ALASKA STATE MUSEUMS

CONCEPTS

SPRING 2009 TECHNICAL PAPER NUMBER 5 REVISED

Symbols of Russian America: Imperial Crests & Possession Plates in North America

by Mary Foster & Steve Henrikson

As Russian adventurers sailed eastward along the Pacific coast of Alaska in the late eighteenth century, they methodically placed numerous "calling cards" as tangible evidence of their visits. By giving sculptures of the double-headed eagle—symbolic of Russian imperial authority—to Native leaders, and by burying metal plates with Cyrillic messages, the explorers laid claim to Russian America.

The rich lands of the Northwest Coast drew explorers, scientists, and fur traders representing the world's most powerful colonial empires. The United States, Great Britain, Spain, and Russia, each with commercial and political interests in Alaska and the Pacific coast, sent sea expeditions to discover natural resources, establish ownership of desirable lands and diplomatic and open trade relations with Native inhabitants. Each nation attempted to lay a solid foundation of physical and documentary evidence to support its claims of land title: detailed logs and charts and metal markers placed on the land or given to the Native leaders established discovery and possession.

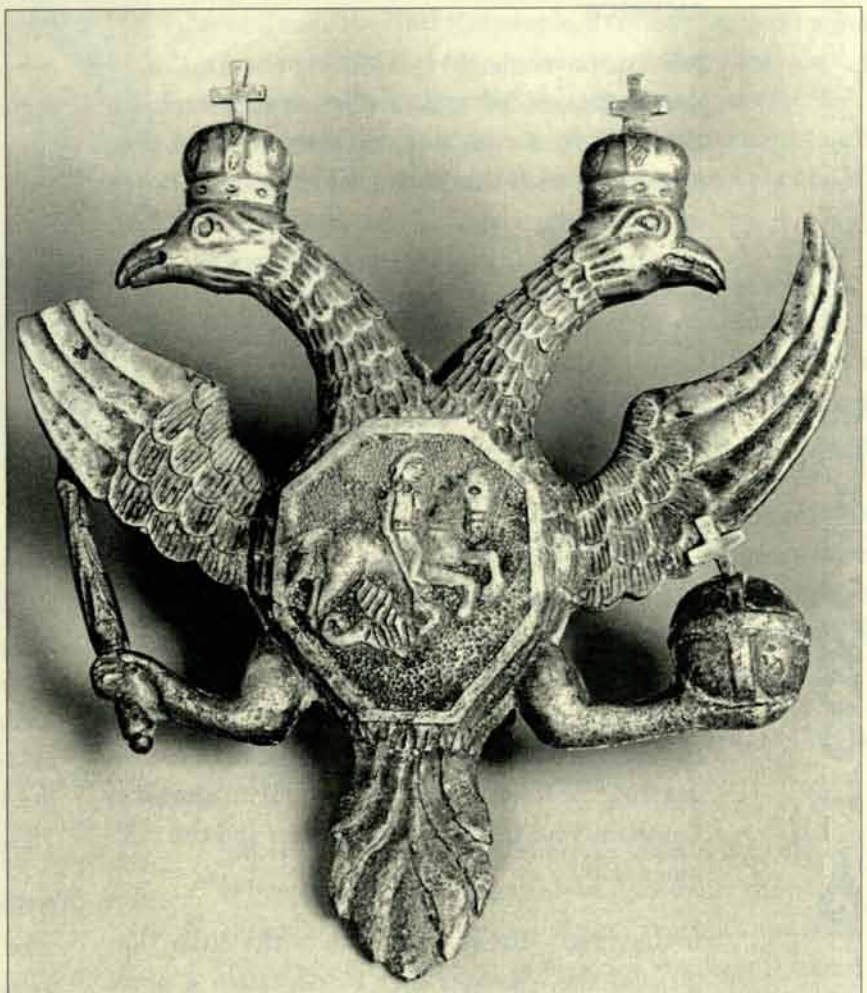

Figure 1. *The Kiks.ádi clan of the Sitka Tlingit received this double-headed eagle crest as a peace offering following the 1804 Battle of Sitka. Alaska State Museum III-R-150.*

Some possession markers were designed to be visible warnings to rival nations that the land was under claim. Crosses placed on prominent headlands, highly visible from the water, announced to late-coming seafarers that there was "no vacancy." Symbolic gifts given to Native leaders—written proclamations, medallions, and coats-of-arms—also signified that the land was already under imperial claim. Other markers were silent, buried in the ground at secret locations, to be used as proof of ownership should it be disputed. Metal plaques, coins, notes in bottles, and other tokens, buried in secrecy, were safe from destruction by potential counter claimants. While the use of markers was once common along the coast, few have survived into the twentieth century.

