

A RIVER'S MANY FACES

Depictions of Life on the Yukon River by
Charles O. Farciot and Willis E. Everette, 1882-1885



National Park Service

Edited and Notes by Chris Allan

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Yukon-Charley Rivers National Preserve



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Acknowledgments

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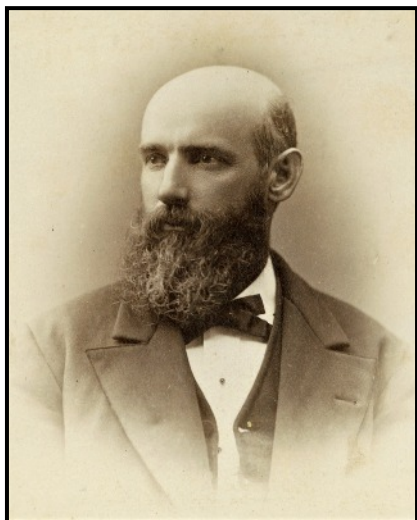
Front Cover: A Tanana Athabascan woman returning from a hunt with two snowshoe hares. This photograph by Charles Farciot was likely taken near the Nuklukyet trading station not far from where the Tanana River enters the Yukon River. Alaska State Library, Wickersham State Historic Site, Schieffelin Brothers Yukon River Album.

Title Page Inset: Willis Everette's drawing from St. Michael Island near the mouth of the Yukon River reveals his interest in seismology. His caption reads, "Emerged from the ocean in 1812 per Eskimo report. Cliff of volcanic slag and pumice showing two distinct layers of lava and slag separated by a layer of grey sand. North-East Cape St. Michaels Island, Alaska, 1884." University of Alaska Fairbanks, Alaska and Polar Regions Collections & Archives, Dr. Willis E. Everette Collection.

Back Cover: The French-Canadian fur trader François Mercier (at center petting dog) with family and friends at Nuklukyet trading station near the mouth of the Tanana River. Alaska State Library, Wickersham State Historic Site, Schieffelin Brothers Yukon River Album.

Portraits in Biographical Sketches: Charles Farciot's portrait is from the Alaska State Library, Wickersham State Historic Site, Schieffelin Brothers Yukon River Album; and Willis Everette's portrait is from the University of Alaska Anchorage, Consortium Library, Archives and Special Collections, Fred Wildon Fickett Papers.

Charles O. Farciot



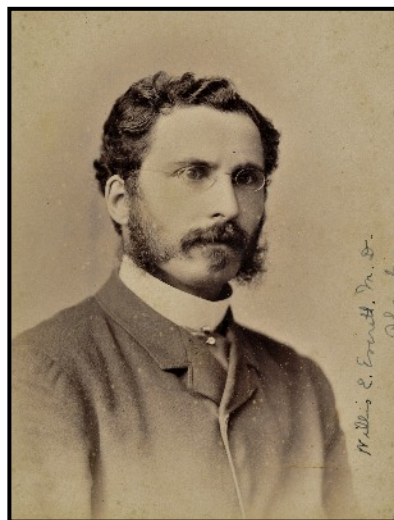
Charles Ordelle Farciot was born in Switzerland in 1839 and immigrated to the United States in the early 1860s, settling in Pennsylvania and serving in both the Union Army and Navy during the Civil War. He was discharged at Mare Island, California, in the early 1870s and began working as an itinerant machinist and inventor. He received patents for steam engine parts like pumps and condensers and later moved to Arizona to pursue mining opportunities. In Arizona he also began taking photographs of miners, soldiers, settlers, and scouts and sold them as stereographic slides which rendered a 3-D image when viewed through a hand-held stereoscope.

During his travels, Farciot met Edward Schieffelin who had discovered the silver deposit that led to the founding of Tombstone, Arizona. Although Schieffelin was already wealthy, he wanted to search in Alaska for gold and recruited his brother Effingham, the multi-talented Charles Farciot, and two other friends. The prospecting expedition, launched in 1882, was well equipped and brought its own river steamboat—*New Racket*—to carry the party up the Yukon River to the trading station known as Nuklukyet.

In addition to being the steamboat's engineer, Farciot used a tripod and camera to capture images using "rapid dry plates" that could be stored and developed later. His portraits of Indigenous people and of fur traders and prospectors serve as a valuable record of a moment in Alaska history when Native and non-Native cultures coexisted and a series of gold discoveries would soon bring dramatic changes to the region. After a year of finding only trace amounts of gold, Schieffelin gave up and declared Alaska "a very hard country."

When the group disbanded and sold the *New Racket*, Farciot was the only member of the group who elected to stay. He spent two more years traveling the Yukon River using a skin-covered kayak and a tiny steam launch he built from spare parts. When he returned to California in 1885, the forty-five photographs he took, despite being hauntingly beautiful, never made him much money. He gave lectures about his Alaska adventures, continued as an inventor (he designed a "sled-boat for Arctic regions"), and eventually moved to Chino Ranch, California, where he worked as an engineer at a beet sugar factory until his death in 1891 at the age of fifty-two.

Willis E. Everette



Willis Eugene Everette was born in Brooklyn, New York, in 1855 and was orphaned at the close of the Civil War. As a young man he became an autodidact, eventually training as a doctor, a mining expert, a lawyer, and a linguist specializing in the dialects of North America's Indigenous peoples. In the 1870s and early 1880s, Everette worked as a scout for the U.S. Army during battles with Chief Sitting Bull's men and other American Indian groups; soon after, he learned metallurgy and started a career as an assayer at a mine in the Black Hills of South Dakota. Wherever he went he compiled lists of Indigenous vocabularies.

