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## The Illusive Kostromitinov Ranch: A Russian-American Company Ranch in Sonoma County, California

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*Surface pedestrian survey and geophysical survey conducted in the summer of 2004 and spring of 2005 attempted to identify the location of the Kostromitinov Ranch, an outlying farming operation intended to supply Russian-American Company outposts. Established in 1833 between Spanish and Russian colonial footholds in northern California, the ranch is noted on historic maps and in historic documents. While the archaeological surveys produced negative results, the establishment of Kostromitinov Ranch at the intersection of colonial and Native worlds offers historians and anthropologists a fresh perspective on aspects of Russian America and colonial encounters.*

Located in present-day Sonoma County, California, Colony Ross, or Fort Ross as it is known today, was a mercantilist operation and outpost for the Russian-American Company (hereafter, RAC) from 1812 until 1841. The Ross colonial district, or counter, included the administrative and mercantile center of Colony Ross, Port Rumianstev at Bodega Harbor, a hunting artel located on the Farralon Islands, and at least three ranches located south of Colony Ross (Lightfoot 2005:5).

At the far corner of a geographically extensive commercial enterprise that profited from sea mammal hunting and the fur trade, ethnic Russians comprised only a small fraction of the total population at Colony Ross (Federova 1973 [1867]:203). Native Alaskans and native Californians, who lived and labored at Colony Ross, outnumbered RAC administrators (e.g., Istomin 1992). Clearly defined ethnic neighborhoods and a broad range of interethnic households emerged from this amalgamation of cultural backgrounds (Lightfoot 2005; Lightfoot et al. 1991, 1993).

Although Native Alaskans and native Californians represented the majority of the population at Colony

Ross, Russian settlers were able to assert their cultural practices and social organization (Osborn 1997:154). Native Californians usually comprised the lowest rank in the socioeconomic hierarchy at Colony Ross, working as unskilled laborers primarily in the orchards and fields surrounding the Colony Ross stockade. Petr Tikhmenev (1978 [1862]:232) argued in 1861 that “without the help of the natives living around the Ross settlement, it would have been impossible to harvest the crops because of a shortage of labor.”

Similarly, RAC employees never actually hunted sea otters, relying instead on native Alaskan hunters whose expert knowledge of hunting on icy seas was well-established (Osborn 1997:153). A deliberate commercial strategy of the RAC thus involved recruitment from native populations (Tikhmenev 1978 [1862]:55). Across the Pacific Ocean, RAC administrators, native Alaskans, and Ainu comprised the demographic makeup of the RAC outpost in the Kurile Islands north of Japan (Shubin 1994). Locals could be paid less, required less upkeep, and were familiar with locating and extracting local plants and animals that could supplement company supplies.

By the mid-1820s, mounting economic difficulties stemming from a failed boat-building program, failed grain harvests due to inclement weather, grasshoppers and vermin, and a decimated local sea otter population forced colonial administrators to concentrate on agriculture and animal husbandry (Essig et al. 1933:70; Federova 1973 [1867]:198, 241–42; Lightfoot et al. 1991:17; Tikhmenev 1978 [1862]:224, 226). Three ranches—Kostromitinov Ranch, Khlebnikov Ranch, and Chernykh Ranch—were established in the 1830s south of Colony Ross where warmer temperatures favored bread grain and vegetable harvests (see Chernykh 1967 [1841]; Golovnin 1979 [1822]). Of the three, only Khlebnikov Ranch has been relocated (Selverston 2000a, 2000b).

An emphasis on agriculture demanded more laborers to cultivate and harvest the several hundred acres of ranchland, while increased productivity and labor demands were met with taxing recruitment policies, which often violently removed native Californians from their home villages (Lightfoot et al. 1991:24–26). Kostromitinov Ranch, which was established in 1833 near the confluence of Willow Creek and the Russian River, offers an ideal site to examine the relationship

between Colony Ross and native Californian groups during the waning years of the Russian colony of Ross.

