

ENGLISH LEARNING FOR CURIOUS MINDS



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Episode #277
Alaska: The Last Frontier
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[00:00:00] Hello, hello hello, and welcome to English Learning for Curious Minds, by Leonardo English.

[00:00:12] The show where you can listen to fascinating stories, and learn weird and wonderful things about the world at the same time as improving your English.

[00:00:21] I'm Alastair Budge, and today we are going to be talking about Alaska.

[00:00:27] As you probably know, Alaska is a state of the United States, but it is a state unlike any other.

[00:00:35] Not only is it the coldest and least densely populated state, it is also the largest and is thousands of kilometres away from the mainland United States.

[00:00:46] Indeed, if you were to drive from Alaska's biggest city, Anchorage, to the capital of the nearest US state, Seattle in Washington, it would be a 3,600 km trip and take you about 42 hours, it's a similar distance as Barcelona is away from Moscow.

Alaska: The Last Frontier

[00:01:07] Which [begs the question¹](#), and the subject of today's episode, how and why did Alaska become part of the United States, and what does this mean for this piece of North America nicknamed "The Last [Frontier²](#)"?

[00:01:23] Okay then, let's get started and look at the unusual history of Alaska.

[00:01:29] Today, Alaska and Russia are separated by the Bering [Strait³](#), the 90km of water that separates North America and Asia.

[00:01:38] But in prehistoric times, there was no such separation.

[00:01:43] During the last ice age, sea levels were lower than they are today, and the first human [settlers⁴](#) of the region were able to cross the area that separates Russia and Alaska, on foot.

[00:01:57] These prehistoric [settlers](#), who [migrated⁵](#) from Asia to Alaska, are the [ancestors⁶](#) of the Inuits and other native Alaskan [tribes⁷](#).

¹ makes you want to find the answer to the question

² extreme limit

³ a narrow passage of water connecting two seas

⁴ people who arrived in order to live in the new area

⁵ moved to a new land and stayed

⁶ relatives of them who belonged to past generations

⁷ groups of families or other groups that share the same language, culture and history

Alaska: The Last Frontier

[00:02:07] Over time, sea levels rose and about 10,000 years ago North America and Asia became separated by water.

[00:02:16] As you might imagine, Alaska's now native [tribes](#) were originally [nomadic](#)⁸ - they moved from one camp to another depending on food availability and the seasons. With time, different [tribes](#) developed in different regions each with their own [distinct](#)⁹ culture and way of life.

[00:02:37] [Spear hunting](#)¹⁰ and salmon fishing were important for [tribes](#) living in Alaska's interior, who would [build up](#)¹¹ food [stocks](#)¹² before moving south to survive the [harsh](#)¹³ winters.

[00:02:49] Societies on the coast, on the other hand, became specialised in hunting whales, developing a special type of small boat, very similar to modern day [kayaks](#)¹⁴, that could stay [afloat](#)¹⁵ even in dangerous seas [in pursuit of](#)¹⁶ large sea mammals.

⁸ moving from one place to another, wandering

⁹ different, separate

¹⁰ hunting using weapons with pointed metal tips and long wooden handles

¹¹ collect, accumulate

¹² supplies or quantities

¹³ difficult to survive in, hostile

¹⁴ light narrow boats

¹⁵ above water without sinking

¹⁶ looking for

Alaska: The Last Frontier

[00:03:07] Alaska's native **tribes** had their own traditions and mostly lived in harmony, with respect for nature.

[00:03:14] However, their way of life would begin to change with the European "discovery" of Alaska.

[00:03:21] In 1741, Vitus Bering, a Danish **cartographer**¹⁷, a **mapmaker**¹⁸, who worked for the Russian navy first caught sight of Alaska, **claiming**¹⁹ it for Russia. As you might have guessed, The Bering **Strait** is named after him.

[00:03:38] In 1784, Russia started to **set up**²⁰ **bases**²¹ in Alaska, mainly to hunt **sea otters**²² for their thick **fur**²³ **coats**²⁴.

