

Alaska History News

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Homer Boat Harbor, about 50 years ago. Come to Homer for the Alaska Historical Society conference this October to see how things have changed! Homer Boat Harbor (b4-f16-16), Alaska Department of Fish and Game Historical Photograph Collection, 1950-1991, Alaska Resources Library and Information Services, on behalf of Alaska Department of Fish and Game.

“New Directions” theme of Homer conference

This fall’s annual Alaska Historical Society conference in Homer will focus on the impacts of global forces on local communities’ experiences, environmental changes and contributions of Alaska Native peoples under the overall theme, “New Directions in Alaska History.”

The conference is slated for October 7-10, 2026, at the University of Alaska Kachemak Bay campus. Proposals for conference presentations are being accepted now.

The society board adopted the theme to help bring attention to the importance of oral histories, cross-cultural interactions and the dynamic relationship between people and the land. In recent years, Alaska history has expanded beyond tradition-

al narratives of exploration, statehood and resource development to include a broader range of perspectives and themes.

The theme seeks to explore the social, economic and political transformations that have shaped Alaska throughout the 20th and 21st centuries. Topics such as urbanization, climate change and the evolving role of Alaska within both national and international contexts are now central to the study of the state’s history.

The conference will kick off with a full day of exploration inspired by the expansive work of the late University of Alaska history professor Steve Haycox. More than a dozen scholars who were influenced by Haycox’s research will examine topics from the resilience of Alaska Native peoples to

the influence of oil in state politics to the lasting impact of Russian culture and policy on the state.

The goal of this initiative is to convert the new historical research inspired by Haycox into a book.

Friday and Saturday will be devoted to presentations of historical papers, following a keynote address. Proposals for presentations at the conference are currently being accepted.

To propose a presentation, please submit a title, abstract of 100 words and two-sentence biography to www.alaskahistorical-society.org. Presentations are 20 minutes in length. The deadline for proposals is May 1, 2026.

—Jeff Meyers

New AHS board president works to trace dropped stitches

Greetings to fellow supporters of Alaska history!

I am honored to serve as the new president of the Alaska Historical Society, and equally honored to sit on a board alongside 15 accomplished and dedicated peers.



It is a challenge to follow David Ramseur, AHS president for the past four years. Readers of this column

know him as a deep thinker, a researcher, a person who knows pretty much everyone in Alaska. Those on the board know him as an organized, hard-working and dedicated leader and a consummate fundraiser.

I am an anthropologist by training and ethnohistorian by inclination and practice. I have worked with Alaska's museums, school districts, tribal organizations, state and federal agencies and cultural centers for more than half a century.

Most of my work has involved what I consider translation—not from one language to another, but from one set of cultural premises and perceptions to another. In order to do the work, I partner with those who are culturally different from me. My professional experiences have taught me the necessity of bringing a variety of perspectives to any explanatory work about Alaska.

Current events demonstrate a truism that has guided historical study for a century, that history is not a linear progression from the primitive to the enlightened. Every day we are reminded of this as we witness messiness: a tendency, if not toward entropy, to sideslip or backslide in directions some had thought our nation left behind. The world seems inexplicable.

It is the historian's job—by which I mean not just academicians but all of us who engage in historical thinking and writing—to make the inexplicable understand-

able; to inject some order into the chaotic picture. Historians offer a way of understanding our present by tracing dropped stitches or following loose threads from the past. We express and uncover suppressed knowledge and unvoiced perspectives.

The historian's role is thus essential.

At the same time, the audience must expand as our need for understanding increases. Cathy Gorn, the retiring head of National History Day, explained in a January 14 press release:

[O]ur nation is unfortunately weak when it comes to civic engagement and an appreciation and understanding of the past. As we saw with recent cuts to the National Endowment for the Humanities and other programs involving history, it is ever more important for NHD to speak about the importance of history education, to advocate on behalf of teachers in the classroom, and to support students and all learners who believe an understanding of our past is a critical part of our health as a country and a democracy.

You can read the full press release at www.tinyurl.com/GornRetires.

2026 will bring several opportunities to expand our individual and collective searches for historical understanding:

- We will continue our Critical Issues Lecture Series;

- We will sponsor Alaska History Day for middle and high school students throughout the state;

- We will hold an annual conference, October 7-10 in Homer, that will feature one day of papers building on the work of history professor Stephen Haycox, who passed away last summer;

- And we will feature your perspectives, research, hypotheses, and conclusions at our annual conference.

Please consider adding your voice and your point of view to the conversation. The call for presentations in Homer is out with a May 1 deadline for proposals. See page 1 for details.

And thank you for the opportunity to serve you.

—Patricia Partnow



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Historian inspires new research in his memory

To honor the pathbreaking scholarship of Alaska's preeminent historian, the late Professor Stephen Haycox, the Alaska Historical Society has launched an initiative designed to advance new research into Alaska's history.

More than a dozen historians have volunteered to undertake research into Alaska history topics influenced by Haycox's work. Each will present their findings during the AHS October annual conference in Homer. The papers are to be compiled into a book slated for publication in 2027.

Haycox, who died unexpectedly in August 2025, profoundly shaped Alaska's understanding of its history. A founding faculty member in the University of Alaska Anchorage History Department, for more than 50 years he authored seminal works including *Alaska: An American Colony* and *Battleground Alaska: Fighting Federal Power in America's Last Wilderness*. Haycox also was a trusted voice on public policy and a resource for scholars, journalists and the public.

The initiative is a *Festschrift*, a German term meaning "celebration writing" which often takes the form of a book honoring a respected academic and is usually presented to the honoree during their lifetime. Before his passing, Haycox worked with the AHS to plan the initiative and recommended scholars to invite to participate.