### **“WHERE IS THE KOSTROMITINOV RANCH?”**

While reconnoitering an area near Willow Creek, a student asked me why I haven't placed a sign on the side of Highway 1 reading, “Where is the Kostromitinov Ranch?” Although this idea is not a bad one, information about the Kostromitinov Ranch comes primarily from ethnohistoric documents in the form of travel narratives and a probate inventory, from historic maps, and from archaeological data.

As a mercantilist operation at the crossroads of the Spanish (later, Mexican), Russian, and American territories, Colony Ross received numerous visits from RAC administrators, dignitaries, artists, scientists, and naturalists who left behind an equally impressive collection of diary entries, reports, and illustrations (e.g., Shur and Gibson 1973). However, few documents note the trip from Bodega to Colony Ross. From Bodega Bay, visitors to the Russian colony could take roads directly north to Colony Ross or travel inland to the Khlebnikov and Chernykh ranches (Dufлот de Mofras 1841).

As Kostromitinov Ranch was located on the road to Colony Ross, it often served as a traveler's way station bearing the name “Halfway House” (Gibson 1976:118, quoted in Stewart 1986:9). Hubert Bancroft (1886[ii]:63, quoted in Stewart 1986:9) noted that one of the structures at the ranch served as a guest house, earning the Kostromitinov Ranch the name “Three Friends Ranch,” perhaps because of its warm hospitality (Selverston 2000b:90). Ranch structures that appeared on the Final Bill of Sale for Colony Ross, a probate inventory of all RAC property in California created for the sale of the property to John A. Sutter in 1841, included a barracks, a warehouse, a house, threshing floors, a kitchen with two stoves, a bathhouse, a corral, a boat, and 100 acres of cultivated land (Essig et al. 1933:70).

Buildings listed on the Bill of Sale for Kostromitinov Ranch closely resemble those at Khlebnikov Ranch (Essig et al. 1933; Selverston 2000a, 2000b), as well as RAC outposts at Three Saints Harbor (Crowell 1997), the Komakovskiy Redoubt (Oswalt 1980), and Kurilorossiiia (Shubin 1994). Furthermore, the spatial organization of company buildings and native settlements,

or “neighborhoods” (Lightfoot et al. 1991), at other RAC outposts appear consonant and offer a reasonable picture of what one could encounter during an archaeological investigation at Kostromitinov Ranch.

