Astor and Baranov

Partners in Empire

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James Ronda of the History Department at the University of Tulsa has written on various aspects of exploration and development in the Pacific Northwest. His major work Lewis and Clark among the Indians *(Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1984) reinterpreted the relationship of the two captains with the Natives they encountered while venturing west as agents of empire and capitalism. Spanish and French traders and settlers had, from the beginning of the 17th century, already drawn the Natives into the world market system. At the start of the 19th century the American John Jacob Astor sought to organize the interior and maritime fur trade into a unified system, which, had it been successful, would have changed the nature of the economic history of North America.*

In his book on Astor and his imperial idea, Ronda explores what he calls the "Russian Connection." Astor sought to make an ally of Aleksandr Baranov, chief manager of the Russian-American Company and Governor of the colony of Russian America. Knowing that the Russians were dependent on external sources of supply, Astor suggested to Baranov that he, Astor, become the Russians' sole colonial supplier. In exchange, he asked that Baranov grant him exclusive non-Russian trading privileges along the coast. In a period when the Europeans still were vying for sovereignty along that coast, this was a daring proposal; Astor sought to become the dominant power in the continental West, a role which later the Hudson's Bay Company would fill, though to a lesser degree, for half a century.

In the piece reprinted here, written for the Anchorage symposium "Russian America: The Forgotten Frontier," Ronda examines the details of Astor's proposed contract with Baranov and the motivations of each party to the agreement. Baranov achieved the success he did with the Russian-American Company through shrewd judgment and ruthless control. His involvement with Astor was much to

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his and Russia's advantage and, in the end, the more so, since John Jacob Astor gave up his imperial design while Baranov solidified the Russian hold in the Northwest. In this volatile period before the lines of sovereignty were drawn, any one of the contenders for imperial control might have succeeded: Spain, Britain, Russia, or the United States. Had Astor and Baranov successfully concluded their negotiations, the map of the Northwest would likely be considerably different today.

The name John Jacob Astor has come to symbolize the single-minded pursuit of profit. Astor seems to us the archetypal moneygrubber whose life was defined by ledger lines and the bottom line. Alexander Baranov, governor of the Russian empire in America, suffers an even worse fate. He has simply become the invisible man on a frontier so distant as to be unimportant. From the pen of Washington Irving, Baranov emerges as a brawling, profane, hard-drinking tyrant. The moneygrubber and the tyrant are easy stereotype descriptions that mask a complex reality and a fascinating although brief relationship.

Contemporaries knew better. They understood what latter-day commentators sometimes overlook—that both Astor and Baranov possessed powerful, audacious plans for empire in the far Northwest. Thomas Jefferson recognized the imperial dimensions of Astor's plans. Writing in 1813, he likened Astor to Columbus and Raleigh, and portrayed Astoria as the "germ" of a great western empire.[1] Baranov's impressive plans for exploration and expansion might have prompted Jefferson to put him in the pantheon of empire builders as well. Because the Astor and Baranov visions crossed paths here in the north Pacific, it is even more important that we take the measure of each dream and then plot their crossing.

John Astor's western dream first sprang to life in late 1807. It was then that Astor first mentioned his western ideas to DeWitt Clinton. Clinton was an ideal sounding board. Mayor of New York and sometime lieutenant governor of the state, he had important political friends and considerable business savvy. And it was not lost on Astor that Clinton's uncle George was Jefferson's vice-president. No direct record of those earliest talks between Astor and Clinton survives, but it is clear from later correspondence that the mayor urged his friend to pursue the Pacific enterprise.[2]

Astor's flash of imagination took written shape in January 1808. In a private letter to DeWitt Clinton, Astor carefully drew the outlines of what he hoped would become the first American empire west of the Rockies. In this and subsequent letters to President Jefferson and Secretary of the Trea-

sury Albert Gallatin, Astor proposed a vast trade network extending from western Europe and the American Great Lakes to the Pacific Northwest and on to Russian America and China. He envisioned a complete land and sea transportation system shifting trade goods, pelts, information, and employees around a global marketplace. The vehicle for this enterprise would be the Pacific Fur Company, a private venture with close ties to the federal government. In Astor's scheme, company posts would occupy sites from the Missouri to the Columbia. Fur and the flag would join forces to plant American sovereignty along the Great River of the West.[3]

Alexander Baranov's expansionist strategies were no less audacious or visionary. Driven by the need to expand hunting territories and locate suitable sites for agricultural settlements, Baranov undertook an impressive exploration program. The 1808 Kuskov expedition, the founding of Fort Ross, and tentative moves toward Hawai'i represent a kind of national-corporate expansionism that Astor would have readily grasped. Working from opposite sides of the continent, Astor and Baranov shared a common passion—the drive for empire.[4]

