

12-14-1871

Fur-seal fisheries, Alaska. Letter from the Secretary of the Treasury, transmitting copy of report of the special agent in charge of the fur-seal fisheries at the islands of St. Paul and St. George, Alaska

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#### Recommended Citation

H.R. Exec. Doc. No. 20, 42nd Cong., 2nd Sess. (1871)

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FUR-SEAL FISHERIES, ALASKA.

LETTER

FROM

THE SECRETARY OF THE TREASURY,

TRANSMITTING

*Copy of report of the special agent in charge of the fur-seal fisheries at the islands of St. Paul and St. George, Alaska.*

DECEMBER 14, 1871.—Referred to the Committee on Commerce and ordered to be printed.

TREASURY DEPARTMENT,  
*Office of the Secretary, December 11, 1871.*

SIR: I have the honor to transmit a copy of a report made by Mr. Charles Bryant, special agent in charge of the fur-seal fisheries at the islands of St. Paul and St. George, Alaska, dated November 10, 1871; and a copy of a letter of instructions written by Mr. Bryant to Samuel Falconer, esq., special agent in charge of the fishery at the island of St. George, dated August 1, 1871; also a copy of a report made by Mr. Falconer to Mr. Bryant, dated August 3, 1871.

Very respectfully,

GEO. S. BOUTWELL,  
*Secretary.*

Hon. JAMES G. BLAINE,  
*Speaker National House of Representatives, Washington, D. C.*

HEADQUARTERS SPECIAL AGENCY,  
*St. Paul's Island, Alaska, August 1, 1871.*

SIR: You are hereby instructed to see that the laws of the United States concerning the seal fishery under the contract with the Alaska Commercial Company are observed; that the natives are protected in their rights; and, in general, you will perform all those acts which shall appear to be necessary for the interests of the United States in that island, and report all facts in connection therewith at these headquarters.

CHARLES BRYANT,  
*Special Agent Treasury Department.*

SAMUEL FALCONER, Esq.,  
*St. George's Island.*

SPECIAL AGENT'S OFFICE,  
*St. George's Island, August 3, 1871.*

SIR: I have the honor to report the arrival of the steamer Alexander at this island on the 2d instant, bringing a cargo of all needed supplies for the coming winter.

Since the date of my last report, May 14, 1871, the harmonious relations heretofore existing between the natives and the Government and company have continued uninterrupted, the natives having worked faithfully during the past two months in securing skins and provisions for their sustenance next winter; and I am happy to state that, with the co-operation of the company's agent, Mr. Brown, I have succeeded in so far restricting the quantity of spirituous liquor brewed by them from their sugar and flour rations that no intoxication has been manifest.

The number of skins secured to this date amounts to about 19,000, of which some 17,000 of this year's catch and 3,000 of last year's will be at present shipped per Alexander as per certificates herewith inclosed.

Please find also inclosed certificates for 20 cords of wood turned over to the natives by the company for their use in accordance with the terms of the lease, and for a full supply of salmon for gratuitous distribution during the winter.

The meteorological record has been kept in accordance with your instructions, and returns are hereto appended showing an average temperature for the month of May, 38° 32'; June, 40° 85'; and July, 44° 09'. On the night of the 12th ultimo two sharp flashes of lightning were experienced, accompanied by thunder and heavy rain; and it was noticeable on the next morning the bachelor rookeries were nearly deserted, the seals having gone into the water; they, however, returned during the day.

The school which was supported through last winter has been suspended for the sealing season, but will be again opened as soon as it shall seem profitable to do so.

I am, respectfully,

SAMUEL FALCONER,  
*Special Agent.*

CHARLES BRYANT, Esq.,  
*Special Agent Treasury Department, St. Paul's Island.*

FAIRHAVEN, MASSACHUSETTS,  
*November 10, 1871.*

SIR: I have the honor to report the arrival at St. Paul's Island, Alaska Territory, on the 31st of July last past the Alaska Commercial Company's steamer Alexander from San Francisco, having on board as passenger Stephen N. Buynitzky, esq., a clerk of the Department, with authority to take charge of the island, and allow me to report for duty in the Atlantic States, and now beg leave to submit the following report:

For the details of my administration from the time of my taking charge of the Seal Islands, July 10, 1870, until the departure of the Alaska Commercial Company's steamer Constantine, October 19 of the same year, I beg leave to refer to my former reports, dated July 14 and October 19, respectively.