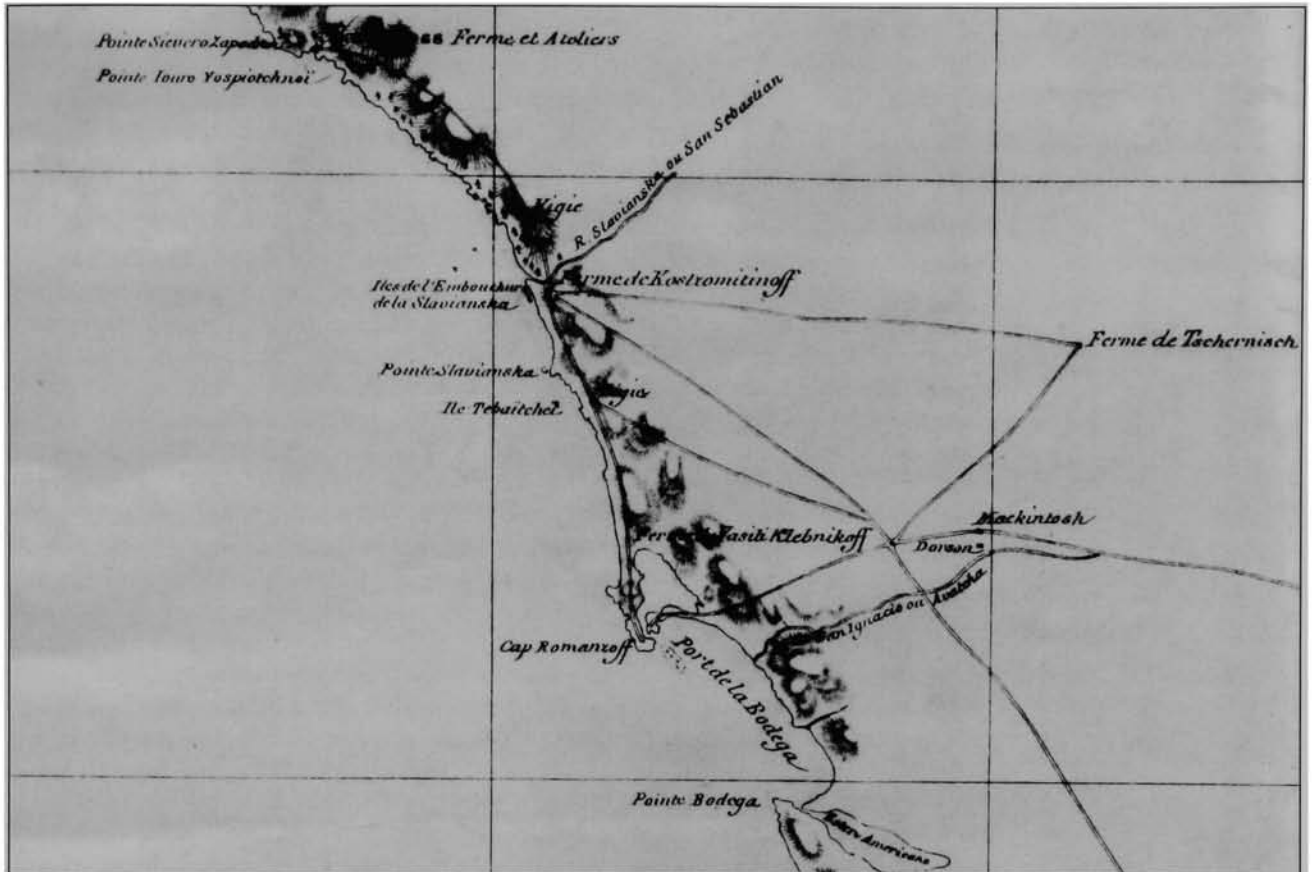
Archived maps drawn by Eugene Dufлот de Mofras (1841, 1844a) provide additional information about the possible location of Kostromitinov Ranch, highlighting the complex network of colonial roads that linked RAC lands with the north San Francisco Bay area. Both maps show the location of the Kostromitinov Ranch as being at the conspicuous last bend in the Russian River, now the location of the town of Bridgehaven, before it reaches the Pacific Ocean (Fig. 1). This location is also supported by a description written by G. M. Waseurtz af Sandels, a Swedish traveler in northern California in 1842 and 1843 who (while on his way to the remains of Colony Ross) noted a farm building located high on a bluff overlooking the Russian River:

[The farm building] was situated on the high bank of a mountain brook, which, in winter, must have been very powerful. There was a small port for boats where farm products must have been rolled down to the landing place [Waseurtz 1945 (1842–1843):80].

Another translation of the Final Bill of Sale mentions the use of wooden flumes for sliding grain down to a brook or river (Dufлот de Mofras 1844b:253). However, other scholars have challenged the idea that the ranch was near the Russian River and focus instead on nearby Willow Creek, where coastal mountains block most onshore winds, resulting in warmer temperatures and more favorable living conditions (e.g., Haase 1952; Stewart 1986). Most archaeological research follows this model (Lightfoot 1997; Stewart 1986).

### **THE ARCHAEOLOGY OF WILLOW CREEK**

Archaeologists working for the California Department of Parks and Recreation conducted the first systematic survey of the Willow Creek Unit in 1986. Park archaeologists located two prehistoric archaeological sites (CA-SON-1513 and CA-SON-1514), one historic archaeological site (CA-SON-1515/H), and a fourth site (CA-SON-1512/H), situated in San Quentin Gulch (Stewart 1986:1). The previous year, E. Breck Parkman graded several transects in San Quentin Gulch and unearthed glass, a ceramic plate fragment dating between



**Figure 1.** An 1841 map of RAC ranches and road networks drawn by E. Duflot de Mofras. (Courtesy of The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley).