In 1883, Everette decided to study the languages of the Yukon River basin and Alaska and repeatedly asked for support from the Smithsonian Institution. He was rebuffed by Director John W. Powell and instead turned to the U.S. Army with a plan to cross the Chilkoot Pass, move north and west into Alaska, and conduct a "military reconnaissance" of the Copper River from its headwaters to the ocean. Everette set out with a gold miner and several Indigenous guides, but his travels ended at the Yukon River trading post called Fort Reliance where he suffered a prolonged bout of typhoid fever.

After twenty-two days spent facing his own mortality, Everette cut his expedition short, boarded the steamboat *Yukon*, and headed downriver to St. Michael on Alaska's western coast. Before leaving, he used colored crayons to draw Fort Reliance and did the same at other trading stations where the steamboat stopped. He also collected Alaska Native cultural objects and conducted linguistic studies on the fly. At the trading post of Nuklukyet, the veteran fur trader François Mercier gave him a place to stay and Everette wrote:

Through the assistance of all the fur traders on the Yukon river, Mr. Mercier especially, I have gathered a mass of very valuable and never-before-collected facts in relation to every missionary, fur trader or miner who has ever been on the Yukon River since the Russian transfer . . .

Once back in San Francisco, Everette lectured and said he was writing a book about his travels, but none appeared. He made three more trips to Alaska before moving to Dawson City to work as an assayer during the Klondike gold rush. Later in life he studied radio and microwave technology and died in San Rafael, California, in 1938 at the age of eighty-three.

Introduction

In the early 1880s when Charles Farciot and Willis Everette traveled the Yukon River, they captured glimpses of a world largely unknown to outsiders. The river wended its way across nearly 2,000 miles of the continental interior, creating a watery highway that linked the Yup'ik, Koyukon, and Gwich'in with the Han, Tutchone, and Tagish near the U.S.-Canada border and farther east at the Yukon headwaters. Indigenous traders had long converged on the Yukon River, arriving from all directions to exchange food, furs, and other trade goods. The river served as both a transportation corridor and as a meeting place for people who are masters of long-distance travel and survival in a harsh environment.

The Indigenous people of the Yukon River had dealt with outsiders before. Russian fur traders arrived in the 1830s seeking sea otter, beaver, and fox furs to sell in Chinese and European markets. Beginning in the 1840s, an international fleet of whalers followed their prey into the Arctic Ocean and traded along Alaska's western coast. Agents of the Hudson's Bay Company established trading posts at Fort Yukon and on the Porcupine River to compete with the Russians in the fur business. Missionaries of various denominations arrived seeking converts, and, on the eve of the 1867 purchase of Alaska, members of the Western Union Telegraph Expedition came with plans to link North America and Asia with communication cables.

Soon after Alaska became an American possession, a cadre of backcountry entrepreneurs showed up looking for opportunity. Alfred Mayo, Arthur Harper, and Leroy "Jack" McQuesten were some of the first. They panned for gold in Yukon River tributaries on both sides of the border but quickly realized that trading with local people for furs was more lucrative. And they were not alone. A coterie of fur traders—some holdovers from the Russian era, others newly arrived—formed rival companies and negotiated with trappers for the best furs. François Mercier of Montreal, Quebec, Andrew Fredericks of Norway, the Finnish-Russian Gregory Kokrine, and Moise Lorenz from the Russian city of Odessa all made careers trading in furs and eventually becoming agents of the far-reaching Alaska Commercial Company.

These frontiersmen built new trading stations in Indigenous villages or wherever they calculated might bring in the most profit. St. Michael, near the mouth of the Yukon River, was first established by the Russians in 1833 and served as the entrepôt for the entire river system. At the other end of the route was Fort Reliance founded by François Mercier and Jack McQuesten in Canadian territory. In between were Fort Yukon, at the river's northernmost bend, Nuklukyet (near present-day Tanana), Novikaket, Nulato, Anvik, Andreafsky and other communities that also served as trading stations. They could all be reached by a mosquito fleet of paddlewheel steamboats—*Yukon*, *St. Michael*, and *New Racket*—which carried trade goods upriver and furs downriver to St. Michael.

In addition to fur traders, the Yukon River attracted a handful of adventurers in the 1880s, including journalists, artifact collectors, explorers, and gold prospectors. Willis Everette was drawn north by his desire to study local languages—he intended to investigate the Copper River region, but after a bout of illness, he settled on a steamboat ride down the Yukon. Charles Farciot

arrived in Alaska as part of Edward Schieffelin's five-member gold prospecting expedition and, after his comrades left empty-handed, he remained to search for gold in the Yukon River headwaters. At the time, the flow of gold-seekers into the Yukon River basin was only a trickle—around fifty in 1882 and one hundred by 1884—but the number rose quickly after gold strikes on the Fortymile River (1886) and on Birch Creek near Circle (1893). As the economy shifted to gold mining, Indigenous people along the Yukon River found they lost influence as fur trappers and traders. The flood of newcomers that came with the Klondike gold rush (1897-1898) would be even more disruptive.

