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Charte von dem Meer von Kamtschatka mit Capt. Ios. Billings und Mart. Sauers Reise Routen Gezeichnet von Ferd. Gotze. . . . 1803 (Russian Alaska & NE Coast of Asia)

Stock#: 27168
Map Maker: Land Industrie Comptoirs
Date: 1803
Place: Weimar
Color: Outline Color
Condition: VG
Size: 17 x 17 inches
Price: SOLD



Description:

Extremely rare map of Alaska and the contiguous regions of Russia, etc. illustrating the explorations of Joseph Billings, as reported by his assistant Martin Sauer, under the commission of Catherine the Great and the Russian Imperial Navy.

Joseph Billings was born in England in about 1758. He enlisted in the Royal Navy on April 8, 1776 as an able seaman and joined the *Discovery* which, with the *Resolution*, was sailing under James Cook's command for the north Pacific. In the course of the voyage, during which Billings became an astronomer's assistant, the expedition was at Nootka Sound (B.C.) from 29 March to 26 April 1778, and subsequently visited Alaska, the Bering Sea, the Kamchatka peninsula, and the Portuguese port and depot of Macao (near Canton, People's Republic of China). Billings was still an able seaman when he was transferred to the *Resolution* in September 1779, but he was promoted warrant officer upon the expedition's return to England in October 1780.

In 1783, Billings made application to enter the Imperial Russian Navy. His Russian service record shows him as a lieutenant from 1 Jan. 1783, but he was probably not in Russia until October at the earliest. At that time the Empress Catherine and her advisers were planning explorations of the extreme northeastern parts of her dominion, and Billings, as Cook's former "companion," appeared a suitable choice as a leader. In August 1785, spurred by news that the Comte de Lapérouse [Galaup*] had commenced his exploratory voyage, Catherine formally commissioned Billings to command "an expedition . . . for bringing to perfection the knowledge acquired under her glorious reign, of the seas lying between the continent of



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Siberia and the opposite coast of America." Billings was also to report on the fur trade in Alaska and to claim for Russia territory not previously discovered by any European power.

Billings set out from St Petersburg (Leningrad) in October 1785. In his travels eastwards through Russia he met his former shipmate, the New Englander John Ledyard; he would have enlisted him, but Ledyard was arrested as a French spy. Captain James Burney, who knew them both from the voyage with Cook, recorded later in a book on Russian northeastern exploration that Catherine should have jailed Billings and given his commission to Ledyard. Travel overland to the east coast and preparations there took a great deal of time, and it was not until the summer of 1789 that Billings made his first attempt to set out to sea; when one of his two ships succumbed to a storm he went only as far as Petropavlovsk (Petropavlovsk-Kamchatskii) to winter over.

In May 1790, the lost ship replaced, the expedition finally set sail and, moving up the Aleutian chain, landed on Unalaska Island on 3 June. The ships went as far as Prince William Sound before turning back toward the Kamchatka peninsula to seek winter quarters. During the stormy return voyage Billings's deficiencies as a navigator, combined with his arrogance and stubbornness, became increasingly apparent. In June 1791, Billings's ship was again in the Aleutians, but Billings decided to abandon further exploration of America for his other commissioned task: to map the northeastern Russian coastline. Disappointment was general, but, as his secretary Martin Sauer wrote, "the representations of every officer who had hitherto presumed to have an opinion, were always treated by the Commander with petulant and illiberal retorts." At St Lawrence Bay (Guba Sv. Lavrentiya) on the Chukotsk peninsula Billings put his plans into effect. He led a survey party overland to the northwestward, but it suffered starvation and ambush and produced little of value; meanwhile the vessel, commanded by the expedition's surveyor, Gavriil Andreevich Sarychev, went back to explore the Aleutians.

The expedition was largely reunited at last in January 1794 at Yakutsk, and it returned to St Petersburg in March, having added little in its nine years to geographical knowledge of the north Pacific littoral. Nevertheless, reports of the expedition brought to light the Alaskan natives' "abject slavery" to Russian traders, and possibly led to improvements in their circumstances, which George Vancouver* was to observe when he visited an Alaskan trading post. In 1790 Billings had been in communication with the Spaniard Salvador Fidalgo near Kodiak, but this encounter of rival imperial interests had no immediate political consequences owing to Spanish preoccupation with the Nootka Sound controversy [see James Colnett; Esteban José Martínez*], which was to undermine Spain's claims to all the northwest coast of America. Valuable charts of the north Pacific were compiled by Sarychev; a later explorer, Admiral Ivan Fedorovich Kruzenshtern, in describing these hydrographic accomplishments tended to praise Sarychev at the expense of Billings.



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In 1796 Billings was transferred to the fleet in the Black Sea, where he conducted coastal surveys. In 1799, he published his findings in an atlas which surpassed in accuracy and completeness anything previously available. In November of that year he was retired on full pension with the rank of captain-commodore. He died in 1806, leaving an uncertain record of achievement in Arctic and north Pacific discovery, but clearly having aided the process whereby Russian interests in Alaska were expanded, consolidated, and eventually regulated.

Detailed Condition:

Minor soiling. Narrow lower left margin, with a bit of additional staining and some minor abrasions along the edge of the map