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Archaeological Test At The Russian Three Saints Bay Colony, Alaska

ABSTRACT

Three Saints, established on Kodiak Island in 1784 and abandoned several decades later, was the first substantial Russian settlement in Alaska. Test excavations show that the site has not been disturbed to any notable degree through natural and human agency. Test excavation uncovered portions of historic features and a modest number of European historic artifacts were recovered.

History of the Colony

Gregory Shelikhov established the first Russian settlement on Kodiak Island in 1784 at Three Saints Bay (Figure 1) (Shelikhov 1981). Although earlier shore stations had been occupied in Alaska, Three Saints was the first actual colony. It is a landmark in the European settlement of northwestern North America.

In 1786 Shelikhov sailed back to Siberia, after entrusting local affairs to his men. Alexander Baranov arrived to take charge of the fur company colony in July 1791 and recognized the necessity to move the settlement (Khlebnikov 1973). The problems with Three Saints were subsidence which had occurred during a severe earthquake in 1788, insufficient space for an ambitious settlement, and especially the lack of timber near the site. By 1793 Baranov was building a new settlement at the present town of Kodiak. Three Saints was maintained in a reduced status as a small station until the middle of the 19th century, but sometime between 1793 and the mid 1800s the station was transferred to a new site approximately 2 km from Shelikhov's settlement.

Description

It is apparent that the hillside along the small protected harbor at Three Saints was too steep for

construction; all buildings had to be located on the grassy beach gravel flats (Figures 2, 3). Boulders were abundant on the outer beach ridges near the site but few were sufficiently angular for masonry and except for discontinuous foundation blocks stone was little used at Three Saints.

Joseph Billings and Gavriil Sarychev visited the harbor in 1790 and members of their expedition published the first contemporary descriptions of the settlement. A sketch by expedition artist Luka Voronin shows a cluster of small buildings along the shore, two beached ships, and other features or structures. Captain Sarychev (1807) only briefly described the settlement, but he pointed out that the dwellings were mud-walled huts—probably referring to single-story structures banked with earth and constructed by laying vertical planks against a main frame. Expedition secretary Martin Sauer (1802) reported (a) five houses built after the "Russian fashion," (b) barracks, (c) building which housed the hostages, (d) storehouses, (e) ropewalk, (f) smithy, (g) carpenter's shop and cooperage, (h) two vessels of about 30 tons each, hauled on a low scaffold near the water and armed for defense, and (i) gardens. To these can be added, from expedition naturalist Merck (1980: 96-97), (j) a bath house.

According to these reports there were approximately 50 Russians, several of their wives, agriculture was being attempted, and there was a so-called school. Sauer specifies that cabbages and potatoes were being grown and that four cows and twelve goats were being kept. Later accounts report that many natural products such as whale meat, berries, and salmon were processed for distribution elsewhere. The settlement served as a local base for recruiting or impressing and managing native fur hunters, trappers, and laborers (cf., Gideon in Black 1977:89-90). Archaeological observations are reported in the sections to follow.

Surficial Features

Surface features at Three Saints indicated traces of occupation. These features include a lush growth of stinging nettles *Urtica lyalli*, pits, post

site date: 1784 - ca. 1850

HISTORICAL ARCHAEOLOGY
pp. 114 - 121

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TABLE 1
ARTIFACTS FROM SHELIKHOV'S THREE SAINTS SITE

Identification	Details
Non-ferrous Metal	
Sheet brass	6 fragments (scrap)
Spring?	Coiled brass
Cartridge case	.44-40 centerfire, no headstamp (late)
Musket ball	9 mm dia., retains casting nubbin
Metal button	Disc front, 4 holes in depressed center
Clothing fastner	Hook, rectangular wire
Iron	
Trap part	Siberian spring torsion fox trap prong
Nails and spikes	24 forged or forged and cut, 41 to 123 mm long
Chisels	2 5.7 and 9 cm long
Latch hook	
Padlock	Probably screw type
Unidentified tools	2 incomplete
Glass and Ceramics, Other	
Glass sheet	7 fragments 1.14-2.9 mm thick
Curved glass	9 sherds, shades of green, variable
Wound beads	8 white, dark blue and light blue 7-10 mm dia.
Tube beads	121 smoothed (cane) 2.0-4.5 mm dia., incl. 85 white, 16 dark purple, 13 light green interior-red exterior Cornaline d'Aleppo, 4 light blue, 3 dark blue
Table ware	16 sherds apparent porcelain and other wares, no hallmarks
Terracotta	Sherd 7.5 mm thick, cylindrical
Brick	2 small fragments, 1 crumbly and coarse like those produced in Alaska
Crucibles	3 small incomplete, 50-70 mm diameter
Mica panes	Muscovite small 40 × 32 mm, 50 × 35 mm, with perforations around the edge

at the site has a potential to materially enrich our knowledge of the early Russian period in Alaska. However, given the site's relative inaccessibility, which makes it unlikely for development as a public monument at the present time, plans for it should focus on its preservation for future generations.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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cipally by the U.S. National Science Foundation. The writer was a student assistant. Although the excavation was done more than two decades ago, no report has been published on the historic component. The 200th anniversary, in 1984, of the founding of Three Saints is deemed an appropriate occasion for this note.

REFERENCES

- BLACK, LYDIA T. (TRANSLATOR AND EDITOR)
1977 The Konyag (The Inhabitants of the Island of Kodiak) by Iosaf [Bolotov] (1794-1799) and Gideon (1804-1807). *Arctic Anthropology* 14(2):79-108.