

# **MATANUSKA-SUSITNA BOROUGH**

## **Historical Preservation Commission Agenda**

Edna DeVries, Mayor

Andrew Schweisthal  
Kevin Toothaker  
Jake Anders  
Fran Seager-Boss  
Janet Kincaid  
Angela Wade  
Vivian Smith

Gerrit Verbeek – Staff



Michael Brown, Borough Manager

PLANNING & LAND USE DEPARTMENT  
Alex Strawn, Planning & Land Use Director  
Kim Sollien, Planning Services Manager  
Fred Wagner, Platting Officer

### **December 7, 2023**

### **REGULAR MEETING (RESCHEDULED)**

6:00 p.m.

Ways to participate in the Historical Preservation Commission meetings:

#### **TELEPHONIC TESTIMONY:**

**Join on your computer or mobile app**

[Click here to join the meeting](#)

#### **Or call in (audio only)**

Dial (907) 290-7880 and enter the Phone Conference ID 391 428 133#, or click  
[+1 907-290-7880,,391428133#](#) United States, Anchorage  
[\(844\) 643-2217,,391428133#](#) United States (Toll-free)

Phone Conference ID: 391 428 133#

- State your name for the record, spell your last name and provide your testimony.

- I. CALL TO ORDER
- II. ROLL CALL – DETERMINATION OF QUORUM
- III. APPROVAL OF AGENDA
- IV. LAND ACKNOWLEDGMENT

"The Matanuska-Susitna Borough Historical Preservation Commission acknowledge that we are meeting on traditional lands of the Dene people, and we are grateful for their continued stewardship of the land, fish, and wildlife throughout time immemorial."

V. APPROVAL OF MINUTES

- A. Approval of 8/10/23 HPC Minutes

VI. AUDIENCE PARTICIPATION (*three minutes per person, for items not scheduled for public hearing*)

VII. HISTORICAL SOCIETY/MUSEUM UPDATES

VIII. STAFF/AGENCY REPORTS & PRESENTATIONS

- A. Historic Preservation Plan Phase II Update

IX. UNFINISHED BUSINESS

X. NEW BUSINESS

- A. Task for Commission - Interpretive Sign Design
- B. Task for Commission - Review of Draft HPP Sections
- C. Stakeholder Survey - HPC

XI. MEMBER COMMENTS

XII. NEXT MEETING DATE:

- A. Next Regular Meeting – February 8<sup>th</sup>, 2024

XIII. ADJOURNMENT

**Disabled persons needing reasonable accommodation in order to participate at a Historical Preservation Commission Meeting should contact the borough ADA Coordinator at 861-8432 at least one week in advance of the meeting.**

# MATANUSKA-SUSITNA BOROUGH

## Historical Preservation Commission Minutes

Edna DeVries, Mayor

Andrew Schweisthal  
Kevin Toothaker  
Jake Anders  
Fran Seager-Boss  
Janet Kincaid  
Angela Wade  
Vivian Smith

Gerrit Verbeek – Staff



Michael Brown, Borough Manager

PLANNING & LAND USE DEPARTMENT  
Alex Strawn, Planning & Land Use Director  
Kim Sollien, Planning Services Manager  
Fred Wagner, Platting Officer

### August 10, 2023 REGULAR MEETING

#### I. CALL TO ORDER

Andrew Schweisthal made a motion to call the meeting to order, second Jake Anders.  
Meeting called to order at 6:06 pm

#### II. ROLL CALL – DETERMINATION OF QUORUM

Members Present: Jake Anders  
Andrew Schweisthal  
Kevin Toothaker  
Fran Seager-Boss  
Janet Kincaid  
Vivian Smith

#### III. APPROVAL OF AGENDA

**Motion:** Jake Anders made a motion to approve the agenda, second Fran Seager-Boss

**Vote:** All in favor

#### IV. LAND ACKNOWLEDGMENT

#### V. APPROVAL OF MINUTES

**Motion:** Janet Kincaid corrects the May 2023 Regular Meeting Minutes to reflect that Section IX A (Unfinished Business: Drafting a Letter...) should state "Janet Kincaid noted that she served on the Palmer Board of Economic Development," and makes a motion to approve

the minutes with the correction. Second Andrew Schweisthal.

**Vote:** All in favor

**VI. AUDIENCE PARTICIPATION**

There were no audience participants

**VII. HISTORICAL SOCIETY/MUSEUM UPDATES**

There were no Historical Society/museum updates

**VIII. STAFF/AGENCY REPORTS & PRESENTATIONS**

**A. Historic Preservation Plan Phase II Update**

Staff notified HPC members of Round 1 Public Outreach events, intended to introduce the general public to the purpose and benefits of a Borough Historic Preservation Plan. Attendance at these events was low, and staff will adjust the event advertising strategy in the future. HPC members offered to help advertise future public outreach events, and requested to be given digital copies of advertising materials.

Fran Seager-Boss also recommends attending historical society meetings, and Planning Department outreach meetings for other topics. Janet Kincaid recommends attending Community Council meetings, the Builder's Association, and the Chambers of Commerce.

**B. Response from Brad Hanson, City of Palmer Community Development Director, Regarding Architectural Guidelines in the Palmer Historic District.**

Fran Seager-Boss recalls that the City of Palmer recognized the Agricultural Station staff buildings as a historic district and adopted some form of architectural guidelines in the 1990s. Gerrit Verbeek requested any records.

Commission members noted there was a public meeting about design elements for a new library on August 15<sup>th</sup> at 6 p.m. at the Palmer Depot, and encouraged each other to attend and suggest a new building should have similar architectural elements to existing historic buildings.

## IX. UNFINISHED BUSINESS

### A. Drafting A Letter to the Board of Economic Development Regarding Potential Removal of Railroad Tracks in Downtown Palmer

Janet Kincaid notes that the City of Palmer is occupied with the collapse of the library roof, and therefore modifications to the tracks are not likely in the near future.

Commission members discussed the draft letter and found it to be too unclear in its intent. They agreed it would be better to include a clear set of bullet points, emphasize it is primarily informational rather than persuasive, and include a request for the Commission to receive updates from the City of Palmer.

**Motion:** Jake Anders moves to approve the letter once it is revised with a few bullet points, and to direct staff to send it on the Commission's behalf. Second Andrew Schweisthal.

**Sub-Motion:** Janet Kincaid moves to additionally strike the sentence "As such the railroad is a point of pride for many, but is not universally viewed as an unambiguous improvement..." on the basis that it is negative and does not serve the intent of this letter. Second Vivian Wagner

**Vote:** All in favor

**Action Item:** Gerrit Verbeek to revise the letter to contain 2-3 bullet points, keep an informational tone, and to strike the 4<sup>th</sup> paragraph, 3<sup>rd</sup> sentence ("As such the railroad is a point of pride for many...").

## X. NEW BUSINESS

### A. Discussion of Feedback on Actions Related to Geographic Naming Proposals at the May Meeting of the Historical Preservation Commission.

Brief discussion, Commission members agree this is a non-issue and no further action is needed.

B. Selection of a Project for a 2024 CLG Grant Proposal.

Janet Kincaid proposes a CLG grant for new informational signs, other Commission members agree.

Fran Seager-Boss recommends proposing specific, high-traffic sites on Borough property including Hatcher Pass, Settlers Bay, the Matanuska River Park, Wasilla Creek, Machetanz Elementary, school trails, Fish Creek, Government Peak, and Scout Ridge.

Kevin Toothaker notes that Knik Tribe has a fabrication lab which could potentially be involved.

**Motion:** Janet Kincaid moves to submit a 2024 CLG grant application to develop targeted signage emphasizing Native histories and traditional use of high-traffic sites around the Borough. Second Andrew Schweisthal.

**Vote:** All in favor

XI. MEMBER COMMENTS

Kevin Toothaker: “How ‘bout those Nuggets?”

Fran Seager-Boss expresses concern for the Fairview School, constructed in 1919 and refurbished in 1984 but since neglected. The school sits on a 5-acre, Borough-owned parcel which is difficult to access, but it is a “delightful building” and Fran fears for its condition.

Janet Kincaid notes that Magnolia producers are currently filming a project in town, and distributed an NPS booklet “Alaska’s Matanuska Colony.”

Fran Seager-Boss also notes that Helen Hegener produced a book on Colony farms.

Commission members note that Commission meetings used to be held at various places throughout the Borough, and that it would be fun and facilitate public outreach to begin doing so again.

**Motion:** Jake Anders moves to plan the November 2023 meeting to be held at the Dorothy Page Museum or the Wasilla Library. Second Fran Seager-Boss.

