

# Field Notes

## Lee Farrow

Exactly 150 years ago this March, Russia and the United States concluded a treaty that transferred Russian America—Alaska—to the United States for \$7.2 million. In 2014, the Alaska State Legislature passed a resolution recognizing the significance of the event, “requesting that the Alaska Historical Commission coordinate events; and inviting Alaska communities, schools, universities, libraries, museums, businesses, civic and historical groups, and government agencies to participate in and support commemorative activities and events.”<sup>1</sup> Subsequently, in October 2016, Governor Bill Walker proclaimed 2017 “The Alaska Year of History and Heritage” and encouraged all Alaskans to use the occasion of the 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the purchase “to study, teach, reflect upon our past, and apply its lessons to a brighter, more inclusive future.”<sup>2</sup> Not surprisingly, there are many events planned in Alaska and elsewhere to celebrate the sesquicentennial, including plays, museum exhibitions, lectures, panel discussions, commemorations ceremonies, and special anniversary curriculum for school children. The state’s historic commission has assisted these efforts by providing over two dozen grants to help fund the various commemorative activities. Other organizations, such as the Alaska Historical Society and the Office of History and Archaeology, as well as the Interpretation and Education Program of Alaska State Parks, have contributed to the planning and coordination of events as well, and Alaska Airlines has assisted with travel support. The end result is an impressive calendar of activities created and supported by a large community of Alaskans coming together for the purpose of marking an important historic event and highlighting their state’s uniqueness and cultural diversity and richness.<sup>3</sup>

The celebration of the sesquicentennial kicks off with a special publication entitled, “150 Reasons We Love Alaska.” Under the coordination of the Alaska

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<sup>1</sup> Senate Concurrent Resolution No. 17, Alaska State Legislature House State Affairs Standing Committee, April 3, 2014, located online at <http://www.legis.state.ak.us/pdf/28/M/HSTA2014-04-030806.PDF> and <http://dnr.alaska.gov/Assets/uploads/DNRPublic/parks/oha/grant/scr17.pdf> [Accessed February 19, 2017].

<sup>2</sup> Proclamation of Alaska Governor Bill Walker, October 17, 1867, located online at <https://gov.alaska.gov/newsroom/2016/10/the-alaska-year-of-history-and-heritage/> [Accessed February 19, 2017.]

<sup>3</sup> Brochure entitled, “1860s Alaska,” distributed by the Office of History & Archaeology, Alaska Department of Natural Resources, 2017; Alaska Historical Society webpage, <http://alaskahistoricalsociety.org/about-ahs/150treaty/calendar/> [Accessed February 6, 2017].

Historical Society, this booklet will feature short essays solicited from primarily residents of Alaska enumerating the ways in which their state is noteworthy and special. There will also be a traveling exhibition of Emanuel Leutze's painting of the purchase of Alaska. Painted in 1867 shortly after the event, the painting mistakenly includes Charles Sumner who was not present at the signing, but is an important artifact of the history of the treaty. As such, it will be on display throughout the year, traveling to Fairbanks, Anchorage, and Juneau.

Several other exhibitions are being created for the anniversary as well. The "Polar Bear Garden," a new exhibit that highlights the links and similarities between Russia and the United States throughout history and up to the present day, will be on view at the Anchorage Museum for much of the year. The special display will feature the actual treasury check for the Alaska Purchase on loan from the National Archives, as well as the U. S. copy of the treaty signed by Seward. In October, it will be joined by a show entitled, "Perceptions: The Alaska Treaty of Cessions Intercurrent." Held at the International Gallery of Contemporary Art in Anchorage, this show will present interpretations of the treaty by historians, writers, artists, and performers. Similarly, the University of Alaska's Museum of the North in Fairbanks will be the site of a special exhibit entitled "Lifeways in Interior Alaska in the 1860s." Finally, in an effort to educate Alaska's youth about its history, the Anchorage School District also is releasing a special curriculum focusing on the transfer and its significance. Anchorage school teachers from all grade levels participated in various meetings and trainings and then created a set of lessons and educational materials that can be adapted for use with students of all ages. These materials are being shared with teachers across the state.

The calendar of commemorative events will also include lectures, panel discussions, and conferences. Three projects deserve particular attention: the celebration of Seward's Day in Washington, D.C.; the dedication of a statue of William Seward; and, the annual Alaska Day festivities in Sitka. On March 30, 2017, the nation's capital was the site of three events to honor William Seward and his important achievement. Members of the Alaska Historic Commission hosted a luncheon at the National Press Club which included a brief presentation by Alaska Historical Commission member Jonathan Ross on the importance of Seward in the history of Alaska. This was followed by a reception at the Diplomatic Reception Rooms at the State Department and a concert at the William G. McGowan Theater in the National Archives by Wild Shore New Music, a group that fosters collaborations between living composers, the nation's finest classically-trained musicians, and the extraordinarily creative artists and residents of Alaska.

Another project of note is the unveiling, transporting, and dedication of a statue of William Seward. Several years ago, John Venables, a historical reenactor who frequently played the part of William Seward at celebrations of Alaska Day and Seward's Day, began to push for the erection of a statue of Seward in Juneau and even held a groundbreaking ceremony in October 2013. But before Venables could see his dream come to fruition, he passed away in 2015. By this point, however, the statue was already being designed by David Rubin of Ketchikan and his sister Judith Rubin of Boston, and the Seward commemorative statue committee

was determined to pursue Venables's mission and to plan the events associated with the statue's unveiling and dedication. There was some discussion during the design phase about whether Seward should be portrayed as he really looked, with a significant scar on the lower part of his face a reminder of how narrowly he escaped death in the same assassination plot that killed Abraham Lincoln. (Seward was attacked in bed in his own home, where he was recovering from an accident.) The statue committee decided to include the scar. The six-foot bronze statue will be placed on a four foot high block of Alaska Tokeen Marble which itself will sit on a one foot high concrete foundation. The statue will be unveiled in May at the Seward House Museum in Auburn, New York, and then will travel across country to its new home in the courthouse plaza directly across from the capitol building in Juneau, Alaska.

