The Survivor Camp and Wreck Site of the Russian-American Co. Ship *Neva* (1800-1813), a British Built Frigate in Russian Alaska

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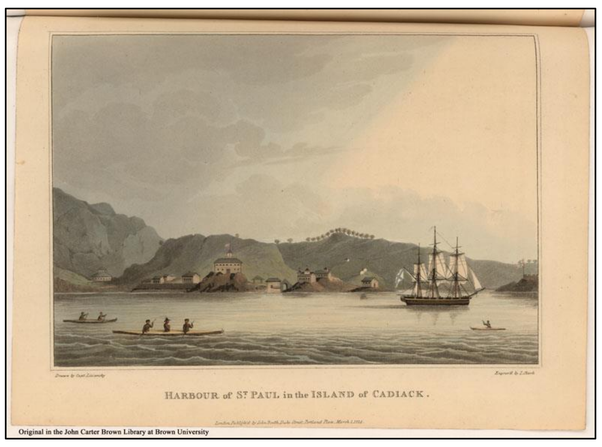
Historical Background

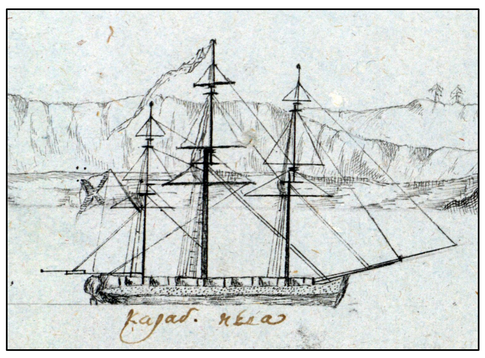
The Russian-American Company (RAC) ship *Neva* was one of the most historically important vessels along the North Pacific coast of North America during the early 19th century. The 372 ton frigate was launched as the *Thames* in 1800 at the King and Queen shipyard in Rotherhithe, London. Peter Mestaer, already known for building ships for the East India Company and British Navy, constructed the vessel for Robert Taylor of Crutched Friar, London.

When surveyed by Lloyds in August 1800 (1801-1802, Entry #289), the vessel was described as built of first class materials, ship-rigged, single deck with beams (later described as having two decks), 372 tons, and initially unsheathed. Other details are provided in the Registry of Shipping, London Foreign Trade for February 1802. There the vessel is described as having three masts and two decks, an extreme length of 110 ft. 6 in., an extreme breadth of 28 ft., a height between decks of 5 ft. 8 in., weighing 372 1/94 burden tons, a square-sterned ship with flush deck and quarter badges, no gallery, and a carved 'knac' (knee?) (British National Archives BT 107/13: 217-218).



An image of the *Neva* at the Kodiak settlement during the winter of 1804-1805 (Lisianski 1814:192-193).

After a short career in British commercial service, the *Thames* was purchased by Russia in May 1803 and renamed *Neva*. Another British ship (*Leander* / renamed *Nedezhda*) was purchased at the same time. Under the overall command of Admiral Adam Johann Ritter von Krusenstern and Court Chamberlain Nikolai Rezanov, the two ships participated in Russia's first 'round the world voyage (1803-1806). Krusenstern took command of the *Nedezhda* and assigned command of the *Neva* to Captain Urey (Yuri) Lisiansky. In 1804, the *Neva* became the first Russian ship to call in Hawaii, and later that year played an instrumental role in the Battle of Sitka between the Russians and Kiks.ádi Clan of the Sitka Tlingit Indians. Withdrawal of the Tlingit allowed the Russians to re-establish the New Archangel settlement (Sitka, Alaska), which served as the capitol of Russian America from 1808-1867. After returning from her 'round the world voyage in August 1806, the *Neva* was in the service of the RAC until she wrecked near Sitka in January 1813.



Line drawing of the *Neva* by Urey Lisianski while in Kodiak during 1804-1805. It was extracted from a larger image in Lisianski's ship's log. The original is in the Russian Naval Archives, St. Petersburg, Russia (No. 0870_001_02622_0035).

