

# Overview of Alaska Native Cultures & History

Prepared for Native CDFI Capital Access Convening  
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Sealaska Heritage Institute  
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**SEALASKA  
HERITAGE**

Yeidiklas'akw ka Kaaháni yóo xát duwasáakw  
Ch'áak' naa áyá xát  
Shungukeidí naax xat sitee  
Kawdliyaayi Hítdáx áyá xát  
Jilkáat kwáan áyá xát  
Lukaax.ádi dachxán áyá xát

My Tlingit name is Yeidiklas'akw. It is an ancient name that has been handed down through generations of our clan, and its meaning has been lost in antiquity.

My ceremonial name is Kaaháni, which means “Woman Who Stands in the Place of a Man.”

This name recalls an historical event involving intertribal trade, and it speaks to the status of women in our society.



I am an Eagle of the Thunderbird clan and the House Lowered from the Sun in Klukwan in the Chilkat region.

I am a grandchild of the Sockeye clan.

I am entitled to use the Eagle, Thunderbird, and Sun clan crests and the White Bear, Killer Whale, and Shark Spirit designs.

My identity reflects our ties to our ancestors and our real and spiritual relationship to our land, environment, and universe.



In addition, our clan claims ownership rights to the U.S. Naval military uniform and to the name “Lt. Frederick Schwatka.”

Under Tlingit law, because Lt. Schwatka failed to pay a debt to my great, great clan grandfather, the Thunderbird clan claimed his name and the naval uniform or semblances of them as liability payments.



Photo by Chris Miller

# Ancient History<sup>1</sup>

1 The first section of this presentation was largely abstracted from Rosita Kaaháni Worl, “Alaska,” *Oxford Handbook of American Indian History*, ed. Frederick E. Hoxie (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016) 301-314.



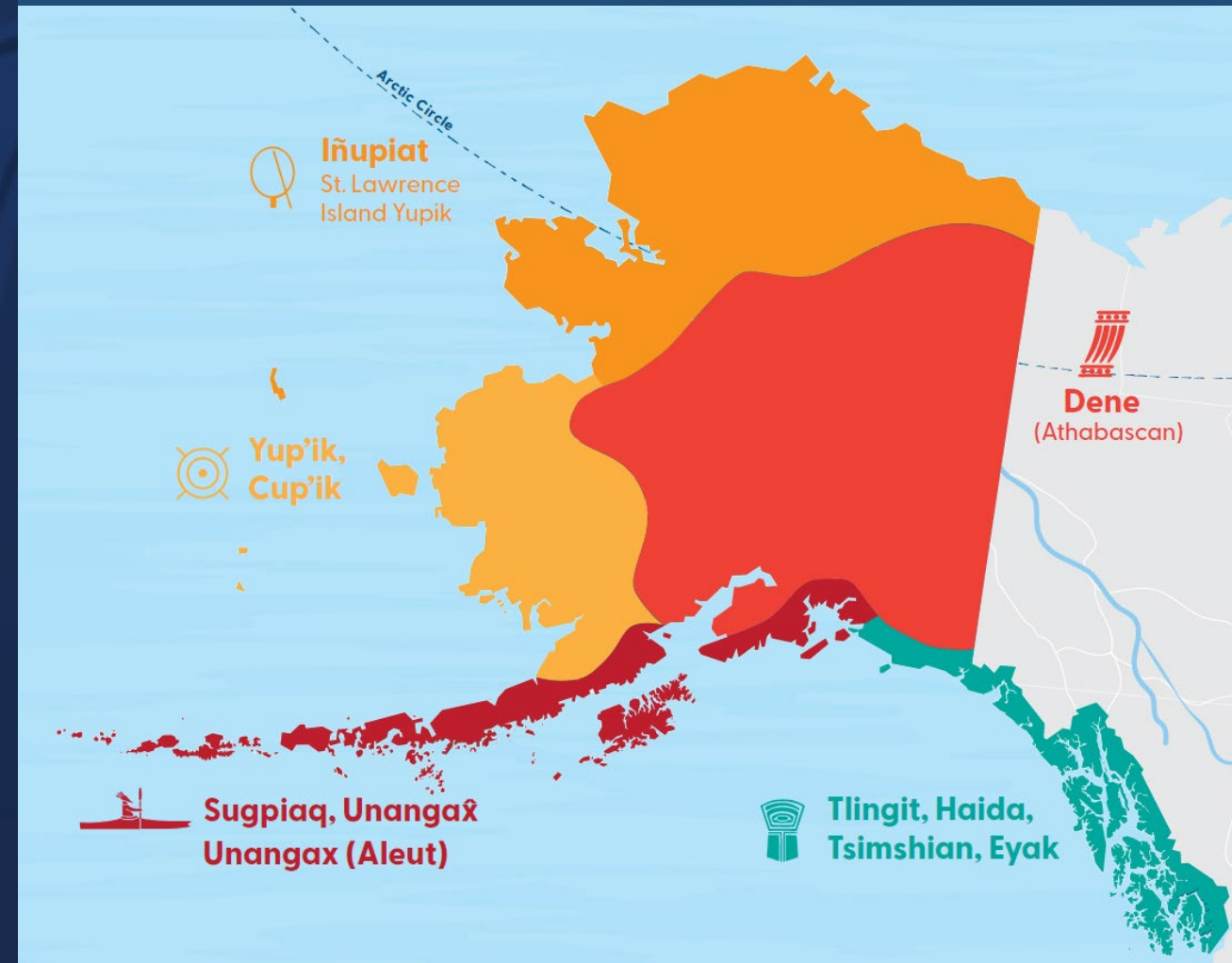
Alaska is the aboriginal homeland of four major cultural groups:

- Inupiat and Yup'ik, historically identified as Northern and Southern Eskimo
- Alutiiq and Unangan, commonly referred to as Aleut
- Athabascan
- Tlingit and Haida Indians

At Western contact in 1741, the Indigenous population was estimated at 80,000.

The Tsimshian are a recent group, which migrated from Canada to Alaska in 1887.

While each of the Indigenous groups is characterized by cultural differences, they share significant cultural similarities despite speaking different languages.



Courtesy of Alaska Travel Industry Association

## Overview of Aboriginal Population

Today the four major groups are collectively referred to as Alaska Natives, although they are insistent on maintaining their separate tribal identities.

Alaska Native societies are characterized by a group orientation rather than the individualistic emphasis of Western societies.

They all believe that humans and animals alike have spirits and a spiritual relationship exists between them.

Their economies centered on subsistence hunting, fishing, and gathering.



Kodiak Alutiiq Dancers. Photo by Brian Wallace.

## *Inupiat*

- Population at the time of contact was estimated at 10,000.
- They occupy northwestern Alaska and the interior region north of the Brooks Range.
- The coastal Inupiat depended primarily on sea mammals, including the mammoth bowhead whales.
- The inland Inupiat subsisted largely on the migratory caribou herds.





## *Yup'ik*

- The largest Native group with a population of 30,000 at the time of contact with Westerners.
- Occupied a vast region from the coast in Prince William Sound in south central Alaska to St. Lawrence Island in the Bering Strait.
- They were primarily dependent on marine mammals and salmon in the riverine systems.



## *Alutiiq and Unangan*

- Aboriginal population ranging from 15,000 to 18,000
- They were located on the southern tip of the Alaska Peninsula and the Aleutian Chain of islands.
- They were noted for their successful maritime adaptation in hunting sea mammals in the open oceans, the most important being the sea lions and whales.
- On the Alaska Peninsula, they depended on a mixed economy of caribou and fish.



## *Athabaskan*

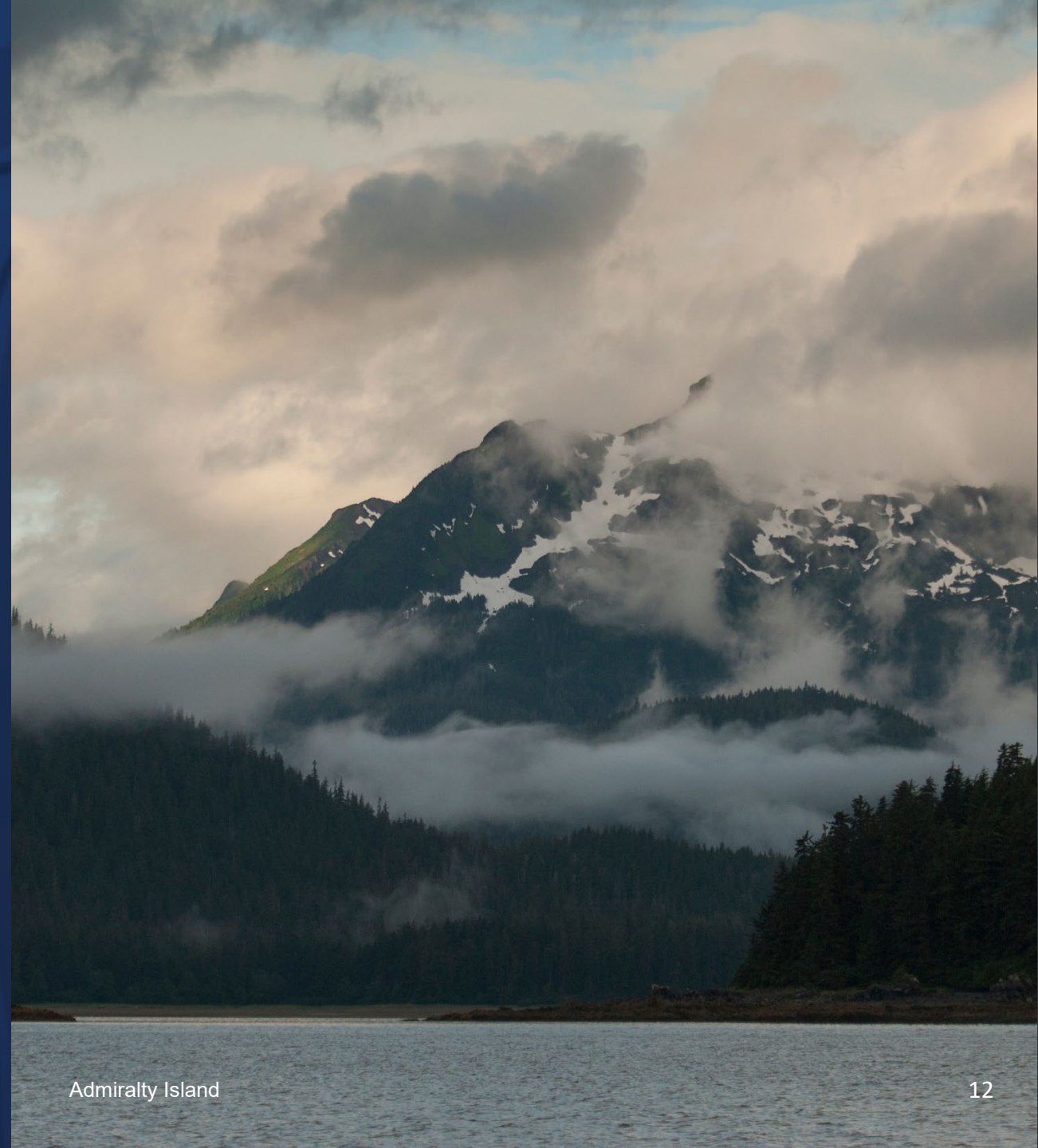
- Population at the time of contact was between 10,000 and 11,000.
- Occupied the interior regions of Alaska between the Brooks Range in the north and the Alaska Range in the south.
- Only one Athabaskan group lived on the coast in Cook Inlet.
- The riverine and Pacific Athabascans depended primarily on salmon supplemented by caribou and moose.
- The upland groups depended primarily on caribou and moose.



Brooks Range

## ***Tlingit and Haida***

- The Tlingit population numbered approximately 15,000 at the time of contact while the Haida population numbered under 2,000.
- The Haida are recent immigrants to Southeast Alaska, migrating from Haida Gwaii in Canada some 200 years before the arrival of Europeans to Alaska.
- The Tlingit and Haida live in Southeast Alaska and are primarily dependent on marine resources, notably salmon.



