

Meeting of Frontiers

Exploration of Alaska During the Russian Period

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Overview:

This unit is designed to give students an understanding of the era of Russian exploration of Alaska as revealed through maps. Emphasis is placed on the dramatically changing understanding of the size and shape of Alaska as expressed in cartography from the late 1600's to the late 1700's.

Grade Level:

High School

Standards:

Geography Standards. The geographically informed student knows and understands:

- ❖ How to use maps and other geographic representations, tools, and technologies to acquire, process, and report information from a spatial perspective.
- ❖ How to use geography to interpret the past, interpret the present, and plan for the future.

Geography Skills.

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

Historical Thinking Standards. The history student:

- ❖ Thinks chronologically.
- ❖ Comprehends a variety of historical sources.
- ❖ Engages in historical analysis and interpretation.
- ❖ Conducts historical research.

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:

- ❖ How did European perceptions of “Alaska” change from the late 1600’s to the late 1700’s as expressed in maps of the time period?
- ❖ What problems did cartographers face in constructing their maps?
- ❖ How have place names in Southeast Alaska reflected the exploration activities in Alaska during the Russian American period?

Vocabulary:

Cartographer
Latitude and Longitude
Azimuthal Projection
Place Names
Toponymy

Historical Map Activity

Questions:

- ❖ How did European perceptions of “Alaska” change from the late 1600’s to the late 1700’s as expressed in maps of the time period?
- ❖ What problems did cartographers face in constructing their maps?

Activity:

The purpose of this exercise is to give students an understanding of the dramatic changes in North Pacific geography as perceived by the Europeans (including Russians) during the 18th century. The exercise illustrates how cartographers early in the century speculated on what the region looked like. In some cases, better information was available to some cartographers but not others. Unlike today’s world, up-to-date geographic information was scarce. In some cases, governments were loathed to reveal the geographic results of their latest expeditions.

The exercise also illustrates the value of the Meeting of Frontiers web site in allowing the user to draw from a number of rare maps found today in libraries located Fairbanks, Washington D.C., St. Petersburg, and Moscow.

Introduction. The unit may be introduced by looking at the concept of discovery. Something new is revealed which is revealing and puzzling. It causes us to see the world differently. Class discussion might focus on what students remembered from going to a new place and their reaction to it. This can lead to how the world changed for Europeans and Natives of the 18th century in Alaska.

The Meeting of Frontiers web site sections on “Exploration” (especially the sub-unit “Exploration and Science”) and “Alaska: Russian Exploration” have discussions of the overall exploration period as well as detailed accounts of explorers.

Main Lesson: A table is provided for the exercise to provide students with a framework for seeing how the North Pacific world “changed” geographically for the Europeans. Part of the exercise asks students to find basic information such as the map title, date, and where it the map is physically located. In addition, for all but two of the maps, students are asked to provide a sketch of how the particular map displays Alaska. An outline map of Alaska is provided as a base. The idea of the sketch portion of the exercise is to give students an idea of how dramatically the perceived shape of Alaska changed over time.

A final part of the table focuses on “Comments” on the map. For some teachers, this section can be used for students’ comments comparing the actual versus the cartographic representation of Alaska. However, this section can be expanded to have students probe more deeply into the historical geography of the period. In that case, the table structure will have to be reformatted to allow sufficient space for discussion.

Below are background comments and suggestions for the teacher on possible topics that could be addressed regarding the individual maps. The maps are divided into three groups. The first group uses two maps developed before extensive knowledge of the North Pacific region was developed. The second group of maps includes early cartographic representations of Alaska based on Russian exploration. The final group of maps shows Alaska after Captain Cook’s 1778 voyage to Alaska.

Map Comments/Questions

NOTE: The map “url” is given for the bibliographic page of each map. Information on the author of the map, the date of the map, the location of the map, and general information regarding the map are found on this page.

Before 1732

The first set of maps deals with the period up to the voyages of Gvozdev in 1732.

1. Philip Lea. 1685. **North America divided into its III principall [sic] parts.**

<http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.gmd/g3300.mf000041>



Philip Lea's map shows the area of Middle and North America as Europeans knew it. The northern and western areas of North America are largely unknown territory on the map.

Have students use an historical atlas (or US history book) to identify on a copy of Lea's map the general areas dominated by the British, French, and Spanish. (See Bibliography.)

