

Andrew P. Kashevaroff

Thomas Riggs Jr, who became Alaska's governor in 1918, faced many challenges associated with managing an increasingly complex territory with a growing economy and population. In spite of numerous pressing distractions, Riggs completed moving the library and museum from Sitka to Juneau, opened the collections to the public for the first time, and became the founding president of the Alaska Historical Association, a support group for the institution.

Certainly, Riggs' greatest contribution was in recognizing that building the library and museum was a full-time job. Though personally interested in the library and museum, Riggs delegated responsibility to a full-time Librarian and Curator. In November 1919, a man renowned for his knowledge of Russian history and Alaska Natives—Russian Orthodox priest Andrew P. Kashevaroff—began his twenty-year tenure, which ended with his death in 1940.

Kashevaroff was a vocal and energetic advocate for the Museum and Library, and today, he is fondly remembered as its true “founding Father.” He was uniquely suited for the position of Librarian and Curator. His Russian ancestors were navigators and colonists who came to Alaska in the 1700s and married Alutiiq or Creole women in and around Kodiak. Born there in 1863 during the Russian administration of Alaska, he dedicated his life to serving the Russian Orthodox Church, while maintaining his interest in Alaska history and culture. He was considered a leading authority on Alaska, and became a popular lecturer and author. His Russian and Alaska Native heritage, and his ability to live and work as an American, helped him develop and lead a distinctly Alaskan institution.

Kashevaroff began his working life in the late 1800s as an educator and priest in the service of the Russian Orthodox Church, and for several decades was posted to churches throughout southern Alaska: Kodiak, Nuchek, Angoon, Sitka, and Juneau. He was used to rigors of “bush” living, and at times relied on travel by kayak and dog sled. He had a lifelong interest in music and was a gifted violinist and choir leader. In 1893, he married Martha Bolshanin, a Kiks.adi Tlingit from Sitka, with whom he would have six children. His Tlingit friends affectionately called him Aandanéi.

Kashevaroff became priest of Juneau's St. Nicholas Cathedral in 1913. When the Russian Revolution disrupted the Church in 1917, his salary was suspended, but he was duty bound to continue his priestly work gratis. To support his family, took on additional work as a music teacher, clerk of the weather bureau, and customs officer. Even after he was hired as a full-time Librarian and Curator, he continued his service to the church, and was eventually offered the prestigious rank of Bishop of Alaska, which he declined perhaps in part due to his interest in continuing his library and museum work (Pierce 1990:215-216)

Kashevaroff's family connections, skill in languages, and experience working within Russian and Alaska Native cultures afforded special access. His access to both cultures was beneficial to the

library and museum. Long after Alaska had been pronounced “picked clean” by collectors for the large museums, he acquired hundreds of Russian objects and publications, and thousands of Alaska Native artifacts for the library and museum. In time, thousands of objects were accumulated, and Kashevaroff wrote: “...now the territory has a museum depicting the life, art, [and] craft of the native tribes in Alaska, through the specimens exhibited in the Museum. Mere words cannot portray the scope of the interesting specimens which have been gathered from all over Alaska. One has to see the varied collection to appreciate the value of the whole.”

From the beginning, the survival of the Library and Museum depended largely on the generosity of private citizens--Alaskans who valued history and saw its preservation as a vital function of government. In 1920, Governor Thomas Riggs, Dr. Daniel S. Neuman, and Rev. Andrew Kashevaroff founded the Alaska Historical Association. The role of the Association was to support the Library and Museum in Juneau, collect artifacts, and to promote and conduct cultural activities around Alaska. Association members donated hundreds of artifacts directly, helped fund the purchase of hundreds more, and published the first catalog of the collection.

As Kashevaroff recounted:

"On the 25th of May 1920 three men met at the Office of Governor Thomas Riggs for the purpose of discussing the means of preserving and disseminating the history of Alaska. In order to carry out this idea, it was agreed that an historical association be formed. Articles of incorporation were then drawn and signed by Governor Thomas Riggs, Rev. A.P. Kashevaroff and Dr. Daniel S. Neuman. The purpose of such an organization was to gather together, acquire and preserve for the Territory of Alaska all historical, geographic, literary and economic data connected with the Territory of Alaska from its earliest history, together with that of other countries connected with early Alaskan explorations and settlement; and to diffuse the information so gathered through the medium of publications, lectures, entertainments or any other method agreed upon."