The sealing season had so nearly expired at that time that only 1,600 seals were taken for their skins. November 2 about four inches of snow fell, and it became sufficiently cold for the purpose. The natives commenced taking their supply of winter food, and completed it the 11th of the same month, taking in all 2,800 young seals. These were obtained

by driving the females with their young to the uplands, where the pups are caught and examined, males only being selected for this purpose, when the others are allowed to return to the rookery, and those selected are driven to the village and slaughtered; after which the chiefs apportion to each family their part. Some are preserved by salting; others suspend them on poles, allowing them to freeze, and are so preserved for eating fresh. These pups at this time are four months old, and weigh, on the average, 36½ pounds. Their skins have no commercial value.

The principal occupation of the natives during the winter months is hunting foxes, which abound in large numbers on the island, for their skins for sale, and shooting such small game for food as can be found at that time of year. The present year the company have paid premiums to the parties getting the three highest numbers, and under this stimulant 1,400 were taken during the months of November, December, January, and February.

During the holidays, from Christmas to Lent, there was much drunkenness from beer, made by fermenting sugar and flour together. The evil became so great that it became necessary to restrict the sale to a bare ration, sufficient for their tea, and even then so strong was their appetite that they would associate together and save their small allowance until enough could be had to have a holiday, as they term it. This was especially the case on birth and saints' days. Fortunately, it does not make them quarrelsome. I was twice necessitated to interpose my authority to prevent disturbance among the natives, and once a difficulty occurred between the first chief, when drunk, and one of the employés of the company, which led to some dissatisfaction among the people, but was amicably arranged. There is no authority in the native government or provision for punishing crime other than the church by penance, and this seems insufficient for this kind of misdemeanor. It would seem worthy of consideration whether authority should not be given the officer in charge of the island to impose small fines in these cases and apply the proceeds to relieving the necessities of the poor.

The only possible place where a school could be accommodated was the dining-room of the employés of the company, and that could be had only two hours each afternoon. As early as practicable a school was opened, and both parents and children were deeply interested in its success. It was attended by twenty-nine scholars between the ages of five and eighteen, the average attendance being 95 per cent. All learned the alphabet, and many to read simple sentences, but great difficulty was experienced in enabling them to understand the meaning, their isolated condition being unfavorable to the development of ideas, and it was found that the only effective method was object-teaching, for which there existed a scant supply of material. The school had to be closed in April, and, owing to the difficulty of many attending during the sealing season, it had not been resumed. At the time of my leaving, (August 15,) a large building was being fitted expressly for the school, and a place for the people to assemble.

The past winter has been the most severe in long-continued cold weather in the memory of the oldest inhabitants of the island. On the 5th of February large bodies of drift-ice came down from the north, enveloping the island on all sides, and did not finally disappear until May, a period of ninety days. Although no considerable ice formed along the shores of the island, huge sheets of this drift-ice, three or four feet thick, were pushed by the tide high on the rocks, and remained obstructing the rookeries until late in June, before melting. Owing to this cause the seals were a month later than usual in landing, and many landed in a crippled condition, exhibiting evidence of having

suffered injury in washing through the large bodies of ice to the south of the island.

May 15, 1871, the Alaska Commercial Company's steamer Alexander arrived from San Francisco, having on board the general agent of the Alaska Commercial Company, and a number of employés of the company to reside permanently on the island. The steamer had also as passengers, the Russo-Greek bishop from San Francisco, with his attendants, making a parochial visit, and to minister to the spiritual wants of the people. The steamer having touched at St. George, in accordance with verbal orders given him by me, Special Agent Samuel Falconer, esq., came to confer with me in regard to the affairs of that island. The steamer brought all needful supplies and materials for conducting the business of taking seal-skins. These were landed, and a small number of seal-skins shipped, (3,448, as per certificate dated May 19, 1871.) The steamer sailed on the 19th for San Francisco.

A small number of seal were taken for food during the month of May, and the skins salted.

June 1, the seals being present in sufficient numbers, the company commenced taking skins. This employed all the natives steadily, the working force of the island being just sufficient to perform the work in the given time.

June 11, the company's bark Cyanè arrived from San Francisco, laden with lumber, wood, and salt for the island.

