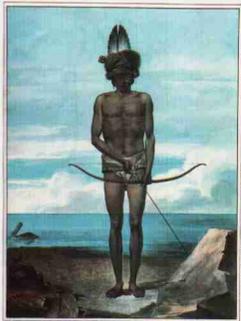


Welcome to Fort Ross State Historic Park



Native Californian from the Fort Ross area, as painted in 1818 by the Russian artist, Mikhail Tikhonov.

For the small group of California natives, that cool, overcast day in March 1812 was a forerunner of massive change. They stood there in astonishment as a large sailing ship came to anchor in the little cove beneath their quiet blufftop settlement. For the next few days, they continued to watch as some twenty-five Russians and eighty Alaskans came ashore, set up a temporary camp, and began building houses and a sturdy wood stockade — the colony and fortification of Ross.

The Kashaya people assembled to watch the spectacle had no way of knowing that their hunting and gathering lifestyle would be changed forever. These Russians had come to hunt sea otter, to grow wheat and other crops for the Russian settlements in Alaska, and to trade with Spanish California.

In addition, though they were careful not to say so, they came with an eye toward continuing the saga of Russian eastward expansion, a process that had begun some 250 years earlier, in the time of Ivan the Terrible, Russia's first Tsar.

The presence of Russian fur hunters in the North Pacific induced Spain to occupy Alta California in 1769. For forty years thereafter, development of the province continued on a gradual basis. By 1812, though, San Francisco Bay still marked the northern limit of Spanish settlement. That summer, while the establishment was being built, Spain, France, Russia, and the other great colonial powers of the day were preoccupied with a major war. Napoleon's army was deep inside Russia, driving toward Moscow. Great Britain was at war with its upstart ex-colony, the small but restless United States of America. Nobody was ready to block the Russian move. In fact, it was several months before the civil and military leaders of Alta California were even aware of the development at Ross, and by then it was too late. The fort was complete, and though it was made of wood, it was well armed and vigilantly manned.

Starting in 1742, Russian fur hunters, or "promyshleniki," as they were called, began to leave the mainland to seek furs on and near the many islands to the east. Emel'ian Basov holds the distinction of being the first to leave the Asian mainland to gather furs. He and his crew spent the winter of 1742-43 on Bering Island. Another Russian, Mikhail Nevodchikov, reached Attu (the westernmost Aleutian island) on September 25, 1745, becoming the first of the flood of fur hunters to reach territory that was later to become part of the United States.

The first permanent settlement on Kodiak Island in what is now Alaska was built by Gregor Shelikov in 1784. The organization he put together and led became the Russian-American Company in 1799. That same year, Tsar Paul granted the company a charter that gave it a complete monopoly over all Russian enterprises in North America. In 1806, the company was even granted its own flag, a replica of which is on display in the visitor center at Fort Ross.

Following elimination of competition from other fur traders, events moved rapidly in Russian America. Sitka, which the Russians called New



Blockhouse

Archangel, was founded in 1799 and became the capital of the region in 1804. Large profits began to flow to company shareholders, who included members of the royal family. The operation expanded still further in 1804, when American ship captains began to contract with the Russians for joint ventures, seeking sea otter pelts along the coast of Alta and Baja California.

The man behind this surge of activity in Russian America was Alexander Baranov, an employee of the Russian-American Company since its founding, and a resident of North America since 1791. It was he who developed the system in which native Alaskan hunters travelled south aboard American ships to hunt sea otters along the coast of California. Under Baranov's leadership, schools were established in the Sitka territory, more equitable treatment was given to the natives, and creature comforts began to replace the harsh realities of frontier life in Russian America.



Kuskov House

Early Contact Between the Russians and the Spanish

The first significant contact between the Russians and the Spanish came in April 1806. Nikolai Resanov had arrived in Sitka the previous year as an "imperial inspector and plenipotentiary of the Russian-American Company." He found the colony on the verge of starvation, and decided to sail southward to Spanish California in hopes of obtaining relief supplies for the beleaguered Alaskan colony. On April 5, he and his scurvy-stricken crew passed through the Golden Gate. Resanov knew that foreign ships were not allowed to trade in California, but he sailed his ship, the *Juno*, boldly past the Spanish guns at the harbor mouth. For the next six weeks, the *Juno* lay at anchor in San Francisco Bay while a battle of wits went on between the Russians and the Spanish. The impasse was broken when Resanov proposed to marry Concepcion Arguello, the teenage daughter of the Spanish commander at San Francisco. The *Juno* was soon being loaded with grain for the starving settlement to the north, and on May 21 passed again through the Golden Gate.