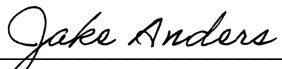
**Vote:** All in favor

XII. NEXT MEETING DATE:

A. Next Regular Meeting: November 16th, 2023 – 6:00 pm

XIII. ADJOURNMENT

Andrew Schweisthal made a motion to adjourn, second Kevin Toothaker.  
Meeting adjourned at 7:40 pm

  
\_\_\_\_\_  
Jake Anders, Chair

October 13 2023

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

  
\_\_\_\_\_  
Gerrit Verbeek, Planner II

October 13 2023

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date



# MATANUSKA-SUSITNA BOROUGH

## Planning and Land Use Department

### Planning Division

350 East Dahlia Avenue • Palmer, AK 99645

Phone (907) 861-7833

[www.matsugov.us](http://www.matsugov.us)

## Quarterly Progress Report for July 1 – September 30, 2023 Mat-Su Borough Historic Preservation Plan Phase II CLG Grant #22002

### Project Status

The project is on schedule based on an extension of project funding until August 31, 2024.

### Accomplishments for the Reporting Period

- Project Management:
  - A. Five (5) Bi-Weekly Status Meetings with DOWL and MSB Staff
  - B. The cost structure of the contract with DOWL was changed from a lump-sum contract to a time-and-materials contract, with internal discussions on July 13, discussions with DOWL on July 18, and an amended contract signed on September 6
  - C. New collaborative work plan agreed to on August 17th, and a shared draft document created in Teams on the same date.
- Public Outreach
  - A. Update given to Historical Preservation Commission on August 10.
- Plan Drafting
  - A. The switch to Time and Materials allows MSB staff to more effectively contribute to work involved in drafting the Plan.
  - B. Responsibilities for drafting the content related to various historical themes was divided on August 17<sup>th</sup> as follows:
  - C. DOWL is drafting sections for the following 23 themes under the bolded categories:
    - Archaeological and Indigenous Traditions in MSB:** Dene People, Alutiiq People, Tool Traditions
    - Dene Subsistence Practices and Traditions:** Traditional Practices and Ecological Knowledge, Change Through Time, Russian Orthodoxy, Euro-American Interface, Diseases and Challenges
    - Commerce and Resource Extraction in the MSB:** Mining, Freightage, Commercial Fishing, ANCSA, ANILCA, and Tribal Governance
    - Transportation Networks in the Matanuska Susitna Borough:** Trails, Waterways, Dog-sledding / Iditarod, Railways, Non-Government Roads, Government Roads and Highways, Aviation
    - Agriculture and Farming:** Subsistence / Homesteading, Commercial Agriculture, New Deal / Colony Program
    - Patterns of Demography across the MSB:** Impact of North Slope Oil / the Trans-Alaska Pipeline System (TAPS)

*Providing Outstanding Borough Services to the Matanuska-Susitna Community.*

- D. MSB staff are drafting sections for the following 13 themes under the bolded categories:  
**Commerce and Resource Extraction in the MSB:** Dene Trade Networks, Hunting and Fur Trade, Government Exploration, Non-Government Exploration, Tourism / Recreation;  
**Agriculture and Farming:** Fur Farming;  
**Military influence and activity across the MSB:** Military Infrastructure, Economic and Demographic Effects;  
**Patterns of Demography across the MSB:** Native Populations, Early Immigrant Settlement, Political History, Establishment of Matanuska-Susitna Borough, 1964, Population Growth and Formation of Modern Communities
- E. DOWL proposed adding short descriptions to the Historical Themes to define the boundaries and timespans which each theme would include. MSB staff delivered the descriptions and reviewed with DOWL on September 14.
- F. DOWL contractors proposed rearranging the Historical Themes section to combine certain sections and to avoid repeating information in closely related thematic sections. This does not change the adopted list of Historical Themes associated with the Historical Preservation Plan update. This change was accepted and adopted September 27<sup>th</sup>. DOWL edited the draft Plan to reorganize historical themes under sections titled 'Peopling the Mat-Su Borough,' 'Developing the Mat-Su Economy,' and 'Shaping the Political Landscape'.

### **Problems or Obstacles and How Resolved:**

During June and July, MSB staff identified that the 'lump sum' cost structure of the contract with DOWL was not aligned with the workflow for the Historical Preservation Plan. The workflow envisioned significant content creation by MSB staff, which was hard to justify while the contractor held sole responsibility for completing the entire plan and was to receive a lump sum payment for its completion. After internal discussions and discussions with DOWL, the contract was switched to 'Time and Materials' in late August. This allows MSB staff to contribute more time, and fair compensation for contractor work.

Credit should be given to DOWL for recognizing the issue and fully cooperating with MSB staff in order to amend the contract and formally adopt a new work plan. MSB staff is grateful for their flexibility in adopting a more collaborative model than they typically use for similar contracts.

### **Plans for the Next Reporting Period**

From October 1<sup>st</sup> – December 31<sup>st</sup>, planned activity includes:

- DOWL and MSB to continue drafting Plan sections
- Review of first set of drafted sections on October 12
- MSB staff to finish formulating goals and objectives with the help of the steering committee
- Round 2 of Public Outreach to communicate draft goals and objectives
- Work review at Historical Preservation Commission meeting in November

### **Contact Information**

Gerrit Verbeek, Project Manager  
Matanuska-Susitna Borough  
350 E Dahlia Ave Palmer AK 99645  
(907) 861-8439  
gerrit.verbeek@matsugov.us

## Task for Commission - Interpretive Sign Design

In anticipation of a \$25,000 CLG grant for interpretive sign installation, please begin brainstorming locations, design elements, and content for signs. An example of a creative sign could be:



Source: Heidentor Ruin, Austria, via reddit.com

### *Early Immigrant Settlement*

Defining a cutoff between ‘early’ and ‘modern’ settlement depends on context and location within the Borough, and very few transitions in history happen in an instant. In general, ‘early settlement’ is characterized as the period of minimal local government when infrastructure and services were primarily self-organized by the resident population. By that interpretation the ‘early’ era faded into ‘modernity’ in the time period between 1915 and World War II. The locations of most modern settlements and transportation infrastructure within the Mat-Su Borough were determined by the 1915 selection of the route of the Alaska Railroad, many major public works projects were completed in the 1930s, and the high population growth which characterize the modern Mat-Su began ca. 1945. Before all that the population of upper Cook Inlet was negligible, particularly during the times of the year that the Dena’ina communities left to hunting camps in the mountains. In 1876 John Ballou, the storekeeper at Knik, wrote in his logbook “**I am the loneliest man in the world.**”

There are undeniable stories of exploitation, rivalries, and violence, but on the whole life in the early Mat-Su Valley was difficult and remote that early populations depended on their neighbors for success and survival. Cooperation and integration were themes of the day, both to get work done and to stave off loneliness. G. W. Palmer’s store in Knik was famously unattended: customers were trusted to help themselves and leave cash in a box. Harry Hicks, the famous guide, arrived in Cook Inlet and married into Dena’ina, as did Palmer and Ballou. Orville G. Herning, a trader and prospector who established the Willow Creek Mining District, arrived with his entire family but worked closely with the local Dena’ina. Martha “Babe” White, the first American child born on the shores of Cook Inlet in 1894 or 1895, grew up in Tyonek speaking English, Dena’ina, and Russian, and reportedly liked English the least! In 1915 she was given the honor of driving the first railroad spike on the Alaska Railroad, at Ship Creek.

[Placeholders – Babe White and G. W Palmer photos]

The population of the Borough from 1900 until the establishment of the Matanuska Colony in 1935 was small by any standard, but larger than many imagine or give it credit for. Several thousand short-term residents flocked to the Susitna drainage during the gold rush, and Knik boasted a population of 500 by 1915. Looking at records from the Bureau of Land Management for the area between Palmer and Wasilla shows that a large amount of land had been homesteaded well before the Colony project. The histories of many early townsites associated with mining and railroad construction begin in this era, including Eskra, Chickaloon, Willow, the defunct town of Kellyville in the Talkeetna Mountains, and Talkeetna as an American town.

[Placeholder: Claims Prior to 1935]

The era of early settlement may feel like it is long gone and irrelevant, but the history can offer some valuable insights. Americans and other developed populations around the world are showing a growing interest in bushcraft, wilderness skills, and returning to the land and homegrown food. Alaskans are also increasingly concerned with food security and our vulnerability to disrupted supply lines in the event of a major disaster. Understanding more about this era of cooperation and self-sufficiency, limited by local resources, can teach us what’s possible here without the modern luxury of importing 12,000 lbs of goods per Alaskan resident per year.

