

Southeast History: Life and Times of Charles Baronovich

By Pat Roppel – *Capital City Weekly*

Charles Vincent Baronovich came to my attention years ago when I started researching a mine in Karta Bay. As I continued to research, I found many more things about this man who pioneered the mining and saltery industries in the 1870s. In addition, this independent individual enlightened me about episodes of illegal activities in early Southeast Alaska.

Baronovich is generally referred to as a Slav or Austrian. It is believed he was a native of Dalmatia, Croatia, at that time part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. As a young man, Baronovich came to America and soon joined the transient mining population anxious to find new bonanzas. First, it was California that fired his enthusiasm. Then in the early 1860s, he was among the first to head north, lured by the stampede up the Fraser River to the Cariboo and Cassiar gold fields of British Columbia.



Charles Vincent Baronovich is pictured with his wife, Mary, and several of their children.

When Baronovich arrived in Alaska, it would have still been under Russian rule. It is likely that he would have arrived via the Stikine River; landing in what today is Wrangell.

Baronovich ended up in Karta Bay. This part of Kasaan Bay on eastern Prince of Wales Island was home to the northernmost tribe of the Haida, who originally migrated from the Queen Charlotte Islands in British Columbia.

Although there had never been a trading post in Karta Bay, the Natives were experienced traders. From as far back as 1792 or maybe earlier, ships had traded at the southern end of Prince of Wales Island at Kaigani, where Alaskan Haidas would paddle canoes filled with peltries to trade. Since the Kasaan Haidas were a considerable distance from Kaigani, they welcomed Baronovich to their village.

In time, Baronovich married a woman named Mary, one of the daughters of Chief Skowl, the ruler of Skowl and Kasaan Bays. As an integral part of the tribe, Baronovich kept two households at Old Kasaan, not to be confused with the present village of Kasaan, which is in a different location. Baronovich's larger home, built in typical Haida style, was run by his wife in the tribal custom, with several families living together. Since Baronovich was not accustomed to this communal fashion, he built for his immediate family a smaller home of logs and rough-hewn planks with partitioned rooms.

Sources indicate that the couple had at least nine children, and maybe as many as 14. The youngest, F.J. "Joe" of Ketchikan, went on to serve a term in the Alaska House of Representatives in 1933-36. Emma married Tom Case of Wrangell.

Another daughter, Cecilia, is described by contemporary author Matt Hawthorne; his memoirs describe Cecilia working at New Kasaan's cannery when it first started. She attended Carlisle Indian School and eventually married someone named Balenti, a name I found connected with the Carlisle school.

A son, Nick, had a gravel business in Ketchikan for many years. Caroline, reputedly the oldest, married Paul Young of New Kasaan; another was Nellie. Another child died as a youth.

Baronovich had a passion for fine weapons and metal work. At one time he possessed many arms that were, even at that time, considered worthy of a museum. Often he would lovingly polish the inlays, rub down the stocks and clean the working parts to his guns. One day, to his horror, as he was cleaning his gun it discharged, and he accidentally killed one of his children.

The Haida, who had taken him into their midst, viewed this deed by their laws – a life for a life. Chief Skowl was asked to take Baronovich's life in punishment, but the chief defended his son-in-law from the charge, declaring the shooting an accident. Baronovich was freed by he was ordered to make restitution of one hundred Hudson's Bay blankets to his wife's clan.

After Baronovich's death, Mrs. Baronovich sold his guns, one by one, to the various officers who visited Baronovich Fisheries at Karta Bay. Among his treasures was a pair of dueling pistols covered with delicate engravings and inlays. These passed into the hands of a U.S. Navy officer. Another officer purchased Baronovich's ancient double-barreled flintlock shotgun that had the barrels and stock richly damascened with silver and gold. This officer reportedly preferred this fowling piece made by Gunnell of London over the latest Remington of the time.

Years ago, my husband, Frank, and I visited the site of Baronovich's saltery in Karta Bay. In the brush near remains of a log cabin foundation, we saw a gleam of metal in the moss. It proved to be a barrel from a small pistol with engraving on the side. When I look at it on my windowsill, I like to think it belonged to Baronovich.