AHS board member and UAF professor emeritus William Schneider initiated the project and serves as its coordinator.



"During my career, I depended enormously on Professor Haycox's scholarship and know many Alaskans did, too," Schneider said. "I suggested this initiative to recognize Steve and celebrate his groundbreaking contributions to Alaska's history and set the stage for future historians who will benefit from his work and that produced for this project."

The scholars and their research topics are:

- **Pierce Bateman**, UAA history professor: "The Politics of Alaska's Cold War Subnational Diplomacy;"
- **Annaliesa Claydon**, former Alaskan and adjunct researcher at the University of

Tasmania: "Of Shearwaters, Whales, and Seals: Some Entanglements of the Bering and Tasman Worlds, c. 1850-1900;"

- **Ross Coen**, University of Washington history lecturer: "Still Searching for that Usable Past;"

- **Bathsheba Demuth**, author and Brown University associate professor of environmental history: "Thinking with Alaskan Land: or Why Alaska is the Best Place to Write Environmental History;"

- **Holly Miowak Guise**, Iñupiaq historian from Anchorage and Unalakleet: "Centering Alaska Native History: A Focus on the 20th Century;"

- **Ian Hartman**, UAA associate dean and history professor: "Introduction to the *Festschrift* and Appraisal of Dr. Haycox's Work and Its Impact on Alaska History Scholarship;"

- **Mary Mangusso**, UAF history professor emeritus: "Biography and the Work of History;"

- **David Ramseur**, author, AHS board member and past president: "Alaska-Russia Relations: The Vital Role of Alaska Native Peoples;"

- **Lisa Weissler**, former natural resource and oil and gas attorney: "Oil and Alaska Politics, Learning from History;"

- **Phil Wight**, UAF history professor and AHS board member: "Myths and Materialism: Alaska's Energetic Past and Fractious Future;"

- **Leanna Williams**, UAF doctoral candidate in Arctic and Northern Studies and AHS board member: "Flight, Fame and Frontier: Alaska Aviation in the Popular Imagination, 1926-1938;"

- **Charles Wohlforth**, former Alaska journalist and author: "First Drafts: The Changing Role of Journalism in Recording Alaska's History and Establishing Its Cultural Narrative;"

- **Andrei Znamenski**, University of Memphis professor of history: "Alaska in Geopolitical Imagination of Current Russia;"

- **Dagmar Phillips**, Dr. Haycox's widow: "A Family Perspective on My Late Husband."

The *Festschrift* is designed to encourage Alaskans to think deeply about the state's history and new directions in its study and to provide a forum to discuss the soundness of the interpretations and conclusions of the presenters.

—David Ramseur

Alaska-Russia ties article wins award

An insightful account about Alaska Native interactions across the Bering Strait with the Soviet Union is the winner of this year's best article in the Alaska Historical Society's acclaimed, peer-reviewed journal, *Alaska History*.

Historians Benjamin D. Seymour and Erin Algieri Segarra won the Morgan & Jeanie Sherwood Award for their article, "Breaking Storm Over the Diomedes: 1938's Native Travel Program Across Bering Strait."

The award is presented annually, with authors receiving a \$500 prize. Journal editor Ross Coen called the article "an outstanding piece of scholarship that merits the honor." The

Sherwoods initiated creation of the award and generously endowed it.

Ian Hartman, University of Alaska Anchorage history professor and associate dean, recently accepted Ross's invitation to join the journal's editorial advisory board. Other advisors are Bathsheba Demuth, Ann Fienup-Riordan, Holly Guise, Mary Mangusso, Tim Rawson, John Whitehead and Andrei Znamenski.

The advisors review manuscripts submitted to the journal and advise the editor on policies. They greatly assist in ensuring the accuracy of information and soundness of interpretations in the articles published in the journal. Many thanks to them.

Eagle carefully preserves gold rush era treasures

After the Taylor Highway to Eagle was completed in 1954, things around town started disappearing.

Motorists were discovering the small, isolated Yukon River community and nearby Fort Egbert, abandoned by the Army in 1911. Derelict buildings echoed the town's gold rush-era past as the military, judicial, transportation and communications hub for interior Alaska.

"All the old cabins were still full of all the stuff that people used in those days," said Diana Wasson, volunteer and board member for the Eagle Historical Society and Museums (EHS&M). "People would come into Eagle and just take things from the fort and abandoned cabins."

Concern about vanishing artifacts and decaying buildings spurred local residents to incorporate the Eagle Historical Society in 1961. The fort and several city buildings are part of the Eagle Historic District, added to the National Register of Historic Places in 1970.

Today, through a 1991 cooperative agreement, the historical society's collections are exhibited in historic buildings owned by EHS&M, the City of Eagle and the Bureau of Land Management. BLM has invested millions of dollars into stabilizing and restoring the Fort Egbert buildings (only five of the original 45 remain) since 1975 in cooperation with the National Trust for Historic Preservation.

Board member Randy Fabrizio, who moved to Eagle in 2019 and was voted onto the 10-member EHS&M board while on a grocery run to Fairbanks several years ago, manages the society's web presence and gets out the newsletter. Like other board members, he also volunteers to lead museum tours, offered from Memorial Day to Labor Day. Last year about 100 people took the tour, mostly during the town's July 4th celebration (see page 8).