[Placeholder: HPP\_2-2-7-2\_HerningStore.jpg]

## *Government Exploration*

To understand the timeline and goals of early American government exploration in and around the Mat-Su Borough, it helps to keep in mind what was going on in the rest of the United States during the late 1800s. The purchase of Alaska was signed on March 30, 1867, not even a year and a half after the end of the Civil War in late 1865. The war resulted in the death of 620,000 soldiers and many more civilians out of a total population of 31.5 million. In terms relative to the overall population, it was over 10 times deadlier for Americans than World War 2.

Another major influence on the federal government's expectations in Alaska were the American Indian Wars, a collective term for multiple centuries of conflicts as the American military subdued indigenous resistance to westward expansion of the United States. At the same time that the United States was purchasing and integrating the Territory of Alaska, it was engaged in wars against the Sioux tribes in the Dakotas and Montana. The Battle of Little Bighorn, famous for Custer's Last Stand, was fought in 1876 and the war ended following the Wounded Knee massacre in 1890. The Sioux War was sparked by a gold rush in North Dakota, when American prospectors entered the Black Hills region in violation of the Fort Laramie Treaty of 1868, which had set the land aside for exclusive use by the Sioux. The Federal government, rather than evict the trespassing prospectors, sent in the Army to support them. That national backdrop informed how the U.S. government interpreted Alaska and planned its exploration from 1867 into the 1890s. There was plenty to focus on in the Lower 48 between ongoing Indian Wars and post-Civil War reconstruction, a miniscule non-Native population between Cook Inlet and the Copper River in Alaska, and the government's primary concern was the possibility of Alaska Native resistance to eventual American settlers.

And so the Army stationed a small garrison at Fort Kenai, which had previously been a Russian fort in what is now the city of Kenai, in 1869. After 17 peaceful months observing the Kenaitze Dena'ina and Chugachmiut Alutiiq, the fort was abandoned. The next military activity in the region dispatched Lieutenant William Abercrombie in 1883 and Henry Allen in 1884 in expeditions to explore the Copper River and determine "the numbers, character, and disposition of all Indians living in that section of country" and especially "the feeling which existed among them toward the present Government, and the white people who were making their way toward that region." Neither expedition encountered any Native hostility, and Allen's expedition was assisted by Ahtna guides and saved from starvation by the charity of multiple chiefs. Those findings satisfied the American government, and the Matanuska and Susitna River valleys remained unexplored by government agents.

Then, in 1894, gold was struck on the Kenai Peninsula, prompting thousands of prospectors to rush to Turnagain Arm and begin exploring the Susitna, Matanuska, and Knik Rivers. A few years later, in 1897, the massive Klondike gold rush began. The discovery of the Klondike gold fields in Interior Alaska brought many more prospectors who viewed the Mat-Su and the Copper River Valley not as destinations but as potential travel corridors from ports such as Valdez and Seward to the Yukon. So, just a few years after the end of the Sioux War the government once again faced a situation of thousands of their citizens entering an unfamiliar region populated by indigenous tribes while motivated by gold and the possibility of life-changing fortunes.

Government exploration of Alaska was supercharged over the next few years in response to these new demands. In 1898 the Army planned three expeditions to seek travel routes into the Interior. Parties were to explore the Matanuska and Susitna Rivers under Captain Edwin F. Glenn, the Dalton Trail from Haines under Capt. Bogardus Eldridge, and the Copper River under a returning Capt. Abercrombie. U.S.

Geological Survey (USGS) staff were embedded in each military expedition for assistance with mapmaking and examining natural resources.

The Glenn Expedition was the landmark in government exploration of the modern Borough. Glenn split his men into independent groups under Lt. Henry Learnard and Sgt. William Yanert to explore the Susitna drainage, and under Lt. Joseph Castner and Sgt. Frederick Mathys to explore the Matanuska drainage. Learnard traveled up the Susitna to the headwaters of the Talkeetna River, sending out a smaller party under Yanert which reached Broad Pass. Castner's party drove up the Matanuska River, and then up Caribou Creek to the area around Lake Louise. A party led by Glenn followed their route and, after meeting up with Castner, returned to Cook Inlet while Castner and two enlisted men continued up the Delta River across the Alaska Range and eventually reached the Yukon. Mathys branched off to explore the Chickaloon River and covered nearly all of the ground up to Learnard's turnaround point on the Talkeetna. The expedition also explored the Kenai Peninsula and around Turnagain Arm. That brief summary glosses over the tremendous hardships the parties endured, but the overall expedition was spectacularly successful in exploring transportation routes across the Mat-Su. As in earlier cases, any fears of Native hostility were dispelled. To the contrary, guides from various Dene tribes led the expeditions to the edges of the regions they were familiar with, and villages saved multiple Army parties from failure and starvation.

[Placeholder: [Scott Dumonceaux Map Fig. 11 p.381](#), pending permission]

Several follow-up Alaskan expeditions were organized by the Army in 1899, one of which was led by Glenn and returned to the Mat-Su region. Various parties under his command retraced routes established the previous summer and also covered the Yentna and Kichatna Rivers and the upper Susitna River.

[Placeholder: [Scott Dumonceaux Map Fig. 18 p.456](#), pending permission]

Later government exploration work primarily focused on mapping at ever-increasing levels of detail in support of private resource development. To this end the USGS did more work to explore the Mat-Su Borough than any other government agency, producing dozens of maps and technical assessments for any region and resource prospectors showed interest in. In the 1906 the party surveying the Matanuska-Talkeetna region covered 7200 square miles<sup>[a]</sup> in three and a half months. The topographer in the group, R. Harvey Sargent, recalled he had hiked 800 miles and climbed 100,000 vertical feet<sup>[a]</sup> that summer and that "it rained some part of every day for forty days, and on every day I got drenched."

Survey work initially involved hauling survey equipment up mountainsides and drafting maps while standing in the elements but rain or clouds could block visibility and stop all work. The concept of using panoramic cameras to capture the same swaths of terrain as long as it was clear for a minute or two, then map back in a comfortable office, was pioneered by USGS staff in the Alaskan branch and tested in the Mat-Su Borough and other regions. Fred E. Wright and C. Will Wright, two brothers working for the Alaskan USGS, built the first known panoramic camera designed for mapping work in 1904.<sup>[a]</sup> James W. Bagley and Fred Moffitt became experts with it and used it across Alaska in places including the Talkeetna and Chugach Mountains. The same technology was mounted to aircraft flown by US Navy aviators to map coastal southeastern Alaska in the 1920s, and later used to map Greenland and Antarctica. The techniques form the foundation for aerial mapping today.

[Placeholder: USGS Topographer in the Nelchina-Susitna region, 1914. Photo by James W. Bagley.]

*Figure 1 – USGS Topographer in the Nelchina-Susitna region, 1914. Photo by James W. Bagley.*

In 1910 Congress also directed the USGS to establish a public land survey across Alaska, dividing the land into townships measured from common meridians. The Bureau of Land Management (BLM) surveyed the finer details of those townships, which enabled legal descriptions of land and facilitated private land ownership. Other survey work by agencies such as Alaska Engineering Commission and the Alaska Road Commission supported the railway and highway construction described under the **Transportation** themes in this chapter. Exploration of the Mat-Su Borough by different levels of government continues largely in a scientific sense, and involves tools such as satellites, IFSAR radar techniques, and aerial photography.

[Placeholder: The Talkeetna region, 1915. Photo by James W. Bagley.]

Maybe this could be on its own page, juxtaposed against a satellite image, terrain model, or modern view of the same terrain also produced by gov't exploration]

## Non-Government Exploration

‘Non-governmental explorers’ is a catch-all label covering everyone from wealthy celebrities with professional media coverage, to academics in search of specific data, to local residents poking around for their own gratification. Some explorers were self-promoters who seemed to put more effort into trumpeting their exploits than into the work of exploration. But a surprising number were quiet about their accomplishments to the point that finding any trace of their stories is a challenge. There is lots of exciting work left to be done to document this aspect of the Borough’s history, and no doubt many stories were never recorded or communicated and are permanently lost.

Little is known about the ongoing exploration of the Borough by Alaska Natives prior to arrival of Europeans at the level of detail we usually expect, such as exact dates and the names of the first people to reach a certain point. One reason is lack of documentation, another is that Alaska Native cultures place less emphasis on feats of individual exploration and very rarely named geographic features after individuals. Meanwhile, all it takes is a drive from **Hatcher** Pass through **Palmer** up the **Glenn** Highway to the **Castner** Glacier to notice that commemorative geographic naming is a key mechanism for remembering explorers in American culture. But there are obvious practical reasons for subsistence foragers to be familiar with every corner of the territory they occupy, and on top of that recreation and curiosity are universal human traits as soon as our basic needs are met. We can be confident that the Dene and Alutiiq extensively explored the landscape they could access, based on evidence including archaeology, their ability to guide newcomers, and geographic names referencing resources which can only be seen up close, such as Ggisgajt’in K’ilant (“Where There is Pyrite,” 61.7295, -149.5904, Little Susitna). Other names for certain mountains such as Benench’iltledi (“Land That We Slide Down,” Peak near Honolulu Creek)<sup>[1]</sup> confirm that the Dene did not confine themselves to the easy terrain.