Astor's plans were prompted neither by the journeys of American explorers like Lewis and Clark nor by the western vision espoused by Jefferson. Rather, it was his connection to Canadian promoters—especially the North West Company—that gave both form and substance to the design. Astor's tutors in empire were Peter Pond, Alexander Mackenzie, and his own Montreal partner, Alexander Henry the elder. By the fall of 1809, Astor was busy turning his Canadian lessons into American reality. In August, there had been a hasty and ultimately unsuccessful trip to Montreal for discussions with the North West Company on the joint Pacific venture. Now back in New York, Astor was busy with final preparations for his first voyage in the northwest maritime fur trade. His ship *Enterprise* under Captain John Ebbets, was soon to sail for the Pacific.[5]

What played now was a diplomatic ballet of exceptional delicacy. Sometime during September 1809, Astor was approached by Andrei Dashkov, a Russian diplomat and commercial agent of extraordinary skill and energy. Dashkov represented not only the Russian government but also the Russian-American Company. The company had been trying for some time to negotiate a diplomatic arrangement with the United States to restrain weapons trading along the Northwest coast. Once in the United States, Dashkov was to press for a commercial treaty. That treaty was to contain an especially deceptive provision virtually forcing the United States to halt the weapons trade. If such diplomatic maneuvers

failed, Dashkov was instructed to negotiate with an American merchant who could deliver provisions on a regular schedule to Russian America. But the company wanted no ordinary entrepreneur with modest Pacific experience. Dashkov had to find someone with solid credentials and contacts in Canton.[6]

Dashkov's diplomatic efforts proved fruitless. American officials seemed quite uninterested in the problems of one Russian company on so remote a frontier. By the end of August 1809, the Russian agent had abandoned diplomacy and was busy seeking a private American ally. That search brought Dashkov to Astor. Every crossing of dreams needs a broker, an intermediary; Dashkov was now to be a midwife for Astor and Baranov.

The conversations between Astor and Dashkov changed the course of Astoria's history and the history of the greater Northwest. Dashkov explained Russian needs and problems, suggesting "a direct and permanent trade with our settlements." When he asked Astor about his western plans, the merchant confided that the Pacific Fur Company intended to establish a colony on the north bank of the Columbia River. Astor consistently told the Russians that his post was planned for the north bank of the river. Astoria was, of course, built on the south bank. Astor may have purposely misled Dashkov as part of his scheme for a joint Russian and American presence to squeeze out the Canadians. Warming to the benefits of cooperation between the two companies, Astor suggested that if the Russians moved south while American traders headed north, the British would be eliminated as a power in the Northwest. Dashkov was taken aback by such a daring proposal and gave only the vaguest of replies. But the Russian was impressed with Astor's capital, spirit of enterprise, and business acumen.

Finding that Astor was well disposed toward a venture in Russian America, so much so that it seemed to Dashkov "as if he had had this same thought before," the two men fashioned a proposal for Pacific Fur Company–Russian-American Company cooperation. Their plan called for both companies to sign a three-year agreement. The pact made Astor sole supplier of all goods to Russian America. He would be required to send at least two or three ships each year. Payment for these goods could be in cash, fur, or bills of exchange. Astor's ships would then be chartered by the Russian company to transport furs to Canton. Astor promised that the Russian furs would be sold to the Chinese by his commercial agent, thus concealing their true origin. Dashkov believed that a deal with Astor would achieve both company and national goals far quicker than any tedious ne-

gotiations with American diplomats. He was convinced that once other American merchants learned of Astor's monopoly to provision the Russian settlements all incentive for northern voyages would vanish. The deadly weapons trade would promptly collapse. The settlements would be fed, furs would be sold in Canton at good prices, and the Russians might feel more secure in Alaskan waters.[7]