Of the adventurers and explorers on the Yukon in this era, Farciot and Everette are some of the most obscure. In 1883, Frederick Schwatka was sponsored by the U.S. Army to chart the Yukon River, and his account entitled *Along Alaska's Great River* (1885) benefited from his lively writing style. Another explorer who eclipsed Farciot and Everette was Army lieutenant Henry T. Allen who launched an arduous journey up the Copper River and reached the Yukon on June 25, 1885, before moving on to the Koyukuk River. Allen's *Report of an Expedition to the Copper, Tananá, and Koyukuk Rivers . . .* (1887) used line engravings based on Farciot's photographs as illustrations. Beyond this, it seems Farciot had limited success marketing his photographs or convincing others to follow in his footsteps. On September 19, 1885, a reporter for the *San Francisco Bulletin* said of the collection,

[They show] the barrenness and forbidding nature of the country, which need hardly to be supplemented by his interesting recital of hardships to wean any one from a desire to shoulder a pick and shovel and start on a journey to the Arctic circle.

Nevertheless, Farciot's photography and Everette's colorful drawings offer a rare glimpse of a moment in Yukon River history when Indigenous people, traders, steamboat captains, prospectors, and explorers existed in a hybrid world created largely by the fur industry. Farciot often directed his camera at Alaska Native leaders—including Red Shirt, Ivan, Charley, and Sinate—because the smattering of outsiders depended upon them and local communities not only for furs but also as suppliers of food, clothing, and boats and as river guides, woodchoppers, and middlemen who brought furs from the hinterlands. Much of this changed abruptly when the Klondike rush brought thousands of gold-seekers northward. In the blink of an eye, gold not furs dominated the economy and Indigenous people were forced to the margins.

Organization and Archives

In this booklet, Charles Farciot's photographs appear in a roughly geographical and chronological order. The images begin at St. Michael, where he arrived with Edward Schieffelin's prospecting party in 1882, and advance up the Yukon River through Alaska and into Canadian territory (at Fort Reliance). When Schieffelin abandoned his search for gold, Farciot remained and spent two additional years prospecting, taking photographs, and traveling in summer and winter until he too left Alaska. I have placed Willis Everette's pictures of Yukon River trading posts where they are geographically appropriate; he created all of them in 1884 as he traveled by steamboat from Fort Reliance to St. Michael. Farciot and Everette were not traveling together, but they likely encountered each other multiple times, including in 1885 when Farciot photographed Everette as part of a group in St. Michael (see page 23).

All of the Yukon River-related photographs in this booklet were taken by Charles Farciot and can be found in the Schieffelin Brothers Yukon River Album (ASL-PCA-277) that is part of the Wickersham State Historic Site Collection of Alaska Photographs in the Alaska State Library's Historical Collections in Juneau. The album is also online in the image database known as Alaska's Digital Archives. Note that in the album, the portrait of Charles Farciot at the beginning is mislabeled as "Ed. Schieffelin." Willis Everette's drawings can be found in the scrapbook he kept during his multiple trips to Alaska, which is part of the Dr. Willis E. Everette Collection (UAF-1976-91) in the University of Alaska Fairbanks's Alaska and Polar Regions Collections & Archives. The drawings are also available in Alaska's Digital Archives. See page 24 for a list of sources used in this project.



The Koyukon Athabascan shaman called Red Shirt poses on a Russian cannon at St. Michael near the mouth of the Yukon River. He regularly made trading excursions from his village at the mouth of the Koyukuk River to the Kobuk River and to the coast.



François Mercier and Moise Lorenz, both traders with the Alaska Commercial Company, prepare to take a photograph of the Alaska Native camp at St. Michael. As General Agent, Mercier was in charge of company operations along the length of the Yukon River.