# Arrival of the “White Men”



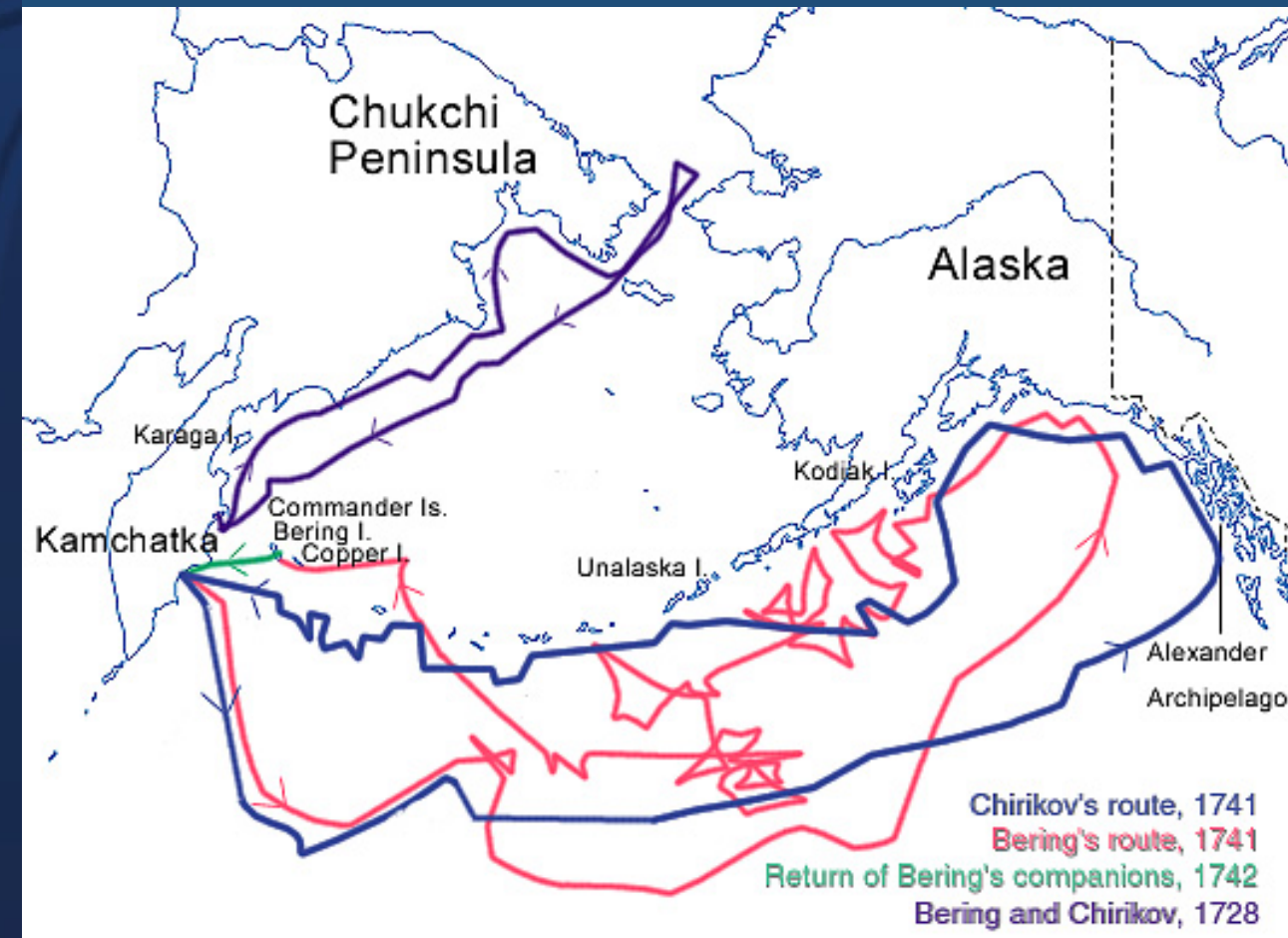
The Russian "Rurik" sets anchor near Saint Paul Island in the Bering Sea. Drawing by Louis Choris in 1817. Public domain.

When the Natives first saw the Westerners, who first arrived in 1741, they did not conceive of them as humans.

The Tlingit, who were the first Native group to see them, thought the ship with its white sails was White Raven returning to earth and the sailors were crows.

The Yup'ik didn't believe that the first White men they saw were humans until they saw that one of them defecated like a human being.

Unfortunately, the Natives were soon to realize the brutal nature and hunger of these foreign human beings for their land and resources.



Map of Bering and Chirikov's routes, <http://frontiers.loc.gov/intldl/mtfhtml/mfak/mpbering.html>

The Russians, who had learned of the great abundance of the sea otters on their first voyage to Alaska and their worth in the Chinese market, returned for sea otters.

They first conscripted the Aleuts in service, who in their sea-faring kayaks, were remarkable hunters. To ensure their continued service, the Russians took the Aleut women as hostages.

Historical records and oral traditions are replete describing the widespread Russian atrocities perpetuated against the Alutiiq and Unangan.



Alaska State Library - Historical Collections

Russian crest and sword. Alaska State Library. ASL-P20-176

One such account records the Russians taking 25 young women when they were leaving Alaska. When they arrived at Kamchatka, they sent fourteen of the girls ashore to pick berries. Two of them ran away, one of them was killed by a Russian, and the remaining girls threw themselves into the sea.

To ensure there were no witnesses, the Russians had all the remaining Aleuts thrown overboard with the exception of one boy.

Through the 1780s, the Koniag and Chugach Eskimos, who today identify themselves as Aleuts or Alutiiq, were the next to be subjugated by the Russians in their quest for sea otters.



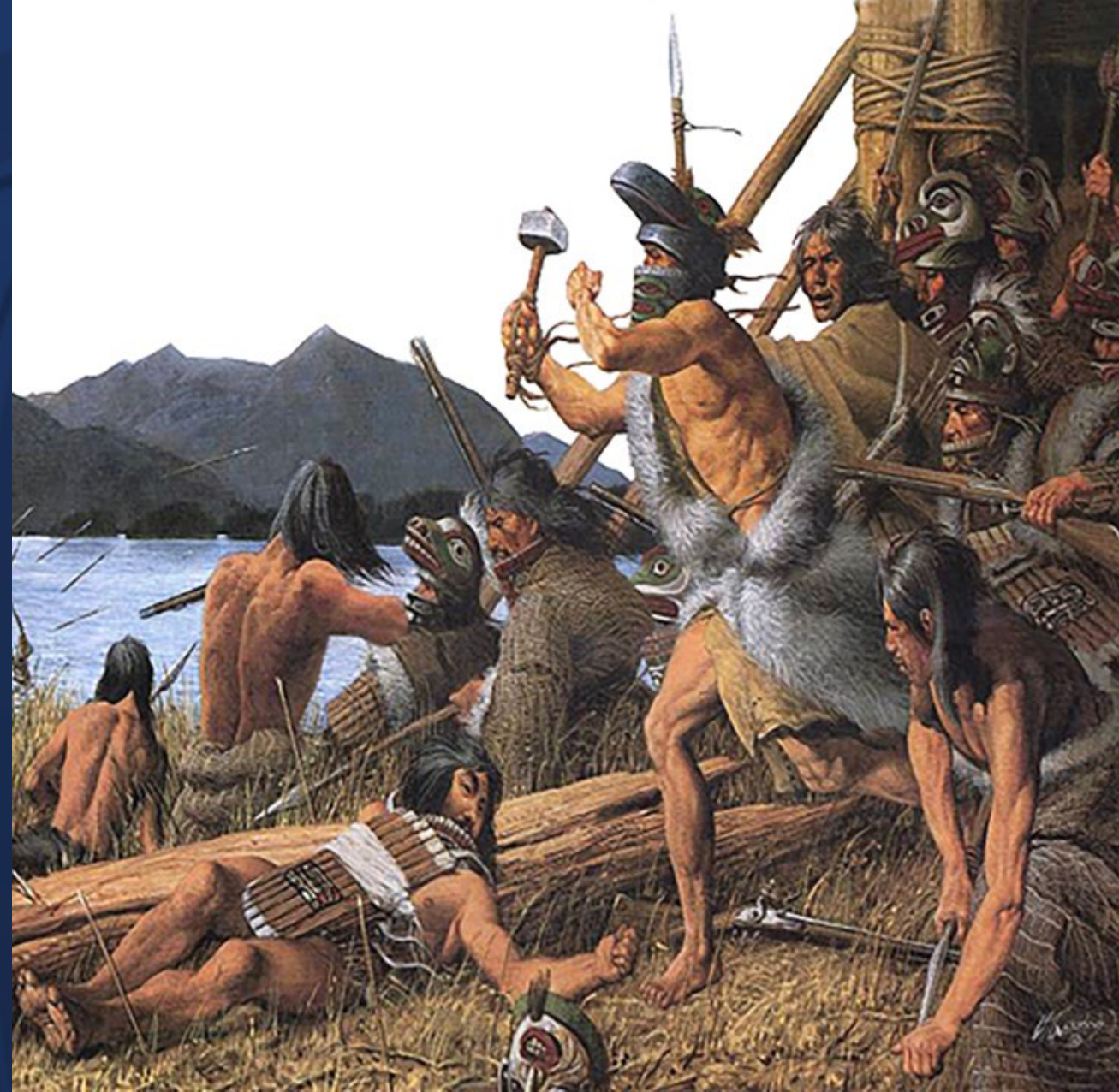
*Man of Kodiak.* Drawing by Gavriil Sarychev, Geographical and Astronomical Marine Expedition, 1785-1793. Alaska State Library ASL-P20-034.



The story would be different, however, with the Tlingit, who had a strong warriors' society and who possessed superior American weaponry obtained in trade.

The Tlingit were able to keep the Russians at bay. In 1802, the Tlingit clans united under the leadership of the Kiks.ádi clan war leader, K'alyáan, and defeated the Russians.

In 1804, however, the Russians, fortified with a larger contingency, including Aleut hunters and four ships, were able to defeat the Tlingit. It was a tenuous peace, with the Russians never leaving their fort after dark.



*Battle of Sitka* by Louis S Glanzman. Sitka National Historical Park Collection. Public domain.

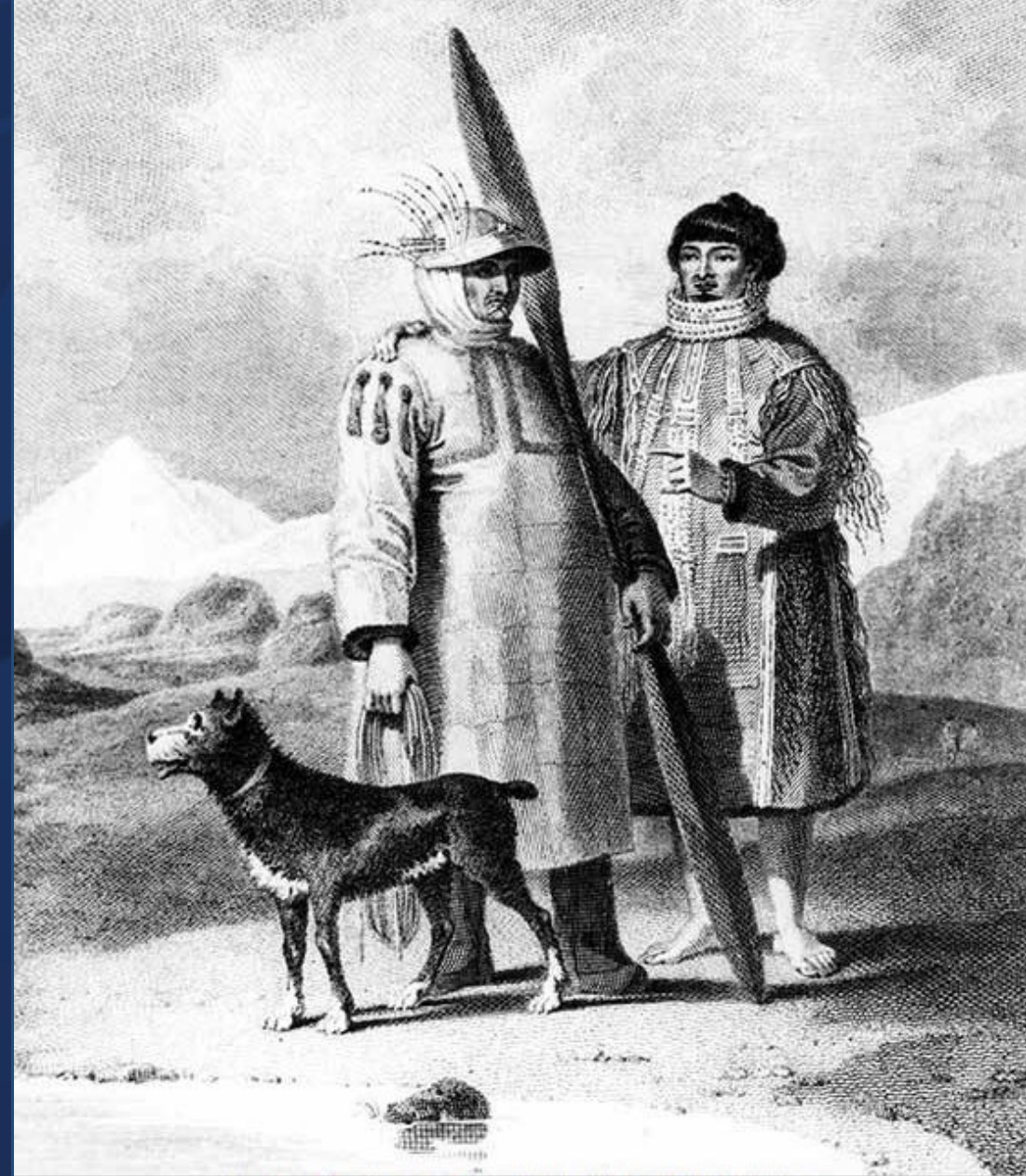
Following the Russian fur traders were Russian Orthodox priests who were brought not only to proselytize, but to train the Aleut in the skills needed by the Russians, e.g. blacksmiths, carpentry, etc.

