**“Soft Gold: The history of Russians in Alaska” Script**

Green text indicates instructions for the presenter/headings

Red text indicates where you should click to play an animation/advance the PowerPoint

Blue text indicates an interactive element

Purple text indicates words to add, based on whether or not the audience/students correctly or incorrectly answer questions

Gray highlights for elements that the current presenter may want to revise and/or personalize to make the program seem more in their own voice

**Slide 1: Introduction**

Hello everyone! My name is \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_, and I am a(n) \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ here at Sitka National Historical Park here in Sitka, Alaska. I’m so excited to be here today with you all to talk about a very important piece of Alaskan history!oday we are going to be talking about Russians in Alaska- the first non-Alaskan native people who came and settled here. This had a HUGE impact on the people who already lived here in Alaska, as well as the history of the world. Let’s get started!

**Slide 2: Info on Alaska**

First, we need to talk about Alaska. This is a map of Alaska, with the large green areas of forests and tundra, the blue of the rivers, lakes, and oceans, and the brown of our high mountains.

Sitka, Alaska is located right here in Southeast Alaska, where you see this BIG red arrow and “X” just appeared on the screen.

This next map is of a part of Southeast Alaska we call the Alexander Archipelago. The bright white parts on this map actually represent the ocean, and all these green shapes represent islands.

Sitka is located right here on this large island that just appeared in this red circle on your screen. This island is called *Baranof Island*, or *Shee* in the Native Tlingit language. Now, you might be asking yourself why an island in Alaska has such a strange, Russian-sounding name? Many places in this part of Alaska, especially near the coast, have Russian names- these places are named after people who were important to Russian settlement here in Alaska. For example, Baranof Island is named after Alexander Baranof, the first governor of Russian America. We’ll get into this a little bit later!

This next map is of downtown Sitka, as it appears today. You can see the blue of the water and the grey land, with these white-colored streets running all throughout it. However, this big green area in the bottom-right corner of the map is Sitka National Historical Park- where I am today!

Sitka National Historical Park works to honor, respect, and preserve Southeast Alaskan Native culture, while also recognizing the history of the Russian settlers who lived here.

**Slide 3: The Tlingit**

The first people to settle in this part of Alaska are called the Tlingit. In this black and white photograph from 1904, you can see a large group of Tlingit people all standing together in traditional Chilkat robes, masks, and jewelry. All together, we call this regalia- special clothing and accessories worn during gatherings and ceremonies. This photo is actually from a traditional festival and feast called a “potlatch”, where different clans would come together to share gifts and connect with one another, so regalia is important here!

The Tlingit have a very rich oral history- the collection of all their history and legends have been passed down in stories and songs from generation to generation. According to this oral history, the Tlingit have lived in this area of nearly 10,000 years. Not only do we have the Tlingit’s history, but archaeologists, scientists who learn about the past by studying artifacts, have found evidence that this is true.

This is an artist’s idea of what a traditional Tlingit Village may have looked like in pre- Russian contact Sitka. The large, green mountains in the back leading up to the blue water, and the islands may look familiar to you. On the shore, you can see a few large structures, as well as people out on the water in boats. I’d like you all take a minute to look at it, and tell me what kind of things you see. What kind of buildings are in this picture? What are the people doing?

The large buildings you see here are depictions of clan houses- they were large buildings that many people lived in, and often had more than one floor. Sometimes, they would even be built down into the ground. Each house would be decorated with beautiful carvings. This is a closeup of what Tlingit clan house might have looked like- you can see the brown wooden house decorated with intricate carvings of animals and people, painted in white, red, green and brown. Each of these carvings has a purpose, telling and honoring the stories of the clan who live in the house and their ancestors. The boats you see here are canoes- raise your hand if you’ve ever been in a canoe before! Except these canoes aren’t exactly like the ones you and I think of today, which only hold two or three people. Traditional Tlingit canoes could be small like ours, or very, very large and could hold many people and lots of supplies.

There’s something else that’s special about this drawing- does anyone have a guess what that is?