This is the first of a four-part series about Charles Baronovich.

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Southeast History: The liquor smuggler

By Pat Roppel – *Capital City Weekly*

Editor's note: This is the second installment in a four-part series about Charles Vincent Baronovich. In last week's issue, we learned about how Baronovich arrived in Alaska, married the daughter of Chief Skowl of a village in Polk Inlet and started a salmon saltery in Karta Bay. He also hunted and traded fur seals out of Kodiak. We continue his story when he decided to smuggle liquor to Alaska where it was illegal.

Baronovich sold most of his furs in Canada at Fort Simpson, near Prince Rupert, once Alaska became a U.S possession in 1867. No longer was it necessary to make the extended trip to Kodiak to purchase supplies and trade goods.



Buildings at Baronovich's saltery were searched by the U.S. Revenue Service for smuggled liquor.

It was through this change of ports that Baronovich became involved with smuggling. Canada possessed all the things desired by Alaska Natives, items they had become accustomed by trading with the Hudson's Bay Company (HBC).

Liquor was in great demand. Back in 1844, the Russians and HBC had signed an agreement to prohibit the sale of liquor at all trading posts north of 50 degrees latitude. Alaska remained bon dry until 1898, although the ban to the Native population remained in effect until after World War I.

There are always those who break the law, and it was the fur traders who had the best chances to purchase Canadian liquor. Baronovich was a likely suspect for officials to watch for liquor smuggling.

Baronovich is perhaps best remembered because of his interactions with a U.S. Revenue Service commander, whom smugglers seldom baffled. The commander brought his vessel into Karta Bay and dropped anchor near Baronovich's saltery. Baronovich undoubtedly knew what to expect; he had been subjected before to unexpected searches.

The armed patrol came ashore with the commander. Baronovich, the old Slav, received them courteously without showing apprehension. The commander gave a formal announcement for the purpose of the visit.

Baronovich nodded his agreement, bid them to search the entire premises and asked leave to take a nap as they did so. But the commander was not fooled. He placed a watch on the trader, informing the sailors that Baronovich had better not get out of their sight.

Bringing more men ashore, the men and officers searched the entire area. In each building, every corner and hole was pried, poked and peered into for false partitions, secret cellars and dark cubbyholes. The saltery, the packing house with its barrels, the Indian bark huts, the tents and Baronovich's dwellings all revealed nothing. Even the canoes on the beach did not escape the search.

The men followed every trail and broken pathway into the woods, looking for signs of fresh dirt where the contraband could have been buried. Every tree, fallen log and stump was tapped to determine if it was hollow.

While this went on, the commander sent several men out in a skiff. Their orders were to row back and forth across the harbor to see if any whiskey was anchored out there. The men were soon exhausted and had given up hope of unearthing any smuggled goods. They were convinced that there truly was no liquor near Baronovich's trading post.

Back at Baronovich's home, the guard informed their commander that the old gent had passed the afternoon dozing and smoking beside the fire. Having himself checked occasionally, the commander was certain the trader had not left his chair.

An apology for the inconvenience of the search was made, and Baronovich invited the men to dine with him. Before serving the meal prepared by the Native women, Baronovich excused himself long enough to put on a white shirt and black frock coat. Then, at the head of the table, he played the congenial host to the commander and his officers.

At the end of the meal, the men sat back in their chairs exclaiming about the feast. "But the best is yet to come," the host announced. Baronovich disappeared for a few moments and then placed a full bottle of whiskey in front of each man. Returning to the table, the wily old trader poured a glass from his bottle and lifted it to propose a toast to the U.S. Revenue Service and its commander.

A great silence ensued as the officers waited to see what their superior officer would do. The commander slowly tipped the bottle, watching the amber fluid flow into his glass, took an appreciative sniff, sportingly arose and accepted the toast.

