

Background: Attu Prehistory and History

By Rachel Mason, with Prehistory section adapted from Corbett et al. 2010

Attu's remote beauty has always impressed visitors, but its beauty is often hidden by fog, wind, and rain. In a 1994 student paper, Jennifer Jolis wrote:

Attu Island. Forty-two miles long, fifteen miles wide, mist-enshrouded, wind-whipped, mountainous, and mysterious, it lies at the western end of the Aleutian chain of islands, which curve across the top of the North Pacific like jewels in a necklace, connecting North America with its past. These volcanic islands are the crest of a submarine ridge approximately 1,400 miles long, twenty to sixty miles wide, and 12,000 feet high above the ocean floor to either side. The islands separate the North Pacific Ocean to the south from the Bering Sea to the north. Coming together over the islands these systems clash and mingle, giving rise to climatic conditions that have earned them the sobriquet "birthplace of the winds." At any time of year warm moist air from the Pacific, meeting the frigid arctic air of the Bering Sea, can produce gale force winds, dense fog to sea level, or brilliantly clear sunny skies, followed in moments by rain squalls and more fog. Attu is the westernmost island in this arc, indeed, the westernmost point in North America. At longitude 173 degrees East it lies over 1,100 miles from the mainland of Alaska and less than 550 miles from the Kamchatka Peninsula of Russia. The island's volcanic origins have produced a terrain of steep mountains rising from a deeply indented coastline with an abundance of bays and inlets. In summer

wildflowers bloom in brilliant profusion in the alpine tundra, lovely surprise for anyone who looks closely: orchid, monkshood, lupine, rhododendron. The British botanist Isobel Hutchison collected 69 species in less than two hours at the end of the 1936 season and estimated that a complete sampling would rival Unalaska's 350 species. The long beach grasses bend and sway to the earth before the winds that sweep across the hills, mimicking the waves in the coves and bays. On foggy evenings the calls of loons and eiders sound lonely, lost, otherworldly. The upwelling produced by the convergence of the northern and southern waters around the islands produces a marine life of great richness and variety. The sea is home to sea otters, sea lions, harbor seals, the occasional whale, migrating waterfowl and gulls, halibut, salmon, greenling, flounder. Although numbers of all species have diminished over time, the area continues to be one of the most rich and productive in the world, boasting the world's largest number of sea mammal species. (Jolis 1994:3)

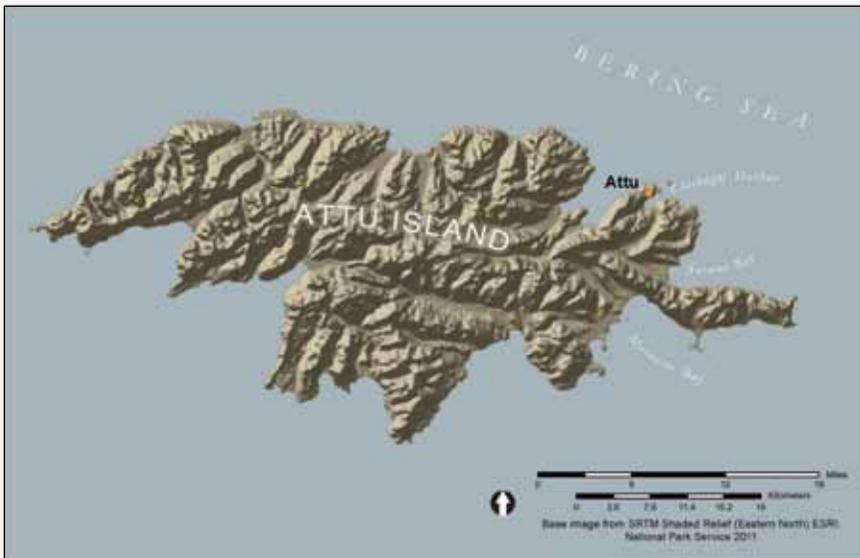


Fig. 7. Map of Attu Island.