Pause for a moment and let students make guesses

Yes, what a good guess! This drawing was made almost 230 years ago, and depicts the *original* Tlingit village that existed right here where Sitka is today, called *Shee Atika*. I love this picture, because even though these buildings are gone today, I can still go for a walk through town and look out at the water and see these islands, or look behind me and see these mountains. Pictures like these are a great reminder that even though places change, you can always study and learn from the past!

On this map you can see the traditional lands of the Tlingit in Southeast Alaska. These dotted lines show how the land is separated into different *Kwaan*s, which are kind of like states, or regions. Each *kwaan* can have many different clans of Tlingit people living there.

One of the big reasons the Tlingit settled in this part of Alaska was for its natural resources. Someone define for me what a “Natural Resource” is. For the Tlingit, this region had enough food to hunt and fish for or gather, and trees to cut and build or make things with. Give me some examples of things people hunt for here, or things people make from the trees. It was this natural abundance that brought the Russians here in the 1700s. But before we get to that era, we need to take a step back and find out exactly what the Russians wanted here in Alaska.

(Slide 4 is hidden for the sake of time, but would be good to include if you are talking to people on the Eastern and Midwestern US and Canada)

**Slide 5: Siberian Fur trade**

While the British and French hunted for beaver in North America, something similar was happening on the other side of the world in Russia. However, instead of beaver Russian fur hunters were looking for this animal. This small, brown furry animal standing in this crisp white snow has very soft and warm fur that was very, very valuable.

Can anyone guess what this animal is? Show me on your fingers again if you think it’s 1. A Sable, 2. A Wolverine, or 3. A Marten?

Pause for a moment to let students make their guesses, and see what they think.

This animal is called a Sable! They are native to the vast forests of Russia. This is a map of Russia, and you can see the large area inside this red circle- this whole area is called Siberia. You can see lots of greens and brown on this map, and that is because this whole region is lots of mountains, forests, rivers. This is the perfect place for sables to live, because they can hide way high up in trees to get away from predators.

This next red circle you see on the map way over to the far left is actually where most of the people in Russia lived at the time- its where the biggest cities like Saint Petersburg and Moscow are located. Because Siberia, the region we just talked about, is SO big and SO cold, not many people wanted to live there. However, when people began hunting for sable they began moving into the region. This long red line right that just appeared on the map is where the Ural Mountains are located. They are a natural barrier between the left, where most of the people lived, and Siberia- they had to cross them in order to reach the sable. These two red arrows show how these hunters moved across the continent searching for sable. Eventually, people moved across the WHOLE continent looking for Sables, and found their way here, to the area inside this red circle on the right of the map- the Pacific Ocean.

When they got to the coast, they found another animal whose fur was even warmer and more valuable than the sable. Who wants to guess what that animal is?

Have the teacher call on students to make guesses.

(Amazing guess! if correct / Those were great guesses! if incorrect) The animal I’m thinking of is this one right here- the Sea Otter. In this picture, you can see a fuzzy, brown sea otter floating on its back in some water. Sea Otter fur is incredibly special for a few reasons.

At this point, get out the Sea Otter pelt

I have here a sea otter pelt- If you look closely at this, you can see just how dense the hairs are here.

Hold the pelt up close to the camera so students might be able to get a closer look

If you were to look at a single square inch of this fur under a microscope,

With your fingers, show students what a single square inch looks like on the pelt

you would be able to count over a million hairs. (To compare, a human has about 1000 strands per square inch, dogs average 15,000 and cats can range from 60,000 to 120,000) Students can provide pet examples (raise your hand if you have a dog- pick one student to tell 3 things about their dog- name, breed or color, do they shed? Do the same for cats.)

That is one of the biggest reasons the Russians were so interested in Sea Otter Fur- because of how thick this fur is, it is incredibly soft and warm, and also prevents water from getting in- unlike the hair you or I have on our heads.

**Slide 6: Luxury Goods**

However, there was a problem- there just weren’t that many sea otters near the Russian coast. I’d like to read you a quote from the “American Naturalist” a scientific journal.

