

2-11-1871

St. Paul Island, Alaska. Letter from the Secretary of the Treasury, transmitting a report of the special agent of the Treasury Department, stationed at St. Paul Island, Alaska Territory, in charge of the seal fishery.

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.law.ou.edu/indianserialset>

 Part of the [Indian and Aboriginal Law Commons](#)

---

#### Recommended Citation

H.R. Exec. Doc. No. 122, 41st Cong., 3rd Sess. (1871)

This House Executive Document is brought to you for free and open access by University of Oklahoma College of Law Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in American Indian and Alaskan Native Documents in the Congressional Serial Set: 1817-1899 by an authorized administrator of University of Oklahoma College of Law Digital Commons. For more information, please contact [darinfox@ou.edu](mailto:darinfox@ou.edu).

---

ST. PAUL ISLAND, ALASKA.

---

LETTER

FROM

THE SECRETARY OF THE TREASURY,

TRANSMITTING

*A report of the special agent of the Treasury Department, stationed at St. Paul Island, Alaska Territory, in charge of the seal fishery.*

---

FEBRUARY 11 1871. — Referred to the Committee on Commerce and ordered to be printed.

---

TREASURY DEPARTMENT,  
*Office of the Secretary, February 8, 1871.*

SIR: I transmit herewith, for the information of the House of Representatives, a copy of a report of Captain Charles Bryant, special agent of the Treasury Department, stationed at St. Paul Island, Alaska Territory, in charge of the seal fishery, dated July 14, 1870, marked A; also copy of a report from the same agent, dated October 19, 1870, marked B; also copy of a report by S. N. Buynitzky, a clerk in this Department, dated December 30, 1870, marked C.

Mr. Buynitzky was sent to Alaska to aid Captain Bryant, and also to report to the Department such information as he might acquire relative to the seal fishery, the commercial interests of the islands, and of the country generally. Captain Bryant recommends, and gives what seem to me satisfactory reasons for the appointment of an agent and an assistant at each island; and he also suggests an appropriation for the erection of a house on each island, at a cost of \$2,000 for each building. As the communication between the islands of St. Paul and St. George is occasional only, and uncertain, the importance of having two agents at each island is manifest. Mr. Bryant states that at present the agents of the Government are dependent upon the agents and managers of the Alaska Commercial Company for lodging, and suggests that this arrangement ought not to be a permanent one. I concur in this opinion and respectfully ask the attention of Congress to the two important suggestions made by Captain Bryant.

I ought to say further that Captain Bryant is now a special agent of the Treasury Department to aid in the collection of the revenue. The entire force authorized by law in that branch of the service is not sufficient to justify the detail of four of them to the fur-seal islands for the management of that business. Moreover, the business itself is of a na-

ture which renders it questionable whether the management of it is properly within the jurisdiction of those officers.

Very respectfully,

GEO. S. BOUTWELL,  
*Secretary.*

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

A.

ISLAND OF ST. PAUL, ALASKA, July 14, 1870.

SIR: In compliance with the instructions of the Department, of May 24, 1870, ordering me to take charge of the sealing islands, and to provide for the immediate wants of the inhabitants, if found in a condition of necessity, I called on the chiefs at each island to give me a statement of the actual wants of the population. From the information so obtained, and from the absence of provisions in the stores of Hutchinson, Kohl & Co., and Williams & Havens, it became apparent that measures should be taken for supplying the natives from such stores as were put on board the revenue steamer Lincoln in prevision of that emergency. I therefore requested the commander of the Lincoln to land on the islands all the bread and flour which might be possibly spared from his vessel, as well as the provisions specially ordered by Department's telegram to the collector of customs at San Francisco, dated June 8, 1870. The following supplies were put at my disposition: Bread and flour, 20,000 pounds; sugar, 4,000 pounds; tea, 525 pounds; salt, (as per report of July 5,) 10 tons. The native population on St. Paul being 240, and on St. George 132, all these stores will be divided between the two islands to correspond, as nearly as possible, with the proportion of said population.