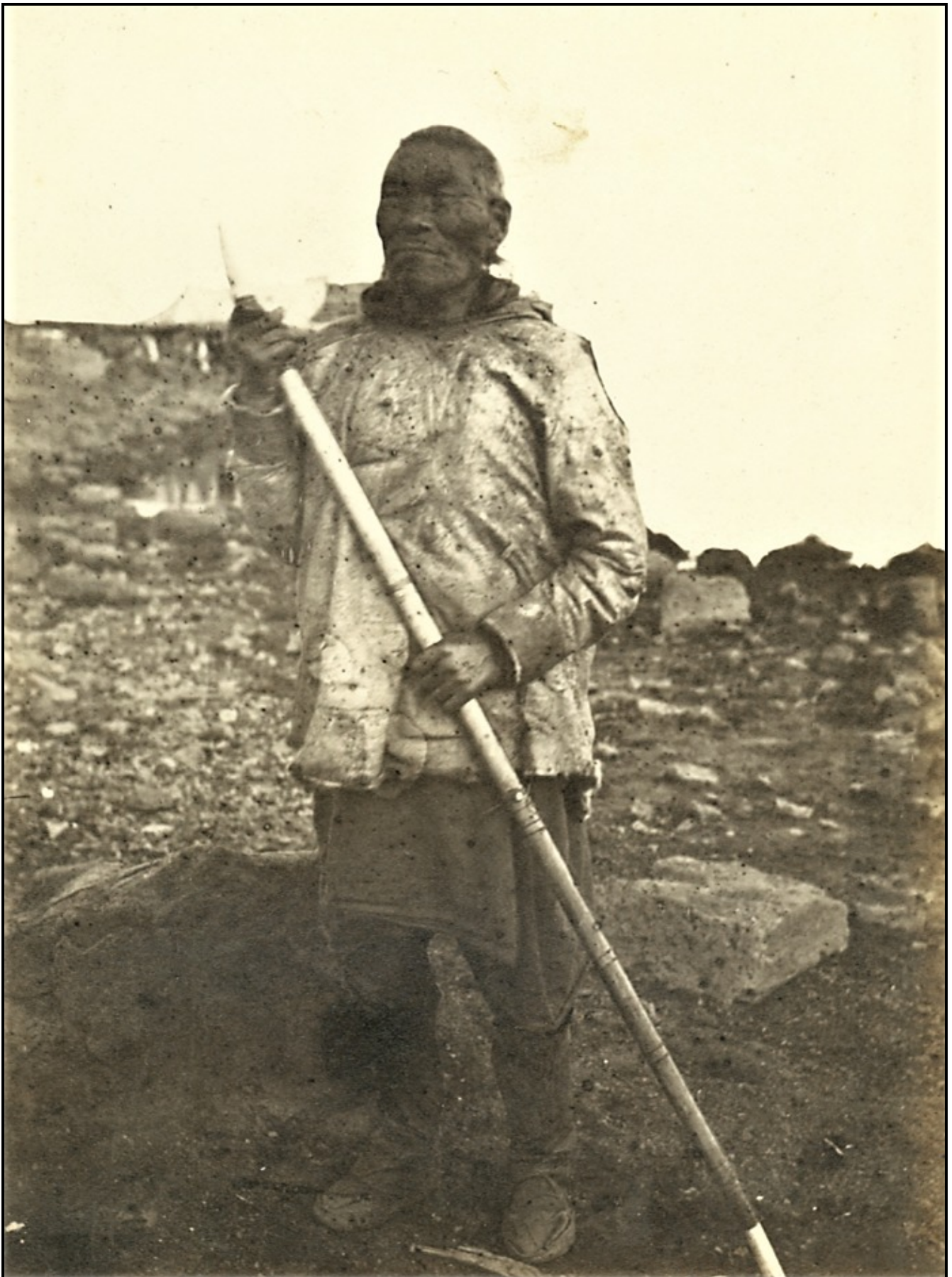
Edward Schieffelin's prospecting party prepares their steamer *New Racket* for the ocean crossing between the wharf at St. Michael and the Yukon River mouth. The photograph also captured the blurred image of a skin-covered kayak.



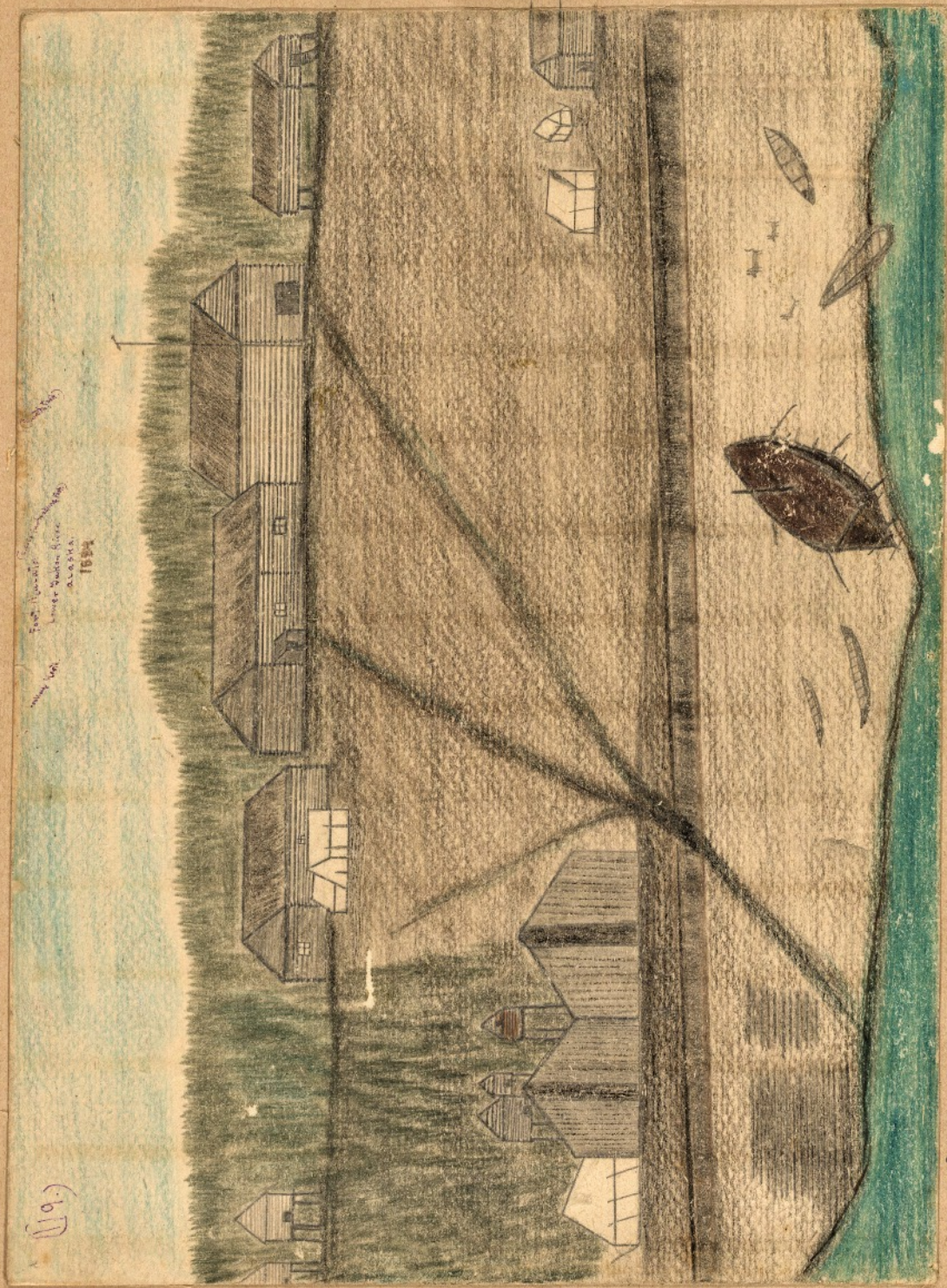
A Yup'ik family associated with the Catholic mission at St. Michael. First established by the Russian-American Company in 1833, St. Michael became both an Alaska Native community and an important outpost of the Alaska Commercial Company.