2. Herman Moll. 1719. **A new & correct map of the whole World.**

<http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.gmd/g3200.mf000001>



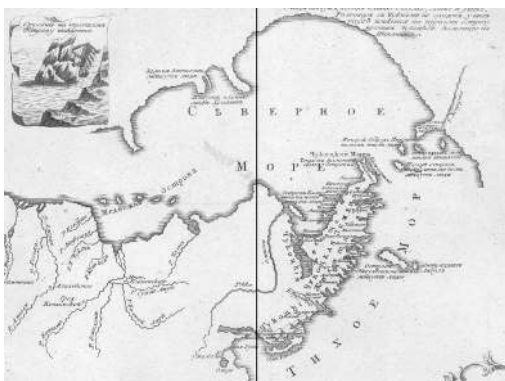
Moll's map depicts what western Europeans knew about the world in the early 1700's. In the lower left hand corner of the map is an inset map showing an arctic (azimuthal projection) map. What is the believed eastern extent of land in Siberia in degrees of longitude? Similarly, how far west, in degrees longitude, does North America extend? Compare those numbers with the actual degrees of longitude of Chukotka (northeast Asia) and Alaska.

How does Moll describe on the map the area of northwestern North America?

3. Author unknown. 1780. **Karta Chukotskago Nosa soobshchennaia ot polkovnika Plenstnera.**

<http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.ndlpcoop/mtfxmp.nmap012>

See also: <http://memory.loc.gov/intldl/mtfhtml/mfdiscvry/igdscientific2.html>



This map is a depiction of the area of Chukotka and shows the area where the Cossack Semen Dezhnev explored in 1648. The actual map was made in 1780. Dezhnev was not aware of being so close to North America. Further, his records were largely unknown for over a century.

How might Moll's map have been different if he had been aware of Dezhnev's expedition?

Compare the amount of detail on the map for Chukotka and for Alaska.

1732 to 1778

Once the results of Bering's voyage and later Russian voyages were revealed Alaska began appearing on maps. Obviously, given the limited area of their explorations, the information was incomplete.

When Captain James Cook traveled to the North Pacific region in 1778, he took two regional maps with him. One map was made by Jakob von Staehlin published in 1774. The other map was by Gerhard Muller which was published by Thomas Jeffreys, a British geographer. The version shown here was published in French by Robert de Vaugondy in 1768.

1. Jakob von Staehlin. 1774. **A map of the New Northern Archipelago discov'd by the Russians in the Seas of Kamtschatka & Anadir.**

<http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.ndlpcoop/mtfxmp.f77405>



This map characterizes Alaska as being not a large unit connected to North America, but instead, a series of islands. Von Staehlin's map was based on the reports of the Russian explorer Ivan Sindt. The route of his voyage is shown on the map.

Thus, the Staehlin map led Cook to believe that it was possible to make his way northward to what would be a Northwest Passage between Europe and Asia. When he

arrived in what is now called Cook Inlet, he was initially of the belief that it might be the passage to the north.

2. Robert de Vaugondy. 1768. **Carte générale des découvertes de l'Amiral de Fonte représentant la grande probabilité d'un passage au nord ouest par Thomas Jefferys.** (General map of the discoveries of Admiral de Fonte showing the high possibility of a passage to the north west by Thomas Jefferys)
<http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.ndlpcoop/mtfxmp.f77206>



In contrast to von Staehlin's map, Muller's map suggests that there is a large land mass of which only a part is known. The Aleutian Islands and the coastal areas were generally identified since that is the area observed by Bering and Chirikov. However, the land area to the north was a vague guess. The shape that somewhat resembles Alaska has within it notes stating that these were areas "indicated" by the Kamchatans and the Japanese. Note that the routes of the voyages of Bering and Chirikov are displayed on the map.

If Cook had relied more on Muller's map, he would have expected to find the opening to the north much farther to the west (than according to von Staehlin) through the Bering Strait ("Detroit de Bering").

While it is easy for us to now criticize these maps, it must be remembered that the cartographers had little information to go on other than that from the Bering-Chirikov expedition and later Ivan Sindt. Students should note where their ships sailed and why maps based on their findings might look the way they do.

Maps following Captain Cook's Alaska Voyage

1. **Carte der Entdeckungen zwischen Sibirien und America bis auf das Jahr 1780.** 1781. [Map of the discoveries between Siberia and America to the year 1780.]

