

University of Oklahoma College of Law

## University of Oklahoma College of Law Digital Commons

---

American Indian and Alaskan Native Documents in the Congressional Serial Set: 1817-1899

---

3-19-1872

**Condition of the inhabitants of Alaska. Letter from the Secretary of the Interior, relative to the condition of the inhabitants of Alaska who resided there prior to the date of our acquisition of that Territory.**

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.law.ou.edu/indianserialset>



Part of the [Indigenous, Indian, and Aboriginal Law Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

H.R. Exec. Doc. No. 197, 42nd Cong., 2nd Sess. (1872)

This House Report is brought to you for free and open access by University of Oklahoma College of Law Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in American Indian and Alaskan Native Documents in the Congressional Serial Set: 1817-1899 by an authorized administrator of University of Oklahoma College of Law Digital Commons. For more information, please contact [Law-LibraryDigitalCommons@ou.edu](mailto:Law-LibraryDigitalCommons@ou.edu).

CONDITION OF THE INHABITANTS OF ALASKA.

---

L E T T E R

FROM

THE SECRETARY OF THE INTERIOR,

RELATIVE TO

*The condition of the inhabitants of Alaska who resided there prior to the date of our acquisition of that Territory*

---

MARCH 19, 1872.—Referred to the Committee on the Territories and ordered to be printed.

---

DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR,  
*Washington, D. C., March 16, 1872.*

SIR: I have the honor to transmit herewith, first, copy of a letter from the Commissioner of Indian Affairs to this Department, dated March 14, 1872; second, copy of a communication addressed to the Commissioner of Indian Affairs, by William Borrows, late of the United States Army; third, copy of a letter addressed to this Department by Felix R. Brunot, chairman of the board of peace commissioners, dated February 14, 1872; fourth, copy of a letter from Hon. L. M. Morrill, addressed to this Department on the 10th of February, 1872.

These papers each refer to the condition of the inhabitants of Alaska who resided there prior to, and at the date of, our acquisition of that Territory. The communication of Mr. Borrows gives some interesting and valuable information in reference to the numbers, character, habits, and general requirements of these people.

The letter of Commissioner Walker, referring to this subject, suggests doubts as to whether the native inhabitants of Alaska should be administratively recognized as Indians, within the intention of the laws organizing the Indian Office, prior to some positive legislation bringing them within the recognized jurisdiction of the Office of Indian Affairs.

The letter of Mr. Brunot expresses a desire that the inhabitants of Alaska be placed under the care of the Department of the Interior, and that a portion of past appropriations, placed at the general discretion of the Secretary of the Interior, to benefit the Indian tribes, be expended in providing for the education of these inhabitants.

I have given this subject such consideration as the pressure of public duty has permitted. It is undoubtedly a duty which the Government of the United States cannot ignore, to provide for the welfare and civilization of the inhabitants of Alaska. It is not material to this question that these people should have descended from the same ances-

try, and be of the same race as the Indians of North America, now under the guardianship of this Government. Though fully recognizing this duty, I cannot, as an executive officer, undertake in the course of administration to expend the funds of the nation in its discharge without clear warrant of law. I am, therefore, compelled to recur to some of the circumstances connected with this question which influence my mind in arriving at the conclusion which I shall present in this communication.

In the first place, let it be remembered that Congress has not yet provided any territorial government for Alaska. In the second place, it must be borne in mind that prior to the acquisition of Alaska we had a well-defined and distinctly organized system of Indian service, embracing all the Indians of the United States, and applicable to such persons only. In the third place, it must be remembered that it is exceedingly doubtful whether the inhabitants of Alaska, so far at least as they inhabit the islands, belong to the same race or family of men as the Indians of North America. It may, therefore, be well doubted whether, in view of these considerations, appropriations made for the general service of the Indian Office, as known and recognized prior to the acquisition of Alaska, can with propriety, without distinct and definite legislation authorizing it to be done, be expended in providing for the wants and subsistence of the people of Alaska. That it is the duty of the Government to bring this semi-barbarous and uncivilized people under the influence of the beneficial provisions made for the Indian tribes now under the jurisdiction of the Indian Office I have no doubt, and I therefore take great pleasure in laying before Congress the information which is contained in the several papers herein referred to.

I have expressed the views contained in this communication for the purpose of inviting the attention of Congress to this subject in order that such legislation may be introduced and perfected as will lead to the performance of the duty which the Government owes to the inhabitants of Alaska, without having such result accomplished by what would be at least a very doubtful if not a clearly erroneous interpretation of existing laws.

