

the fleet of the russian-american company

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abstract

From the first fur-hunting expeditions in the middle of the eighteenth century until the sale of Alaska in 1867, the success of Russian colonization in Alaska depended on the colonial fleet. Ships brought the first explorers and settlers across the ocean, delivered supplies and people from the motherland, defended the coast, and carried on trade and commerce. Yet to date there has been no study specifically focused on the fleet of the Russian-American Company. This article fills this gap by discussing the formation of the company's fleet as a dynamic process within the context of a wide array of commercial, political, and social issues.

introduction

In many instances Russian colonialism followed the typical pattern of European expansion, but several aspects made "Russia's adventure in America" unique. Russia joined the European exploration of the New World relatively late. Russian Alaska was the country's first and only overseas colony. Moreover, it was the Russian Empire's first attempt at establishing a sociopolitical organization of almost exclusively maritime character. With the exception of Pomor fishing in the White Sea, Russia had no access to the ocean throughout most of its history and claimed its place among maritime states only at the beginning of the eighteenth century. For a country that had only recently mastered the waters of the Baltic Sea, expanding into the New World was an ambitious maritime endeavor.

From the first fur-hunting expeditions in the middle of the eighteenth century until the sale of Alaska in 1867, the success and the very existence of Russian colonization in Alaska depended on the colonial fleet. Ships brought the first explorers and settlers across the ocean, delivered supplies and people from the motherland, defended the coast, and carried on trade and commerce. Russian sea voyaging to Alaska both predated and predetermined the establishment of the Russian colonies and played a significant role in the development of the social and economic structure of Russian America. The reliance on ships as the main mode of transportation affected the geographi-

cal pattern of colonial settlements—almost all of which were located on the coast—and thus determined the extent of Russian contact with different Alaska Native groups as well as the colony's ability to access and exploit different natural resources. Yet to date there has been no study specifically focused on the fleet of the Russian-American Company (RAC), although some aspects of it were addressed in conjunction with Russian shipbuilding (e.g., Andrews 1934) and shipwrecks in Alaska (e.g., Anichtchenko 2013a; Anichtchenko and Rogers 2007; Black 1983; Pierce 1983; Rogers et al. 2008).

Understanding the development of the fleet of the Russian-American Company is relevant for both archaeological and anthropological research on Russian America. Ships' artifacts and timbers entered both maritime and terrestrial archaeological records as remains of shipbuilding activities, anchorages, and docks. Elements of abandoned and sunken ships were often recycled and reshaped into tools and structural wood. For most indigenous people of Alaska, the first contact with Russians was a maritime affair. First greetings and trade goods between Native inhabitants and non-Native newcomers were often passed between indigenous skin boats and the decks of ships. Carrying new technology, resources, and culture, shipping and ships themselves were agents of social and cultural change.

early russian shipbuilding in the north pacific

Through seventy-five years of operation in the North Pacific, the RAC owned eighty vessels, acquired from three different sources: colonial shipbuilding, purchase in America, and European acquisition. Shipbuilding accounted for 61% of the entire fleet and was one of the company's most productive and consistent efforts. The RAC's first and last ships were launched in the colonial shipyards. In fact, the first ships used by the company and the first Russian shipyards in Alaska were built before 1799, when the Golikov-Shelikhov enterprise became the RAC, first in the East Siberian port of Okhotsk and later in Alaska.

Russians reached the Pacific coast of Eurasia in 1637 when a group of Cossacks under Ivan Moskvitin sailed down the river Ulia. Eight years later at the mouth of the Okhota River the Cossacks founded Okhotsk, a settlement destined to play a key role in the history of Russian expansion on the Pacific. By 1703 the Russians had five settlements in the North Pacific, three of which (Nizhne-Kamchatsk, Verkhne-Kamchatsk, and Bolsheretsk) were located on the Kamchatka Peninsula. All of the settlements were built at river mouths, which facilitated access to fresh water and offered optimal locations for shipbuilding. Shipbuilding had a very sporadic character. Even in the major ports, such as Okhotsk, there were no permanent shipyards. Ships were built when and where needed, usually by the same people who later took them to sea. As news about the Russian advances on the Pacific reached Tsar Peter I, the state took a more active position in ocean exploration. The year 1714, when "ship-carpenters, seamen and materials for the construction of vessels, were sent from Yakutsk to the port of Okhotsk" (Burney 1819:106), is considered the birth date of Russia's Siberian fleet.

The earliest voyages in the region, such as Dezhnev's famous passage through Bering Strait in 1648, were carried out on *koches* and *lodyas*. Both ship types were actively employed by the Russian mariners of the White Sea since the Middle Ages, but despite the longevity of these boat types, or maybe because of it, it is hard to identify their specific configurations. James Burney, for instance, believed that *koches* were "generally understood to be strong built vessels" (Burney 1819:64). The term *lodya* is even more generic—at different times it was used for Viking ships, dug-out fishermens' boats, and merchant vessels of Novgorod. The Russian word for "boat," *lodka* originates from *lodya*, and means literally "small *lodya*." Iconographic

evidence for both *koch* and *lodya* is equally confusing. Belov's reconstruction of the *koch* found in Mangazeia (Belov 1980: plate XXXV) is, for instance, identical to the representation of *lodya* in the 1859 work on Russian merchant shipbuilding (Bogoslavskij 1859). What is certain is that by the second quarter of the eighteenth century both *koches* and *lodyas* were ordered out of Russian shipyards and waterways. Much in accordance with his program of westernizing Russia, Tsar Peter I decreed that instead of these vernacular vessels, Russian mariners should build European (or more precisely Dutch) galliots, flutes, or frigates (Jasinski and Ovsyannikov 2010:154). The *List of Vessels of the Siberian Fleet* for the years 1714 through 1853 mentions eleven *lodyas*, the last of which was built in Okhotsk in 1729 (Bancroft Library 1855:folio 3).