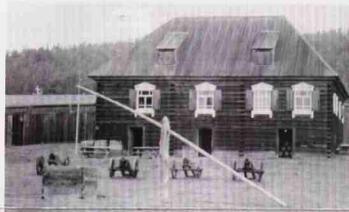
Plans for a Russian Settlement on the California Coast

Resanov brought back two ideas from his venture into Spanish California — the desire to establish permanent trade relations, and the wish to found a trading base on what the Russians referred to as the "New Albion" coast north of Spanish territory. Resanov convinced Baranov of the value of his ideas, and Baranov sent Ivan Kuskov, a company employee of long standing, on a voyage to locate a site suitable for the planned settlement. Moving southward on the ship *Kodiak*, Kuskov arrived at Bodega Bay on January 8, 1809, remaining there until late August. He and his party of 40 Russians and 150 Alaskan natives explored the entire region, and brought back more than 2,000 sea otter pelts.

By November 1811, Kuskov was ready to head south again, this time to build a colony on the New Albion shore. After arriving at Bodega Bay in early 1812 aboard the *Chirikov*, he decided that the most suitable location for the colony was the site of a Kashaya Indian village, 18 miles to the north.

The spot was called *Meteni* by the local Indians. According to one account, the entire area was acquired from the natives for "three blankets, three pairs of breeches, two axes, three hoes, and some beads."

The land offered a harbor of sorts, plentiful water, good forage, and a nearby supply of wood for the necessary construction. It was also relatively distant from the Spanish, who were to be unwilling neighbors for the next 29 years. The fort was completed in a few weeks, and was formally dedicated on August 13, 1812. The name "Ross" is generally considered to be a shortened version of "Rossiya," the Russia of Tsarist days.

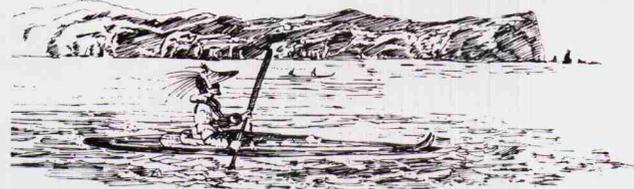


Kuskov House

Life at the Ross Colony

The structures were built of redwood using joinery techniques that were typical of maritime carpentry in those days. A wooden palisade surrounded the site, in much the same configuration as seen today. It included two blockhouses, one on the north corner and one to the south, complete with cannons that could command the entire area. The Russian-American Company flag, with its double-headed eagle, flew over the stockade.

The interior of the stockade contained the two-story house of the manager, the officials' quarters, barracks for the Russian employees, and various storehouses as well as lesser structures. The chapel was added in 1824. A well in the center provided the colonists with water. Outside the walls were the homes of company laborers, a native Alaskan village, and the dwellings of the local native Americans, whom we refer to today as the Kashaya Pomo.



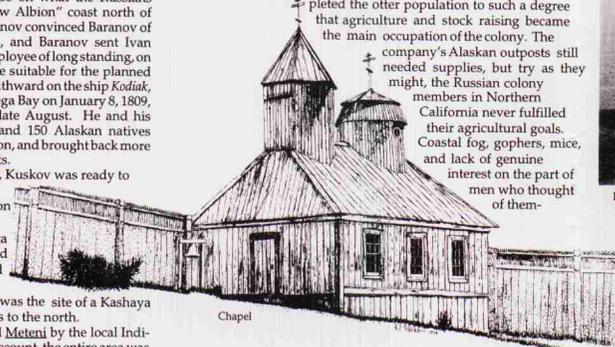
Sketch from: Inhabitants of Unalaska with their canoes, an engraving by Friedrich H. von Kittlitz, 1828. The Aleuts were skillful hunters in their little but sturdy birch canoes, and much admired by the Russians, who impressed them into service to gain the benefit of this adaptation to marine life. From the F.P. Litke Atlas, Alaska and Polar Regions Dept., Elmer E. Rasmussen Library.

In the early years, life at the colony under Kuskov revolved around the hunting of sea otter, whose pelts were extraordinarily valuable in the China trade. Most of the hunting was done by Kodiak islanders in the service of the company. They would go out in their bidarks (hunting kayaks), and use the atlatl (a throwing board for darts). These hunters and their families had their own village just west of the stockade, on the bluff above the ocean. The Alaskans and their Russian overseers ranged the coast from Baja California to Oregon, in search of marine mammals.