DOUBLE-HEADED EAGLE CRESTS IN RUSSIAN AMERICA

Russian fur traders, representing the Tsar, used the double-headed eagle symbol as they explored the north Pacific. As they annexed new lands, they negotiated with the Native inhabitants in hopes of convincing them of the advantages of Russian rule. To ratify an agreement, they gave metal double-headed eagle crests to important Native leaders who were asked to wear and display them prominently. An original crest, nine and one-half inches tall, is preserved in the Alaska State Museum. Cast of a metal resembling bronze or brass, it is a simplified version of the tsarist double-headed eagle (figure 1).

This particular crest was reportedly presented to a Tlingit chief during the peace negotiations following the Battle of Sitka in 1804, when the Russians acquired land from the Tlingit Indians for the establishment of New Archangel. Now known as Sitka, the town served as the Russian-American Company's fur trading headquarters and the colonial capitol.

In July 1805, the Kiks.ádi clan of the Sitka Tlingit and the Russians met to negotiate a peace settlement. Aleksandr Baranov, chief manager of the Russian-American Company, was eager to establish peace, since his success in the fur trade depended on the Natives' benevolence. A Kiks.ádi delegation, led by clan elders, came to the Russian fort, and joined Baranov in an elaborate peace ceremony. Iurii Lisianskii witnessed the negotiations and wrote that Baranov presented the leader of the delegation with a "Russian [coat of] arms made of copper, fixed to the top of a long pole, and ornamented with eagle's feathers and ribbands." The chief received the gift "with great pleasure." Baranov "hung a copper crest" on another clan leader in recognition of his "zeal and friendliness toward the Russians" (Dauenhauer, Dauenhauer and Black, 2008:239,241.) One of these crests is likely the one now in the Alaska State Museum.

The details of the battle, peace negotiations, and presentation of the crest are preserved in Tlingit oral tradition, and over time, the crest became an heirloom to the Sitka Kiks.ádi. In 1885, Father Anatoli Kamenskii, a Russian Orthodox priest living in Sitka, wrote that Russian diplomatic gifts such as medals, certificates, military uniforms, and "a double-headed eagle weighing about ten pounds" were counted as ceremonial regalia and considered "priceless" (Kamenskii 1985:37). William Wanamaker, a clan member, inherited the crest and passed its history on to his children. He became friends with Father Andrew P. Kashevaroff, first curator of the Alaska Historical Library and Museum, and placed the crest at the Museum for safekeeping in 1935.

Just prior to World War II, George Benson, a Tlingit carver, designed a totem pole that relates the story of the Kiks.ádi battle with the Russians. Included on the pole is the carved depiction of the double-headed eagle crest symbolizing the peace settlement (figure 2). The pole stands in Sitka near the historic boundary between the Russian and Tlingit sections of the community.

Other double-headed eagle crests were distributed in Alaska both before and after the 1804 battle. In 1788, Gerasim Izmailov and Dmitrii Bocharov explored parts of the southern coastline of Alaska and claimed the land for Russia. They car-