The full scope of early European and American exploration is also largely a mystery, and the few records really just emphasize how much we don’t know about. Organized Dene and Alutiiq resistance to Russian in the 1780s ensured that the Russians never established permanent settlements on upper Cook Inlet, but they did send occasional exploring parties. The Lebedev-Lastochkin Company, which controlled fortified trading posts at Kachemak Bay and at Kenai, sent expeditions up the Matanuska River to Tazlina with varying degrees of success in 1794, 1803, and the 1840s. <sup>[2]</sup>

### [Placeholder: Russian expeditions]

Especially during the early American era, many known accounts of explorers refer to surprising encounters with other individuals prodding around the edges of the modern Mat-Su Borough. Johan Adrian Jacobsen, a Norwegian ethnologist engaged in non-governmental exploration to acquire Native Alaskan artifacts for European museums, reached the Copper River delta in 1883 “where to my surprise I found three American prospectors who had come from Sitka to test the Copper River for metals.” He then traveled by ship to the opposite edge of the Borough, Iliamna Bay, and was greeted “in the friendliest fashion by the trader at a summer post and a few gold miners.” The trader was likely C. D. Ladd, who established Ladd’s Station.<sup>[3]</sup> But clearly American and other immigrants were probing the region, and the odds are high that at least a few explored the Borough far earlier than is currently known.

Early records of gold exploration once again reminds us of the gaps. The 1898 party led by O. G. Herning, who are credited with striking the first placer gold in the Hatcher Pass region at Grubstake Gulch, in fact encountered five men already working the area: three Americans and two Mexicans. The Mexicans had been the first to arrive and had “been working their mines ‘on the quiet’ for three years,” earning “ounce diggings to the man per day.”<sup>[4]</sup> Their names, how they wound up in the Talkeetna Mountains in 1895, and what became of them afterward are all unknown. Other names such as ‘Hatcher’ and ‘Bartholf’ are still associated with the region, but not many modern Borough residents know the biographies of the individuals behind those names.

The Willow Creek Mining District, as the region developed by Herning and his colleagues became known, was the first expansion of the Cook Inlet gold rush into the Mat-Su Borough. Within the next ten years thousands of prospectors had fanned out and explored many watersheds. Most were devoid of gold, but rich strikes were recorded on the Yentna and Skwentna Rivers, the Alfred and Albert Creek region near Gunsight Mountain, and around Valdez Creek near the modern Denali Highway. It was during this same timeframe that the prospector William Dickey explored the Susitna River and became the first recorded American to sight the tallest mountain in North America, naming it Mt. McKinley in 1896.

Exploring the Alaska Range and the Talkeetna and Chugach Mountains is another extensive chapter in non-governmental exploration which sportsmen of all stripes contributed to. Exploration continues today in the form of pilots, paragliders, paddlers, boaters, snowmachiners, horse riders, and many others innovating new ways to access and enjoy the public lands of the Mat-Su Borough. At this point there is not much chance to be the first person to see any part of the Borough’s landscape, but there will always be limitless potential to look at that landscape in a new way.

*Population Growth and Formation of Modern Communities***Placeholder – State Population Graph, 1880-2020**

If a single day with the most influence on the location of the Mat-Su Borough's modern communities had to be selected, April 10<sup>th</sup> 1915 would be an excellent candidate. On that day President Woodrow Wilson announced the selection of the route of the government: from Seward, up the Susitna River, and over Broad Pass to Fairbanks. Overnight, years of speculation and rivalry between Valdez and Seward as the major terminal port was decided. The Seward Gateway simply printed "HURRAH! HURRAH!"

**Placeholder – Angled front pages of [Cordova](#) and [Seward](#) papers, 4/10/15**

Anchorage sprang up from nothing to serve as a railroad construction headquarters, had a population of 2000 by July, and has continued growing ever since. Homesteaders crowded to stake land along the right of way and as tracklaying advanced northwards construction stations and depots became the seeds for most of the Mat-Su Borough's modern communities.

By May 1917 the townsite of Wasilla was platted at the junction between the railway and the supply road to the Willow Creek Gold District, Hatcher Pass and lots were auctioned by the Alaska Engineering Commission. Most residents of Knik, which had historically been the largest settlement on upper Cook Inlet, moved their buildings to the new town. The communities of Matanuska and Palmer formed nearby, around the junction of the main railway and a spur to the coal deposits of the Matanuska Valley. Up the Susitna Valley, rail stops at Talkeetna, Curry, Montana, Caswell, produced settlements which are still recognized today.

Many of the major public works projects which shape the Borough's population patterns were completed in the next few decades. The construction of the Eklutna Power Plant (1929), establishment of the Matanuska Colony (1935) and the completion of the Anchorage-Palmer Highway (1936) within that timeframe are all examples of key events signaling the end of what can be considered 'early settlement' and the transition to 'modern' communities.

But while railroad construction rearranged the population within the state into its modern settlement locations, it didn't do much to draw new permanent settlers from out of state. From 1900 until 1940, the population of the entire Territory of Alaska held steady at 55,000 to 65,000 residents. The events and outcomes of World War II produced the next population boom.

The bombing of Pearl Harbor and the invasion of the Aleutian chain by Imperial Japan led to military construction in Whittier, Ft. McGilvray near Seward, and Elmendorf Field near Anchorage. It also caused large troop deployments as Alaskan military bases supported the war in the Pacific Theater. But the World War II itself did not create a massive boost in the permanent population. In 1943, at the height of World War II there were 152,000 active military personnel in Alaska; three years later in 1946, that number had dropped to 19,000.

Instead, it was the post-War global order which really kicked off military spending and skyrocketing population growth in Alaska. In a March 1946 speech Winston Churchill first used the term "Iron Curtain" for the sphere of influence the Soviet Union was establishing in eastern Europe. In August of that same year the Soviets tested their first atomic weapon, sparking an arms race. For the next several years the Federal government spent incredible amounts of money fortifying Alaska, and the Territory's

population grew proportionately. In the single year between 1950 and 1951 the population of southcentral Alaska, including the Matsu Borough, increased 52 percent, although the majority of this settlement was close to Fort Richardson and Elmendorf AFB (Sundberg, Hunsiger, and Whitney 2013).

The discovery of oil at Prudhoe Bay in 1967 and the construction of the Trans Alaska Pipeline System, through which oil began flowing in June 1977, brought another boost to the Mat-Su Borough as oil families, welders, ironworkers, heavy equipment operators, and other blue collar workers immigrated to the state to take part in the boom. Once again the Mat-Su Borough was firmly a travel corridor between ports of Anchorage and Seward and resource development in the Interior.

This growth triggered more organized local government to address the needs of the population. The Mat-Su Borough officially formed in 1963 and Wasilla incorporated as a city in 1974. In the meantime a few other small communities coalesced in rural parts of the Borough. The community of Chase, north of Talkeetna, formed to keep the spirit of subsistence homesteading alive. A community around Lake Louise developed after the construction of the Glenn Highway and the abandonment of the area as an Army recreation site. The community of Trapper Creek was founded by a group of immigrants from Michigan who were known as the 59ers. Alaskan and national newspapers followed their trek to Alaska and speculated on the odds of their success. After initially planning to go to the Kenai Peninsula, they chose to settle in the vicinity of the old Cache Creek Mining District. For years before the Susitna River was bridged, the remote community signaled to Talkeetna using blasts of dynamite whenever they needed a pilot such as Don Sheldon for support. That spirit of independence coexisting with a willingness to help out a neighbor remains a quality of life in the Mat-Su Borough which most residents take pride in and aspire to preserve.

## Native Populations

The numbers and settlement patterns of human populations in the Mat-Su Borough before recorded history, stretching back to the first settlement following glacial retreat, is a puzzle which may never be solved. Uncovering more about this aspect of the Mat-Su Borough's history helps us to understand the human settlement of the American continents and to understand some of the oldest continuous cultures on earth.

The best estimate of the population of the Mat-Su Borough circa 1800, prior to the epidemics associated with outside contact, is roughly 3000 individuals from the Dena'ina and Ahtna tribes. Alutiiq and Sugpiaq settlements on the shores of Cook Inlet and up the Susitna River Valley have been found in the archaeological record, but both the scientific evidence and the oral history of indigenous populations indicate that the Dena'ina had displaced Alutiiq populations from Borough territory by the 19<sup>th</sup> Century prior to the first Russian contact.

