LETTER FROM SHELHIKOV TO BARANOV

August 9, 1794

Dear Sir  Aleksandr Andreevich.

. . . We have received your letter of April 28, 1792, from Kodiak, on the ship Mikhail, and another of July 24, 1793, from Chugach. With the first letter we have received the shipment of furs, for which we are deeply grateful. We beg you not to forget us with your letters and furs in the future. We hoped that the ship Simeon sent by you, even it if would not bring us something cheerful, at least would not cause any troubles, but the opposite happened because the above-mentioned ship arrived at a time when we had to put up the rigging and armament on two new ships. You know how hard it is here to have such work done on account of the usual drunkenness, laziness, and other vices. . . .

Thus, even your dispatch of the ship Simeon brought lots of grief because in the first place even though you gave your orders in July the ship left Kodiak only in August. This is too late. The ships must be made ready in the fall and should start on the voyage in April so that the cargo shipped here can be transported to Irkutsk. If you are unable to send the cargo in April it would be better to wait till the next year. . .. . In the future, send ships earlier and do not think that ordering a ship here is just as easy as sending a boat across the river. The very best and most trustworthy men should be assigned, not drunkards.

. . . Also, you should not have sent your papers about troubles at Kenai to the government, but rather should have sealed them and had them delivered to us so that we could use them as we think fit. Do so in the future. . . .

Your strength now is in your right to build settlements anywhere that you find an unoccupied territory. You can build settlements even on Kenai, and have 500 square versts of land on which nobody else has the right to set foot. That would stop the wildness of the Kenai gentlemen [of the competing Lebedev-Lastochkin trading company]. If you will show better judgment and act more carefully than you did when you became frightened by mice, the gentlemen and owners of Kenai who interfere in the Chugach territory will have nothing else to do but get out of Kenai. . . .

You also made a mistake in writing to the government about an insufficient number of men, as if complaining. To end your dissatisfaction and to make you feel better, we are sending you 123 men. . . .

We have to thank you for moving to another harbor [on Kodiak Island]. Pray God that this new place will be quiet and more profitable than the old. . . . It remains now, after finding a good location on the mainland, to build a well planned settlement, one that will look like a town instead of a village, even at the start. In case it cannot be avoided and some foreign ship comes, let them see that the Russians live in a well organized way. Don’t give them reason to think that Russians live in America in the same abominable way as in Okhotsk.

. . . To give the place an air of importance and to impress foreigners and the natives, it wouldn’t be bad to dress the hunters in some coats of military pattern and give them when needed some weapons to carry, such as, for instance, bayonets to be worn on the side. . . .

If possible, invite the peaceful natives to live closer to the settlement. From them you can always obtain required information, and you can use their labor, though not, of course, without pay or favor of some kind. Coming often to the settlement, they will get used to our way of living. They will bring berries for sale, and other products.

The Russians should be in close contact with the natives, but one important rule must be observed. At night, there should be very few natives in the settlement, and the sentries should let nobody in. They also should have signals, and beat iron plates at regular intervals, by hourglass. . . .

The settlers, hunters, and the Americans should be under strict surveillance. Devise police regulations for them. If a settler becomes turbulent, punish him by sending him to work for the company in some other place, give his job in the settlement to one of the hunters, and drag him from job to job for about a year so that the others will know what will happen if a man becomes troublesome. . . .

We are very much astonished at your unconcern about the visit of the English ship [Phoenix, Capt. Hugh Moore]. You knew, even before you got the new regulations, that visits by foreign vessels cannot be tolerated. . . . Their trading with natives is thiev- ery, and we have suffered enough losses on account of it. . . . In the future, please act according to instructions of His High Excellency, and be bold enough to tell the foreigners that they have no right to trade.

. . . The French [in the midst of their Revolution] are forcing the whole world to fight them. . . .

In sending ships for exploration and survey, try to send not more than five Russians on each of them, but add to their number American [Native] boys sent by me and Polevoi to study practical navigation. . . .

After writing all this, we wish you sincerely good health, luck and happiness. God’s blessings on all your exploits, civil and military. We remain, Dear Sir, your obedient servants,

Grigorei Shelikhov, Aleksei Polevoi

LETTER FROM BARANOV BACK TO SHELHIKOV

May 20, 1795

Dear Sirs:  Grigorei Ivanovich! Aleksei Evsev’evich!

I had the honor to receive your letter with a very long number but without month and date. The letter arrived on the vessel Tri Sviatitelia, with Father Archimandrite, on September 24th. I read it with extreme politeness, in spite of the fact that you consider me not as a friend, but as a lowly slave who serves only for his own interest and gain, and is not worthy of the important position of manager of the colonies. If you think that I do not know the difference between sending a boat across the river and a ship to Okhotsk, and so on and so forth, I am going to answer every part of your letter following my rules of righteousness to which I have always adhered without fear of the strong and powerful of this world.

As to the first part of your letter, I will speak only about the shipping of furs. You repeat several times that the Simeon left with a cargo of stones [ballast?] instead of sea otters. Sea otters are not caught in the same way that humpback salmon are caught in Okhotsk, but over a distance of 2,000 versts, from Unga to Yakutat.