Russian interaction with the Inupiat and Athabascan was minimal. They had a more sustained relationship with the Yup'ik in Western Alaska through the five trading posts they established in southwestern Alaska.

Relationships with the Aleut and the Tlingit were considerably more intensive.

The Russian period ended with the subjugation and near decimation of the Aleut population.

Within the first thirty years of Russian occupation, their numbers plunged from a high of 18,000 to under 2,000.



Alaska State Library - Historical Collections

The epidemics introduced by Russians not only led to widespread deaths, but they also facilitated the conversion of the Aleut to Russian Orthodoxy.

While the Tlingit were able to maintain their political independence during the Russian occupation, they near succumbed to the diseases brought by Westerners that were described as “a demographic and cultural shock so great that it threatened their continued existence as viable sociocultural entities.”

Another effect of the epidemic was the conversion of many Tlingit to Russian Orthodoxy after the Tlingit saw that their shamans had no power to cure the new disease and attributed their survival to the spiritual power of the Russian priest who vaccinated them.



Alaska State Library - Historical Collections

Skoon-doo-oo yak [Skundoo], shaman of the Eagle tribe. Case and Draper Photographs 1898-1920. Alaska State Museum. ASL-P39-0448

A scourge that began in the Russian period and continues to the present period and that was as equally devastating as were the infectious diseases was alcohol.

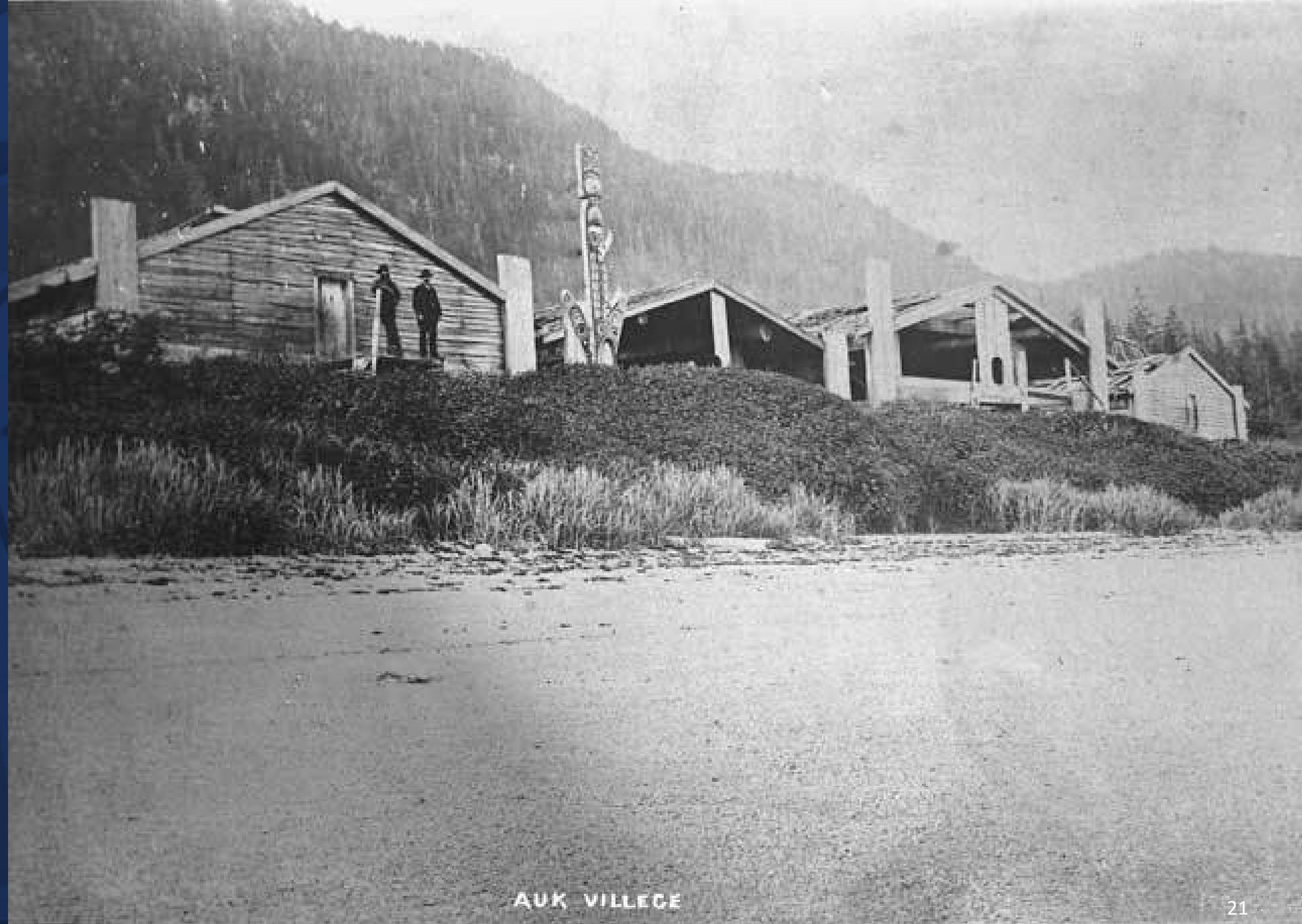
The initial euphoria of their first taste of alcohol would be replaced in succeeding decades by widespread physical and social devastation among all Alaska Natives.



Grave posts. Khinkwan. Cape Fox Village, Alaska, Sir Henry Wellcome Collection, 1856 – 1936. US National Archives and Records Administration (298006).

# Sale of Alaska

Auk Village, 1888.  
Alaska State Library.  
ASL-P226-206

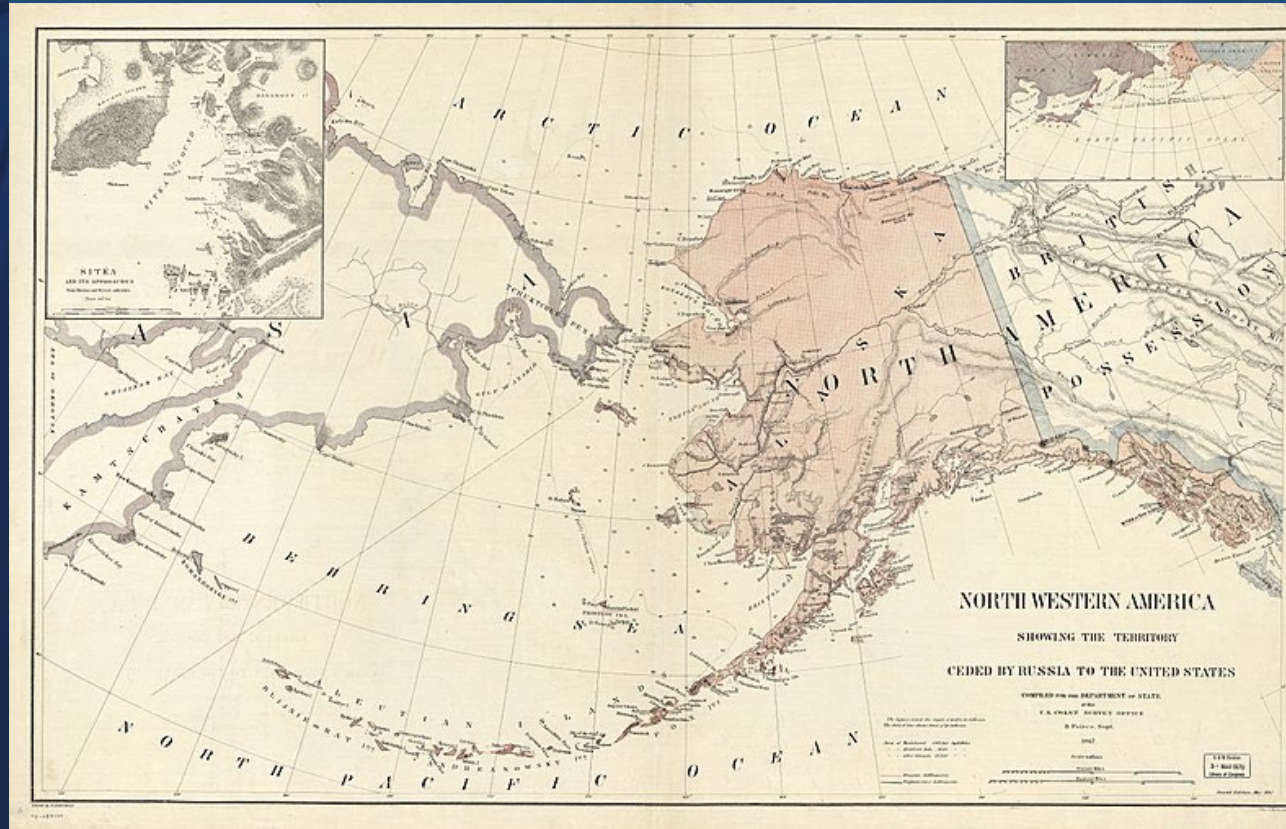


AUK VILLEGE

The Russian era ended with the 1867 Treaty of Cession (15 U.S. Stat. 539) through which Alaska was sold to the United States for \$7.2 million. It prescribed the treatment of Alaska Natives:

*Uncivilized tribes will be subject to such laws that the United States may from time to time adopt in regard to aboriginal tribes of that country.*

The Tlingit immediately objected to the sale of their land. They held that if the United States wanted their land, they should have paid the \$7.2 million to them.



Map of Territory (Alaska) ceded to the United States by Russia. U.S. Coast Survey Office, 1867. Public domain.

A council of clan leaders met to decide if they would wage war against the United States. They wisely decided that they could not win a war against the United States because of their superior weaponry and their vast numbers.

Instead, they hired a lawyer and embarked on a 100-year legal and political battle to seek recognition of their ownership of their ancient lands.

Other Alaska Native groups, some of whom had never encountered Russians, were largely unaware that a land transaction between two nations had even occurred and that they would be subject to American rule.



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YOUNG NATIVES COPPER RIVER ALASKA

Alaska State Library - Historical Collections

# Alaska Natives Under American Jurisdiction

Portrait of Saginaw Jake (Kitcheenault) and Harlampy Sokolof in regalia sitting in front of American flag. Alaska State Library, Vincent Soboleff Collection ca 1896-1920. ASL-P1-007





The arrival of the Americans brought dramatic and far-reaching changes to the lives of Alaska Natives more than anything that had happened previously.

For the Aleut of the Pribilof Islands it would be an extension of Russian colonialism.