Attu Prehistory (Adapted from Corbett et al. 2010)

Attu is one of the Near Islands, so named because they are the nearest Aleutian Islands to Russia and Asia. They are not very near to the mainland of Alaska; Atka, the closest village in that direction, is 500 miles away. In spite of being so far from mainland Alaska a surprising amount of archeological work has been attempted in the Near Islands. Most of the work has emphasized the distinctive culture of the Near Island Unangan.

Beginning in 1874 William H. Dall (1877), a surveyor with the Coast Survey, excavated village sites on Attu, Agattu, and Amchitka as well as islands further east. He was followed by Waldemar Jochelson (1925), leading an expedition sponsored by the Imperial Russian Geographical Society and the wealthy Riaboushinsky family. His team spent 19 months in the Aleutian Islands excavating sites on Unalaska, Umnak, Atka, and Attu. In 1909, they excavated three sites on Attu. One, a post-Russian site they called “Sin,” was near the 20th century winter village on Chichagof Bay. A second site, also from the historical era, was near the summer village at Sarana Bay. At the third, called Nanikax, on Lastova Bay, the crew found 15 pits (Jochelson 1925:24). A typical prehistoric Unangan winter settlement consisted of a few large houses with several families in each. Summer homes, less permanent, were smaller and housed only one family (Corbett 1990:9). Jochelson found human remains in kitchen midden near the village sites, but later research indicated that most burials were in specially constructed houses within the village. Unlike other Unangan, it appeared the people living in the Near Islands did not use caves for burials or practice mummification (Jochelson 1925:46; Laughlin and Marsh 1951:82).

Alĕs Hrdlička (1945), a physical anthropologist at the Smithsonian, spent a summer working on Agattu. A member of Hrdlička’s field team, Alan May, excavated a site near the village in Chichagof Harbor.

In the 1950s, after the war, 1950s, Albert Spaulding (1962) excavated at Krugloi Point, Agattu. Since then, most professional work in the Near Islands has consisted of site surveys notably by Ted Bank II in 1948 and the National Park Service in 1968 (McCartney

1974). In 1975, to aid in their Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act applications for historic and cemetery sites, the Aleut Corporation contracted with Bruno Frohlich and David Kojansky to survey the coast of Attu, where they found 12 archeological sites. In 1985, the U.S. Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) began investigating these claims in the western Aleutians on Amchitka in the Rat Islands. The Civil Rights Act of 1988 led to the BIA investigation of the historic village on Attu. BIA surveyed the rest of the Near Islands in 1988 and 1989. Corbett (1990) tested several sites on Shemya Island. Beginning in 1997 the Western Aleutians Archaeological and Paleobiological Project began 14 years of work to understand the history and lives of the Near Island Unangan. The teams excavated on Attu, Shemya, Buldir, Rat and Little Kiska Islands. The report for the work on Shemya has been published (Corbett et al. 2010), the rest of the work is still being analyzed.

Most archeologists agree that the Aleutians were settled from the east. The origins of the Near Island Unangan may be found in many places, but their deep roots as maritime hunters are found on the Alaska Peninsula, and eastern Aleutians. More than 9,000 years ago, land-based hunters developed the skills and technology to hunt sea mammals and fish offshore.

The earliest evidence of human occupation of the Aleutians, dated to about 8,000 years ago, is on Anangula Island in the eastern Aleutians (Laughlin and Marsh 1951). Recently, Anangula style sites have been found in Unalaska Bay (Knecht and Davis 2001). The distinctive tool kit consists of long narrow, parallel sided blades, burins for carving bone, and end and side scrapers. This technology is a variant of the widespread Paleo-Arctic tradition found throughout Alaska and parts of Siberia.

About 7000 years ago sites at Umnak and Akun still show a relationship with Anangula but people had added stemmed points, bifacial tools, and shallow semisubterranean houses. Dumond (2001) suggests this tradition shares similarities with the Ocean Bay tradition of Kodiak and the Alaska Peninsula.