The amounts of provisions usually required *per month* for an average family of six persons, as stated by the chiefs, have been since the treaty of cession as follows: Bread and flour, 120 pounds; sugar, 15 pounds; tea, 3 pounds; seal flesh from sixty animals of medium size. These figures, when multiplied by the number of average families,  $62 \left( \frac{372}{6} \right)$  give the amounts required for *one month* on both islands: Bread and flour, 7,440 pounds; tea, 186 pounds; sugar, 930 pounds; seal flesh, from 3,720 animals.

As my calculations at San Francisco had to be reduced to the lowest rates, in view of the fact that the Lincoln would take a large quantity of coal at Nanaimo, it necessarily follows that the provisions now on hand cannot last four months, as I expected, if no reduction is made from the requisition of the chiefs.

It being desirable to satisfy the natives to the same extent as was done under the control of private companies, I determined to issue rations without reduction, in the hope that the Department will find means to forward more supplies during the *three months* from the date of this letter, through which period my present supplies will carry me at the above rates.

The mode of issuing and distributing provisions, determined upon after consultation with the chiefs, will be, on each island, as follows: A committee of three chiefs, elected by the people, will receive every week from the officer in charge a weekly proportion of provisions, and receipt for the same in a book provided for that purpose. The distribution will be made by the chiefs under the supervision of said officer. As to the seal flesh, I determined to allow the killing, from time to time, of such numbers of seals as will be actually eaten. No killing will be permitted for the purpose of putting up dried seal flesh for the coming winter unless the prohibition contained in my instructions is expressly revoked by further orders from the Department. In regard to the skins of animals which will be killed for flesh, I considered but just that the natives should salt, preserve, and hold at the disposition of the Government such quantity of choice skins from each killing as will be sufficient to cover the actual cost of provisions and salt issued to them up to the date of said killing, adopting the usual market price of skins on the islands (40 cents) as a standard of calculation. By this arrangement, after three months from date, a lot of 2,100 choice skins on St. Paul, and 1,500 on St. George, will be held, free of any private claim, at the disposition of the Treasury Department. These 3,600 skins, if sold at auction in San Francisco, would probably realize from \$10,000 to \$12,000 in coin; and thus, after deduction of about \$2,000 for the supplies now granted, and the expenses of transportation and sale, a fund of at least \$8,000 might be created to cover further expenditures on behalf of the natives of the sealing islands. With reference to the balance of skins which will remain in the hands of the natives after deduction of the number reserved as above, I did not consider it advisable, in the absence of any instructions on this point, to interfere with the desire expressed by the natives that they might be allowed to exchange or sell said skins for the purpose of procuring from the stores now on the islands, dry goods, clothing, crock-

ery ware, hardware, and various small articles to which they have been accustomed for many years past. A sufficient stock of these commodities is still extant on the islands from last year's supplies, but more clothing will be absolutely required the coming winter. In this connection I beg leave respectfully to invite the attention of the Department to the fact that the Aleutian population of the sealing islands has, with very slight variations, the same wants as any rural community in the Christian world. Should the killing of seals be permitted to cover the wants for the whole year, the required number of seals to be killed would be in all (from July 15 of this year) 44,640, (3,720 by 12.)

Coming to that part of the instructions given me which refers to suggestions as to the future action of the Government in regard of the sealing islands, I have to state that under the pressure of urgent business, conferences with natives, attendance to the counting of skins to be taken on the steamer Alexander, and in view of the necessity of sending this letter as soon as possible, I can only advert to such features as require prompt and immediate action.