The third major event to commemorate the purchase will occur in October, with a multi-day celebration of Alaska Day in Sitka. Alaska Day marks the anniversary of the transfer of Russian America to the United States on October 18, 1867, and the city has marked this special day for a century. This year, the Alaska Day celebration will be significantly more extensive. On October 13<sup>th</sup>, the New Archangel Dancers, a troupe of local women are scheduled to perform authentic Russian and Ukrainian dances in brightly colored costumes. A conference of Tlingit tribes and clans will open that day as well. This biennial event explores the culture of indigenous peoples of Southeast Alaska with participation by Alaska native tradition bearers, elders, and fluent speakers of indigenous languages. This year, it will also highlight the perspectives of Alaska Natives toward the Alaska Purchase. The following days will feature a Sitka Historical Society Brew Cruise and Brew Festival, a ball, a performance of shape note singers, and the annual Alaska Day parade. There will also be a speaker's series that will include lectures and panel discussion by historians and local writers.<sup>4</sup>

The sesquicentennial of the Alaska Purchase is an important event in the history of the United State in general, and in the history of Russian-American relations. In this moment when the interactions between Russia and the United States are being carefully scrutinized, it is even more critical to study the history of this long and complicated relationship.

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<sup>4</sup> Much of this article was based on information obtained by telephone or email correspondence with various individuals associated with the commemorative events.

**Institute of Historical Research , University of London****The Russian Revolution–Centenary Lecture Series**

(From announcement in *London Review of Books*)

21 February 2017: “The February Revolution: Eight Days in Petrograd”, Peter Waldron (University of East Anglia)

21 March 2017: “Children of Revolution: Armageddon Experienced?”, Catriona Kelly (University of Oxford)

25 April 2017: “Lenin and Leninism: A Centenary Perspective”, James Ryan (Cardiff University)

23 May 2017: “Kaleidoscopes of Revolution: Regional Approaches to Russia’s Revolutionary Period”, Sarah Badcock (University of Nottingham)

20 June 2017: “Kerensky and His Cult”, Boris Kolonitskii (European University, St. Petersburg)

26 September 2017: “Living the Revolution: Inventing a Socialist Lifestyle”, Andy Willimott (University of Reading)

24 October 2017: “The Meaning of October 1917 a Hundred Years on”, Steve Smith (University of Oxford)

21 November 2017: “Reflection on 1917”, panel discussion

All the above events begin at 6:00 p.m. and are followed by refreshments in the Wolfson Room 1 of the Institute of Historical Research, Senate House, University of London.

For information on tickets, etc.: [ihr.events@sas.ac.uk](mailto:ihr.events@sas.ac.uk)

**Americans in Revolutionary Russia** is focused on bringing back into print the observations and experiences of Americans who were witnesses to war and revolution in Russia between 1914 and 1921. There were numerous accounts by Americans from a variety of perspectives. These men and women offer a rich perspective on the tumultuous events that gripped Russia during this time. Most of these books have not been republished since they were first issued a hundred years ago. This series offers new editions of these works with an expert introduction, textual notation, and an index. The first two volumes - Princess Julia Cantacuzene Countess Speransky nee Grant, *Russian People: Revolutionary Recollections*, edited and annotated by Norman E. Saul and Albert Rhys Williams, *Through the Russian Revolution*, edited and annotated by William Benton Whisenhunt have been published. More volumes will appear later in 2017 and beyond. Visit [https://slavica.indiana.edu/series/Americans\\_in\\_Revolutionary\\_Russia](https://slavica.indiana.edu/series/Americans_in_Revolutionary_Russia) for more details.

Americans in Revolutionary Petrograd International Conference  
6-7 October, 2017  
European University at St. Petersburg

Revolutionary Russia attracted many Americans, from left-wing activists to journalists to government employees and other officials who traveled to Petrograd and beyond Russian capital in 1917 and subsequent years, met many leading figures of Russian political, military and social stage and even participated in the revolutionary events. Bolshevik leaders seem to have special hopes for the American connections, as many considered the USA the model state born by revolution, and because America was a fresh member of European political alliances that could make a difference for the new Russia's future path. That role of the Americans in the Russian revolution, be it observers or active participants is understudied in both Russian and American scholarship, due to the ideological biases of the Cold War, the role of the October revolution as the foundational myth of the Soviet State and restricted access to the sources. Nowadays, however, many of those obstacles are lifted, and new opportunities have emerged.

The goal of the conference is to share the findings of Russian and American scholars on the history of Americans in the revolutionary Petrograd. The event will feature the leading researchers of the theme from both Russia and the United States and become the focus of the Russian-American commemoration of the centennial of the Russian revolution in St. Petersburg.

Two exciting panels will be held at the 49th Annual Convention of the Association for Slavic, East European, and Eurasian Studies (ASEEES) in Chicago on November 9-12, 2017. The first panel will be "Revolutionary Days Revisited: Commemorating the Russian Revolution at the New York Public Library, Columbia University and Slavica Publishers" featuring Susan Smith-Peter, William Benton Whisenhunt, Tanya Chebotarev, and Matt Miller. The second panel will be "Americans Recall the Bolshevik Revolution" featuring Norman E. Saul, Lee Farrow, Matt Miller, William Benton Whisenhunt, and Olga Porshneva.