[Placeholder: Indigenous populations map]<sup>[1], [2]</sup>

Defining how many people lived within the current boundaries of the Borough will also have a certain amount of fuzziness because Dene populations traveled hundreds of miles in annual cycles to reach certain resources at certain points in the year. The Dena'ina would spend portions of year in the Mat-Su Borough but also months in the vicinity of modern-day Anchorage and on the Kenai Peninsula, with nothing resembling a year-round fixed address. Likewise, the Ahtna would circulate into the Copper River valley.

The effect of both population loss and assimilation into Western economic system and culture reduced traditional lifestyles based on annual travel circuits and concentrated indigenous populations into permanent settlements. This trend had a statewide influence on Native settlement patterns, and the political and economic power of Anchorage and nearby population centers have drawn immigrants from Native populations which never historically inhabited the region, such as Inupiaq, Yupik, and Tlingit Alaskans. Immigration to the Mat-Su Borough in its context as a population center in the present-day State of Alaska has therefore resulted in a more diverse modern population of Natives than at any previous point in the region's history. Today two tribal governments, the Chickaloon and the Knik Tribal Council, take joint responsibility for representing the population of the Mat-Su Borough claiming indigenous heritage. Knik Tribe offers an associate tribal membership to local Native residents from all backgrounds. According to 2020 Census data, just over 14,000 residents of the Mat-Su Borough declared some degree of Alaska Native or American Indian racial heritage in the 2020 Census.<sup>[3]</sup>

## *Military Infrastructure*

The Mat-Su Borough has a relatively small military footprint compared to other regions of Alaska. All available evidence indicates that the Russian Empire never constructed any fortifications in this region of Alaska. Only a handful of sites were operated by the U.S. military throughout the American era as well, excluding the highway system and other infrastructure built by the military but primarily intended for civilian use.

Following the first Cook Inlet Military Expedition in 1898, Captain Glenn appropriated a parcel of land near Knik and left a small garrison. Glenn was anticipating follow-up expeditions in future years, and one of his biggest frustrations with the first expedition was the challenge of securing enough packhorses to keep the exploring parties supplied.<sup>[1]</sup> To move the stock to Homer, Glenn <sup>[2]</sup>. Glenn reported that he located the camp on the site of an “Indian fishing village, just below [Knik] station, [from which] a good trail over high ground could be opened to connect with my trail.”<sup>[3]</sup> The name ‘Soldier Creek,’ which connects Caves Lake to Knik Arm southwest of Knik, references this camp. After it had served its purpose supporting early military exploration of the region, the camp was abandoned.

[Placeholder: Map 945]

Federal interest in the region jumped again with the announcement of government railroad construction project. In April 1914 the Federal government formally established military reservations around Cook Inlet, including one at Point Mackenzie, for any future strategic needs.

[Placeholder: Map R\_PUB\_1924003, Military reservations at Fire Island, Point Mackenzie, and Point Campbell, established by executive order of Woodrow Wilson on April 21, 1914]

Those sites remained undeveloped until World War II and the subsequent Cold War introduced a critical sense of urgency. During World War II military development focused millions of dollars fortifying Anchorage, Seward, and Whittier. During the Cold War, concerns about the evolution of long-range bombers and ICBMs led the U.S. government to establish a surface-to-air missile battery to protect the military bases and settlements of Cook Inlet. The network consisted of three missile batteries which echoed the military reservations of the 1910s, with missile bases at Point Campbell and an aircraft control center located on Fire Island. The Point Mackenzie military reserve was never used, but instead a battery was established near Goose Bay. This ‘Site Bay’ Nike Missile base was the most developed military site in the Mat-Su Borough’s history.

Site Bay operated from 1959 to 1979 and its concrete bunkers housed Nike-Hercules missiles, which were surface-to-air missiles capable of carrying nuclear warheads and designed to intercept entire formations of enemy aircraft. The base also housed a 5000’ runway, the Goose Bay Air Force Auxiliary Field. GIs stationed at the site recall a relaxed atmosphere, far from the rigors of typical military life thanks to an early warning system in place to any inspections. An anonymous soldier wrote:

"There were only 2 ways an inspection team could travel to Site Bay - either by air or by land. Of course, it cost us a little bit of booty (e.g., some smoked salmon), but we got good information from Flight Operations at Ft Richardson or the only restaurant within the final hour's drive from Palmer and Wasilla. [...] We always had sufficient time to ‘dispatch’ all the vehicles from the motor pool or to make final corrections to a missile component."

Site Bay outlasted Site Point on Point Campbell, Site Summit above Arctic Valley, and all others in the country, becoming the last operational Nike-Hercules Missile battery in the United States. After its closure as a missile battery the site served a variety of colorful purposes, including as a prison from 1984 to 1987, and briefly as a staging point in 1993 for reindeer being airlifted from Bristol Bay to the “Rudolph and Co.” reindeer company in Lubbock, Texas. All structures except for the reinforced bunkers were removed in October 2005,<sup>[4]</sup> and the site currently sits vacant.

One final military site in the Mat-Su Borough is the Alcantra Armory in Wasilla, operated by the Alaska National Guard. The armory was first constructed in 1974 and operational in 1978, overlapped with Site Bay’s final years. The Armory continues to be used as a training ground and equipment storage yard.<sup>[5]</sup>

In addition to those primary military structures, other traces were left in the Borough by military recreation and training sites, and other secondary traces of activity. Both Big Lake and Lake Louise were home to military recreation camps for rotating soldiers during World War II, and Point MacKenzie was used as an anti-aircraft gunnery training range. In the 1950s engineering and demolition squads with the Air Force and the Army Corps of Engineers undertook training exercises to create channels between Big Lake, Mirror Lake (or Mud Lake), and Flat Lake, which were possibly prioritized by senior officers who had private residences in the area. The wreckage of a Boeing TB-29 Superfortress, which crashed on what is now known as the Bomber Glacier in the Talkeetna Mountains on November 15, 1957, is another unintended monument to military activity in the Borough.

*Economic and Demographic Effects*

Placeholder - HPP-2-2-6\_MatanuskaServicemen.jpg

There are no military bases in the Mat-Su Borough yet 15%, or 3 out of 20, of adult residents in the Matanuska-Susitna Borough are military veterans or actively serve. That prevalence of veterans is nearly 2.5 times the national average. It is among the highest in Alaska, tied with the Fairbanks North Star Borough and Southeast Fairbanks Census Area, which are home to Fort Wainwright and Fort Greely. The remarkable statistic of the high number of veterans in the Mat-Su is a story of opportunity and of local culture.

A key to understanding those settlement patterns is the Homesteading Act of 1862 and related legislation, which laid out the rules by which individuals or families could claim homesteads from the federal government for a very low monetary cost. The rules were tweaked and amended multiple times but each version tended to favor veterans with rules such as an exclusive 90-day window for veterans to apply for a homestead before a civilian could, and deferments which could reduce the amount of time required to prove up a homestead from three years for non-veterans to seven months for veterans. While non-veterans were required to cultivate a portion of the land, “veterans with more than nineteen months service and an honorable discharge”<sup>[1]</sup>

A government program granting veterans favorable access to land was one major piece of the puzzle, and the other was a large influx of people looking for places to live. The Homestead Act and other land programs for veterans had existed for a long time, but prior to 1940 fewer than one thousand homesteads had been claimed in the entire Territory of Alaska.<sup>[2]</sup> The right conditions appeared following World War II. As mentioned in the section on Population Growth, from 1940 to 1950 the population of the Territory of Alaska nearly doubled from . The boom caused such a housing shortage in Anchorage that people were living in trailers, shipping crates, Quonset huts and improvised shantytowns. A huge number were active duty military personnel deployed to Alaska as the United States shifted its attention towards the Pacific with the Soviet Union and the Cold War conflicts in Korea and, later, Vietnam. Others were retired servicemembers who had spent all or part of their service in Alaska and were attracted to the open spaces and opportunities to pave their own futures. By 1948, 100 homesteads were being claimed in Alaska each month.<sup>[3]</sup>

The veteran population still might have settled somewhere else in Alaska, During World War I many of the released land for homesteading had been on the Kenai Peninsula in the Chugach National Forest. The final piece of the puzzle for the initial wave of veterans in the Mat-Su was the amount of available land in the Mat-Su at the time they arrived. Just when homesteading programs were restarting in the post-War United States, 45000 acres around Wasilla and Goose Bay which had been reserved for the Matanuska Colony was opened to homesteading on October 17, 1947. Significant additional acreage was available all along the rail corridors of the Mat-Su. Especially with the housing shortage in Anchorage, the land was extremely desirable. It was near to the road system, near to the jobs and commerce of Anchorage including Fort Richardson and Elmendorf Air Force Base, and included excellent agricultural land by Alaskan standards. The DNR map below, showing all claimed homesteads in Alaska, shows that the Mat-Su Valleys were a center of homesteading activity in Alaska. The desirability of the land, the advantages veterans received over the general population when applying for it, and its availability when they arrived were the seeds for the large military population today.<sup>[4]</sup>

The last homestead to be granted under the Homestead Act was claimed in 1988, but veterans and many other populations continue to be drawn to the Mat-Su by affordable housing prices compared to Anchorage. The established population of military families also influences the culture of the Mat-Su Borough and makes it more comfortable and attractive for new military families to consider moving to.