Only a small number of Russians actually lived at Ross, and very few Russian women (usually wives of officials) lived there. However, intermarriage between Russians and the natives of

Alaska and California was commonplace. Natives and people of mixed ancestry as well as lower-ranking company men lived in a village complex outside the stockade walls.

By 1820, extensive sea otter hunting had depleted the otter population to such a degree that agriculture and stock raising became the main occupation of the colony. The company's Alaskan outposts still needed supplies, but try as they might, the Russian colony members in Northern California never fulfilled their agricultural goals. Coastal fog, gophers, mice, and lack of genuine interest on the part of men who thought of them-



Chapel

selves primarily as hunters all combined to thwart the agricultural effort. Ranches and farms were established at inland sites — at Willow Creek on the "Slavyanka" (now known as the Russian River), and near the towns of Bodega and Graton — but still, the colonists could not produce enough to make a profit.

The Russians Leave

In 1839, the Russian-American Company signed an agreement with the Hudson Bay Company to supply Sitka with provisions from its settlements in present-day Washington and Oregon. Soon afterward, the Russian-American Company decided to abandon the Ross Colony. First, they tried to sell to the Mexican government. When that failed, they approached Mariano Vallejo and others. In December 1841, they reached an agreement with John Sutter of Sutter's Fort in the Sacramento Valley. Within a few months, the Russians were gone. Sutter sent his trusted assistant, John Bidwell, to Fort Ross to gather up the arms, ammunition, hardware, and other valuables, including herds of cattle, sheep, and other animals, and transport them to Sutter's Fort in the Sacramento Valley. Thereafter, the buildings at Fort Ross that were not dismantled and removed by Sutter were used for a variety of purposes by successive owners. In 1873, the area was acquired by George W. Call, who established the 15,000-acre Call Ranch.

The Post-Russian Period

Call's ranch involved some of the same commercial activities that the Russians had attempted at Fort Ross. Cordwood, railroad ties, fence posts, and other forms of lumber were the principal exports, along with tan bark and some dairy products. Vegetable and fruit growing and other agricultural endeavors made the ranch largely self-supporting. A steep, narrow, winding road connected the ranch with the rest of the coast and the interior, but for 50 years or more, until the present-day coast highway was established in the 1920s, primary access to the Call Ranch continued to be from the ocean. A wharf was built by the Calls at the foot of the bluff in the most sheltered part of the cove, and a 180-foot-long chute carried lumber and other bulk cargo directly from the top of the bluff to ships anchored in the bay.



Dehaut-Cilly lithograph of Fort Ross, 1828

some of the more important structures inside the stockade. A visitor center includes interpretive exhibits and sale publications about Fort Ross and its role in western American history. Ample parking is available.

Fort Ross State Historic Park Today

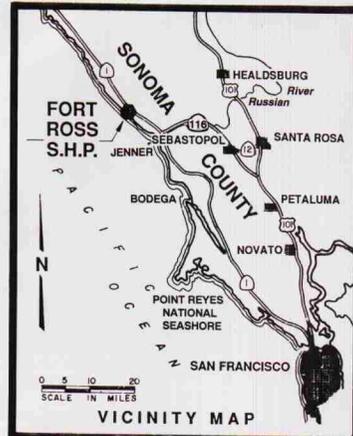
Fort Ross is located on the Sonoma coast, 11 miles northwest of the town of Jenner on Highway 1. It is about a two-hour drive from San Francisco. In addition to the park's mainland acreage, some 90 acres of submerged lands and tidelands are managed by the Department of Parks and Recreation under a long-term lease from the State Lands Commission.

Other State Park System units in the area are Salt Point State Park and Kruse Rhododendron State Reserve, about eight miles upcoast. Sonoma Coast State Beach is about 14 miles downcoast.

Fort Ross is located on a narrow, flat, coastal terrace between the ocean to the west and the high, forest-covered hills to the east. The San Andreas Fault runs along the base of the hills. The southern portion of the park is characterized by steep bluffs that drop several hundred feet into the sea. Fort Ross Cove, on the other hand, includes a protected, quiet beach and still water. Four distinct types of vegetation occur in the unit: coniferous forest, grassland, scrub, and coastal strand. Open grasslands predominate on the coastal shelf, while Bishop pine and Douglas-fir occupy the upland slopes. Stands of second-growth redwood can be found in the protected hollows and ravines.

Volunteer Opportunities

Volunteers devote countless hours to the state's ongoing effort to preserve and interpret the site's history. The Fort Ross Interpretive Association, open to anyone for nominal annual dues, sponsors "Living History Day" and other events. The association provides artifacts and research assistance, staffs the bookstore in the new visitor center, and provides financial assistance for the interpretive programs at Fort Ross.