<http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.ndlpcoop/mtfxmp.f78103>



Published soon after the results of Captain Cook's voyage were known, this map gives special tribute to the British captain. Note that Bering Strait is referred to as "Cook's Stasse". Also, the map clearly indicates that it was based on Captain Cook's exploration results ("nach Capit. Cook's Bestimmung"). The area northeast of the Seward Peninsula is approximated.

This map indicates the latitude and longitude of the Bering Strait (65 _ degrees North and 209 1/2 degrees West). How accurate is it? [Note: there was no internationally established base for longitude at that time. See: Dava Sobel. 1996. Longitude.]

2. Ivan Shelikov. 1792. **Karta Shelekova.** (Shelekov Map.)

<http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.ndlpcoop/mtfxmp.f79111>





This map is attributed to Ivan Shelikov whose company then controlled Russian America. In contrast to the previous maps, the coastal areas of Southcentral and Southwestern Alaska are fairly accurate. The region around the Seward Peninsula is obviously inaccurate. The route of Shelikov's voyage is identified on the map. (See especially the area around Kodiak Island where he established his base.) Note also the highlighting of the mountain ranges of the Alaska Peninsula.

Discovering Alaska



Maps Before 1732

MAP TITLE/ CARTOGRAPHER	MAP DATE	WEB URL and MAP LIBRARY LOCATION	COMMENTS ON MAP
		http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.gmd/g3300.mf000041	
		http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.gmd/g3200.mf000001	
	1648/1780	http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.ndlpcoop/mtfxmp.nmap012	

Maps from 1730 to 1778

MAP TITLE/ Cartographer	MAP DATE	WEB URL and MAP LIBRARY LOCATION	COMMENTS ON MAP	MAP SKETCH (Sketch map over actual Alaska outline)
		http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.ndlpcollection/mtfxmp.f77405		
		http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.ndlpcollection/mtfxmp.f77206		

Maps After Captain Cook's Alaska Voyage

MAP TITLE/ Cartographer	MAP DATE	WEB URL and MAP LIBRARY LOCATION	COMMENTS ON MAP	MAP SKETCH (Sketch map over actual Alaska outline)
		http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.ndlpcoop/mtfxmp.f78103		
		http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.ndlpcoop/mtfxmp.f79111		

Assessment:

Students may work individually or in small groups for this exercise. Evaluations may be based on the quality of the completed project as it relates to the table above. In addition, teachers may wish to have students write a summary essay, or conduct group discussions) on the overall transformation of cartographic representations of the North Pacific during the 18th century. Key assessment points to address with the students include:

- Completeness of the table in all categories (map title and author, map date, library where map is located, map comments, and map sketch.
- Quality of the sketches is important, but allowances should be made for non-artists.
- Student map “comments” should be evaluated in terms of their completeness and insights into the maps and the comparison of the maps. Teachers may wish to include, or not, topics noted in the “Map Comments/Questions” section.
- In the case of a summary essay, the assessment should consider the quality and thoroughness of the presentations and their insight into larger historical issues of the time.

Toponymy Activity

Question: What has been the legacy of the Russian colonial period on Alaska’s place names (toponymy) today?

Activity:

Place names are useful for understanding the history of an area. Humans name things. They name places. When names of places are printed, they often gain a degree of permanence despite changes in who inhabits an area. Also, with a little detective work, we can surmise the linguistic origin of names. The following exercise gives students a chance to examine two maps dating to the 1867 Russian cession of Alaska to the United States. It also gives the students a chance to be “detectives” on the linguistic origin of names and to gain an insight into what groups may have lived and/or passed through an area.