Some buildings that visitors tour are:

- **Judge Wickersham's first courthouse**, built in 1901 and used until the court moved to Fairbanks in 1904. The courtroom is still intact upstairs, with original furnishings. Downstairs are exhibits on geology of the area; artifacts,



In Eagle's Redmen Hall, Sarah Owens, conservator at Interwoven Fibers LLC, directs EHS&M volunteers Rita Becker, Joyce Bendell and Diana Wasson in painstaking days of gently brushing and vacuuming dirt from moosehide drapes. Photo courtesy Sarah Owens.

clothing and other objects from the Han Gwich'in peoples of the area; exhibits on education and early social activities in Eagle; and a gift shop.

- **Redmen Hall**, built in 1904 as the lodge of an early social organization, the Improved Order of Red Men. EHS&M owns the building and hosts Eagle's big July 4th weekend potluck and dessert silent auction there.

- The **Quartermaster's Storehouse**, built in 1899 at Fort Egbert. Exhibits tell about the fort and day-to-day life of soldiers there at the turn of the century.

- The **Mule Barn**, built in 1900. Mules' names are still posted above the stalls. Among the large building's many exhibits are mule snowshoes, harnesses, tools, pelts of area furbearing animals and a blacksmith area. Upstairs are exhibits on mining history and transportation, including an authentic birchbark canoe.

- The **Granary**, built in 1900. BLM's displays inside document work done to preserve fort buildings.

The tour also stops at city hall, housed in an early 1900s log cabin, and Amundsen Park, which commemorates the explorer's rush to Eagle in 1905 to telegraph news of his successful voyage through the Northwest Passage.

Some buildings with exhibits are

currently in need of repair and closed, including Fort Egbert's Non-commissioned Officers Quarters, built in 1900; St. Paul's mission, also built in 1900; and the 1901 Customs House, which had been a tour highlight, but was damaged in a 2009 flood, moved to higher ground and still in need of repair.

EHS&M is funded by memberships, trusts, grants and donations, including donations from the Bill Stroeker Foundation and the Pioneers of Alaska Fairbanks Igloo, Wasson said. Rasmuson Foundation, through Museums Alaska, has generously funded an ongoing project to restore textiles that had been stored in the log mission. These include two moosehide drapes, each comprised of six sections decorated with pyrographic designs and sewn together. Such drapes were popular in gold rush Dawson, but Eagle's are unusual, with abstract instead of representational designs.

EHS&M recently reroofed their small archives building, packed with boxes of historical records that need to be digitized. The society is seeking a summer intern for the task.

Make the road trip to Eagle, just short of the U.S.-Canada border, or follow EHS&M's work at www.eagleak.org.

—Carol Gales

Canadian-born Alaska-transplanted historian passionate about state's transportation routes

Mark Rice is a natural fit for an Alaska Historical Society board member as a professional historian who studied history in college, is married to a historian, and has other nonprofit history-related board experience.

Rice is a newcomer to the AHS board, joining in March 2025. He now serves on the 2026 conference program committee and loves being part of Alaska's "history community." In 2014 he volunteered with the Friends of Nike Site Summit (FONSS) board on a conference on Cold War history. Rice has been on the FONSS board ever since, helping with tours and displays. "This event really opened me up to the history community," he said.

Rice most recently presented at the 2025 AHS conference in Fairbanks on the Detroit 59ers, a group of Detroit residents who were lured north to homestead on the Kenai Peninsula, and their eventual fate. Spoiler alert—most of them returned to Detroit, although some settled in Anchorage, and two or three families ended upon the Susitna River and helped found the community of Trapper Creek.

Rice was born and raised in Toronto, Canada (he's now a dual citizen), realizing a love for history as early as his high school years, and going on to receive a bachelor's degree in history from the University of Toronto before moving to Ohio for graduate studies in history (master's degree in contemporary history at Ohio University in 2004, followed by a Ph.D. in diplomatic and international history from Ohio State in 2010).



A historian of Alaska's transportation modes, Mark Rice enjoys hiking, camping, fishing and international travel. Here he kayaks off the Valdez Glacier in 2021.

It was at Ohio State that Rice met his wife Ray Ball, also a historian, whom he followed to Alaska when she was offered at job as history professor at the University of Alaska Anchorage. She is now a vice provost and dean of the Honors College at UAA.

Rice has worked as a historian for several divisions at the Alaska Department of Natural Resources since 2014, doing research for a variety of historic preservation projects, as well as a history of Alaska's roads and highways published by the Federal Highway Administration. He is now

with the Public Access Assertion and Defense section of ADNR, working on assessments of the history of the use of Alaska rivers and historic RS2477 trails.

"Alaska is one of the few places in the country where I can do real in-depth historical research outside of academia as part of my job," he says. "I can really put my history training to use."

Rice's past cases included mapping the movement of gold rushers and government and army officials from Valdez Glacier and along Klutina Lake down to Copper Center as part of an RS2477 assessment. He's most recently been researching the history of recreational boating in Alaska, and its ties to the larger recreational boating history in the lower 48. His job also takes him out into the field across Alaska, from the Kobuk River to Eagle to Prince of Wales Island.

Rice says he's mostly a "home body," but, like most Alaskans, loves to hike with his dog, and camp and fish in the summer. He and his wife also enjoy travel, most recently visiting Mexico.

—Molly McCammon

Deadline for scholarships set for May 31

The Alaska Historical Society annually makes two Student and Emerging Professional Awards to attend and present at the fall conference, which this year will be in Homer, October 7-10.

Students researching an Alaska history topic and professionals engaged in Alaska history or cultural work and

employed fewer than five years are eligible.

The awards are for airfare, lodging and a conference registration. Applicants are to make a presentation at the meeting. Information on how to apply is on the AHS website; the deadline is May 31.