Should no change have occurred in the legislation nor in the views of the Department in regard to the sealing islands, I would suggest that the following supplies be forwarded with all possible speed, to secure the subsistence of the population for eight months from October 15 of this year to June 15, 1871: Bread and flour, 59,536 pounds; sugar, 6,740 pounds; tea, 1,488 pounds; salt, 45 tons; wood for baking purposes, 10 cords. If the temporary arrangements adopted by me are approved, and authority be given me to prolong the same for the coming winter, I would suggest that Hutchinson, Kohl & Co. may be authorized to send to the islands this necessary stock of clothing, dry goods, hardware, &c., otherwise, that measures should be devised to provide for these commodities on account of the skins which may be taken to San Francisco at the end of this year's sealing season.

In view of the very limited capacities of our revenue cutters for carrying freight, it would seem advisable to charter a sailing vessel for the purpose of carrying supplies to the islands and taking to San Francisco such skins as may be ready for shipment. Should any information be desired on that behalf, I would respectfully refer to Captain C. W. Scammon, commander of the Lincoln, who is well acquainted with the resources of the Pacific Coast, and has devoted much attention to the subject under consideration.

As soon as circumstances will permit, I will devote myself to the completion of a detailed plan of administration of the sealing islands. In connection with this matter I would respectfully request that Mr. Buynitzky be relieved from the island of St. George as soon as practicable, and ordered to assist me at St. Paul for some time before leaving for Washington. I consider it particularly desirable that he would become thoroughly acquainted with all the details of the plan to be submitted by me to the Department.

I am, sir, very respectfully,

CHARLES BRYANT.

*Special Agent Treasury Department.*

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

B.

ISLAND OF ST. PAUL, ALASKA,  
October 19, 1870.

SIR: On the 9th instant the steamer Constantine, belonging to the Alaska Commercial Company, arrived here, bringing to me a letter of the collector of customs at San Francisco, covering certified copies of Department's letter of August 8, 1870, to said collector, and of the act of July 1, 1870. At the same time the general agent of the Alaska Company, Mr. H. H. McIntyre, informed me, verbally, that official letters addressed to myself and S. N. Buynitzky, esq., had been sent from the custom-house at San Francisco, but went, by error, with the mail to Kodiak. Thus it happens that I am left to act on fragmentary information. I found on board the Constantine, as passenger, Mr. Samuel Falconer, late deputy and acting collector at Sitka, who stated to me that he has left the service of Hutchinson, Kohl & Co., and would offer his services to the Government.

Having in view the desire expressed to me by Mr. Buynitzky in July, to be relieved this fall from his temporary duties at St. George, in consideration of urgent family matters requiring his presence at Washington, I thought it advisable to avail myself of Mr. Falconer's offer, and, by letter of 10th instant, I appointed him, subject to the approval of the Department, assistant special agent, at a compensation of \$6 per diem, and after his filing the customary oath of office I instructed him to proceed, together with myself, to the Island of St. George. On the 12th instant we sailed over to St.

George, where he relieved Mr. Buynitzky, who was thus made free to proceed to Washington.

In the absence of any instructions from the Department under the new status I intend to adopt such course of action as is most obviously suggested by the import of the act of July 1, 1870; that is, to take such measures as will most efficiently secure the interests of the Government and those of the population at the sealing islands, and have instructed my assistant accordingly. I hope that my action in the premises will meet with the approval of the Department, and the nomination of Mr. Falconer and the terms thereof will be confirmed. As to my action, from the day of my taking charge of the sealing islands up to the present date, I have briefly to state that I have punctually carried out the programme described in my report of July 14, 1870, and have found that the same has been faithfully executed by Mr Buynitzky on the island of St. George. Provisions have been distributed, and fur seals taken and skins subdivided as set forth in said report, and I may justly say that the result has been satisfactory to all parties concerned. The company doing business at the islands had no motives of complaint, and the natives have expressed their entire satisfaction and asked me to transmit to the Hon. Secretary of the Treasury their sincere thanks for the timely relief and the easy terms at which provisions have been supplied them.

Notwithstanding the novelty of the incoming state of affairs at these islands, some points of paramount importance claim immediate attention, and I consider it my duty forthwith to make most urgent representations in regard to the necessity of immediate action of the Government to meet imperative exigencies created by the leasing of the islands and the removal therefrom of the United States troops.