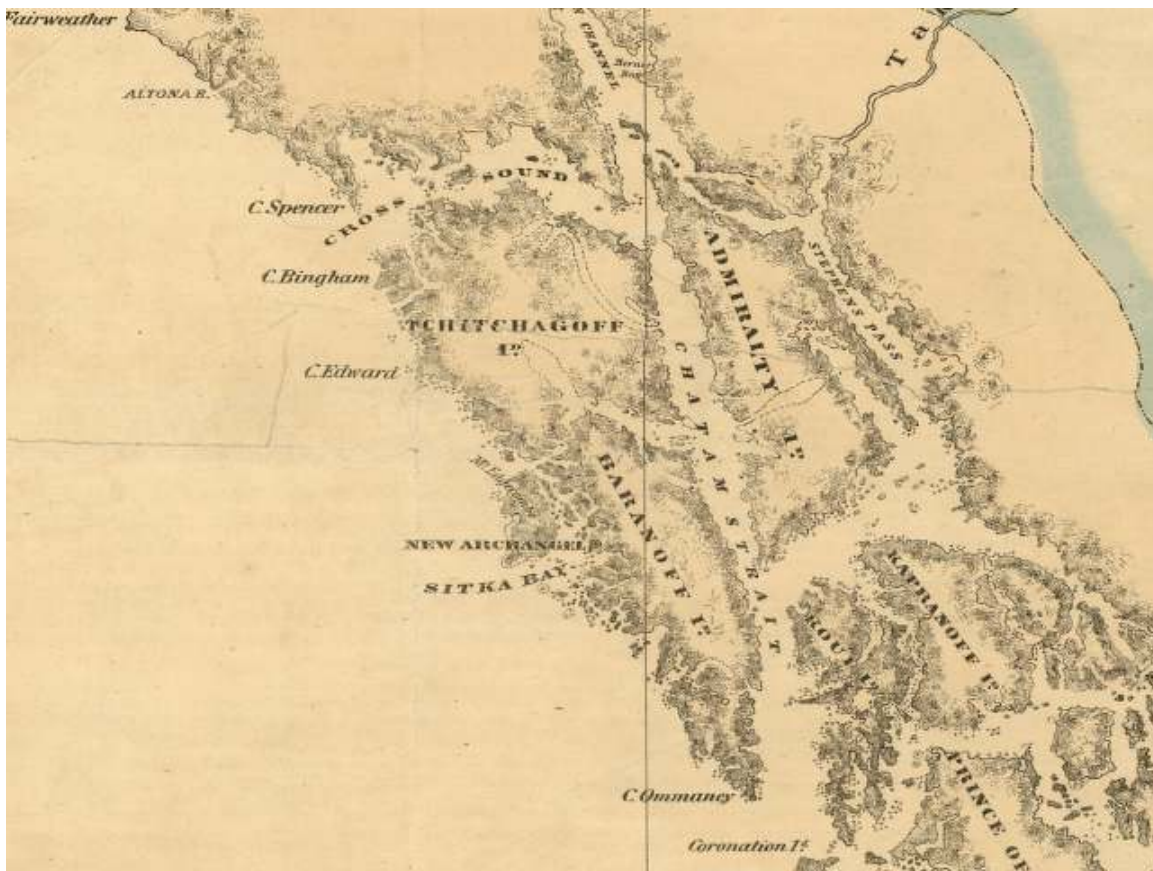
Examine the Colten and Lewis maps of Alaska in 1867 from the perspective of place names. Have students work in small groups and speculate on the linguistic origin of the place names that were used around the area of Sitka. Focus their research on the area from Cross Sound in the north to Sumner Strait (on today’s map) or a line linking the Stikine River and Coronation Island to the south.

Detail from Colton's Map:



Source: <http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.ndlpcoop/mtfxmp.f86705>

Detail from Lewis's Map:



Source: <http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.ndlpcoop/mtfxmp.f86705>

Below is a sample table that students can use to identify the places:

Colton (1867)	Lewis (1867)	Name Origin
Admiralty Island	Admiralty Island	.English
Koutzrou		Native or Russian?
Tchitchagoff Island	Tchitchagoff Island	Chichagof Island. Capt. Lisianski. 1805. For Russian Admiral Vasili Yakov Chichagov.
<i>[Continue identifying]</i>	<i>Place names]</i>	

Appendix 1 provides a more complete sample table for reproduction.

When the student groups are through with the exercise, have them compare their results and the reasons for their answers. **Appendix 2** provides a framework for final discussion.

Assessment:

1. Evaluate students on their thoroughness in finding names and their ability to identify name characteristics in the above exercise.
2. For an additional assessment, have students conduct a debate/discussion on whether or not some historical place names should be changed given the way that they were informally adopted. The assessment should focus on the quality, thoroughness, and persuasiveness of the presentations.

For background on how to establish a place name or change a place name in Alaska today, see: Office of History and Archaeology, Alaska Department of Natural Resources: <http://www.dnr.state.ak.us/parks/oha/histcomm/aknames.htm>.

3. A final assessment approach is to have students study how street names can be useful markers of the history and geography of an area, have students examine a map of downtown Sitka today. A convenient way to view the street names is either through the Google or Yahoo map servers which can be found at: <http://www.google.com/maps> or <http://maps.yahoo.com/>

Have student groups do a quick check on these street names for their significance to Alaska:

Arrowhead Street
Baranof Street
Etolin Way
Halibut Point Hwy
Harbor Road

Lincoln Street
Monastery Street
New Archangel Street
Princess Way
Sawmill Street

Seward Street
Tlingit Way

Black, Lydia T. 2004. Russians in Alaska, 1732-1867. Fairbanks: University of Alaska Press.