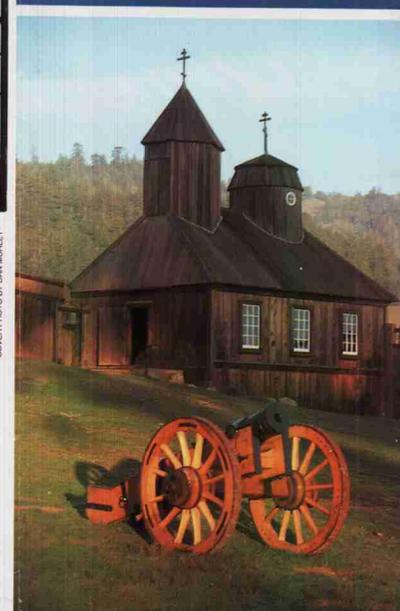
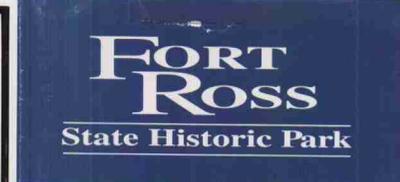
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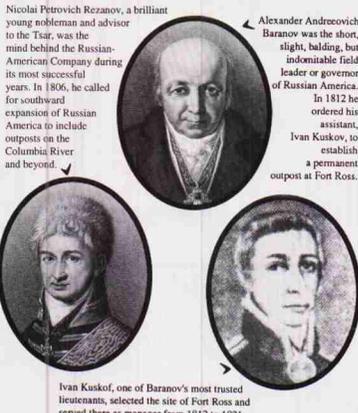
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DONALD W. MURPHY
Director, Dept. of Parks & Recreation



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COVER PHOTO BY DAN MURLEY



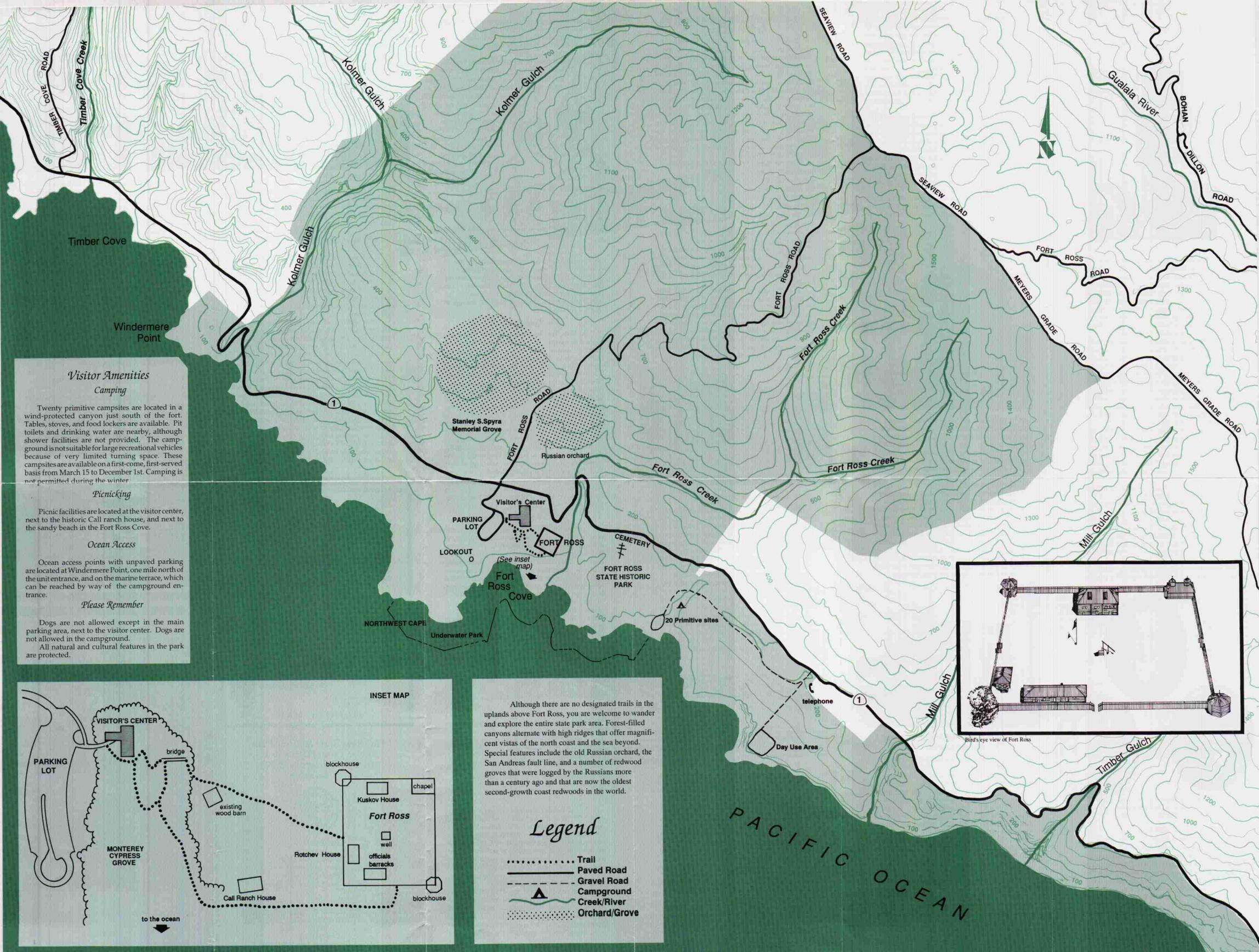
Alexander Andreovich Baranov was the short, slight, balding, but indomitable field leader or governor of Russian America. In 1812 he ordered his assistant, Ivan Kuskov, to establish a permanent outpost at Fort Ross.

