In the late 18th century the navigators of the 60 different Siberian trading companies searched the North Pacific and Bering Sea for the land of the fur seals. Most of them looked for the fur seals' winter home in the waters between Japan and Oregon where the weather was not as violent as in the Bering Sea. But several navigators plied the northern sea looking for the summer home of the sea mammals. Despite all attempts, a decade of following the slippery seals both north and south of the Aleutian Islands brought no results.

One of these navigators was Gerrassium Pribylov, a man whose father was said to have been on the crew of the St. Peter with Bering when it was wrecked on the Commander Islands. Pribylov had succeeded his father in the Aleutians in 1778 and had become the chief navigator of the largest trading company in that part of the world, the Lebedov-Lastochkin Company. It was rumored that Pribyulov had accidentally overheard an old Aleut story about the son of an Unimak chief who many years before had found the fur seal islands by being blown north of Unimak. Or perhaps the chief deliberately told Pribylov where the islands were as Aggey Galaktionoff remembered:

This was not Pribilof at first—but Aleut hunting ground. They used to use the bidarki from Unalaska to here to get seal winter supply. They just dry them up. No salt in those days. Just dry them up... Chief make up his mind to show his appreciation to Russians and tell Russians there are two seal island over on the northwest side of Unalaska. And Russians appreciate this.
So the Russians ask for Aleut pilot and discover these islands. They arrived here and even his name—Pribilof—but give credit for Aleut help. And then they started working under the Russian flag.

For whatever reason, Pribylov was convinced that the summer breeding grounds of the fur seals could be found northwest of Unalaska and he began to make preparations to find it. After having made several previous attempts to find these highly-sought islands, Pribylov sailed out of Iluluq harbor on Unalaska Island with a mixed Russian-Aleut crew in early June in 1786. For three weeks Pribylov and his crew wandered north of the Chain on his ship, the St. George, hunting for islands in the ubiquitous summer mists. Then on June 25th, the crew heard the unmistakable sound of thousands of fur seals echoing off the Bering Sea fog.

As told by the Aleuts on St. George in the early 19th century, on that day the fog was so thick the sailors could not see the length of the ship. Suddenly, the ship gave a tremendous lurch as its bowsprit hit hard rock. It had drifted into one of the high cliffs now called Tolstoi Mees, that rise straight out of deep water. Although the men were jolted, the ship was undamaged and the sounds of the fur seals told the sailors that they had quite suddenly reached their destination. The men scrambled up a steep gully in the cliff, reaching a plateau on the island which was 350 feet above the raging ocean. This island, which Pribylov called St. George after the namesake of his ship, was 192 miles north of Unalaska and 200 miles south of St. Matthews Island. It lies unprotected by any other land for hundreds of miles, exposed to all the Aleutian weather. Its isolation and cool, damp climate made it an ideal breeding ground for the fur seals as well as the sea otters, sea lions, walruses and foxes.

The sea mammals controlled the beaches, making the invasion of man more difficult. There was no natural harbor on St. George so Pribylov's ship remained in the open sea while the crew collected enough otter and seal furs to provide convincing evidence of their discovery. After the holds of the ship were filled with the furs, the St. George returned to Unalaska to spend the winter and replenish its supplies. When the ship sailed south it left behind 20 Russians and 20 Aleuts under the leadership of Efin Popof to collect more furs during the winter. This band of men were given supplies to last until Pribylof.
returned the next summer, but before spring their tea, alcohol and flour were gone.\textsuperscript{10} There was plenty of meat on the island from the sea mammals, and the men could gather eggs from the birds, but the small amenities of life were gone and with them went the men's patience. Each day the men posted themselves on the island to watch for ships that might accidently be in those waters. However, by July no ship had been seen, and the hunters' hopes that they would be rescued from their animal island diminished rapidly.