A village chief from Nushagak (center) and his companions visiting St. Michael. Nushagak, near present-day Dillingham in southwestern Alaska, was a trading center and Alaska Native settlement with a Russian Orthodox mission.

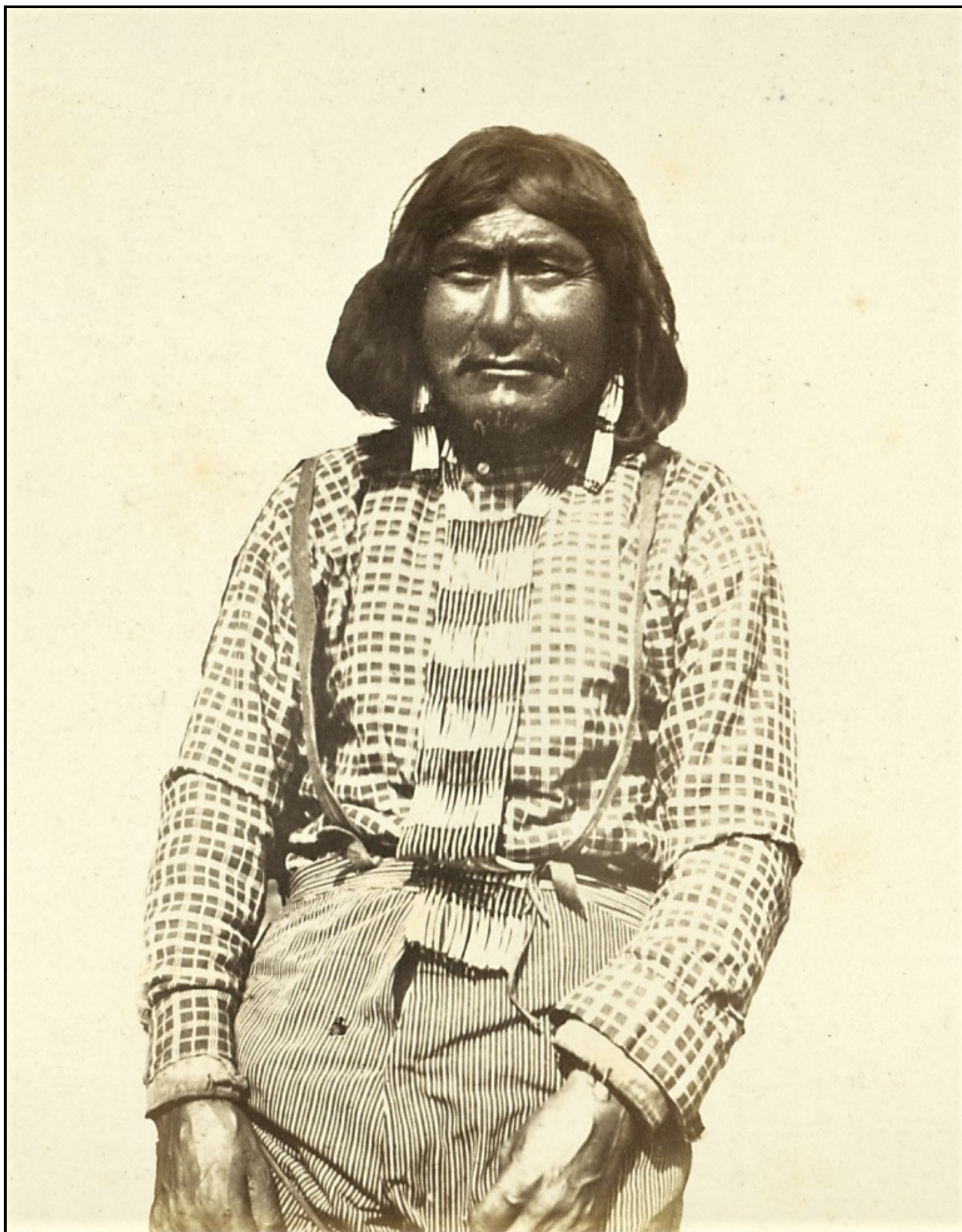


Farciot described this man as “the oldest Chamon, or Medicine Man, in Northern Sound.” He holds a lance decorated with rings and tipped with an ivory point. Farciot is referring to Norton Sound where the Yukon River empties into the ocean.