Gaining public support for the institution became critical, and the Association would provide a mechanism to build Alaska-wide support for the institution. "It must be understood," wrote Riggs, "that every act of the Association is made in the interest of the Territory as a whole." (Riggs 1921:23). The initial annual dues were two dollars, and the Alaska Daily Empire (9/2/20 p. 8) reported that "It is the hope and belief of those interested that there will be few, if any, residents of Alaska who will not join in the work contemplated." A membership of five hundred would be sufficient to support the Association's goals. But getting members from the hinterlands was challenging.

While Governor Riggs embraced the institution politically, Kashevaroff drummed up grass roots support in the form of funds as well as donated books and artifacts—and did so with the zeal of a missionary. He wrote dozens of letters to friends and acquaintances asked them to join the Association and to send in their artifacts for the museum.

Even after the museum first opened to the public in 1920, Kashevaroff continued his solicitation efforts: “We get the impression that Father Kashevaroff buttonholed everyone who attended the

opening” said museum docent Bea Shephard (1996). By 1921, 316 Alaskans had joined the Association, and many contributed artifacts and specimens as well. While the Association itself did not survive the 1920s, the museum and library flourished due to the early assistance of this organization.

Alaskans overwhelmingly accepted Kashevaroff as the territory’s leading historian: as a columnist for the Fairbanks News Miner put it in 1923:

“ Father Andrew P. Kashevaroff, Russian arch-priest, at present librarian for Alaska and curator of the Historical Museum at Juneau, in which all Alaskans are or should be deeply interested.... He is the only man the News-Miner knows the name of who is competent to speak of "Alaska," for he knows it from start to finish, personally."

Kashevaroff remained the institution’s sole employee until 1930, when he hired Josephine White as Assistant Curator—a role she would play over the next 20 years. Josie White came to Alaska in 1898 with her husband, E.J. “Stroller” White, a pioneering newspaper man. She is remembered as much for her outdoor adventures as for her instrumental efforts to document, catalog, and arrange books and artifacts. She led an energetic life, was a crack bear hunter, trapper, mountain climber, and dog musher—and once even took a lengthy sea voyage aboard a wandering iceberg.

Taking a serious approach to the study of history and ethnology, Kashevaroff held himself and others to a high standard of professionalism and accuracy. His assistance was sought by both amateur and professional scholars who needed information on Alaska. Indeed, as much of his time was spent helping others, leaving little time for his own work. His own research, focused on Tlingit culture, church history and on specific objects in the museum and library collections, remains largely unpublished, though he did edit a short Descriptive Booklet of the museum collection, and published a few articles.

Museum visitors found Kashevaroff a memorable character. Many elderly Alaskans fondly remember how he encouraged them as children to “hang out” in the old museum after school, to wander among the picturesque displays and listen to his adventurous stories. In the summers, he was on call to open the museum at any hour of the day for visiting steamship passengers, some of whom were prominent personalities themselves. Humorist Will Rogers wrote:

"Well, all I know is just what I run onto awhile back when I was messing around up in Alaska. That’s a most interesting country. I was mentioning to you one time about being in the fine museum in Juneau, the capital of Alaska. There is a little Russian man in there, he was born in Alaska before it was sold to us, Father [Kashevaroff]. Well he has made a great study of Alaskan customs, relics, languages, its history and everything, and if ever a fellow fit in a museum it’s him in this one."

Another visitor, a columnist for the Milwaukie Sentinel (5/21/60) recounted a 1930s visit:

“Our favorite refuge from the rains was the Territorial Museum, whose most interesting ‘exhibit’ was its curator, Father A.P. Kashevaroff. There was an old-world charm about

him that seemed incongruous in that lusty mining town. His dark, clerical garb accentuated his snow-white Van Dyke. He was small and retiring, but to talk with him for a minute was to feel the force of an extraordinary personality....”

"Small he was, but in my memories of him....he was anything but retiring," remembers historian Robert DeArmond. Judging from his letters and numerous accounts of his activities published in Alaskan newspapers, he was a passionate and energetic force for both the church and the library and museum.