[00:03:49] And for the first 100 years or so after its discovery by Vitus Bering, it remained a Russian **outpost**²⁵.

¹⁷ someone who draws maps

¹⁸ someone who draws maps

¹⁹ formally saying that it belonged to

²⁰ organise, establish

²¹ places used as a centre of operations

²² sea animals with four legs and short brown fur that swim well and eat fish

²³ the thick hair that covers their bodies

²⁴ hair coverings

²⁵ a place that represented their authority and business interests

Alaska: The Last Frontier

[00:03:57] Although the centre of Russian power was thousands of kilometres away to the west, Siberian fur hunters from the Russian Far East knew about living and working in extremely cold conditions, and could easily adapt to life in Alaska.

[00:04:13] After all, Alaska wasn't all that different from Siberia.

[00:04:18] England and Spain also explored the area and set up fur hunting outposts²⁶, but Russia remained the dominant presence in the area.

[00:04:28] At this time, in the 18th century that is, the future geopolitical²⁷ importance of Alaska wasn't obvious.

[00:04:36] As a large, icy area that was difficult to access, never mind live in, Alaska was simply not considered to have much strategic importance.

[00:04:46] Though, if you've ever played the game Risk, you'll know just how important having Alaska can be.

[00:04:53] Alaska's position allows access to both Asia and North America.

[00:04:58] What's more, if you control this area, you also have easy access to the Arctic.

[00:05:04] And although the Russian mainland is 90km away from the North American mainland, in the Bering Strait there are actually two islands. The western one is part of Russia, the eastern one is part of Alaska, and is therefore American.

²⁶ places that represented their authority and business interests

²⁷ relating to politics and its location

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[00:05:21] They are just 4km apart, and in winter the water between them freezes, making it actually possible to walk over from Russia to The United States of America.

[00:05:33] As you might expect, now Alaska is of vital²⁸ strategic importance to the United States in its geopolitical struggle²⁹ with Russia.

[00:05:42] But in the 18th century Russia's great enemy wasn't the US. It was Britain.

[00:05:49] By the 18th and 19th centuries, Russia and Britain were already rivals in many domains³⁰ and both countries were trying to increase their presence in the Pacific.

[00:06:00] Britain had established numerous colonies in modern-day Canada, which wouldn't become its own country until 1867.

[00:06:09] In 1854, Britain and Russia were on opposite sides in the Crimean War back in Europe. The war weakened³¹ the Russian army and drained³² Russia's finances.

²⁸ extreme (importance)

²⁹ competition, conflict

³⁰ areas of interest

³¹ caused it to be less powerful

³² Caused them to be less in amount, consumed

Alaska: The Last Frontier

[00:06:21] Meanwhile, fur trading had become less lucrative³³, there was less money to be made, plus the sea otters, those cuddly³⁴ little creatures, had been hunted almost to extinction³⁵.

[00:06:34] Russia did not have the financial means³⁶ to continue to set up military bases in Alaska but above all, it didn't want the British to get their hands on it³⁷.

[00:06:45] If it could only sell Alaska to another country that wasn't Britain, it would serve two purposes: a welcome injection³⁸ of money and it would keep it out of the hands³⁹ of the British.

[00:06:59] As strange as it may now sound, before eventually selling Alaska to the USA, the Russian Empire is said to have offered the territory of Alaska to one of the world's smallest countries, the landlocked⁴⁰ European microstate⁴¹ of Liechtenstein.

³³ producing a lot of money

³⁴ making you want to hug them

³⁵ the point where their existence was in danger

³⁶ resources, income

³⁷ succeed in having or owning it

³⁸ supply, gain

³⁹ keep it away from

⁴⁰ entirely surrounded by land

⁴¹ very small country

Alaska: The Last Frontier

[00:07:16] This tiny country between Switzerland and Austria was on good terms with⁴² the Russian Empire at the time and was well known for its large gold reserves - just what the Russians needed.

[00:07:29] Liechtenstein decided not to go ahead with⁴³ the offer, worried about taking on such a large chunk of land, a territory that was over 10,000 times its size, and was so far away.

