

Preface

The Russian State Archives of the Navy (the RSAN) are one of the oldest national archives, a repository for the unique documents of the 17th – 20th centuries.

Documents related to the history of the nation's navy from the time of its foundation by Peter I, the great reformer of Russia, until the beginning of the Great Patriotic War, are stored in its archives.

It should be noted that Russia's 300 year-long Naval history has been closely connected to the city that emerged on the banks of the Neva – the grand project of Emperor Peter I. The city named after St. Peter is rightly considered as the naval capital of our Fatherland.

St. Petersburg started out as a fortified town and chief naval base. Its appearance was also influenced by the city's role as the “window to the West”, which opened the vast empire internationally.

This explains why the RSAN possesses such a huge amount of materials related to the history of designing and building St. Petersburg. The collection of plans of the metropolitan city occupies a special place within the mass of archival documents.

The plans of St. Petersburg are of exceptional interest. They give a full idea of the process of its creation, and the gradual changes in its borders and appearance over the centuries.

The collection of the 18th-century city plans is stored in three large archival vaults: “The Chief Engineering Administration” (f. 31), “Atlases, Maps and Charts of the Navy's Central Cartography Production” (f. 1331) and “Construction Designs” (f. 326).

The Axonometric Plan of St. Petersburg (1765–1773) is known historically as “The Plan of Saint-Hilaire, Sokolov, Gorikhvostov” who were its creators. It is an invaluable memorial to the history and culture of St. Petersburg. This unique masterpiece of national 18th-century cartographic art is matchless in the world. The plan turned out to be a unique attempt to feature the general view of the capital of Russia, as well as the appearance of the city as it had been formed by the mid-1760s, axonometrically.

Some words should be said about the history of this precious document. In the second half of the 18th century the position of the Russian State grew stronger, its international prestige was raised, which, in turn, urgently demanded the due representation of the capital's appearance.

This task was entrusted to the Commission for Masonry Construction in St. Petersburg and Moscow. It was established in December 1762 by the decree of Catherine II. The architectural department of the Commission was led by the talented architect Alexey Kvasov.

The history of “The Plan of Saint-Hilaire” is closely connected to the activities of the Commission established. The plan was devised to feature the whole city so that the Commission could get a real picture of the building conditions in St. Petersburg by the time they began the work on re-planning the city.

In 1764, I. I. Betskoy, President of the Academy of Arts and a member of the Commission, showed Catherine II “The Perspective Views” of the Hague, created by the French cartographer, mathematician and graphic artist Pierre Antoine de Saint-Hilaire. At the same time, I. I. Betskoy informed the Empress about Saint-Hilaire's intention to make a similar plan of St. Petersburg. The Empress approved the project, which was followed by her order to commence work on it.

In October 1764, I. I. Betskoy submitted a memorandum to the Commission informing it of Catherine II's approval of Saint-Hilaire's proposal and her order to include a scientist in the Commission to create an axonometric plan of St. Petersburg. This memorandum was supplemented by Saint-Hilaire's report entitled “The Project of How to Make a Geometrical and Vertical Plan of the City of St. Petersburg”. According to the author's idea, the plan was to be not a map but a graphical picture of the city, with every building and main feature shown in it.

Rivers, canals, embankments, bridges, all the streets, and all the squares of the city were to be shown in the plan. This detailed representation required great accuracy of image and, correspondingly, a large

scale of five sazhen to one decimetre. The resulting plan was to be about 590 square metres in size. Saint-Hilaire asked for 15 young men experienced “in architectural drawing” to do the job, Gorikhvostov being singled out as “quite a skilled one”.

The first surveys of the plan were started immediately after the submission of Saint-Hilaire’s report to the Commission. In November 1764, at Saint-Hilaire’s urgent request, Ivan Sokolov, who later supervised the work on the plan, was appointed his assistant.

In February 1765, the Commission submitted to Catherine II their report with detailed listing of all the conditions needed for “making up a plan with facades”. The Empress approved of the report.

The money needed for carrying out the work was allotted from the “Cabinet funds”. By the spring of 1765, Saint-Hilaire’s team was decided. Ten Academy of Arts students and ten “soldiers’ children” for “carrying the tools” were assigned to him.

Work on the axonometric plan of St. Petersburg can be divided into two main stages: from 1765 till 1768 it was performed under the guidance of P. Saint-Hilaire, from 1768 till 1773 it was directed by I. Sokolov.

The progress, however, was slow due to the immensity and complexity of the task. In May 1768 the Commission reported to Catherine II that it was impossible to have the work finished within the term approved and asked to have their funding extended for another three years. The Empress gave her consent.

In June 1768, Saint-Hilaire turned in his written resignation “on the grounds of quite poor health” and was dismissed.

After Saint-Hilaire’s resignation the general direction of the work was passed on to A. Kvasov, the chief architect of the Commission. But it was I. Sokolov who was entrusted with the direct supervision of the work. Graphic materials in the Archives prove that many of the sheets were made by Sokolov and his assistants.

Unfortunately, at the end of 1773, work on the plan stopped never to be resumed. Thus, the grand enterprise remained incomplete; still the Commission managed to accomplish a great deal.

The creators of the plan took measurements and drew the buildings of the main districts of the city: Vasilievsky Island, and the left bank (the area between the coast of the Gulf of Finland, the Neva and the Fontanka). St. Petersburg Island was also drawn but, unfortunately, these drawings have not survived.

The Axonometric Plan of St. Petersburg (1765–1773) is the most valuable source of information regarding the history of the city on the Neva. It has frequently been used by researchers, historians, and regional studies and restoration specialists. This document can be undoubtedly considered as outstanding evidence of the highly developed Russian architecture, cartography and art of the 18th century.

This unique historical and cultural document, however, has not yet been published, except for several small fragments.

The publication of “Saint-Hilaire’s Plan” by RSAN and Kriga Publishers is an important and timely undertaking on the eve of the tricentenary of St. Petersburg.

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