By 5,000 years ago there were people in the Rat Islands, but as far as we know the Near Islands were still uninhabited. Between 4,000–3,000 years ago a distinct Margaret Bay tradition appears on

Unalaska and neighboring islands. The most notable aspect of this tradition is houses with stone walls, clay floors, and sophisticated fireplaces with external vents, chimneys and subfloor channels (Knecht and Davis 2001). By 3,000 years ago the Aleutian tradition as it is widely recognized was fully developed.

While the area could have been occupied as early as 2000 BC (BIA 1988:8-9), we will never know exactly when the first exploring parties landed on the Near Islands. They came from the east, from the Rat Islands. Young men, proving themselves, explored the new islands. These pristine islands with untapped hunting grounds must have electrified the people. By 3,000 years ago, there were several settlements in the Near Islands. The earliest colonists settled in areas with the richest resources; at Massacre Bay on Attu, at Aga Cove and Krugloi Point on Agattu, on the south coast of Shemya and where Alaid and Nizki connect.

Early inhabitants hunted fur seals in local rookeries, and caught huge cod at sea. A thousand years later smaller reef fish, and shellfish were more common. This switch prompted an increase in the use of small, jewel-like bone fishhooks to catch the smaller prey. The tool kit also changed. The oldest sites contain more, large cobble tools, including hammerstones, choppers, and abraders. Later, there is an increase in cutting and scraping tools. A variety of drills and chisels, ground stone knives, and adzes appear. Bone tools became more elaborate, with new styles of harpoon and spear points and awls and the addition of fishing gorges and woodworking chisels to the toolkit. The appearance of jewelry and other decorative pieces signals increased status differences between individuals.

Populations in the early settlements were small but by 2400 years ago had grown dramatically and many new villages appeared. The early villages were made up of a few houses, each occupied by an extended family, maybe 30-40 people. Before about 1000 years ago there were probably about 2,000 people in the Near Islands. Major cultural changes occurred sometime about 750 years ago. The population grew to possibly four times the size it had been earlier. Villages lined the coastlines of all the islands, and some with several hundred inhabitants. In each village one or two houses were substantially larger than the others. Larger communities need more

formal leadership than family based hamlets. When the Russians arrived in 1745 they reported that village chiefs built large houses to care for orphans and the poor, and for communal ceremonies.

The Near Island culture was firmly rooted in the ancestral Aleutian tradition, extending back to Anangula and even further to the Alaska Peninsula. At the western end of the Aleutian Islands they were free to develop their own unique traditions, and their culture became one of the most distinctive variants of the historic Unangan people. The *Sasignan* were the Unangan group that inhabited the Near Islands, including the people of Attu, Agattu, and the Semichi Islands (Bergsland and Dirks 1990:2).

Russian Colonialization

Because the Near Islands were the closest populated lands to Russia, the people of those islands were the first to be contacted in the 18th century. Crews of *promyshlenniki* (fur hunters and traders) that included both Russians and Kamchadals were assembled in the Russian Far East to travel to the Aleutians (Laughlin 1984:315). With the arrival of Russian fur hunters off Agattu in September 1745, the world of the Aleuts changed forever. The Russian crew was met on shore by 100 armed men and moved instead to the less populated Attu Island (Berkh 1974:16). The Russians captured an old woman and a boy, keeping the boy to train as translator. Within a few weeks, a Russian party attacked another settlement and killed 15 men to get women. These violent acts are recorded by the names Murder Point and Massacre Bay on Attu.

Between 1745 and 1799, 80 Russian hunting parties worked in the Near Islands, mostly on Attu. In 1750, Andreian Tolstykh introduced arctic fox to Attu Island from the Commander Islands. In many places in the Aleutian Islands, the company encouraged the introduction of breeding pairs of foxes as crop animals (Black 1984:101-102).

Because the initial Russian hunting pressure was concentrated in the western Aleutians, the sea mammal population declined quickly in the Near Islands. The hunters went further east, to the Fox Islands, where there were more sea otters and foxes. They continued to stop in the Near Islands to collect tribute and to press the residents into service as hunters (BIA 1988:17).

The effects of contact were devastating. Within a few years, the population had declined greatly because of disease and because of the hardship of forced labor for the Russians (BIA 1988:18). By 1762 the merchants Cherepanov and Kul'kov estimated a total population of 100 for the island group (Liapunova 1979).