[00:07:42] Plus at the time, the only resource Alaska was known for was its dwindling⁴⁴ fur trade.

[00:07:49] So, Russia then offered the less than hundred years old United States of America the chance to buy Alaska.

[00:07:57] The sale was completed on the 1st August 1867.

[00:08:02] The US paid \$7.2 million, which works out at around \$120 million in today's money, approximately €110 million or €64 per square kilometre.

[00:08:16] And what I need to reiterate⁴⁵ is quite how big Alaska is.

[00:08:21] It's 1.7 million square kilometres.

⁴² friendly with

⁴³ proceed, continue

⁴⁴ decreasing, becoming smaller in amount

⁴⁵ say again, repeat

Alaska: The Last Frontier

[00:08:25] To put it another way, if Alaska was a country, it would be the 17th largest in the world.

[00:08:32] You could fit all of France, all of Spain, all of Germany AND all of Italy inside Alaska and still have a little bit of room left over.

[00:08:42] Today, it might seem pretty incredible that such a huge amount of land could just be signed over⁴⁶ and sold for such little money, especially those of us who are keen⁴⁷ Risk players and have experienced firsthand⁴⁸ the strategic importance of Alaska.

[00:08:59] However, this was the era⁴⁹ of vast land purchase. Louisiana was purchased from France in 1804, Florida from Spain in 1819 and California from Mexico in 1848.

[00:09:14] But, even to a young country that had plenty of experience making territorial acquisitions⁵⁰, Alaska was something else. Its sheer size alone, means that Alaska makes up 15% of the entire country.

[00:09:28] For comparison, Texas, the second largest state in terms of area, is under half the size of Alaska, at just under 700,000 kilometres squared.

⁴⁶ given by signing a document

⁴⁷ enthusiastic, committed

⁴⁸ directly, personally

⁴⁹ period of time

⁵⁰ purchases, things bought

Alaska: The Last Frontier

[00:09:39] The American public were, perhaps understandably, not too keen on Alaska's purchase.

[00:09:46] Alaska was seen as being an icy⁵¹, barren⁵² land, devoid of⁵³, without, resources. The fact that it doesn't share a border with any American state made the purchase even more unpopular.

[00:10:00] It was criticised as being a waste of money, And it was nicknamed "Seward's Folly⁵⁴" - Seward was the Secretary of State at the time, and the chief supporter of the purchase.

[00:10:11] A "folly", by the way, is something that shows a lack of common sense, it's a foolish⁵⁵ idea or action.

[00:10:19] Foolish as it may have seemed, Seward's purchase of Alaska was vindicated⁵⁶, was proved to be right, in part at least, when gold was discovered in the Klondike River just over the Canadian border in 1896.

⁵¹ covered in ice

⁵² unable to produce plants or fruit

⁵³ without

⁵⁴ silly or stupid act or idea

⁵⁵ silly, not showing common sense

⁵⁶ proved to be right

Alaska: The Last Frontier

[00:10:34] Thousands of Americans travelled via sea, and then overland across Alaska, with towns on the trail⁵⁷ growing significantly as businesses sprung up⁵⁸ to provide essentials, as well as gambling⁵⁹ halls to relieve⁶⁰ any successful gold miners of their money.

[00:10:53] In 1899 gold was found in Alaska at a coastal town called Nome. Copper mining, fishing and canning⁶¹ industries began to take off⁶² and construction started on Alaska's railway in 1902.

[00:11:08] Things were starting to look a little rosier⁶³, a little more positive, with population growth and improved finances.

[00:11:15] In 1912, Alaska became a territory of the USA, a bit like Puerto Rico today.

⁵⁷ path, way

⁵⁸ appeared suddenly

⁵⁹ relating to playing games of chance for money

⁶⁰ take it from them

⁶¹ relating to putting food into small metal containers

⁶² become very successful

⁶³ more positive

Alaska: The Last Frontier

[00:11:23] However, the Great Depression put a hold on⁶⁴ Alaska's progression towards becoming a fully fledged⁶⁵ state.