Spill inspired action to retain value of state's oil

Editor's note: After awarding oil tax law and policy expert Lisa Weissler an AHS Contributions to Alaska History award for her book, *Capital Crude: The Impact of Oil on Alaska Politics*, we asked her for an essay on the impact of the Exxon Valdez oil spill on legislative oil tax policy. The spill affected much of Prince William Sound and even reached Homer, the site of this year's conference. Because of space considerations, we do not use endnotes in the newsletter but they are available from the author.



The grounding of the *Exxon Valdez* oil tanker in Prince William Sound on Good Friday in 1989 devastated southcentral Alaska's environment and communities. Yet, within the tragic history of the oil spill is a little-known tale of political redemption for some Alaska legislators who, compelled by public outrage over the spill, came around to supporting a change to the state's oil and gas production tax, a change that helped retain Alaska's share of revenue from production of Alaska oil.

The story begins in 1977, when Alaska lawmakers passed a new oil and gas production tax that used a formula to determine how much tax an oil company owed. For a marginal oil field with low production and limited profitability, applying the formula meant the company paid the state less production tax and potentially encouraged continued production of oil that might otherwise be left in the ground. In 1981, legislators suspended application of the formula on the Prudhoe Bay oil field until 1987, when they estimated oil production from the massive reservoir would begin to decline.

Turned out they were wrong. As the date for lifting the tax formula suspension approached, Prudhoe Bay ranked as the largest oil field in the country and was still going strong. Because of how the tax formula was written, if it was applied to Prudhoe in 1987, the field's producers would receive a significant tax break long before the field could be considered marginal or uneconomic.

Adding to the problem, Alaska's economy was in a tailspin. In 1986, low oil prices caused the loss of more than \$1 billion in anticipated state oil revenue in the space of six months. Unless lawmakers repealed or delayed the pending 1987 application of the oil tax break to the Prudhoe Bay field, Alaska



Workers cleaning up after the *Exxon Valdez* oil spill prepare for Corexit testing at Smith Island's Quayle Beach on August 8, 1989. *Exxon Valdez Oil Spill - 0768*, *Exxon Valdez Oil Spill Photo Collection*, Alaska Resources Library and Information Services.

would lose hundreds of millions in oil revenue, deepening the already dire fiscal crisis.

The oil companies operating on the North Slope wanted to make sure the tax break for Prudhoe Bay took effect as planned. The 1986 election offered them the opportunity to get like-minded legislators elected. They poured money into campaign chests, donating mostly to Republicans who were unlikely to support higher taxes on their industry.

ARCO, a major Prudhoe Bay oil producer, led the charge as the top industry contributor. "We need to flex our political muscle," ARCO president Harold Heinze wrote in an in-house publication. "We're the largest private employer in the state. People know we've got a loaded gun. They don't know yet if it's a blank or silver bullet. They will see the proof in this election."

Industry campaign donations and insider political maneuvering paid off. Senate President Jan Faiks, who received the most oil company contributions for her 1986 reelection campaign, blocked House attempts to extend the Prudhoe Bay tax break suspension in both the 1987 and 1988 legislative sessions. The oil production tax reduction formula began applying to Prudhoe Bay in June 1987, siphoning away hundreds of millions of dollars of state revenue from the almost two million barrels of oil a day flowing out of the state.

The 1989 legislative session looked to be a repeat of the past two, this time under

the leadership of Senate President Tim Kelly, also a recipient of substantial oil company contributions. Like Faiks, Kelly blocked House legislation that would stem the loss in state oil revenue from the productive Prudhoe Bay oil field.

The *Exxon Valdez* oil spill broke the dam holding back the oil tax legislation and the bill finally made its way to the Senate floor for a full vote by the body. During Senate debate on the legislation, Senator Dick Eliason, who originally opposed the continued suspension of the Prudhoe Bay tax break, responded to Senator Faiks touting the industry's 12-year record without a major oil spill.

"Twelve years is certainly not enough as far as I'm concerned," Eliason said. "I was a believer at one time—until Good Friday." He declared that any senator who was "naïve enough to believe that our politics have not changed since Good Friday, you're wrong. The politics of Alaska has changed."

On May 8, 1989, the Alaska legislature passed legislation that prevented the oil and gas production tax reduction formula from applying to Prudhoe Bay and other large oil fields for years to come. Notably, four Republican senators, including Eliason, crossed party lines to provide the necessary votes for passage. It took an oil spill to get them there, and didn't begin to make up for the devastation, but at least for a while, Alaska got a better deal for its oil.

—Lisa Weissler

Civics education bill gets legislative hearing

Legislation requiring civics education as a high school graduation requirement is before the Alaska Legislature again this year. SB 23, “An Act relating to civics education, civics assessments, and secondary school graduation requirements,” received its first hearing in the Senate Finance Committee February 11, 2026.

The bill’s sponsor, Senator Gary Stevens of Kodiak, noted that “preparation for active citizenship was a foundational principle of public education in America from its beginning, and it is a principle that must be reaffirmed by each generation.... By passing SB 23, Alaska will join with other states in an effort to restore attention to the importance of civics education in our schools, and ultimately in steadying civic engagement within our country.”

Board member Molly McCammon tes-

tified in favor of the bill on behalf of AHS with these comments:

The Alaska Historical Society has long been concerned about the lack of civil discourse among Alaskans, and in response, we have sponsored over the past several years a series of public lectures to promote civic discourse on a variety of topics.

The lack of civility, however, can also be traced to the poor condition of civics education in Alaska. Preparing young people for active citizenship and engagement in our democracy is increasingly important as the challenges we face at the local, national, and global levels become increasingly complex.