State interest in the Pacific created a link between Russian maritime outposts in the Far East and the contemporary European shipbuilding tradition. The first attempts to build European-style ships during the preparation for the first Bering expedition demonstrated how arduous such an undertaking could be on the far edge of the frontier wilderness. It took almost two years to deliver all supplies and specialists necessary for the construction of the one-masted *Fortuna* from St. Petersburg to Okhotsk (Golder 1960:135–137). This might explain the persistence of more affordable ships built in the vernacular tradition despite the state's attempt to westernize local shipbuilding. By the middle of the eighteenth century the list of shipwrights in Okhotsk included Russian shipcarpenters Kirill Plotnitskij and Kargopol'tsev, as well as the Englishman Chaplin, who came to the Russian Far East with the first Bering expedition (Bancroft Library 1855). Shipbuilding in the Russian Far East was gradually becoming a specialized industry acquainted with European traditions of naval architecture.

Following the second Bering expedition and discovery of the Aleutian island chain, the rumors of this newly discovered region's riches caused a wave of short-lived merchant companies, formed with the sole purpose of "enriching themselves through sea otter skins" (Berkh 1974:1). Between 1743 and 1800, more than twenty companies built over eighty vessels for voyages to the Aleutian Islands and the Alaska mainland. Historical accounts identify only a quarter of these vessels according to their type. The rest of them are referred to as "vessels" (Blinov 1957:9–15). While the small percentage of identified ships does not allow one to draw definite conclusions, there seems to be a chronological pattern in the succession of the

vessel types. The largest group of identified ships consists of eight *shitiks*, which were built and used between 1743 and 1753. *Shitik* (from the Russian verb *sheet*, “to sew”) was a vernacular sewn watercraft popular in the Novgorod and White Sea regions from the Middle Ages until the early twentieth century. Its base was a single dugout tree trunk, to which side boards were “sewn,” usually by means of willow twigs. The seams were caulked with moss. Propelled by oars or square sails, *shitiks* were decked one-masted vessels about 14 m long and 5 m wide with a net tonnage of up to 24 tons. Rigging and sails for *shitiks* were often made of reindeer skins; the anchors were of wood with tie-on stone weights (Black 1984:79). A deck cabin, located aft, provided accommodation for the crew, while cargo was stored on the middle of the deck under a triangular shelter (Makarova 1975:107). An English traveler of the late eighteenth century, Captain James Burney, left an interesting account of the constructional and functional peculiarities of this watercraft:

On account of the frequency of being enclosed in the Icy Sea by the drift ice, it was customary to construct vessels in a manner that admitted of their being with ease taken to pieces; by which they could be carried across the ice to the outer edge, and there be put together again. Vessels so constructed were called *schitiki*; the planks were sewed together with twisted osiers, and fastened to the timbers only by leathern straps, in lieu of nails or pegs. The interstices were stuffed with moss, instead of caulking, and the seams were covered with lathes, to prevent moss from being washed out. The name *shitik* implies sewn. Notwithstanding the slightness of their construction, they were decked (Burney 1819:64).

Peculiarly, the ship of Bering’s first expedition, the above-mentioned *Fortuna*, was also identified as a *shitik* (Gibson 1992:97). However, a contemporary sketch by Spanberg, one of the members of the expedition, reveals a modern and sophisticated vessel with fully developed stem and stern, suggesting the likely presence of iron fastenings (Golder 1960:167).

Bot, a Russian adaptation of the Dutch single-masted shallow-draft *bootier* (Black 1980:316), which relied on both sail and oar propulsion, dominated from 1757 until 1778, when five of them are mentioned in the sources. One of the documents of the Russian Archive of the Ancient Acts in Moscow provides an interesting account. It supports the date of transition from the vernacular sewn boats to the later more European craft: “In 1757 they began to

build boats (*boty*) or barks (*barki*) with wooden reinforcements, or ribs, which to distinguish from the *shitiks* were called ‘*gvozdenniks*’ [held with nails or pegs] (Makarova 1975:107 citing RGADA [*Rossiiskii Gosudarstvennyi Arkhiv Drevnikh Aktov*, the Russian State Archive of Ancient Documents] f. 199, d. 538, ch. II:11, 236–247). By the end of the eighteenth century, the historical accounts of local shipbuilding start mentioning *galliot*s, three of which were built between 1783 and 1785; one is recorded in 1762. Like *boty*, *galliot*s originated in Holland and became popular in the Russian Azov and Baltic fleets during the reign of Peter I. They measured about 20 m in length, 3 m in beam, had 3 m depth, and carried one or two masts (Black 1980:316–317; Gazonko 2000:27–28).

Building and equipping a ship was by far the most expensive part of preparation for a voyage. While Okhotsk had plenty of suitable timber, other material such as iron fasteners, canvas, rigging, and ropes had to be purchased in Yakutsk. Most of these items were quite expensive: a *pud* (36.11 pounds) of iron, for example, cost 20 rubles, which equaled the average monthly salary of a Siberian Cossack, and cordage was twice that much (Berkh 1974:13). With most food supplies also brought from Yakutsk, a vessel equipped for a fur-gathering voyage cost from four to ten thousand rubles (Makarova 1975:107).