[00:11:30] The price of fish and copper plummeted⁶⁶, causing workers to be laid off⁶⁷ and wages reduced for those lucky enough to still have a job.

[00:11:40] It would take World War II to really drive home the strategic importance of Alaska to the rest of the USA, when two islands in Alaska were occupied by the Japanese forces.

[00:11:52] These two Alaskan islands, Attu and Kiska, were the only parts of continental USA to be occupied during the entire war.

[00:12:02] It took two weeks of fierce⁶⁸ fighting and almost 4,000 American casualties, including 1,200 caused by severe cold, to liberate⁶⁹ only Attu.

[00:12:14] The second island, Kiska, was bombed extensively rather than risking even more lives.

⁶⁴ made it stop

⁶⁵ completely established, of full status

⁶⁶ dropped very quickly and suddenly

⁶⁷ fired, dismissed from employment

⁶⁸ intense and frightening

⁶⁹ free from enemy occupation

Alaska: The Last Frontier

[00:12:21] After World War II, with Alaska's **geopolitical** importance now clear to see, large numbers of military personnel were sent to the state.

[00:12:32] Building the first military **bases** helped to boost the population, while the completion of the Alaskan Highway finally linked Alaska to the lower 48 states by road for the first time, passing through Canada.

[00:12:46] However, while it was evident that Alaska was strategically important, it would take a huge financial **turnaround**⁷⁰ to prove its economic stability enough for Alaska to be seriously considered for **statehood**⁷¹, for becoming a **fully-fledged**⁷² state of the USA.

[00:13:04] The Swanson River Oil Discovery in 1957 did just that. While oil had been found before in Alaska, this was the first time that oil was discovered in large enough amounts to be economically **viable**⁷³ to **exploit**⁷⁴.

[00:13:21] And sure enough, Alaska officially became an American state on 3 January 1959.

⁷⁰ unexpected change

⁷¹ the status of being a completely recognised or established state

⁷² completely established, of full status

⁷³ practical, suitable

⁷⁴ make full use of

Alaska: The Last Frontier

[00:13:29] With the completion of the Alaska Highway and increased troop⁷⁵ numbers stationed⁷⁶ in the state, Alaska became more open to visitors. Soldiers returning home helped to spread the word⁷⁷ about the state's stunning⁷⁸ wilderness⁷⁹.

[00:13:44] Tourism quickly became a major source of revenue for the state, with more than 2 million tourists visiting the state every year for its pristine⁸⁰ landscape and unspoiled⁸¹ nature.

[00:13:57] Alaska's other main source of income was and still is oil. The problem is that the oil extraction and tourism industries don't always go hand in hand.

[00:14:09] If you are coming to see wonderful unspoiled beaches, glaciers⁸², rivers and mountains, you will be disappointed if you find large factories, pipelines⁸³, or beaches covered in nasty black oil.

⁷⁵ soldier

⁷⁶ positioned, assigned

⁷⁷ make it known

⁷⁸ extremely beautiful

⁷⁹ not populated, wild areas

⁸⁰ in its original condition, not affected by human presence

⁸¹ not affected by human presence

⁸² large masses of ice that move slowly

⁸³ very long large tubes usually for carrying gas

Alaska: The Last Frontier

[00:14:23] But this was exactly what tourists found in 1989, after the Exxon Valdez oil tanker [ran aground⁸⁴](#) on the Alaskan coastline, polluting 1,800km of [shoreline⁸⁵](#) with 50 million litres of oil and killing thousands of animals.

[00:14:41] And there is still this [tension⁸⁶](#) today between the oil industry, which claims to create jobs for 10% of the Alaskan population and be responsible for billions of dollars of income to the state each year, and the tourist industry, which wants to keep the oil industry out of view.

[00:15:01] The other [tension](#), which of course shows no signs of going away, comes from the fact that Alaska is the closest part of the United States to Russia.

[00:15:11] As you might expect, the United States continues to see Alaska as an important strategic [outpost](#).