Any plan as ambitious and far-reaching as this needed approval from both the Russian-American Company and the imperial government. But Astor and Dashkov were unwilling to wait for so lengthy a process to take its course. Sometime in October 1809, they decided to change sailing plans for Captain Ebbets and the *Enterprise* to include a long stay at Sitka. If this voyage proved successful, it would provide solid experience for future journeys from both New York and Astoria. All this meant a flurry of work for everyone from Astor and Ebbets to the *Enterprise* crew and dock hands. New supplies had to be found, some Indian trade items off-loaded, and cargo manifests rewritten. The *Enterprise* had originally been loaded with cargo suitable for the maritime fur trade. Using a list supplied by Dashkov, Astor and Ebbets were able to reload the ship with items more suited to the Sitka market. Notes from Captain Ebbets reveal the sorts of things destined for the Russian colony. The *Enterprise* cargo hold was crammed with everything from twenty dozen empty bottles and countless strings of blue beads to barrels of molasses and bolts of canvas cloth. Dashkov's original list suggested one thousand gallons each of rum and brandy. Perhaps because he had made earlier voyages to Alaska, Ebbets knew better. The Captain doubled the amounts and ordered that "the liquors must be as strong as *Aqua Fortis* if possible."[8]

Having the right cargo for Russian needs was essential for this first venture and subsequent success. Because Ebbets was to be Astor's initial contact with Baranov, the captain's detailed instructions occupied much of Astor's attention. During the first week of November, with the *Enterprise* nearly ready to sail, Astor drafted two sets of orders for Ebbets. One set, enclosed in Astor's November 4 letter to Dashkov, presented in straightforward terms how Ebbets was to deal with the Russian company. The captain was told to sail for the Russian settlements without delay, trade at the best and fairest terms, and then take on Russian furs for Canton. Ebbets was granted full authority to make a binding contract with Baranov.[9] These bland instructions were meant for Dashkov's eyes. A rather different set went directly to Ebbets. Astor and Dashkov had agreed that if necessary the *Enterprise* could deliver her cargo on the Siberian

mainland. What Astor feared was that the *Enterprise* and future ships might be ordered by Russian officials to sail throughout the North Pacific as something of a private company navy. The Russian part of Astor's western design was important, but it could not be allowed to dominate the entire venture. Ebbets was privately told that he was not obligated to go to more than one post in addition to the call at Sitka.[10]

During that busy first week of November, Astor made room for an important letter to Baranov. Good relations with the governor were essential, not just for this voyage, but for Astoria's future. Astor recited a brief history of his dealings with Dashkov and the subsequent changes in the *Enterprise*'s lading. "Nothing would be more gratifying to me," wrote Astor, "than to be in a small degree useful in assisting in the establishing a trade on such a footing between us as would secure stability and success to a trade, the importance of which is as yet known only to yourself." Knowing that details of the pending arrangement between the Pacific Fur Company and the Russian-American Company were to be spelled out by Dashkov, Astor saw no reason to repeat such items. But he did want to reassure the governor about the weapons trade. If American ships were denied a place in the lucrative provisioning trade because Astor had a monopoly, far fewer Yankee ships and Boston skippers would trouble Alaskan waters.[11]

Once the *Enterprise* sailed at the end of November, Astor had to face far more complex diplomatic challenges. From the time he first laid western plans, Astor knew that his dream would be hostage to the shifting winds of international diplomacy. Now the twists of national policy—Russian and American—threatened to sever Astor's ties to Baranov. Dashkov had been ordered to make a commercial treaty with the United States, and despite his dealings with Astor, the Russian diplomat was intent on pursuing that goal. Astor, on the other hand, hoped he would fail. Any commercial treaty with the United States was sure to touch on the weapons trade, thus making any private arrangement with Astor much less attractive. Throughout the early months of 1810, Astor seemed to have little to fear. Dashkov's meetings with Secretary of State Robert Smith produced no immediate progress.[12] Astor's confidence that the talks were going nowhere suddenly vanished in the light of two unexpected events. In early May 1810, the State Department decided that John Quincy Adams, American ambassador to the Russian imperial court, might well begin informal talks with Russian officials regarding a commercial treaty. If those consultations produced a treaty, Astor had no deal.

And now there was a new complication. Astor had long depended on Andrei Dashkov for both information and direction. But in the spring of 1810, Dashkov suddenly became only the second most important Russian official in the United States. His new superior and the first fully credentialed Russian ambassador to the American republic was Count Fedor Pahlen. Now Astor had to watch events in St. Petersburg while courting a new ally in Washington.[13]

Like his predecessor Dashkov, Ambassador Pahlen hoped to strike a deal with State Department officials. Secretary of State Smith had decided to let John Quincy Adams do the negotiating in St. Petersburg, and Pahlen soon found himself as frustrated as Dashkov.[14] Astor heard about that frustration and decided to play on it. His chosen performer in this diplomatic dance was Adrian Benjamin Bentzon. Bentzon, a former Danish diplomat, was rapidly becoming Astor's most adept agent. And it did not hurt that he was married to Magdalen Astor, John's eldest daughter. Astor now dispatched Bentzon to Washington, and the agent made sure he and the ambassador were soon fast friends. Pahlen found Bentzon an easy listener, and the Russian promptly poured out his bitterness at American indifference. Rebuffed, Pahlen vowed that he would never again call at the State Department. Once Pahlen made that promise, Bentzon made his move. He laid out in careful detail the proposed arrangement between Astor and the Russian company, dwelling on the obvious advantages to both the company and the empire. Pahlen was quickly sold and suggested that Astor send Bentzon to St. Petersburg for direct talks with the government.[15]

