

INTRODUCTION.

When the transfer of the territory of Alaska to the United States was consummated, few Americans were aware that we had acquired a river which, rising far in the interior and draining a vast area, flows two thousand miles in its course to the sea. The Yukon is the largest and longest stream emptying on the western coast of the American continent, and it may well be regarded as one of the great rivers of the world.

This mighty stream, the region which it waters, and the tribes which inhabit its banks, will be the subjects of subsequent chapters. In these introductory pages I propose to give, as briefly as may be, a history of the explorations which have been made in this portion of the new Territory; to indicate the sources of information which exist concerning it; to explain the character and scope of the duty with which I have been honored; and, finally, to describe the system which has been followed in the preparation of this report.

The coast of Russian America and the islands of the Aleutian Archipelago have been well examined by both Russian and English navigators. The interior of Alaska is, however, comparatively unknown. In the year 1842 Lieutenant Zagoskin, of the Russian navy, visited, under the direction of the Russian government, the region of the Kvichpak (Yukon) River and made extensive explorations, remaining in the country about two years. He afterwards published a book (which I believe has been translated into German) containing the results of his observations. This book I have not been able to obtain, and consequently the little I have gathered concerning Lieutenant Zagoskin's explorations has been derived entirely from secondary sources. He traveled from the mouth of the river to a point a little above Nulato, the most eastern post of the Russian company, a distance from the sea of about six hundred miles. His book was almost the only authority concerning the river, until, in the year 1855, the Western Union Telegraph Company commenced explorations for an overland telegraph route, in order, by a cable crossing Behring Strait, to connect the eastern and western hemispheres. This enterprising company employed several hundred explorers on both sides of the Pacific; and their explorations in the northern section of Russian America have added greatly to our knowledge of this part of the continent.

It is said that the honor of having made the first journey from the western coast to Fort Yukon belongs to Ivan Simonsen Lukeen, an employé of the Russian company at St. Michael's, who succeeded in reaching the fort in the summer of 1863; but the information thus obtained was not made public. This journey was next made, in the summer of 1866, by Messrs. Ketchum and Labarge, of the telegraph company. Up to this time the Yukon River of the English and the Kvichpak River of the Russians had been supposed to be distinct streams; and they are represented on quite recent maps, the former emptying into the Arctic Ocean and the latter into Norton Sound. From this exploration we first learn that they are one and the same stream.

In the winter of 1866-'67, these adventurous travelers again made their