\textbf{The Russian Discovery of St Paul}

On an exceptionally clear day that June a man on the high cliffs on the north side of the island swore that he had seen land on the horizon. A large boat (\textit{niditiq}) that the Aleuts had made was fitted out for the journey to explore this new land, more than 40 miles north of St. George. A tiny band of these stranded hunters landed on this distant island on June 29, 1787, St. Peter and St. Paul's day, and the island was appropriately named after these two saints. Over time, however, the name proved too cumbersome for general use and St. Peter was dropped in favor of St. Paul.\textsuperscript{11}

The men had trouble landing on the south and southwest side of the island since, like St. George, it was covered with a multitude of animals. There were so many sea otters at Zolotaya and Tolstoi that their beaches looked golden from the sea.\textsuperscript{12} Therefore, the boat had to land at Zapadni beach, west of Tolstoi, on a small stretch of sand.\textsuperscript{13} Mindful of their religious traditions, the men marched to the highest point they could see and erected a huge cross on the hill, claiming the island for God. The name of the hill has survived today as Bogoslav, which in Russian means the Work of God.\textsuperscript{14}

From the top of Bogoslav the men could see that this new island was considerably larger than St. George. It did not have as steep bird cliffs as St. George, but its triangular shape provided more coastline to harbor the millions of sea mammals. Volcanic cones dotted the middle of the treeless island and in the summer the entire land was covered with a deep green tundra sprinkled with wild flowers.

Near where the men had landed, in English Bay, in the high grass just above the beach, they found, to their astonishment, the ashes of a fire, the stem of a clay pipe, a broken tinderbox, and a sword hilt.
Europeans had clearly been on the island recently and had stopped at least long enough to light a fire and smoke a pipe. But the identities of these unknown sailors were never learned since no one ever came forth to claim their sword and the credit for the first European discovery of the island. These unknown men were undoubtedly on one of the many vessels that had been lost without any record of their achievements in the merciless gales of the Bering Sea.\textsuperscript{15}

Despite the lack of faith in Popov's men, Pribylov did return later that summer. He brought two ships and 137 Aleuts he had taken from Atka and Unalaska, but his ship had an unwelcomed escort.\textsuperscript{16} Although Pribylov had tried to keep his discovery of the fur seal islands a secret when he returned to Unalaska the year before, the news of such an important discovery quickly spread to the other trading companies. As a result, when he set out for the fur seal islands the following summer he was doggedly followed by ships carrying hunters from at least a dozen different trading groups. Each trading company landed its own Russian and Aleut hunters on different parts of the two islands, jealously staking out their own territory and guarding it from the other hunters.\textsuperscript{17} They watched with envy as Pribylov's two ships loaded the 40,000 fur seal skins, 2,000 sea otter furs, and 14,000 pounds of walrus ivory that Popov's men had amassed during their lonely year on the islands.\textsuperscript{18}

Villages sprang up quickly on both islands. The first village established on St. George was near one of the principal rookeries called Starry Artell; another village was soon established at Zapadnie.\textsuperscript{19} On St. Paul, five or six traders established themselves and their Aleut helpers on the northern shore near North East Point, along the beaches of Marunich and near Big Lake. On this shore was a place which was well-remembered by the 19th century Aleuts as Vesolia Mista, the Jolly Spot, where some of the traders would congregate to drink and gamble their fortunes away. Soon villages were also established at Polovina and Zapadnie, which were near the major rookeries on the island.\textsuperscript{20} Within a few years graveyards were also silently erected near each village as people who came to the Pribilofs for only a year or two to make a fortune finished their lives there and stayed forever.

\textit{The Aleuts' Legend}

The Aleuts who arrived on St. Paul that first summer admitted to their Russian escorts that this was indeed the island that had been
discovered long before by Igadik, the son of the Unimak chief. The Aleuts had called it the Island of Amiq and in 1825 they were still able to show visitors where Igadik had landed near Zapadnie on St. Paul. However, for the Russians' benefit they made up a story which would not diminish Pribylov's discovery of the islands.

The Aleuts said that when God had created the world, the Islands had risen up from the ocean's floor. Bogoslav volcano was the first land to break through the water, but was soon followed by the lesser volcanoes and rocky cliffs that made up the rest of the two Islands. Then God bid the seals to breed there, protected by the fog in which He had wrapped the Islands. Only the most religious followers of God would ever find this land that was so well hidden from the rest of mankind. And therefore, it was no accident that the Russians had found the islands that God had created for them. There was a shade of irony in this legend since it was these same religious Russians who had, by 1876 been responsible for the deaths of thousands of Aleuts, stolen their furs and destroyed their homes. But irony is too subtle a tone for men who hear only the sound of money.

