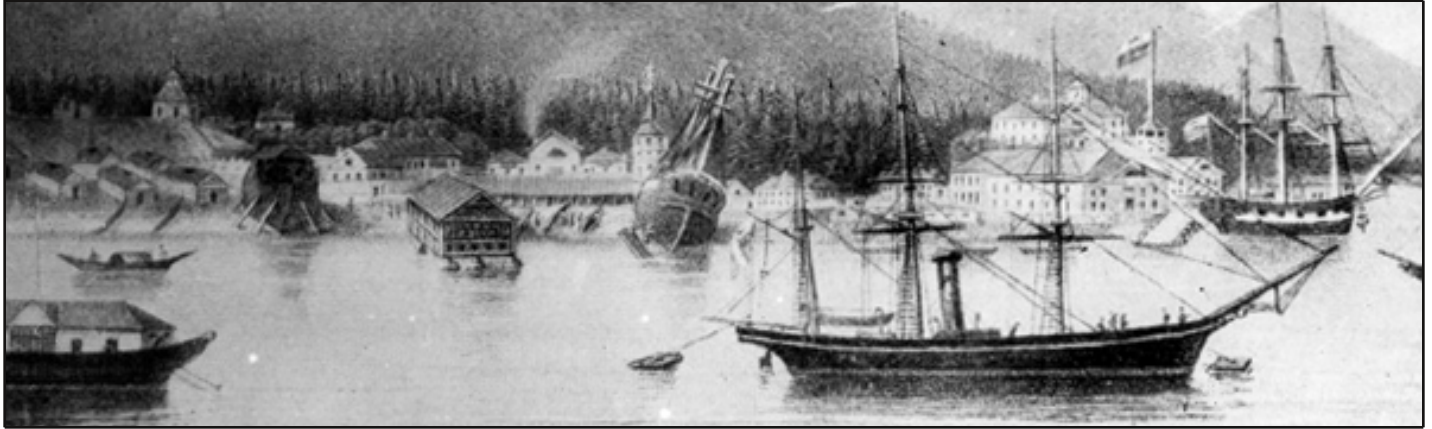


The Sitka Maritime Heritage Society



SUMMER NEWSLETTER 2012

Russians Built Dozens of Ships in Sitka Yard

Note: SMHS board president Rebecca Poulson has researched the ships built in Sitka during the Russian era. This article is a much shorter account, drawing in part on Rebecca's work. The main source is "The History of the Russian American Company" by P.A. Tikhmenev. (University of Washington Press, 1978)

By Andrew Miller

A wooden sign near the flagpole in front of Sitka's Totem Square Inn reads: "Russian Shipyards – Established in 1806, vessels were built and repaired here for the world's merchant trade. The first steam ship on the Pacific Coast was built here in 1840."

The sign, which can be easily overlooked, marks the location of Sitka's once-busy shipyard. It does not, however, begin to explain the role of the shipyard in the development of the West Coast during the first half of the 19th Century.

Shipwrecks were common in those days – the Russian American Company lost 16 ships, or

nearly half its fleet, between 1799 and 1821 – and shipyards were scarce. In fact, for a number of years, the only shipyard on the West Coast was located in what is now Sitka.

Between 1805 and 1867, at least 24 ships ranging from 38 feet to 130 feet in length were built in the shipyard, and many more ships underwent repairs in Sitka during this time.