Requiring core government and civics education at the high school level, and passage of a civics assessment like that required by naturalized immigrants or a comparable civics project assessment, would go a long way

towards helping young Alaskans prepare for their place as active citizens. If there was some way to require this for Alaskans of all ages, we would enthusiastically support that as well, as we all need frequent “refreshers” on the core principles included in documents such as the Declaration of Independence, Articles of Confederation, the U.S. Constitution, and our Bill of Rights.

As we approach the 250th anniversary of the signing of the Declaration of Independence, a well-educated citizenship is more important than ever. And with young people beginning to vote at the age of 18, now is the time to make sure they are prepared for future community engagement.

The bill, with a hefty fiscal note, was held over in committee for further consideration.

—Molly McCammon

History Day 2026 set for April 6-11, judges needed

Alaska History Day 2026 is coming up April 6-11. Judges from the history community are needed to review student projects for the National History Day state affiliate contest, now in its fourth year with oversight by the Alaska Historical Society.

National History Day is a project-based learning program for 6-12th graders, who research historical topics of their choosing and create a project in one of five categories (documentary, website, performance, exhibit or paper) connected to an annual contest theme. This year’s theme, recognizing the 250th anniversary of the Declaration of Independence, is “Revolution, Reaction, Reform in History.”

Alaska’s History Day contest is unique among NHD affiliates because it is all online and asynchronous, so our judge teams are spread across the United States and even farther afield. Judges are teachers, librarians, archivists, university students and more. You don’t need to be a historian or even in Alaska to participate. You just need an internet connection and the time to help out Alaska students. Please visit ak.nhd.org to learn more about judging.

Donate today to support work of AHS

To continue its efforts to advocate for and share our history with Alaskans, the Alaska Historical Society offers numerous ways to contribute to our non-profit organization.

At the end of March, the society kicks off its annual fundraising drive. Your membership and conference fees support the annual conference, journal, newsletter and events such as the Critical Issues Lecture Series, but they do not cover the entire cost for the valuable programming and publications AHS provides. Don’t wait for a mailer from us to make a donation.

Another option for donating is through the Alaska Permanent Fund. As you register for the 2026 dividend, please consider donating a portion to the

AHS through the Pick.Click.Give. program. The society dedicates the funds raised each year through this means to support scholarships and awards for students and new professionals to attend and participate in the annual AHS conference.

Even if you have already applied for your PFD or are not an Alaska resident, you can still make a donation to support everything AHS has to offer. Scan the QR code



above or visit www.tinyurl.com/DonateToAHS.

A big thank you to all supporters!

—Gwen Higgins, AHS Treasurer

Alaska will be represented at the “Young People’s Continental Congress” NHD program this summer in Philadelphia. A teacher and student team of Elizabeth Bender and Tessa Davis of Kodiak has been selected to represent our state.

While in Pennsylvania, teams will participate in a week of learning, including trips to Carpenters’ Hall, Independence National Historical Park, the National Constitution Center, the Museum of the

American Revolution and the Historical Society of Pennsylvania.

The event culminates with a vision for the next 250 years of our nation. According to the NHD website, “Delegates will also co-create and sign a joint declaration of their aspirations for American democracy, just as their historical counterparts issued the Declaration of Colonial Rights and the Declaration of Independence.”

—Leanna Prax Williams

JUNEAU

Account details Juneau Cold Storage's past

The fall/winter issue of the *Gastineau Heritage News* had a long article by Kimberly Metcalfe about the Juneau Cold Storage Company, a multifaceted seafood processing company that also stored beer and bottled Coca-Cola for eight decades and was vital to Juneau's economy. The company incorporated in 1915. It used ice harvested from Taku Glacier to keep fish cold until it could be delivered by steamship to markets in the Lower 48. In 1927, construction began at a new location (today's Elizabeth Peratrovich Plaza) of a building that would be the company's home for the rest of its existence. By 1935, the company, now using electric freezers, could store up to four million pounds of fish. The plant survived a disastrous landslide in 1936 and a huge fire in 1956, but eventually fell to a botulism scare in 1980-81 and another big fire in 1987. To read the whole story, or to learn more Juneau history from back issues of the newsletter, contact juneauhistory@gmail.com.

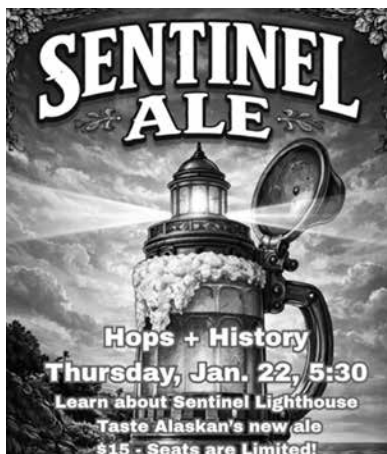


Juneau Cold Storage on November 22, 1936, after a landslide. Alaska State Library, Katherine Shaw Photo Collection, photo by Trevor Davis, P109-45.

Hops and History focused on lighthouse

This January, the GCHS sponsored Hops and History at the tasting room of the Alaskan Brewing Company in Juneau. Participants had a chance to try the brewery's new Sentinel Ale and learn about the history of the Sentinel Island Lighthouse from Gary Gillette, GCHS president.

Poster of Sentinel Ale, courtesy Gastineau Channel Historical Society.



ANCHORAGE

CIHS explores Cold War in music, education

The Cook Inlet Historical Society's monthly lectures this year look at the U.S.-Soviet Union Cold War, 1946-91, and its impact on Alaska. Pierce Bateman, assistant professor of history at the University of Alaska Anchorage, delivered the January lecture, describing the role of Alaska universities in promoting global science, cultural exchanges and international trade throughout the Cold War. He profiled the Geophysical Institute at UAF, the North Pacific Studies Program at Alaska Methodist University and the Alaska Center for International Business at UAA.