[Placeholder: Homesteading map]

### ***Dene Trade Networks (Dena'ina and Ahtna)***

“You probably go around to the Yukon, the Tanana River, all places like that, if you go and say ‘Idluytnu’ [Eklutna], they know where that is.”

The traditional practices discussed in the last chapter reflect thousands of years of cultural development which allowed the Dene and Alutiiq to live in southcentral Alaska – with winters down to -40F, gale-force winds, blizzards, volcanoes, and earthquakes – using only the materials which could be found in their territories. But although they were self-sufficient, it would be inaccurate to say that they were isolated. The Susitna and Matanuska Valleys are routes on an ancient trade network directly connected to the Aleutians, Prince William Sound and the Yukon, which circulated trade goods from as far away as Asia and the Dakotas.

[In 2021, archaeologists in the Brooks Range discovered Venetian glass beads in a site dated to the 1400s, meaning they had reached Alaska several decades prior to Columbus voyage. Christopher Columbus was born about 250 miles away from where these beads were manufactured. They reached Alaska decades before he reached the Caribbean. ]

The Dena'ina and Ahtna both particularly benefited from trade due to their locations as gatekeepers between their fellow Dene neighbors in the Interior to oceangoing cultures. The Ahtna controlled the Copper River and trade from Eyak and Tlingit sources, while the Dena'ina occupied a unique position as the only coastal Athabascans and controlled the flow of goods such as furs and copper from Yupik peoples of the Alaska Peninsula and Outer Kenai Coast. In exchange the Dena'ina imported some of the incredible marine technology of the Alutiiq and Yup'ik, such as kayaks and waterproof gut parkas. But overall the trade was imbalanced and the Dena'ina enjoyed significant economic leverage, particularly over the neighboring seafaring Alutiiq:

“Alutiiq territory contained few resources the Dena'ina needed, but the Dena'ina controlled subarctic resources mostly in the form of furs the Alutiiq needed. Consequently, the Alutiiq desired to trade with the Dena'ina, but the Dena'ina did not need to trade with the Alutiiq” (Nanutset ch'u Q'udi Gu, p.33)

The Dena'ina community which occupied Knik and Eklutna at various times was the key hub, in use for so long that “nobody knows when they moved there.”<sup>14</sup> The evidence is both physical, such as archaeological finds of trade goods including Chinese coins presumably brought by Russian intermediaries, and cultural. Centuries before a Borough or State official dreamed of loading international container ships at Port MacKenzie, its Dena'ina name was *Dilhi Tunch'del'usht Beydegh*: “Point Where We Transport Hooligans.” Hooligan (also known as eulachon or candlefish) are extremely high in fat which can burn, grease, or nourish, which made it a valuable commodity. So long before ‘Prudhoe Bay’ or ‘TAPS’ meant anything to the average Alaskan, Point MacKenzie was already an export point for valuable oil. The Ahtna made annual trading trips to Knik during the winter, and rare trading expeditions were even recorded in various sources from Interior tribes beyond the Alaska Range. When Western anthropologists began documenting the Dena'ina language shortly after European contact the Dena'ina listed names for tribes all over Alaska, demonstrating the reach of their trade networks.

[Placeholder – Cash coins]

So when Europeans initially arrived they did not set up new trade systems; they slotted themselves into the existing system. British and Russian ships bartered for goods in Cook Inlet in the same way which any other visitor would, and the Alaska Commercial Company store at Knik was strategically located on the well-established trade route. It would take until the 1880s for the transition to a cash economy and introduction of large volumes of industrially manufactured goods to substantially change the traditional trade system.

One interesting and perhaps unexpected detail is that gold did not really have any value in this trade network prior to Russian and European influence. The Dene were well aware of gold but found no practical value in a metal too soft to hold an edge. Of course gold was not historically valued as a purely utilitarian metal anywhere on earth. Mediterranean cultures such as Romans, Greeks, and Egyptians assigned value to gold based on its scarcity and ability to craft into beautiful prestige goods, and spread the use of gold as a store of wealth to Western European cultures. The American Northwest, however, standardized on dentalium.

Dentalium describes the tubular shells produced by a particular family of marine shellfish, some of which are native to Cook Inlet waters. The dentalium trade connected most of the western United States from Alaska to the Great Plains to Central California. In Dena'ina and Ahtna society, dentalium was known as *k'enq'ena* and closely associated with the position of qeshqa or qí'yu: rich men and women who were responsible for managing the resources of the community and organizing activity.<sup>[1]</sup>

Placeholder: Collage demonstrating the extent of the pre-Contact dentalium trade

HPP_2-2-3-1_ChiefStephenKnik.jpg	HPP_2-2-3-1_DentaliumTradeMap.png	HPP_2-2-3-1_Tuyedi.jpg
HPP_2-2-3-1_YakimaWoman.png	HPP_2-2-3-1_ThunderCloudBlackfeet.png	HPP_2-2-3-1_NoHeartSioux.png

### *Hunting and Fur Trading*

For any human hoping to live a life in the Mat-Su which is not utterly reliant on imported food and clothing, the skills of catching, killing, and processing game into meat and useful materials are indispensable. And for all of the ingenuity and progress with modern fabrics, to this day animal products such as down, wool, leather, and fur outperform the very best synthetics, Goretex, and nylon in many applications. When gold rush prospectors arrived on Alaskan shores they quickly learned that Native fur clothing and sinew snowshoes were preferable to imported gear, and Iditarod mushers still prefer beaver mittens for the most frigid sections of trail.

[Placeholder: Dena'ina socks] With Trail of a 98er quote?

The wealth of the Mat-Su Valleys has always been its animals. There are richer deposits of oil and gold to the north, salmon to the south and west, and copper to the east. The high quality coal deposits are limited, and were also developed just a little too late to meet coal's peak as an American energy source. But moose, caribou, bear, wolves, sheep, wolverines, foxes, ermines, and all else have been a through-line in our history, providing meat, furs, encounters and memories from the Stone Age to the Space Age.

The Dena'ina, Ahtna, Alutiiq, and other Native cultures of Alaska each learned to use the species within their territories to the fullest, and furs and other animal products were the primary commodity in the trade networks described in the previous section. The Russians and the English, along with the Spanish and French to a lesser degree, considered furs the most lucrative trade good the North Pacific offered, and explored the region in hopes of dominating the fur market to Asia and Europe.

On May 29<sup>th</sup> 1778, while anchored in the vicinity of modern-day Kenai, Captain Cook's expedition bartered with the Dena'ina for a load of Cook Inlet furs including "skins of wolves, foxes, squirrels, deer, and some few beaver", [\[1\]](#) some of which may have come from the Mat-Su Valleys. Decades before gold rushes and salmon canneries, that fur trade was what first attracted year-round American residents to Upper Cook Inlet and the edges of what is now the Mat-Su Borough. During the Russian era the Lebedev-Lastochkin Company operated trading posts at Kenai and Kodiak and records indicate a one-man trading outpost operated for a couple of seasons somewhere in the Matanuska region, but the Alaska Commercial Company was the first to establish a permanent store in upper Cook Inlet, at Knik.

Around that same time, as furs were flowing out of the Mat-Su Valleys into international markets, began to attract recreational hunters. In the late 1800s and early 1900s tourists, especially American, English, and German sportsmen, traveled to Alaska for trophy moose, bear, and sheep. The Kenai Peninsula received the bulk of the traffic in that era, but the Knik River became a destination for Dall sheep. The guiding industry was accessible to Native men because of their traditional skills and deep knowledge of the landscape, and they provided guiding services to most early trips. Jim Nikita, the namesake of Jim Creek on the Knik River, guided the first recorded Knik River hunting expedition. Harry Hicks and his Dena'ina brother-in-law, Billy, also formed a successful guiding duo. Aside from guiding, the Dena'ina found work supplying meat to settlements and work crews, and from selling furs and gear such as mittens, parkas, and snowshoes.