Very respectfully, your obedient servant,

C. DELANO,  
*Secretary.*

The Hon. the SPEAKER, *House of Representatives.*

---

DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR,  
OFFICE OF INDIAN AFFAIRS,  
*Washington, D. C., March 14, 1872.*

SIR: I have the honor to acknowledge receipt, by reference from the Department of the 19th ultimo, of a communication from Hon. Felix R. Brunot, chairman board of Indian commissioners, accompanied with a resolution adopted by that board on the 13th of January last, and a letter from Senator Morrill on the subject of Indian affairs in Alaska.

By this resolution it is proposed that the Indian tribes be placed under the care of the Department of the Interior, and that the sum of \$45,000 of the appropriation, "For the support of schools not otherwise provided for," be devoted to the education and civilization of said Indians.

The Hon. L. M. Morrill states that the Indian commission, as well as the Secretary of the Interior, had recommended that a special amount

be appropriated for the civilization of the Indians of Alaska, but that the Committee on Appropriations preferred to make the appropriation for support of schools, &c., general; leaving it to the Secretary to apply such part thereof to Alaska Indians as, in his discretion, should be deemed advisable.

Mr. Brunot's letter having been referred to this office for its views on the subject embraced therein, I am constrained to say, without disparaging the importance of early efforts for advancing in civilization the natives of Alaska, I cannot recommend the application to that purpose of any of the money appropriated by the act of July 15, 1870, for the support of manual-labor and other schools among the Indian tribes at present under the control of the Department. My reasons for withholding such recommendation are threefold:

1st. It appears to me that the provisions of the act of July 15, 1870, in the respect mentioned, must be held to apply only to Indian tribes within the territory of the United States, exclusive of Alaska, and that the Department would not be justified in extending its agencies over a people, numbering fifty or sixty thousand, by authority of anything contained in that act. Even were the right to do so unquestioned, I should not regard it as judicious to commit the Department to a work involving the necessity of continued appropriations, and upon an increasing scale, without some distinct expression of intention and purpose of the law-making power.

2d. The Department has, upon the recommendation of this office, requested such a modification of the act of July 15, 1870, as will allow the balance of \$93,717 91 to be applied under the direction of the Secretary of the Interior at such times, in such sums, and for such tribes and bands as, in his opinion, may be required in promoting education among the Indians.

If the bill which has been introduced into Congress in accordance with this recommendation should become a law, I am entirely satisfied that the balance of the appropriation remaining could be applied with much larger results of good to tribes nearer at hand, and with which the Government has long sustained relations.

3d. I suggest with diffidence whether it is on the whole desirable that, in advance of legislation for the organization of Alaska as a Territory of the United States, the natives of that region should be administratively recognized as Indians within the intention of the laws organizing the Indian Office.

The efforts and expenditures proposed in the communication of Mr. Brunot could hardly be expected to yield any considerable result of a positive character within the time which will probably precede the organization of some form of government for this district. But the effects of such administrative treatment might be most unfortunate, inasmuch as, if regarded as Indians, these natives must be held to be subject to a constitutional disqualification for citizenship. For myself I have never believed that the natives of Alaska were Indians within the meaning of the Constitution, any more than are Esquimaux or Kanakas, and I am disposed to avoid entirely the use of the word Indians as applied to them. The balance of probabilities seems to me to incline toward an Asiatic origin, at least so far as the inhabitants of the coast and of the islands are concerned. The inference from their geographical position, strong as it may be, is hardly so strong as the inference from their singular mimetic gifts and the high degree of mechanical dexterity which they are capable of attaining. These are qualities characteristic of the Oriental, and they are precisely the qualities in which the

North American Indian is most deficient. But without attempting to establish their connection with the Chinese or Japanese, or to trace their descent from the lost tribes, it is sufficient for the purpose of this report if it be shown that the Department is not concluded by any irresistible sequence to treat the natives of Alaska as Indians within the intention of the law organizing the Indian Office. That it is undesirable to do so, appears to me plain. The provision of the Constitution excluding Indians from the political body is so far invidious and opposed to the general spirit of that instrument, and more especially to the spirit of the recent amendments thereto, that it should be construed strictly, not extended unnecessarily to races of a questionable ethnical type, and occupying a position practically distinct and apart from the range of the undoubted Indian tribes of the continent.

