

THE DISCOVERY OF UQAMAQ— CHIRIKOF ISLAND

As told by Arsentí Aminak, 1851



In 1851, Finish Naturalist Heinrich Holmberg visited Alutiiq Elder Arsentí Aminak at Aminak's home. With help from an interpreter, Holmberg recorded this story about Chirikof Island. Alutiiq place name spellings are updated here.

"Earlier, our people often celebrated games and dances, at which the guests were usually treated with food and gifts. To celebrate such feasts we sometimes traveled to Ugak Bay; at other times the Ugak Bay inhabitants came to us, to Aiaktalik. Once, such a feast was to be celebrated at our place—it must have been many years before the first Russians arrived, for I was yet unborn at that time—and, among others, a relative of my father left Ugak Bay with a companion in a two-oared baidarka. When they had passed the strait between Sitkalidak and Kodiak, a heavy fog arose, and because the wind had probably changed direction without them noticing it, they got lost and rowed day and night. As the weather cleared they spied an island which was unknown to them; they landed on it and called it Uqamaq. There were many sea otters and evrashkas [ground squirrels] on the islands, and much amber lay on the shore. They stayed there for one month and, when they left, filled the baidarkas with these treasures. Where should they go, though? Trusting to luck they rowed north, rowed and rowed, and finally saw the mountain of the Alaska Peninsula, which was foreign to them. Thus they came to Katmai, whose inhabitants (Aglegmiuts) were hostile to the Koniags although they spoke our language. They immediately fell upon the strangers, seized their treasure, and were about to kill them, but an enemy chief saved them on condition that they should lead him to the island of the many treasures. In two large baidarkas they now set out for Uqamaq, and soon clubbed to death many sea otters on the shore, stabbed evrashkas with spears, gathered much amber, which was very valuable, and returned to Katmai. As a reward for their services the chief gave the lost ones an escort to Ayakulik portage, from which they went to my father at Aiaktalik, where they had been believed dead after half a year's absence. My father readily accepted the relative who, in happiness at being saved from so many dangers, presented the island and all its treasures to my father as a gift."

Holmberg, Heinrich J., 1985, Holmberg's Ethnographic Sketches.

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Uqamaq Village, ca. 1860, watercolor by Vincent Colyer.
Courtesy of the Beinecke Library, Yale University.



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