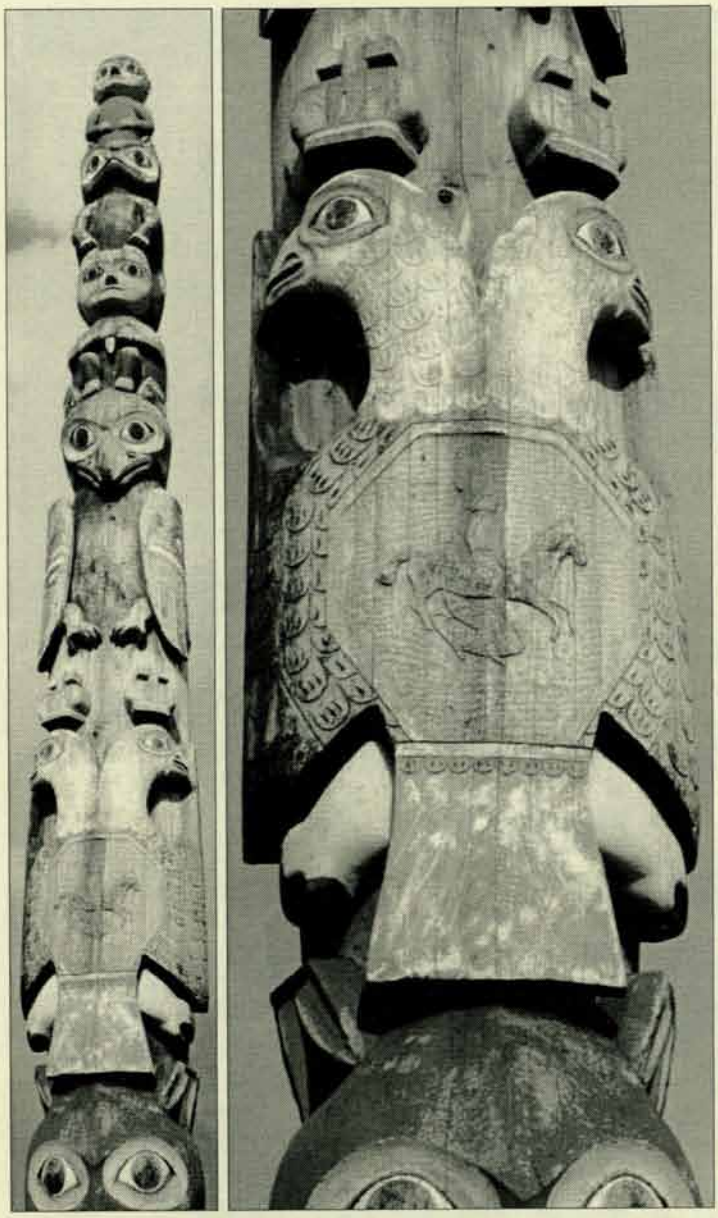

Figure 2. This totem pole, designed by Tlingit carver George Benson, tells the story of the 1804 Battle of Sitka, and includes a carved image of the double eagle crest given by the Russians to the Kiks.ádi Tlingit as a token of peace. The totem pole was erected in Sitka in the 1930s where it stands today. Photographs by Steve Henrikson.

ried five crests with them, one of which was presented to a Tlingit chief at Yakutat Bay. To show his loyalty to Russia and to protect his village from foreign ships, the chief was instructed to wear the crest on the front of his clothing. According to the Russians, the chief received the gift with great joy.

In 1793, Aleksandr Baranov's efforts to establish the fur trade among the Alutiiq included the presentation of a double-headed eagle crest to a village chief. In theory, rival fur traders would respect Russian sovereignty and trade monopoly over the area if they saw a crest being worn or displayed by Natives. However, Baranov wrote later that:

> out of the four villages I had annexed in the name of the Empress, [rival traders] plundered two and took the people prisoners. They took the crest of State which I had given to a toion [chief] and threw it on the ground and broke it. They said that this crest was a children's toy and that I was just fooling people (Tikhmenev 1979:34).

Only one other double-headed eagle crest is known to have survived, and was for many years in the Smithsonian Institution (figure 5). In 1934, the crest, broken and partially melted, was excavated from an eighteenth-century Klickitat Indian grave on an island in the Columbia River, in present-day Oregon. Since there is no evidence that the Russians ever visited the Klickitat people, a tribe living approximately one hundred and fifty miles upriver from the coast, the crest was probably received in trade from a coastal tribe. In recent years the Smithsonian repatriated the crest to a Native American group who claimed it as a funerary object.

POSSESSION PLATES

While the double-headed eagle crests carried by Natives were visible reminders of Russia's claim to North American shores, the Russians also left markers directly on the land. Posts and crosses, mounted on promontories, were visible from ships at sea. With rival nations encroaching on its claims, Russia's secret markers were buried in the earth, hidden from casual view, but available in case Russia's territorial claims were contested. At least twenty numbered plates, and an unknown quantity of unnumbered ones, may have once been buried along the Pacific coastline.

In 1787, Ivan Varfolomeevich Iakobi, governor general of Irkutsk, ordered Russian traders to:

> follow the shores of the American mainland to discover new islands and bring the islanders under the power of the Russian Empire, and affirm the acquisition of all the newly acquired part of America, marking the land with signs appropriate and natural to the Might and Name of Russia (Shelikhov 1981:83).

The following year, navigators Ismailov and Bocharov set sail with five metal plates, each marked with a cross and the words "Russian Territory" (Sheliknov 1981:84), which were to be buried at different locations along the coast.