Read the quote from the presentation slide

This quote was written in 1870, so just over 150 years ago. Kamchatka and the Kurile Islands, two of the places the author mentioned, are located off the coast of Russia- these are the Sea otters that these Russian fur hunters found.

Just like the beaver, people wanted Sea Otter fur to make clothes out of- but because they were so rare in Russia, only the richest people could afford them. They were so valuable, that people called sea otter fur “Soft Gold.” At the time, China was one of the biggest places Russian fur hunters traded their Sea Otter fur. On this map, you can see large green forests of Siberia and the Russian coast near the top, and the rest of Asia down below. In China, the hunters could easily trade fur for other valuable goods like tea or porcelain, which they would bring back to Russia and sell. Although today we can pretty easily get our hands on these kinds of products, at the time people in big Russian cities like Saint Petersburg and Moscow would pay LOTS of money to have them.

This is a black and white drawing of a Chinese man wearing a coat made from sea otter fur. You can tell that he must’ve been a very wealthy in order to have an entire coat made out of sea otter fur and may have worn his finest expensive attire to have this portrait done. Show me by raising your hands, does anyone here plan to get a special picture taken for the school yearbook or for their senior year? Who is going to wear their nicest or newest clothes for the picture? This might be a similar experience.

Goods like Sea Otter fur, tea, and porcelain became “Luxury Goods”- something that isn’t necessary to live but is seen as very valuable or highly desirable within a certain society or culture. Throughout history and across the world, luxury goods have always been incredibly important for trade, and encourage different cultures, like Russia and China in this case, to interact with one another and help spread important parts of culture like language, music, food, and many other things.

How about some examples from today? Today, which of these things would be considered luxury goods? Show me on your fingers if you think any of these are luxury goods: 1. Groceries, 2. A toothbrush, 3. A car, 4. Sunglasses, 5. Hand Sanitizer, or 6. A laptop. Remember, it should be something that isn’t necessary to live, but we all think of as very valuable.

Pause for a moment to let students make their guesses, and see what they think. A statement about what people or cultures perceive as necessity vs luxury may be appropriate.

**Slide 7: Russians move into the Aleutian Islands**

So now, we need to answer the question- Where did the Russian hunters go first to find Sea Otters to hunt? They went here, to this chain of Islands- does anyone know what these islands are called? I’ll give you a hint- their name was in the quote I read to you all earlier. Does anyone remember?

You’re correct! These are the Aleutian Islands! On this map, you can see Russia on the left and Alaska on the right, with the Aleutian Islands inside this red box in the middle. Because the islands stretch between the two continents, Asia and North America, Russian hunters (who weren’t good sailors) could travel the short distance between these islands, rather than having to sail all the way across the ocean.

There were also people already living here in the Aleutian Islands- they are called the Aleut or Unangan people. The name for these people, Aleut, is from a Siberian word and is what the Russians called them, and it’s why the islands are named the way they are! In this drawing, you can see a man and woman dressed in their colorful, beautifully decorated traditional clothing, holding traditional tools like a paddle and baskets and standing on a cliff above the ocean.

The Russian hunters relied on Alaskan native people to help them hunt sea otters. The Aleut had lived in these Islands for thousands and thousands of years, and knew how to hunt the kinds of animals that lived in the waters around their homes. Animals like the Sea Otter, Whales, and seals were all an important part of their culture and they knew exactly where to look for them and how to trap them.

Although the Russians relied on Alaskan native people, one important thing we have to talk about is how the Russians treated the Aleut. It is very important to understand that, although the Russians did sometimes trade with and pay the native hunters for their work, most of the time the Russian hunters weren’t nice to the Aleut People. They did not treat them fairly or with respect. Often times, they would threaten to hurt the Aleut or kidnap members of their families if they didn’t give them supplies or help them hunt for Sea Otters. There’s a word that describes what the Russians did to make the Aleut work for them- coercion. Coercion means forcing someone to do something they don’t want to either using force, or by threatening them. Unfortunately, this happens a lot when people with a lot of power, which often comes in the form of manpower or technology like guns or steel, encounter people with less than them. This is a very important concept to understand. This is not unique to Alaska, either- it has happened globally. Who would like to share another example of coercion? What are some other words for coercion? (Bullying, pressure, force, intimidation)

It happened to many native people in North and South America when European settlers arrived.

