



## Looking ahead to AHS fall conference in Fairbanks, Sept. 24-27, 2025

The Alaska Historical Society has adopted “Vital Lifelines in Alaska’s History” as its 2025 conference theme. Turn to page 12 for details. This image shows people at the Christ Church Mission in Anvik greeting the first mail of the season, which had arrived by sternwheeler. UAF-1985-72-148, Walter and Lillian Phillips Photograph Collection, APRCA, University of Alaska Fairbanks.

## AHS hosts national historian

One of America’s most prolific and preeminent historians, University of Texas Professor H.W. Brands, will travel to Alaska in March for two public presentations and meetings with history students in Anchorage and Fairbanks.

The author of more than 40 books, including two that were finalists for the Pulitzer Prize, will address the topic: “America: The Next 250 Years,” at 7 p.m. March 20 at the Anchorage Museum. At 5 p.m. on March 21, Brands will speak about his new book, *America First: Roosevelt vs.*

*Lindbergh in the Shadow of War*, at the BP Design Theater at the University of Alaska Fairbanks.

His first Alaska visit is part of the Alaska Historical Society’s Critical Issues Lecture Series, designed to raise the level of civil discourse and show how history can inform discussions of current issues. His Anchorage presentation is co-sponsored by the Cook Inlet Historical Society and the Alaska World Affairs Council and funded by a grant from the Atwood Foundation.

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H.W. Brands. Photo: University of Texas.

## PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE

# In marking the Semiquincentennial, let's examine the next 250 years

Will the United States still exist in another 250 years?



That essentially was the question posed by H.W. Brands, the nationally recognized University of Texas historian, to this year's sold-out writers festival near Palm Springs, California, a couple weeks ago.

Historians across the country have been gearing up to commemorate the first 250 years of America under the federally sanctioned "Semiquincentennial Celebration."

Although an expert on colonial America, Brands pushed the envelope by forcing participants to consider whether this country will make it through President Trump's second term, much less another 250 years.

I was keenly interested in Brands' presentation because the Alaska Historical Society has persuaded him to visit Alaska in mid-March. As the cover story details, Brands will give two free public presentations as part of our continuing Critical Issues Lecture Series focused on how to improve civil discourse and the vital role history plays.

Brands' latest of the 40 books he's written on American history is about the runup to World War II and the showdown between President Franklin Roosevelt and famed aviator Charles Lindbergh. It's especially timely because Lindbergh led an "America First" movement advocating U.S. isolation while FDR successfully persuaded Americans that "good people should act against bad people," as Brands put it.

A similar debate is underway as the president decimates the federal entity President John Kennedy established to administer U.S. aid and development assistance across the globe. And he's burning bridges with our closest allies through tariffs, broken commitments and waving a white flag to Putin.

Last month in the California desert, Brands was among 55 of the nation's top writers, historians and political commentators such as Doris Kearns Goodwin, Bill Gates, Douglas Brinkley and Liz Smith. Even

the most conservative argued Trump's actions in recent weeks constitute a threat to American democracy, the likes of which we haven't experienced since the Civil War and WWII.

Less than two months into his term, fears about the impacts of those policies are widespread. Alaska is especially vulnerable to tariffs on Canadian goods because of our over-size reliance on their timber, agricultural products and food. Alaska nonprofits, universities and immigration advocates already are experiencing bottle-necked federal grants and ideological restrictions. Services and benefits provided by many agencies, from the National Park Service to Social Security, may be crippled by random firings.

Over opposition from most Alaskans, Trump unilaterally changed the name of Alaska's tallest mountain, Denali, to honor a 19th century imperialist president who never stepped foot in Alaska and believed Indigenous peoples inferior. The AHS commends U.S. Senators Lisa Murkowski and Dan Sullivan for acting on our request to pursue legislation to return the mountain's rightful name.

Rather than focusing on today, Brands forced conference attendees to think big picture. He reminded us America's foundations were built when our population was just 2.5 million and slavery was legal in all 13 colonies. Concepts we take for granted today, such as capitalism and human rights for all, were unheard of in 1776.

Territorial acquisition dramatically expanded the size of America in its first century. With Greenland, Canada and even the Gaza Strip being eyed as new American possessions, could America grow even larger? Or will we shrink as secession efforts in states such as California gain momentum?

If our international stature continues to decline under the guise of America First, will the national language of future generations of Americans become that of more dominate countries, Chinese or Russian?

As we reflect back on our first 250 years as a nation, a rigorous public conversation about the United States today and how the next 250 may develop should be on the agenda of historians and others who will shape the future.

—David Ramseur



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# Society fights to protect, promote Alaska history

In response to President Trump's renaming of North America's tallest mountain without public consultation, the Alaska Historical Society called on Alaska's congressional delegation to promptly introduce legislation to return the traditional name favored by Alaska Native peoples and most Alaskans—Denali.

In a January letter to U.S. Sens. Lisa Murkowski and Dan Sullivan and Rep. Nick Begich, the AHS notes Alaska Native peoples have long used names to describe North America's tallest mountain, all which reference "the great mountain," "the tall one" or "mountain-big." The name of America's 25th president, William McKinley, was attached to the mountain by a gold prospector passing through the region in 1896.

"Historians have come to judge McKinley as an imperialist who viewed colonized populations as inferior and incapable of self-government," the AHS wrote. "McKinley exemplified characteristics Alaskans have long resisted: discrimination and ill-treatment of indigenous peoples, exploitation by distant colonialists, and manipulation of markets for personal gain. He never stepped foot in Alaska. Rather than being ashamed of the name affixed to our state's most prominent landmark, Alaskans want to be proud of the symbol of our state's majesty and the rich history it represents."

On February 13, 2025, Murkowski introduced legislation to rename the mountain Denali and require that any reference in U.S. laws, maps, regulations or other records refer to the mountain as Denali. Sullivan is a co-sponsor of the bill.

