

INTERPRETATION OF CULTURE CONTACT AT COLONY ROSS

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The short history of the Russian settlement of Ross in northern California has been represented in many interpretive displays, programs, and publications since the site became a park in 1906. This paper will examine the early emphasis on representations only of the Russian presence. Later, with increased sensitivity, research, and more accurate information, Native people who were the most populous group at Ross and who accomplished the most meaningful contributions to the settlement's existence, began to be acknowledged. The growth in this awareness finally began to emerge in the public interpretation of these noteworthy and indispensable Native groups. Proposals for new interpretive programs will also be discussed.

Secluded on the rugged coastline of Sonoma County in northern California, Fort Ross State Historic Park was chosen for preservation in 1903 by the California Landmarks League. This unique historic site was then held in trust by William Randolph Hearst until the California State Legislature transferred ownership to the people of California in 1906. The original 3.01 acres, which Hearst purchased, was designated as a park in 1906 just a month before the 1906 earthquake which devastated many structures in Northern California; the earthquake damaged or destroyed many of the original Russian buildings at the Ross Colony. Therein I feel lies a great deal of the problem with the mission and message brought to the visiting public by the State of California in its century of stewardship. Too much attention was paid to the restoration of the "original" buildings, with little or no research into the actual inhabitants of the isolated Russian colonial venture. It was not until the 1940s, under the supervision of State Park Ranger John C. McKenzie, that an emphasis on the cultural aspects of Russian settlement was seriously considered in the interpretation and investigation of the site. In subsequent years, other rangers and interested archaeologists began to search for the "true" mission and purpose of the park, and its rightful place as a significant location of colonial cultural contact and as a model for critical analysis of a suite of topics. These include analyses regarding culture contact and ethnic identity in pluralistic colonial communities.

Fort Ross State Historic Park was established by the California Department of Parks and Recreation, to enhance the visitor's appreciation for this unique, nineteenth-century settlement. To adequately and effectively interpret this important California landmark, one must understand and appreciate the main purpose

of the Russian and Alaska Native presence here. Most important in any interpretive endeavor is to assure that visitors achieve a sense of the impact that this diverse, disparate, sometimes disreputable, cultural congregate had on the environment of coastal California. In particular, this interpretation examines the effects of Russian and Native Alaskan cultures on California's Native.

One of the main elements of the Russian occupation of this site was the acquisition and trade of the pelts of sea otters and fur seals. For that reason, the Russian American Company established this outpost and sent its Native Alaskan workforce throughout the Eastern Pacific in search of the 'soft gold,' the economic basis of Russian trade. Fur, particularly marine mammal fur, was the lifeblood and driving ambition of the company and, ultimately, the Czarist government in Mother Russia. Through an historically accurate trail design, a thoughtful and culturally sensitive setting of trail viewing locations, tasteful subtle signing and a comprehensive trail guide, one might achieve the feeling of actually being in this colony and experiencing the sights, sounds, and smells that an actual resident of the Russian settlement might have experienced.

One must be constantly reminded of the remoteness of the location, due to the current-day intrusions of State Highway One, the remaining structures of the C.A. Call Ranch, and logging operations. Modern recreational use of the Fort Ross Cove beach area, with traffic going directly through the heart of the settlement, remains a challenge. I and others have, however, suggested alternatives to relocation of the existing road to the beach and development of adequate boat-launching facilities in a

less obtrusive area within the park, yet out of the main settlement occupation and habitation locations (Murley 1994).

Currently, park displays and interpretive exhibits do not adequately portray the importance of trade and interaction with Native people, Spanish/Mexican governments, and the all-important Yankee traders. The procurement of marine-mammal pelts and the subsequent trade of these items to an international clientele were paramount to the very existence of this colony. Without this barter and its ultimate importance to the Russian American Company and its Russian stockholders, this settlement would never have been established or would have quickly disappeared. Any interpretive efforts should emphasize the multi-cultural interactions, which characterized daily life at the colony.

The primary interpretive period for Fort Ross State Historic Park is from 1812, when the Russians first established the colony, to 1841, when they abandoned the settlement and returned to their previously established headquarters in Alaska. A cultural-history trail could transport visitors, with minimal construction or intrusion, back to the bustling days of an outpost on the California coast, an outpost of cultural diversity and interaction. An emphasis should be placed on the day-to-day life of the residents. As I tried to capture in the paper "Kolonie Ross: Sounds from the Silence" (Murley 1992), colorful, descriptive language could be used to allow the visitor to be transported back to the 1800s through text, and sensually stimulated by the surroundings where they now stand. They could view the landscape and the structures as a Native Alaskan hunter; a Native Californian; a Russian overseer; or a visiting American, Spanish, Mexican, or British trader.

