



## Description:

In this lesson students will analyze translated letters sent between Baranov, Shelikhov, and others. While learning about life during the Russian/Alaskan era, students will also confront the challenges of maintaining research objectivity when former cultural norms differ from current values. The goal is for students to interpret primary source information without filtering it through customs, norms, or beliefs.

## Materials:

Correspondence: Taken from *A History of the Russian American Co Vol II*, RA Pierce and AS Donnelly, Limestone Press, Kingston, Ontario, Canada, 1799.

Baranov to Shelikhov (Complete) July 24, 1793

Shelikhov to Baranov (Response: Partial) Aug 4, 1794

Baranov to Shelikhov (Response: Partial ) May 20, 1795)

Archbishop Ioasaf to Shelikhov (Complaint about Baranov: Partial) May 18, 1795

## Other Resources (Optional but Helpful)

NPS- *Stern and Rock Bound Coast: Historic Resource Study*

[http://www.nps.gov/history/history/online\\_books/kefj/hrs/hrst.htm](http://www.nps.gov/history/history/online_books/kefj/hrs/hrst.htm)

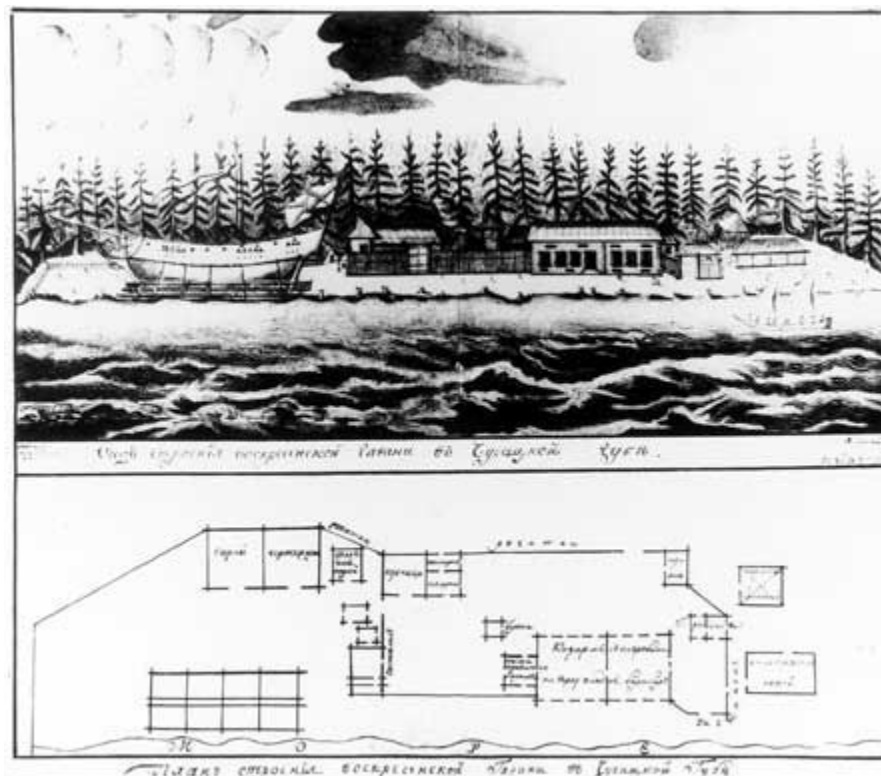
## Alaska Content Standards:

### History:

**A-4:** Understand that history is the interpretation of evidence

**A-6:** Know that cultural elements reflect the ideas and attitudes of a specific time

**C-2** Use historical data from primary resources



Courtesy Kenai Fjords National Park Service website: <http://www.nps.gov/kefj/index.htm>

## Inquiry Based Thinking Strategies Utilized:

**Interpreting Data:** Students will decipher meaning from Russian documents without over-generalizing.

**Classifying:** Students will determine which segments of reading address various diverse topics.

**Evaluation:** Students will make non-value judgments of relationships and facts based upon analysis of correspondence, understanding these were written by people with their own personal set of values and agendas.

