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The New Archangel (Sitka) Magnetic Observatory: Archival Materials of Mid-19th Century

Abstract

The article is based on archival materials on the activity of the New Archangel (Sitka) Magnetic

Observatory, which are being introduced into scientific use. The sources (materials of official correspondence, registers of scientific instruments, texts of contracts, observation dairies) have been identified in the Russian State Archive of the Navy (RGA VMF) and in the Russian State Historical Archive. The observatory was established as a part of the worldwide net of observation stations created in the 1840s. It was a logical continuation of A. von Humboldt's experiments in syntonical registration of angle and force elements of geomagnetism. The main initiator of Russian participation in this international project was academic A. Kupfer strongly supported by the minister of finance E. F. Kankrin and other high-level officials, mining engineers, businessmen, representatives of army and Navy commanders. The New Archangel Magnetic Observatory faced all the difficulties common for Russian America: stuff shortage, problems with supply of food, scientific instruments, books, journals, and correspondence. Nevertheless, it worked over twenty years. The most Eastern observation station of the Russian Empire played an important role in the development of sciences in Russia and worldwide. Systematic observations from different points of the planet paved way to solving one of the most important navigation problems of the period: determination of terrestrial coordinates in open sea using magnetic instruments, without astronomical methods and devices. Revealed and analyzed documents contain valuable data on the details of the observatory organization, its instruments and devices, its staff members. Original project was modest in its terms and research objects. First two navigators sent from St. Petersburg to New Archangel spent there seven years instead of the planned three. Besides magnetic, they took systematic meteorological observations, made conclusions on local climate and perspectives of agriculture development. Permanent observatory staff included director, two assistants from lower ranks; periodically, they had help from mechanic and clock-master sent there from St. Petersburg by the Russian-American Company. Collected data became a valuable contribution to the development not only of geomagnetism, but also of meteorology, climatology, geography, and astronomy.

Keywords

Historical sources, Russian America, geomagnetic observation, history of sciences, international research project, meteorology, geography, astronomy.

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