Each Island had its own chief. Agattu was politically dominant at contact, but by the 1760s, power had shifted to Attu. Chief Bakutan and his second chief Chintuyach were based on Attu, and most people had moved to that island. The move was prompted by many factors including population collapse, a desire to be near the Russians and their trade goods, and protection by the Russian presence from raids by their eastern neighbors (Black 1984:73).

In 1799, the Russian government granted the Russian-American Company a 20-year monopoly on the Pacific fur trade. The Attuans remained independent of Company control, they hunted for themselves and traded with the Russians. By the end of the 18th century, the small community, with 20 able bodied men, occupied two settlements: one in Massacre Bay, and the other at the mouth of Chichagof Harbor.

In 1805, the Russians moved people from Adak or Amchitka, called Atkans,¹⁸ to Attu. They built a Company settlement at the head of Chichagof Harbor. A visitor in 1811 reported poor conditions in the new settlement. No ship had stopped there for five years, and supplies were low. Some of the Atkans had left Attu, and the only Russians remaining were the manager and one other man. The Attuans were living separately from the Atkans, and were more independent of the Russian company, although they traded furs in return for goods such as thread, guns and ammunition (Black 1984:159-161). In subsequent years, the number of Attuans decreased, while the Atkan settlement grew (BIA 1988:18-19). By 1830, the Chichagof Harbor village was the only permanent winter settlement.¹⁹

¹⁸According to the late Lydia Black, none of the "Atkans" was really from Atka (Debbie Corbett, pers. comm., 2011).

¹⁹The Russians also moved Unangan to settle the Commander Islands to the west. Between 1814 and 1816, some of the relocated "Atkans" and several Attuans were taken from Attu to the Commander Islands (Lantis in Oliver 1988: xxiv). Other transfers from Attu followed. Even after Russia's 1867 sale of Alaska, in 1872-1873 a group of 38 Unangan hunters and their families, mainly from Attu, moved to the Commander Islands (Black 1984:105). The Attuan dialect once spoken on Copper Island, one of the Commanders, was creolized, with Russian verbal inflection (Bergsland and Dirks 1990:5, 7fn).

Although the first baptism took place on Attu in 1758, predating the arrival of Russian Orthodox clergy, it was 1825 before a chapel was in existence there. When the priest Iakov Netsvetov, a “Creole” of mixed Russian and Unangan descent, was appointed to head the Atka parish in 1828, his duties included regular visits to Attu and other outposts such as Amlia and Bering Island. Netsvetov made his first trip to Attu in 1831, noting at that time that the language spoken on Attu was different from the one on Atka. Netsvetov counted 120 Unangan and Creoles in a company settlement at Chichagof Harbor. All of them were baptized, but he said the Attuans were more independent and superstitious than other Unangan. At the time most Native residents lived in barabaras (sod houses), but the village also included three houses, a store, and a chapel (Netsvetov 1980:33-34). According to his records, the priest’s next visits were in 1833 and 1838 (Netsvetov 1980:79, 173-174). Local people maintained the chapel during the several years that might elapse between visits from a priest.

Sea otters were the focus of the Russian company’s interest. Company hunters left for the Semichi Island hunting grounds for sea-otter hunting in November and December. The hunters returned to Attu in December to trap foxes until spring. Attuans accompanied the Atkans to the Semichis and Agattu to hunt, but did not trap foxes (Khelbnikov 1994).

After each May, subsistence pursuits took over from commercial hunting. Red salmon were caught from in weirs at fish camps in Sarana and Massacre Bays and dried for winter. Barrels of salmon were also salted. Men traveled along the north coast of Attu hunting driftwood, accompanied by women who fished on the reefs and gathered grass and edible plants. Sea lions and seals were hunted where and whenever found. Except for tea, sugar, molasses, and biscuits, the islanders were self-sufficient in food. They traded fox and sea otter furs for rifles, shot and powder, and fiber to make nets. The most sought after goods were wool worsted, linen, Chinese cotton and silk, velveteen, velvet, and taffeta. Finished clothing, such as vests, shirts, trousers, caps and hats, and silk shawls was also popular. Other necessities included cooking vessels, copper tea kettles, casks, wooden beams, and needles and thread.