Ivan Kuskov, one of Baranov's most trusted lieutenants, selected the site of Fort Ross and served there as manager from 1812 to 1821.

History

Russian Movement Into the Americas

The first steps toward Russian colonization of California were taken in 1578, when an outlaw band of Cossacks crossed the Ural Mountains and conquered the Tatars of central Russia. After that, the lure of furs, riches, and glory continued to propel these early fur hunters and free spirits rapidly eastward. By 1706, they had swept across the whole of Siberia, and occupied the Kamchatka Peninsula, northeast of Japan. The stage was set for further expansion to the east, across the Bering Strait.



Visitor Amenities

Camping

Twenty primitive campsites are located in a wind-protected canyon just south of the fort. Tables, stoves, and food lockers are nearby. Pit toilets and drinking water are nearby, although shower facilities are not provided. The campground is not suitable for large recreational vehicles because of very limited turning space. These campsites are available on a first-come, first-served basis from March 15 to December 1st. Camping is not permitted during the winter.

Picnicking

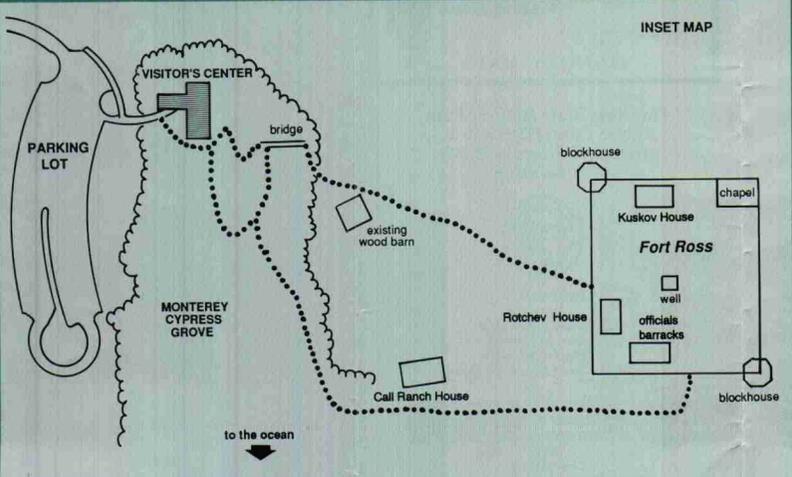
Picnic facilities are located at the visitor center, next to the historic Call ranch house, and next to the sandy beach in the Fort Ross Cove.

Ocean Access

Ocean access points with unpaved parking are located at Windermere Point, one mile north of the unit entrance, and on the marine terrace, which can be reached by way of the campground entrance.

Please Remember

Dogs are not allowed except in the main parking area, next to the visitor center. Dogs are not allowed in the campground. All natural and cultural features in the park are protected.



Although there are no designated trails in the uplands above Fort Ross, you are welcome to wander and explore the entire state park area. Forest-filled canyons alternate with high ridges that offer magnificent vistas of the north coast and the sea beyond. Special features include the old Russian orchard, the San Andreas fault line, and a number of redwood groves that were logged by the Russians more than a century ago and that are now the oldest second-growth coast redwoods in the world.

Legend

- Trail
- Paved Road
- - - - - Gravel Road
- ▲ Campground
- ~ Creek/River
- Orchard/Grove