There were several families residing on the island who came here in the employ of the former Russian fur company, from the island of Kodiak. At the time of the transfer of the territory, four of these contracted to work in the employ of Williams & Havens, of New London, Connecticut, to be returned by them to Kodiak at the end of the sealing season of 1869. It not being convenient for the agent of Williams & Havens to do this, they agreed with him to cancel said contract, and received one hundred dollars each instead of the conveyance to Kodiak, and have since resided on the island, sharing with the other natives in the labor and proceeds of the sealing business. As the bark Cyane was to return by way of Kodiak, and the agent gave them permission to take passage, four families availed themselves of it. These contained eight adults and five children.

The bark having landed her supplies, sailed again on the 16th for San Francisco, via Onalaska and Kodiak, and the sealing was continued until July 31.

July 31, steamer Alexander arrived from San Francisco with the supplies for the ensuing winter. After landing part of her cargo August 1, the steamer visited the island of St. George to land supplies and take on-board skins, Stephen N. Buyinzky, acting under verbal orders from me, taking passage on her for the purpose of conveying to Samuel Falconer a letter of appointment as special agent of the Treasury Department, also a letter of instructions from myself, a copy of which, with a copy of his report on the condition of that island, I herewith inclose.

There are on the islands a population of 370 natives, so called; these are about one-half pure Aleutian blood, the other half of creole blood; in several the foreign element predominates. They have a well-organized system of government under chiefs of their own election, subject to removal at the will of the people, whenever they choose. Those now acting have done so for three years, and are very efficient men. These exercise a kind of patriarchal supervision over the affairs of the whole people, but possess no power to enforce their authority beyond the expression of their will. This meets all their wants as a simple community, but there sometimes arise contingencies when this is insufficient.

The proceeds of the sealing business are a common property, shared by all, and all are expected to participate in the labor.

Sometimes when delivering skins to ships some are disposed to shirk their duty for apparently frivolous reasons. In such cases I have felt called on to exercise my authority. There, too, is always a liability of differences arising between natives and the employés of the company which call for the exercise of judicial powers. These make it worth while to consider how far the resident officer should be empowered to act in cases where an appeal to the Department would require a year to get a decision.

The population of St. Paul is 249; that of St. George, 127; this is somewhat unequal in proportion to the labor and proceeds of the sealing business; St. Paul having two-thirds of the population, with three-fourths of the labor and proceeds; but this will probably be equalized by the removal of some of the people from St. George to St. Paul.

The population of both islands, except the chiefs, who live in wooden houses of their own, are living in underground houses built of turf, containing three compartments; an outer one, where in an open space the cooking is done with blubber for fuel; a middle one, half wash-room and half out-house; an inner one, not larger than ten by twelve, lighted by a single sash. Not half of these have wooden floors or ceilings. Here, crowded together without ventilation, to keep themselves warm as they best can by animal heat during long tedious winters, sickness necessarily prevails; and without means to struggle against or for comfort, their average life is shortened, and its later years full of pain and suffering, while full half the infants, for want of care, do not live to six months. And this, where the experience of the military and civil officers and employés of the company demonstrates the climate to be especially favorable to robust health. I would most respectfully ask, in behalf of these people, that application be made to Congress for an appropriation to furnish material to build small wooden houses above ground. There are native carpenters sufficiently skillful to do all the labor. All that would be necessary is to furnish the material at the islands and place it in charge of the Government officer, who could see to its proper disposal and use. Such material would cost at the island five hundred dollars per house, and the number required would be on St. Paul forty, and St. George twenty. The company propose building such houses and allow the natives to live in them, but refuse to sell the lumber or houses to them, being averse to the natives acquiring any right or title to such property on the island. This, for obvious reasons, ought not to be. The natives are already more than sufficiently dependent on the company, and ought not to hold their houses at the will of the resident agent. Congress, by leasing their island and taxing its only industry, the seal fishery, so heavily as to preclude the company's being liberal, owe it to them to see that they have every reasonable comfort, and are fully protected in their rights. It is doubtful whether, without the right of ownership in their houses, they can be induced to change their confirmed habits, so as to secure the necessary conditions of cleanliness and comfort desirable for their better health. Some method might be adopted by which they might repay the outlay for their houses, as the proceeds of the seal fishery, \$30,000 on St. Paul, and \$10,000 on St. George, annually paid by the company, is amply sufficient, with proper economy, for all the comforts and many of the conveniences of civilization.

