On October 18, 1867, the Russian flag was lowered over the city of Sitka, Alaska. In its place waved the stars and stripes of the American flag. Secretary of State William H. Seward orchestrated the purchase of Alaska in 1867. For years the thriving fur trade had made Alaska a profitable land for ownership and occupation. However, by 1860 over-harvesting made Alaska look more like a frozen wasteland than a territory worth braving for profit. Even after the purchase, the U.S. government took a lax attitude toward it, first administering it through the War Department, followed by the Treasury Department. To Seward, “Alakshah,” as he called it, seemed like a natural expansion of America’s greatness. Alaska, with its abundance in fish and seemingly unlimited expanse of land, presented wide-open commercial possibilities. To acquire it was an irresistible opportunity.

The United States, however, was preoccupied with Reconstruction. Foreign markets were an afterthought, as bitterly debated postwar domestic issues consumed Congress. Moreover, the United States still held to the foreign policies outlined in the 1823 Monroe Doctrine. Foreign governments had been warned that time to steer clear of any colonial aspirations in the Western Hemisphere. In this context, any impulse to expand America’s own colonial empire in the 1860s was seen, for the most part, as simply unwarranted. Thus, when Seward signed a treaty with Denmark to purchase the Virgin Islands for $7.5 million, Congress said no. When a proposal came before Congress for exclusive rights to build a canal through Columbia, Congress said no. An 1870 treaty providing for the annexation of the Dominican Republic met a similar fate in Congress. However, Seward achieved success with the purchase of far-off Alaska.

Some called it “Seward’s folly.” Others termed it “Seward’s icebox.” The New York Tribune coined the term “Walrussia.” However, in 1867 Seward enlisted the help of Charles Sumner, chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, to convince Congress to purchase a land that was twice the size of Texas. At $7.2 million, the expanse cost a mere 2 cents per acre. The offer to sell came in 1866 from Russia, which had held the territory since 1741. Over the years both British and American settlements dotted Alaska’s southern border, raising eventual territorial quarrels. Short on funds, and not wishing to see an expansion of colonial claims by Great Britain, Russia directed Baron Eduard de Stoeckl, Russia’s minister to the United States, to negotiate sale of Alaska to the United States. Seward quickly offered $5 million for the frozen land. Stoeckl, aware of Seward’s passion for expansion and cognizant of the need for Congress to approve the deal before it recessed, countered with a price of $7.2 million in gold. The deal was struck. However, Congress didn’t fully approve the treaty or release the monies until 1868.

In addition to the purchase of Alaska, Seward convinced Congress to annex the uninhabited Midway Islands, located about halfway between California and the Asian continent. These tiny islands had been claimed for the United States in 1859 by Captain N.C. Brooks, who found it only right to name the atolls “Middlebrooks.” Seward reasoned that the islands could serve as a base for the United States in the Pacific. Pleased with his success, in May 1867 Seward penned the following poem:

Abroad our empire shall no limits know,
But like the sea in boundless circles flow.

Although white settlement had expanded as far west as the continent would allow, additional
opportunities awaited American ingenuity overseas. The expansion of railroad and telegraph lines, the growth of cities, exportation of such industrial products as steel and motors, and western statehood hurried America into a new era. In the meantime, the purchase of Alaska opened another uncharted frontier, with challenges and discoveries beyond the imagination. However, statehood would wait until 1959, when Alaska entered the Union as the forty-ninth state.

NATIONAL ARCHIVES DOCUMENT

March 30, 1867

Treaty concerning the Cession of the Russian Possessions in North America by his Majesty the Emperor of all the Russias to the United States of America; Concluded March 30, 1867; Ratified by the United States May 28, 1867; Exchanged June 20, 1867; Proclaimed by the United States June 20, 1867.

ARTICLE I.
His Majesty the Emperor of all the Russias agrees to cede to the United States, by this convention, immediately upon the exchange of the ratifications thereof, all the territory and dominion now possessed by his said Majesty on the continent of America.