The technological sophistication of these ships was not always a good match for the opportunistic enthusiasm of the Siberian seafarers. Aleksandr Baranov, the first manager of the RAC, when asked about the reason for the extreme slowness of the ships of “these first Argonauts,” provided insight into the local approach to ship construction:

Formerly all owners of seagoing vessels tried to build them very high, figuring that this way they would have more room for crew and cargo. Most of these vessels had galiot type rigging with short, heavy masts and narrow sails in order to economize on canvas. The rudders were of amazing design with blades at least 1½ sazhen [2.7 m] long. Putting out to sea in such a ship the navigators soon found that it had no speed at all. Believing that a long rudder contributes to the speed of the ship, they added frequently to its length. When two such navigators would meet at some island, the first question after the usual courtesies and conversation about sailing would be: “How many times have you lengthened your rudder?” During my stay at Okhotsk, a clerk of the Shelikhov and Golikov Company came to ask my permission to take eight bottles of French brandy to the shipwright. “Why do you want to give him such a handsome present,

brother? He gets a stipulated pay.” “This, my dear sir, is unavoidable, for two weeks now I have been asking him to build the galiot *Petr i Pavel* at least one arshin (0.7 meter) higher, but he refuses and I think a present will help in this case a great deal.” “Naturally,” continued Baranov, “I put this block-head out of my room, but by doing so I offended all the Company’s employees. Only the shipwright, a man skilled in his trade, approved my action” (Berkh 1974:69–70).

However unsophisticated the vessels of the Far Eastern seafarers may have looked in comparison with European ships, they performed fairly well. Ten or more years of operation was not an unusually long career for the vessels built on Siberian and American coasts in the second half of the eighteenth century. The high rate of wrecking (virtually one of every four ships was lost to the sea), although naturally related to the quality of the ships, should, nevertheless, be assessed in conjunction with both the absence of navigational charts and the legendary severity of the North Pacific.

russian-american company’s shipbuilding

The beginning of Gregorii Shelikhov’s company, which in 1799 became the RAC, was no different from other

Alaska enterprises. With starting capital of 70,000 rubles, he built three ships. Like many other products of local shipbuilding of the last quarter of the eighteenth century, these ships were galiots named after the saints whose protection was sought to improve the odds of sailing in Pacific waters: *Tri Sviatitelia* (Three Bishops), *Arkhistratig Mikhail* (Archangel Michael), and *Simeon Bogopriimets i Anna Propochitsa* (Saint Simeon and Anna the Prophetess) (Tikhmenev 1978:12). The real departure from the prevailing mode of fur trading came later when, following the establishment of the first Russian settlement in Kodiak, Shelikhov instructed Baranov to start building ships in Alaska. While shipbuilding in Okhotsk was difficult and expensive, it was still far easier than in Alaska.

Nevertheless, by 1794 the first Russian shipyard in Alaska and the first shipbuilding facility on the entire Pacific coast of North America began its operation at Voskresenskoe settlement in Resurrection Bay (Seward) (Fig. 1). Here English shipwright James George Shields constructed three ships: the *Phoenix*, *Dolfin*, and *Sv. Olga*. To make up for the shortage of pitch, paint, and oakum, the ships were caulked with a mix of pitch, ochre, and whale blubber. These and other creative shortcuts affected the vessels’ performance. In 1795, only a few months after the *Olga* was finished, Baranov took her on a voyage to Yakutat Bay. On the second day at sea she sprang a leak and



Figure 1. Shipyards of the Russian-American Company. Map by Jason Rogers.

almost sank. After repairs, however, the vessel remained at sea until 1802 when she wrecked and was burned “to celebrate the conclusion of peace” after the clash between Tlingits and Russians (Tikhmenev 1978:74). The iron from the *Olga* was used in the construction of two new vessels: the *Ermak* (100 tons) and *Rostislav* (85 tons), built by Russian shipwright Ivan Kuskov in Yakutat the same year (Fedorova 1973:191; Tikhmenev 1979:74). The lack of naval stores was so pressing that even the rotten ropes from the wrecked vessel were used after fortification with tree roots, baleen, and hemp (Tikhmenev 1978:74). In 1799, the Russians started building ships in newly founded Novo-Arkhangelsk (Sitka).

Despite all the difficulties and the ships’ mediocre performance, Shelikhov’s shipbuilding had meaning beyond immediate pragmatic considerations of profit. Establishing such an advanced industry in Alaska gave Shelikhov’s enterprise political resonance and raised it above other Russian companies, which approached the Aleutian Islands and mainland Alaska exclusively as hunting grounds. Ships of other countries, especially Great Britain and Spain, were now also venturing into Alaska waters. Russian shipyards and forts on the North American shores were a nonverbal declaration of Russian rights to the territory and the intention to defend them. Thus, shipbuilding heralded the official establishment of the Russian colonies in America.

Although directed towards European powers, the Russian message had strong implications for the Native peoples of Alaska. The Russians’ use of water and land resources violated traditional systems of ownership, and although formal agreements were sometimes reached (as in the case of the establishment of Novorossiisk settlement in Yakutat Bay in 1796), they were forced, uneasy, and consequently fragile (Tikhmenev 1978:42–44). Neither written sources nor oral traditions provide direct evidence of the indigenous perspective regarding Russian shipbuilding facilities, which were likely perceived as part of Russian settlements. The first Alaska Native encounters with the ships, however, are captured in several dramatic accounts. The earliest of them is Arseni Aminak’s recollection of Stepan Glotoff’s ship, which called at Alitak Bay on Kodiak Island in 1763:

When we saw the ship at a distance we thought it was an immense whale, but soon discovered that it was another unknown monster of which we were afraid, and the smell of which made us sick. The people on the ship had buttons on their clothes, and at first we thought they might be *octopai*,

but when we saw them put fire into their mouth and blow out smoke we knew they must be devils (Bancroft 1960:144).