Ismailov and Bocharov mapped each burial site, and went to great effort to keep the locations hidden from their crew and local Natives. Their original orders stated that each burial site was to be marked with a double-headed eagle crest, but since metal of any kind was in great demand among the Natives, this was deemed impractical. Surrendering to the inevitable, they simply presented the crests directly to Native leaders as gifts.

Secrecy was of utmost importance to prevent a rival empire from the tangible proof of Russia's claims. In 1802, when the locations of the secret plates were published without permission, Aleksandr Baranov was instructed to move the original plates as soon as possible, and to stealthily plant additional ones. The Russians probably continued depositing plates along the coast, from Alaska to California, until at least 1811.

Russia's claim to Alaska endured over time but its claims to lands further south did not prevail; Great Britain and the United States maintained a grip on these territories, and eventually won title, beginning in 1824. When Alaska was sold to the United States in 1867, Russia's possession plates, having served their purpose, remained buried and forgotten. Many decades passed before any of the plates gave up their secret vigil.

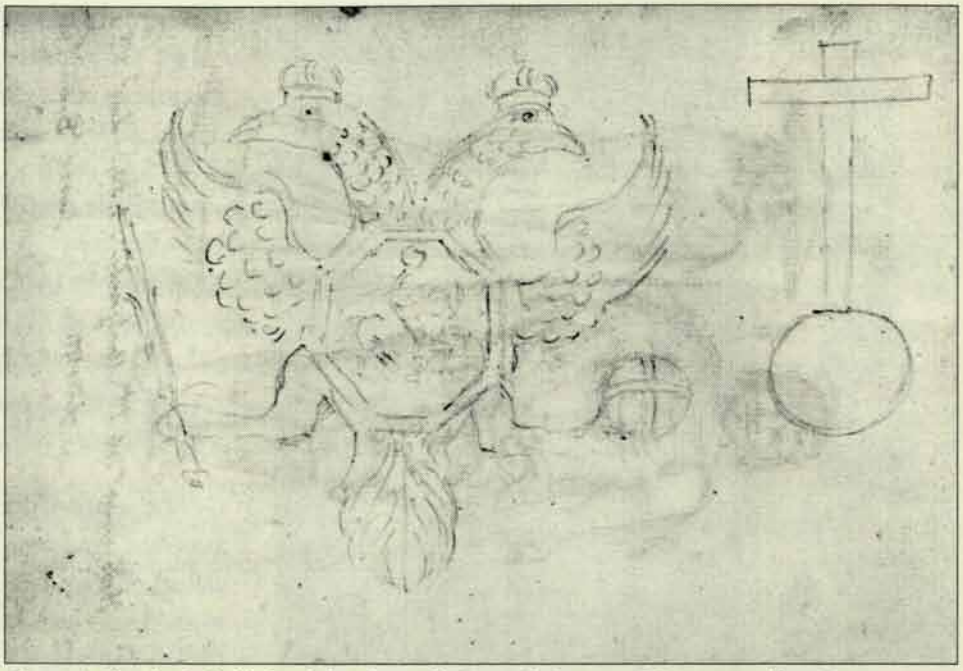

Figure 4. *Sketch of a double-headed eagle crest by Tomás de Suría, ca. 1791, presumably at Port Mulgrave (near Yakutat Bay) Alaska. The crest, possibly left by Ismailov and Bocharov, was displayed to deSuría of the Spanish expedition led by Alejandro Malaspina. Courtesy Yale Collection of Western Americana, Beinecke Library.*

Figure 5. *Found during the excavation of a Klickitat Indian burial in Oregon, this crest was probably traded inland from a coastal tribe. Smithsonian Institution, catalogue number 420307.*

The History and Symbolism of the Double-Headed Eagle

BY GARY CANDELARIA

While Russian explorers used the double-headed eagle as a symbol of the Russian imperial crown, it originally served as the crest of the emperor of the Eastern Roman Empire, perhaps inspired by the eagle standards carried by Roman legions. The eagle with one head facing west, the other east, gives image to the dual nature of Imperial Rome in its latter years: co-equal emperors, one residing in Rome, the other in Constantinople.

***Figure 3**. In its complete form, the double-headed eagle is an elaborate symbol of the Russian empire and the kingdoms it contained. Illustration by Keith Hoofnagle, courtesy National Park Service.*

With the fall of Rome, the double-headed eagle took on new meaning. The left (westward-facing) head now symbolized the fallen western empire, while the right (eastward-looking) head represented the surviving Eastern Roman Empire, renamed Byzantium. After the fall of Constantinople in 1453, the symbol emerged in Russia following the marriage of Ivan III, ruler of Moscow, to the niece of the last Byzantine emperor in 1472. Ivan proclaimed himself heir to the Byzantine throne, and adopted the appropriate trappings and symbols. Thus, the double-headed eagle was added to his heraldry, and came to be the dominant symbol of the Tsar of Moscow.