Laura Koenig, who teaches in the Music Department at UAA, presented the February lecture, entitled "Music and the Cold War." Her presentation was a concert and a lecture, integrating live music and dance with recorded music and video montages of Cold War images. The program focused on music inspired by the geopolitical struggle between the USSR and U.S. The audience heard music as propaganda, as patriotism, as protest and as satire. Featured composers included American Aaron Copland, Russian Dimitri Shostakovich and musical entertainer Tom Lehrer.

Grant restoring historic Russian Orthodox church

Russian Orthodox Sacred Sites in Alaska (ROSSIA) is devoted to preserving Alaska's Russian Orthodox churches. ROSSIA received \$350,000 from the National Park Service, through the efforts of Senator Murkowski, to begin restoration of the Old St. Nicholas Russian Orthodox Church in Eklutna. The church, identified as the oldest building in the Municipality of Anchorage, is on the National Register of Historic Places. Last fall, the church was lifted off its foundation so a new one could be built and rotten logs at the base of the building replaced with new ones. Next, a new cedar plank roof will be installed and the bell tower restored. The final phase will be to restore the interior, complete exterior landscaping and install interpretive signs.

EAGLE

Courthouse readied for July 4th festivities

The Wickersham Courthouse in Eagle was long overdue for repairs. At the beginning of last summer, the city hired a local contractor to fix the front porch and back steps, and visitor tours resumed for the Fourth of July festivities. On the big day, a crowd gathered for the flag raising and parade. Eagle Historical Society and Museums' Jeffrey Quad historic vehicle was driven by Jude DePue in the parade, although it was a little late because the engine wouldn't start right away.

EHS&M is planning an even bigger Fourth celebration this year, as 2026 marks the 65th birthday of the organization as well as the 250th birthday of the United States. Many activities are under discussion, including reenactments of trials in the courthouse, a historic theme for the parade and even a fashion show from 1901, the year Eagle was founded. Back in 1976, Eagle residents dressed up in 1776 clothing to commemorate the bicentennial of the United States. EHS&M will pay tribute to past and present members, perhaps with an illustrated presentation of its accomplishments through the years. Stay tuned as plans develop by checking EHS&M's website at www.eagleak.org.

SEWARD

Church art depicted Alaskan models

Local historian Doug Capra gave a presentation at the Seward library and museum holiday open house about the life and work of artist Jan Van Empel and his painting “The Resurrection,” which is the backdrop to the altar of St. Peter’s Episcopal Church in Seward. The painting was commissioned by the church and completed in 1925. It depicts real Alaska residents observing the resurrection of Jesus. Capra’s lecture described Van Empel as “an enchanted wanderer and a vagabond artist.” The painter was born in Amsterdam and came to the U.S. in 1895. After wandering in the U.S. and Canada, Van Empel arrived in Seward, perhaps inspired by Rockwell Kent’s book *Wilderness*.



Jan Van Empel’s painting “The Resurrection” in St. Peter’s Church, RBHS 303 1.9.

Couple drove Alaska Highway to deliver movies

The “Pages from the Past” feature in the Resurrection Bay Historical Society’s January newsletter was a 2012 article by Bob Stark in the *Seward Journal* about Skip and Marie Fletcher, who took over the Liberty Theatre in 1957. In those days, films were circulated out of Seattle, and Skip would drive the Alaska Highway several times a year to bring movies to Seward. The drive to Seattle was a lot more arduous in those days than it is now.



Marie and Skip Fletcher at the Liberty Theatre. *Seward Journal* photo.

Skip and Marie met in Kodiak, where Skip’s father managed the Orpheum Theatre. Skip’s parents hired Marie to work at the theatre, and after Skip came back to Kodiak from fighting in the Korean War, the two married. A few months after their marriage, the Fletchers had the opportunity to take over the Liberty Theatre. They loved living in Seward, and eventually expanded their theatre business to Kenai and Palmer. When business declined and interest rates skyrocketed in the late 1970s, the Fletchers sold the other operations but kept the Liberty, which also served as their home. The theatre was still in business when Stark’s article appeared in 2012, but it closed after Skip’s death in 2013. Marie turned 90 in February of this year.

PALMER

Pioneer tells role of church for “Everybody Else”

The November History Night presenter for the Palmer Historical Society was Joe Lawton, a 78-year member of Palmer’s United Protestant Church. Lawton took the audience through the history of one of the town’s founding institutions. Several blocks of the Matanuska Colony were allocated along denominational lines: Lutherans, Catholics and “Everybody Else.” The United Protestant Church was in the catch-all category, although it is identified as Presbyterian. The church, established in 1937, is on the National Register of Historic Places.

Further details on Signal Corps work told

In January, Dr. Alex and Meg Hills followed up their earlier Palmer Historical Society presentation on the U.S. Signal Corps’ development of Alaska’s first communications system. In the 1970s, Alex Hills created two radio stations that provided a basic communications system for western Alaska and later helped several of the villages get a telephone system.



United Protestant Church in Palmer. Photo by Jimmy Emmerson, from National Register of Historic Places website.

HOMER

High schoolers create history exhibit at Pratt

During the fall semester, about 60 Homer High School students studying Alaska history had a hands-on opportunity to learn about museum work by creating a temporary exhibit at the Pratt Museum. As reported in the *Homer News* of December 10, 2025, the students chose artifacts about Alaska history from the museum’s collections. After conducting research on the objects, they prepared exhibits displaying them and showing their connection to Alaska history. The items ranged from Alaska Native precontact tools to objects used in the response to the 1989 *Exxon Valdez* oil spill.