Indigenous relationships with ships evolved throughout the history of contact. Magical and strange at first, the large vessels were perceived as hostile. Russian ships that fell into Native hands during the initial contact period—as during the “Aleut revolt” of 1763—were often burned (Laughlin 1980:122). This likely had as much to do with sacrificial extermination and purification of the land and ocean as it did with obtaining metal from their fasteners. The above-mentioned burning of the ship *Sv. Olga* during the peace ceremony between Russians and Tlingits also had a sacrificial character (Tikhmenev 1978:74). The peace was short lived and two years later the Russian settlement at Yakutat and local shipbuilding facilities were destroyed.

In Novo-Arkhangelsk the shipbuilding proceeded with great difficulty, which Nikolai Rezanov, one of the founders of the RAC, described in his letter to Hieromonk Gedeon in September 1805:

We live very badly, it pours with rain every day, and however necessary the work, one does not feel very enthusiastic about carrying it out. In the mean time a quay is under construction here and slipways have been cleared for two ships, we are felling a little wood and with God’s help we shall soon have on the stocks a 16-gun naval brig and an eight-gun tender—plans and sketches for which have already been drawn up (Bearne 1978:158).

Both vessels were decent productions of two Russian shipwrights, Koriukin and Popov. Count Rezanov characterized them in his report to the shareholders in 1805:

Mr. Koriukin and Mr. Popov, ship apprentices, appear skillful in their profession. If kept in hand they are very useful men. The first is a very good draftsman and makes good sketches, surveys and maps and is so exact in his work that he pleases everybody. The second, besides being skillful in his trade, is a good sailmaker and likes mechanics. Because of that he is useful in construction of works of various kinds. When sober they are very easy to get along with, but when drunk they are worse than useless and anything can be expected from their wildness. They have not acquired this ruinous habit, but being young they will do so by indulging too often (Tikhmenev 1979:192).

This turned out to be a prophetic statement: by 1806 both were fired for heavy drinking (Pierce 1990:130).

Starting in September 1806, ships in Novo-Arkhangelsk were built by an American shipwright named Lincoln (Pierce 1990:310). Until he left Novo-Arkhangelsk in 1809, Lincoln built three ships (the brig *Sitkha*, the three-master *Otkrytie* of 300 tons, and the schooner *Chirikov*), repaired two more company vessels (the *Juno* and *Alexander*), and trained a Russian carpenter, Vasilii Grudinin, as a shipwright. Lincoln's departure terminated building of new ships for several years. At the same time the company continued building ships in the Russian Far East. During the first decade of the eighteenth century, the colonial fleet included fourteen ships launched in Okhotsk (Blinov 1957:20–23). Ranging in price from 15,000 to 25,000 rubles each, they appeared too expensive for the company's board of directors, which considered building the ships in America or purchasing them from English or American captains more feasible (Tikhmenev 1978:60).

In 1816, a shipyard opened in Ross settlement, the RAC's California outpost, where Grudinin built six vessels, two of which were constructed specially for the missions at San Francisco and San Jose (Allan 1996:38). These were the first vessels sold by the company. The ships proved to have an extremely short life span, never exceeding five years, which was blamed on the quality of California oak. Since the same oak was successfully used in the California shipyards of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the poor durability of the ships was more likely a result of improper seasoning of the timber (Allan 1996:45). In 1827, shipbuilding at Fort Ross was abandoned (Tikhmenev 1978:228). Grudinin moved to Novo-Arkhangelsk and was employed in repairing ships (Pierce 1990:181).

The California shipbuilding disaster convinced the company directors of the superior durability of the timber of the Russian Far East, consequently leading to restoration of the company's shipbuilding in Okhotsk (Tikhmenev 1978:209). Shipbuilding in America was restricted to the shipyards of Novo-Arkhangelsk, which by that time had become an impressive North Pacific port with docks, stores, and all workshops necessary for shipbuilding and repair. In 1843, the waterfront of the city was improved with a stone pier and a new wooden embankment on a stone foundation (Russian-American Company 1844:26). The port had a lumber mill, chandlery, and a sail-loft aboard the old company ship *Rurik*. The workshops were not solely devoted to the needs of the shipyard: blacksmiths also produced agricultural tools, a foundry

cast bells for trade with the California missions, and copper workers were engaged in producing artifacts for barter with the Natives (Litke 1987:47).

In 1827, general-manager Chistiakov commenced building of small tenders, which proved particularly useful for the "Aleut" hunting parties and for coastal sailing. Four such vessels built on the same plan (the *Unalashka*, *Bobr*, *Sivuch*, and *Aleut*) were launched in 1827 (Tikhmenev 1978:208). The main production of the shipyards, however, was rowboats, called *baidara*, three of which were launched annually. In 1850, Captain Collins of the British ship *Enterprise*, which called at Novo-Arkhangelsk for repair, purchased nine of these small watercraft (Russian-American Company 1851:24).

Commenting on the conditions of shipbuilding in Novo-Arkhangelsk particularly and the colonies in general, the famous explorer and geographer Fedor Litke wrote in 1830:

The ships that are built here [Novo-Arkhangelsk] do not last very long, either because of the poor quality of the wood or because it is not left long enough to dry before it is used. A type of cypress is used for the ship's frame; fir for the decks and the bridge; and larch wood for the sheathing and, sometimes, also for the bridge. The governors sometimes prefer to buy vessels built in the United States and these are the best ships owned by the company, but the top management found this speculation not to their advantage and decided to concentrate more on on-the-spot construction. . . . All ships are reinforced with copper and nowhere is this precaution more essential than here, where wood is terribly worm eaten. It has often happened that ships, which stayed in port for several months at a time found, when they weighed anchor, that the anchor stocks were completely eaten away (Litke 1987:46–47).