After seeing the main park visitor center for general orientation, the time traveler would visit the interior of the reconstructed stockade and exit the front sally port, where the journey would begin. The first stop would be the Native Alaskan Village Site. Here in the trail guide/brochure would be information and an artist's renditions of the area during the height of activity. The depictions of the site could come either from archival drawings or from a composite sketch done by a current historical illustrator. This image and all representations other than original drawings would be done with an "historic sense and feeling," using styles and materials employed by travelers and ocean voyagers of the period. Particular attention should be paid to the works of early visiting scientists, ethnographer and naturalists and artists Il'ia Vosnesenski, Louis Choris, Georg von Langsdorff, Pavel Mikhailov and Mikhail Tikhanov. The information should emphasize that by far the most

populous group at Ross was the Native Alaskans. In the 1820 census compiled by then-manager Ivan Kuskov, 53% of the adult population of 260 were Alaskan Natives, and the majority of these (126) were from Kodiak Island (Istomin 1992: 9). The identity of these valuable workers, who were truly the backbone of the Russian American Company, has often been confused and poorly represented. Using the term "Aleut," the Russians indiscriminately lumped together many different Native Alaskan cultural entities, including Chugachmiut from Prince William Sound, some Unekurmiut from the Kenai Peninsula (Pullar and Knecht 1995:15), and many Qikertarmiut, "the People of the Island," from Kodiak Island (Pullar 1994:23, note 3; Clark 1984:195; Murley 1994:1). It should be explained that a Native Alaskan village of small wood or plank houses and possibly some semi-subterranean dwellings was located on the ocean bluff in front of the stockade. Here resided single Native Alaskan men, some Native Alaskan families, and other households consisting of Native Alaskan men and Native Californian women and their children. Native Californians lived in a small village east of the stockade and in many other villages in the coastal hills above Ross (Lightfoot et al. 1991:23-24; Lightfoot and Martinez 1997:8).

Here also should be mentioned that as populations of sea otter diminished near Ross, hunters had to travel farther for the company's fur profits. Commonly, the Alaskan hunters undertook long-term expeditions. Russian ships would transport the baidarkas (*quayq* in Alutiiq) to a given location, then drop off the men and their skin boats. These free-ranging hunters would remain for two or three months, hunting sea otter, fur seal, or sea lion, then be retrieved by a mother ship and returned to the settlement at Ross (Murley 1994:14). Another important yet little-cited fact which should be mentioned is that the Russians also had an artel (a work group of hunters) for many years on the Farallon Islands, the rocky granitic specks which lie about 30 miles west of the entrance to San Francisco Bay. Here bird eggs were gathered, birds were killed for food, and skins were used for garments, and fur seals and sea lions were hunted. "At the Farallons, 200 sea lions were killed annually to provide skins and sinews for the baidarkas, meat and blubber for food, bladders for waterproof clothing and oil for lamps" (Essig et al. 1995:8, note 21). We know from some Russian American Company archival information that in the 1820s, Kodiak Island native hunters who had been brought to Ross by the Russians were also taken to the Farallons. There were also local natives, some of whom were wives of the men and others who were sent to the island to work as punishment for "crimes" against the Russians (Istomin 1992:5). The archaeological record also reflects this

ethnic composition, as artifacts recovered by Francis Riddell represented elements of Russian, Alaska Native, and Native Californian cultures (Riddell 1955:18; see also Murley 1994:14). In excavations done by Riddell in the 1950s and by Dr. Thomas Wake and myself in 1999, it was reaffirmed that the artifactual assemblage we excavated represented the diverse cultural mix of the island's inhabitants. We know the names of some of these people from a census recorded by then-Ross manager Ivan Kuskov.