The Life of the Hunters

The Russian hunters who settled on the Pribilof Islands were an unruly, ungovernable group of men. Each hunter owed the merchant who had sponsored him a predetermined number of furs; anything he caught above that number he could keep as his own. The life these hunters led was so barren and their rewards were so distant that often they would gamble away their future fortune for the pleasure of an exciting hour. The furs that the hunters would keep for themselves became a form of currency. Late in the evening, when they had drunk themselves senseless and gambled what money they had away, the furs replaced their money and the stakes were raised from currency to skins.

The Russian hunters adopted some of the life style of the very people they had so easily killed on the Aleutian Chain. They lived in underground houses with sod roofs supported by whale bones and drift wood. They also ate the Aleuts' food of sea mammal meat and bird eggs, and when their clothing wore out they stitched together the hides of the animals they had killed. But the resemblance between the two sets of hunters was superficial. The Aleuts had always lived in a conscious
harmony with nature and instinctively knew how to use its resources wisely; the Russians knew nothing of nature's rhythms and therefore were senselessly destroying the fur seals on which they depended.

Most of the early Russian hunters on the Pribilofs remain nameless, but one in particular left his name and reputation behind on the beach he commandeered. Lukanin, a notorious Russian promyshlen-niki, had mistreated Aleuts everywhere he had gone. On St. Paul he also abused the animals. In the summer of 1787 he was reputed to have killed over 5,000 sea otters and many more fur seals with the help of another hunter, Kaitkov. The next summer he caught no more than 1,000 sea otters and after that year sea otters rarely were seen on the Island.24 The beach which had become barren of all its original life was left with nothing but his name.25

The End of Pribylov's Life

The individual names of the two islands have remained unchanged almost 200 years since they were discovered. But the name of the islands as a group has shifted over time. Pribylov had actually only been the navigator of the ship, St. George; the owner of the ship, Lebeder-Lastochkin and his partner, Shelikhov, named the islands Zubor after Prince Platon Aleksandrovich Zubor who had done them many favors in St. Petersburg.26 However, other people called them the New Islands, the Fur Seal Islands, and the Northern Islands. Eventually it was Pribylov's name that was most closely associated with the islands and it was his name, spelled different ways, that was used to identify them.

The discovery of the Islands had come at an important time economically since the sea otters of the Aleutians had been decimated.27 After 1787 the fur seals replaced the sea otter as the most important fur resource in Russian-America. Over time, the income from the Pribilof Islands added a great deal of wealth to the Russian treasury, as well as to the different trading companies that operated out of the Islands. Unfortunately, the navigator who discovered the Islands never shared in the wealth that they produced.

After discovering the Islands Pribylov continued to be the chief navigator for the Lebedev-Lastochkin Company in the Aleutians. In 1791 Pribylov signed on as a navigator for the Billings scientific expedition. Captain Joseph Billings had been a member of Captain Cook's crew
on his visit to the Aleutians and was now returning with a commission from Catherine the Great to report on the Russian activities in this far-flung colony. The entire expedition, including Pribylov, wintered on Unalaska where the Aleuts told the members of the expedition of their abuse at the hands of the promyshlenniki. The expedition's report finally put an end to the wanton murders of the Aleuts, but did not eliminate the abuse they were subjected to.

In the next five years Pribylov became increasingly known as a heavy drinker and an unreliable sailor. His notoriety was heightened when Baranov, the new governor of Russian-America accused him of stealing his personal shipment of liquor that Baranov's brother had shipped him from Siberia. Pribylov began his last voyage in 1796 from Kodiak to Yakutat, but never finished it because of high winds. A year later he died on his ship The Three Saints, near New Archangel, an impoverished and friendless man.28

Pribylov's death came at the same time as the fur seal herd on the islands he had discovered were being rapidly diminished. By 1796 the indiscriminate killing of the seals had seriously reduced the numbers that had originally swarmed over the beaches of the Islands.29 Even though the Aleuts had continually warned the hunters that killing females and pups would ultimately destroy the fur seals, their warning was not heeded by men who wanted quick fortunes. Many skins were taken too hastily and were of no commercial value. Many other skins spoiled before they could be shipped back to Russia. Each summer fewer and fewer fur seals hauled up on the rocky beaches that had once held millions. With the decrease in the number of skins harvested each year the anxiety of the Siberian merchants increased again. However, the competition among the rival trading companies was too fierce for them to impose any self-discipline on themselves. They rashly demanded the finding of new fur islands as they had done when the sea otters almost disappeared, but this time there were no new fur islands to be found.30