KETCHIKAN

Posts show ownership of historic buildings

In traditional Tlingit, Haida and Tsimshian cultures, house posts were placed in front of and inside houses to indicate the identity and history of the group that owned them. In 1987, with funding from the Alaska State Council on the Arts, advanced student carvers worked with master carvers to create house posts for the Totem Heritage Center. The completed posts of Raven, Eagle, Killer Whale, Wolf and Bear represent moieties, phatries and clans that serve as primary divisions for the Native peoples. Haida master carver Freda Diesing carved the Killer Whale pole, while Tlingit master carver Dempsey Bob carved the Bear pole in honor of the Tongass Bear clan and completed the Eagle pole after initial work by students. The Raven and Wolf poles were carved by students with help from instructors. The house posts were installed outside the Totem Heritage Center in 1988. This year, Tlingit master carver Tommy Joseph restored the Eagle, Raven and Killer Whale house posts in anticipation of the Totem Heritage Center's 50th anniversary celebration.

Museum celebrates hand-made wooden objects

The Ketchikan Museums' February artifact of the month is Turner's sled. Lloyd Hiram "L.H." Turner, his wife and son moved from Washington to Kasaan in a boat he built in 1931 to try fishing. After a few years he concluded fishing was not for him, but having worked as a carpenter he saw a need for quality oars for boats. In 1934 the family moved to Ward Cove where he began making oars and other wood products from Sitka spruce. In addition to oars, Lloyd made tables, cupboards, sleds, and useful items like broomstick handles. His quality craftsmanship was known around town.

KODIAK

Printing block produced newspaper nameplate

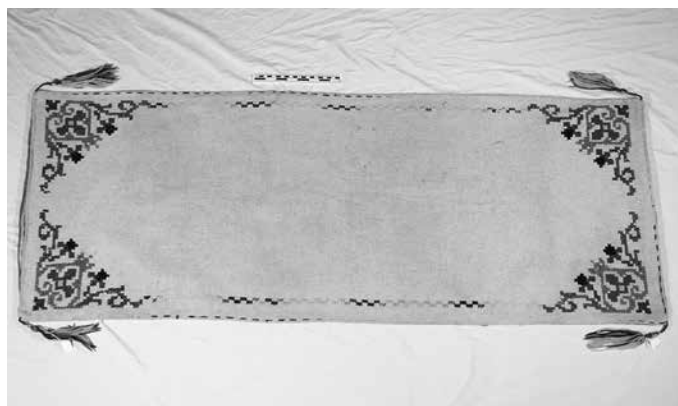
Kodiak History Museum's Historical Highlight for January was a newspaper printing block used to print the nameplate for the *Kodiak Mirror*. The first issue of the newspaper was published on June 15, 1940, by Gene Dawson, who used a mimeograph machine on the naval base to print the weekly paper. The printing block was first used April 21, 1967, when Karl Armstrong was the paper's editor. In addition to the paper's name, the block features a bear, a fish and a crab. The newspaper changed its name to the *Kodiak Daily Mirror* in 1976.



Printing block for the *Kodiak Mirror*, courtesy Kodiak History Museum.

Embroidery by a Russian monk highlighted

The Historical Highlight featured in the December issue of KHM's newsletter was a handmade scarf created by Fr. Gerasim Schmaltz in 1936. Born in Russia in 1888, Fr. Gerasim served for many years as the village priest of Ouzinkie, spending his summers at Monk's Lagoon on Spruce Island to honor the memory of Fr. Herman, who was later canonized as St. Herman. The scarf is embroidered on monk's cloth, a type of cloth long used for needlework crafts. Fr. Gerasim gifted the scarf to Mary Torsen Sears after she moved from Ouzinkie to Kodiak. The gift was accompanied by a heartfelt letter written in August 1936, in which Fr. Gerasim described the scarf's Russian-inspired design and told of his peaceful summer at Monk's Lagoon.



Upper image: Father Gerasim Schmaltz, Kodiak History Museum, Cecile Benson Collection, P-639-9-A. Lower image: Cross stitch on Monk's cloth by Father Gerasim, Kodiak History Museum, KHS 2011-02-01.

FAIRBANKS

Story of the 1912 "big one" detailed by scientist

Carl Tape, UAF professor of geophysics, spoke in February about a large earthquake, "Mystery Solved: Revealing the 1912 Denali Earthquake." It was felt from Dawson to Nome and Fairbanks to Seward. A team of mountaineers near Denali were blasted with ice and debris from avalanches. In addition to telling about the event, Tape spoke about his research that has provided new information about the origin of the earthquake and its implications for future events in central Alaska. The Science for Alaska talks are in-person and virtual. More information is at www.gi.alaska.edu/scienceforalaska.

Historian shares tales of outsiders before Pedro

Indigenous people lived in and traveled through the Fairbanks area long before prospector Felix Pedro met up with trader E.T. Barnette on the banks of the Chena River in August 1901, a moment that usually stands as the beginning of the history of Fairbanks. Before that, outside traders and government agents had been active in the waters of the Chena River. Col. Russ VanderLugt has been studying those outsiders and their interactions with Native residents in the years preceding Pedro's arrival. VanderLugt presented his lecture entitled "Fairbanks Before Felix" in November as part of the Tanana-Yukon Historical Society's lecture series.

In addition to TYHS lectures, this winter folks in Fairbanks can go to talks sponsored by the Alaska Mining Hall of Fame Foundation and Science for Alaska talks sponsored by the Geophysical Institute.