Fort Nulato: 1884.
 Alaska Commercial Company
 Lower Yukon River. Alaska

Everette used colored crayons to draw Fort Nulato, one of the Alaska Commercial Company's trading posts. The settlement of Nulato has a long history as a center for trade between the Koyukon Athabascans and the Inupiat of the Kobuk River.



Chief Ivan of the Tanana Athabascans poses in trading post clothing and traditional dentalium shell earrings and breast plate. Tanana River people routinely traveled north to the Yukon River to participate in the Nuklukyet trade fair and to visit other villages.



The Gwich'in Athabascan leader Sinate (right) and companions at Fort Yukon. As an influential fur trader, Sinate (also spelled Shahnayati) was able to dictate terms first with the Hudson's Bay Company and then with the Alaska Commercial Company.



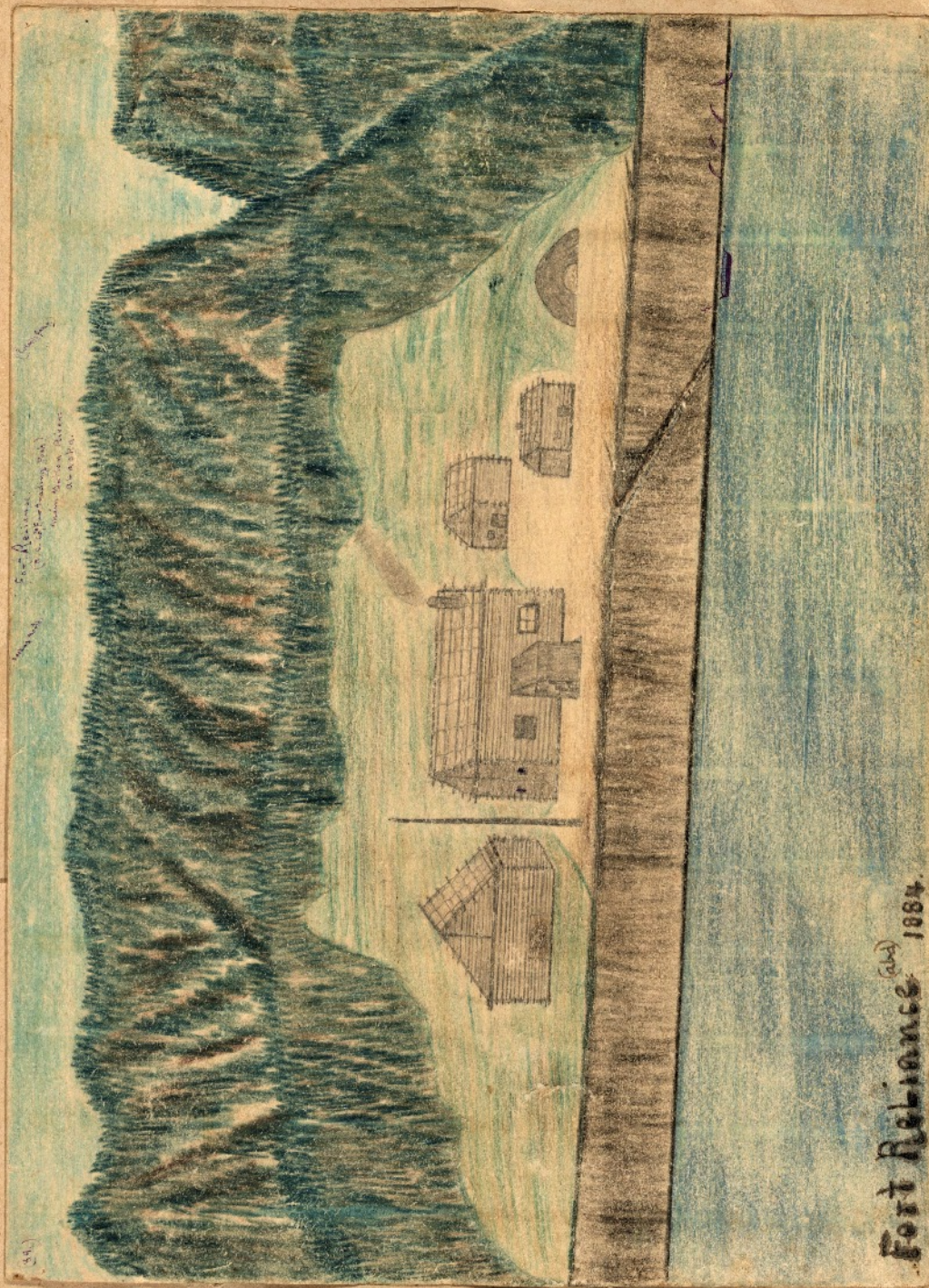
The missionary Vincent C. Sim (in black on left), the trader Arthur Harper, and three Alaska Native men visit the abandoned Fort Yukon trading post established by the Hudson's Bay Company in 1847. The blockhouse at right was part of a defensive stockade.



In the 1870s and 1880s, the Han Athabascan leader Chief Charley (center) lived at Charley's Village near the Kandik River mouth. After the 1886 Fortymile River gold strike, he moved his people into Canadian territory to take advantage of trading opportunities.



Left to right: Deshaddy, Kheeltat, and Kheeltat's son—Tanana Athabascans visiting the Yukon River trading post of Belle Isle Station and the Han Athabascan community of David's Village. Today this is the vicinity of Eagle and nearby Eagle Village.