I beg, in the general connection, to inclose a communication from Captain William Borrows, late of the United States Army and stationed in Alaska, in which will be found many interesting statements in regard to the numbers, condition, character, and habits of the inhabitants of the Alaska coast, and also some valuable suggestions as to the most available methods of improving the condition of the people and advancing them in civilization, through such agencies as may by law be established. Captain Borrows has kindly prepared these statements at my request, and I submit them with an assurance that they will be found both interesting and useful.

The letter of Mr. Brunot with its inclosures is herewith returned.

Very respectfully, your obedient servant,

F. A. WALKER,  
*Commissioner.*

Hon. C. DELANO,  
*Secretary of the Interior.*

---

WASHINGTON, D. C., March 4, 1872.

GENERAL: In compliance with your request I have the honor to submit the following report in regard to the coast tribes of Alaska. A residence of three years in that Territory has given me considerable insight into their numbers, character, habits, and general requirements, and experience has shown that their condition is susceptible of great improvement.

#### NUMBERS.

The inhabitants are properly divided into three classes, the Aleutes inhabiting the Aleutian Islands, the Indians of the interior living on the Youkon River and its tributaries, and the coast tribes extending from Tongass to the Chilcot country, as well as those living on the island of Kodiak and about Cook's Inlet.

The population has been variously estimated at from sixty to seventy thousand, but these figures, I think, are excessive.

Of the actual number of Indians living in the interior of the country we have but little knowledge; of the coast tribes, however, we can speak with more confidence, as our intercourse has been more exclusively with them since the occupation of the country. Their aggregate strength is about ten thousand, and they are divided into some fifteen tribes, the most important of which are the Sitkas, numbering about twelve hundred; the Chilcats, two thousand; and the Hydahs, fifteen hundred; the other tribes, consisting of the Tongass, Cape Fox, Hanieas, Stackeenes, Kakes, Contznoos, Auks, Takoos, and those of Newchuck, Kodiak, and Cook's Inlet, vary in numbers from one hundred and fifty to one thousand each, the largest of these being the Takoos, living on the main land at the mouth of the Takoo River, and the Stackeenes, on Wrangel Island, near the mouth of the Stackeen River.

The Stick tribe, an offshoot of the Stackeenes, live more in the interior of the country, and number about six hundred.

It would be extremely difficult to obtain a correct census, owing to the nomadic habits of the people, which keep a portion of each tribe constantly away from their homes, fishing, hunting, trapping, and trading.

## CHARACTER.

These Indians, in some respects, differ but little from their brethren of the plain being proud, treacherous, and very revengeful. The older men are warlike in disposition, and disposed to consider the occupation of their country by the "Bostons," as they term the Americans, as an infringement of their rights, which they would resent forcibly had they the power. Their feelings of animosity are particularly directed toward the traders, who attempt to penetrate into the interior of the country, claiming that, by these means, their principal source of livelihood is taken away.

The coast Indians have, for years past, claimed as an exclusive privilege their right to trade with those of the interior, visiting them every summer for this purpose, and exchanging the goods obtained from the Hudson's Bay and Russian Fur Companies' posts for the more valuable peltries which could only be obtained from these people. The interior tribes were prevented from coming to the coast by threats, and, in many instances, by actual violence when the attempt was made, and, in this manner, the coast Indians, who are excellent traders, succeeded in obtaining their furs on the most advantageous terms, which were afterward sold to the whites at a very considerable advance.

The white traders being permitted to trade in the interior was a source of constant complaint to the military authorities on the part of these Indians, and, at one time, the Stackeenes and Takoos threatened with personal violence and even death any white man whom they found beyond a certain limit; and it was only the decided action of the commanding officer at Fort Wrangel which prevented a serious outbreak.

The younger Indians, within the past year, have evinced a more friendly feeling toward the whites. They have adopted our style of dress, and, in many instances, endeavored to conform to our mode of living; have also expressed a great desire to learn to read and write. Their powers of imitation being very strongly developed, writing can be taught them with but little difficulty, and as artists they compare very favorably with the Chinese and Japanese, whom they resemble strongly in appearance.

Their carving in wood, and work in metals, is truly wonderful; and they copy with great truthfulness and skill any design which may be given them. The Hydahs are excellent workmen in gold and silver ornaments, and their productions are in great demand by all of the other tribes; they are also more advanced in civilization, and are anxious to improve their condition. Several of their principal chiefs have asked me, time and again, "when the great chief, in Washington, was going to send some one to instruct them, so that they might resemble more closely the 'Bostons.'"