Let’s explore some of the reasons that these Russian hunters were better at hunting animals that lived on land, like the sable, and the Alaskan native hunters were much better at hunting animals that lived in the waters near their home. This first drawing is of Russian hunters in Siberia. It’s a black and white drawing of two hunters standing in a snowy forest, ready to hunt. I’d like you all to take a minute and look at this, and think about what kind of tools, or clothing you see that would allow these hunters to be successful on land.

Give students a minute to study the picture, before having them give examples they see in the picture- things like their heavy fur clothing, skis, dogs, sleds, bow and arrow, gun, etc.

Now, here are drawings of Alaskan native hunters in the water. In all of them, you can see Alaskan native hunters out on the water with their traditional clothing and tools. What do you see in these drawings that would help these hunters be successful at hunting animals that live in the water? There are a few that are easy to spot, and some that are more difficult.

Give students a minute to study the picture, before having them give examples they see in the picture- things like the kayaks, their hunting tools, their waterproof coats (made of intestine), visors to block the sun, etc.

Slide 8 is hidden, but can be used to talk about sea otter habitat, ecosystems, keystone species, subsistence)

**Slide 9: Russians move inland**

So, where do you think the Russians went? Here, we have that same map of Alaska with the green forests, blue water, and brown mountains that we saw at the beginning of our presentation. On this map, I’ll show you a few different ways the Russians might have travelled and I want you to raise your hand when you think you see the right one

Make a comment based on what if/how many hands you see up

If you think they immediately followed the coasts NORTH to hunt sea otters raise your hand.

Okay, now if you think they went WAY up the rivers into the interior of Alaska raise your hand!

Make a comment based on what if/how many hands you see up

If you think they stayed south and went along the coast, put your hands way up high where I can see them!

That’s right! Just like the Russians had travelled east along across the Pacific Ocean and across the Aleutian Islands, they continued their way east ALL the way along the southern coast of Alaska.

Even though the Russian hunters were moving along the coast and away from the Aleutian Islands looking for otters, they still needed the help of the Aleut hunters they forced to work for them- so much so that actually brought large numbers of them with them along the coast. In this drawing, we can see a large Russian sailing ship and many Aleut hunters in kayaks approaching an island with a village on it- however, these people are not Aleut or Unangan- they belong to another group of Alaskan native people called the Sugpiaq, or Alutiit.

These are all artists renderings of different Sugpiaq people in their traditional clothing made from animal fur (like sea otter!) with traditional piercings and headwear. These people live all across South-central Alaska! If we go back to our hand device representing Alaska, the Sugpiaq live from right about the first joint on your first finger all the way to the thumb! Now, I’d like you all to remember the word we talked about earlier- coercion. The Russians “coerced” the Sugpiaq into working with them the same way they had with the Aleut- by disrespecting and threatening to hurt them if they didn’t help.

With their large force of Aleut hunters, combined with the new workers they gathered from the Sugpiaq, Russian fur traders could travel out in hunting parties that contained hundreds of men in many kayaks, looking for otters. However, having this many hunters all operating in the same area was difficult to coordinate. They were far from home, and they needed places to stop and sleep, to eat, to repair their ships and tools, and store the furs they had gathered until they could be sold.

They needed to build outposts and colonies! Again, we have our map of Alaska but this time there are red stars on it- these are all places that the Russians built colonies, including in Sitka! The Alaskan coastline offered them many opportunities to build and settle here that other places did not- The interior would have plenty of building materials, but it was hard to get to and they would be far away from the Sea Otters.

Gesture to this area with hand motions, laser pointer, mouse, etc.

Going back and building on the Aleutian Islands would make them too far away from the Sea Otters, and many of the islands were small, or didn’t have good building materials. On the coast, they had plenty of the things they needed. Easy access to food, lots of trees to build with, land to build on, and access to the ocean made the coast the perfect place to build!