[00:15:19] Today there are over 22,000 American soldiers [stationed](#) in Alaska.

[00:15:24] On the other side of the Bering [Strait](#), Russia is also developing numerous military [bases](#).

⁸⁴ hit the coast, touched the ground and got stuck

⁸⁵ the line along which the sea meets the land

⁸⁶ a state of opposition, disagreement or hostility

Alaska: The Last Frontier

[00:15:31] And while Alaska's **geopolitical** importance may have been severely **underestimated**⁸⁷ before WWII, with increasing **tensions**⁸⁸ between Russia and the United States, and with the Arctic Ocean becoming increasingly accessible as a sea route, the **geopolitical** importance of Alaska has never been clearer.

[00:15:52] So, now that we've learned a bit about the history of Alaska we have time for a few curiosities about this unusual place.

[00:16:01] Have you ever wondered why Alaska is called Alaska? What does it mean?

[00:16:06] Well, the word Alaska means the "Great Land" in one of the state's native tribal languages, a language I imagine you might not have heard of called "Aleut".

[00:16:17] Another equally **fitting**⁸⁹ name often given to Alaska is the "Land of the Midnight Sun".

[00:16:23] For over two months in summertime, like in northern Europe and northern Russia, the sun does not set in the northernmost part of Alaska, meaning it is light for 24 hours a day.

[00:16:36] Alaska is also famous for its remarkable **geographical**⁹⁰ features.

⁸⁷ considered less than it really was

⁸⁸ states of opposition, disagreement or hostility

⁸⁹ suitable, appropriate

⁹⁰ related to the natural characteristics of the earth's surface

Alaska: The Last Frontier

[00:16:40] You might have heard of the Rocky Mountains, but did you know that Alaska, not Colorado, is home to 17 of the 20 highest mountains in America?

[00:16:51] Mount Denali, also known as Mount McKinley, is the highest point of elevation in the whole of North America.

[00:16:59] Alaska also holds the record for the lowest point in America, the deep-sea Aleutian Trench, as well as the continent's largest [glacier⁹¹](#), the Bering [Glacier](#), which measures 3,261 km² - almost one and a half times the size of Luxembourg.

[00:17:18] And our final interesting detail that sets Alaska apart is its state flag.

[00:17:24] The flag is deep blue, with eight gold stars in the shape of Ursa Major, or the Great Bear [constellation⁹²](#), representing strength and the North Star.

[00:17:35] It's a nice looking flag, but one interesting bit of [trivia⁹³](#) was that it was designed by a 13-year old boy living in an [orphanage⁹⁴](#).

[00:17:44] Alaska certainly is an unusual place, and its story is unlikely.

⁹¹ a large mass of ice that moves slowly

⁹² a group of stars seen as a figure or design

⁹³ details that are not that important

⁹⁴ a public institution for the care and protection of children without parents

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[00:17:50] A huge mass⁹⁵ of freezing land on the edge of North America, one trying to figure out the balance between preserving⁹⁶ nature for future generations and extracting oil from nature to provide an income for people living today.

[00:18:06] It's also a place with an unlikely geopolitical significance, a place where the United States and the Russian Federation meet, and where, when it's cold enough, you can literally walk between the two countries.

[00:18:18] There are perhaps no better places deserving of the name "the Last Frontier"

[00:18:25] OK then, that is it for today's episode on the weird history of Alaska.

[00:18:31] I hope it's been an interesting one, and you've learned a bit about how Alaska got to be the place it is today, as well some extra details about what makes Alaska special.

[00:18:42] As always, I would love to know what you thought about this episode.

[00:18:46] How would the world have been different had Russia not sold Alaska?

[00:18:50] How would it have been different had it sold it to Britain?

[00:18:54] How do you think we should think about the balance between preserving natural habitats and fossil fuel extraction?

⁹⁵ very large body

⁹⁶ keeping or maintaining it in its original or existing state

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[00:19:01] Have you ever visited Alaska or it is on your list of top potential destinations?

[00:19:07] I would love to know, so let's get this discussion started.