At Sutkhum and at Kenai Bay the hunting has been getting constantly poorer, and now amounts to nothing as the experiences of last summer and of this spring demonstrated. Without speaking of other places the route to Yakutat alone is hard on the natives. Imagine the poor natives making this journey both ways, 2,000 versts in narrow baidarkas [kayaks] without sails – using only paddles. They have to endure hunger on the way and often perish in stormy seas because this coast offers no adequate shelter. In places where the natives are not subjugated they are always in constant danger of attack by the bloodthirsty inhabitants of these regions. It is under these conditions that they have to hunt sea otters. . . .

In April of . . . 1794, an English expedition showed up here. It consisted of two ships, one under command of Captain Vancouver and the other under Lieutenant Puget. They passed Kodiak and without stopping sailed to Kenai Bay [Cook Inlet] and to Kamyshak Bay, making a thorough survey. They were looking for a passage or a strait to Hudson’s Bay that does not exist. They were very eager to get information from our people and wanted to see me but I was detained at Kodiak on business and could not see them. . . . They were friendly and fair with our men.

. . . Beyond Bristol Bay, from the big Aglurmiut [Yup’ik] village, we got by accident from the northern Alaska Peninsula two girls, prisoners. They were brought to me, and after obtaining from them all the information needed, I ransomed them, gave them presents, and sent one of them with Grigorei Raskashchikov, and with some of the bravest of the newly baptized natives for a peace parley. I don’t know the result of it yet – judging by what I have heard from the girls, there are no great opportunities for trade there – but from them we can find out about the Kwikpagmiut [people of the Yukon River] and others farther on. Perhaps there is something there, but there is no hope as to sea otters. One does not see even a small piece of this fur in their dress. Perhaps there are river beavers there and farther on the much wished-for strait connecting the north sea between Hudson’s Bay and our sea between Alaska and Bering Strait. . . .

I am shipping to you the samples of iron ores, ochre from which the paint is made, and iron, also others of a different kind, three rods of iron forged by me last winter, 1793. . . There was no time to smelt cast iron and do forging, and to tell you the truth, I do not know how to do it. . . . I think that you should send two men who know how to smelt and manufacture iron on a small scale. . . .

I do not care what the hunters leaving these parts tell you. You can judge by what has been accomplished if I have spent my time in idleness and debauch or not. . . .

It is true that we are having good, clean fun on some of the holidays. For example: we have music in the evening, and dancing with the Americans, six or eight couples dancing the kazach’ka, the contredanse, and others. The islanders watch these dancers with interest. Some of them are learning different steps, and astonishing others. . . . Of course, this pastime has been criticized.

It is not true that we drink vodka all the time. Nobody with the exception of myself and Izmailov makes it, or at least if the hunters make it too, it is done in such secrecy that I never hear of it. But when I make it I do so only once or twice per year: first when I return from a tour of inspection or a journey and find a barrel or two of raspberry and bilberry juice prepared for this occasion, and second, on my birthday, I make a bucket of vodka and treat everybody to it. Sometimes on Christmas and Easter I make half a bucket out of snakewood roots, and this is all. We get so used to living with- out it, that we do not even think of it. It seems that the law does not prohibit the manufacture of wine from berries and roots if it is for one’s own use. Besides, it is beyond the Russian boundaries and in a new part of the world. Making wine with mercury, I have rescued from death many who were perishing from venereal diseases. . . . [Once] I was drunk. . . . If you can call it vice, then it was vice. . . .

In all there are about 1,000 men on ships and baidarkas [large open skin boats], including natives. Besides these the hunters in baidarkas, counting two men to a baidarka, number 1,400. Out of this number, some men are used for fishing and trapping. . . . [M]any are killed or drowned, too old or too young, or rotten from a disease well known here. The hunting party in baidarkas is getting smaller every year and in summertime the villages are almost abandoned. . . .

It seems to me there is nothing more to write, unless I forgot something in a hurry. I will wait either for a change in your attitude toward the men and me, or for the arrival of my successor who will be better than I am. I remain, wiling to do my best.

Your obedient servant, My dear Sir, Aleksandr Baranov

As for the vodka shipped to me, or the white brandy or alcohol, Pribylov while on the high seas swallowed a whole flask without leaving a drop. . . . It seems that I have to suffer through no fault of my own, receiving instead of thanks a reprimand and suspicion.

. . . Your plans for the construction of settlements seem to surpass human strength and especially the strength of our settlers.

. . . I forgot to answer your accusation of being friendly with Captain Moore of the English trading ship [Phoenix]. Your rebuke astonished me. It shows greed and cupidity without limit. How can you hope that I would break the holy laws of hospitality and philanthropy . . . who instead of being called civilized would be called barbarians and in the world’s history a stain would remain of a baseness that could not be forgotten. . . . Keep in mind, my Dear Sirs, that we have not received any information that the English are our enemies and are at war with our country. . . . I consider the French our enemies; but I do not take it upon myself to repulse the English by force from places that are not defined by our government as being part of the Russian Empire, without getting first an official order. . . Speaking again of economy I do not know what more to say but are you hinting embezzlement that you repeat so often “I have not enough capital”?