• **Wickersham House** Troubled by reports that the State of Alaska will not open Juneau's Wickersham House to visitors this summer, the AHS wrote the state official who oversees the house requesting details about any plans.

In a December letter to Southeast Parks Superintendent Preston Kroes, the society noted that Judge James Wickersham is one of Alaska's most important historic figures. His house above the Capitol is designated a State Historic Site and listed in the National Register of Historic Places.

In a brief phone call in early February, Kroes reported his division does plan to open the house this summer, contingent on securing volunteers to staff it. He said his department is looking for another entity to operate it, such as an historical nonprofit.

The AHS is seeking a meeting with Kroes to further discuss opening the house to the public.

• **Civics Education Legislation** After last year's failure by the State Legislature to pass legislation requiring high school students to take a civics class, the bill's sponsor, Sen. Gary Stevens, has reintroduced the measure. Now titled Senate Bill 23,

the bill says Alaska public schools cannot graduate students who have not completed one semester of comparative government and civics education, which includes issues such as America's founding, constitutions of the United States and Alaska, and civil liberties and rights.

Stevens' SB29 died the final day of last year's legislative session. The measure received broad support, including from AHS, and passed the Senate but failed to reach a final vote in the state House. The new bill is co-sponsored by Anchorage Sen. Elvi Gray-Jackson.

• **Anchorage Municipal Library** After the AHS wrote Anchorage's new mayor Suzanne LaFrance requesting an update on the library in December, she announced the appointment of Marjorie Harrison as the new municipal librarian. Harrison has nearly 30 years of library and management experience in libraries across the U.S., working most recently as executive director of a 13-branch library system in Lake Charles, Louisiana. She is to start work in March.

The AHS also asked LaFrance for an update on plans to reestablish the Alaska Room at the Loussac Library. A 2017 flood led to closure of the room and division of the collection of 25,000 books, maps and other relevant materials. LaFrance has not responded to the AHS letter.

—David Ramseur

## Brands visit

*Continued from page 1*

While in Alaska, Brands also will meet with history students at the University of Alaska Anchorage and UAF, with Anchorage high school history students and with the 49 Writers.

A native of Portland, Oregon, Brands studied math and history at Stanford University. He earned a doctorate in history at the University of Texas Austin, taught at Texas A&M University and is currently the Jack S. Blanton Sr. Chair in history at UT.

Brands' latest book recounts the fierce debate over the U.S. entering World War II through its two most important figures: President Franklin Roosevelt and aviator

Charles Lindbergh. It also has lessons for today's current debate over "America First" policies.

Brands holds a progressive view of the nation's founders and the U.S. Constitution, arguing the founders were at heart radicals who were willing to challenge the status quo in search of a better future. He believes Americans today should not be constrained by the views of self-government held by the founders.

"In revering the founders, we undervalue ourselves and sabotage our own efforts to make necessary improvements in the republican experiment they began," Brands has said. "Our love of the founders leads us to abandon and even betray the principles they fought for."

Other Brands books include biogra-

phies on Benjamin Franklin, covering the colonial period and the Revolutionary War; on Andrew Jackson, covering the War of 1812 and western expansion; on Ulysses S. Grant, covering the Civil War and Reconstruction; on Theodore Roosevelt, covering the industrial era and progressive movement; and on Franklin Roosevelt, covering the Great Depression, New Deal, Second World War and the ascension of the U.S. as an international power.

In addition to his books and articles, Brands publishes a regular column, *A User's Guide to History*, on Substack.com.

Brands' presentations are free to the public. The Alaska Historical Society's website has information on how to join online.

—David Ramseur

## MUSEUM/HISTORICAL SOCIETY PROFILE

# Haines museum strives for honesty, accuracy

The Chilkat Valley—with its abundant food resources, access to ancient trade routes from the head of Lynn Canal and millennia of occupation by Indigenous people followed by Americans—holds a unique place in Alaska history.

The Haines Sheldon Museum aims to more fully share the story of this special site through a new main exhibit to be unveiled in 2026. New illustrations and infographics, along with three levels of text detail, will be part of the makeover.

“It’s going to appeal to a wider range of people while also maintaining a heavy focus on history and culture,” said Brandon Wilks, executive director.

The museum began with 8-year-old Steve Sheldon’s purchase, in 1893, of a piece of the original transatlantic cable for a museum he imagined having one day. After he moved from Ohio to Haines in 1911 and married, the couple began 50 years of collecting Tlingit art and a wide array of other objects. Their daughters later donated that collection to the community. The Haines Women’s Club led efforts to start a museum, which was dedicated in 1980 by the Haines Borough.

Like Sheldon, Wilks got hooked on history as a boy. After hearing the story of the Battle of Bunker Hill from his father while growing up in Eagle River, Wilks became an avid consumer of history books. He later served with the U.S. Army in Afghanistan, earned bachelor’s degrees in English and history from the University of Alaska while living in Juneau, then moved with his wife to Haines in 2021.

With his Texan father descended from a “long line of pioneers” and his mother a member of the Clallam tribe in Washington state, Wilks eschews the “us-and-them view of history” common in many museums. The new exhibit will focus more on location and resources and less on differences in cultures and peoples.

“History is full of ugliness and contention and conflict but it is history, and we need to tell it accurately and without favor,” Wilks said. “It’s important that



The main exhibit, “Everything From Afar Drifts Ashore,” includes a dugout canoe created by Tlingit carver Wayne Price. The exhibit, which explores Tlingit and non-Native interactions and culture 1850-1900, will be replaced in 2026. Photo courtesy Haines Sheldon Museum.

we not gloss over the importance of either Alaska Natives or pioneers who came later. We do not exist as a town or as a museum without all of it together.”

Accessible by road, ferry and cruise ship, Haines, population 1,770, sees more than 100,000 visitors annually. Most of the 5,000 museum visitors in 2024 were cruise ship passengers.

