

SALE OF LANDS IN THE TERRITORY OF ALASKA.

FEBRUARY 16, 1877.—Recommitted to the Committee on the Public Lands and ordered to be printed.

Mr. WALLING, from the Committee on the Public Lands, submitted the following

REPORT:

[To accompany bill H. R. 4560.]

The Committee on the Public Lands, to whom was referred the bill H. R. 4260, reported as a substitute H. R. 4560, and accompanied the same with the following report:

A memorial, signed by several merchants and business men of San Francisco, was presented to this House during the first session of the present Congress, asking that they be permitted to purchase, at the Government price per acre, a tract of land in the Territory of Alaska, on the islands lying between Sitka and the main-land, for the purpose of enabling them to establish ship-yards and lumber-manufacture. This memorial was subsequently followed by a bill introduced at the request of the same parties, who had incorporated themselves, under the laws of the State of California, as the Alaska Ship-Building and Lumber Company. The proposed bill conferred the authority on that corporation to make the purchase mentioned in the memorial.

The committee, being satisfied from the character of the persons whose names were attached to the memorial, and from representations made in relation to the project, that the enterprise was backed by good faith and by the ability and determination (if permitted) to carry it out, have, after such investigation as it has been possible to make, embodied their recommendations in H. R. 4560, as a substitute for H. R. 4260.

Alaska was ceded to the United States in 1867. Although glowing representations were made of the value of the Territory and of its ability to support a large population and varied industries, ten years of opportunity have yielded no return beyond the seal-fisheries of the islands of Saint Paul and Saint George, under lease to the Alaska Commercial Company. Population has diminished until at the present time, except the native Indians and a few traders, there are no inhabitants remaining who have the means of getting away. The Indians even, who previous to the cession had been taught to respect the laws of civilization and in some slight degree to appreciate its advantages, are lapsing into their former ways, with the added corruptions, physical and moral, rather fostered than repressed by the cupidity or license of the few whites who barter for their peltry.

All these facts abundantly appear from the reports and exhibits at-

tached to Ex. Doc. No. 83, made by the Secretary of the Treasury to the first session of the present Congress, on the "Seal-Fisheries in Alaska." Attached to that document is a careful, scientific, and extended report, made by Prof. Henry W. Elliott, a special agent of the Government sent to Alaska for the purpose of obtaining information in regard to the resources and condition of that Territory. He says:

In this report I have endeavored to give a concise description of the agricultural character of the territory as I have seen it, which thus far might be truthfully summed up in saying that there are more acres of better land lying now as wilderness and jungle in sight, on the mountain-tops of the Alleghanies, from the car-window of the Pennsylvania Road, than can be found in all Alaska; and when it is remembered that this land, wild, in the heart of one of our oldest and most thickly-populated States, will remain as it now is, cheap and undisturbed, for an indefinite time to come, notwithstanding its close proximity to the homes of millions of energetic and enterprising men, it is not difficult to estimate the value of the Alaskan acres, remote as they are, and barred out by a most disagreeable sea-coast climate, leaving out altogether the great West, and the vast agricultural regions of British America.

In giving more particular description the country is grouped into sections, of which the southern and (agriculturally) most valuable, called "the Sitkan district," extends in its northwesterly and southeasterly dimension between 55° and 60° of north latitude, about three hundred and fifty miles in the coastwise direction. It is within this district that the memorialists propose to make their experiment of ship-building and lumbering. Of this region the report continues, (p. 10 of report):

The Sitkan district.—Starting from Portland Canal and running north to Cross Sound and the head of Lynn Canal the eye glances over a range of country made up of hundreds of islands, large and small, and a bold mountainous coast, all everywhere rugged and abrupt in contour, and with exception of highest summits, the hills, mountains, and valleys, the last always narrow and winding, are covered with a dense jungle of spruce and fir, cedar, and shrubbery, so thick, dark, and damp that it is traversed only by the expenditure of great physical energy, and a clear spot, either on islands or mainland, where an acre of grass might grow by itself, as it does in the little "parks" far in the interior, cannot be found. In these forest-jungles, especially on the lowlands and always by the water-courses, will be found a fair proportion of ordinary timber of the character above designated. The spruce and fir, however, are so heavily charged with resin that they can be used for nothing but the roughest work; the cedar is, however, an excellent article.

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Here, under the powerful influence of the great Pacific, winter is never anything but wet and chilly, seldom ever giving the people a week's skating on the small lake back of Sitka. Day after day there are high winds and drizzling rains, with breaks in the leaden sky showing gleams of clear blue and sunlight; and here the agriculturist or gardener has like cause for discouragement, for nothing will ripen; whatever he plants grows and enters on its stages of decay without perfecting. It must, moreover, be remarked that there is but very little land fit even for this unsatisfactory and most unprofitable agriculture, *i. e.*, properly drained and warm soil enough for the very hardiest cereals. There is not one acre of such tillable land to every ten thousand of the objectionable character throughout the larger portion of this area, and certainly not more than one acre to a thousand in the best regions. Grass grows in small localities or areas, wherever it is not smothered by forests and thickets, in the valleys over this whole Sitkan district; its presence, however, is not the rule, but the exception, so vigorous is the growth of shrubbery and timber; and even did it grow in large amount, the curing of hay is simply impracticable. Although the winters are mild, still there is not enough ranging ground to support herds of cattle throughout the year and have them within control.