At various times over the last three decades the shipyard was

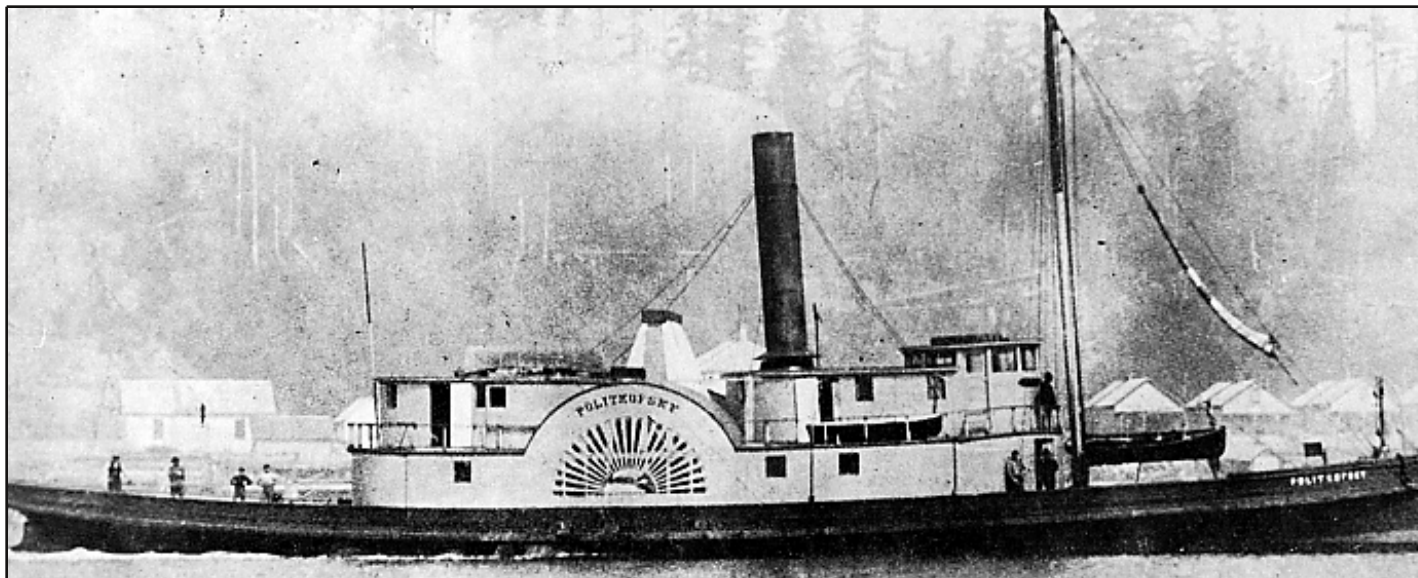
in operation, the Russians were milling wood for ships at a sawmill in town, one 15 miles to the south at Redoubt Lake, and finally at a mill at Sawmill Creek.

Not only did the Russians build ships with locally cut wood (primarily yellow cedar), but, by the 1840s, they also had a machine shop, workshops for repairing ships' instruments, and a brass and iron foundry in the downtown area, where steam engines

Continued on page 2



DONATION -- SMHS president Rebecca Poulson (right) holds historic planes donated to SMHS by Harry Jimmy (left). Read about the gift on page 3. (Photo by James Poulson)



The steamer Politkofsky was one of the last ships built by the Russians in Sitka. She was eventually used to haul logs in Puget Sounds but returned to Alaska in the Nome gold rush. (Sitka Historical Society picture)

Russian Boatyard Continued. . .

were assembled.

Russian American Company director Nikolai Petrovich Rezanof ordered the construction of a slipways in Sitka in 1805, within a year of Russian settlement here. He also brought two Russian shipwrights to Sitka to work in the new shipyard that year.

The first shipwrights only lasted until the fall of 1806, barely long enough to complete work on the tender Avos, the first ship built in the yard.

Rezanof writes that the winter of 1805-06 was difficult with starvation, scurvy and substantial alcohol abuse common in Sitka. He said his shipwrights, one of whom was involved in a knife fight during his short stay in Sitka, were good workers -- when sober.

Ultimately, the Russian shipwrights were replaced by an American named Lincoln in the fall of 1806. The next year Lincoln built the Sitkha, a brig, which was lost that same year. He also built the 300 ton brig-

antine Otkrytkie, in 1808, and laid the keel for the Chirikov, a 120 ton schooner.

Lincoln left Sitka in 1809, and local shipbuilding ceased until 1817, when two schooners were built. At this time the Company was attempting to move its shipbuilding operation to Fort Ross, California.

The Company built four ships in California, but, fortunately for Sitka, they were all of poor quality and all of them rotted within a few years, leaving the Russian American Company to abandon its plan for a California shipyard.

In 1834 Company director Ferdinand Wrangell closed all the Russian colonial shipyards except the one at Sitka, giving the Sitka shipyard a monopoly on the Northwest Coast.

At that time, the shipyard was under the direction of Osip Netsvetov, who was a person the Russians called a Creole -- of Russian and Alaska Native parents. As was common in Russian America, Netsvetov had been sent to

St. Petersburg, Russia, to learn his trade. The Russian American Company often trained the children of their employees in the trades in exchange for an obligation to work for the Company for a number of years in return.

The first steam engine arrived in Sitka in 1838 when machinist Edward Moore brought one from Boston. The next year, Netsvetov and Moore installed the engine in the Nikolai, a 130-foot paddlewheeler built in the yard.

The Nikolai, which was said to reach speeds of seven or eight knots, is most likely the first ship built on the West Coast with a steam engine. It, however, was recalled from open-ocean service within a year because of leaks.

Two years later, the eight-horsepower steam tug Mur was built in Sitka. All of the major engine parts, except for the boilers, were made by Moore.

The Russians built a few more steamships in the 1840s and 1850s. Two of the final ships

Continued on page 4

Maritime Society Given Historic Boat-building Tools

In February, the Sitka Maritime Heritage Society was given a collection of boat-building items from the first half of the 20th Century that will eventually be displayed in the Japonski Island Boathouse.

