

Vitus Jonassen Bering (European Discoverer of Alaska)

netstate.com, U.S. Dept. of State, Encyclopedia Britannia, Alaska State Library, Explore North



Vitus Bering was a Danish navigator and notable explorer. He was born in Horsens, Jutland (Denmark) in 1681. When he was still a young man, he left for the sea and spent most of his life exploring. He joined the Russian Navy in 1703. He married a Russian Woman and fathered several children. In 1715 he made a brief visit to his hometown, never to see it again.

Bering distinguished himself during Russia's war with Sweden; and when it concluded he was employed by Russia to seek out the eastern-most limits of the north coast of Asia. In those days, much of the world was uncharted and it was still not known whether Asia and America were connected, or separate land masses. Commissioned by Peter the Great, Bering left St. Petersburg on February 5, 1725 leading an expedition that traveled across Siberia and set up a base in Kamchatka. From there, they constructed ships and prepared for sea. Finally, in 1728 he sailed through the strait that now bears his name, proving that indeed America and Asia were separate continents. The expedition returned to St. Petersburg in 1730.

Russia commissioned Bering for another expedition, an enormous undertaking that became known as The Great Nordic Expedition. Some say that ten thousand men took part in the quest to map the Russian-Siberian coast and the western coast of America as far south as Mexico. The 1733 expedition eventually spanned a decade.

In 1741 he commanded the *St. Peter* while Aleksey Ilich Chirikov (d.1748) commanded the *St. Paul*. They set out, rounded Kamchatka, founded the town of Petropavlovsk and then sailed west. Bering sighted the volcano, Mount Saint Elias, in 1741 and sailed past Kodiak Island.

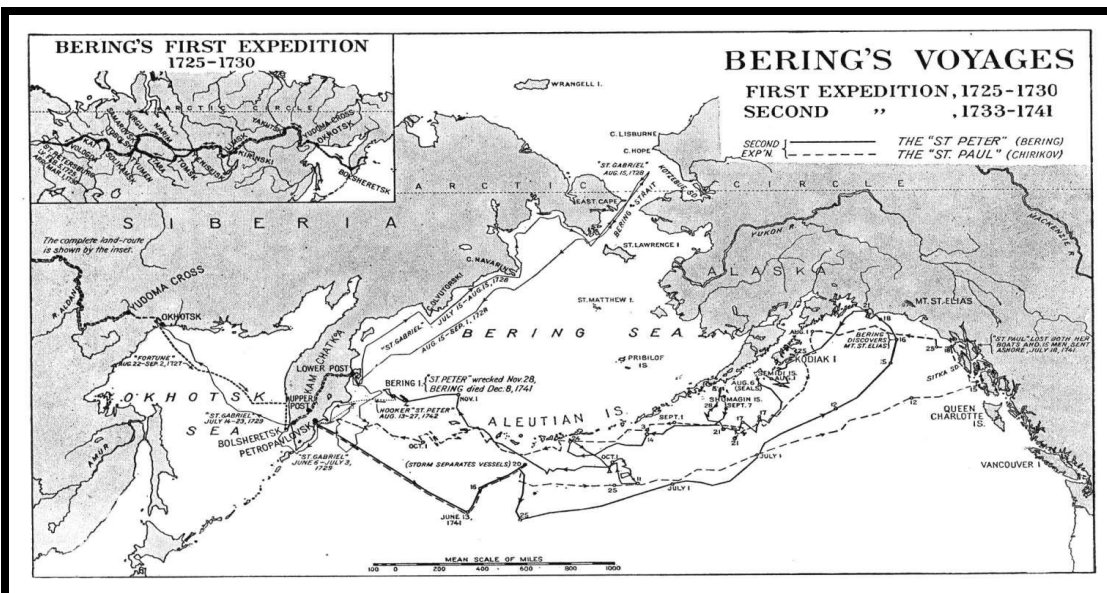
Storms and sickness prevented Bering from completing his explorations, however. Bering was soon forced by adverse conditions to turn around. He discovered some of the Aleutian Islands on his way back.

One of his sailors died at this time and was buried on an island there. Bering named this group of islands after him, they are known as the Shumagin Islands.

Bering, himself, became too ill to command his ship, which was at last wrecked on an uninhabited island in the Commander Island Group. In December of 1741 Vitus Bering died on this desolate island from scurvy, along with 28 men of his company. This island now bears his name.

The only surviving carpenter, S. Starodubtsev, with the help of the rest of the crew managed to build a smaller vessel out of the wreckage of their ship. The new vessel had a keel length of only 12.2 meters (40 feet) and was also named *St. Peter*. Out of 77 men aboard *St. Peter*, only 46 survived the hardships of the expedition which claimed its last victim just one day before coming into home port. Starodubtsev, returned home with governmental awards and later built several other seaworthy ships.

Vitus Bering's explorations paved the way for a Russian foothold in North America. Russia continued to have a keen interest in Alaska, but they never could afford a strong presence here. Russian Settlers in Alaska never numbered more than 400. The United States bought Alaska from Russia in 1867.



Vitus Bering's brave deeds and exploits will always be remembered.

MushHusky!
1-888-866-0156
mushhusky@acsalaska.net
www.mushhusky.com