Speculate on what he is trying to show in the picture. Why is the picture not historically accurate? See: Emanuel Leutze, Painting of the signing of the Treaty of Cession: (<http://www.library.state.ak.us/hist/cent/020-0181.jpg>)
- ✓ Give a "Television newscast" presentation on newspaper editorials at the time of the purchase: (<http://www.pbs.org/harriman/1899/newspaper.html>)

Assessment:

For classes in which a **debate** is arranged, the debate assessment for each student (and the group):

The debate rubric should consider the following:

Thoroughness of knowledge
Number and quality of citations and resources used
Teamwork between members
Quality of presentation including degree of enthusiasm and confidence

For individual or group **presentations**:

Research and Presentation Scoring Guide

Research

- Thoroughly researched
- Satisfactory work completed
- Sketchy and incomplete
- Little to no research

Participation in Group Project

- Leading role and much enthusiasm

- Moderate involvement and enthusiasm
- Little involvement and enthusiasm
- Little attention to work and group involvement

Presentation: Substantive Material

- Provided audience with an excellent summary of the educational system and its context in time
- Provided audience with a relatively complete summary of the educational system and its context in time
- Provided audience with a limited summary and context
- Provided audience with sketchy summary of the educational system and virtually no context in time

Presentation: Performance

- Considerable enthusiasm and clarity in presentation
- Enthusiasm and clear presentation
- Minor enthusiasm and somewhat unclear presentation
- No enthusiasm and little clarity in presentation

Comments and Score:

References:

Bolkhovitinov, N.N. 1990. "The Sale of Alaska in the Context of Russian American Relations in the Nineteenth Century." Pacifica, 2(2): 157-171.

Dmytryshyn, B., E.A.P. Crownhart-Vaughan, and Thomas Vaughan (Eds.). 1989. The Russian American Colonies: A Documentary Record, 1798-1867. Oregon Historical Society Press.

Gilbert, Martin. 1972. Atlas of Russian History. Dorset Press.

Haycox, Stephen. 2002. Alaska An American Colony. Seattle: University of Washington.

Jensen, Ronald. 1975. The Alaska Purchase and Russian-American Relations. Seattle: University of Washington Press.

Miller, David Hunter. 1981. The Alaska Treaty. Kingston, Ontario: The Limestone Press.

Shiels, Archie. 1967. The Purchase of Alaska. College, AK: The University of Alaska Press.