Some of this information could be condensed and added to the brochure. The visitor could learn about "Kap'pisha," a Coast Miwok from Bodega Bay, who was serving his sentence out on the islands, and he was accompanied by *Vayamin*, a Kashaya woman "from the vicinity of Ross" (Istomin 1992:14). It is not clear, but one might speculate that they met at Ross when he was brought there for punishment. Another native woman from the Ross area named "Yayumen" was married to a native of Kodiak, "Kosma Talizhun," from Shashkatskoe village (Istomin 1992:30), and they worked on the islands, also. In our excavations we found a few glass trade beads that probably belonged to one of these native people. The round, red glass beads were found in an excavation unit that also contained the bones of many marine mammals, mostly California sea lion, and numerous bones of common murre. We know these workers were sent here to process food for the Ross colony, so my thought is that while butchering and preparing these animals, the worker might have broken a necklace or bracelet of trade beads, and in retrieving them for restringing, might have lost the couple which we found. Interestingly, a red trade bead similar to those found on Southeast Farallon was recovered from the Native Alaskan Village Site at Fort Ross, excavated by Dr. Kent Lightfoot and his crew from the University of California, Berkeley, in 1989-91. In another unit, we turned up an abalone shell ornament and a clamshell disc bead, which are traditional adornments for California native people. These might have belonged to *Vayamin* and were lost while working in this other location. We will never know exactly what happened. However, by looking at artifactual materials we excavated and archival information gleaned from historical records, we can get a better picture of what life might have been like for those misplaced individuals on those barren isles.

Moving to a location overlooking the cove, one could read in the pamphlet information on the commercial uses of the beach site. This could cite Dr. James Allan's (1997) extensive research regarding the ship-building area, which details the cove work area as well as a building and launching area for ships. He notes that the decline in profits from fur-bearing sea

mammals, combined with the disappointing agricultural yields at Ross, forced company management to implement new economic enterprises to offset losses. In 1816, the first sailing vessel built in Alta California was begun in Fort Ross Cove (Allan 1997:53). One could discuss the "banya" described by Father Mariano Payeras in his visit to Ross in 1822 (Payeras 1979). This feature was actually excavated by Dr. Lightfoot, Roberta Jewett, and myself in the summer of 2000, and probably should be mentioned before it is eventually washed away by surf and slope erosion in the cove area.

The analysis of the Russian Orthodox Cemetery at Ross was a multidisciplinary investigation that took place over several years (Osborn 1997). These investigations provided invaluable evidence for the interpretation of life, and death, at this remote outpost of the Russian Empire. Rather than going into a detailed text suggestion here, let it be noted that insights into certain individuals can be treated while looking across the ravine of Fort Ross Creek toward the reconstructed cemetery location. Here also it may be appropriate to include the discovery and analysis of a human burial isolate found washed out of the creek bank in 1999. Mention of extensive consultation with Native Americans both in the Ross area and in Alaska, as well as with the Russian Orthodox Church, are probably worth highlighting, due to the importance of the link between today's Native people and their ancestors. Perhaps a mention of the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act of 1990 would be deemed necessary. In any case, osteological and mtDNA analyses, along with historical documentation, suggest that the most parsimonious explanation is the following: the male burial from Fort Ross was descended from a Native Alaskan woman, was brought to California by the Russian America Company, and resided with a local native woman in the vicinity of Fort Ross, where he died and was buried outside the cemetery (Hollimon and Murley 1999).

Moving to the east side of the stockade facing Highway One, the coastal ridge system and the possible site of Metini, many important (and perhaps controversial) topics might be addressed. From studies by Dr. Antoinette Martinez (1997, 1998) and others, we have learned about life in proto-historic Native households near Ross, and particularly in ridge village sites. It is well documented that soon after their arrival in California, Native Alaskan men formed unions with Native California women. "As early as 1815, the San Rafael baptismal register records that a Kashaya woman gave birth to a daughter by a "Codiaco" or Kodiak husband (Jackson 1983:240). Kuskov also notes in his 1820 census that of the native women from "the vicinity of Ross," "from the Cape Barro-Dearena" [sic]

