

Meeting of Frontiers

Russian America Colonization: Settlements

Roger Pearson
Alaska Geographic Alliance
Institute of the North
Anchorage, Alaska 99501

Overview:

This unit is designed to give students an understanding of the era of Russian colonization of Alaska. Emphasis is placed on the geography of Russian settlement, the people who inhabited the Russian settlements, as well as their economic activities and the educational system. The unit provides a framework for comparing the early colonization by the U.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.
- ❖ The physical and human characteristics of places.
- ❖ 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:

- ❖ What were the main settlement considerations of the Russians in establishing a permanent base in Alaska?
- ❖ What did Russian settlements look like in Russian America?
- ❖ Where were Russian settlements found in Alaska?
- ❖ Who inhabited the Russian settlements?

Vocabulary:

Bilingual
Creoles
Demography
Ethnicity
Lithographic images
Region

Question: What were the main settlement considerations of the Russians in establishing a permanent base in Alaska?

Background Comment: Russian colonization of what is now Alaska began with the *promyshlenniki* or fur merchants. Their activities began in the Aleutian Islands and later extended to the Alaska Peninsula and the Kodiak Island area. In 1784, G.I. Shelikhov and Ivan Golikov, Siberian fur merchants, established on Kodiak Island the first permanent Russian settlement. Fifteen years later, the Russian government chartered the Russian American Company with control of the entire area of Alaska known to the Russians.



Grigorii Shelikhov

DIGITAL ID mtfph c0001

The following exercise utilizes two key documents in the formation of the permanent Russian base in Alaska. The first document was written in 1794 by Lt. General Ivan Piliushin, the Governor General of Siberia. Shelikhov had appealed to the Czarina Katherine for an expansion of his trading activities in Russian America. Czarina Katherine granted that

request. In informing Shelikhov of the approval (in a Ukaz), Pil also decided to offer his advice on how settlement expansion should proceed. He identifies ten “rules” for Shelikhov’s company to follow. At the time, Baranov was the chief manager of the Shelikhov-Golikov Company.

Twelve years later, in 1806, a second set of “Instructions” was offered on improving the status of the (now) Russian American Company. In this case, the author was Nikolai P. Rezanov, who represented the Board of Governors of the Russian American Company. Rezanov traveled to Alaska as part of the first Russian circumnavigation voyage under the command of Captain Ivan Kruzenshtern. Before leaving Alaska, Rezanov offered his secret instructions to Baranov.



Alexander Baranov

DIGITAL ID mtfph c0003

Note that in both cases, 1794 and 1806, Baranov was the chief manager of the Russian companies. Also, Baranov did not always follow the “rules” and “instructions” offered to him, often for pragmatic reasons. However, Pil’s and Rezanov’s ideas are useful in gaining an understanding of how Russian leaders perceived the key ingredients for successful Russian settlement in Alaska.



N.P. Rezanov

DIGITAL ID mtfph c0002

Exercise: Have students brainstorm ideas on what might be necessary considerations in establishing a commercial colony. (If this unit is presented as part of a US history course, comparisons might be made with the British, French, and Spanish early settlements.)

Note the student ideas on and save them for a comparison later of the Pil and Rezanov recommendations.

Note: *The documents found in the attached **Appendix 1** are translations of Russian transcripts found on the “Meeting of Frontiers” web site. The transcripts are in the Russian written at the end of the 18th century. The translations were written for ease in understanding by students in the 21st century.*

Divide the class into four groups. Two of the groups will focus on Pil and two of the groups will focus on Rezanov. Their assignment is to determine the similarities and differences between Pil’s assessment and that of Rezanov. Below is a chart that identifies eight of the ten main points made by Pil to Shelikhov. These will be used as the basis for comparison with Rezanov. The groups should be divided so that each group covers four issues (e.g., 1-4 and 5-8). The groups can summarize their findings on either a poster paper or in a PowerPoint presentation.

TOPIC	PIL’S RULES	REZANOV’S INSTRUCTIONS
Defense		
Townsite/Settlement Considerations		
Food Supply		
Resource Development		
Crime and Justice		
Native Alaskans		
Shipyards Facilities & Ships		

Foreign Vessels & Relations with Foreigners		
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Once the groups have completed their findings and presented their reports, have the class evaluate the similarities and differences between Pil and Rezanov. This can be done as a class exercise with all students being given a chart to complete such as the one above.

Assessment:

First, students should individually complete an expanded table that includes a short summary of the main points of Pil and Rezanov. Essentially this portion of the assessment evaluates how much they gained from their own group effort and from their own summary of the class discussion. **Second**, students should make a comparison of their class list of considerations with those of Pil and Rezanov. Their summaries can be developed in either a poster or PowerPoint format.

Question: What did Russian settlements look like in Russian America?

Russian culture in Alaska was established in small communities. The most significant community in Alaska was Novo-Arkhangel'sk or today's Sitka. From 1808 until the sale of Alaska to the United States, Sitka was the home of the Chief Manager of the Russian American Company, and therefore, the administrative center of Russian possessions in America.

In our imaginations, an administrative center for a large area might appear to be a substantial town. In reality, Novo-Arkangel'sk was carved out of the forested lowlands of SE Alaska and housed a small population. This exercise will illustrate the progress attained by the mid-1820's using art works from that time. It also illustrates the continuing significance of Russian American influence in today's Sitka.

Activity: Novo-Arkangel'sk in the 1820's.