A Russian-American Company census of Attu in 1860 found 227 Unangan and 21 Creoles including the company manager.

About 50 men and 10 women were sent out each year to hunt, and furs were shipped out at the end of each year's hunt. The village included a chapel, a wooden house, a bathhouse, a barracks, a wharf and a store (BIA 1988:19).

Attu in the American Era, 1867-1942

After the sale of Alaska in 1867 to the United States, a decline in services on remote islands contributed to a dramatic drop in the population. By 1880, the village had 107 inhabitants, down from 220 in 1870 (Scammon 1874; U. S. Census 1884). The economy depended on sea otter and fox furs.

In the first decades of the 20th century, Attu received few visits from outsiders. Those who did visit the remote island were impressed with how clean and neat the village was, and how friendly and happy its residents. In 1909, Attu was one of the sites Waldemar Jochelson studied with the Aleut-Kamchatka Archaeological Expedition. The party arrived June 15 and stayed in the island's winter village in Chichagof Harbor. A few days later they moved with the Unangan to Sarana Bay, the summer village, where they remained until early August (Jochelson 1925:16-17). The village teachers' files show that in the same year, 1909, there was an attempt to place reindeer on Attu, as part of educator Sheldon Jackson's program to institute new ways of life among Alaska Natives. The effort to make Attuans into reindeer herders was not successful.

The 1920s brought high fox prices and prosperity to the islands. A. B. Sommerville had leased the Semichi Islands in 1911 and planted 15 blue foxes there (Gray 1939:134). In 1922, Fred Schroeder of the Aleutian Fur Company bought Sommerville out and planted foxes on Agattu, and built cabins on Shemya and Alaid (Golodoff 1988).

The Aleuts on Attu replaced their sod barabaras with frame houses (Gray 1939). A wooden church, built of materials purchased with proceeds from baskets made by seven women, was completed in the 1920s (Shapsnikov and Hudson 1974). A school was built in 1932 (Golodoff 1988; West 1938), but no teachers arrived until 1940. Trappers left home around October to restock and repair the nine cabins around the coast of Attu. Trapping began in November and ended in March. They returned to the village in January for the

holidays. The Attuans also trapped on Agattu, the Semichis, and in the Rat Islands on Rat Island proper. Islands were worked on a rotation, allowing fox populations to recover for several years before returning. Men trapping these other islands were often accompanied by their families.

Innokenty Golodoff (1988) described trapping on Shemya in 1938. Innokenty, his brother Willie, Willie's wife Julia, and their children Mary and Michael, along with three other adults travelled to Shemya in late fall. They took two dories, 5 hp motors, gas lanterns, fuel, tobacco, and staples such as flour, sugar, tea, and coffee. The cabin, a one-room frame structure, was located on the eastern shore of Alcan Harbor. Each man set about 10 traps and checked them on foot. They wore homemade sea lion-gut raincoats and sea lion-flipper boots in foul weather. When conditions permitted, they motored to Alaid and Nizki and trapped there.

The men hunted sea lions, seals, geese and ducks, on the offshore rocks around Shemya. The trappers also spent a great deal of time searching for driftwood to heat the cabin and for cooking. Trappers on the outer islands could remain in camp until May before a vessel arrived to take them home (Golodoff 1988).

In the 1930s and the beginning of the 1940s, Attu was the remote and peaceful place that visitors praised and that Nick remembers from his earliest years. The trader, Fred Schroeder, was the main source of store goods, cash, and credit in return for fox furs and baskets. Contacts with the outside world came when Coast Guard cutters stopped every few months. In the years just before the war, when fears of the Japanese were mounting, a radio was brought to Attu and Chief Mike Hodikoff was taught how to use it—a job Foster Jones, the teacher's husband, took over in 1941.

The Japanese invasion of the village in June 1942, and the other events related in previous chapters, ended forever the village's reputation as a remote paradise.