In my report to the Department dated October 19, 1870, I had the honor of calling the attention of the Department to certain exigencies existing under the new arrangement of affairs at the islands. One was



that a suitable building be erected on each island for the accommodation of the government officers, they being now dependent on the company, whose means are limited for their own employes. Another was that a physician be allowed for each island and paid by the government, and a suitable building erected for their accommodation. Should this be granted I would suggest that one building be erected for both purposes, as less expensive. The other was that an additional officer be allowed each island, and this I deem important for the following reasons: The interests of the Government are too great to be left dependent on the health of a single officer, the great distance and infrequent communication rendering it liable that a whole year might elapse before the information could be transmitted and the want supplied. Another, and equally important, is that the nature of the business is such that the required knowledge necessary to keep the Government informed of its condition in advance can only be obtained by a residence on the island at least one year, and by careful observation comparing one year with another; nor can it be imparted to another, unless on the ground, and in the event of a change of officers the experience of the one leaving would be lost to the Government.

The whole number of seals taken during the year 1869, as ascertained by actual account on their delivery in July, 1870, was:

On St. Paul's Island.....	60,992
On St. George Island.....	24,909
Total.....	<u>85,901</u>

*Seals killed during the year 1870.*

<i>On St. Paul's Island:</i>	
From April 28 to July 1.....	3,988
July 1 to October 9, salted.....	6,449
Cut skins not salted.....	278
October 9 to November 30, salted.....	1,597
Cut skins not salted.....	202
Young seals killed for winter supply of food.....	2,800
Total.....	<u>15,314</u>
<i>St. George Island:</i>	
Previous to July 1.....	1,799
July 1 to October 10.....	4,987
October 10 to close of the season.....	473
Pups for winter supply.....	1,200
	<u>8,459</u>
Grand total for 1870.....	<u>23,773</u>

*Skins taken during the present season, 1871, up to July 31.*

<i>On St. Paul's:</i>	
May, for native food.....	418
June.....	20,042
July.....	24,705
Cut skins rejected.....	335
	<u>45,503</u>
St. George Island, as per report of special agent, Samuel Falconer, up to July 31.....	17,000
Total on both islands up to July 31, 1871.....	<u>62,503</u>

Beside the above 1 per cent. should be allowed for loss by heating while driving and otherwise; this will cover all seals killed at the islands.

During the interval between July 1, the date of the act authorizing the lease and its promulgation at the islands October 10, there were killed on St. Paul's, 6,449, and on St. George, 4,987 animals for food for

the natives. These were mostly one-year old seals, and their skins are not of prime value. Of these, there were reserved in accordance with the plans stated in my report of July 14, 1870, and salted on government account, on St. Paul's, 2,040, and on St. George, 1,500 skins. These are the same mentioned in my report of May 19, 1871, the necessary order for the shipment of which miscarried by mail, and I only received the certified copy at the date of my leaving the island, when no opportunity occurred for shipping them, the steamer being loaded to her fullest capacity with skins belonging to her owners. The remainder of these skins are in the hands of the Alaska Commercial Company; not being worth the tax, are left on the islands.

Skins damaged by cutting have always sold at half price in market, and the same rates been paid for them at the salt-house. Since the leasing, they not being considered with the tax, have been rejected by the company. This has resulted in no loss, as will be seen by reference to the foregoing statement. Formerly the average of cut skins equalled 6 per cent. of the whole; since their rejection the average has decreased to three-fourths of one per cent.

About six thousand gallons of oil have been rendered, at a cost of 25 cents per gallon, by allowing the natives 6 cents per gallon for skinning and carrying the blubber to the place of rendering—a compensation scarcely in proportion to the labor, as the saving of the oil doubles the skinning and carrying. The cost of rendering, 25 cents, added to the tax, 55 cents, makes a total of 80 cents per gallon at the island; while the market value is less than 50 cents. It must be obvious no company can afford to incur the expense necessary for carrying on a business involving such positive loss. In my opinion, no great revenue can be derived from taxing the oil, and as the natives are the parties most to be benefited by its saving by us, its affording an additional industry to their island, I would suggest that in place of a revenue tax there be established a regulation fixing a stipulated price, say 20 cents per gallon, to be paid by the company to the natives for all the oil shipped from the island. This would leave a margin sufficient to pay the cost of rendering and shipping. In this way about fifty thousand gallons of oil may be obtained annually above or over what blubber is required by the natives for fuel. The proceeds of this would enable them to purchase wood or coal to warm their houses in winter. The blubber, being entirely unfitted for that purpose, is now burned in an out-house for cooking only, the sixty cords of wood now annually distributed among them being insufficient for baking purposes.