The items, donated by Harry Jimmy, include several wood planes, boat molds, patterns, lumber and parts for a rowboat, which had been stored in Jimmy's boatshop on Katlian Street.

The shop was originally built in 1940 by Andrew Hope, Sitka's best-known and most prolific wooden boatbuilder. Hope built many boats, mostly commercial fishing vessels, from the 1920s through the 1960s, when his last boat, the Vali, was launched from his shop.

The donated artifacts were presumably used or made by Hope. Some of the planes have wooden bodies, so date from the early 20th century or before, and some are all metal.

The molds are wooden patterns for Andrew Hope's version of the round-bottom Davis-style work boat in common use prior to the advent of mass-produced fiberglass boats. The Davis-style is named for the Davis boatshop in Metlakatla, which turned out wooden row-boats that were sold throughout Southeast Alaska in the 1920s and 1930s.

SMHS is planning to build a boat using the molds from Jimmy's shop. While designed for oars, this version has a transom (squared-off end) to which a small outboard could be attached.

One donated artifact is a bowstem for a rowboat of this design, which will be preserved as an example of Hope's craftsmanship. It is made of yellow cedar, nearly all of it one piece of wood. It is smoothed to a polish, and has a rabbit roughed in to receive the planking

ends.

A version of this story first appeared in the Daily Sitka Sentinel.



Kathy Hope Erickson holds a plane once owned by her grandfather, Sitka boatbuilder Andrew Hope. (Photo by James Poulson)

Grab a Copy of our New Brochure!

The Sitka Maritime Heritage Society has a new brochure featuring historic photographs and information about Sitka waterfront locations and the various fishing vessels in Sitka's harbors.

The brochure is targeted at visitors and locals alike and is available at information racks around Sitka. Please contact the Maritime Society at sitkamaritime@gmail.com to obtain additional copies for your summer visitors.

Russian Boatyard Continued. . .

built in the Sitka shipyard were the 129-foot Politkofsky, built in 1863, and the steam tug Baranof, built in 1860.

These ships were both sold at the time of the Alaska Purchase and were used for decades to come by Americans.

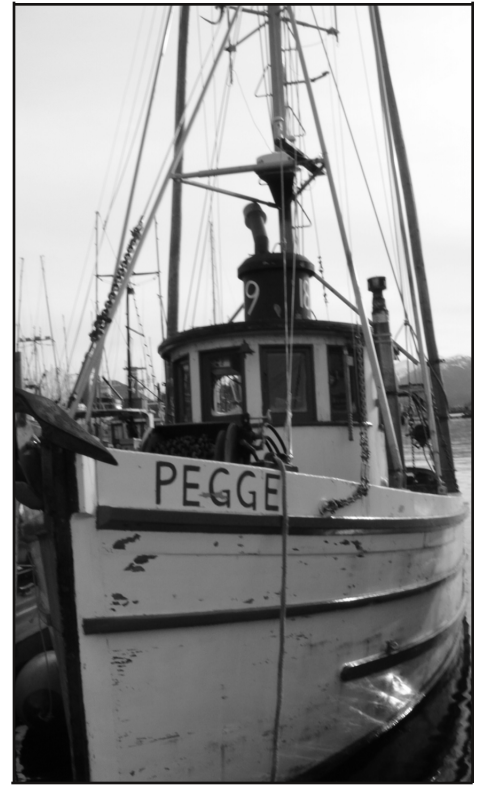
While some ships built in Sitka remained in use long after the transfer, the boatyard essentially died when the American flag was raised on Castle Hill. By 1869, the ways had been dismantled and destroyed.

In the years that followed, ship building was sporadic, and generally done by the prospec-

ive ship owners themselves. The ships built in the late 19th Century were often of a poor quality, and did not last long.

Today, no ships built in the Russian Boatyard remain. The Politkofsky, perhaps the last ship from the era, was towed to Nome during the 1903 gold rush and broke up in a storm in 1915.

As for the shipyard itself, the only evidence of what had been there is the sign in front of the Totem Square Inn. A parking lot and the grassy lawn of Totem Square occupy most of what was once the Russian Boatyard.



ONE-HUNDRED YEARS OLD -- The F/V Pegge, a 38-foot troller, is one of the oldest vessels in Sitka's fleet. Built in Ballard, Washington, in 1912, the Pegge originally served as a four-person halibut boat in Puget Sound before being converted to a salmon troller in the 1950s. The Pegge has fished Alaska since at least the '50s. She is now owned by Amanda Dunaway, who grew up sailing wood boats and felt she was buying a piece of history when she bought the Pegge in 2009. (Photo by Andrew Miller)

No Summer Work on Boathouse Project

The Sitka Maritime Heritage Society is raising funds this summer for the next stage of its renovation of the Japonski Island Boathouse. The first substantial stage of the renovation occurred in the summer of 2011, when the building's roof was replaced.

