

purchase of alaska

Purchase of Alaska is a significant event in American history that transformed the territorial landscape of the United States. Acquired from Russia in 1867, this purchase not only expanded U.S. territory but also had lasting implications for the economy, politics, and culture of the nation. This article explores the background, motivations, negotiations, and consequences of the Purchase of Alaska, providing a comprehensive overview of its historical context and significance.

Background: The Russian Empire and Alaska

In the 18th and 19th centuries, Alaska was a part of the Russian Empire. Russian explorers first arrived in the region in the late 1700s, drawn by the abundant fur resources, particularly sea otters. The fur trade thrived, leading to the establishment of several Russian settlements and trading posts.

However, by the mid-19th century, the Russian Empire faced numerous challenges, including:

- Economic difficulties due to overexpansion and declining fur trade profits.
- Geopolitical concerns regarding potential conflicts with Britain and the United States.
- Logistical challenges in defending and managing such a remote territory.

Recognizing these issues, Russian officials began to consider the sale of Alaska as a viable option to mitigate these challenges.

Motivations for the Purchase

The Purchase of Alaska was driven by various motivations from both the United States and Russia.

Russian Motivations

1. **Defense Concerns:** The Russian Empire feared that it would be unable to defend Alaska effectively in the event of a conflict, particularly with the British, who were expanding their influence in the Pacific Northwest.
2. **Economic Factors:** The fur trade was declining, and maintaining Alaska was becoming increasingly costly. Selling the territory could provide necessary funds for the imperial

treasury.

3. Geopolitical Strategy: By selling Alaska, Russia aimed to keep the territory out of British hands, thereby limiting British influence in North America.

American Motivations

1. Expansionist Policy: The mid-19th century was marked by the ideology of Manifest Destiny, the belief that the United States was destined to expand across North America. Acquiring Alaska fit into this narrative.
2. Resource Acquisition: American leaders were interested in Alaska's natural resources, including gold, fish, and timber, which could contribute to economic growth.
3. Strategic Positioning: Control of Alaska would provide the U.S. with a strategic advantage in the Pacific, enhancing its influence over trade routes and military positioning.

The Negotiations

Negotiations for the Purchase of Alaska began in the early 1860s, with U.S. Secretary of State William H. Seward playing a pivotal role in the discussions. His vision for acquiring Alaska was met with skepticism by some members of Congress and the American public, who referred to the deal as "Seward's Folly" or "Seward's Icebox."

Key Players

- William H. Seward: As Secretary of State under President Abraham Lincoln and later Andrew Johnson, Seward was a staunch advocate for the purchase. He believed strongly in the expansion of U.S. territory and influence.
- Eduard de Stoeckl: The Russian minister to the United States, Stoeckl was tasked with negotiating the sale on behalf of the Russian Empire. He recognized the potential benefits of selling Alaska to the United States.

Terms of the Agreement

After extensive negotiations, the two parties reached an agreement. On March 30, 1867, the United States formally acquired Alaska for \$7.2 million. The terms included:

- An exchange rate of approximately two cents per acre, which amounted to about 586,412 square miles.
- The agreement was formalized with the signing of the Treaty of Cession, which outlined the transfer of rights and obligations.

Public Reaction and Initial Impacts

The Purchase of Alaska was met with mixed reactions in the United States. Many Americans were skeptical about the value of the territory, viewing it as a barren wasteland. Despite this skepticism, the acquisition eventually proved to be a significant strategic and economic decision.

Skepticism and Criticism

Critics of the purchase, including prominent politicians and journalists, voiced their concerns:

- **Economic Concerns:** Opponents argued that the investment was wasteful and that Alaska would not yield sufficient returns.
- **Geographic Disadvantages:** Many believed that Alaska's remote location would make it difficult to govern and integrate into the Union.

Long-Term Outcomes of the Purchase

Despite early doubts, the Purchase of Alaska ultimately became a pivotal moment in U.S. history. The territory would prove to be rich in resources and strategic importance.

1. **Economic Development:** Alaska became a significant source of natural resources, including gold, oil, and fish. The discovery of gold in the late 19th century spurred a gold rush that brought thousands of settlers to the region.
2. **Military Significance:** During World War II, Alaska played a crucial role as a strategic military base for the United States, particularly in the Pacific theater.
3. **Statehood:** Alaska was officially admitted as the 49th state of the United States on January 3, 1959, solidifying its status as an integral part of the nation.

Conclusion

The **Purchase of Alaska** remains a landmark event in American history, characterized by strategic foresight and economic ambition. Initially met with skepticism, the acquisition has since proven to be a valuable addition to the United States, both in terms of resources and geopolitical strategy. As Alaska continues to play a significant role in the economic and cultural landscape of the U.S., the legacy of this historical purchase endures, reminding us of the complexities and opportunities inherent in territorial expansion. The purchase not only reshaped the map of the United States but also set the stage for future developments and challenges in the ever-evolving story of the nation.

Frequently Asked Questions

What year did the United States purchase Alaska from Russia?

The United States purchased Alaska from Russia in 1867.

How much did the U.S. pay for Alaska?

The U.S. paid \$7.2 million for Alaska, which was approximately two cents per acre.

Who was the U.S. Secretary of State responsible for the purchase of Alaska?

William H. Seward was the U.S. Secretary of State who negotiated the purchase of Alaska.

What was the public reaction to the purchase of Alaska at the time?

The purchase was initially criticized and referred to as 'Seward's Folly' or 'Seward's Icebox' due to perceptions that it was a barren wasteland.

What significant resources were discovered in Alaska after its purchase?

After its purchase, significant resources such as gold, oil, and natural gas were discovered in Alaska, which contributed to its economic value.

When did Alaska officially become a state in the United States?

Alaska officially became the 49th state of the United States on January 3, 1959.

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