By the 1920s and 1930s white American guides such as Lee Waddell (1890-1950) and Arthur Allen "Tex" Cobb (1872-1962) were bringing out-of-state clients up the Knik River and into the local mountains. Cobb was a true jack-of-all-trades- a guide, trapper, homesteader who settled near Matanuska in the

1920s and had a successful ranch by the time the Matanuska Colonists arrived. He also became a minor pop culture icon through a connection to the hunter and author Russell Annabel. While Jack London and Robert Service wrote about the Yukon, the Matanuska and Knik Valleys were Annabel's stomping ground. Annabel was an author who embellished his real experiences into fictionalized hunting stories and wrote so well that Ernest Hemingway called him "the finest outdoor writer" of the 1930s. 'Tex' Cobb was Annabel's regular hunting partner and is frequently mentioned in his Alaskan stories. The publicity elevated the reputation of the Mat-Su Valley as an exciting locale to pursue game.

Each incremental advance in transportation networks led to an increase in recreational hunting activity. For example, newspaper reports of locals organizing self-guided recreational hunting trips towards Sheep Mountain begin appearing shortly after the construction of the railroad spur to the Chickaloon coal mines facilitated access up the Matanuska River.<sup>[2]</sup> As civil aviation developed in the 1920s and 1930s, guides and pilots were quick to incorporate chartered aircraft to their clients access hunting grounds. The use of aircraft particularly boosted recreational hunting up the Matanuska River, and bush pilots such as Jack Wilson (), Mike Meekin (-) and the local landmark Sheep Mountain Lodge got their start in the 1930s and 40s.

Throughout the entire history of the Borough, hunting and trapping has also played a role as mundane and necessary as going to the grocery store. As gold, railroad construction, military activity, and every other boom brought larger populations to the Mat-Su, most residents relied on local sources of food. Many elderly lifelong residents of the Mat-Su Borough recall moose stew as a staple meal, and helping their parents or grandparents run a trapline to supplement income.

Today, 30% of Mat-Su residents have hunting licenses and 46% have fishing licenses, but the impact is greater because many of those individuals hunt to help feed an entire family.<sup>[3]</sup> Trapping has largely declined along with global fur prices and fashion trends but a small and largely hobbyist trapping community continues to operate. Guides, taxidermists, and game processors supporting both locals and hunting tourism make a significant sector of the local economy.

## *Fur Farming*

Fur farming is "largely an ignored chapter in the cultural history of Alaska," as Larry Roberts writes in his *Preliminary Survey of Historic Southeast Alaskan Fur Farming*. During its heyday in the early 1920s Alaska's fur exports were the third largest industry in the territory following mining and fishing.<sup>[1]</sup> The chapter was mostly written in Southeast Alaska and Prince William Sound, but a smaller set of enterprising individuals in the Mat-Su Borough participated with varying degrees of success.

Fur farming involves keeping a captive population of fur-bearing mammals restricted to a controlled space, as opposed to trapping or hunting animals in an unrestricted wilderness environment. The Department of Fish and Game records over 45 species have been farmed in Alaska, with a focus on land mammals because aquatic species were more difficult to keep captive and manage.<sup>[1]</sup> Fox and mink were the most popular farmed furbearers due to being the right combination of lucrative and relatively easy to raise in captivity.

Roberts and others note "two distinct management schemes" used for foxes and other species: "the island or free running of *Alopex lagopus* (blue fox) on suitable islands" and "the pen or corral raising of both blue fox (*Alopex lagopus*) and red fox (*Vulpus vulpus*)." Setting animals loose on an island where they could den and hunt was significantly simpler than constructing cages, which is why fur farming boomed along the green coasts of southeast Alaska. Feeding foxes allowed for larger populations, better health, and higher quality fur compared to leaving them to fend for themselves, giving island farms another advantage since their owners could often source cheap feed in the form of salmon or whales. For all of its abundant natural resources, the Mat-Su Borough has a distinct lack of deepwater islands available, and local fur farmers learned the more "specialized effort" of raising foxes and minks in pens.<sup>[2]</sup>

It can be hard to differentiate between hopeful dreams and true success in the optimistic newspaper articles which document fur farming operations in the Borough. One mention of an early operation appears in 1915 in a surprisingly remote location from the perspective of modern road infrastructure: Goose Creek on the Oshetna River, northwest of Lake Louise. The farm was operated by a Mr. Conrad and one other business partner.<sup>[3]</sup>

But there is no central repository of records. In order to piece together an estimate of 622 private farm owners in the peak year of 1929 for her book *Fur Farms of Alaska*, researcher Sarah Isto had to cross-reference "census records, licensee lists, propagation permits, general land office records, and blue fox brand records," and then concluded it is "difficult to guess how many additional fur farmers operated without coming to government attention."<sup>[4]</sup> Filling in the gaps of fur farming in the Borough remains an interesting research topic for future historians.

In the boom years of the 1920s records can be found of fox and mink farms on Montana Creek, Caswell Lakes, and in Wasilla. The Matanuska Minkery in Wasilla was an early source for start-ups to purchase breeding pairs of the mustelids circa 1925, and the Susitna Mink Breeders Association formed in 1930. Gerrit 'Heinie' Snider's ambitious and professional mink operation was also located in Wasilla, boasting of a "\$1000 mink shipment" in a 1929 photograph.<sup>[5]</sup> Snider's operation was one of the largest in Alaska, and he managed to stay in business through the Great Depression.<sup>[6]</sup> In 1927 another Wasilla resident, Frank Cook, was reported to be starting up after buying some initial breeding stock from Snider. The Caswell Lake Fur Farm was owned by Olson and Overby and operated from at least 1927 to 1936. They claimed, either sincerely or for marketing purposes, to be the largest fur farm in the state.

[Placeholder – Snider mink shipment photo]

The same commercial pressures that befell hunting and trapping for pelts depressed the fur farming industry as well. Although fur performs well in the harshest conditions, as early as the 1950s synthetic materials were competing with utilitarian fur clothing and providing acceptable performance for most applications. The 1930s also revealed a clash of old and new industries. The reproductive habits of foxes and mink are extremely sensitive to noise and disturbance, and increasing airplane activity in Anchorage and the Mat-Su seemed to cause many farmed animals to stop producing pups or even kill their litters as a stress response. Aircraft noise continuously increased into the 1970s and supersonic aircraft began producing sonic booms over populated areas. Local farmers protested and pursued legal action against the federal government for lost , <sup>[7]</sup>

The last recorded fox farm in the Mat-Su Borough, a large operation on Fairview Loop in Wasilla, was surrendered to the state by the Native corporation which owned it in 1988. The corporation had purchased the farm from Lucian Dancaescu the year prior, but found it unprofitable. Shortly after acquiring it, the state government shuttered the farm due to poor management and animal welfare concerns.<sup>[8]</sup> A few years later in 1993, Whitestone Farms in Delta Junction closed its doors as the last known operation in the state, closing the chapter of farmed fur in Alaska for the foreseeable future.<sup>[9]</sup>

### *Tourism / Recreation*

This entire chapter only very briefly covers the Mat-Su Borough's history, but includes a huge variety of people with different nationalities, religions, political leanings, and levels of wealth and education. With a surprising ability to cut across all of those differences is the joy we find in our free time. From a paleolithic hunter armed with a slate spear to a vegan with a bush plane and a carbon-fiber splitboard, nearly every human who has passed through this area has had the capacity to gaze at the alpenglow and sit around a fire with friends.

So learning about the history of recreation in the Borough offers a chance to connect with those who we don't share much else in common with. Fleshing out the history of tourism in the Mat-Su Borough also offers one of the best opportunities to uncover previously unseen photos and footage of the Borough at various points in history. In many cases tourists were the ones with the wealth, free time, and curiosity to document the Borough as they saw it, while the local residents around them were busy just getting on with their lives. Their photo albums and film reels are around the world, waiting to be discovered.

It is impossible to catalogue every way in which enjoying the Mat-Su Borough has brought a smile to someone's face. Broad trends in tourism and recreation are usually closely related to particular destinations and transportation methods.

Dog sledding, river travel, and hunting and fishing for sport go back to the early days, when fun often blended in with more serious goals. The Knik River was an early magnet for hunters seeking to kill and capture the first Dall Sheep specimens for museums and private collections, while the Susitna River and the lakes around Wasilla drew fishermen. Even when catching a fish or animal was serious business to earn a paycheck or put food on the table, the diaries and interviews of practitioners reveal true recreational delight. Mushing the Seward-Yentna Trail, the Iditarod Trail, and trails up the Matanuska River were also once vital for mail delivery and commerce, but the work left plenty of room for working mushers to have fun, at least on the good days. As mushing became obsolete as a transportation mode, it transitioned into recreation for those who love the unique thrill of a fastpaced sport riding behind a bunch of engines which each have a mind and a personality of their own.