Here is where I remained 22 days, ^(on a reconnaissance of the entire Yukon river) all alone, sick with typhoid fever, waiting to die, in August of 1884. This was an abandoned fur trading post of McQuesten, Hammer and Mayo for the Alaska Commercial Company. It was about six miles below the mouth of the Klondike river ^{the site of Dawson City}. Had I been aware of the fact, I had the entire golden wealth of the Klondike placer region, ^{entirely and alone in my hands}. The Klondike gold was not discovered, until 1896, or 12 years later than when I was alone on its ^{by gravel}. I recovered my strength, and fortifying on down the Yukon river, wintered at St. Michaels Fort, 1884.

Everette's drawing of Fort Reliance, the fur trading post built by François Mercier and Jack McQuesten in 1874. The post was abandoned and reestablished several times; in notations, Everette describes being there alone for 22 days with typhoid fever.



The itinerant Anglican missionary Vincent C. Sim preaching to Han Athabascans at Fort Reliance, a trading post established in 1874 by François Mercier and Jack McQuesten on the Canadian side of the boundary.



New river ice at Nuklukyet trading station. Edward Shieffelin's men ice skated and Farciot (note the shadow of his camera and tripod) captured the *New Racket* and the *Yukon* grounded for the winter to protect them from the pressure of shifting ice.



Edward Schieffelin, the discoverer of silver at Tombstone, Arizona, feeds his dog team. His river steamer, *New Racket*, was grounded on the banks of the Yukon River and his prospecting team lived nearby at Nuklukyet trading station.



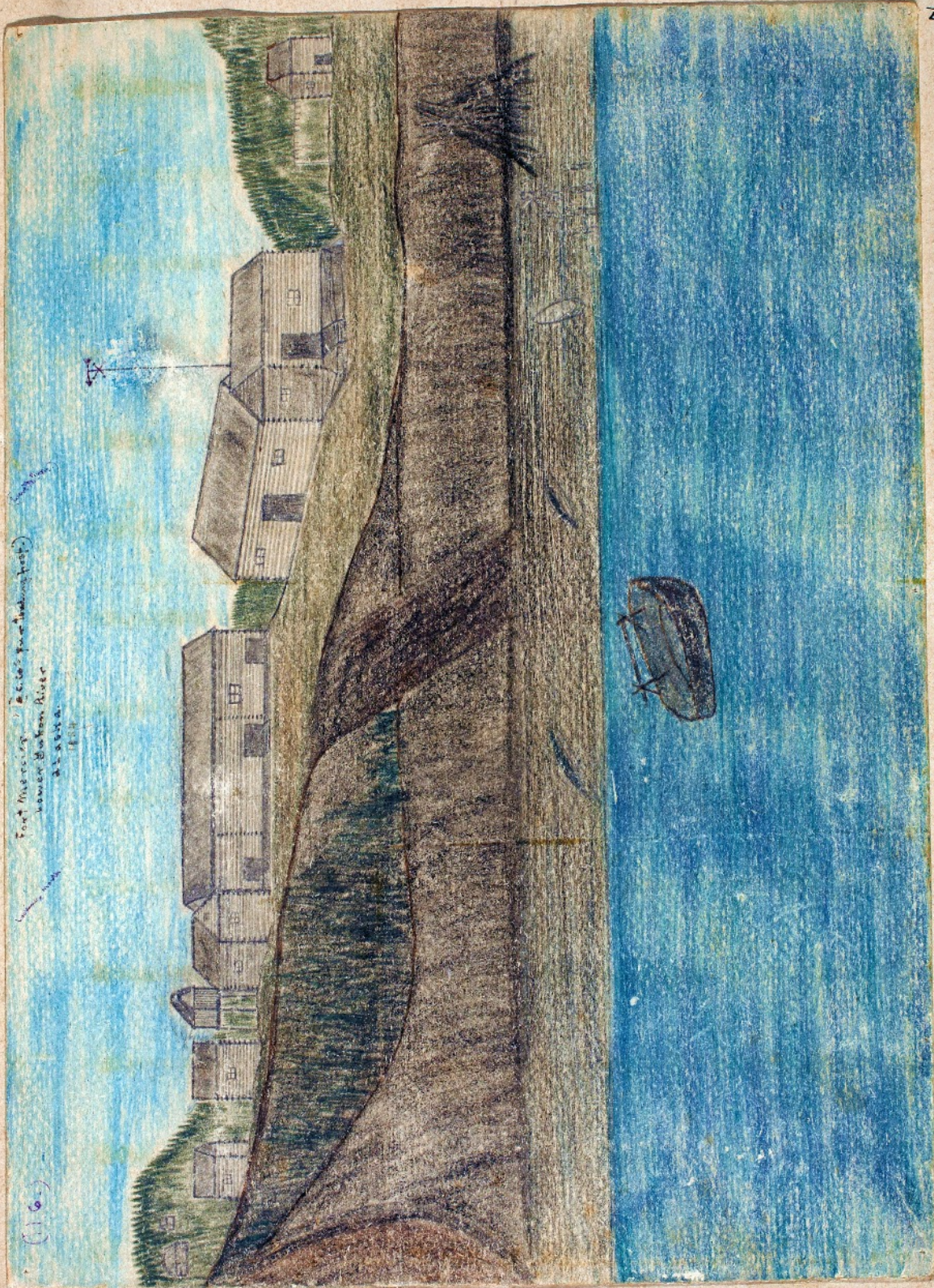
Edward Schieffelin leaving by dog team on a prospecting mission. Although Schieffelin and his men found some gold 60 miles upriver at a place they called Maybeso Gulch, it was not enough to keep the veteran miner in Alaska for a second year.