## Russian America: Interpreting Primary Source Information



### Background Information:

In our modern time, we take for granted long distance communication. Even before the instant messaging capabilities of the internet, posted mail could be sent throughout the world in just a matter of days. Now consider communication during the 18th century when owners of companies in Russia tried to keep tabs on their managers plying the waters of Alaska. At best, assuming ships did not flounder, a year or more could go by in order to receive orders or responses. As one might imagine there was great opportunity for miscommunication and strife.

What follows are four correspondences (1 full and 3 partial) discussing business matters in Russian Alaska. This lesson provides many valuable opportunities:

- A) Gain insight to life, travel, and place names in Russian America
- B) Read between the lines. Tease out values and practices that have changed over time
- C) Maintain objectivity even when these practices conflict with present day morals.
- D) Maintain Awareness. Primary resources are valuable, but they carry baggage. These letters are from men with their own personal agendas and values.
- E) Keep questioning. While primary resources can be valuable sources of information, sometimes more questions emerge than are answered.

Using primary source documents is not without its pitfalls. It requires the researcher to interpret the information— to distill volumes of sources into a form that can be understood by others. One of the greatest challenges is trying to accurately research and describe historic events and actions without being influenced by one's current knowledge base and personal emotions or values. In this lesson it is possible that many students will be taken aback or offended by some of the scenes described in these correspondences. This is particularly true in the relationships between Russians and Native Alaskans and the exploitation of the sea otter population. But the idea about learning history is not to judge the past but rather to frame it accurately within its context. This is the challenge that this lesson offers.

In addition, place names, distances, and vocabulary may be different from present day (as it is in these letters). This is yet another factor that makes primary research so interesting yet so confounding and, at times, frustrating. Places and events cannot be taken on "face value." Further research is often needed.

This lesson culminates with a shared inquiry focused upon Socratic questioning from the teacher. This strategy is illustrated in the Junior Great Books curriculum: (<http://www.greatbooks>). During shared inquiry, students develop ideas and learn to substantiate these relying on evidence within the reading. Students will offer a question, then determine their point of view, and substantiate that view with passages from the text.

*Dear Sir,*

*Grigorii Ivanovich,*

*My reports of my activities  
future were sent from Kadiak  
Mikhail a year ago, in early  
Now I can write you the vesse  
rived from Chugach Bay with  
about the depravity of the men  
company. I set forth myself in  
May 7, after dispatching the  
Chiniak I made plans for a*

# Russian America: Interpreting Primary Source Information



## Procedure:

### 1) Predetermine scope of reading

The reading is lengthy and it is up to the teacher to determine the scope of the reading assignment. The readings are also included on the KMTA website in an editable format so that sections can be excluded to reduce reading assignment.

### 2) Predetermine focus

Depending on the discretion of the teacher, the students may (or may not) be prompted to focus on certain aspects of the reading. These might include any or all of the following:

#### A) Russian—Native Relations

*(Of the foci, perhaps this is the most powerful as it is difficult to resolve the terms “hostages”, “servants”, and “real slaves”. In addition, there are relations between various indigenous groups which factor into this discussion. Lastly, Ioasaf’s letter adds a divergent, critical view.)*

#### B) Unfamiliar Place Name/Locations

*(Place names are changed (either in spelling or in name) making it sometimes difficult resolve locations.*

#### C) Building of the ship, Phoenix, and Fort Vozkrensenskii

*(Baranov and Shelikhov have two different versions of the fort/townsite being constructed. There are issues about required supplies for building of the ship. Lastly, there is no mention of Vozkrensenskii (Resurrection). Baranov does imply he’s building the fort and ship in Chugach Bay—Prince Williams Sound. What’s going on here?)*

#### D) Unfamiliar Vocabulary (not Proper Nouns or Names)

*(Some terms will be unfamiliar. For example, versts, baidardas vs baidars, kamliei, etc.)*

#### E) Friction between competing companies and relationship between Baranov and Shelikhov.

*(Conflict between companies is discussed. Baranov has many complaints about company support. Shelikhov and Ioasaf do not hide their feelings towards Baranov as a manager.)*

### 3) Predefine scope of reading

In order to get the full context of the resource, it is best to have students read the entire selection. However, some students may need modified assignments. In these cases, it is up to the teacher to determine how much of the reading to assign while still meeting the parameters of their lesson objectives. Sections have been numbered so that specific sections can be focused upon.