For the Tlingit, it would prove to be a vastly different experience than that they endured under the Russians.

The other Alaska Native groups would largely be spared the impacts of American jurisdiction and settlement until the Klondike Gold Rush of 1898 brought a stampede of thousands of prospectors to Alaska.



Alaska State Library - Historical Collections

Potlatch in Sitka, Alaska, 1904. Alaska State Library. ASL-P20-055

## The Aleuts of Pribilof Islands

The Unangan (Aleuts) of St. George and St. Paul served as indentured laborers to harvest seals—first for a Russian commercial company and then the Americans. The American system of forced labor began in the nineteenth century and continued until very recently.

The government maintained a policy of secrecy about its remote Pribilof sealing operations and restricted travel to the islands.

The general public was not aware of the economic deprivation suffered by the Aleut or the restrictions on their civil liberties and the control of every aspect of Aleut life, even identifying who they could marry.



As if the Aleuts did not suffer enough indignities, the Unangan were evacuated from their homeland and taken to Funter Bay in Southeastern Alaska after the Japanese bombed Dutch Harbor and Unalaska in 1942 and Japanese troops landed on the Aleutian Islands.

The Aleut were forced to live in a cannery that had been abandoned for 12 years. The living conditions were unspeakable. The Aleuts were repatriated to their homeland in 1944 only to find that their homes had been looted and damaged.

They filed a lawsuit in 1950 against the federal government for damages against the Aleut and were awarded \$8.5 million and were successful in securing title to their lands and their houses.

The Pribilof Unangan had endured and survived a 110-year colonial rule under the federal government that is yet largely an unknown part of Alaska Native history.



Alaska State Library-Historical Collections

Cemetery for Aleutian Islanders [Unangan] during WWII died of T.B. and other diseases 1940s. Alaska State Library ASL-P01-3749.

## Bombardment of Tlingit Villages

Another little-known fact in Alaska Native history is that the United States military bombarded and destroyed several Tlingit villages at Wrangell, Kake, and Angoon during the period they governed Alaska.

The military initially recognized Tlingit law and allowed them to punish their own members for internal crimes according to their own legal standards.

They also accepted the sanctions imposed by the Tlingit to avoid conflicts between the Tlingit and Whites and compensated the Tlingit when violations of their laws occurred. In 1882 the policies recognizing Tlingit law and sanctions were rescinded.

Recently discovered historical documents offer intriguing evidence that the actual reason for the bombing of Angoon was for rich coal beds adjacent to the Tlingit settlement and the need to relocate them rather than for crimes supposedly committed by the Angoon Tlingit.



Unexploded 1869 Kake bomb, diffused in 2011.

As a result of various military encounters with the Tlingit and the unmet liability payments due to the Tlingit, several clans, including the Deisheetaan, Kaagwaantaan, and the Shangukeidí clans have taken military uniforms as payments for offenses against their clans by the Navy.

Today, these appropriated uniforms are used as reminders of the military's unpaid debts to the Tlingit and the persistence of Tlingit law.

The Tlingit are also seeking an apology from the military and reparation from the government for the bombing of their villages.

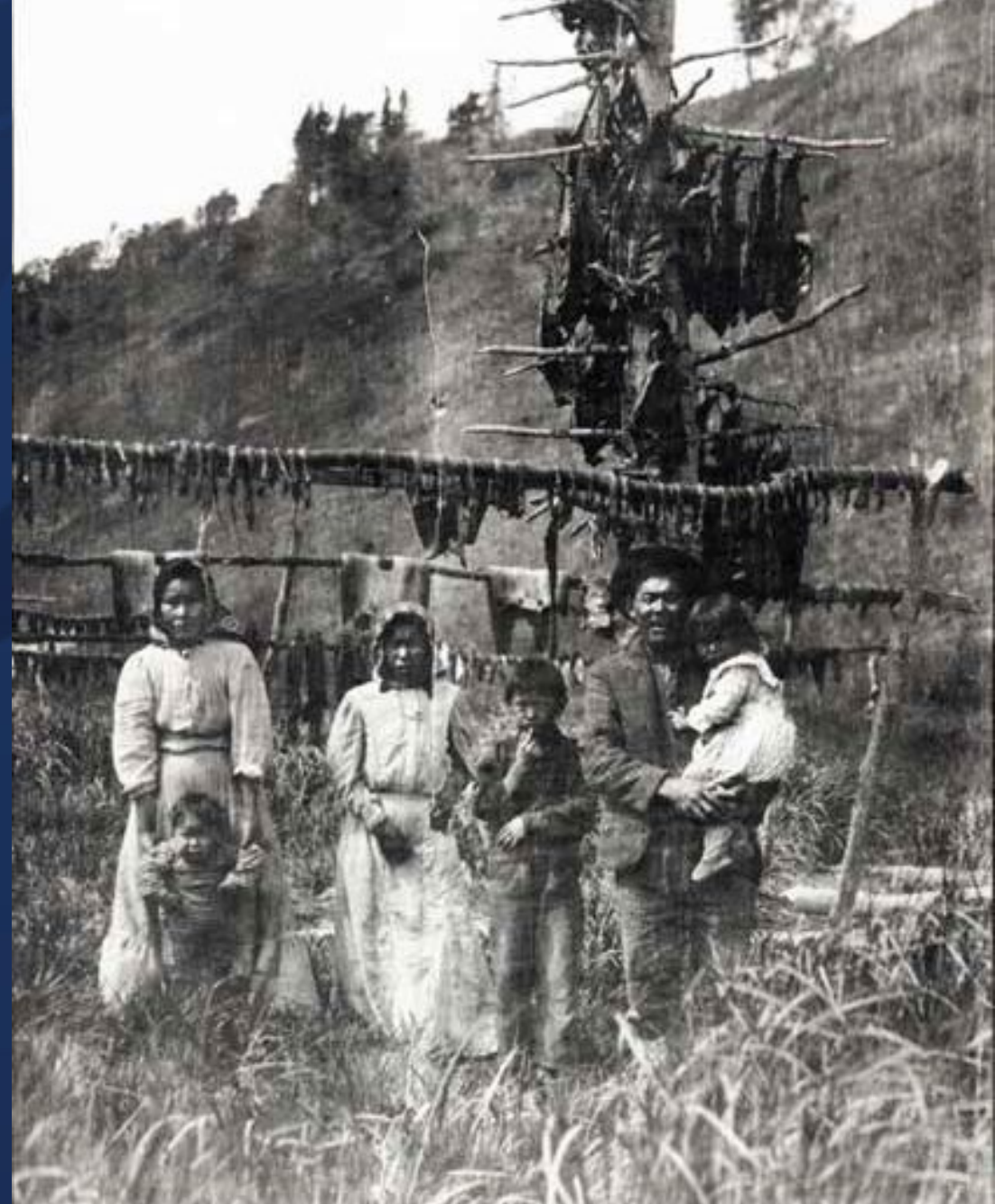


## Threats to Subsistence Hunting and Fishing Lifestyle

Alaska Native societies developed a body of traditional knowledge and hunting techniques and technologies that allowed them to flourish in environments that are more often described by outsiders as harsh and barren.

Their physical and spiritual relationships to the environment were the foundation of their cultures. Their social bonds were strengthened through their collective harvest, distribution, and sharing of the products of the land among extended family units.

Their villages and camp sites dotted the Alaska landscape. Through their thousands of years of occupation, they had become part of the landscape that was their homeland.



Drying fish, Tyonek, Alaska, circa 1915. Alaska State Library. ASL-P431-73

With the arrival of Westerners, the initial threats were competitive uses of the resources on which Alaska Natives depended. This was followed by governmental regulations that restricted Native use of the resources.

As the non-Native population expanded, competition from sports hunters and fishers would further constrain Native subsistence.

Other threats came with mega projects and forces that had the potential to damage the environment and resources.



Eskimo berry pickers, Nome, Alaska, between 1900 and 1907. B.B. Dobbs, University of Washington Libraries, Special Collections.

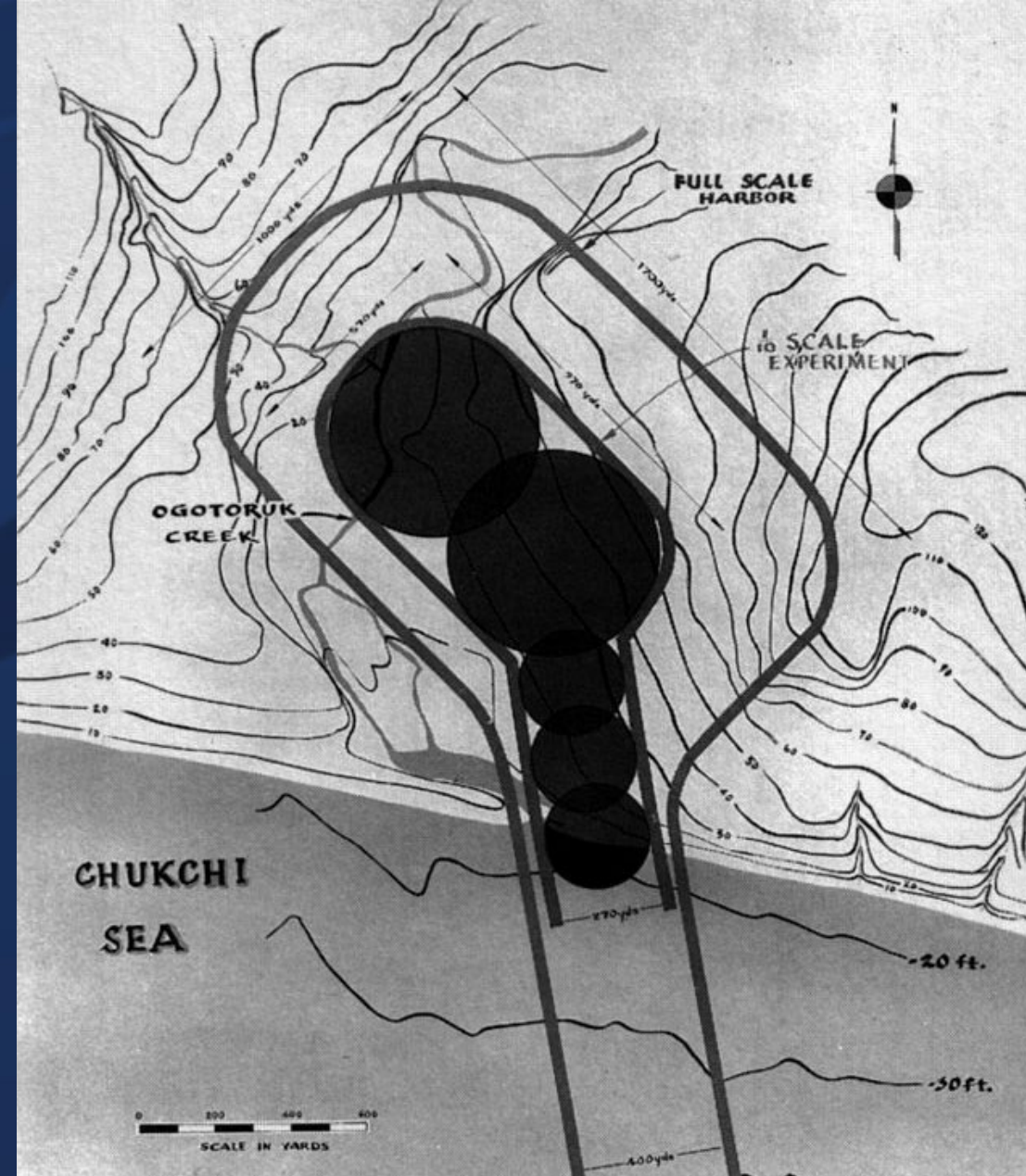
## Project Chariot and the “Duck In”

In 1958, the Atomic Energy Commission (AEC) announced its intent to create an instant deep-water harbor by detonating several thermonuclear bombs near Point Hope. A harbor would be made to open the area to development.

No one had bothered to consult with the Inupiat.

AEC representatives met with the Point Hope Inupiat and assured them that “airborne radioactivity could not possibly be enough to cause injury to the people or the animals.

The Inupiat remained unconvinced, and they reaffirmed their position opposing the project citing the effects of radiation on themselves as well as the animals.