Three full-time staff host lecturers, researchers and local student field trips; operate a museum store and coordinate volunteers and seasonal workers; post on social media, write grants and develop a budget with the Haines Borough; collaborate with local Native organizations; develop exhibits, sometimes with contractors; and care for a collection of over 4,500 artifacts, 12,000 photos and countless historic documents. Reaccreditation with the American Association of Museums is underway.

The museum has produced original publications about Haines and the museum. A book about Fort William H. Seward is currently in the works. The fort was completed in 1904 to monitor gold rush traffic. From 1925-1940 it was the only active Army post in Alaska. A National Historic Landmark, the fort buildings today are private homes and businesses.

Aside from the main gallery, a smaller space houses traveling exhibits and temporary exhibits from the museum’s collection. The current Alaska Indian Arts exhibit, featuring local carvers, weavers and other artists who were part of a Native arts revitalization from the 1950s-1970s, will soon travel to other Alaska museums.

A new art wall provides space for area artists to display work in a rotating “six-week spotlight” series. Another initiative to keep locals coming to the museum is First Friday events. “We also like to do mini exhibits—especially during the down season—that our community can participate in, bringing in photos and stories of loved ones,” Wilks said.

The museum’s board members volunteer and give financial support. Several years ago they negotiated a separation from the borough, making the museum an independent nonprofit. The borough owns the building and land and supplies substantial funding. The museum owns the collection, and projects are supported by grants and private donations.

Visit [sheldonmuseum.org](http://sheldonmuseum.org) to find a trove of details about current and past exhibits, informational videos, written historical vignettes and more.

—Carol Gales

# Helping young Alaskans value their history motivates this anthropologist to AHS service

Patricia Partnow's anthropology background and love for history as the "telling of stories" led to her join the Alaska Historical Society board in June 2023, and she now serves as treasurer.

Partnow also was drawn to the board by the creative individuals who were already serving. She had worked with many and appreciates their knowledge and collegiality.

"The society's greatest strength is what it can do for Alaska as a multi-cultural organization helping Alaskans understand their history as a process of storytelling, one that contains many voices," she said.

Partnow points to the society's support for Alaska History Day as a way of making a difference in students' lives and their understanding of who they are as Alaskans. She also points to the society's recent Critical Issues Lecture Series as a high point for the organization.

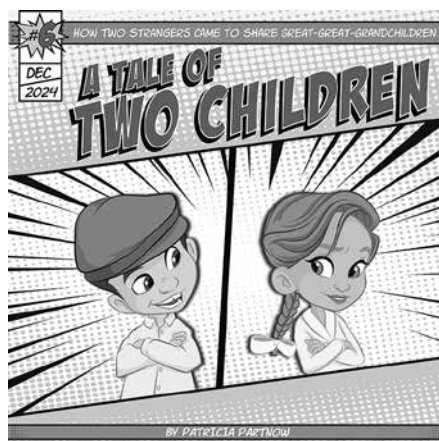
"These programs explore issues facing Alaska. They allow experts to share their research and encourage audience members, who come from all over the state, to examine the evidence in the context of their own experiences," she said.

The daughter of a career Marine pilot, Partnow was born in Oceanside, California, and has lived all over the U.S. She graduated high school in Newport, Rhode Island, and then attended Brown University and graduate school at Northwestern University.

She received her Ph.D. in anthropology at the University of Alaska Fairbanks, studying with a stellar group of Alaska historians and anthropologists: Clause Naske, Dick Pierce, Bill Schneider, Phyllis Morrow, Jeff Leer and advisor Lydia Black.

Her dissertation focused on oral traditions and stories shared by the descendants of those who fled the 1912 Katmai volcano eruption. Her descriptions of how people used oral traditions to define their ethnicity was published in the book, *Making History: Alutiiq/Sugpiaq Life on the Alaska Peninsula*.

Partnow came to Juneau in 1971 with then-husband Peter Partnow, one of the new Alaska assistant attorneys general hired by Governor Bill Egan. That was the beginning of the Land Claims era, which was rapidly followed by the construction



of the Trans-Alaska Pipeline.

Three years later they moved to Anchorage, and Partnow has been there ever since. She raised her son Seth, now a sports analytics expert specializing in the NBA and living in Milwaukee, and daughter Alix, a neurological veterinarian outside Seattle. Partnow has two grandchildren.

Until partial retirement, Partnow also held an Alaska teaching certificate and worked for many school districts including Anchorage, Lower Kuskokwim, Yukon Flats, Unalaska, North Slope Borough and others. She also has worked with museums and cultural centers in all regions of the state.

Above: Pat Partnow hiking in Chugach State Park. Left: The cover of the latest of 12 books of fiction Partnow has completed for her grandchildren. Images courtesy Pat Partnow.

Partnow's primary role as an anthropologist and educator has been as part of a team working with Indigenous knowledge-bearers to incorporate traditional knowledge into mainstream social studies, science and language arts curriculum. Partnow also has designed Alaska Studies high school courses for five Alaska districts. Although she has retired from working directly for school districts, Partnow still works as a contract anthropologist and educator as co-owner (with her son Seth) of Partnow Consulting and splits her time between Anchorage and Rancho Mirage, California.

Partnow used the Covid pandemic as the impetus to write and self-publish books of fiction for her grandchildren, using them as primary characters. Together with several talented illustrators, she has completed a dozen books. The latest is a graphic novel about the childhoods of two of her grandchildren' great-great-grandparents—one a Russian immigrant, the other a South Carolina toddler who was adopted and raised by a relative.

—Molly McCammon

## KODIAK

### Exhibit on 50 years of salmon limited entry

A new exhibit, *50 Years of Limited Entry: The Closing of Alaska's Salmon Commons*, created by the Kodiak Maritime Museum, opened at the Kodiak History Museum in January. The exhibition focuses on the conditions that created the salmon limited entry program in 1973, the effects of the program on fishing communities, and recent proposals to address unintended consequences of the program. The exhibit runs through April.