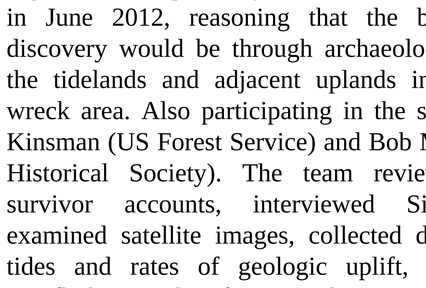
The Final Voyage

In August 1812, the *Neva* set sail from the Siberian port of Okhotsk with supplies and passengers bound for New Archangel (Sitka, Alaska). Among the passengers was Tertii Stepanovich Bornovolokov, who was to replace Alexander Baranov as Chief Manager of the RAC. With a late start and rigging damaged by storms early in the journey, the ship was plagued from the beginning. We know that, after more than four months at sea, the doomed vessel ran aground off the outer coast of Kruzof Island, Alaska in early January 1813 while sailing the last leg of the journey in fog. All attempts to save the ship failed and she eventually broke apart on the rocks, leaving 26 survivors to await rescue on a harsh Alaskan shoreline. Thirty-two died in the wreck, and 15 others died during the voyage. Bornovolokov was among those who perished in the wreck. In early February, 1813, the survivors were discovered and taken to Sitka. Despite initial salvage efforts, the location of the wreck site was eventually lost to time. Given the rocky high energy shoreline, the vessel would have broken apart leaving behind only heavy items such as cannons and heavy hardware.

The wreck of the *Neva* by Russian artist German Nexnaikin, oil on canvas (1991). Image courtesy of the family of Dr. Robert White. High basaltic cliffs are punctuated by a small pocket beach that allowed some to survive.

The Discovery

David McMahan, former Alaska State Archaeologist, organized an exploratory search for the Neva wreck site in June 2012, reasoning that the best chance of discovery would be through archaeological survey of the tidelands and adjacent uplands in the predicted wreck area. Also participating in the search were Jay Kinsman (US Forest Service) and Bob Medinger (Sitka Historical Society). The team reviewed published survivor accounts, interviewed Sitka residents, examined satellite images, collected data on historic tides and rates of geologic uplift, and conducted overflights to identify a search area. A survey of the beach at low tide was unproductive, so a metal detector survey was conducted on an upland terrace predicted to be an optimal location for a survival camp. There the team discovered two buried caches of stacked Russian axes. Other metal targets were also identified but were left undisturbed pending the development of a comprehensive research design. In August 2013, a nearshore marine magnetometer survey was conducted. Because the survey area is near the extinct Mt Edgecumbe volcano, a steep magnetic gradient (caused by iron-rich lava and pyroclastic flows) masked any anomalies that might be caused by artifacts. A single scuba dive revealed limited visibility of the sea floor due to thick kelp and eel grass.



Scan for 3D Overflight

Archaeological Investigations

An international team of American, Canadian and Russian scientists, with funding from the U.S. National Science Foundation, conducted investigations at the site during the summers of 2015 and 2016. This included block excavations and metal detector survey in the survivor camp area, coupled with side scan sonar and scuba surveys offshore.

The 2016 field crew (L) and block excavations at the Neva Survivors' camp (R).

Recovered early 19th century artifacts included French gunflints, a brass buckle, reworked sheet copper, copper and iron nails, musket/pistol balls, 20 Russian axes, the leg from a brass nautical divider, a tobacco pipe stem, and faunal remains. Survey of a small cove north of the survivor camp, and in the estimated trajectory of wreck debris, revealed a stack of copper sheathing, another cache of Russian axes, iron shot, iron bar stock, and a pair of trunnion caps from a cannon carriage. These items suggest caching behavior in the aftermath of the wreck, either by survivors or salvors.

Scan for details / 3D
Trunnion Cap

Scan for details / 3D
Russian Axes

Trunnion caps from a cannon carriage (L) and a pair of associated Russian axes (R).

Near the close of 2016 excavations, the outline of a grave was discovered at the northern edge of the survivor camp. The rectangular wood stain was oriented east-west and was outlined by mismatched wrought iron nails from the wreck. As a condition of permitting, the grave was only excavated to the extent necessary to see the organic stain that coincided with the top of the coffin. It was then backfilled without further disturbance. Survivor accounts mention the recovery of two intact bodies, and mention only Bornovolokov with regard to burial. We may never know the true identity of the lost sailor.

Scan for details / 3D
The Grave of a Sailor

Conclusions

Despite close geographic, cultural, and historical links between Russia and Alaska, there have been relatively few collaborative studies in historical archaeology. The *Neva* Project broadens our knowledge of colonial Russian America and of shipwreck survival in the subarctic winter. After almost a month in a harsh onshore environment, the 26 survivors were able to craft basic survival tools and forage until their rescue. This project has replaced some of the "lore of the sea" surrounding the *Neva* with scientific outcomes.

More Information

Neva Project Information, Sitka Historical Society
http://sitkahistory.com/?s=neva

Neva bibliography / downloadable articles
http://mcmahanconsulting.com/home/neva-bibliography

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Acknowledgments

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