A RESTORER'S CONCERNS ABOUT THE CIVIL WAR TOMBSTONES REPLACED AT MARE ISLAND

As a professional fine arts restorer, and an historian of Russian Naval History as pertains to their presence in California during the 19th century, I am very concerned about last year's replacement of six Civil War tombstones of Russian sailors in the Mare Island cemetery.

My concerns are two fold: the proper care of historic resources and the accurate representation of their historic context. In this I am in complete agreement with the Secretary of Interior's Guidelines, and with the historic preservationists who wish to see the original three Russian sailor's gravestones from 1863 restored and returned to their original places, and the three later "Russian Sailor" gravestones in the U.S. Civil War style to their original places.

The City of Vallejo as caretaker for this National Historic Landmark, have already adopted the Secretary of Interior's Guidelines for Historic Resources and incorporated these guidelines as the standard for its "Architectural Heritage and Historic Preservation Ordinance".

While it is clear that the parties involved in the removal and replacement of the six Russian grave stones in 1995 and 2010 had neither adhered to these standards nor perhaps had even been aware of their intent, their actions damaged not only the historic artifacts themselves in their unauthorized removal, but damaged the historical integrity of the entire cemetery with the replacement grave stones that are neither of the right period or material.

The reasons for the six stones removal were, like the lack of awareness of professional standards for historic preservation by the parties which undertook their replacement, flawed by the absence of sound historical research which would have prevented the replacement of original artifacts with "interpretations" from a different century.

A restorer's advice at this point also would have proved invaluable.
No professional restorer that I am aware of would knowingly introduce anachronistic elements into a restoration. As an example, I would cite the numerous Civil War monuments throughout the country which employ side-arms in their design; should such a monument be damaged and require the restoration of a hand holding such a side-arm, to restore the 1851 revolver (illustration 1) with a 1900 automatic pistol (illustration 2) would be laughably incompetent!

Illustration 1: Colt 1851 Navy Revolver

Illustration 2: Model 1900 Colt Automatic pistol
Similarly, if a painting of the Russian Squadron's visit to Mare Island in 1863 were to arrive in a restorer's studio for the restoration of a missing section which involved the flagship BOGATYR,

Illustration 3: Russian Bogatyr class Steam Corvette, 1863

and the restorer instead substituted the BOGATYR from 1904

Illustration 4: Russian Cruiser Bogatyr, 1904

his or her credibility among their colleagues in the fields of history and art would be forever disgraced.
An awareness of the enormous changes in design and technology during this 40 year period (1863-1904) can easily be applied to a similar time frame in the 20th century; should anyone assume that the Wright flyer of 1903 would be a good representative of aviation's advancement by 1944, a jet aircraft would immediately point out the anachronism.

The Russian Consulate's position paper of September, 2010, stated; "In considering replacements for the gravestones for the Russian sailors from 1863, we turned to gravestones that were over 100-years old, gravestones already installed in the Mare Island Cemetery. These were from 1904/1905, and were for two Russian sailors from HMS Lena which was quarantined at Mare Island during most of the Russo-Japanese War. Those stones were more traditional for Orthodox Christian Russian Sailors, sturdier to prevent deterioration over time, and far more difficult to vandalize, as appears to be what has been happening to many gravestones in the cemetery over the past several years."

To presume that because the LENA's gravestones were over "100 years old" that they were appropriate to represent gravestones that were from a previous century, is evidence of the lack of an historian or a restorer's advice being sought in the matter of gravestone design appropriate for the 1863 period.

An historian could have further advised the Consulate that their statement that "Russians, especially in the 19th century, always put crosses on the graves of their dead, never the kind of standard American obelisks that were in place on the graves of six Russian sailors." is obviously contradicted by the appearance of the three original 1863 Russian gravestones that were removed in 1995, and by accounts of historic visits to San Francisco in 1825 by Russian Naval ships, who record one of their officers erecting a "pyramid" over the grave of one of their buried officers. There was no cross mentioned. In fact the presumption of any kind of singular tradition concerning Russian funerary monuments can be contradicted not only in the Russian Hill cemetery in San Francisco (the earliest Russian cemetery in California) but in the historic descriptions of the Fort Ross cemetery, where descriptions of pyramids (as well as crosses) are also found.
The original Russian gravestones from 1863 more closely resemble the "Russian Sailor" grave markers placed over the graves of the three unidentified Russian sailors after 1896 than do the recent cross-topped replacements.

The original 1863 stones identifying three Russian sailors from Admiral Popov's squadron

The 1896 stones provided by the U.S. Navy over the graves of three unidentified Russian Sailors
Had a restorer, landscape architect and historian been initially consulted by the parties involved in the removal and replacement of the Russian gravestones, he or she would surely have pointed out that the style and dimension of the 1904 type stones are entirely out of place and character to the oldest section of the Mare Island cemetery, where all the grave markers in this section date to the mid to late 19th century. The large cruciform monuments bear no similarity to any other markers in this section. Where the LENA's markers are, in the section where 20th century burials are found, there are numerous other examples of cross-topped monuments. There are none in the oldest section, where the original Russian markers from 1863 were located before removal in 1995.

John Middleton
Honoured Lieutenant of the Russian Navy
Cavalier of the Order of Friendship of the Russian Federation
Foreign Member, Russian Academy of Science, Centre for Research on Russian-America and Russian-American Relations
Director of Middleton-Tidwell Art Conservation