

ALASKA.

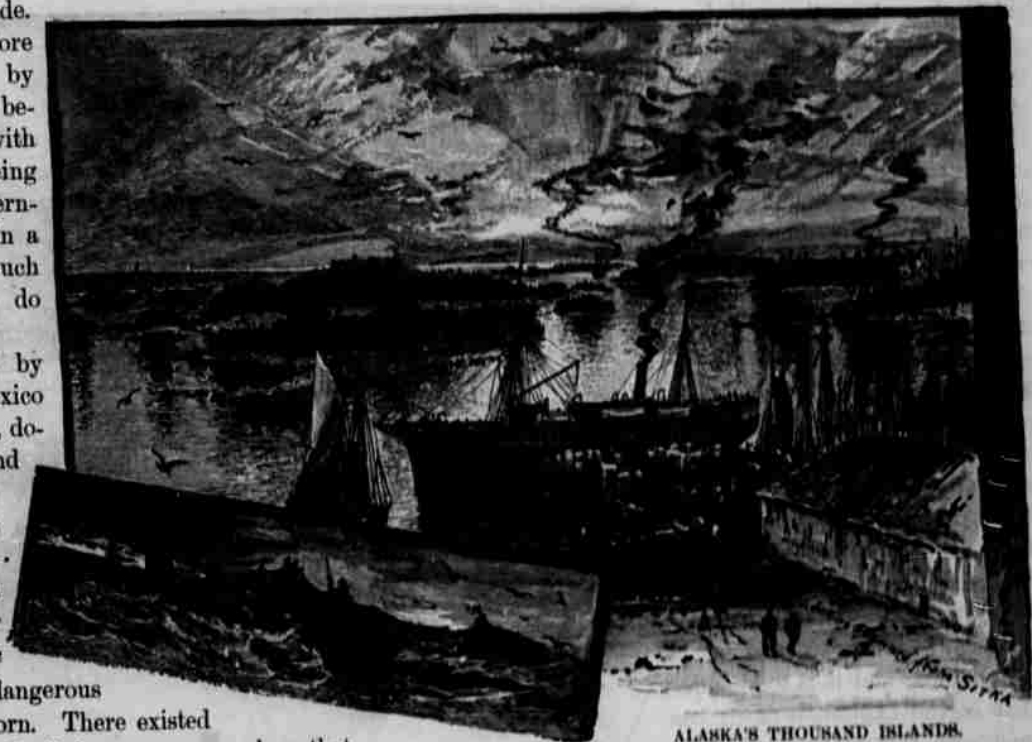
YEAR by year Alaska becomes better known to the people at large. When Mr. Seward paid \$7,200,000 for what was popularly considered a gigantic iceberg, few besides himself realized the great value of the purchase. The Russians occupied its coast for years without exploring its interior enough to give us even an approximately correct map, and during her seventeen years of ownership the United States has done but little better. Even last year an officer who found time dragging heavily upon his hands, while waiting for a vessel to take him away from that region, managed by a short journey into the interior to stumble upon a river, the existence of which was previously unknown, and which, if his opinion is well founded, is not only greater than the mighty Yukon, but one of the largest rivers on the globe. At the same time Lieutenant Schwatka was exploring the latter stream and verifying, for the first time, the reports of its great magnitude.

An expedition to explore the river discovered by Lieutenant Stoney is being fitted out, and with the enterprise now being displayed by the Government, we may hope in a few years to know as much about Alaska as we do about Central Africa.

For years Spain, by her possession of Mexico and Central America, dominated the Pacific and enriched herself with the commerce of the Indies. In vain England and other Powers sought for some other route into the Pacific than the long and dangerous

one around Cape Horn. There existed at that time a general belief among geographers that from Hudson's Bay or the North Sea, as the Arctic Ocean was then called, and which was considered easily accessible from the Atlantic, there must be a passage into the Pacific, which was known as the Straits of Anian. Diligent search on the Atlantic side, and occasional voyages in the Pacific, failed to reveal such a geographical feature. At last, in 1728, a Russian expedition under Behring sailed through the straits which now bear his name, without being aware that they were out of the open sea. Other expeditions soon followed, which discovered the islands of the Aleutian group and reached the mainland in the vicinity of Mount St. Elias. This was followed by the establishment of stations for the fur trade on the islands and at various points on the mainland. These furs were chiefly procured by purchase from the natives, and were all sent by vessel to the town of Petropavlovski, in Kamtchatka, from which they were for-

warded by dog sledges to Irkutsk, a distance of 3,450 miles. From there some were sent south 1,300 miles to Peking, China, and the others were forwarded across 3,760 miles of dreary waste to St. Petersburg. The poorest navigators and least scientific explorers of the Pacific were the Russians and Spaniards. One English voyage was worth a dozen such as they frequently made. Russians occupied the coast and islands of Alaska thirty years, entertaining the belief that from Mount St. Elias westward and northwestward to the coast of Asia was a vast sea of islands; while the Spaniards, after several voyages from Mexico to Alaska, were unable to draw a chart of the coast line with the least approach to accuracy. It was left for the celebrated Captain Cook, who was dispatched by England in search of the Straits of Anian, to demonstrate to the Russians in 1778 that Alaska was a vast northwestern projection of the continent, fringed with thousands of islands great and small, and to



ALASKA'S THOUSAND ISLANDS.

enlighten the Spaniards upon the character of our coast line, though only following the course pursued by their own vessels a few years before.

The Alaskan fur trade was concentrated in the hands of the Russian-American Trading Company by royal charter in 1781, and was expanded gradually until there were forty stations established on the islands and mainland, with headquarters at New Archangel, or Sitka, as it is now called. The charter was renewed in 1839, and expired finally in 1863, and four years later Alaska was purchased by the United States. In 1870 the Government leased to the Alaska Commercial Company the exclusive privilege of catching fur seals in the new territory, confining them to the two islands of St. Paul and St. George, and limiting the number of seals to be killed annually to 100,000. This lease was for twenty years, and has six years yet to run. The yearly rental is