Again, one of the places that the Russians chose to build a colony was right here on Baranof Island. However, we already talked about another group of people who were living here, taking advantage of these natural resources.

The Tlingit! Here we have a historic photograph taken in 1904 of Tlingit wearing traditional regalia and standing next to a type of carving called “house post”- these are the types of carvings that you might find outside the clan houses we talked about. This wolf carving is in our visitor’s center at Sitka National Historical Park, so if you all come visit you can see this carving in person!

We already talked about how the Russians treated the Aleut and Sugpiaq people, and forced them to work for them hunting sea otters. We know that the Russian’s did not respect the native people of Alaska and thought they could take advantage of them.

**REWORD** However, unlike these other two groups of people, the Tlingit chose to take the risk of resistance against the Russian hunters. Although they did not want to fight, they also did not want the Russians to settle near their home. These two groups fought over the land, especially right here on Baranof Island. This is a historical painting that shows the Tlingit, who are on the right in traditional battle clothing and armor and armed with guns, which they got by trading with American and British merchants, and the Russians and their Alaskan native workers, down on the left of the picture, coming off the water and their ships.

In 1802, and 1804, the Russians and Tlingit people fought each other for the land in Sitka. Although they did their best to prepare for the battle, the Tlingit realized they could not defeat the Russians in battle and made the decision to temporarily leave this part of this of Baranof island, to preserve their culture and way of life. Because the Tlingit made this decision, The Russians had the opportunity to settle in this location and establish a colony.

**Slide 11: New Archangel**

After the Russians settled here, they gave their new colony a name- Ново Архангельск (Novo Arhangelsk). In this drawing, you can see the buildings and walls of this Russian colony, built on the shore between the snowy mountains in the background and the water, where several sailing ships are anchored.

Let’s try to pronounce this name together! This first word is pretty easy, repeat after me- “No” (pause), “Vo” (pause)- “Novo”. This second word is a little bit tricker, but I’m sure you can do it! Repeat after me, “Ar” (pause), “Hang” (pause), “El” (pause), “Sk” (pause), “Arhangelsk”. So now, let’s try to put these two words together- “Novo Arhangelsk”. Very good! The Russian colony of Novo Arhangelsk, which translates to “New Archangel” in English, became the capital of Russian America.

Does anyone know what the capital of the United States is? Show me on your fingers if you think it’s 1. New York City (pause), 2. Boston (pause), 3. Washington D.C. (pause), 4. Chicago (pause), or 5. San Francisco (pause)? I hope you can all see the bright red stars that just appeared on this map- America is here in white, while Mexico and Canada are shown as a tan color.

That’s right, it’s 3. Washington D.C. It’s important to realize that a capital doesn’t have to be the biggest city or have the most people, it is just where the government of that country is located. So, in Russian America, all the important decisions were being made in Novo Arhangelsk.

Probably the most important decision involving Russian America, however, happened in 1867- nearly 70 years after the colony was founded. And that was the decision the Russians made to sell Alaska to the United States. This is a painting of all the important figures negotiating the sale, standing in front of large globe showing Alaska. However, the Russians didn’t just sell the land they had settled on here in New Archangel/Sitka- they sold ALL of the land in Alaska, including the land that belonged to the Tlingit, to the Aleut, to the Sugpiaq, and to many other Alaskan native people- land that wasn’t theirs to sell. Unfortunately, we don’t have time to talk about this fascinating and complex piece of history, so we’ll save that interesting story for another time.

(If you want to hear more, we have another program ALL about the “Alaska Purchase”, which I or one of my fellow staff here at Sitka National Historical Park would love to give you- so make sure you ask your teacher!)

This is the official end of the presentation, so conclude the program in your own voice (written below is an example)- make sure you include time for questions at the end, and have the teacher call on students to ask their questions.

I want to thank you all for being such excellent listeners, and a special thank you to your teacher, \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_, for inviting me to come speak to all of you today. I truly hope that you’ve all learned a lot not only about the history of the fur trade in Alaska, but that you’ll continue your day and think how you can be mindful of our place in history! We do still have a little time left, so if anyone has any questions, they’ve been holding on to feel free to ask them now!