Astor must have been delighted with this response. With work going forward on other aspects of his western design, he did not want to lose his Russian chance. The problem now was to organize an unofficial diplomatic mission to St. Petersburg without running afoul of either the State Department or Ambassador John Quincy Adams. Throughout the fall of 1810, Astor used every bit of influence he could muster. There were hurried talks with his long-time Washington confidant, Secretary of the Treasury Albert Gallatin, and through Gallatin, contacts were made with President James Madison.[16] All of this produced no results. And with Astor's overland and seaborne expeditions to the Pacific already under way, something had to be done. That something was the kind of personal influence peddling few did as well as Astor. In December 1810, he heard that the naval frigate *John Adams* was preparing to sail, carrying on board the American diplomat George W. Erving. Turning to Gallatin, Astor asked

why not slip Bentzon and his wife on board. Astor and Gallatin had become increasingly close personal and political friends. Those connections now paid off, and by mid-January 1811, the names of Adrian and Magdalen Bentzon were on the *John Adams* passenger list.[17]

With the thorny transportation question resolved, Astor and Bentzon met in New York at the end of January 1811 to plot their final Russian strategy. They knew they could depend on Pahlen to pave the way with officials at the foreign ministry. Bentzon and Astor now reviewed the proposals to be offered to the Russian company. Astor recognized that the greatest advantages to the Russians were in regularly scheduled supply shipments and the sale of furs at Canton. Astor gave Bentzon two different supply schedules, suggesting that the Russians could select the one best suited to their needs. While these arrangements were sure to bring Astor some profit, he wanted Bentzon to press for Russian acceptance of two additional demands. The first was economic. Astor wanted duty-free access to the Russian domestic fur market. This demand was closely linked to a second geopolitical request. Bentzon was to recruit the Russians for joint action against Anglo-Canadian activities in the Northwest.[18]

Adrian Bentzon reached St. Petersburg in the late summer of 1811. For once, the winds of diplomacy were blowing in Astor's direction. In early August just as Bentzon arrived, talks between Ambassador Adams and Foreign Minister Nikolai Rumiantsev on a possible commercial treaty broke off. Adams was convinced that war between the United States and Great Britain was imminent. In a period of such uncertainty, Adams thought talk of commercial treaties was senseless. If the Russians wanted their Pacific problems resolved, they would have to turn to Astor.[19]

Adrian Bentzon was ready. Formal talks with the company's chief director Michael Buldakov began in September 1811. While Buldakov was eager to sign an agreement on supplies and markets, Astor's other demands met with considerable resistance. The Russian-American Company was not about to be drawn into Astor's skirmish with the Canadians. And there was an equally strong rebuff to Astor's request for special privileges in the Russian domestic fur market. Bentzon pressed his case, the company refused to budge, and there were endless consultations with imperial government officials. It was not until early May 1812 that Bentzon and company agents finally signed an agreement.[20] A month later the War of 1812 stormed into the Atlantic. Its tidal motion would eventually capsize Astoria and sink Astor's grand western design.

In the midst of these complex diplomatic events, we need to recall

that Astor's vessels did make calls at Sitka. The *Enterprise* reached the Russian settlements in the summer of 1810. More important was the journey of the ship *Beaver.* In early August 1812, the *Beaver,* her captain Cornelius Sowle, and Astor's chief western agent Wilson Price Hunt left Fort Astoria on the Columbia bound for the Russian settlements. Hunt, a mild-mannered St. Louis merchant, was no match for Baranov. The Russian subjected Hunt to an endless round of hard bargaining, punctuated by boisterous drinking sprees. Throughout September, Hunt struggled to hammer out an arrangement with Baranov. When terms were finally settled on, Baranov announced that he would pay in seal skins. Since the warehouses at New Archangel currently held none of those skins, Hunt and Sowle were obligated to sail to St. Paul in the Bering Sea. It was not until the end of October 1812 that the *Beaver* could begin loading at St. Paul. In the first week of November, fortune turned against Hunt and the *Beaver.* A fierce storm severely damaged the ship making repairs necessary before any trip to Canton.[21]