#### Native—Russian Relations

A1, 3, 11-13, 17-19, 21, 24, 26-27, 28

C5-7

D4-6

#### Company Complaints/Needs and Lebedev Issues

A1,3, 11-13,17-19, 21, 24, 26-28

B1-3, 5-7

C1-4, 8-9

D2-3

#### Building of the Ship

A1-2, 15, 23, 26

B4-7

C2, 4

#### Otters and Furs

A14, 16, 18,

B1

### 3) **Set the stage:** The Challenges of Communication in the 18th Century

Prior to distributing correspondence prompt a discussion about the challenges of communication between Russia and Russian America during the time of the sea otter harvesting.

### 4) **Establish the problem:** Using primary documents from long ago provides incredible insight to life long ago however using primary documents is not easy and can have many challenges.

Solicit from students the benefits and pitfalls of using primary documents from centuries before. The benefits involve having a perspective (accurate or not) directly from that time period. Challenges may include (but not limited to): readability of document (if original), different terminology (or language), different place names, values and practices that may be objectionable or immoral, as well as a host of other challenges.

# Russian America: Interpreting Primary Source Information



## Let Them At It: Read It!

This lesson will culminate with a Shared Inquiry discussing facets of the reading. In order for this to be successful, the students must have a full understanding of the reading. If possible, students should read/examine the selection 3 times:

### First Reading- Quick Read:

(orally if possible): During this cursory reading, students should mark on reading QUESTION MARKS (?) for words/paragraphs/sections that don't make sense or prompt a question and EXCLAMATION MARKS (!) for sections that somehow seem important or profound. Don't get hung up on these definitions... just go with the gut feeling. There's no right or wrong response; it's just a way to pre-mark sections where they might want to spend extra time later in order to understand what is going on.

### Second Reading- Weed out the details:

Do a full reading again, this time slower—especially those sections that were previously marked. This time add comments (either to the ? ! symbols or whenever there is a need to question or elaborate. Sometimes comments might be extraneous (“Wow!” or “You’ve got to be kidding!” or “What’s going on here?”) Sometimes it might be substantive (“Baranov didn’t reciprocate with a gift to the English captain!” or “I wonder why the English and Russian ships share the same name?”) Short paragraphs are ok too. Question the writing; tease out the details that lie below the surface.

### Gearing Up for Shared Inquiry:

It's time for the Shared Inquiry. A teacher that has never done one will find it to be one of the most powerful educational tools in the pedagogical tool shed. This is a strategy that is detailed in a number of websites and utilized by the Greatbooks Foundation ([greatbooks.org](http://greatbooks.org)). Shared Inquiry throws the reader into higher-ordered thinking and collaborative problem solving strategies. It is a way that participants can come together to explore the meanings of a given reading. Each participant brings their own unique perspective of how they understand a work of literature. Sharing their interpretation can deepen or even change their initial understanding. It has profound

implications for primary sourced research. As much as one may try to distance themselves and their cultural values from the primary source, we still end up interpreting it through our personal and cultural sieve. By sharing their perspectives, in an academic manner, they can justify and compare their perspectives with those of others. In theory, the end result will be a well thought out thesis of a given event—this being Baranov plying the waters of Alaska.

The catch to a viable and dynamic Shared Inquiry is to formulate a question. This question must have two qualities a) It must be compelling: It must be important or interesting and b) It must be authentic: The answer should be “unclear” to the asker. The question should beg many interpretations. The idea is to prompt many perspectives from the students.

### Hit them with the question:

There are many questions that arise from this reading. However, the one that seems most compelling is this or a variation of: “What did it mean to be a Russian hostage?”

There are enough conflicting accounts throughout the correspondences to realize that our current view of being a hostage and the Russian/Native view was two different things. But what it means is up to interpretation. Time to go to work.

### Third reading—resolve the question:

Give the students time (over night?) to reread the selection with the question in mind. Be sure to tell the students the key features of Shared Inquiry: 1) Every viewpoint is welcome, however, b) Every viewpoint must be justified directly from text.