ARTICLE III.
The inhabitants of the ceded territory, according to their choice, reserving their natural allegiance, may return to Russia within three years; but if they should prefer to remain in the ceded territory, they, with the exception of uncivilized native tribes, shall be admitted to the enjoyment of all the rights, advantages, and immunities of citizens of the United States, and shall be maintained and protected in the free enjoyment of their liberty, property, and religion. The uncivilized tribes will be subject to such laws and regulations as the United States may, from time to time, adopt in regard to aboriginal tribes of that country.

ARTICLE V.
Immediately after the exchange of the ratifications of this convention, any fortifications or military posts which may be in the ceded territory shall be delivered to the agent of the United States, and any Russian troops which may be in the territory shall be withdrawn as soon as may be reasonably and conveniently practicable.

ARTICLE VI.
In consideration of the cession aforesaid, the United States agree to pay at the treasury in Washington, within ten months after the exchange of the ratifications of this convention, seven million two hundred thousand dollars in gold.

Below: Check for the purchase of Alaska.
Critical Thinking

Analyze Cause and Effect
In January 1868 writer Mark Twain chided Congress for holding up payment to purchase Alaska. Twain wrote:

If the Senate should refuse to pay for it [Alaska], they would do a very absurd thing. To offend so powerful a friend as Russia for the trifle of $7,000,000 would be unwise. Russia, by her simple attitude of friendship, and without lifting a hand, is able to save us from wars with European powers that would eat up the price of Walruussia in four days.

Why did Twain consider $7 million a trifle? What was he suggesting?

Assess Significance
One of the first natural resources exploited following the purchase of Alaska was salmon. In 1881, canneries packed 9,000 cases of salmon. By 1888, the number grew to 714,000 cases. By 1917, half of the world’s canned salmon was packed by canneries that dotted the northwest coastline. What other markets developed as a result of the purchase of Alaska?

Compare and Contrast
How does the purchase of Alaska compare with the Louisiana Purchase? How does it contrast? Was the purchase of either a “folly”?

Research and Writing

Relating Events
Beginning with the discovery of gold at Sutter’s Mill in California in 1848, mining, and the elusive hope of striking it rich, became a driving force in western expansion during the second half of the nineteenth century. Thousands of would-be miners, consumed with “gold fever,” poured into the West seeking to stake a claim on ground that would make them rich beyond their dreams. In 1898 gold was discovered on the Klondike River, far north in the Yukon. The ensuing Klondike Stampede brought some 60,000 adventures to Alaska. Research the impact of mining on westward expansion. How did the discovery of gold and silver spur the growth of cities? Where did the discoveries take place? How long did they last? What were their social and economic impacts?

Biography
William H. Seward was born in New York in 1801. He began his political career as New York state senator. Research the life of William Seward. What were his political achievements? How did his strong abolitionist and expansionist beliefs influence his political decisions? What influence did he exert as secretary of state?

Link to the Past
In 1968 oil was discovered in Prudhoe Bay. Soon after, several oil companies joined to form the Alyeska consortium. This group proposed, designed, and subsequently built an 800-mile pipeline linking the oil found in Prudhoe Bay with the ice-free port at Valdez. Since the pipeline’s completion, billions of barrels of oil have been pumped through and loaded into tankers for transport to domestic and foreign ports. Constructed between 1975 and 1977, the pipeline was a colossal undertaking, crossing rivers, streams, and mountains. Over half of it had to be built above ground due to the Alaskan permafrost. At the time of its construction, environmentalists worried that construction and possible oil spills would harm Alaska’s pristine environment. Research the history of oil exploration in Alaska. What have been the economic benefits? What efforts were taken to protect the environment? What problems have been encountered? Why do some Americans feel the economic benefits gained by tapping into Alaska’s oil fields justify the environmental risks? Draw your own conclusion concerning this environmental/economic debate. Construct a well-documented essay to explain your conclusion.