Gregory Kokrine (in seal-skin parka at center) was in charge of this trading post called Nowikakat near the mouth of the Nowitna River. Kokrine worked first as an independent trader and then for the Alaska Commercial Company.



Charles Farciot (left front) poses at a traditional winter fish trap near the Nuklukyet trading station. The trap, which is anchored near the river bottom, was made of split spruce boughs and spruce tree roots. The day's catch is frozen on the ice to the right.



Fort Mercier, or "Nuklakayet", 14 miles below the mouth of the Tanana river on the right bank down stream. 1884.

Everette's drawing of Nuklukyet near the mouth of the Tanana River. He also calls the busy trading station Fort Mercier after the Alaska Commercial Company agent who built it and managed it, François Mercier.



Farciot photographed Tanana Athabascans who arrived at Nuklukyet in a fleet of birch-bark canoes for the Spring trade fair. Farciot's own transportation is the steam launch at right with a flag at the bow and the engine he built using sheet metal and spare parts.



The entire Yukon River steamboat fleet—*St. Michael*, *New Racket*, and *Yukon*—moored at Nuklukyet. In the 1880s, these small vessels served rival trading companies; after the Klondike gold strike, over 100 steamboats plied the same route.



François Mercier (petting his dog Jack) with family and friends at the Nuklukyet trading post. Mercier helped to find jobs for fellow Canadians at several Yukon River trading posts, including for his brother Moses at Fort Yukon.



Charles Farciot poses with the kayak he and his Indigenous guides used to travel over 2,000 miles along the Yukon River. Once winter arrived, he had to transport the Aleutian-style kayak or baidarka to Nuklukyet with a dog team and freight sled.



Farciot (at sled) wrote that this photograph was taken at 50 degrees below zero, but his exposed head suggests that he was exaggerating. Nonetheless, he did make several long-distance treks in winter between Nuklukyet and St. Michael on Alaska's west coast.



The Norwegian fur trader Andrew Fredericks (bearded, under flag) and local residents in the Yukon River village of Anvik. Fredericks had a store in Anvik and managed the Alaska Commercial Company post in Andreafsky farther downriver.



Residents in Anvik stop for a photograph at the village's cemetery. Anvik is the home of the Deg Hit'an Athabascans who share language and culture with other communities of the lower Yukon and upper Kuskokwim rivers.



At center is the boat Charles Farciot built to travel the Yukon River when he was not working as engineer on the *New Racket*. Ever the mechanic, he built the engine and propeller himself and put the boat on exhibit when he returned to California.



In 1885, when Charles Farciot again arrived at St. Michael, he found a number of Alaska Commercial Company employees as well as steamboat captains and engineers willing to pose at the town's most popular look-out—the pair of Russian cannons dating from when St. Michael was an outpost of the Russian-American Company. These men, many of whom arrived soon after the 1867 purchase of Alaska, built trading posts, negotiated with Alaska Natives over labor and furs, searched for gold, and became part of a multi-ethnic society in the years before the Klondike gold rush:

- The explorer and ethnographer Willis Everette can be seen leaning on the right-hand cannon with his oilskin suit, pince-nez eyeglasses, and walking stick—he would soon board the company's steamer *St. Paul* to return to San Francisco.
- To the right of Everette, in mukluks and a fur-trimmed coat is Gregory Kokrine, a Finnish-Russian fur trader who managed a trading station at the mouth of the Nowitna River and later became the namesake of the nearby village of Kokrines.
- To the left of Everette, seated on the cannon in a bowler hat, seal-fur coat, and ornate mukluks is Andrew Fredericks, a Norwegian trader who had a store in Anvik and was an Alaska Commercial Company agent at St. Michael and Andreafsky.
- Behind Fredericks is the American miner and trader Joseph Ladue who crossed the Chilkoot Pass in 1882, prospected his way along the Yukon, and became the founder of Dawson City on the eve of the Klondike gold rush.
- Seated on the cannon to the left, with the goatee and peacoat, is Moise Lorenz, a Russian employed as the Alaska Commercial Company's commissary agent.
- In the back row, third and fourth from the left, are two of the most famous Yukon River figures, Arthur Harper and Alfred Mayo, who arrived in 1872 from Canada via the Porcupine River. After failing to find paying amounts of gold, they worked with Leroy "Jack" McQuesten (not pictured) to dominate the fur trading economy of the region.
- Lastly, towering over the group, with the longest beard, is François Mercier of Montreal, Canada, who arrived in Alaska in 1868, established the trading stations of Fort Reliance and Nuklukyet and went on to become the Alaska Commercial Company's General Agent in the region. When this photograph was taken, Mercier was preparing to leave Alaska after seventeen years of work as a frontier entrepreneur. His *Recollections of the Youkon*, published by the Alaska Historical Society, is an invaluable chronicle of the period.

Sources

Archival Materials:

Schieffelin Brothers Yukon River Album (ASL-PCA-277), Alaska State Library, Historical Collections, Wickersham State Historic Site Collection of Alaska Photographs, 1882-1930s; a nearly identical album is at the Huntington Library in San Marino, California.

Dr. Willis E. Everette Collection (UAF-1976-91), University of Alaska Fairbanks, Elmer E. Rasmuson Library, Alaska and Polar Regions Collections & Archives.

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