# Russian America: Interpreting Primary Source Information



## The Shared Inquiry– Time to Roll Up the Sleeves:

Now it's time for the students to engage themselves. There are a few critical items to take care of:

### Room arrangement:

No rows here. Position sitting into a circle where everyone can see each other.

### One person at a time:

Teacher can determine how students can ask for the floor. Rather than raising hands, try flipping a card over in front of desk or raising “table flag.”

### All responses must have justification from the text:

This is important in any Shared Inquiry. More so for the interpretation of a historic source. The student isn't trying to put their values onto history: they are trying to put history's values onto themselves.

### Justifications include text location info:

When using text for justification, first say section number (B-7) then pause so everyone can be on that page.

### Not Everyone has to Talk:

But they do have to participate. Everyone must follow discussion and text references. Writing notes in the margins to interpret the reading is required.

### Teacher?— not!:

Sorry, no longer are you a teacher. You are relegated to being a facilitator. Here's your job:

- A) Insure that one person at a time speaks.
- B) Views must be substantiated with sections from text (Everyone should follow using section numbers for reference)
- C) Confirming Understanding: “So do I understand this right? You think that . . .”
- D) Or get them to dig deeper: “Why do you believe this selection implies what you've said?”
- E) Leading into more directions: “Why was even having hostages so im-

portant to the Russians? (*Remember, these letters cover far more than just Russian—Native relations. Tie more items into the topic without losing sight of the topic.*)

- F) *Keeping things civil. There will be differing opinions. Maintain respect.*
- G) *Keeping the discussion on track while also bringing in parallel issues.*

### More thoughts:

**It is said that the truth is not a solitary thing.** This statement is well represented throughout this reading. In terms of Native relations there are many paradoxes. The letters talk about Native blood shed while describing collaborative hunting with various Native groups. The letters talk about hostages while statement such as “he demanded other hostages from them they refused, telling him they hey had already given hostages (enough)” suggests that our definition of hostage may be dissimilar from theirs. Indeed our cultural perspective doesn't seem to reconcile when the Kenaitze chief Razkaznikoff gives Baranov his young daughter in order to cement loyalty between the Russians and the Natives.

There are plenty of issues. For example, the statement about sea otters “took only 197,” as the writer complains about the poor hunting and securing a mere “700” pelts certainly creates cultural dissonance.

Then there are questions of academia and knowledge. The letter refers to distances in vertz and building the fort and ship in “Chugach Bay” —the Russian name for Prince William Sound— which seems to be historically inaccurate since the Phoenix was built in Resurrection Bay (named— but never mentioned in Baranov's letters). In addition, the letters show the frustration of corresponding long distance during this time and the personal conflict between the three authors.

There are obviously many perspectives and knowledge that remain muddled but beg for discussion. It is up to the teacher-facilitator to help guide the students through this matrix of issues.

# Russian America: Interpreting Primary Source Information



**Evaluation:** Evaluation could be assessed through a written summary or from the participation of discussion.

	<b>Student uses a variety of statements to defend an interpretation.</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>1</b>
		Students cite several statements from different letters/authors to support an interpretation.		Students cite some examples to explore an interpretation however sometimes interpretation is not cited.		Student either does not formulate an interpretation or the interpretation is shallow will little or not substantiation from letters.
<b>Student explores incongruent facts to develop an interpretation of a cultural perspective.</b>	<b>Student recognizes and avoid their own cultural bias when interpreting historical text.</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>1</b>
		Student's interpretation is complex and perhaps evolving. Although the student may expressively compare modern cultural norms to those expressed in letters, they will avoid putting modern values upon these behaviors.		Student actively interprets the events and actions discussed in letters. The student sometimes judges these actions with present day norms. Interpretation lacks depth.		Student is quick to judge historic actions and values as being "good" or "bad". Interpretation is not engaging and does not rely as several statements of support.

Note to teachers: Columns 4 and 2 are blank to allow for assessment that blends elements from adjacent columns. Teachers can underline criteria that describe student performance and use blank column to add comments specific to student.