In its Russian resurrection, the double-headed eagle was embellished and given new meaning. Imperial crowns were added to each head, with a third crown suspended in between, symbolizing the rise of Moscow as the "Third Rome." The saying was, "Two Romes have fallen, Moscow is the third, there will be no other." The eagle's breast usually has a shield on it, depicting St. George, patron saint of Moscow and Russia (eight to ten other shields were later placed on the wings as the Russian Empire absorbed other empires and kingdoms). An orb, symbolizing the divine right of kings, and a scepter, representing royal power, are usually shown gripped by the eagle's talons. In its complete form, the symbol was intricate and detailed.

The double-headed eagle eventually became recognized around the world as the symbol of the tsars. Ivan was first to call himself "Tsar," a Slavic translation of the ancient term "Caesar," for "ruler." The title and the symbol passed down through three hundred years of the Romanov dynasty, to finally fall with the Bolshevik Revolution in 1917. The hammer and sickle of the Communist Party replaced the double-headed eagle, a hated symbol of the overthrown autocratic tsarist system. Recently, the double-headed eagle has made a comeback in the former Soviet Union as an historical symbol. As the country moves into a new age, the double-headed eagle has arisen as a respected reminder of the nation's distant origins, and as a link with the centuries, rulers, struggles, miseries, glories, and peoples of ancient Rome, vanished Byzantium, and historic Mother Russia.

In the mid-1930s, the Civilian Conservation Corps, when excavating the site of Russia's first settlement at Sitka, uncovered a possession plate at the depth of twenty-four inches, sandwiched between four specially-made bricks and topped with a flat stone (figure 6). The plate is made of iron, affixed with a cross and a strip of Cyrillic lettering that reads "Country in Possession of Russia." A separate strip of metal reads "No. 12"—according to Russian documents, Aleksandr Baranov was issued this plate in 1790, and probably buried it during his first reconnaissance of the Sitka area in 1795. In extremely fragile condition, this is the only numbered plate known to exist today. The plate remains in Sitka in the care of the National Park Service.

Other plates may still be buried along the coast. In 1971, historians Richard Pierce and Alexander Doll attempted to locate the plates deposited by Izmailov and Bocharov, using original maps and written descriptions of the burial sites. Another expedition in 1993, led by Russian navigator and historian Leonid Lysenko of Vladivostok, tried to find a plate originally buried at Nanwalek, Alaska. Neither efforts were successful in locating any evidence of the plates.

Since the written details were vague to begin with, and the landscape has changed significantly during the past two hundred years, locating any more of the original plates will be difficult. To complicate matters further, if Baranov had indeed relocated the plates as ordered, following the publication of the Izmailov and Bocharov journals, the plates would no longer be at their original locations.

With the burial sites now lost, it might only be through accident that additional plates come to light. Wave action, landslides, and corrosion pose bleak prospects for their survival. With the realization that further discoveries are unlikely, the historical value of the few surviving originals is extremely high.

Double-headed eagle crests and metal plates once delineated the extent of Russia's claim to the Pacific coast of North America. Effective control of the land, and profitable exploitation of Russian America, were impossible to achieve in the long run, given the tremendous obstacles involved in establishing successful settlements and industries on the isolated Pacific coast. Today, they symbolize the Russians' dream of colonial expansion and profit in the New World.

Figure 6. *Possession plate number 12 was excavated at the site of the first Russian settlement in the Sitka area. Sitka National Historical Park, catalogue number SITK 1650, photograph courtesy National Park Service.*

Russian Mystery in California

In 1960, this mysterious, unnumbered plate was found on Coronado Island in California. Cast of pewter, it was unearthed by W.G. Chapple in his backyard near San Diego, and it depicts the double-headed eagle. Completely devoid of lettering, the date and purpose of the plate is unknown. While the style of the double-headed eagle may be of 1850s vintage, references to unnumbered plates can be found in Russian documents dated much earlier.

Authentication and further research on this enigmatic artifact is stymied—the owner, and the plate, cannot be located. Fortunately, a casting of the plate was made while it was on temporary loan to the Junipero Serra Museum in San Diego, California.