This broken voyage and the larger events of the War of 1812 put a stop to any thoughts of linking a Russian empire in the north Pacific to an emerging American one in the Northwest. By 1814, Astor knew all the grim details—Astoria sold, ships lost, and chances beyond grasp. Writing to his old ally Andrei Dashkov, Astor reported that the post on the Columbia was in British hands and "the whole property gone." With remarkable equanimity, Astor reminded the Russian of a timeless proverb: "This makes good the saying that one misfortune seldom comes alone." Officials in St. Petersburg were not nearly so eloquent. "That is the end of it" was their blunt announcement.[22] The winds of war had switched about and changed courses for both Astor and Baranov. For one imperial moment partners, now their empires seemed bound for separate ports.

NOTES

1. Jefferson to Astor, Monticello, November 9, 1813, Jefferson Papers, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

2. The fullest discussion of Astor's plans is in James P. Ronda, *Astoria and Empire* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1990), ch. 1.

3. Astor to Clinton, New York, January 25, 1808, DeWitt Clinton Papers, 4: 5–6 Butler Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Columbia University, New York.

4. James R. Gibson, *Imperial Russia in Frontier America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1976), 3–23. See also Basil Dmytryshyn, E. A. P. Crownhart-Vaughan, and Thomas Vaughan, eds., *To Siberia and Russian America: Three Centuries of Russian Eastward Expansion, 1558–1867,* 3 vols. (Portland: Oregon Historical Society, 1985–89), especially vol. 3.

5. Ronda, *Astor and Empire,* ch. 2.

6. Russian-American Company to Dashkov, St. Petersburg. September 1, 1808, Nina Bashkina, Nikolai N. Bolkhovitinov, and David F. Trask, eds., *The United States and Russia: The Beginnings of Relations, 1765–1815* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1980), 523. Hereafter cited as *Russ. Docs.*

7. Dashkov to Baranov, Philadelphia, November 7, 1809, *Russ. Docs.,* 608–13. See also Dashkov to Rumiantsev, Philadelphia, November 18, 1809, ibid., 614–15.

8. John Ebbets, Notes on *Enterprise* cargo, late October 1809, John Jacob Astor Papers, Baker Library, Harvard University Graduate School of Business Administration, Boston, Massachusetts. Hereafter cited as Astor Papers, MD-BA.

9. Astor to Ebbets, New York, November 4, 1809, *Russ. Docs.,* 601–603.

10. Astor to Ebbets, Philadelphia, November 4, 1809, Astor Papers, MD-BA. There is some confusion over Astor's whereabouts on November 4. The document in Russian archives is datelined in New York; that in the Astor Papers was drafted in Philadelphia.

11. Astor to Baranov, New York, November 4, 1809, *Russ. Docs.,* 603–604.

12. Dashkov to Rumiantsev, Philadelphia, November 15, 1809, *Russ Docs.,* 614–17, The fullest account of United States–Russian diplomacy in this period is Nikolai N. Bolkhovitinov, *The Beginnings of Russian-American Relations, 1775–1815* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1975).

13. Smith to Adams, Washington, May 5, 1810, Diplomatic Instructions, All Countries, 7: 91, RG 59, National Archives, Washington, D. C. Hereafter cited as DNA.

14. Pahlen to Rumiantsev, Philadelphia, July 29, 1810, *Russ. Docs.,* 677–79.

15. Bentzon to Astor, Washington, July 9, 1810, Astor Papers, MD-BA. See also Pahlen to Rumiantsev, Philadelphia, July 21, 1810, *Russ Docs.,* 675–76, and Pahlen to Rumiantsev, Philadelphia, October 26, 1810, ibid., 677–79.

16. Gallatin to Madison, Washington, September 5, 1810, and Madison to Gallatin, Montpelier, September 12, 1810, James Madison Papers, Library of Congress.

17. Astor to Gallatin, New York, December 27, 1810, including Gallatin's marginal notes, Albert Gallatin Papers, New York Historical Society, New York.

18. Astor to Bentzon, New York, January 21, 1811, Astor Papers, MD-BA.

19. Adams to Monroe, St. Petersburg, August 9, 1811, Diplomatic Despatches, St. Petersburg, 2, RG 79, DNA.

20. These negotiations are discussed in Ronda, *Astoria and Empire,* 83–86.

21. Ronda, *Astoria and Empire,* 283–84.

22. Astor to Dashkov, New York, September 26, 1814, Astor Papers, MD-BA; Russian-American Company