

This Day in History... October 18, 1867

U.S. Takes Possession of Alaska

On October 18, 1867, Alaska became part of America in a move dubbed “Seward’s Folly.”

The earliest known European presence in Alaska came in 1741 when Vitus Bering led an expedition for the Russian navy. Bering’s crew returned to Russia with some of the finest sea otter pelts in the world. Soon, fur traders began sailing from Siberia to the Aleutian Islands, establishing the first European settlement in 1784.



Stamp pictures Denali (formerly Mount McKinley), the highest mountain peak in North America.



Stamp illustrates what the Bering Strait, which linked Siberia and Alaska, may have looked like to Asians crossing it thousands of years ago.

The Russians quickly used force to dominate the native Alaskans, killing many and forcing others into slavery by making them hunt sea otters. Over the next few decades however, fur revenues dwindled and Russia was considering selling the unprofitable territory. In the 1860s, Western Union was building the first electric telegraph line that ran from California up the North American coast, across the Bering Strait to Moscow, joining the European telegraph network. When the Transatlantic telegraph line was completed, work on the Russian-American line was suspended.

The US government believed the line to Moscow was still a good idea. So Secretary of State William H. Seward traveled to Alaska to negotiate with the Russian Ambassador to complete the line. The Russians didn’t believe the telegraph line was worth the money, so they decided to sell the Alaskan territory to America in exchange for the value of the telegraph. The US purchased Alaska from Russia on March 30, 1867 for \$7.2 million, about two cents per acre. At the time, the purchase was known as “Seward’s Folly” or “Seward’s Icebox.”

On October 18, American and Russian officials met in Sitka, Alaska to formally transfer the property. During the ceremony, the Russian flag was lowered, but it got stuck on the pole, eventually taking the efforts of three men to remove it. The American flag was then raised, cannons fired by both sides, and the Department of Alaska officially became part of the United States.



The original design for these Alaska-Yukon stamps pictured a seal on an ice floe. However, the committee didn’t want Americans to think Alaska was always cold, so they changed it to picture Seward.



This stamp is a rare occurrence as it pictures a living person – DeeDee Jonrowe competing in the 2000 Iditarod Trail Sled Dog Race.

Alaska proved to be a valuable resource – rich in fish, minerals, timber, and sources of hydroelectric power. Soon, the valuable resources taken from the new territory had more than paid for the purchase price. By the early 1900s, the discovery of gold had attracted thousands of new settlers and aroused nationwide interest in Alaska. And in 1909, the Alaska-Yukon Exposition was held to celebrate the rapid development of the Alaska-Yukon-Pacific Territory. The two Seward stamps above were issued to commemorate the expo.

The area officially became the Territory of Alaska in 1912. However, early attempts at establishing statehood failed because of the territory’s small population and lack of interest from the locals. The Alaska Territory proved its usefulness during World War II, and the discovery of oil led to its admission to the Union on January 3, 1959.



Stamp issued in 1959 to celebrate Alaska’s statehood

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