Map depicting proposal for chaining five thermonuclear devices to create an artificial harbor at Cape Thompson, Alaska, for Project Chariot in 1958. Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory image. Public domain.



The scientific studies, in fact, showed that if the fallout was directed inland, the heaviest contamination would move directly into the heart of the Point Hoppers caribou ground and hunting would have to be restricted for an indefinite period.

At the same time, the Barrow Inupiat were also facing challenges. On May 29, 1961, a Barrow hunter was charged with possession of an eider duck.

Under the terms of the Migratory Bird Treaty Act signed by the United States, Canada, and Mexico in 1916, the hunting season opened in September; however, the waterfowl arrived in the Arctic in the early spring and were generally gone by September 1.



Caribou movement in spring. Photo by Zak Richter/NPS. Public domain.

The Treaty had never been enforced up until this time. The “Duck In” began with 138 hunters marching to the game warden each with a duck in hand and demanding to be arrested.

Several months later a Native Rights Conference was convened in Barrow. The 200 assembled Inupiat were joined by the Yup'ik Eskimo, who were also dependent on ducks.

The delegates identified aboriginal land and hunting rights and economic and social development as priority issues. They also identified two major problems: the Migratory Bird Treaty Act and Project Chariot.

“The really beautiful thing about the ‘duck-in’ was that it was spontaneous ... and, you know, by attempting to enforce the treaty obligation, the federal government marshaled the Eskimos, not just from Barrow, but from all over. ... The people acted, and what was amazing was not only the Northern Eskimos acted but the Athabascan Indians and Yup'ik Eskimos and the Aleuts; they all acted spontaneously... And I saw that the people, all of the people, acting together could win.”

-- Charlie Edwardsen, Jr. (Etok) of Barrow

They based their opposition to Project Chariot in terms of land ownership, "We deny the right of the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) to dispose of land claimed by a native village" and called on the BLM to revoke the AEC's permit for Project Chariot.

The Inupiat and Yup'ik Eskimo joined in opposition to Project Chariot.

A few of the Project Chariot scientists also broke ranks with AEC and joined the opposition because inaccurate or incomplete versions of their reports had been released.

On August 24, 1962, the AEC issued a press statement announcing that Project Chariot was to be held in abeyance.

*Letter to  
AEC 11/17/58*

# COMPLETION REPORT

## PROJECT CHARIOT - PHASE I OPERATION PLOWSHARE

U. S. ATOMIC ENERGY COMMISSION CONTRACT AT-(29-2)-20  
CAPE THOMPSON AREA - ALASKA

HN 111-942  
1958

H O L M E S & N A R V E R I N C



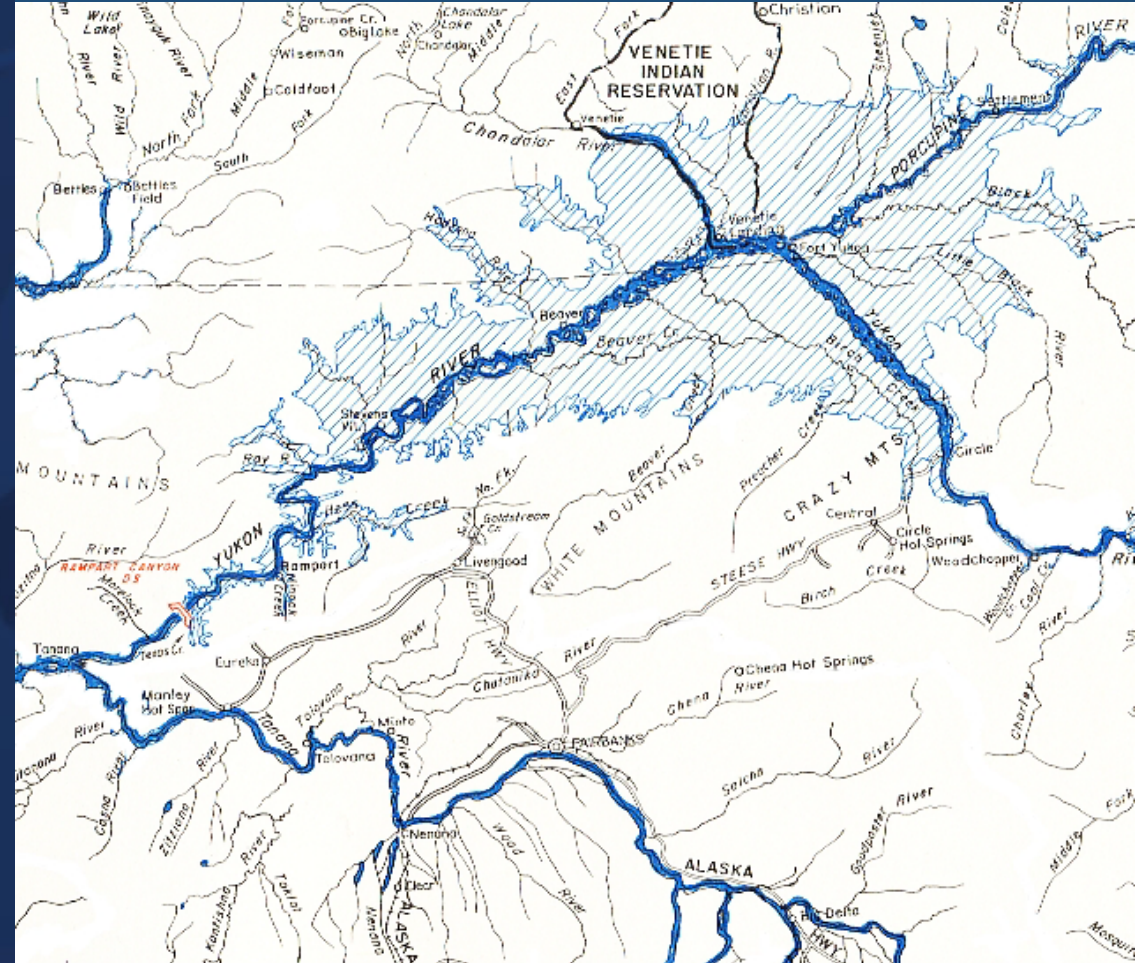
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# Rampart Dam

Following on the heels of Project Chariot was another megaproject, Rampart Dam. It was envisioned to be the world's largest dam to be constructed on the Yukon River near the Athabascan village of Rampart.

The marshy lowlands known as the Yukon Flats would be submerged and a 10,000 square mile lake would be created.

The \$1.3 billion project would generate five million kilowatts to provide cheap power for mining and logging development.



A map of the proposed reservoir that would have been created by the Rampart Dam on the Yukon River in Alaska. Actual rivers are in dark blue, and the proposed reservoir is shaded in diagonal blue. This map is an excerpt of a larger map published in 1962. US Army Corps of Engineers. Public domain.

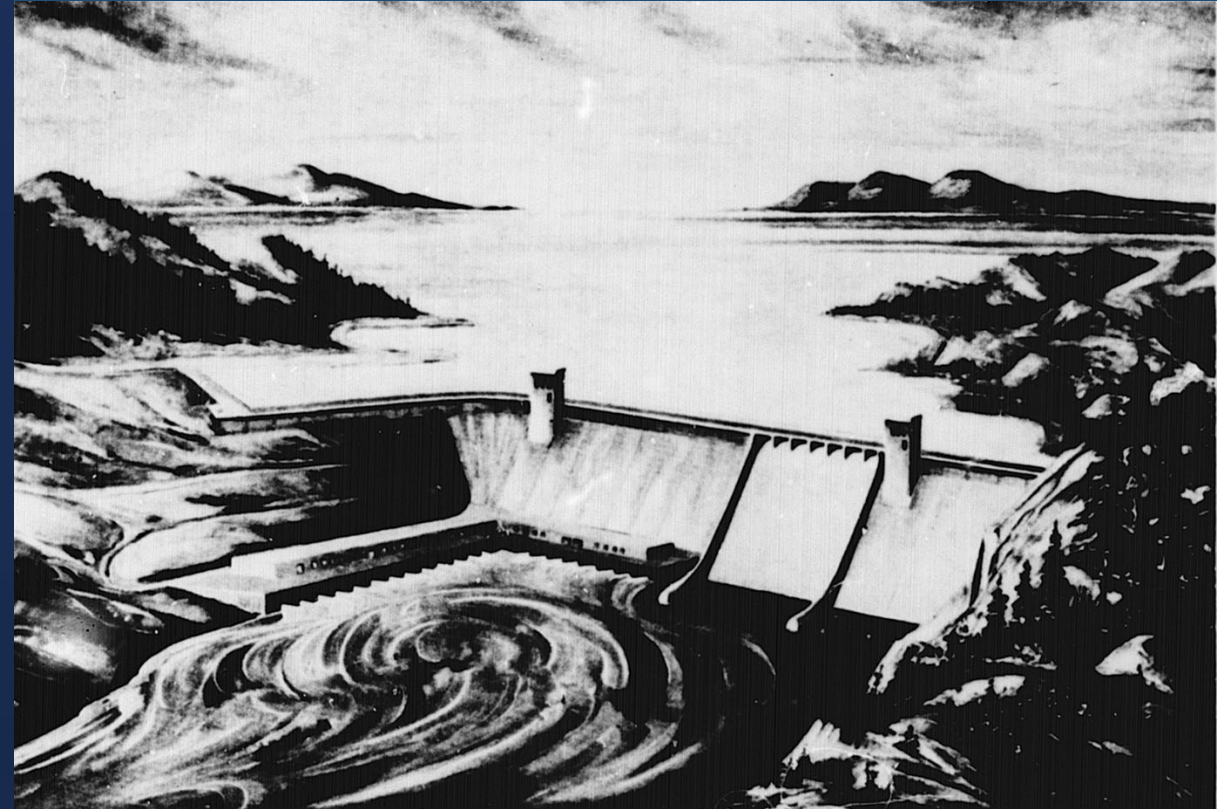
George Sundborg, an assistant to the governor of Alaska offered an assessment:

*Search the whole world over, and it would be difficult to find an equivalent area with so little to be lost through flooding. In fact, those who know it best say the kindest and best thing one could do for the place is to put it under 400 feet of water.*

The loss of seven Athabascan villages inhabited by 1,200 people and disappearance of their homeland and livelihood didn't mean much to Sundborg, who offered that the whole area contained "not more than ten flush toilets.

The Athabascan mounted an effective campaign against the dam and their forced relocation.

By 1968, the Rampart Dam was a dead issue.



An artist's rendition of the proposed Rampart Canyon Dam on the Yukon River, U.S. Army Corps of Engineers. Public domain.

## Federal Land Withdrawals

The Native subsistence way-of-life was further disrupted by federal land withdrawals, including commercial sites and parcels for churches, school buildings, and town sites that benefitted the wave of non-Natives arriving in Alaska.

Although the Organic Act of 1884 recognized the rights of Natives to their homes and camps and stipulated that they were not to be disturbed in their use of those sites, it did not provide a mechanism to protect Native land use and ownership.

In 1891 Congress allowed non-Natives to apply for title to land and as a result many Native properties were taken.



Alaska State Library - Historical Collections

Alaska Natives, however, could not apply for title to their lands as they were not citizens.

In 1915, the Territorial Act enacted measures under which a Native could be recognized as a citizen if the Native met the following qualifications:

- passed a teacher's test demonstrating qualifications to exercise the obligations of a voter;
- abandoned all tribal customs and severed tribal relations;
- adopted the habits of civilization;
- certified by five White citizens.

The applicant then had to "solemnly swear" before a notary that he did and forever renounce all tribal customs and relationships.

Alaska Natives along with other Native Americans were finally granted citizenship in 1924.

1103,

**CERTIFICATE**  
OF EXAMINATION OF AN ALASKA INDIAN AS TO QUALIFICATIONS AS TO CLAIMS OF  
**Citizenship**

THIS IS TO CERTIFY:

That on the 2 day of January, 1919,  
John M. Tlunaut an Indian born in  
Haines, Alaska, on October 15<sup>th</sup> 1892  
made application to me, the undersigned, constituting a majority of  
the teachers in the United States Government School at Haines  
Alaska, to be examined by me as to his qualifications and claims for citizenship;  
That on the 2 day of January, 1919,  
I duly examined the said applicant, which said examination broadly covered his  
general qualifications as to an intelligent exercise of the obligations of suffrage, his  
total abandonment of tribal customs and relationship, and the facts regarding his  
adoption of the habits of civilized life;

That on such examination I we found that, in my opinion, the said  
applicant, John M. Tlunaut, has abandoned all tribal customs  
and relationship, has adopted the habits of civilized life and is properly qualified to exercise intelli-  
gently the obligations of an elector in the Territory of Alaska.