1891 and 1925, a ceramic beer bottle stopper with an 1893 patent, bricks, window glass, milled boards, and prehistoric lithic artifacts (Stewart 1986:28–29). These artifacts, along with spring board cuts still visible in nearby redwood tree trunks, are compelling evidence of a historic structure in the area, but are more likely associated with late nineteenth-century lumber camps.

In the fall of 1997, UC Berkeley students enrolled in Kent Lightfoot's archaeological field methods course conducted archival research, a magnetometer survey, and surface pedestrian surveys in an attempt to locate the Kostromitinov Ranch. The remains of the ranch were not located; however, crews did find several historic road cuts, a rock wall, and a platform (Lightfoot 1997).

Reconnaissance and surface pedestrian surveys of five areas in the Willow Creek Unit were conducted as part of a UC Berkeley field school at Fort Ross State Historic Park during the summer of 2004. No artifacts or architectural features associated with the Kostromitinov

Ranch were found; however, we located several more road cuts and a portion of a railroad bed (Fig. 2) possibly belonging to the Willow Creek branch of the Northern Pacific Railroad (see Schneider 2006).

The following spring, students from UC Berkeley returned to Willow Creek to conduct a geophysical survey of San Quentin Gulch. Three thousand six hundred square meters were surveyed using a G-858 cesium magnetometer. Results from the magnetometer survey show multiple subsurface anomalies, which may indicate soil disturbance from previous archaeological grading in San Quentin Gulch or archaeological features associated with historic settlements. Future auger tests and a refined geophysical survey in this area will help resolve this problem.

A reconnaissance of the bluffs overlooking Bridgehaven, also conducted in the spring of 2005, generated new thoughts on the location of Kostromitinov Ranch. The area is generally flat and quite amenable to



**Figure 2. Willow Creek survey in 2004 near possible railroad bed. (Photograph by author).**

cultivation and for buildings associated with processing and storing grain. This is supported by the description of a chute for transporting grain from the bluff to either Willow Creek or the Russian River (Duflo de Mofras 1844b:253; Waseurtz 1945 [1842–1843]:80). It seems unlikely, however, that houses and barracks would have been located above the Russian River because of the bluff's exposure to unrelenting and frigid ocean winds. It is believed, therefore, that the heart of the Kostromitinov Ranch is located near Willow Creek, while sundry ranch structures associated with the agricultural operation would have been constructed further afield.

#### **ANTHROPOLOGICAL SIGNIFICANCE**

Although archaeological surveys in the Willow Creek Unit produced negative results, historians and anthropologists have much more to learn from the study of colonial encounters in the hinterlands of the Russian Colony Ross.

Kostromitinov Ranch in particular remains a potentially valuable comparative example for future historical and archaeological studies of Native Americans in market economies, frontiers and boundaries, and social identity.

The Kostromitinov Ranch holds great promise for contributing to our knowledge of the experiences of native Californians and their choices as hunter-gatherers and as day laborers in an emerging market economy. It is also a useful comparative datum point with regard to the existing literature that examines colonial agricultural enterprises in North America (e.g., Chávez-García 2004:67–69; Milanich 1999:154–156). As mentioned earlier, the Final Bill of Sale for Colony Ross provides an inventory of all RAC buildings, equipment, livestock, and acreage in the Ross colonial district (Essig et al. 1933:69–72). Also listed are the company houses used by Indian laborers at the Kostromitinov and Khlebnikov ranches (Essig et al. 1933:70). Further examination of historical documents would enhance our understanding



of the treatment and duties of native Californians at RAC ranches, the tribal groups represented at the ranches and their interactions, and their daily and seasonal routines as employees and as tribal members. In a similar case, native Californians laboring at Rancho Petaluma incorporated ranch labor into a seasonal round that appears to have blended precontact settlement and subsistence practices with new trade partnerships, labor, and diets (Silliman 2004:30). Further study along the RAC frontier will also benefit a long-term understanding of colonial encounters and the choices of native Californians following the introduction of an American economy (Lightfoot 2006).