The breeding rookeries, so called, are the rocky shores, selected by the old males for that purpose. They are of variable length, from one-eighth of a mile to three miles in length, and from five to fifty rods in width, separated from each other by intervals of sand beach, from a few rods to six miles in length. The old males land early on these places, and prevent any but females occupying them with themselves. All the other classes, with those selected for killing, occupy the uplands immediately in the rear of these. It is claimed by the natives that the seals return invariably the second year to their places of birth, and when not too often disturbed by driving, continue to do so. This is important, as will appear, and I have instituted experiments to determine the fact, by having one hundred male pups selected before they leave, and marked by cutting off the right ear, on a rookery one mile north of the village, and a like number with the left ear, on a rookery to south of village. This has been done for two years, and next year the first will be old enough to be taken. The seals occupy the southeast and southwest shores of the island a distance of twenty-five miles. For convenience,



and to save long driving, three salt-houses have been built, one at the village, one five miles west of that point, and one at northeast point, twelve miles distant. It being more convenient to take and ship skins from the village, the tendency is to kill an undue proportion of the whole number to be taken from the island from the adjacent rookeries, which contain less than one-fourth of the number. To do this, necessitates their being driven at too short intervals from the same places, so that those driven to the killing-ground, and allowed to return to the water as unfit for present use, do not return to their old places, but shift to more distant parts of the island. This has been the effect from the season of 1868, as over one-half the skins taken each year have been from these places. I would, therefore, suggest a regulation be established, requiring the seals to be taken from all the rookeries in such number as the size of the rookery bears to the whole on the island.

The breeding males and females occupy the same ground, from year to year, without leaving their places until the end of July, and no other classes mix with them. These have clearly-defined boundaries, entirely separate from the grounds occupied by the classes driven for killing, and are never disturbed by it.

As these are the sources that produce the supply, and the age at which most of them are killed is three years, their condition will furnish a standard by which to estimate the product three years in advance. A careful comparison of their condition the present year, 1871, with those of 1869 and 1870, shows a decrease in the number of females the present year equal to ten per cent. of the two former years, which showed a gradual increase. This might indicate a necessity for restricting the number to be taken, were it not for the excess of 1870, which will compensate the deficiency for one year; but should two successive years of decrease follow, it will be different. This decrease is the same on the rookeries where no seals have been taken since 1868 as those that have been worked continuously. Whatever may be the cause of this decrease, I am sure it must be looked for outside of the islands, a period of the year in which we have little or no positive knowledge of their habits. Sufficient search has been made for their winter abodes, with a view to taking their skins, to prove they do not land in any considerable numbers on any known land. They begin to leave the islands early in October, and by the middle of December have all left, and none are seen again until April or May. A few hundred, mostly young pups, are taken by the Indians around Sitka, twelve hundred miles east of the islands, during the month of December, and again in March, on their way returning to the islands, and, in February, off the coast of British Columbia, but in such small numbers as to make no appreciable difference to the immense number that visit the islands annually. This is about all that is known positively of their winter habits. It is evident that sharks or other voracious fish prey on the young pups, while in the water, from the fact that of more than a million pups, annually leaving the islands, not one-third return to them in spring.

The time of the arrival of the seals in the spring varies with the season, from the middle of April to the middle of May, and they are present in sufficient numbers for taking their skins before the 1st of June.

In such cases a discretionary power may be granted to the officer, as the least interested party, but as this is the time when they are most easily disturbed, it should be done with caution.

The new system may now be considered as fairly inaugurated, and although it has not been done without some friction on both sides, no serious differences have arisen, and it is now working harmoniously.

The supplies have been abundant and of good quality, and sold in quantities desired, except sugar, which, for reasons before stated, has been restricted.

All the conditions of the lease have been as fully complied with as the conditions of the situation permitted. And the Alaska Commercial Company, by their previous establishment on the island, and acquaintance with the business, have been able to meet these difficulties better than any other, less favorably situated, could have done. And in the suppression of intemperance, and introduction of sanitary measures, I have had the hearty co-operation of the agent and employes of the company.

I have the honor to remain,

CHARLES BRYANT,  
*Special Agent Treasury Department.*

Hon. GEO. S. BOUTWELL,  
*Secretary of the Treasury.*

H. Ex. 20—2