Isabel A. Gibson  
\_\_\_\_\_  
Teachers in the U. S. Government School  
at Haines, Alaska.

I, John M. Tlunaut, a native born Alaska  
Indian, solemnly swear that I do now and for all time renounce all tribal customs and relationships,  
so help me God.

John M. Tlunaut  
[Applicant's signature]

Subscribed and sworn to before me this 2 day of Jan, 1919,  
at Haines, Alaska.

J. J. January Notary Public  
My Commission Expires \_\_\_\_\_ 19\_\_

We, the undersigned, white citizens of the United States have been permanent residents of  
Alaska for more than one year and do hereby certify that we have been personally acquainted with  
the life and habits of John M. Tlunaut for more than one year, and that, in  
our opinion, —he has abandoned all tribal customs and relationship and is duly qualified to exercise  
the rights, privileges and obligations of citizenship.

J. J. January  
W. E. Winterberger  
Mrs. E. L. Winterberger  
Blanche J. Garside

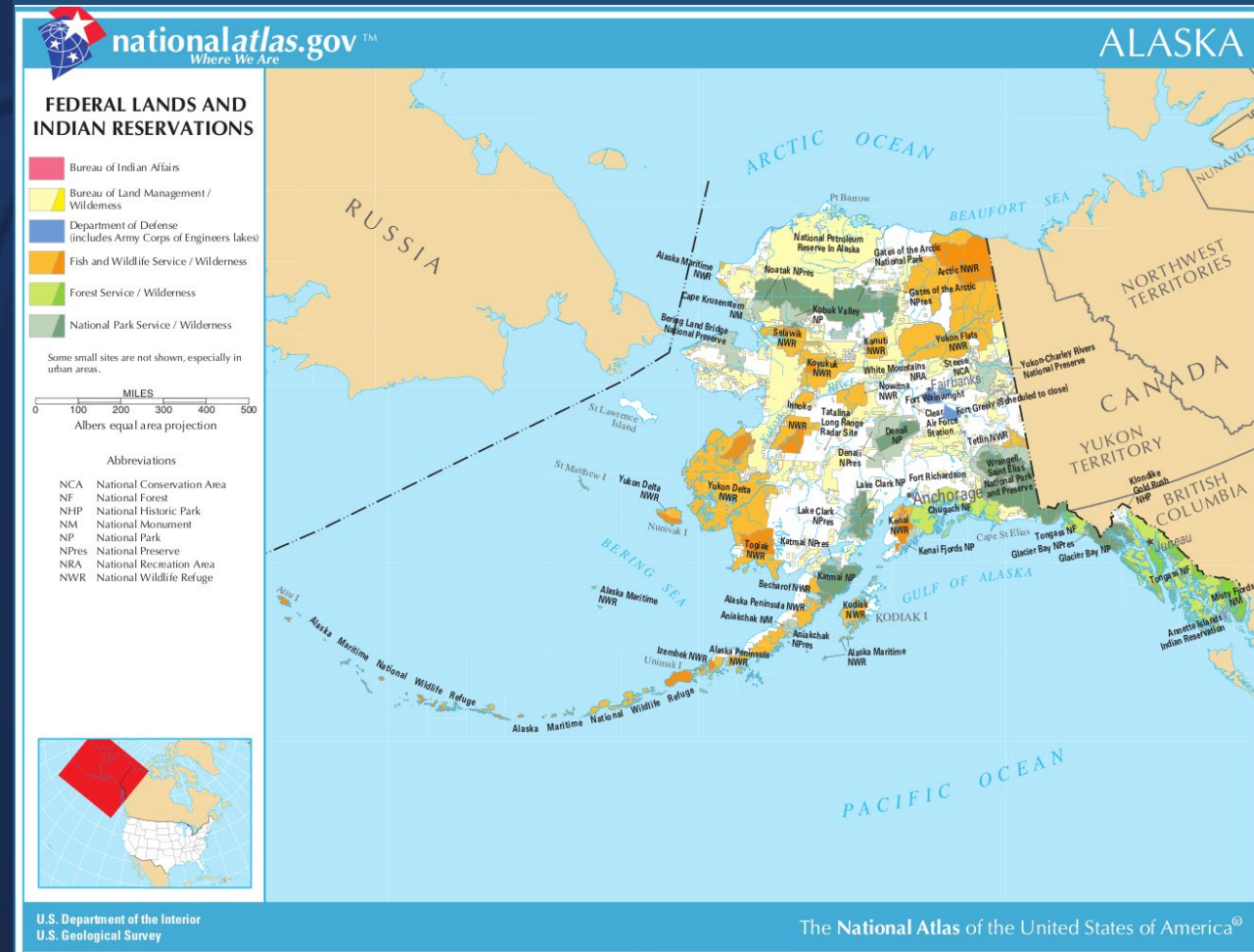
Citizenship Certificate for John M. Tlunaut, the author's grandfather.

The government also withdrew huge blocks of lands for national forests, wildlife refuges, parks, and a large petroleum reserve in the Arctic. Military installations were also established throughout Alaska.

Ironically, the only land set aside for Native groups was for the Canadian Tsimshian. In 1887 Congress established the 86,000-acre reservation on Tlingit land for the benefit of the Tsimshian.

The ultimate blow to subsistence came with the 1958 Alaska Statehood Act that allowed the new state to select 103 million acres of Alaska's 375 million acres.

As might be expected, the state began selecting land encompassing Native villages and their hunting and fishing grounds since these were the prime lands.



USGS, US Department of Interior, National Atlas. Public domain.



# Unification of Alaska Natives

Tanana Chiefs Conference. First conference of Native land rights, July 1915. Alaska State Library. ASL-P277-011-072



JULIUS PILOT, TITUS ALEXANDER, CRAMER, THOMAS RIGGS, RICHIE, CHIEF ALEXANDER WILLIAM,  
JACOB STARR, CHIEF WILLIAM, CHIEF ALEXANDER, CHIEF THOMAS, HON. JAMES WICKERSHAM, CHIEF EVAN, CHIEF CHARLIE,  
CHIEF JOE, CHIEF JOHN, JOHNNIE FOLGER, REV. GUY H. MADARA, PAUL WILLIAMS.

Alaska Natives reacted to the State of Alaska's selection of lands on which they lived and had used for hunting and fishing by organizing first at the regional level to file claims to protect their land ownership.

They formed the twelve regions that closely followed the ancient cultural boundaries. Natives had also formed organizations and alliances in the earlier historic periods and this experience contributed to the rapid formation of the twelve regional organizations.

The Alaska Native Brotherhood in Southeast Alaska was organized in 1912 to advocate for Native civil rights including land protections.



Alaska Native Brotherhood founding fathers in 1912 From left, Paul Liberty, James Watson, Ralph Young, Eli Kalnvok (Katinook), Peter Simpson, Frank Mercer, James C. Jackson, Chester Worthington, George Fields, William Hobson. Public domain.

A few years later, the Athabascan chiefs met to seek protection for lands that were essential for their hunting and fishing activities.

The Inupiat and Yup'ik had united under the Inupiat Paitot in 1961 to protect their lands. Interestingly, they also asserted rights to the minerals on their lands.

In 1966, Alaska Natives united under the Alaska Federation of Natives (AFN) to pursue recognition of their aboriginal land rights and a settlement of their claims through Congress.

They had elected to pursue resolution of their aboriginal claims through Congress rather than through the Court of Claims, which was authorized to make only cash awards.



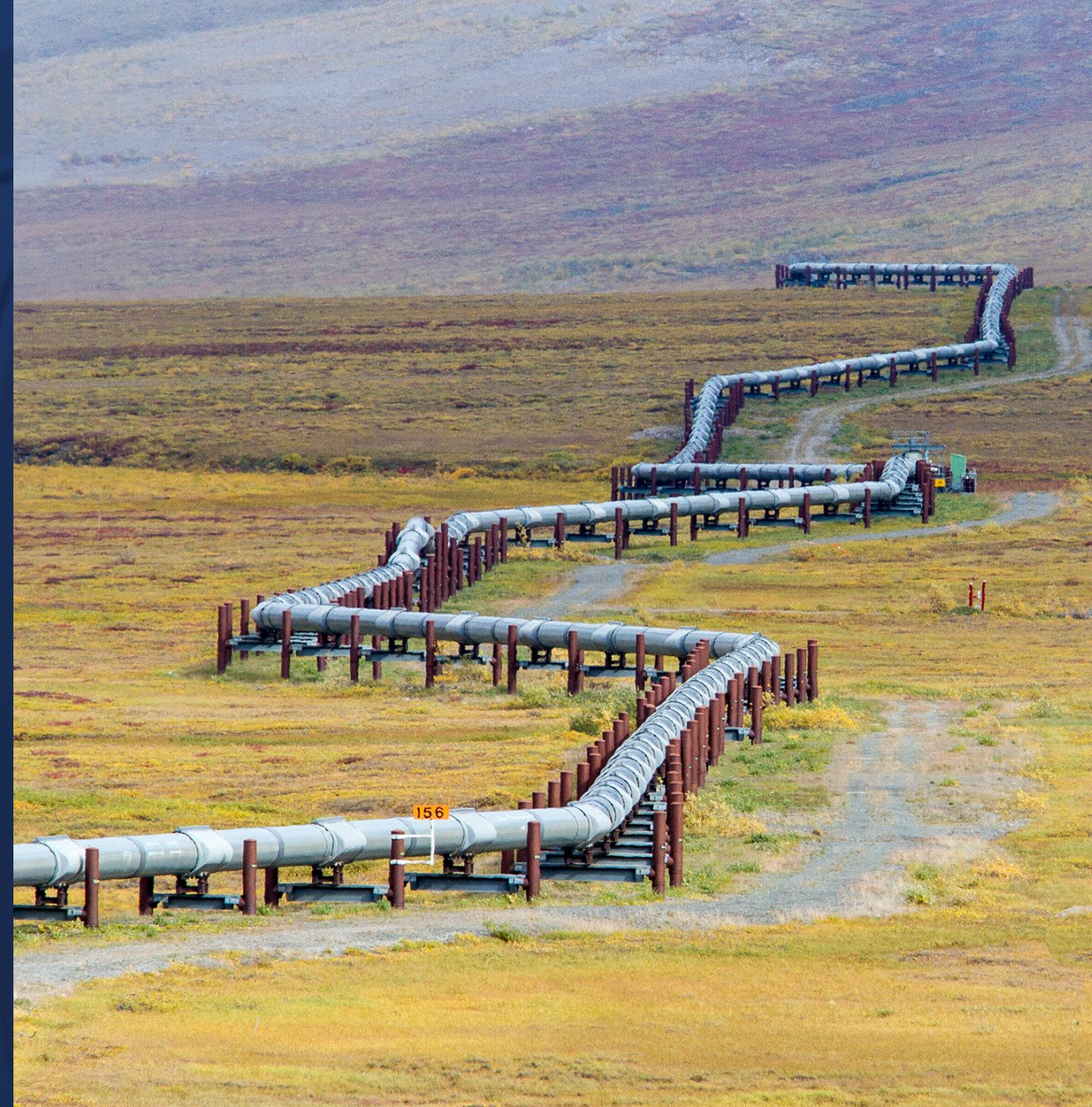
Attorney Jay Greenfield (left), Senator Ted Stevens (center), and Alaska Federation of Natives President Emil Notti (right) discuss the Alaska Native Land Claims hearings in Washington, D.C. in the Senate TV studio on April 30, 1969. U.S. Senate / Stevens Foundation photo. Public domain.

The young, educated Native leadership were intent on retaining ownership of their lands and payment for lands that had been taken by the federal government.

Fortuitous for the Natives' land claim effort was the discovery of oil on the North Slope in 1968.