In 1839, the company yards in Novo-Arkhangelsk started to build steamships. The 60-hp crosshead steam engine for the *Nikolai I*, the first paddle-wheel steamer of the RAC, was purchased in either Boston or New York (Burwell 1999:104–105). The same year her builder, American mechanic Edward Moore, completed another, smaller steamer, which he named after himself. The *Mur* was the first steamship built entirely in Russian America, and also the first steamer constructed on the Pacific Coast. She was sold to a Mr. Leidesdorff of San Francisco in 1847. Under its new name, the *Sitka* became the first steam vessel to navigate California's rivers (Kemble 1935:143).

Satisfied with her performance, the new owner ordered another steamer of 12 horsepower (Russian-American Company 1848:28). By that time Moore had already left the colonies, and the steamship building was supervised by his former assistant, Grigorii Terent'ev (Pierce 1990:361). Hudson's Bay Company Governor Sir George Simpson commented on the ongoing construction of a new steamer at the Novo-Arkhangelsk shipyards: "The workmanship appears good and solid, everything for her is made on the spot, for which purpose they have casting-houses, boiler-makers, coopers, turners and all other requisite for such an undertaking. The boiler is almost completed and is made of copper" (Simpson 1849:310–311).

To replace the *Mur*, the company built the 12-hp paddle-wheel steamer *Baranov*, completed in 1848 (Russian-American Company 1850:26). There is no information regarding the origin of the vessel's machinery. The provenance of the engines of the next two steamships built by the company in 1853 (new *Nikolai I*) and 1860 (new *Baranov*), are also unclear. Tikhmenev states that both of them were imported from the United States (Tikhmenev 1978:360; cf. Russian-American Company 1853:23), while other sources indicate that the machinery of the *Nikolai I* was rescued from its wrecked namesake while the *Baranov's* 30-hp engine was built in Novo-Arkhangelsk (Golovin 1979:50).

In 1850, the Hudson's Bay Company's steamer *Beaver*, known to be the first steamship on the Pacific coast of America, stopped in Sitka for repair (Russian-American Company 1851:21), which gave the company's managers a reason to emphasize once again that Russians possessed the only facility on the Pacific coast that could carry out such a project. The last ship built in Russian America was the steamer *Politkofsky*, commenced in 1862 and finished in 1865. Her engine came from the steamer *Nikolai I*, which wrecked in 1861. She remained in America after the purchase of Alaska and under different owners paddled the North Pacific waters until 1896 (Burwell 1999:110).

Altogether, starting from the first Shelikhov enterprise in 1794 until 1867, the five company shipyards produced a total of forty-nine ships: seven steamers, one barge with a steam-driven sawmill, and forty-one sailing vessels (Anichtchenko 2004a). One of the most energetic periods of shipbuilding coincided with the early history of the company (1794–1804). During this decade, six years of which preceded the official incorporation of the RAC, the company built thirteen ships, roughly one per year (Fig. 2). This was the period of exploration, which took a heavy toll

both on ships and people. Sailing in little-known waters with untrained crews, vessels wrecked frequently, forcing the company to build more ships. With the exception of two ships purchased for the round-the-world voyage from St. Petersburg to Alaska, colonial shipbuilding was the only source for the company's fleet. In 1805 the Russians began actively purchasing foreign-made ships.

The beginning of shipbuilding in Novo-Arkhangelsk in the same year marks the start of a new period in colonial shipbuilding. The RAC felt confident and resourceful enough to terminate the works in Okhotsk in 1809, and for twenty years the company relied on its American facilities. In 1817 the first ship was launched in new shipyards at Fort Ross. For the next decade (1817–1826) these two yards built eight ships (six in Fort Ross and two in Novo-Arkhangelsk). Yet shipbuilding in California split the company's limited labor force and consequently affected the yards' productivity. Once the yard in Fort Ross was abandoned, Novo-Arkhangelsk reached a peak of production with six ships over the three-year period from 1827 to 1829. The Okhotsk yards made a short return, producing three ships between 1829 and 1831. With the exception of one ship built in Aian, the company concentrated its shipbuilding in Novo-Arkhangelsk until the sale of Russian Alaska in 1867.

The total number of ships built was proportional to the longevity of the yards. Novo-Arkhangelsk and Okhotsk together launched over 75% of all ships built in the company's yards (Fig. 3). The importance of the

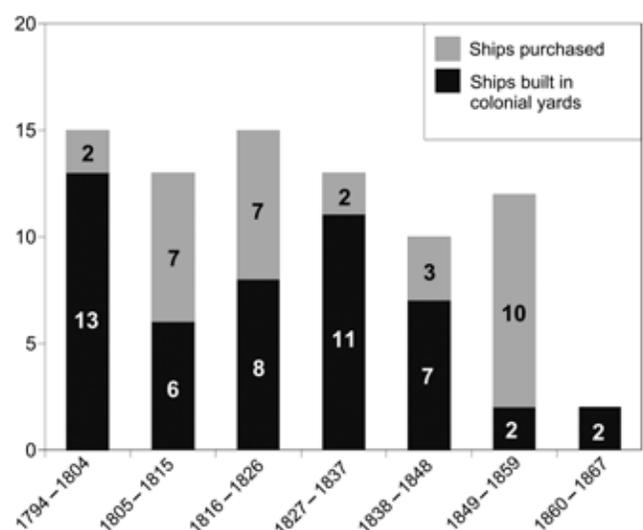


Figure 2. Development of the fleet of the Russian-American Company, 1794–1867.