Image from J.E. Orme's photo album showing a cabin built on the Chena River in October 1898. The source is a website by Mary Lynn Roush, J. E. Orme's great-granddaughter, titled "Tales of the Tanana Chief."

Geologist explains Greenland's attractions

Tom Bundtzen spoke at the Alaska Mining Hall of Fame Foundation Museum on "Geologic Framework and Mineral Resources of Greenland." Use of Greenland's mineral resources began more than a thousand years ago. By the early 19th century, companies in Denmark and other western European countries used Greenland's minerals for strategic commodities and also found gold and gem-quality rubies and sapphires. Bundtzen has worked as a geologist in Greenland.

Two Alaska museums invite visitors to stop in this summer

Two museums renewed their Alaska Historical Society memberships with notes about being open this summer and invited visitors.

The **Soldotna Historical Society and Museum** will be open May 15-September 15. The museum has several historic buildings along with museum exhibits and is just off the Sterling Highway.

The **George Ashby Museum** at Copper Center, off Richardson Highway mile 101, will also be open May 15-September 15. A short trail starts by the museum and leads to where the Klutina River meets the Copper River. A lesser-known route to the Klondike gold fields went from Valdez Arm over Klutina Glacier, down the Klutina River to the Copper River then heading north. Many gold-seekers who chose this route ended their quest at Copper Center and the museum has lots of stories about them.

JUNEAU/SITKA

Birdman of Alcatraz got his start in Alaska

We've all heard of the Birdman of Alcatraz, but did you know that his crime was murder in Juneau? In 1909, 18-year-old Robert Stroud murdered a man in Juneau because of a dispute over payment to a prostitute. He was convicted and sent to Leavenworth Federal Penitentiary and later to Alcatraz, where even other convicts found him disturbingly pathological. In January, Betsy Longenbaugh and Ed Schoenfeld gave a presentation in Sitka about Stroud, showing the distance between the movie version of the *Birdman of Alcatraz* and Stroud's criminal justice history. The event was a fundraiser for the Sitka Maritime Heritage Society.

ZAG 80 Rev. Oct. 1940		ASSOCIATE WARDEN'S RECORD CARD	
Offense: Murder	Begin: 0-28-1922	Age: 1890	
Sentence: Life		Married: Single	Deport: No
Date Imp: 10-1920	At: D. Kavana	Citizen: Yes	Religion: No
Date Rec: 4-28-1922		Physical Condition: Light Duty	
Par. Elig: 27-1922		Mental Condition: Normal	
C. R. Life	Max. 4 Yrs	Education: S.A.T.	
Comm. Fine	G. T.	G.S.C. - College Level	
PREVIOUS RECORD:		PSYCHOLOGICAL and APTITUDE TEST:	
Jails: Ref.		IQ: 8-5	
Pens: Fed. 1	State	IQ: 116	
Detainers: Fed.	State	Occupational Skills:	
Escapes: Fed.	State		
CUSTODY: Unknown		Avocational Interests:	
Crimes Involved: (Enumerate)		Scientific Study of Birds	
1 Previous term for Murder			
		History of Occupational Experience	
		Occupations	No. Yrs. Verification of Performance
			Quality Dependability
Aliases:			
Name	Number	Residence	Occupations
STROUD, Robert	17431-1	Unknown	None 5

The Leavenworth Federal Penitentiary associate warden's record card for Robert Stroud lists his avocational interests as "Scientific Study of Birds." National Archives Identifier: 24731415

—Rachel Mason and Jo Antonson



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AN ODDMENT

Historic behemoth recalls cash for coal

Inside Yukon-Charley Rivers National Preserve, roughly halfway between the towns of Eagle and Circle, is a mechanical behemoth perched high above a silty Yukon River cliff and surrounded by spruce trees. Although the steely hulk is well known to river travelers, its origins are not.

In 1898, during the Klondike gold rush, a miner named Napoleon Bonapart Labrie went hunting for his fortune along the Yukon's southern tributaries when he came upon a coal deposit on Washington Creek. For an enterprising few, coal was as good as gold because it could be sold directly to steamboats going to Dawson City, and Labrie envisioned a railway from Valdez to the Yukon also powered by coal. In his mind, this coal mine had the potential to be the refueling hub for a vast inland empire.

Labrie lost no time finding investors and forming the Alaska Coal and Coke Company. But he faced a serious challenge—how to haul hundreds of tons of coal ten miles to the Yukon River. The solution, he determined, was a Best-brand traction engine that could pull heavy cargo sleds along an ice-covered trail. The engine, with eight-foot-high wheels armed with spikes, arrived and was outfitted with a cabin at the rear to



allow the driver to escape the cold. But by the time the machine arrived, the company was in trouble: Alfred Books, head of the U.S. Geological Survey, declared, “Washington Creek has been the scene of some ill-advised attempts at coal mining ... the outlook for profitable exploitation is not hopeful.” The mining scheme collapsed almost as soon as it began and the traction engine, a triumph of the steam age, was quickly abandoned.

—Chris Allan

Sources: Alfred H. Brooks, et al., *Report on Progress of Investigations of Mineral Resources of Alaska in 1906* (1907) and Ed and Sue Classen, *Making Tracks: C.L. Best and the Caterpillar Tractor Co.* (2011).



Upper image: Edward Kindle of the U.S. Geological Survey poses next to the 110-horsepower Best traction engine along the Yukon River, 1906. USGS Photographic Library, Edward Kindle (107). **Lower image:** The Best traction engine a century later, stripped of its cabin and boiler chimney. Photo by Todd Croteau of the Historic American Engineering Record.