With the Natives claiming aboriginal title to Alaska and a cloud over state ownership of the rich oil fields in the Arctic and the 800 mile pipeline corridor that had to be constructed to bring the oil to market, development could not proceed.

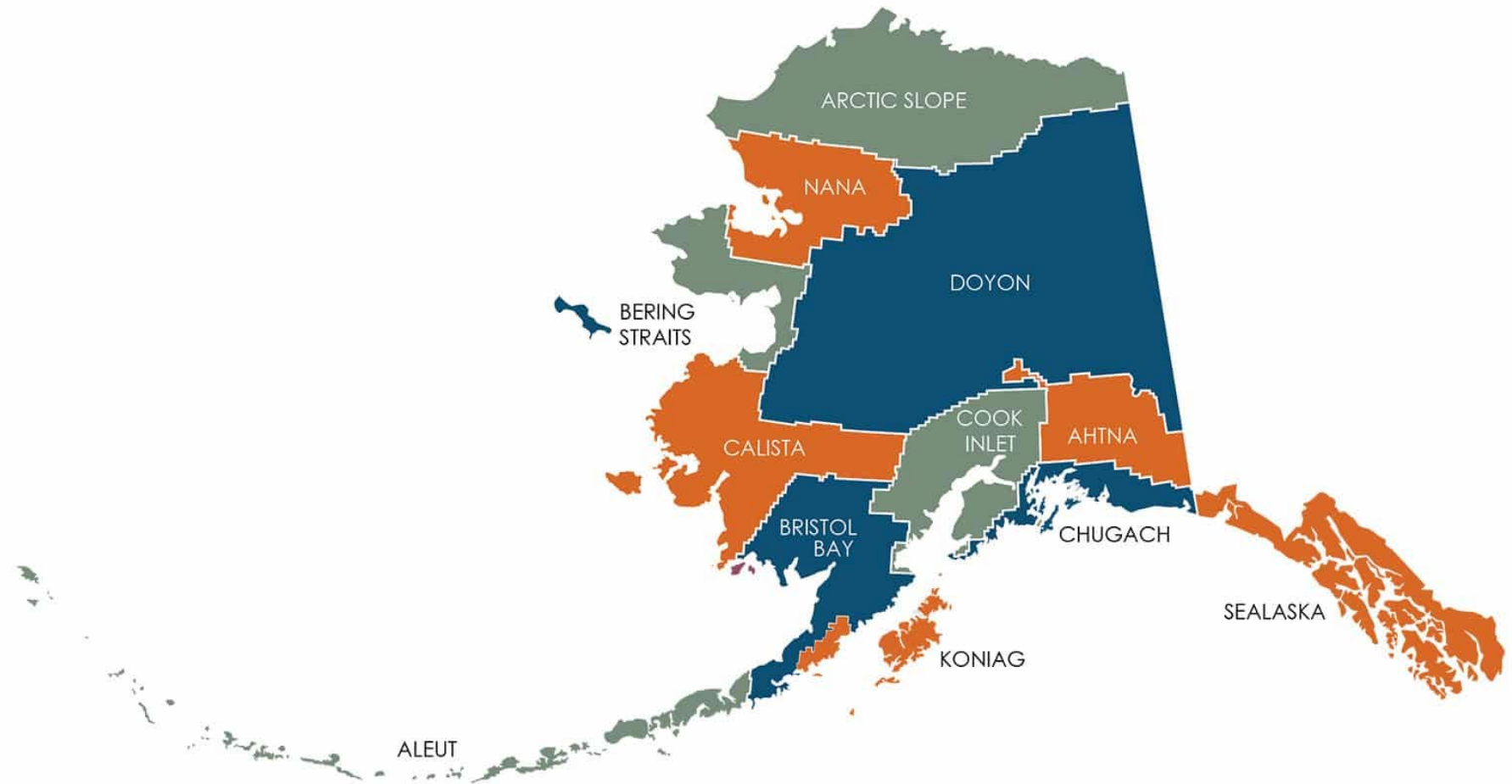
It was in the best interest of the state and the oil companies to settle the Alaska Natives' land claims. The Natives could sue and tie up development for decades. Congress could ill afford to procrastinate in settling Native land rights that it had acknowledged existed since the First Organic Act of 1884.



# Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act of 1971<sup>2</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Abstracted from Rosita Kaaháni Worl and Heather Kendall-Miller, "Alaska's Conflicting Objectives," *Daedalus Journal of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences*. Vol.147, No. 2 (Spring 2018) 39-48.

Map: Courtesy of ANCSA Regional Association



In 1971 Congress enacted the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act (ANCSA). It was unlike the Indian treaty settlements, which set aside reservation lands for Indian tribes and which were held under trust by the federal government.

From the earliest recorded efforts to protect Native land ownership, the nomadic Natives had resisted settlement of their claims through the reservation system.

Alaska Natives wanted full control and ownership of their lands and did not want to be subject to the control of the Bureau of Indian Affairs.

The efforts of Congress and Alaska Natives in seeking the settlement of aboriginal claims converged, but for very different reasons.



Kotzebue, Noatak River.

Alaska Natives sought control of their land rather than having them subject to federal jurisdiction as reservation lands.

Congress also opposed reservation lands and saw ANCSA as a means to assimilate Alaska Natives into the economic mainstream.

The vehicle through which Native land claims would be settled was corporations.

It has often been mis-stated that corporations were forced on Alaska Natives. On the contrary, Native leaders wanted control and ownership of their lands and corporations and fee simple title were the vehicles to achieve these objectives.



Gastineau Channel, Juneau. Photo by Stacy Unzicker

ANCSA was heralded as the largest aboriginal land claims settlement.

It awarded Alaska Natives a cash settlement of \$962.5 million and 44 million acres of land that would be held under fee simple title by twelve regional corporations and 200 village corporations.

Individual Alaska Natives alive on December 18, 1971, were enrolled in corporations based on where they were born or lived and were given 100 shares of stock.



Sealaska directors sign the Sealaska articles of incorporation in 1972 with Assistant Secretary of the Interior Harrison Loesch. Pictured L to R: Clarence Jackson, Jon Borbridge, Jr., Marlene Johnson, Harrison Loesch, Dick Kito, Leonard Kato. Photo courtesy of Sealaska.

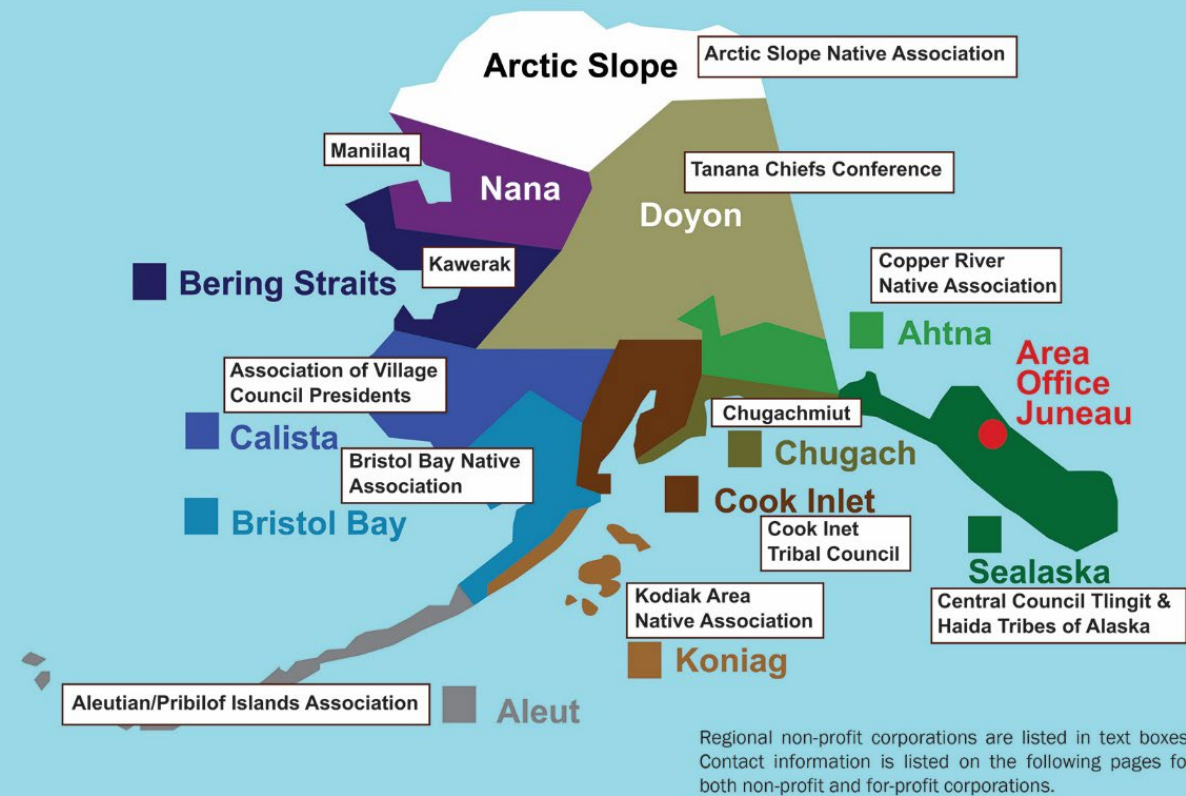


Most Natives are members of both a village and regional corporation. However, some Natives who lived in urban areas were enrolled only into regional corporations and are identified as “at-large” shareholders.

Congress also enacted unique provisions that apply only to Alaska Native corporations and are antithetical to capitalistic economies and corporations.

It adopted provisions that I have labelled as “corporate socialism” under which regional Native corporations are required to share 70 percent of their profits from mineral and timber development with other regional Native corporations. The intent was to equalize the differences between the resource-rich and the resource-poor regions.

## Alaska Native Regional Corporations



State of Alaska Department of Family and Community Services.

## Subsistence

ANCSA extinguished fishing and hunting rights, but Congress declared that it expected the Department of the Interior and the State of Alaska to provide for the "subsistence needs" of Alaska Natives.

The state and federal administration failed to provide for Alaska Native subsistence needs.

Congress enacted the Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act of 1980 (ANILCA) that gave a subsistence priority to rural residents of Alaska.



An original ANILCA bill had designated a Native priority, but the State of Alaska objected, claiming that a Native priority would violate the state constitution that provides for equal access to hunting and fishing for all Alaskans.

The subsistence issue continues to be a major controversy in Alaska between Natives and non-Natives and rural and urban residents. Alaska Natives have expended significant resources to protect subsistence hunting and fishing asserting that it is essential for both food security and their cultural survival.



## Sovereignty

The issue of tribal governments and sovereignty emerged among Alaska Natives in the late 1980s.

Under ANCSA, the taxation exemption and the restrictions on the sale of stock were to be lifted in 1991. Alaska Natives saw the sale of stock as a threat to continued Native ownership of ANCSA lands.

The 1991 discussions, as they were labelled, gave rise to the tribal movement and the transfer of lands to tribes as a means to protect Native land from taxation and alienation.



AFN proposed the QTE provision—the transfer of ANCSA lands to “Qualified Tribal Entities.”

The State of Alaska and Congress were vehemently opposed to the transfer of land to tribal governments without a disclaimer that would have weakened tribal political rights and precluded the recognition of Indian Country in Alaska.

Congress insisted that a “Disclaimer” clause, that was designed to maintain the status quo of tribal rights and governments, be included in the amendments if the land transfer provision were included.

AFN dropped the tribal option believing that the disclaimer clause would undermine tribal sovereignty but AFN vowed to continue the effort to secure recognition of tribes.