The Sitkas work principally in wood and straw; basket-making being one of their chief sources of wealth.

The Indians of Kodiak and Cook Inlet work almost exclusively in ivory and bone, and their productions in these articles would do credit to any white man.

Their morals are of a very low standard; virtue is hardly known among their women, and they are not, as a rule, truthful; they will also steal when the opportunity presents itself, but a trust is held sacred. Anything deposited with them for safe-keeping will be guarded with the utmost care for the time specified, but leave it with them an hour longer than was agreed upon, and they consider that they have perfect license to help themselves to a portion, if not all, of what was intrusted to them.

Both men and women, old and young, use intoxicating liquor to excess, when it can be obtained, but, fortunately, owing to the vigilance of the officers of the Treasury Department, and the military authorities, but little is smuggled into the country at the present time.

In religious belief they strongly resemble the North American Indians, having a knowledge of a good and evil spirit, and of an after-state.

## HABITS.

As a rule, the natives are cleanly in their habits, as far as their persons are concerned, bathing sometimes two and three times a day, both in summer and winter.

They are generally well clad, the greater part of them, as before stated, having adopted our style of dress; blankets, however, are in great requisition, and are used by both sexes as a protection from the rain or cold by day, and as a covering at night.

The houses are large, well built, and comfortable for Indian habitations, and are intended to accommodate from thirty to forty people each. Every village contains a dance-house, which is, as a rule, much larger than the ordinary houses, and is used on occasions of festivity, also serving as a sort of caravansary for the accommodation of visitors from the neighboring tribes. Their food consists chiefly of fish, salmon being found in great abundance; also, halibut, cod, smelt and herring. Clams and crabs of enormous size abound, and are eaten with avidity. Berries form a staple article of food, mixed with grease which is obtained from the uli-con, or caudle-fish, found, principally, in the Naas river, and is one of the most important articles of traffic between the natives. Venison and wild fowl are also obtained in large numbers.

Consumption, pneumonia, rheumatism, and venereal disorders, are the diseases most prevalent among them, the three first being preinduced by their reckless exposure to the weather while hunting and fishing. The venereal diseases are common to both sexes; are most virulent, and, with the other disorders, are rapidly depleting the people.

Their wealth consists, principally, in blankets, skins, and ornaments; bracelets, earrings, finger-rings, and anklets, being worn by both men and women; the silver received in payment for their furs being, as a rule, at once manufactured into the above articles.

Their amusements are chiefly gambling and dancing, the latter being indulged in almost every evening during the winter season, as well as upon any occasion of importance, such as the advent of the salmon and herring, before starting on their hunting expeditions, and in case of death, at which they give away, in many instances, most of their worldly possessions; blankets are torn into strips, and distributed among the guests, and when a sufficient number of these pieces have been accumulated they are made into coats, which are highly prized by their owners.

The language generally spoken, from Tongass to Sitka, is the Stackeene, each tribe having its own particular "patois." The Hydahs have a distinct dialect of their own. Chinook jargon, however, is the diplomatic tongue, and is generally understood by all the tribes, and is used almost universally by the whites in their communications with the natives.

#### GENERAL REQUIREMENTS.

In regard to the general requirements of these native tribes, the vital agent for ameliorating their condition would be to instruct them in the useful trades, for which they already exhibit great predilection. Writing, as before stated, can be readily taught them, owing to their great powers of imitation; reading would be more difficult. Our language can be imparted to them orally with considerable ease, they having very retentive memories.

With a knowledge of carpentering, blacksmithing, shoemaking, and tailoring, the younger and rising generation would probably adapt themselves to our habits and customs very readily, and, with proper implements and a knowledge of their use, they could be taught to raise all of the vegetable and garden products that can be produced in Alaska. Potatoes, onions, turnips, cabbages, radishes, lettuce, peas, and celery, it has been found by experience, can be raised in moderate quantities.

In all dealings with these people, rules of the strictest honesty and integrity should be adhered to, upon the observance of which principles the success of the Hudson's Bay Company's agents among them is principally due. Any deception on the part of the whites is quickly suspected and soon discovered, and the confidence of a native once lost is not easily regained.

The temperature on the coast averages about 30° above zero during the winter; in summer it is about 65°, though the mercury has marked 120° in the shade at Fort Wrangel and 94° at Sitka.