[00:19:10] You can head right into our community forum, which is at community.leonardoenglish.com and get chatting away to other curious minds.

[00:19:19] You've been listening to English Learning for Curious Minds, by Leonardo English.

[00:19:24] I'm Alastair Budge, you stay safe, and I'll catch you in the next episode.

[END OF EPISODE]

Key vocabulary

Word	Definition
Begs the question	makes you want to find the answer to the question
Frontier	extreme limit
Strait	a narrow passage of water connecting two seas
Settlers	people who arrived in order to live in the new area
Migrated	moved to a new land and stayed
Ancestors	relatives of them who belonged to past generations
Tribes	groups of families or other groups that share the same language, culture and history
Nomadic	moving from one place to another, wandering
Distinct	different, separate
Spear hunting	hunting using weapons with pointed metal tips and long wooden handles
Build up	collect, accumulate

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Stocks	supplies or quantities
Harsh	difficult to survive in, hostile
Kayaks	light narrow boats
Afloat	above water without sinking
In pursuit of	looking for
Cartographer	someone who draws maps
Mapmaker	someone who draws maps
Claiming	formally saying that it belonged to
Set up	organise, establish
Bases	places used as a centre of operations
Sea otters	sea animals with four legs and short brown fur that swim well and eat fish
Fur	the thick hair that covers their bodies
Coats	hair coverings
Outpost	a place that represented their authority and business interests
Outposts	places that represented their authority and business interests

Geopolitical relating to politics and its location

Vital extreme (importance)

Struggle competition, conflict

Domains areas of interest

Weakened caused it to be less powerful

Drained caused them to be less in amount, consumed

Lucrative producing a lot of money

Cuddly making you want to hug them

Extinction the point where their existence was in danger

Means resources, income

Get their hands on it succeed in having or owning it

Injection supply, gain

Keep it out of the keep it away from

hands

Landlocked entirely surrounded by land

Microstate very small country

On good terms with friendly with

Go ahead with proceed, continue

Dwindling decreasing, becoming smaller in amount

Reiterate say again, repeat

Signed over given by signing a document

Keen enthusiastic, committed

Firsthand directly, personally

Era period of time

Acquisitions purchases, things bought

Icy covered in ice

Barren unable to produce plants or fruit

Devoid of without

Folly silly or stupid act or idea

Foolish silly, not showing common sense

Vindicated proved to be right

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Trail	path, way
Sprung up	appeared suddenly
Gambling	relating to playing games of chance for money
Relieve	take it from them
Canning	relating to putting food into small metal containers
Take off	become very successful
Rosier	more positive
Put a hold on	made it stop
Fully fledged	completely established, of full status
Plummeted	dropped very quickly and suddenly
Laid off	fired, dismissed from employment
Fierce	intense and frightening
Liberate	free from enemy occupation
Turnaround	unexpected change
Statehood	the status of being a completely recognised or established state

Alaska: The Last Frontier

Fully-fledged completely established, of full status

Viable practical, suitable

Exploit make full use of

Troop soldier

Stationed positioned, assigned

Spread the word make it known

Stunning extremely beautiful

Wilderness not populated, wild areas

Pristine in its original condition, not affected by human presence

Unspoiled not affected by human presence

Glaciers large masses of ice that move slowly

Pipelines very long large tubes usually for carrying gas

Ran aground hit the coast, touched the ground and got stuck

Shoreline the line along which the sea meets the land

Tension a state of opposition, disagreement or hostility

Underestimated	considered less than it really was
Tensions	states of opposition, disagreement or hostility
Fitting	suitable, appropriate
Geographical	related to the natural characteristics of the earth's surface
Glacier	a large mass of ice that moves slowly
Constellation	a group of stars seen as a figure or design
Trivia	details that are not that important
Orphanage	a public institution for the care and protection of children without parents
Mass	very large body
Preserving	keeping or maintaining it in its original or existing state

We'd love to get your feedback on this episode.

What did you like? What could we do better?

What did you struggle to understand?

Let us know in the forum community.leonardoenglish.com