The faithful collection of nearly \$200,000 of tax on fur-seal skins (from the nature of the business and the geographical position of these islands) will principally depend upon the supervision of the revenue officers in charge of the sealing islands, and I am convinced it will be necessary to have on each island two officers, of whom one special agent and one assistant; there being no communication between the two islands but by means of the ships coming up to the islands in summer, under the present system, in case of sickness or death of an agent of the Treasury at one of the islands, the interests of the Government at that island might remain for months exposed to the dangers of anarchy.

The agents of the Treasury have been heretofore lodged in houses claimed by the company, and had to board with the company's officers. This arrangement ought not, for various reasons, to be made permanent. A house should be built on each island for the accommodation of Government officers, and this may be done at an expense of, say, \$2,000 per building, which is but a trifling sum, considering the prospective importance of the revenue to be collected for the twenty years' duration of the lease.

The removal of the United States troops from the islands, and the recall therewith of their contract doctors, leaves both communities exposed to all chances of disease (so frequent in this severe climate) without any medical assistance. The terms on which the Alaska Commercial Company has obtained the lease leave no margin for any improvements in the situation of the nations, outside of the obligations actually imposed on the company. On the other hand the rate of taxation upon the seal skins, (the only industry of the inhabitants of the sealing islands,) and the fact of their being deprived of the benefits of free competition of traders, seem to entitle them to some special compensation on the part of the Government.

I beg leave to suggest that a yearly appropriation of \$5,000 be asked for, to be equally divided between the two islands for compensation of learned and experienced medical practitioners and contingent expenses, and an appropriation of \$6,000 once, for the purpose of providing suitable buildings for hospitals and the dwellings of the doctors.

In conclusion, I take pleasure in bringing to the notice of the Department a fact witnessed by me in my last visit to the island of St. George, a fact gratifying to all those who, like myself, feel interested in the future moral development of the Aleutian population. On the 14th instant I was present at the examination of a school of twelve boys and six girls in English reading; they distinctly read any page of Wilson's primer, counted up to one thousand, named the days of the week, the months and seasons of the year, various articles of dress, household implements, &c., &c. This was the result of about three months' work. Rendering justice to the zeal and ability of the founder of the school, Mr. S. N. Buynitzky, I cannot refuse a due share of praise to the natural gifts of the Aleutian race, and I beg leave to express here my earnest belief that the Aleutes might become as good American citizens as any admitted under the fifteenth amendment to the Constitution.

I am, sir, with great respect,

CHARLES BRYANT,  
*Special Agent Treasury Department.*

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

## C.

WASHINGTON, D. C., December 30, 1870.

SIR: By letter of instructions of May 25, 1870, I have been detailed to the islands of St. Paul and St. George, Alaska Territory, there to act under the orders of Captain Charles Bryant, special agent of the Treasury Department, and also to obtain and report to the Department such information as might be acquired relative to the seal fishery and the commercial interests of the islands and of the country generally. Concerning my action at the islands, under the instructions of Captain Charles Bryant, I beg leave respectfully to refer to Mr. Bryant's official reports. As to the information which I have been able to acquire relative to the seal fishery and the commercial interests of the islands and of the country, I have the honor to submit the following:

The islands of St. Paul and St. George, owing to their isolated position, their climate, and the configuration of their shores, seem to have been particularly designed by nature for the propagation of the species of seals commonly known under the name of fur seal, and scientifically classified under the appellation of "*phoca ursina*." The numbers of fur seals congregating every summer at the islands are literally beyond computation. At the commencement of spring they begin to appear in the Behring's Sea, coming from the Pacific through the straits of the Aleutian islands, chiefly through Dunimac Pass. Full-grown males (called bulls) are the earliest visitors at the islands of St. George and St. Paul; they approach the islands in the last days of April, and after a careful survey of their habitual resting grounds, settle thereon to await the arrival of the females, which takes place considerably later. The seals invariably select for their resting grounds (rookeries) such beaches as are strewn over with large boulders, affording a safe hold against the sweep of the surf; flat sandy beaches are carefully avoided by them, probably on account of the danger to which the new-born seals would be exposed of being carried off by the sea before they have learned to live in that element. From the day of their settling on the rookeries to the epoch of the appearance of the females, the bulls sleep almost without interruption. Towards the end of May they begin to look out for the coming of their families. The females (cows) generally recognize their former mates, and land at their respective rookeries. There being a considerable difference between the male and the female in regard to age of puberty, (six years for the male and two for the female,) this species is necessarily polygamous, and an average family numbers about ten cows to one bull. The rookeries nearest to the water are occupied by the propagators, while the minor individuals of the tribe have to camp on the slopes, where they are more exposed to the danger of being cut off from the sea, and to become the prey of the hunter. The hunting begins as soon as the resting grounds are fully occupied, which generally happens about the end of June. It is carried on until the middle of November, when the seals leave the islands, to disappear for five months in the vast expanse of the Pacific. The surrounding, driving, killing, and flensing of the fur seals has been reduced to a science by the natives of the islands. A day is waited for when the direction of the wind allows of a rookery being approached so that the game cannot scent the hunters; a party of from twenty to thirty men, armed with clubs, cautiously advance along the shore until the retreat of the animals towards the sea is cut by the line of hunters; then, at a signal from the chief of the expedition, the men rush up the cliffs and drive towards the interior of the island as many seals as have been surrounded. When the herd has been driven to a certain distance from the shore a halt is made, and a sorting of the game as to age, sex, and condition of the fur, is effected. This operation requires the exercise of a life-long experience, and is of the utmost importance, as the killing of females, which are easily mistaken for young males, even by the natives, would endanger the propagation of the species, and the slaughtering of males under two or over four years old would be a useless extermination, their furs having little value for trade. The sorting once accomplished, all the animals not destined for killing are allowed to escape toward the rookery, and the balance of the herd is driven to the slaughtering grounds, situated near the salt-houses. Great care is taken, when driving, that the animals do not become overheated, for, should this happen, the skins would become worthless, the fur falling off. On reaching the slaughtering grounds, the drove is allowed a rest of two or three hours, after which, at a signal given by one of the chiefs, the killing is effected with wonderful rapidity. I have seen a drove of sixteen hundred seals dispatched by thirty men in little more than an hour of time. As soon as the animals are killed, all available hands, men, women, and children, rush to the work of flensing, which has to be finished as soon as possible, to prevent the carcasses from stiffening. Every part of the animal is turned to account; skin, flesh, blubber, and intestines. The skins are immediately taken to the salt-house and placed in large vats, the fur side down, and the flesh side plentifully sprinkled with salt. When the skins have been thoroughly saturated with salt, which process requires about forty days, they are taken up and shaken; then another lighter coating of salt is applied, and they are booked up in folds, ready for shipment.

The commercial value of fur-seal skins depends upon their size, and particularly

upon the quality of the fur. The greatest proportion of first-class skins are obtained from seals three years old.

London is the most important and almost the only market for fur-seal skins; there they are manufactured into elegant furs by a series of technical operations, the secret whereof is jealously kept by a single firm. The prices obtained in London by American traders for seal skins shipped in 1867 and 1868 ranged from 16s. to 30s. per skin, according to quality. The cost of each skin rendered at London, including compensation of natives, expenses for salt, shipment from the islands to San Francisco, transshipment for Europe, freight and commissions, amounted to \$1 50 in gold. This was the figure of costs, when the price paid by the traders to the natives for each skin was nominally from 20 to 40 cents, but actually less, as the same traders realized on some articles furnished to the natives a profit of nearly a hundred per centum. At present, when the Alaska Commercial Company has fixed the price to be paid to the natives at 40 cents per skin, and the advance on San Francisco prices of commodities brought to the islands at only 25 per cent., the above figure of costs will be considerably increased. Some increase of costs will be occasioned by the obligations assumed on the part of the company, as to the establishment and keeping of gratuitous schools for the natives, and also by certain additional advantages vouchsafed to the natives, as appears from the instructions of the company to its agents, a copy whereof is herewith submitted. So that in future the actual cost of each seal skin rendered at London will amount to no less than \$2, exclusive of the pro rata of the rental, and the tax imposed by the conditions of the lease.