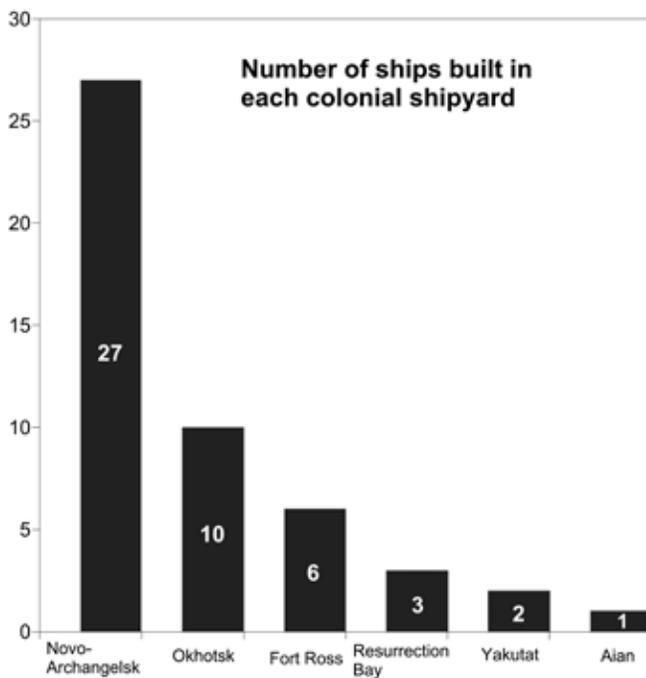


Figure 3. Number of ships built in each colonial shipyard, 1794–1867 (Anichtchenko 2004b:119–147).

shipyard, however, does not necessarily correspond to the number of vessels it produced. Both the Resurrection Bay and Yakutat yards were important as first attempts in the demanding task of building ships in Alaska. Once the RAC's monopoly was established and the rights of the Russian crown to Alaska secured, the meaning of shipbuilding changed. After initial exploration gave way to systematic exploitation, shipbuilding started to play the role of an auxiliary industry and occupied a surprisingly marginal place in the overall management of the company. Throughout its entire history, the RAC made little effort to turn shipbuilding into an avenue of additional income. The company closed the shipyards at Fort Ross in 1825, the same year it sold its first ships, and failed to pursue commercial shipbuilding when Novo-Archangelsk was the only place on the Pacific coast of North America capable of producing steamers. Yet colonial shipbuilding remained the main source of RAC ships.

Paradoxical at first glance, the company's attitude towards shipbuilding was deeply rooted in the phenomenon of mercantilism, which tied together the private pursuit of profit and national interests. Considerations of profit would have dismissed commercial shipbuilding as too laborious, time consuming, and expensive. The strategy of promoting Russian industry ensured that even when it was more cost-effective to obtain ships from other

sources, the company continued to build them, advertising the colonies' self-sufficiency and thus improving the company's image in the eyes of both investors and the international community.

An alternative source of ships immediately available in America was buying them from Russia's rivals in the North Pacific: British and American fur traders. Although not supportive of domestic shipbuilding, these acquisitions were convenient and played an important role in the formation of the RAC fleet.

purchased vessels

On May 9, 1804, the Bostonian ship *Juno* of 206 tons dropped anchor in the port of Novo-Archangelsk. Dispatched from Bristol, Rhode Island, in August of 1803, she had a long and perilous voyage around Cape Horn, and needed maintenance. The captain, John d'Wolf of Rhode Island, enjoyed this break. The Russians impressed him with both their alcoholic hospitality and the scale of their plans. After several months of the fur trade in the Alexander Archipelago, he returned to Sitka as an old friend. It was a difficult time in the company's life. Held back by a shortage of resources and the shipwrights' attachment to liquor, company construction of much-needed ships proceeded extremely slowly. When d'Wolf joked about selling the *Juno* to the manager of the company, the latter pursued the idea. The price paid by Baranov was four times that of a new vessel built in Okhotsk. In return for the *Juno*, d'Wolf received 109,821 rubles (\$65,000), the company's small vessel *Ermak*, and the loan of the *Rostislav* (Pierce 1990:130). Baranov apparently was not dissuaded by the vessel's earlier mishaps: during the preceding year she was battered by storms at Cape Horn, suffered a collision at Valparaiso, and struck a rock in the Alexander Archipelago. The reason for such an unlikely deal lies in the condition of public health in Novo-Archangelsk at the time. In January 1805 the workers began to die of scurvy, and the company needed a sizeable vessel for a provisioning trip to California. In some ways, therefore, the *Juno* was an emergency purchase.

The company's next acquisition was also unplanned. In 1806, a group of Unangan/Aleut sea otter hunters sailed to Baja California aboard the American vessel *O'Cain*, where the Russian captain, Pavel Slobodchikov, quarreled with her owner, Jonathan Winship, Jr. Slobodchikov left the vessel and for 150 sea otter skins (his crew's share of the *O'Cain's* hunt), he purchased the *Sv. Nikolai*, a ship

originally built in Hawai'i for King Kamehameha, christened the *Tamana* and later purchased by two Americans who sailed her to Baja California (Owens 1985:28). Two years later the wreck of this ship aborted Baranov's plans to create a settlement on the Columbia River, allowing the American John Jacob Astor to gain a foothold on the Pacific coast, which ultimately decided the fate of the Oregon country (Gibson 1976:11).

By the end of the first decade of the nineteenth century, prices for foreign vessels acquired in America became much more reasonable. In 1807, for example, the British ship *Myrtle* (renamed *Kad'yak*) was acquired for 42,000 rubles (Pierce 1965:81). The company also found it advantageous to pay for the purchased ships with furs, and in 1814 three "fully equipped copper-sheathed" American vessels of 250 tons each were bought with sea otter skins (Tikhmenev 1978:149). At first these were ships that came to Russian attention while trading or hunting in Alaska, Hawai'i, or California. Not surprisingly, with a few exceptions, the vessels purchased in America were built in U.S. yards in Boston, New Bedford, and New York.