Orth, Donald J. 1971. Dictionary of Alaska Place Names. Washington, D.C.: United States Government Printing Office. U.S. Geological Survey Professional Paper 567.

Appendix 1. Student Work Sheet

[illegible]

Appendix 2. Place Names in the Novo-Arkhangel/Sitka Region, 1867

Colton (1867)	Lewis (1867)	Name Origin*
Admiralty Island	Admiralty Island	Capt. Vancouver. 1794. In 1852, Capt. Tebenkov named it “Fear Island (Ostrov Kutsnoi) meaning fear island.
Cross Sound	Cross Sound	Capt. Cook. 1778. Discovered on Holy Cross Day, May 3
	Cape Bingham	Capt. Vancouver. 1794. For Countess Margaret Bingham, an English amateur painter
	Cape Edward	Capt. Vancouver. 1794. Tlingit name identified by Capt. Tebenkov, 1852, as Elkugu Cape.
Tchitchagoff Island	Tchitchagoff Island	Chichagof Island. Capt. Lisianski. 1805. For Russian Admiral Vasili Yakov Chichagov.
Stephens Pass[age]	Stephens Pass[age]	Capt. Vancouver. 1794. Probably named for Sir Philip Stephens.
Chatam Strait	Chatam Strait	Chatham Strait. Capt. Vancouver. 1794. For the Earl of Chatham, William Pitt Chatham.
Baranoff Island	Baranoff Island	Baranof Island. Capt. Lisianski. 1805

		for Alexander Baranov, first governor of the Russian American Co.
Mt Edgecumbe	Mt Edgecumbe	Capt. Cook. 1778. Probably named after Mount Edgecumbe, Plymouth Harbor, England.
Sitka or Novo-Arkhangel	Novo-Arkhangel	New Archangel: Original Russian settlement named Mikhailovsk for Saint Michael Archangel. New settlement built several miles away in 1804 called New Archangel. Sitka: Named this by Americans in 1867, from Tlingit Indian name for “by the sea”.
Redoubt [Bay]		Capt. Tebenkov. 1805.
Sitka Bay	Sitka Bay	Now called Sitka Sound
	Cape Ommaney	Capt. James Colnett, English Fur Trader. 1789.
Christians Sound		Christian Sound. Capt. James Colnett, English Fur Trader. 1789. For Sir Hugh Christians, Admiral and Commander in Chief of the West Indies in 1795.
Coronation Island	Coronation Island	Capt. Vancouver. 1793. For the anniversary of the coronation of King George III.
Koutzrou		Possibly from “Khutz-n ‘hu” a Tlingit word meaning “bear fort”. Exact place reference is not clear. Orth notes first named in 1869 by U.S. Comdr. R.W. Meade in 1869 and found in Hydrographic Chart 882 in 1881
Koui Island	Koui Island	Tlingit Indian name first published in 1848 by Russian cartographers.
Kuprianof Island	Kapranoff Island	Kupreanof Island. Lt. Woronkofski. 1837. For Capt. Ivan Kupreanov, Governor of the Russian American Company, 1836-40.
Frederick Sound		Capt. Vancouver. 1794. For Prince Frederick, son of King George III.
Great Glacier		Joseph Hunter, Canadian engineer. 1877. Basis for name in Coulton’s map is not known.
Stakine River	Stakeen River	Stikine River. Capt. Rowen. American. 1799. Reported name based on Tlingit name meaning “Great River”.

	Stakeen	No reference to a town in Orth.
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Maps: The two maps are located at the University of Alaska Fairbanks. You may find them through the Meeting of Frontiers Web site by going to the Map section and then to the map list for the University of Alaska Fairbanks. Click on:

[Colton's map of the territory of Alaska \(Russian America\) ceded by Russia to the United States.](http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.ndlpcoop/mtfxmp.f86701)

<http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.ndlpcoop/mtfxmp.f86701>

And:

[Map of Russian America or Alaska Territory compiled from Russian charts and surveys of W.T.Tel. Ex. by J. F. Lewis, chief draughtsman, M. Cadin, asst.](http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.ndlpcoop/mtfxmp.f86705)

<http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.ndlpcoop/mtfxmp.f86705>

*Source: Orth, Donald, 1971.