### City seeks to preserve Griffin Memorial building

The City of Kodiak is preparing its first historic preservation plan. One project the plan promotes is listing the Griffin Memorial Hospital building on the National Register of Historic Places. The Kodiak History Museum hosted a lecture and storytelling event in December for residents to remember and share information about the building. The hospital opened in 1940 with 18 beds. The hospital was named after Edward W. Griffin, secretary and acting governor of the Alaska territory, after he died suddenly of a heart attack on New Year's Eve in 1938 while addressing a gathering in Juneau. After a larger hospital was built in the 1970s, the Griffin building was used for medical offices and wellness care, but is no longer in use. One storyteller recalled, "When I brought my infant son to the Griffin Building for vaccinations in the mid-'90s, the public health nurse told me she had to shop for groceries late at night to avoid causing loud screams when she ran into children who recognized the person who had given them a shot." The City of Kodiak acquired the building in 2022.



Postcard of Griffin Memorial Hospital in the 1950s.

### Artifacts produce MacGyver-ed sunglasses

The Kodiak History Museum February newsletter featured MacGyver-ed sunglasses in its Historical Highlight article. The sunglasses are made of glass bottle bottoms, an old syrup can, copper wire and pipe cleaners. Collections manager Hannah Wolfe-MacPike said: "Creating a needed tool out of what you have is truly an Alaskan skill, a testimony for Alaska creativity and ingenuity."

## FAIRBANKS

### New inductees in Alaska Mining Hall of Fame

Last fall, the Alaska Mining Hall of Fame inducted mining pioneers Wendell Dawson, Keldon "Kelly" Adams and Karl Bachner. Dawson and Adams worked together on Prince of Wales Island. Dawson began his mining career in 1930, when he leased what became known as the Dawson Mine, near Hollis on Prince of Wales, from the Kasaan Mining Company. Dawson worked the mine intermittently between 1931 and 1952. Adams began prospecting in southeast Alaska in 1933 and mined around the old Puyallup mine on Prince of Wales. Later he was hired by Dawson, whose mine was nearby. Dawson put Adams and his partner to work cleaning the tailings from the Old Kasaan gold mine. Adams married Dawson's oldest daughter and moved Outside. In 1945 he brought his family back to Alaska to work the Puyallup mine. Later, he became an airplane mechanic and accomplished pilot in addition to a miner. Although Adams' marriage to Dawson's daughter didn't last, the two men remained lifelong friends.

Bachner, the third inductee, began mining for chromite on Red Mountain near Seldovia in 1953. He was important in the development of chromite mining in Alaska, including traveling to Washington to testify to the Senate Natural Resources committee on the needs of the growing industry.

## JUNEAU

### Grants available for Juneau history projects

Applications are being solicited for the Juneau History Grant, open to any individual or group with a good idea for preserving or sharing Juneau's history and culture. Past grant recipients have done live performances, public presentations, publications, interpretive signs, and have digitized historical photos and documents. Grants typically range from \$400 to \$1,200, but the committee will consider more substantial requests within its ability to subsidize them. Volunteers do most of the project work, with grant funds paying for services and supplies. This year's application deadlines are April 3 and Oct. 1. For details, go to the Juneau-Douglas City Museum's website ([juneau.org/library/museum/juneau-history-grant](http://juneau.org/library/museum/juneau-history-grant)) or call 907-586-3572.

### Nominations sought for Marie Darlin prize

Nominations are open for the annual Marie Darlin prize which recognizes outstanding artistic, literary, performative or scholarly work about the cultures and people of Southeast Alaska, the Yukon and British Columbia. Nominees must be U.S. citizens or U.S. tax-eligible and must have completed a work of enduring value within the last five years. Eligible projects can be fiction and non-fiction publications, art exhibits and performances of theater, music and dance. There is a cash prize of \$5,000. The deadline for submitting nominations is May 1, 2025. For more information, go to the Friends of Juneau-Douglas City Museum's website at [fojdc.org](http://fojdc.org), or call the museum at 907-586-3572.

## Peratrovich legacy honored by museum

February 16 was Elizabeth Peratrovich Day, recognizing the Tlingit woman who in 1945 gave a powerful speech about racism and injustice to the Territorial Senate during its debate on a bill banning discrimination. The Juneau-Douglas City Museum honored her legacy this year with a week-long program. Events included screening the film *For the Rights of All: Ending Jim Crow in Alaska*, and showcasing projects created by Juneau students. Museum admission was free in February thanks to the generous sponsorship of Michelle Storer.

## NENANA AND ANCHORAGE

### Alaska welcomes back railroad's golden spike

When the Alaska Railroad was completed in early 1923, the City of Anchorage presented a solid gold spike to Colonel Frederick Mears, the project's chief engineer. President Harding borrowed the spike to use in the railroad completion ceremony near Nenana in July 1923. The spike returned to the Mears family and was eventually sold. The famed Christie's put it up for auction this year and the Anchorage Museum and the City of Nenana partnered to acquire the spike. They will take turns exhibiting it to the public. The Golden Spike has returned to Alaska after almost a century!

## SOLDOTNA

### Three Reger brothers recall colorful life

At the Soldotna Historical Society's 2025 membership meeting, the featured speakers were three brothers who grew up in Soldotna. Dick, Doug and Paul Reger talked about their family's history in Soldotna starting in the early 1950s. Their father, Harry Reger, came to Alaska to work as a mechanic in Anchorage. He soon moved his family to Soldotna and started a business, Reger's Garage. At first, the Reger family lived upstairs. Later, as more workers came to Soldotna to work in the developing oil industry, Harry opened a restaurant called The Waffle Shop.



Reger's Garage and Waffle Shop. Photo courtesy Soldotna Historical Society.

## KETCHIKAN

### Seward's contributions to Alaska in focus

One of the Thursday noon programs at the Tongass Historical Museum in February was a virtual program with the Seward House Museum in Auburn, New York, to focus on William Seward. The presentation included discussing contested aspects of the acquisition of Alaska, and showing objects and artifacts from Seward's visit to Southeast Alaska in 1869 after he retired from public service.