The fat or blubber of all the seals killed for their skins is not more than sufficient to supply the want of fuel at the islands. Although every chip of drift-wood is carefully collected by the natives, and brought with great pains to the village from the remotest points, almost all of it is used up in the repairs continually required by the rapidly decaying wood-work of their miserable dwellings, and only a small quantity may be reserved for the purpose of kindling the seal-blubber fires. The summer temperature at the islands being 45° and the mean temperature of the year about 38°, the dwellings, which are nothing better than cellars covered with turf, have to be heated all the year round. Notwithstanding the enormous quantity of seal blubber consumed at the islands, a considerable amount of it might be converted into seal oil for exportation; thousands of old bulls, which have become useless for the purposes of propagation and are an incumbrance to the rookeries, might be killed for their blubber, and thus a new and profitable article of trade added to the resources of the islands. Unfortunately the market price of seal oil is lower than the tax offered on this article by the competitors for the lease of the islands, and consequently this branch of industry has no chance of being developed.

The population of the islands, numbering 240 on St. Paul and 125 on St. George, are mostly Aleutes, some half-breeds, and a few descendants of Kamtchadales brought over from Kamtchatka by the vessels of the Russian American Company. Their mother tongue is the Aleutian—a language spoken with slight variations all over the Aleutian islands and the southeast coast of Alaska peninsula. The Russian language is understood by all and intelligently spoken by many. They all belong to the Greco-Russian Catholic Church, and are sincerely attached to their religion.

According to the statement of the natives of the islands of St. Paul and St. George a notable improvement in their material welfare has taken place since the transfer of the territory to the United States. Still, their prosperity is far from being in harmony with the importance of their share in the production of wealth. Their dwellings, damp, insalubrious hovels, constructed of drift-wood and sods, are particularly in painful contrast with all other conditions of their life. There being no building materials at the islands, the natives are unable to accomplish any considerable improvement in their system of building without assistance on the part of the Government.

The prevalence of inflammatory diseases of the lungs, mostly due to the miserable condition of dwellings, requires the presence of a medical practitioner at each island. The recall this summer of the United States troops, and therewith of the contract doctors, who were attached to the military posts at the islands, leaves the population without medical assistance. Some provision toward supplying this want is absolutely necessary. The only place in the Territory besides the islands of St. Paul and St. George, which I had the opportunity to visit, was Unalashka, the most important of the Aleutian islands. Situated near the Unimak Pass, which is the best entrance to the Behring's Sea, and possessing a good harbor, Unalashka is visited by vessels engaged in the fur trade more than any other port, not excepting Sitka. The principal settlement of the island is Illulook Harbor, with three hundred inhabitants. It is the religious metropolis of the Aleutian tribe. From this point the light of Christianity spread all over the Aleutian archipelago. Here lived the apostle of the Aleutes, Father John Veniaminoo, whose name and teachings are reverently transmitted from father to son in every Aleutian family.

Fishing and sea otter hunting are the principal occupation of the inhabitants of

Ounalashka. Fresh and dried fish are the staple article of food. The sea otter skins, of which the Ounalashkans secure from three to four hundred a year, are traded at the rate of from \$15 to \$35 for clothing, hardware, crockery, sugar, tea, and tobacco. The Aleutian tribe, numbering about three thousand, represents nine-tenths of the trade of the Territory, and is unquestionably far in advance of all other tribes with respect to moral, religious, and social development.

I am, sir, very respectfully, your obedient servant,

S. N. BUYNITZKY, *Clerk.*

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