The establishment of Kostromitinov Ranch between Russian and Spanish colonial influence can provide information on the interactions of Europeans and native Californians, as well as on how colonial policies were implemented and manipulated by people inhabiting the hinterlands. Lightfoot and Martinez (1995:474) offer a detailed review of the complex and socially charged nature of colonial frontiers. Rather than viewing frontiers as the homogenous and unchanging limits of a colonial population, Lightfoot and Martinez (1995:474) identify frontiers as zones of intersecting social networks that would have been continuously transformed and recontextualized to suit the needs of people immersed in a changing world. In a telling example, Voss (2005) examines the material practices and changes in social identities on the Spanish frontier. In spite of complicated differences in race, ethnicity, and gender represented by *casta*, or racially mixed, men and women at El Presidio de San Francisco, presidial architecture was designed to mask these differences in order to create a “unified face” to foreign visitors and native Californians and to exaggerate the “distinction between colonial and indigenous populations” (Voss 2005:470).

Further research in ethnohistoric and other source documents may also provide clues to understanding the processes, forms, and benefits of retreats to the frontier by native Californians escaping from Colony Ross and from the Spanish missions. Alluring examples of refuge abound, including one description from Baron F. P. Wrangell, Governor of Russian America from 1836–1840. Wrangell described his encounters with numerous Indians inhabiting the region between Bodega Bay and Colony Ross, including one encounter with a woman near the Russian River:

...[W]e came upon an old woman, who was gathering seeds in a basket woven of fine root fibers. She was scared stiff. We learned from her, not without difficulty, that several Indian families were living beyond the next thicket, who without doubt had already noticed us and had hidden, fearing to fall into the hands of Spaniards who quite often go out to hunt Indians in order to convert their prey to Christianity [Wrangell 1974:2].

In the landscape between Colony Ross and Spanish California, refugee Indian tribes would have convened and intermingled, finding common ground in dissimilar practices and unfamiliar traditions as a means to survive.

## SUMMARY

Weakened by diminished sea mammal populations, American expansion into California, and low agricultural yields despite the establishment of three outlying farming operations, the RAC elected in 1841 to sell Colony Ross to John Sutter and retreat north to Alaska (Federova 1973 [1867]:136–36). While only in operation for eight years, a robust body of ethnohistoric documents, maps, and archaeological information offers tempting avenues of research for locating the seemingly chimerical Kostromitinov Ranch. Renewed archival searches, census studies, and collaborative scholarship may bring us closer to fully comprehending the complex social arrangements and cultural interactions that existed on the frontier between the RAC and the Spanish missions.

A refined archaeological research strategy involving sub-surface testing and geophysical survey near Willow Creek and in Bridgehaven may also bring to light hidden structural signatures and features that would have otherwise gone unnoticed during surface pedestrian surveys. Archaeological features associated with the Kostromitinov Ranch remain undetected, perhaps because John Sutter dismantled the property after its purchase in 1841, or because the ranch remains buried near Willow Creek under several feet of alluvium (B. Walton, personal communication 2004). On-going archaeological research in California and abroad continues to generate popular interest in the RAC (e.g., Powell 2006) and may also lead to the development of refined research strategies for identifying the ephemeral outlines of RAC-era structures.

In the meantime, the study of the Kostromitinov Ranch offers a strong comparative example for understanding social and material dimensions of colonial encounters, the integration of Native Americans into market economies, and the study of frontiers and boundaries. Furthermore, continued research in the RAC hinterland may contribute to a long-term perspective on the practices and choices of individuals throughout California's colonial legacy. Historians, anthropologists, and archaeologists have much more to learn from the study of the Russian Colony Ross and its illusive frontier.

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