## NOME

### 100th anniversary of Serum Run celebrated

In 1925, a relay involving 20 mushers and more than 150 dogs carried life-saving serum 674 miles from Nenana to Nome to battle a diphtheria epidemic. Musher Gunnar Kaasen, with lead dog Balto, arrived in Nome on Feb. 2 carrying the serum. A century later, the Carrie M. McLain Memorial Museum teamed up with the Nome Kennel Club and others to hold a celebration of the Serum Run's anniversary. Events Jan. 25-February 2 included the Sled Dogs on Parade Walking Challenge, storytelling and evening lectures on medicine, Nome's hospitals, details of the relay and the debate over using dogs and sleds vs. airplanes to deliver the serum.



Gunnar Kaasen and lead dog Balto. Photo: Public Domain.

## KENAI

### Renovations completed at cultural museum

The Kenai Chamber of Commerce and Visitor Center has operated a small cultural museum since 1991, with the same exhibit for more than 30 years. The museum was closed last fall for renovations and reopened in January with a complete makeover. Museum artifacts will now be rotated monthly. January's display featured the Kenai Peninsula's ancient history dating back to 8,000 BCE. In February, the exhibit focused on the area's Russian history. The museum is sponsoring a new history lecture series, entitled *The Kenai Chronicles*, as well as educational activities for children. The museum is open weekdays 9 a.m.-5 p.m., free to the public.

## HOMER

### Teacher and historian Mike Hawfield recognized

In December, the University of Alaska Anchorage recognized Mike Hawfield, long-time Alaska Historical Society treasurer, board member and generous supporter, with a well-deserved Meritorious Service Award. Mike retired a few years ago from teaching history at Kenai Peninsula College, holding classes in Homer, Soldotna and online. In addition to his support for AHS, Mike assisted Museums Alaska. He currently serves on the board of the Pratt Museum and is active with Hospice in Homer.

## PALMER

### Valley Colony project recalled

In 1935, the Matanuska Colony Project settled more than 200 families from Minnesota, Wisconsin and Michigan in the Matanuska Valley to encourage farming in the area. This year, the Palmer Historical Society celebrates the 90th anniversary of the project. The society's January/February newsletter contains selections from a 1936 radio interview with Colonel Lawrence Westbrook about the federal government's project. The colonel said that although many people outside Alaska think the climate is frigid, in fact the temperatures in the Matanuska Valley were milder than in some of the northern Midwest states. The soil and growing conditions in the Valley, he said, were superior to those in the Scandinavian countries where many of the Matanuska settlers originated.

Noting that 2025 also is the 30th anniversary of the Colony House Museum, the February History Night speaker was Bob Rieth (of the Church and Nelson Colony families). He shared family photos, newspaper articles and other documents and talked about preservation of historical materials.



When Midwest families arrived in the Matanuska Valley in May 1935 they were housed in tents before being given plots of land to farm. ASL-P270-130, Mary Nan Gamble Photographs, 1935-1945, Official Photographic Album, Alaska Rural Rehabilitation Corp., Matanuska Colonization, Alaska State Library.

## SEWARD

### Polar Bear Plunge marks 40 chilly years

This year marks the 40th anniversary of the Polar Bear Plunge in Seward, a jump into the icy waters of Resurrection Bay to celebrate the beginning of a new year. Emergency personnel, including several divers, are on hand in case there is a problem. A 2010 article in the *Seward Phoenix Log* suggested that participants prepare for the plunge by putting their arms into a bucket of ice water, and then imagining what it would be like to submerge one's whole body in freezing water. Marilyn Sutherland was a stalwart Polar Bear plunger for decades, earning her the title "Polar Bear Marilyn." Since 1986, the plunge has raised money for the American Cancer Society.

### Trusty Tusty celebrated on 60th anniversary

The *Tustumena* has been a member of the state ferry system since 1964. Residents of Seward, Homer, Kodiak and the Aleutian chain have many memories and stories about the big boat. In November, the Resurrection Bay Historical Society celebrated the Tusty's 60th anniversary at a lively Thursdays: Our History program, with former crew members in attendance. Many Seward residents and others miss the days when the *Tustumena's* home port was Seward.



Former crew members of the *Tustumena* ferry. Photo courtesy Resurrection Bay Historical Society.

## TENAKEE SPRINGS

### One-of-a-kind art exhibit features pioneer family

This summer, the Tenakee Historical Collection and Museum will offer a unique exhibit featuring the artwork of Richard "Dick" Zagars (1928-2023). Dick and his wife Sheila had a cabin in Tenakee Springs and spent a good part of their time there. Dick's daughter, Carrie Jo Rehfeld, is curating the exhibit, which includes paintings and personal items.

## ANCHORAGE

### Nike Site Summit friends branch out

Friends of Nike Site Summit has become a nonprofit organization after 17 years of operating under the umbrella of the Alaska Association for Historic Preservation. FONSS is grateful to AAHP for the longtime support and encouragement. FONSS continues its work to preserve structures and buildings associated with the site located in Arctic Valley, installing interpretive panels and educating visitors about Site Summit's role in the Cold War. Recently, the organization acquired a Hercules practice missile from the Museum of Alaska Transportation and Industry and mounted it at the Nike site. Their website is [nikesitesummit.net](http://nikesitesummit.net) and email address is [fonss2007@gmail.com](mailto:fonss2007@gmail.com).

### Pipeline event scheduled for March 27

"50 Years: Fueling Prosperity" is the topic of a free presentation about the start-up of the Trans-Alaska Oil Pipeline. Scheduled for 5:30 p.m. March 27 at the Petroleum Club of Anchorage, the event is sponsored by the new Alaska Oil & Gas Historical Society and will include materials and documents from the era. The Alaska Historical Society is working with the group to commemorate the 50th anniversary as part of AHS's 2025 conference.