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Charles Baronovich's continued smuggling troubles

By Pat Roppel – *Capital City Weekly*

The episode with the U.S. Revenue Service detailed in a recent column was not Baronovich's closest brush with the law. Thomas McCulley, a cooper or barrel maker, made a sworn statement before the Wrangell Collector of Customs charging Baronovich with smuggling. Baronovich owed McCulley wages and apparently did not realize the depth of McCulley's determination to get even. The statement read: "From March 12, 1875, Charles Baronovich brought or caused to be brought from Port Lapwai in British Columbia to his store in Karta Bay, a lot of English-made blankets, 60 more or less. On August 1, 1875, Charles Baronovich brought or caused to be brought, from Fort Simpson to his store, a canoe load of hard bread flour, with said cargo consisting of 10 sacks of flour, 4 boxes of hard bread [pilot bread] and a lot of English blankets, not less than 100 in number. About September 1, 1875, Baronovich brought from Port Simpson [near old Metlakatla, B.C.] to his store 60 English blankets, and I [Thomas McCulley] know the exact number of the blankets as they were wet from the voyage, and I counted them as they were exposed to dry. I am less positive as to the precise dates, as I made no memorandum at the time, but all articles enumerated were brought from Port Simpson while I was employed by Baronovich. I am positive the U.S. import duty was not paid by him or any persons upon any of the blankets, hard bread or flour, and Baronovich frequently informed me that the duties were not paid, and the fact of importation was concealed from the Customs Officers. Baronovich often remarked to me that a man was a fool to pay duties in Alaska as long as they could just as readily be smuggled and so much saved."



Mary Baronovich and some of her children on the porch of her Karta Bay home, circa 1885.

The Native people around Baronovich's trading post in Karta Bay desired Hudson's Bay (or English) blankets over any other United States product. To purchase blankets Natives were to paddle canoes for miles over sometimes turbulent water to Port Simpson. This prompted Baronovich's desire to bring blankets to the Haida and Tlingit people living on the east coast of Prince of Wales Island and others who learned he had blankets and hard tack. Very early, English and Yankee traders introduced the Natives to hard tack that was shipped in wooden boxes or barrels. In turn, the Natives traded deer hides and furs that were sent south by Baronovich on coastal steamers.

When, in 1879, the U.S. Customs Officer, William Gouverneur Morris, arrived in Sitka to take up his duties, he found that Baronovich had paid the wages, and McCulley no longer wished to press charges. Morris suspected the affidavit was made to compel the settlement than for "real zeal for the welfare of public service." Nevertheless, Morris traveled to Karta Bay from Sitka to

read the charges to the trader, “which he indignantly denied interlarding his conversation in broken English with oaths. The antecedents and previous character of this man [Baronovich] are bad,” Morris added. He went on to report, “and I have no doubt that he has been a systematic smuggler for years. I have made a thorough examination of his store and stock of goods on hand and no evidence of smuggling was found.” Those of us who read about the Revenue Cutter captain’s experience in my last column are not surprised at the outcome of the search!

Morris learned that “He has sold nothing to speak of for two years: his fishery has been closed and has done no business of any kind worth mentioning. He is deeply in debt and very poor. In addition to this, the man is so badly paralyzed that he is a helpless cripple. His system is so broken that, in my opinion, he cannot live long... His sands of life are nearly run out and no longer will his pirate craft thread the waters of Karta Bay.”

Prosecution required transporting the smuggler to Port Townsend, WA, and Morris doubted the elderly man could survive such a trip. The charges were dismissed.

Morris’ premonition proved true. Charles Vincent Baronovich died later that year of 1879 aboard a coastal steamship taking him for medical help in Victoria, B.C. He is buried in that city. After his death, the trading post closed. The saltery remained and, for a time, was a profitable business for his widow Mary and sons, who leased it to various operators.

This proved, however, not to be the end of shenanigans at the Karta Bay salmon saltery.

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Southeast History: The demise of the Baronovich Saltery

By Pat Roppel – *Capital City Weekly*

In past columns, we learned about Charles Vincent Baronovich, pioneer at Kasaan Bay and how he married the daughter of Chief Skowal, started a trading post and smuggled liquor and other items from Canada.