(Point Arena), “from the Slavianka River” and “Bodegan,” the vast majority was with Alutiiq men (Istomin 1992). These women were Kashaya, Central Pomo, Southern Pomo, and Coast Miwok; of these 56 Native Californian women residing in inter-ethnic households, 43 were living with Kodiak Island Alutiiq men. These unions with Native Californian women had, according the 1820 and 1821 censuses, produced 28 children (Lightfoot and Martinez 1997:4; Istomin 1992). Khlebnikov (1990:199) also noted in 1824 that, “All the Aleuts have Indian women...” Some adult native Alaskan men also went to the “native place” of local Indians, in effect deserting the company. As Khlebnikov so romantically renders it: “There have been cases in which the Aleuts have run off to the mountains with their lovers ...” (Khlebnikov 1990:194). Some ran off and were either killed or captured by the Spanish, while others escaped temporarily, only to return later. Such a case was reported by Fedor Lutke on a visit to Bodega Bay, while circumnavigating the globe on the Russian sloop *Kamchatka* in 1818. The man who interpreted for the Indians and the visiting Russians was an Aleut. He “had run off when Kuskov first went to the Port of San Francisco. [The Aleut] had lived with the Indians for nearly a year, but when the next group came to hunt, he reappeared and began hunting sea otters with the others ... He said they quite often fight and quarrel with one another, but they never bothered him” (Lutke 1989:275). We would be remiss not to mention at least some of this research, because as Martinez points out, the ephemeral marriages between Kashaya women and Native Alaskan men meant that there was a great deal of movement back and forth between the local villages of the women, and the fort itself. Therefore, there were great opportunities for Kashaya women to be mediators and cultural innovators. An analysis of ridge-top sites in the greater Ross neighborhood demonstrated that the interactions between various ethnicities had a strictly defined gender roles, and that these types of relationships were manifested in the material record of these archaeological sites (Martinez 1997:143).

There should also be considerable mention of the work done by Otis Parrish, Hannah Ballard (1995) and others on the location and the true function of the site referred to most often as Metini. Here again a sensitive artist’s representation done in consultation with local Native people and possibly illustrated by the talented artist and Tribal Chair Eric Wilder, would bring the local Native culture to life. There is a thriving community of Kashaya natives living in the nearby Stewart’s Point Rancheria. Emphasis on the continuity of this culture as well as the intermarriage with men from different, distant cultures could be a highlight of

the trail and serve many far-reaching purposes, including, but not limited to, historical accuracy.

Moving to a final stop on the trail, one could view the area where once stood another seldom-mentioned area of the settlement, the “slaboda.” The multi-ethnic community at Settlement Ross was divided into four distinct ethnic residential areas. Upper-level Russian management lived within the stockade. Ethnic Russians and Creoles (people who were the offspring of Russian/Native unions) of lower standing lived in a village of neat little houses replete with individual kitchen gardens. This village was located outside the stockade to the northwest. It was here, I believe, that a large portion of the ever-growing Creole population lived. This group became a recognized caste in Russian America and eventually comprised up to 50% of the company’s workforce (Fedorova, personal communication 1998).

I propose to take an opportunity not often presented to those of us who “came after” those who “were here before.” In a Cultural History Trail at Fort Ross State Historic Park, misrepresentations, misdirections and misinformation could be addressed and set “on the right path,” so to speak. For what reasons these inaccurate renditions came to dominate, we cannot thoroughly know, but they may have included neglect, lack of resources, lack of interest, or lack of direction. For centuries, dominant cultures throughout the world have attempted to “discover” and display the past through anthropological and ethnographic collections and exhibits in museums. Post-colonial museum professionals have attempted through archaeology and ethnography to interpret indigenous cultures through analysis of both artifact collection and collections of human remains. In their ardent quest for knowledge of the past, they have often treated the cultures they wish to examine as extinct or essentially “dead.” They might suggest that only through archaeology and physical anthropology can even the remaining members of an under-represented group understand their own past. As Larry J. Zimmerman, a professor of archaeology at the University of South Dakota states, “Archaeologists often claim to speak for past peoples, however remote. Implicit in this claim is the notion that they, as practitioners of a science, are the only ones capable of doing so” (Zimmerman 1996:214). This elitist, though sometimes genuinely and compassionately directed, research ideal has become more and more distasteful to indigenous people of the world. Zimmerman quotes Cecil Antone of the Gila River Indian Tribes who said in a manner eloquent and succinct, “My ancestors, relatives, grandmother so on down the line, they tell you about the history of our

people and it's passed on . . . basically what I am trying to say, I guess is that archaeology don't mean nothing" (Zimmerman 1996:214). An awakening of cultural and ethnic identity and a growing pride in their ancestry has driven many Native people to challenge the collection and research methods of the museum culture itself.

"Who owns the past?" This question has come to the forefront of a divisive debate, a protracted and sometimes hostile conflict in many culture-contact sites in the United States in the last half-century. Native Americans have questioned the ethics and the legality of representations of their cultures, and have made no secret of their outrage and enmity. We now have a chance at Ross to set an example for generations of historians, archaeologists, and interpreters of our wonderfully varied and intensely compelling past.

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