## UNALASKA

### 1880s Bishop's House restored

The Bishop's House in Unalaska has been completely restored after a long process. As recognition for its preservation of the historic property, ROSSIA (Russian Orthodox Sacred Sites in Alaska) received a Stewardship Award in 2024 from the Alaska Association for Historic Preservation. The Bishop's House was designed in San Francisco in 1882 at the request of Bishop Nestor. The Victorian structure was built in California, dismantled and shipped in pieces to Unalaska, where the Alaska Commercial Company reassembled it at the location where it stands today. Sadly, Bishop Nestor died in a drowning accident before he ever got to live in the house. In August 2024, His Grace, Bishop Alexei, the current Russian Orthodox Bishop of Alaska, was the first bishop to stay there. ROSSIA began restoration work on the house in 2013. They hired Marc Daniels, an expert carpenter from California who specializes in restoring Victorian houses, to work seasonally on the project

Marc Daniels working on the Bishop's House in Unalaska. Photo courtesy ROSSIA.



## SITKA

### Presentation recalls repopulation of sea otters

Last July, the Sitka Maritime Heritage Society, with support from Allen Marine, sponsored a Wildlife and History Cruise with a focus on sea otters. Retired Alaska Department of Fish and Game biologist Jerry Deppa lectured on the reintroduction of sea otters to Sitka Sound. When the Russian colonists moved their center of operations to Sitka at the beginning of the 19th century, populations of sea otters had already been depleted in the Aleutian and Kodiak waters. After the U.S. acquired Alaska as a territory, American hunters

**National Archives seeks readers of cursive**

If you can read cursive, especially the handwriting of centuries past, the National Archives needs you! Volunteer Citizen Archivists are already working to transcribe handwritten historical documents. The National Archives depend heavily on AI to transcribe and digitize records, but there are some things only a human can figure out. One of several current Citizen Archivist projects is the Revolutionary War Pension Files Transcription Mission, which involves pensions, land claims, and other records of Revolutionary War veterans. To learn more and sign up to be a Citizen Archivist, go to [archives.gov/citizen-archivist/missions/revolutionary-war-pension-files](https://archives.gov/citizen-archivist/missions/revolutionary-war-pension-files).

further decimated sea otter populations. In 1967, Deppa and other biologists learned about the underground nuclear tests the Atomic Energy Commission were conducting on the Aleutian Island of Amchitka, and the expected toll of the blasts on scores of sea otters. They engaged AEC in discussions and the AEC funded relocating over 400 sea otters to seven sites in Southeast Alaska, including Sitka. Deppa described how the sea otters were caught in gillnets and transported by boat or seaplane to the release sites.

### Book details death of prohibition-era rum-runner

Juneau journalist Betsy Longenbaugh presented a murder history talk, "Death of a Rum-Runner," in January for a dessert fundraiser for the Sitka Maritime Heritage Society. The presentation told the true story of Billy Preston, a Juneau Prohibition-era bootlegger who met a violent end. Preston's killer was apprehended and brought to trial.

In February after their annual business meeting, SMHS members listened and shared stories about the now vanished community known as Mt. Edgecumbe, that was on Japonski, Alice and Charcoal islands that surround the city of Sitka. Moderated by Eric Jordan, panelists talked about growing up, living and working on the islands where once there were military facilities, a hospital and the BIA boarding school.

—Rachel Mason and Jo Antonson

# Seeking more judges for Alaska History Day competition

The countdown is on for Alaska History Day 2025!

Teacher and judge registration is open and student registration opened March 1. Last year 160 students entered projects in the state contest, with a team of 50 judges working to select category winners. We expect another exciting contest this year, with students creating exhibits, documentaries, research papers, websites and performances centered on the theme "Rights and Responsibilities in History."

There's no requirement to be in Alas-

ka to lend a hand, as our state contest is all online. A few judges are still needed to review student projects, work with fellow volunteers to rank them and offer suggestions for improvement to help students who advance to the next level.

The contest takes place April 3-9, 2025, with results announced April 11. Visit [ak.nhd.org](http://ak.nhd.org) to learn more and to sign up.

Donations help pay for awards and participation certificates to the 6th-12th grade students in the competition, and for materials and programming throughout the

year. To contribute go to <https://alaska-historicalsociety.org/membership> and look for the button to direct your donation to Alaska History Day.

AHS is in its third year as the sponsor organization for the program, the state affiliate contest for National History Day.

Questions? Please send an email to [alaskahistoryday@gmail.com](mailto:alaskahistoryday@gmail.com).

—Leanna Williams  
Alaska History Day Coordinator

# More Alaska papers to be digitized

At the Alaska State Library, we're thinking about old news. Specifically, old newspapers. Call 'em blabbers, broadsheets, papes, fish-wrappers, fly blisters, scandal rags—whatever the name, these periodicals are some of the most interesting and important historical resources we have available.

Though often sensational and sometimes blaring misinformation, disinformation or pure propaganda, newspapers are vital historical documents. They give context to the times they represent and insights into an ever-evolving world at the community level. Crucially, their articles also capture the voices of regular folks, voices which are underrepresented in the historical record.

Through the Alaska Digital Newspaper Program (AKDNP), more than 300,000 pages of historic Alaska newspapers have been digitized, and another 100,000 pages will be added by August 2026.