After Charles V. Baronovich passed away in 1879, his sons and widow leased out the saltery. Thus, steamers continued to stop at Karta Bay to pick up barrels of salt salmon. In 1883, Eliza Ruhamah Scidmore, a journalist for the *St. Louis Globe-Democrat*, in the ship *Idaho*, described such a stop. She found: "... one little gap in the shores at last gave us a sight of the trader's store, the long row of lichen- and moss-covered sheds of the fisheries with the usual cluster of bark houses and tents above a shelving beach strewn with narrow black canoes. A group of Indians gathered on shore, their gay blankets, dresses and cotton kerchiefs, rubber boots and aprons, flannel shirts and big hats were heroic adjuncts to the picturesque and out-of-the way scene."

Scidmore went on: "The widow Baronovich still lives here, unwilling to leave this peaceful sunny nook in the mountains, but the fishery is now leased by a ship captain, who has taken away the fine flavor of piracy and smuggling and substituting a regime of system, enterprise, and eternal cleanliness."

Little did Scidmore suspect that this ship captain, the one that extended such courtesies to the journalist onboard the *Idaho*, had come to the conclusion if Baronovich could get away with smuggling in this remote place, he, James Carroll, could do the same.

The procedure was to smuggle opium from British Columbia to the saltery in Karta Bay, where it was packed in barrels and stored beside identical barrels of salt fish in the packinghouse. On the first chance, it was taken aboard the steamer, making its way to Port Townsend and the Puget Sound for distribution – which was highly illegal.

Through an informant, the collector of customs for the District of Puget Sound got wind of this and in 1886 the U.S. Revenue Cutter *Oliver Wolcott* seized the *Idaho*, the same ship Scidmore had been in. Found aboard was opium valued at \$48,000. Since the steamer's master had leased the Karta Bay saltery, a party from *Wolcott* was sent north to search the premises. This time the searchers had more success than the commander and his men had with Baronovich. Eleven barrels of opium were found.

The saltery, after this brief return to notoriety, settled down to a peaceful existence. The widow Baronovich was reported to have married one of her own tribe, and by 1889 had rented the saltery to the Cutting Packing Company that operated a cannery at Loring near Ketchikan. For



The Baronovich home and saltery, circa 1885.

this she received \$300 a year and her relatives were paid \$2 a day to keep a barricade across the Karta River so no fish could go up. The fish would school in salt water at the base of the wooden rack, making them easy to catch. The lease was relinquished in 1893 when Cutting Packing Company joined the Alaska Packers Association.

The Baronovich sons began to run the saltery themselves. They packed salmon bellies, a barreled delicacy. This saved only the fattest and most tender portions of the rich salmon. The remainder of the fish was thrown away with the theory that “this could hardly be called waste, as the belly is the best part and the fish swarm in millions.” The federal government in 1906 outlawed this custom.

By 1900 the Great Northern Fish Company, capitalized by Puget Sound and Columbia River financiers, rented the saltery to salt chums or dog salmon for a Japanese market. This company folded after a year, and there is no indication that the saltery operated again.

After the turn of the century the last of Baronovich’s enterprises was abandoned. As a result of a smallpox epidemic, the federal government moved the tribe from their homes in Old Kasaan (Skowl Bay on east Prince of Wales Island) where Baronovich had spent most of his winters. In effect, the government condemned the old way of living, urging the families to build clean, new homes like the white man’s at a new location.

This new village was about a half mile north of a copper claim Baronovich had made soon after he arrived at Kasaan Bay. This was located on the Kasaan Peninsula. Here the Kasaan Bay Mining Company constructed a large salmon cannery, bunkhouses, and sawmill in 1900. An attempt to put the old mining prospect into production was made, but was unsuccessful. Through the urging of this company, the Natives – including Baronovich’s descendants – agreed to make New Kasaan their permanent village.

As Baronovich’s Fisheries fell in to oblivion, so did the memory of that old gent who started it all. His exploits, adventures and oddities are now nearly forgotten despite the fact that he was father to both the salmon preserving and lode mining businesses in Southeast Alaska.

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