Figure 7. *Casting of a plate found in California. The original was made of pewter and may represent another type of Russian possession plate. Photograph courtesy of the San Diego Historical Society.*

MARY FOSTER former docent for the Alaska State Museum.

GARY CANDELARIA, former chief ranger at Sitka National Historical Park.

STEVE HENRIKSON is curator of collections of the Alaska State Museum.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Ascher, Abraham. *The Kremlin*. New York: Newsweek Book Division, 1973.

Barnett, Anthony W. and Paul J.F. Schumacher. *An Analysis of the Archaeological Excavations by the U.S. Forest Service at Old Sitka, Sitka, Alaska in 1934-1935*. Sitka, AK: National Park Service, 1967.

Boraas, Alan. *Report of a Portion of the Admiral Nevelskoi Russian Expedition to Southcentral Alaska*. Soldotna, AK: Kenai Peninsula College, 1993.

Clarkson, Jesse D. *A History of Russia*. New York: Random House, 1961.

Crampton, William. *Flags of the World*. New York: Dorset Press, 1990.

Dauenhauer, Nora Marks and Richard Dauenhauer. "The Battles of Sitka, 1802 and 1804, From Tlingit, Russian, and Other Points of View," in *Alaska History, Number 35: Russia in North America: Proceedings of the 2nd International Conference on Russian America*, edited by Richard Pierce, pp 6-24. Fairbanks, AK: The Limestone Press, 1990.

Dauenhauer, Nora Marks, Richard Dauenhauer, and Lydia Black, editors. *Anóoshi Lingít Aaníká = Russians in Tlingit America: the battles of Sitka, 1802 and 1804*. Seattle, WA: University of Washington Press, 2008.

Dmytryshyn, Basil, et al, editors and translators. *The Russian American Colonies: A Documentary Record 1798-1867*. Portland: Oregon Historical Society, 1989.

Fitzhugh, William and Aron Crowell, editors. *Crossroads of Continents*. Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1988.

Froncek, Thomas. *The Horizon Book of the Arts of Russia*. New York: American Heritage Publishing Company, 1970.

Grey, Ian. *The Horizon History of Russia*. New York: American Heritage Publishing Company, 1970.

Jacobs, Mark. "Early Encounters Between the Tlingit and the Russians," in *Alaska History, Number 35: Russia in North America: Proceedings of the 2nd International Conference on Russian America*, edited by Richard Pierce, pp. 1-6. Fairbanks, AK: The Limestone Press, 1990.

Kamenskii, Father Anatoli. *Tlingit Indians of Alaska*. Translated by Sergei Kan. Fairbanks: University of Alaska Press, 1985.

Khlebnikov, K.T. Baranov. *Materials for the Study of Alaska History, Number 3*. Edited by Richard Pierce. Kingston, ON: The Limestone Press, 1973.

Laguna, Frederica de. "Under Mount Saint Elias: The History and Culture of the Yakutat Tlingit," *in Smithsonian Contributions to Anthropology, vol. 7*. Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1972.

Pierce, Richard A. and Alexander Doll. "Alaskan Treasure," in *The Alaska Journal*, 1(1):2-7. 1971.

Pierce, Richard A. and John H. Winslow, editors. *H.M.S. Sulphur on the Northwest and California Coasts, 1837 and 1839: Materials for the Study of Alaska History, Number 12*. Kingston, ON: The Limestone Press, 1979.

Shelikhov, Gigorii I. *A Voyage to America, 1783-1786: Alaska History, No. 19*. Edited and translated by Richard Pierce. Kingston, ON: The Limestone Press, 1981.

Smith, Whitney. *Flags Through the Ages and Across the World*. New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1975.

Tikhmenev, P.A. *A History of the Russian-American Company*. Edited by Richard A. Pierce and Alton S. Donnelly. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1978.

A History of the Russian American Company, Volume 2: Materials for the Study of Alaska History, Number 13. Translated by Dmitri Krenov. Kingston, ON: The Limestone Press, 1979.

vonVolborth, Carl-Alexander. *Heraldry: Customs, Rules and Styles*. Poole, UK: Blandford Press, 1981.

Woodcock, Thomas and John Martin Robinson. *The Oxford Guide to Heraldry*. Oxford University Press, 1988.

The Concepts series publishes information on the preservation of Alaska's material heritage and recent research on the collections of the Alaska State Museum, Juneau and the Sheldon Jackson Museum, Sitka.

ALASKA STATE MUSEUMS
Division of Libraries, Archives and Museums
395 Whittier Street Juneau, AK 99801
www.museums.state.ak.us