SMHS is working to renovate the historic Boathouse as a maritime museum with a functioning boat haul-out.

A major funding component for the project is a sublease

agreement with the fuel distributor Delta Western, which plans to build a commercial fuel dock on the property.

At this time, Delta Western is making monthly rental payments to SMHS, but rents will increase substantially once the dock is built. Delta Western has said it is optimistic dock construction will occur within the next year.

For more information on the Boathouse renovation or to make a donation to the project visit www.sitkamaritime.org.

About Us

The Sitka Maritime Heritage Society is a 501(c)(3) non-profit with the mission of preserving the maritime history of Sitka, Alaska, and educating the public about that history. Our primary project is renovating the Japonski Island Boathouse as a maritime museum with a functioning boat haul-out. Visit us on-line at www.sitkamaritime.org.

Board Officers

Rebecca Poulson, president
Chris Brewton, vice-president
Mike Litman, secretary and treasurer

Board Members

Joe D'Arienzo
Linda Blankenship
John Dunlap
Grant Miller

Executive Director

Andrew Miller,
sitkamaritime@gmail.com

Maritime Society Expands Oral History Efforts

For years, the Sitka Maritime Heritage Society has held oral history panels on Sitka maritime topics at its annual meetings.

These discussions, focusing on topics ranging from the Shore Boats to the Lituya Bay tsunami to Trolling, have all been recorded and form the core of the SMHS collections.

SMHS is now expanding its oral history documentation with an effort to record and archive the oral history of Sheldon Jackson School - the Presbyterian mission school founded in 1878, and a fixture in Sitka until its closing in 2007.

Some of Sheldon Jackson's history has already been featured in annual meeting presentations, since Sitka's most prominent and prolific boat-builders were associated with the school: two seiners and the 65-foot mission boat Princeton Hall were built for the school, in large part by graduates and students.

The school operated a fleet of boats for most of its history.

Interviews are being digitally recorded and will be archived by SMHS. The goal is to gather the stories of students, staff, teachers, administrators and trustees so that the broader community may better understand what was at the heart of this complex institution.

If you would like to be interviewed, or have ideas for the project, please contact SMHS president Rebecca Poulson at 747-3448.



ANNUAL MEETING -- From right, moderator Eric Jordan leads a panel consisting of John Nielsen, Grant Miller, and Joy Light at the SMHS annual meeting in February. Panelists shared their experiences in commercial and subsistence herring harvest, before members of the audience were invited to share memories of their own. As usual, the meeting drew a full house in the Centennial Hall Maksoutoff Room. (Photo by Andrew Miller)

Upcoming Events

July 4th Parade

The Sitka Maritime Heritage Society will be an entrant in Sitka's July 4th Parade. The theme of the parade is communications, and we are seeking maritime communications items such as flags and radio equipment. Please contact us at sitkamaritime@gmail.com if you have items to share, or if you would like to join us in the parade. We would love to have as many people involved as possible!

Ocean Adventure Race

The annual Sitka Sound Ocean Adventure Race will be held August 11. SMHS will be involved in the post-race cook-out, and all benefits from the race will benefit SMHS. All types of human-powered crafts, including kayaks, canoes, and stand-up paddle boards, may compete in the race, which has 6- and 14-mile distances. For more information or to register, please visit www.sitkaadventureracing.org.

Fall Classes or Lectures

We are always looking for ways to expand our educational mission. Please contact us at sitkamaritime@gmail.com if you have ideas for lectures or possible community classes on maritime-related topics.

To Contribute to the Sitka Maritime Heritage Society

Please return this page with your tax-deductable contribution to
P.O. Box 2153, Sitka, AK 99835 or give online at www.sitkamaritime.org

A one-year membership in the Sitka Maritime Heritage Society is \$30. Contact us if you'd like to know when you last made a membership contribution. Contributions to our boathouse fund made during our summer fund drive count as membership contributions. Thank you for supporting Sitka's maritime heritage!

We offer premiums for contributions of \$100 or more to our Boathouse fund

- Contributors of \$100 or more receive the choice of a SMHS hat, shirt, or a DVD of footage taken by Sheldon Jackson School superintendent Les Yaw in the 1930s.
- Contributors of \$500 or more receive the choice of Rebecca Poulson prints
- Contributors of \$1,000 or more are listed on a plaque at the Japonski Island Boathouse

More information on premiums and membership benefits is available at www.sitkamaritime.org

Name _____

Annual Membership: Individual (\$30) _____ Family (\$40) _____ Senior/Student (\$15) _____

Address _____

Email _____

The Sitka Maritime Heritage Society
Post Office Box 2153
Sitka, Alaska 99835