[Inset: Tourist traffic was low in the era before the railroad, but the 1920s led to a step-change. Following World War I people had wealth, and the railroads were in place for them to move through Alaska in relative comfort after arriving in a port such as Seward. President Harding's tour of the state in 1923 brought a further boost of steamship and railroad. The Curry Hotel north of Talkeetna opened during the Presidential visit and served as the premier luxury resort in the Alaska Range until around 1939.]

In the world of boating, traveling the Susitna River is considered a lifetime achievement by many motorized and non-motorized subdisciplines. Paddlers define the "North American Triple Crown" as completing a full descent of the Susitna River, along with the Alsek and the Stikine, "some of the biggest, most adventurous whitewater in North America". Out of all the sections of the Susitna, Devils Canyon on the upper river is particularly famous as a classic test piece of Alaskan whitewater, and the first run of the canyon in a particular type of watercraft is a celebrated event in the histories of each of those communities. Walt Blackadar of Idaho completed the first kayak run of the canyon in 1972 and local resident Steve Mahay ascended the canyon in a jet boat in 1985. Mark Cramer, also of Idaho, took the entry for inflatables with a cataraft in 2005. The first descent in a packraft is a feat still waiting to be achieved but the Susitna is practically home turf for packrafts, which were invented by the mother-and-son team of Sheri and Thor Tingey while they were residents of Denali National Park.

Skiing and hiking have also been popular pastimes for decades. In a very early newspaper article, a grocer from Nebraska named Charles Beery reported climbing a mountain near the Little Susitna River for photography in 1902, writing back to his hometown paper “I never saw so many huckleberries before. The ground was purple with them, hundreds of bushels of them and no one to eat them but me and the bears.”<sup>[1]</sup> Many of the mountains of the Hatcher Pass region were climbed by in the 1940s by miners and their families, and likely earlier by Dena’ina individuals. Recreational skiing and ski jump competitions were in vogue as early as the 1920s. With all the local skiers, dreams of a major ski resort at Hatcher Pass have been passed around since the 1980s. Hap Wurlitzer, Tom Murphy, and others ran a successful early effort by establishing Hatcher Pass Lodge, which included helicopter-assisted skiing in 1986. Around the same time the Japanese Mitsui Corporation came very close to investing in a resort on the scale of Alyeska, including a publicity stunt in which professional skier and mountaineer Yuichiro Miura was helicoptered to the summit of Government Peak for the first recorded ski descent of a steep face which is now known as the Japanese Headwall. In more recent history, the non-profit community resort of Skeetawk began operations in 2020.

Helicopters and fixed-wing aircraft revolutionized many aspects of recreation in the Mat-Su Borough aside from skiing. The increased access airplanes provided to backcountry hunting and fishing have been discussed in other sections, and many homesteaders also reported first spotting their land during a flight. The Mat-Su’s position at the premier gateway to the Alaska Range was strengthened by the airplane as well. Early access to Denali and Alaska Range mountaineering all approached from the north, including the 1910 Sourdough Expedition to the South Summit, the 1913 Karstens-Stuck Expedition to the true summit, and the first plane-assisted ascent all approached from the North. But in 1951 a team led by Bradford Washburn pioneered the West Buttress route, landing on the Kahiltna Glacier with a plane piloted from Talkeetna. Ever since then, Talkeetna has been the hub of flightseeing and mountaineering access to the Alaska Range and many well-known pilots including Don Sheldon and Cliff Hudson have advanced the craft of bush flying from its airstrip.

### ***Establishment of Matanuska-Susitna Borough, 1964***

Once Alaskans finished celebrating Statehood on January 3<sup>rd</sup>, 1959, they fell to the work of setting up the structures which had been hashed out at the storied Constitutional Convention several years earlier. <sup>[1]</sup> The unit of regional government written into the State Constitution was called a ‘Borough’ – deliberately setting them apart from the ‘counties’ of the Lower 48.

Article 10, the Local Government, includes the following key clauses describing the vision for the Boroughs:

“The entire State shall be divided into boroughs, organized or unorganized.”

“to provide for maximum local self-government  
with a minimum of local government units”

“Each borough shall embrace an area and population with common interests  
to the maximum degree possible.” – Section 3 <sup>[1]</sup>

State law provides the nuts and bolts of the system in Chapter 29.35, defining first, second, and third class boroughs with a variety of mandates and optional powers. Borough investigation committees sprang up around the state, and numerous alliances of citizens and organizations formed to advocate for their particular dream.

But by the beginning of 1963, little concrete action had been taken. Bristol Bay was the only region of the state which had established a Borough. Frustration was growing within the state government that the lack of regional governments was hampering the distribution of money for programs such as schools and roads. Several bills had been introduced in the early 1960s to immediately define all boroughs statewide using existing boundaries such as school districts, but each one failed to advance. <sup>[2]</sup>

In February 1963, Alaska House member John Rader introduced what would soon become known as ‘The Mandatory Borough Act,’ which was passed and signed into law by Governor Egan on April 17, 1963. <sup>[3]</sup> The Act required the most populous regions of the state – the Mat-Su, along with Anchorage, Fairbanks, Kenai Peninsula, Kodiak Island, Juneau, Sitka, and Ketchikan, to promptly hold local elections and establish a first or second class borough.

The carrots were generous. The Act “gave all newly created Boroughs the right to select ten percent of the vacant, unappropriated, and unreserved State land within their boundaries. That amounts to 355,000 acres in the Mat-Su Borough<sup>[4]</sup> This grant was patterned after the land grant from the Federal Government to the State of Alaska as provided in the Alaska Statehood Act.” It also provided an immediate cash grant of \$10 per voter after the voluntary election.

The stick was that, if residents didn’t organize themselves by October 1963, the boundaries would be automatically fixed established Election Districts. Residents would then be required to hold an election to decide the remaining details, including selecting First or Second-Class status and structuring their Assembly. <sup>[5]</sup>

Within the Mat-Su, familiar arguments rang out as residents argued about how wide or narrow the Mat-Su Borough should be. Certain Anchorage and Mat-Su residents argued for a single Borough including Anchorage, on the basis that the region was economically intertwined and that the sparsely-populated

Mat-Su Borough would have too small of a tax base to function effectively on its own. A larger group of Mat-Su residents retorted that lumping the Mat-Su in with Anchorage would dilute their self-governance, and that unreasonably far to travel for political representation.

Two competing proposals developed. In May 1963 a petition circulated calling for a Mat-Su Borough with essentially the current boundaries, which was the most popular design among Mat-Su Valley residents. Supporters of the ‘Captain Cook Borough,’ a proposal for a larger borough including both Anchorage and the Mat-Su, wrote directly to the State Local Affairs Agency to argue their case. Some combination of timing and political influence led the Agency to accept the ‘Captain Cook’ proposal as the local proposal which would receive a vote for approval. The Local Boundary Commission initially scheduled a hearing for the Mat-Su Borough proposal, but cancelled it once the competing proposal had been given an election date.

The Mat-Su residents in support of a Mat-Su Borough excluding Anchorage the filed an injunction with the Third District Superior Court, but despite strong local support the injunction was rejected and the Captain Cook Borough election was held on September 17<sup>th</sup>. If there was any doubt how most Anchorage and Mat-Su residents felt about sharing one local government, the election outcome clearly demonstrated community opinion. The ‘Captain Cook Borough’ proposal was overwhelmingly defeated by a margin of “five-to-one in District 7, Mat-Su, and three-to-one in District 8, Anchorage.” By that time, however, the legal wrangling and the election had run down the clock set by the Mandatory Borough Act and there was no time for another local election to approve a more popular boundary.

On December 3<sup>rd</sup>, having failed to establish a Borough by local action, the Mat-Su Borough was automatically defined using the existing boundaries of District 7. On December 18, 1963, the Mat-Su Borough Assembly and School Board held their first meeting, and here we are 60 years later.

## Stakeholder Survey - HPC

What are your organization's priorities for the next 10 years?

What historical information would your organization like to share with the public and other researchers across the Borough?

What would your organization like to offer to the public, that you may need assistance with presenting or preparing for use?

What historical information or assistance is your organization seeking that you do not currently have access to? This can include resources which you know exist but do not have access to, such as undigitized collections in the National Archives. It can also include resources which you are not certain exist, such as "any oral history recordings or photographs related to a certain area, theme, or era."

In a perfect world, what would your organization contribute to and receive from a relationship with:

Local government?

Local museums?

Local cultural and educational institutions?

Local businesses?

Residents?

Visitors?

Do you have any suggestions for reasonable and achievable ways for local government to help you accomplish your mission?