A more selective approach governed purchase of the so-called "round-the-world ships." Round-the-world ships were ships sent from St. Petersburg to Alaska via Cape Horn and Cape Good Hope. At first the sole purpose of such expeditions was avoiding the long and costly overland transportation of goods necessary for colonial operations. Since the majority of Russia's industrial centers and agricultural areas were located in western Russia, supplying Russian America with Russian goods included overland transportation across most of Eurasia and then shipping from Okhotsk to Alaska. Direct shipping from St. Petersburg was faster and more cost-efficient. This new way of supplying the colonies commenced in 1803, when two ships, *Nadezhda* and *Neva*, sailed from St. Petersburg to the Pacific outposts of the RAC. Since the round-the-world ships often remained in Alaska, this also reinforced the company's fleet. As the company's representatives in St. Petersburg experienced difficulty finding ships appropriate for such demanding voyages in Russia, they began to acquire them in the ports of Western Europe instead.

Both political and economic factors influenced the pattern of European purchases. At the beginning, the company relied on British shipyards. By 1847, however, the escalation in tensions between Russia and England, which eventually led to the Crimean War, prompted the RAC to search for other European builders. The German Hanseatic cities of Lübeck and Hamburg, with their

old tradition of shipbuilding and convenient access to European industries, offered perfect sources of affordable ships and supplies. From 1821 to 1852, six ships for the RAC were purchased in Germany. Two of sixteen RAC round-the-world ships were built in the Finnish city of Åbo (Turku), and five were ordered from East Coast shipyards in the United States.

Not all round-the-world ships belonged to the company: two-thirds of the ships carrying passengers and supplies from Europe to colonial settlements in the New World were Russian imperial naval vessels (Ivashintsov 1980:iii). They usually came to Alaska in late summer, over-wintered, and left the following spring with passengers and goods bound for St. Petersburg. These were the only ships built in western Russia that were engaged in company business.

While company documentation does not explain why the RAC did not purchase more ships from Russian shipyards, there were probably three main reasons. First of all, during the first half of the nineteenth century, Russia was involved in several wars, which forced the country's shipyards to concentrate on naval needs. Second was the matter of price: the highly industrialized shipyards of England, Germany, and America were more efficient and offered more affordable ships. Finally, all the shipyards in Russia capable of producing the required vessels belonged to the government and thus lacked the flexibility of the smaller commercial private European shipbuilding establishments.

In addition to economic goals, round-the-world voyages often had political or scientific agendas. One of the main goals of the voyage of the *Neva* and *Nadezhda* in 1803–1806, for example, was to establish diplomatic relations with Japan. International politics often caused alterations of routes and schedules. Politics, combined with the decline of the fur trade, which meant no profit on the return trip from Alaska, eventually brought round-the-world voyages to an end.

fleet anatomy: analysis

Between 1794 and 1867, forty-nine ships were built in the colonies and thirty-one were purchased. The fact that the company was unable to build enough vessels for its own use was often criticized by both Russian and foreign observers. Yet it also demonstrates that the managers of the RAC recognized the strengths and weaknesses of their shipbuilding, and engaged the American and European

ships to the company's financial benefit. Although at no point in the company's history did the officials and directors develop an articulated fleet program or plan, the average number of active seagoing company-owned ships fluctuated between ten and twelve throughout the sixty-eight years of Russian presence in Alaska.

Colonial shipbuilding reached two peaks: 1794–1804 and 1827–1835. The first was the period before the RAC began to purchase foreign vessels for their fleet; the second was the time when the company had three active shipyards (Fig. 2). The decade from 1849 to 1859 demonstrates a shift from shipbuilding to purchasing ships both in Europe and North America. The further reduction of both colonial shipbuilding and purchase of foreign vessels indicates not the decline of the RAC fleet but rather a general improvement in navigation, resulting in a decreased rate of wrecked company ships.

With time, the average tonnage of ships launched in the colonial yards decreased. Starting in the 1830s, the company's shipyards began to specialize in smaller vessels designed for cruising the coast, leaving the construction of larger deep-water ships to the shipbuilding facilities of Europe and America. Tonnage-wise, foreign-built ships constituted the larger part of the fleet, which demonstrates the company's objective evaluation of their shipbuilding capacity.

The picture emerging from this analysis is a well-planned, though small and somewhat conservative fleet that developed in response to the immediate needs of the Russian colonies. This focus on internal needs resulted in some lost commercial opportunities. Even when the port of Novo-Arkhangelsk was the only facility on the entire Pacific coast of North America capable of producing steamships, the company overlooked the chance to establish a potentially profitable business. Before blaming such an attitude on lack of entrepreneurial ambitions or the company's shortsightedness, one should consider the organization of the company's maritime affairs.

organization of maritime affairs

Throughout its entire history, the RAC battled two problems: the lack of sufficient manpower and the inability to be self-sufficient in agricultural production. Difficulties with recruiting low-class workers for the Russian colonies in America are frequently blamed on feudal serfdom, which the Russian Empire abolished only in 1861 (Sarafian 1970:12). However, neither the free middle

class nor the nobility rushed to settle in the colonies. The company sought to solve this problem through recruitment of Siberian exiles as well as the government-sponsored program of engaging retired naval ranks. One incentive it could not offer was a monetary reward. After Shelikhov's company secured the monopoly on Alaska furs, the flow of wealth rarely reached the pockets of men living and working in Alaska. The labor shortage strongly affected all areas of the company's life, including seafaring. The company rarely had more than two shipwrights. The average number of mariners was thirty-seven sailors and fifteen officers. Considering that it took a crew of thirty to operate a standard sailing ship, this situation was indeed catastrophic.