1. Have student groups brainstorm on what one would expect to find in an administrative center for a large colonial area. Groups should make lists of key facilities. Follow this with a general group discussion and a listing of the most important facilities.
2. Have the same student groups examine the lithographic images from the 1826-1829 around the world expedition ordered by Czar Nicholas. The images of Sitka were made in 1828 (See **Appendix 2** for the series of images.)

The groups should write out their impressions of Sitka based on the lithographs.

Questions to consider:

- What image is presented of the physical environment of Novo-Arkangel'sk?
- Is this a “frontier” community?
- What elements of an administrative center can one see in the images?
- Who seems to inhabit this community?

a. Examine an image for a minute. Give a brief description of the image.

b. Next, divide the image into four sections. Analyze each section and note details related to the question being addressed such as the portrayal of the physical environment.

c. What questions do the images raise regarding Novo-Arkangel'sk at that time?

Assessment:

Students should be assessed on their participation in the groups, their discussion presentations in class, and the degree to which they analyzed the images. A sample scoring guide for the analysis section might look like this:

ANALYSIS	Physical Environment	Frontier Qualities	Administration Features	Inhabitants	Questions on/from Images
Did not answer question					
Minimal features identified					
A number of key features identified					
Extensive Analysis					

Question: Where were Russian settlements located in Alaska?

One way for students to gain an understanding of the size of the Russian American Company effort in Alaska is to view the number and distribution of settlements. In terms of content, this activity will allow students to gain an understanding of the vast area controlled by some 600 Russians. It will also give the students an understanding of how to draw regional boundary lines and apply their knowledge of map making and using latitude and longitude coordinates.

Have students brainstorm on where they think Russian American settlements were located. Students can do this project as a class, in groups, or individually. Use the blank map of Alaska found in Appendix 2. Students should not be concerned with individual settlements but the overall regional locations. Inquire as to the rationale(s) for their decision(s).

Activity 1: Divide the students into small groups. Following the introductory brainstorming map, provide students with a listing of Russian settlements and their latitude and longitude coordinates. This listing is provided, along with a blank map, in **Appendix 3** and is based on the settlement list provided with the transfer of territory in 1867. It does not list all the settlements that ever existed in Russian America, only those identified on that date.

- Have students plot all of the settlements on the map including naming the settlements
- Next, have the students complete the following:
 1. **Appendix 3** utilizes regions used by the Russian American Company for listing the distribution of settlements. Draw approximate regional boundaries around the settlements in each region.
 2. Compare the regions you have created with those from the *Alaska in Maps* atlas (<http://www.....>), specifically “Alaska as Five Regions” and “Alaska as Six Regions.” You may also wish to compare those regions with the one developed by the Alaska Virtual Library and Digital Archives. A discussion of this and other “perceptual regions” is found in the Geography section of the Alaska History and Cultural Studies web site at: <http://akhistorycourse.org/>
Are the regional boundaries used by the RAC appropriate or might one of the current regional maps be more appropriate? Explain your answer.
 3. What Alaska Native groups were most impacted by the Russian American Company? Which were least impacted? To answer this question geographically, compare the map of places developed above with a map of Alaska Native groups such as that found in *Alaska in Maps*.

Assess the student maps and discussion in terms of completion and neatness of the maps and the thoroughness of their discussion on the regional boundary schemes. (See **Appendix 4.**)

Activity 2: Divide the students into groups of three to five students. Have each group evaluate the geographical setting for Russian America.

First, have students discuss the probable reasons for the location of the settlements identified in Activity 1 above. Factors such as transportation problems and economic activities should be emphasized. (Note: This exercise is also a good lead-in to the discussion of the Russian Fur Trade unit.) Each group should make a listing and brief explanation of reasons for the location of the settlements.

Second, have the groups estimate (in percent) how much of Alaska was controlled by the Russian American Company. A convenient way to do this exercise is to have the students overlay a grid of squares on a transparency sheet. They count the total number of squares for all of Alaska and then the number of squares for areas occupied by Russian American Company settlements.

Third, have the student groups use physical geography maps to evaluate the type of environments occupied by the RAC. To do this, they will need to utilize the information derived in Activity 1 and the second part of Activity 2. The students should utilize, at a minimum, maps showing topography, climate, and vegetation or ecosystems. These maps can be found on the web at the Alaska Geographic Alliance Atlas web site.

Assessment of Activity 2 can take the form of presentations utilizing either a PowerPoint format or transparencies and an overhead projector. The quality of the map products, the thoroughness of the research, and the effectiveness of the presentations should all be part of the assessment of this activity. An assessment guide is provided in **Appendix 4**.

Question: Who inhabited the Russian American settlements?

Students may be surprised to learn that for most of the time period less than 600 Russians were living in Alaska at any one time. Generally, the population of the settlements was divided into three ethnic groups, Russians, Alaska Natives, and “Creoles.” The last group represented people who were part Russian and part Alaska Native.

Have students develop graphs that illustrate the main demographic features of Russian American settlements based on the tables in **Appendix 5**.

Table A. Show all groups by regions and male/female in 1860

Table B. Show population changes by ethnic group over time

With time, one might expect the population of the Russian American colony to grow. Did that actually happen? Have students consider if colonial expansion and the establishment of a large Russian colony was the real objective of the Russian American Company.

Assessment should include an evaluation of the clarity and completeness of the graphs and thoroughness and enthusiasm of their discussion points.

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