Grain cannot be raised in Alaska, owing to the shortness of the summers; in fact, nothing but the hardier vegetables can be grown with any success on the coast.

Owing to the family feuds existing between the natives, little fear is to be apprehended of any preconcerted action or general outbreak on their part against the whites. Not only are they in a state of constant war one with the other, but most of the tribes are split up into factions, each being led by a sub-chief; and, in villages of not more than eight or ten families, active hostilities are liable to break out at any time, resulting often in the death of several members of the tribe.

They rarely go any great distance from their homes, except in the trapping and trading season, and then only in large bodies. The Hydahs, however, go all over the coast, and are the only tribe which is generally feared. These last are most friendly in their feelings toward us, and both money and time would be well spent in an effort to improve their condition.

What is most required to guard our interests and keep the natives in a state of subjection are one or two light-draught gunboats, which can visit constantly all points on the coast and navigate the rivers. These, with two companies of soldiers at Sitka, or some other more central location, are all that would be required to preserve peace and quietness between the natives and ourselves. They are greatly in fear of a man-of-war, and are in a state of constant anxiety when one is cruising anywhere in their neighborhood.

The wealth of Alaska consists chiefly in her fisheries: salmon abound in immense numbers in all the streams; halibut, cod, and herring are also caught in very large quantities. The hair-seal is found on the coast by millions, and the sea-otter taken near the Aleutian Islands are very valuable. Of the land furs, the more valuable ones, comprising the dark martens, silver-gray and black fox-skins, are purchased from the Chilcats, Takooe, and Stackeenes, and are obtained by these people from the interior tribes.

Coal has been found in considerable quantities on the coast, but it is principally lig-

nite, apparently of recent formation. Gold, also, has been discovered, but in small quantities, the best diggings being near the head-waters of the Stackeene River.

In conclusion, I would state that it is my firm conviction that, with active and energetic men sent to instruct them, a proper and responsible person, who understands the nature and habits of these people, to supervise and direct, and a judicious expenditure of money for certain articles of food and clothing, much good can be done. They can be greatly improved, both mentally and physically, and the rising generation can be elevated in the scale of humanity.

I have the honor to be, general, your obedient servant,

WM. BORROWS,  
*Late of United States Army.*

General F. A. WALKER,  
*Commissioner of Indian Affairs, Washington, D. C.*

---

BOARD OF INDIAN COMMISSIONERS,  
*Pittsburgh, February 14, 1872.*

DEAR SIR: I have the honor to transmit for your information a copy of a resolution adopted by the board of Indian commissioners at the meeting in Washington on the 13th ultimo, on the subject of Indians in Alaska.

Also, a letter addressed to you by Hon. Lot M. Morrill, late chairman of the Senate Committee on Appropriations, showing that it was the intention of Congress that a portion of the fund alluded to in the resolution of the board should be used for the purpose indicated, among the Indians of Alaska.

The letter from Senator Morrill was procured agreeably to your suggestion, made some time ago, to Mr. Colyer, that such a communication would be desirable, and the transmission of the resolution of the board has been delayed until it could be procured.

Very respectfully, your obedient servant, &c.,

FELIX R. BRUNOT,  
*Chairman.*

Hon. C. DELANO,  
*Secretary of the Interior, Washington, D. C.*

"Resolved, That the President be respectfully requested to place the Indians of Alaska under the care of the Department of the Interior, with a view to the early commencement of measures for their education and advancement in civilization; and that the board respectfully recommend that the sum estimated by the late Commissioner of Indian Affairs, and recommended by the late Secretary of the Interior, of the appropriation for educating Indians not otherwise provided for, be devoted to that purpose."

---

UNITED STATES SENATE CHAMBER,  
*Washington, February 10, 1872.*

SIR: The bill making appropriation for the Indian Department, &c., for 1870-'71, was amended in the Senate by adding a proviso for the support of industrial and other schools among the Indian tribes, not otherwise provided for, to be expended under the direction of the Secretary of the Interior, \$100,000.

The Indian peace commission had recommended a specific appropriation for the Indians in Alaska, as also had the Secretary of the Interior. The committee preferred to make the appropriation general, leaving it to the Secretary to apply such part to Alaska Indians as in his discretion he might think best.

Very respectfully, yours,

L. M. MORRILL.

Hon. C. DELANO,  
*Secretary of the Interior.*