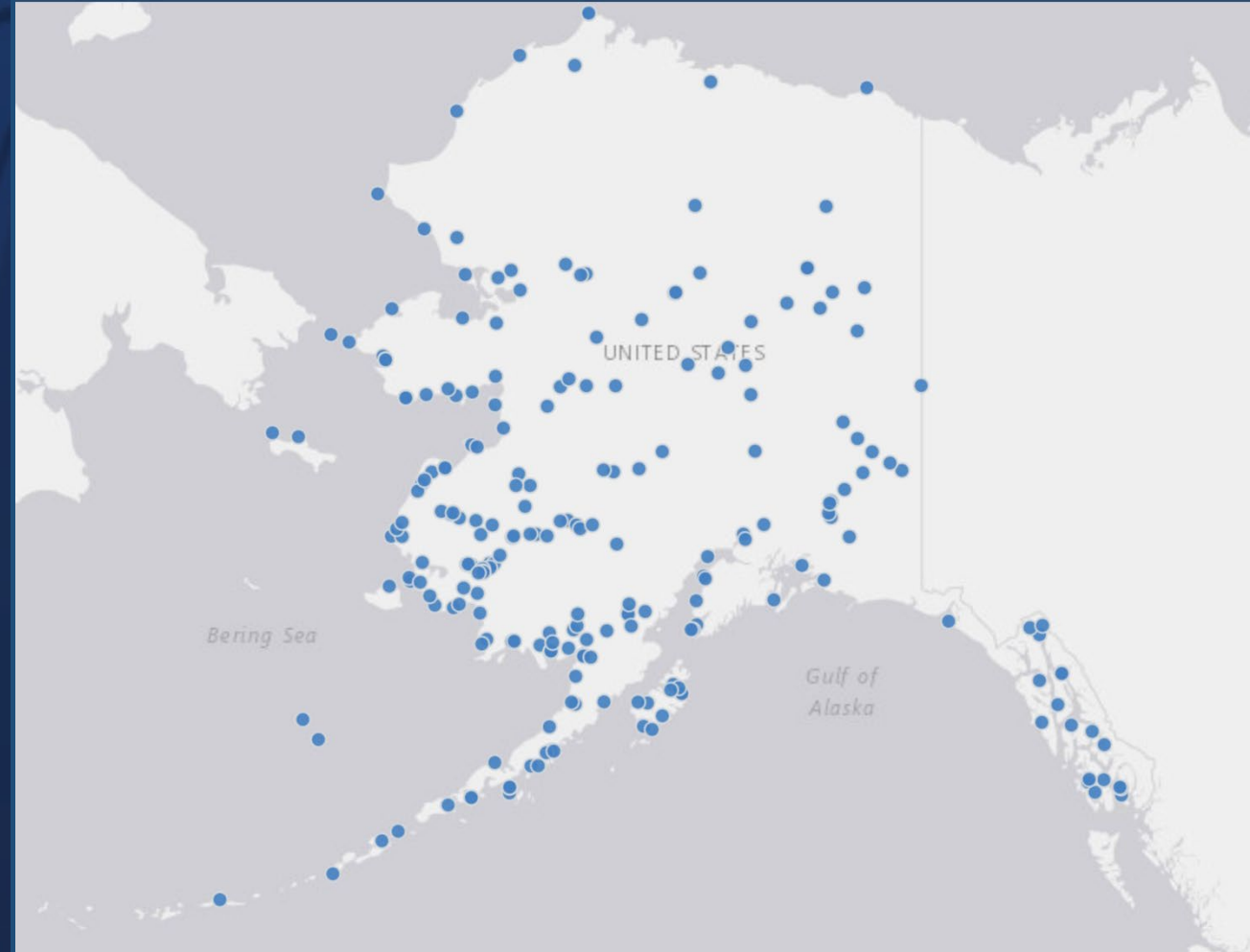


Alaska Native tribes were ultimately recognized and were included in the Federally Recognized Indian Tribe List Act of 1994.

The State of Alaska dropped its opposition to tribes largely as a result of the federal funds that come into the state because of the unique political and legal status of Alaska Natives.

Finally, in 2022, the State of Alaska adopted legislation recognizing tribes.

Today the 200 federally recognized tribes in Alaska provide a host of governmental services to tribal members.



Federally recognized Tribes (228). Dept. of Commerce, Community & Economic Development

# Retribalization of Alaska Native Corporations

Tlingit Raven and Eagle poles in front of  
Sealaska Corporation, Juneau.  
Photo by Kai Monture



In the early 1980s, Alaska Natives began to understand the flaws and dangers of ANCSA, and in 1982, delegates to the AFN Convention directed AFN to make the “1991” issue its top priority.

The 1991 reference was to the provision in ANCSA that would allow for the removal of the restriction on the sale of stock in 1991.

Alaska Natives were also concerned that children born after 1971 were not allowed to become shareholders of ANCs unless they inherited stock. This restriction conflicted with their traditional value that recognized that children born into a tribe are automatically recognized as members of a tribe with full rights to their land.

AFN convened five Native leadership retreats and seven conventions to develop resolutions to the perceived problems and amendments to ANCSA to address these concerns.





In the 1984 Native leadership retreat, Natives from all parts of the state identified common Native values that became the underlying basis for the 1991 amendments:

- **Communal orientation:** Based on an extended kinship system and the sharing of subsistence resources including collectively raising children. Participants also included “respect” for Elders in the sharing of resources. Sharing and reciprocity serve as bonds uniting the tribal members.
- **Land:** Relationship to the land was viewed as similar to the kinship or relationship among families. Additionally, subsistence resources were necessary for food security, physical well-being and spiritual values. Natives also felt that they had a trust obligation to pass land on to children.
- **Native identity:** Based on tribal membership and enrollment in Native corporations.



Photo by Brian Wallace.

Secretary of the Interior Donald Hodel opposed the Native amendments on several fronts arguing they would impede the assimilation of Alaska Natives and undermine the primacy of individual rights over group rights.

He opposed the automatic extension of stock restrictions that would restrict the sale of ANCSA stock that Natives felt was necessary for the protection of Native lands. He also maintained that the issuance of stock to Natives born after 1971 would dilute the value of the settlement for existing shareholders.



Photo by Stacy Unzicker.

The so-called 1991 ANCSA amendments were signed into law on February 3, 1988. The basic provisions provided for the protection of both Native land and corporations by:

- providing for automatic protections for undeveloped land.
- protecting ANCSA lands from taxes and from being taken for a bad debt and bankruptcy.
- providing for restrictions on the sale of stock.
- allowing for issuance of stock to Natives born after 1971 and Left-Outs or those who were eligible but had missed the initial enrollment.
- allowing for issuance of stock and special benefits for Elders.

As adopted, the 1988 ANCSA amendments recognized the values identified by Alaska Natives in 1984, including the communal rights of Alaska Natives; the protection of land ownership; and the rights of children to land ownership and their identity.



Photo by Nobu Koch.

## ANCs as Tribes

In addition to the economic, legal, and cultural dimensions of ANCSA, ANCs are also defined as federally recognized tribes for special statutory purposes.

One of the first efforts was to ensure recognition of ANCs as tribes for the purposes of consultation, primarily in consideration of the large federal land base in Alaska intersecting with ANCSA lands.

The Consolidated Appropriations Act for Fiscal Year 2005 requires “all Federal agencies” to consult with Alaska Native corporations pursuant to Executive Order 13175. See Pub. L. No. 108-447, Division H, Title V, Section 518.

Native corporate leaders were expressly clear in that governing authorities and sovereignty are vested in Alaska Native tribal governments.



Photo by Stacy Unzicker.

ANCSA corporations are recognized as tribes for a wide variety of statutory purposes in over 100 legislative acts that are non-jurisdictional and that provide a range of economic and social benefits and protections to ANCSA lands.

The ANCs have had varying economic success. Each year they have been identified among the largest corporations in the state, but many are at the other end of the spectrum and some are in or near bankruptcy.

Collectively, they have been successful in using the economic strength in the political arena to benefit Native interests.



Photo by Kai Monture.

Several of the regional corporations have adopted resolutions to allow for the perpetual enrollment of Natives who are lineal descendants of the original shareholders.

Many corporations have established cultural and heritage organizations that operate language and cultural programs.

Most notable has been their efforts to protect the subsistence hunting and fishing rights of Natives.

ANCs are hybrid corporations that focus on business enterprises, but at the same time act to preserve their traditional cultures.

Alaska Natives abandoned the strict profit-making corporate model and legislatively incorporated their cultural values into ANCSA.



# Alaska Native Institutional Arrangements



Photo courtesy of SEARHC.

Since Alaska Natives began their quest for a statewide land claims settlement in the 1960s, Alaska Natives have been reconstructing their economic and political sovereignty through a host of institutions.

In contrast to federally recognized Indian tribes located in the contiguous U.S in which governmental services, health care, and tribally owned business entities are consolidated within the tribe, in Alaska these same functions are dispersed among tribal governments, ANCs, and health corporations.<sup>3</sup>

In addition, regional tribal organizations that were initially organized to pursue the land claims settlement today provide a range of governmental services.

Alaska Natives also established specialized organizations providing housing, electrical services, and cultural programming.

<sup>3</sup> This reference builds off of a discussion by Chris McNeil in his paper, ANCSA corporations and the Alaska Federally Recognized Tribe and their respective Constitutional relationship with Congress. ND.

# Alaska Native Health System

## Facts

229 Federally Recognized Tribes (Villages)

## SCF:

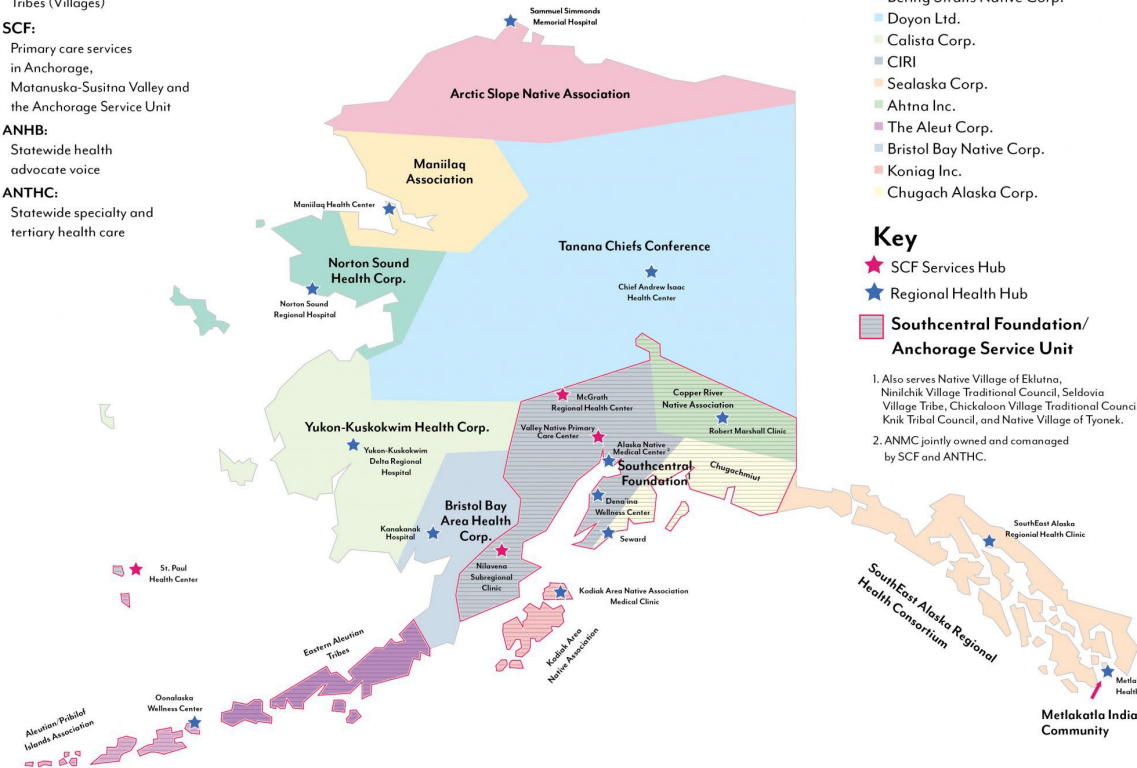
Primary care services in Anchorage, Matanuska-Susitna Valley and the Anchorage Service Unit

## ANHB:

Statewide health advocate voice

## ANTHC:

Statewide specialty and tertiary health care



Courtesy of Alaska Federal Health Care Partnership and Southcentral Foundation.



Although many of the cultures appeared to be on the brink of extinction and significant changes have occurred in Alaska Native societies, they, nevertheless, demonstrated great resiliency and survived as distinct cultural groups as Inupiat, Yup'ik, Alutiq and Unangan Aleut, Athabascan and the Tlingit, Haida, and Tsimshian.



Photo by Nobu Koch.

# Gunalchéesh, Háw'aa, T'oyaxsn



[www.sealaskaheritage.org](http://www.sealaskaheritage.org)