To offset the lack of Russian sailors, the company did two things: (1) recruited local populations, both Alaska Natives and children of mixed Russian and Native parentage; and (2) hired foreigners. Navigational training of Alaska Native and Creole children took place both in the colonies and in Russia. In 1794, a fifteen-year-old Russian boy, Filipp Kashevarov, was assigned to the English shipbuilder James Shields to study navigation. The apprenticeship brought long-lasting results: throughout his career in Alaska, Kashevarov commanded many vessels. Three sons born of his Native wife became seafarers after receiving their education at the Kronshtadt Navigational School near St. Petersburg (Pierce 1990:217–218). Sending children to schools in Russia became a standard practice. In 1850, for instance, the company was sponsoring twelve boys attending educational institutions in St. Petersburg, including two attending navigational schools (Russian-American Company 1851:16). Most of these students were children of mixed Russian and Alaska Native families, although official company records do not specify if Russian parentage was a requirement. Prestigious as it may sound, studying abroad was both difficult and dangerous for young Alaskans. Exposed to the new diseases and loneliness far from home, some of them died in Russia. On average, this educational effort yielded one trained mariner each year. Once back in Alaska, these young men were held in high esteem and often had very successful careers as navigators and ship captains.

Training was also available in the colonies. In 1834, the colonial government requested one officer and three mariners to be sent to Alaska specifically "to train creoles in seafaring" (Russian Naval Archive 1834–1836:1). By 1843, the boys' school in Novo-Arkhangelsk had forty-nine students, and according to the RAC annual report, two of the

graduates “were found very fit for the position of captain’s assistants” (Russian-American Company 1844:26).

State aid for the problems of colonial seafaring consisted mostly of the round-the-world voyages of the naval ships and the dispatch of naval officers for open positions in America. This program was naturally susceptible to changes in European politics: e.g., in the event of escalation of conflict with another nation, officers would be needed for the navy. Yet naval participation in and supervision of the company’s seafaring contributed both to improved ship maintenance and discipline at sea.

Any discussion of discipline in the colonies can hardly avoid the issue of employee alcoholism (Anichtchenko 2013b:133–139). The company managers recognized the problem and tried to battle it, each in his own manner. Alexander Baranov, for example, invented an entire training strategy:

He would lock himself in the fort together with the entire garrison, bring a bucket full of rum and invite everyone to drink as much as they want, and also would drink himself. As soon as he saw that everyone was drunk senseless, he sounded the alarm. Everyone was expected to be in his place. Those ones who could not crawl to their places, but laid with their ammunition, Baranov always praised, but woe betide him who laid drunk without his gun. For this Baranov punished severely. Baranov always said: drink, but mind your business. If one lays drunk with the gun, savages won’t touch him, thinking that he is just pretending, those, however, who are armless, will be attacked by savages, since they will see that he is defended less (Markov 1849:29).

In 1845, the harsh but logical solution was instituted when drinking hard liquor was banned everywhere in the colonies, except aboard a ship, where it was strictly rationed. This prohibition was announced at a public meeting of colonial employees and had such a drastic effect that many people “upon hearing this could not repress tears” (Markov 1849:33). Although this regulation was both widely unpopular and unsuccessful (as smuggling and moonshining were hard to control), no loss of a RAC ship following the prohibition was blamed on a drunken crew or commander. In fact, this period was virtually free of disasters at sea.

The fleet’s performance in fulfilling its mission of colonial trade deserves special attention. Throughout the history of Russian Alaska, fur trade with China was one of the colonies’ main *raison d’être*. Unlike other European

powers, Russia’s main access to the Chinese market was not the sea port of Canton, but the inland trading outpost of Kiakhta. The ships, therefore, only partially participated in this important trade: they delivered furs from Alaska to the ports of Okhotsk and Petropavlovsk, leaving the rest to the long overland routes. Likewise, the valuable cargo of teas, obtained in China, was in many cases sent to Russian markets overland across Siberia. Watercraft, therefore, were mostly engaged in two other areas of colonial life: communication between the various outposts and supplying the company.

The latter was a constant problem. Grain and meats were imported from Europe, European Russia, and California; sugar, salt, rum, and coffee came from Hawai’i. The gold rush of 1849 created a massive exodus of the labor force from Hawai’i and at the same time caused inflation of prices in California, thus destroying two of the Russians’ most important lines of supply. The same gold rush provided new financial opportunities, such as the ice trade, which the company entered in 1852 after the *Bachus*, a vessel belonging to the American Ice Company, arrived in Sitka and purchased 250 tons of ice at the attractive price of seventy-five dollars per ton (Tikhmenev 1978:335). The next year, Russians began ice shipments to San Francisco that would reach 1,200 tons annually. This new commercial initiative demanded year-round participation of two company vessels. Despite its success, the ice trade was not enough to solve the company’s financial problems, and in 1867 the Russian Crown signed the sales agreement with the United States. At this time the Russian American fleet consisted of twelve vessels, only two of which had less than ten years’ career at sea. Ten of the Russian-American Company ships were sold to interested parties in America and Canada; the other two sailed back to Russia (Pierce 1972).

The Russian historian S. B. Okun offered the following outline of the history of the RAC: “in the first period of the Company’s existence there was peltry but no order. In the second period there was more order but less peltry, and, finally, in the third period, there was perfect order but the treasury was empty” (Okun 1951:225). In many ways the development of the company’s fleet fits this description. It started as a random collection of vernacular vessels and developed into a reliable body of ships built to the latest standards of European and American shipbuilding. Although hardly impressive when it came to number and quality of ships, the RAC fleet played an important role in the development of seafaring and naval presence

in the Bering Sea and the North Pacific: ports were built, coasts were charted, and a generation of Russian and Native sailors were trained. The vast oceans east of the Siberian coast were no longer the terminus of the Russian Empire, separating it from America, but a bridge, a connection, the benefits and perils of which continue to play important roles in the political and economic history of both countries.

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