After describing the other districts, the report concludes with the following summary, (p. 48):

In view of the foregoing, what shall we say of the resources of Alaska, viewed as regards its agricultural or horticultural capabilities?

It would seem undeniable that owing to the unfavorable climatic conditions which prevail on the coast and in the interior, the gloomy fogs and dampness of the former, and the intense protracted severity of the winters, characteristic of the latter, unfit the Territory for the proper support of any considerable civilization.

Men may, and undoubtedly will, soon live here in comparative comfort, as they labor in mining-camps, lumber and ship-timber mills, and salmon-factories, but they will bring with them everything they want except fish and game, and when they leave the country it will be as desolate as they found it.

Can a country be permanently and prosperously settled that will not in its whole extent allow the successful growth and ripening of a single crop of corn, wheat, or potatoes, and where the most needful of any domestic animals cannot be kept by poor people?

The Russians, who have subdued a rougher country and settled in large communities under severer conditions than have been submitted to by any body of our people as yet, were in this Territory, after some twenty years at least of patient, *intelligent* trial, obliged to send a colony to California to raise their potatoes, grain, and beef. The history of their settlement there and forced abandonment in 1842 is well known.

We may with pride refer to the rugged work of settlement so successfully made by our ancestors in New England, but it is idle to talk of the subjugation of Alaska as a task simply requiring a similar expenditure of persistence, energy, and ability. In Massachusetts, our forefathers had a land *in which all the necessaries of life and many of the luxuries could be produced from the soil with certainty from year to year*; in Alaska their lot would have been quite the reverse, and they could have maintained themselves there with no better success than the present inhabitants.

The foregoing extended extracts give the latest and most authentic information in regard to this country. It would seem very apparent that this region must remain for an indefinite period in the future, as it has remained hitherto, a worthless waste, unless some inducements are held out to attract associated capital to develop, by large experimental outlays of energy and money, the possibility of turning this inhospitable and uninviting domain to some national use. If the enterprise proposed by the memorialists should prove remunerative, there will remain to the Government millions of acres of similar lands, which would find a market and furnish employment to thousands of mechanics and laborers.

It is unnecessary to refer in this report to the beneficial results that would follow the establishment of ship-building, for it is conceived that, independent of this, it would be to the advantage of the Government to know that climatic and physical obstacles can be so far overcome as that any industry can be successfully and profitably prosecuted in that latest and most questionable of our national real-estate speculations. It is proposed to do this, not only without expense to the Government, but by a sale at the Government price of land now worthless, and which must always remain so until enterprises like this are established.

The island of Kou, upon which the memorialists propose to establish their ship-yard, and upon which and on the shores of the adjacent waters they desire to purchase timber-lands, is one of the islands composing the Alexander Archipelago, separated from Baranof Island, on which Sitka is situated, by Chatham Strait; to the east lie successively Kekou Strait, Kaprianhoff Island, Wrangel Strait, Mitgoff Island, Souchoi Channel, and then the main-land. So far as known, it is valueless, except for a belt of timber that fringes its shores and extends up its narrow valleys.

The bill reported herewith authorizes the Alaska Ship-Building and Lumber Company to purchase 100,000 acres of timber-lands on this island and neighboring shores, upon paying Government price therefor, and no timber or other material is to be removed from any lands until paid for. The entire number of acres is to be selected and paid for within ten years. Surveys are to be made at the expense of the company, to be credited in payment on the lands purchased, and the company undertakes, within two years, to establish a ship-yard, and complete within that time at least one ship of 1,200 tons burden, and thereafter to prosecute ship-building vigorously. The guarantee that this will be done lies in the fact that it will be necessary to make a large outlay

to build a single ship—so large that, if possible, they must continue that industry or lose the capital invested. If the construction of ships can be profitably continued, this preliminary investment will be sufficient to insure a further prosecution of the enterprise; if unprofitable, the Government ought not to insist upon its further continuance. The survey and the entry and payment of the lands will be made through the land-office at Olympia, in Washington Territory. The bill reserves the right in Congress to alter, amend, or repeal the act at any time.

The duty of the United States to the aboriginal inhabitants of that locality has been considered in several reports made by Government agents sent to investigate the condition and resources of Alaska and its inhabitants. They concur in the opinion that (excepting at the fur islands and stations of the Alaska Commercial Company) the withdrawal of the supervision exercised under the former government has been most deleterious, and that no hope of a better state of things can be justly entertained while the Territory is suffered to remain in its present abandoned and lawless condition. Whatever enterprises shall attract an industrious population, and give remunerative employment to such of those people as will labor, will be a step toward their subjection to better influences, and will be evidence to them that the United States is at length willing, not only to encourage industry, sobriety, and morality, but to repress the worse than natural vices into which they are relapsing.

For these and other reasons that will suggest themselves without further extending this report, the committee recommend the legislation proposed by the House bill 4560.