The purpose of AKDNP is to digitally preserve and provide free access to Alaska's newspapers in the searchable online database called Chronicling America ([chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/](http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/)). This site, funded by the National Endowment for the Humanities and facilitated by the Library

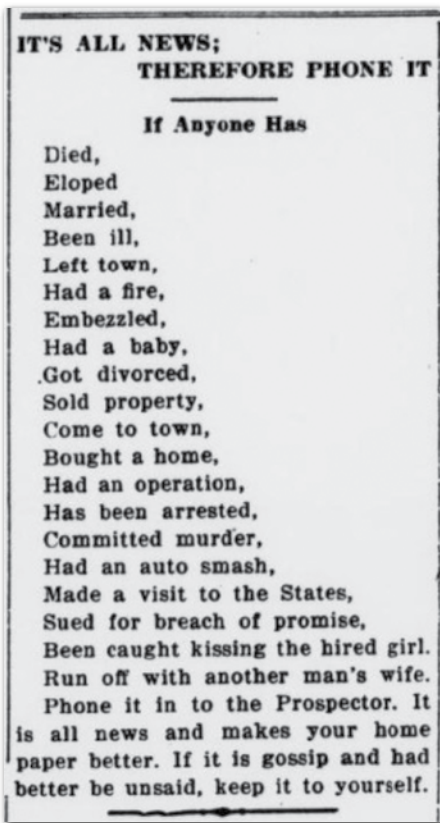
of Congress, allows users to search across thousands of U.S. newspapers going as far back as 1756.

Anyone can look up ancestors, spark a lesson plan idea, dive into first-hand accounts of major world events, or just check out some of the wild headlines of times gone by. (After all, yellow journalism had to walk so click-bait could run.)

A few titles we're planning to add over the next 18 months include:

- *The Glacier* (Fort Wrangell), one of the first newspapers with a focus on Alaska Natives.
- *The Alaska Times* (Sitka), possibly the oldest newspaper published in Alaska.
- *Council City News* (Council), among few surviving records from the gold rush years of the Seward Peninsula town.

Through AKDNP, we hope to provide an avenue for exploring Alaska's rich and complex heritage. Old newspapers teach us that history is not static, but rather a living, breathing, biased, beneficial, brutal and beautiful subject. Preserving the newspapers and honoring the stories and experiences of those who came before us (good, bad, and everything in between) gives greater context to our past, a deeper



Valdez Daily Prospector, July 23, 1917.

understanding of our present, and a hopeful foundation for our future.

—Gina Morris and Jon Henley  
Alaska Digital Newspaper Program

## AHS thanks members and donors for generous support

It's already the third month of our membership year. Thank you to those who renewed your memberships for 2025.

At the time of this writing, AHS has 282 active members. A shout out to members who renewed at the patron level, gave gift memberships and made an additional financial donation.

### 2025 PATRON MEMBERS

Judy Bittner, Anchorage  
Malin Babcock, Juneau  
Tom Buntzen, Fairbanks  
Rolfe Buzzell, Anchorage  
John B. Chenoweth, Juneau  
Viktoria Chilcote, McCall, ID  
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Carol Gales, Nome  
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Richard Mylius, Anchorage  
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### 2025 GIFT MEMBERSHIP DONORS

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Tom Williams, Fairbanks  
Tom Wolforth, Anchorage

### WELCOME TO 21 NEW MEMBERS

Alaska Oil & Gas Historical Society, Anchorage  
Patricia (Tricia) Brown, Anchorage  
Stefanie L. Busch, Anchorage  
Gus Bysted, Fairbanks  
Clayton Library Friends, Houston, TX  
Susan Derrera, Anchorage  
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Maria Lewis, Talkeetna  
Jeff Meyers, Salem, OR  
Shawnel Padilla, Eagle River  
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Jay Ramras, Pike's Waterfront Lodge, Fairbanks  
Joel Ribbens, Anchorage  
Christopher Setzer, Seattle  
Benjamin Seymour, Chelsea, MI  
Diane Shifflett, Tucson, AZ  
Joan M. Skilbred, Fairbanks  
Unalaska Public Library

# Today's Alaska has roots in Progressive Era

*Editor's note: Thomas Alton worked as an editor at the Alaska Native Language Center, University of Alaska Fairbanks, and received the Historian of the Year Award from the Alaska Historical Society in 2019 for his book Alaska in the Progressive Age: A Political History, 1896-1916. With much of modern Alaska's roots in the early 20th century Progressive Era, the AHS asked Alton for this timely article.*



The formative years of modern-day Alaska occurred during a time of broad social, economic and political reform in the United States. The Progressive Age (circa 1896-1916) witnessed advances in regulation of interstate commerce, working conditions for the laboring class, conservation of natural resources and restraints on monopolistic practices of giant corporate trusts.

It was an era in which one core belief prevailed: a strong federal government held a key role in accomplishing a measure of fairness in people's lives. Theodore Roosevelt, who assumed the presidency following William McKinley's death in 1901, viewed government as "the process of giving justice from above."

The Progressive Age extended its influence to Alaska as the population of the nation's northern possession grew dramatically following the 1896 discovery of gold in the Klondike. The rapid influx of prospectors, settlers and explorers prompted Congress to enact regulations and governmental structures where virtually none had existed before.

Legislation instituted systems of civil government and education and created a workable judicial system to serve the entire territory. In the two decades, Alaska developed mineral resources, birthed a structure of highway and railroad transportation and founded its major cities.

Specifically, Congress enacted legislation establishing civil and criminal codes for the territory, designating three judicial districts and placing a judge at the head of each one. It funded the Washington-Alaska Military Cable and Telegraph System, enabling communication between U.S. military forts from Valdez, Eagle, and Tanana to St. Michael and Nome. In 1906 it passed a bill providing a locally elected non-voting delegate to Congress, and in 1912 it recognized Alaskans' long-awaited demand for

self-government by establishing an elected territorial legislature.

But the greatest prize of all was the Alaska Railroad Bill, which President Woodrow Wilson signed in 1914. Its passage was seen as a victory for all Alaskans but especially for territorial delegate to Congress James Wickersham. First elected to office in 1908, the former federal district court judge had worked tirelessly in the halls of Congress on two issues desired nearly universally by Alaskans: the elected territorial legislature and the Alaska Railroad.

The railroad bill was a Progressive Era coup. First, it was a \$35 million federal



**The telegraph propelled Alaska's development, requiring workers such as this "Grizzly Gang," a quartet of old timers who "cut practically all the poles used in constructing telegraph line, and thousands of trees in opening right-of-way." UAF-1974-130-78, Edward R. McFarland Photographs, APRCA, University of Alaska Fairbanks.**

government response to an economic need in a developing frontier. Never before had Congress stepped in to build and operate a transportation system where private enterprise could likely have provided the same service. Secondly, it was a clear repudiation of the excessive power of an unregulated monopolistic corporate trust, namely the Morgan-Guggenheim Alaska Syndicate.

From its beginning in 1906, the Alaska Syndicate dominated the Alaska economy. The partnership was formed for the purpose

of extracting high-grade ore from one of the world's richest copper deposits, located in the Wrangell Mountains in the southcentral part of the territory. The worldwide mining enterprise headed by Daniel Guggenheim joined forces with the New York financier J.P. Morgan, and the new Alaska Syndicate moved quickly to develop the Kennecott copper mine. In addition, it owned the Copper River and Northwestern Railway, the Alaska Steamship Company and a salmon packing company Northwestern Fisheries.

Even more abhorrent to Alaskans, however, was the extent to which the syndicate flexed its political muscle. In Wickersham's view, the syndicate was nothing less than "the overshadowing evil" which threatened the future of the territory and the livelihood of every struggling pioneer. It enjoyed a virtual monopoly in railroad transportation in mainland Alaska and was free of any meaningful government oversight or regulation.

In 1914, the focus of the syndicate's political agenda was blocking the Alaska Railroad Bill. Where progressives saw a need to limit the reach of a giant corporate trust, the syndicate perceived a government railroad as unfair competition and intrusion into a free and open market. "Which shall it be," Wickersham shouted in congressional debate on the bill. "Shall the government or the Guggenheims control Alaska?"

It is fair to say that Alaskans held conflicting views of the powerful Alaska Syndicate. The business conglomerate exercised monopolistic control of much of the Alaska economy and brought its influence to bear in Washington, but at the same time it provided employment to scores of workers. "The Morganheims" should drop their campaign of misinformation and "attend strictly to building and operating railroads and mining copper and coal," one newspaper concluded. "Alaska needs their money, but it does not need their brand of political domination."

It was Alaska's good fortune to have experienced its early growth spurt during a propitious moment in American political history. Far from being neglected and abused, the territory benefited richly from federal government attention in the era of progressive democracy.

—Thomas Alton

# “Vital lifelines” is conference theme, call for papers opens

With Alaska marking two major anniversaries this year, the Alaska Historical Society has adopted “Vital Lifelines in Alaska’s History” as its theme for this fall’s annual conference scheduled for Fairbanks Sept. 24-27, 2025.

The theme has its origins in the 100th anniversary of the Nome Serum Run and the 50th anniversary of construction of the Trans-Alaska Pipeline System. Both encompass transport over hundreds of miles to deliver needed resources: life-saving diphtheria antitoxin to Nome and energy-providing oil through the pipeline.

Conference organizers welcome discussion of these anniversaries and examinations of other vital lifelines, including communications systems, transportation lines, pathways for accessing subsistence, medical and disaster relief delivery, among many others.

The conference theme also speaks to services and human resources that have sustained Alaska. The delivery of modern medical services has brought life-saving care to remote regions. Even with a long history of Alaskans maligning the federal government, federal funds are the most important driver of the state’s economy and constitute a vital lifeline. Today, software and information technology define Alaskans’ lives.

Despite settler myths of the frontier and self-reliance, Alaskans have always relied upon each other and outside resources to thrive. So too, Alaska’s Native peoples developed trade systems and patterns of seasonal travel that functioned as vital lifelines preceding colonization.

The AHS is now soliciting proposals for conference presentations. Please make them through our website, [alaskahistoricalsociety.org](http://alaskahistoricalsociety.org), and provide a title, 100-word abstract and two sentence biography. The deadline for proposals is May 31.

The conference will kick off with a welcoming reception on Sept. 24, with keynote presentations and papers scheduled for Sept. 25-27. The annual business meeting will be held Sept. 25. Conference organizers are planning for most sessions to be on the University of Alaska Fairbanks campus and are soliciting hotels for a conference rate and shuttle services.

—Jeff Meyers, Conference Chair



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## Please donate to support AHS’s work

Alaska Historical Society programs and projects are more far-reaching and ambitious than ever.

We bring nationally known scholars and speakers to Alaska, make our programs available in person and through streaming, advocate for broad public access to archives and library collections, support groundbreaking publications and research, and host an annual conference that is informa-

tive, interactive, cutting-edge and fun.

These activities are costly. Our annual budget is about \$75,000, and of that, 20% is paid for by dues and another 20% by receipts from our annual conference. And while we run a tight fiscal ship and seek grant funds whenever possible, we find we still need additional money.

This is where you come in: Please consider donating an amount in addition to your membership dues. Our goal for 2025 is slightly less than the \$17,000 you donated last year. This year, our budget will balance if we can raise \$15,000. There are many ways you can donate:

- Send a check to the Alaska Historical Society, P.O. Box 100299, Anchorage, AK 99510.
- Donate using the QR code below or the “Donate” button on our website homepage.
- If eligible for an Alaska Permanent Fund dividend, donate through the Pick.Click.Give. program.
- Bid on books and Alaskan ephemera during our annual silent auction.
- Consider adding the Alaska Historical Society to your will.
- Encourage your employer, if you work for a company that gives to nonprofits, to give to the Alaska Historical Society.

—Patricia Partnow,  
AHS Treasurer



## Annual auction needs contributions for fall conference

Donations of Alaska books, art, jewelry and ephemera are being sought for the annual AHS silent auction and bargain book sale held as part of our fall conference. The auction is an important element of the society’s fundraising efforts—and gets Alaskana to folks to enjoy or give as gifts.

A catalog will be in the September newsletter and on our website so anyone can bid often and bid high. But before then, please let us know (so they can be in the catalog) if you have great items to contribute by emailing [members@alaskahistoricalsociety.org](mailto:members@alaskahistoricalsociety.org)