
Alaska's Native Population: Sources for Genealogical and Historical Research

By Gretchen L. Lake and David A. Hales*

Many modern Alaskans have traceable roots that extend for generations into their native soil. Other genealogists have a mother or grandmother from there who wed a soldier during World War II—or a father or grandfather who was drafted into the armed services, was stationed there, and never returned. . . . Many researchers, of both part and full Native origin, need documentation to qualify for government benefits. . . . Whatever the need, significant records exist to effect a search.

Genealogical interest in America's Native peoples is not new. However, the traditional emphasis upon indigenous populations of the East is shifting westward, as new generations further remove society from the era in which the European-American frontier invaded western Indian nations. That intellectual interest has now pushed beyond the Rockies and the Plains to the Pacific Northwest and into the reaches of Alaska.

Although Alaska's statehood is relatively recent (1959) and popular knowledge of the region is still minimal, some written records exist from 1784, when the first Russian trading post was established at Three Saints Bay on Kodiak Island. By the U.S. purchase of Alaska in 1867, its population included some 500 Russians, 300 "American and other non-Russian whites," and 1,500 persons of mixed race—as well as roughly 25,000 to 30,000 people of indigenous origins. Soldiers, traders, and prospectors augmented that population for the next two decades. After news of the 1896 gold strike on the Klondike River, U.S. citizens—by the tens of thousands—surged northward into Dawson, Nome, Fairbanks, and a succession of other mining, fishing, lumbering, and canning camps. With World War II and the completion of the Alaska Highway through Canada, some 150,000 soldiers were dispatched to Alaska to stave off Japanese aggression. In the half-century since, both industry and tourism have fed the population shift to the America's last continental state.¹

The genealogical implications are obvious. Many modern Alaskans have traceable roots that extend for generations into their native soil. Other genealogists have a mother or grandmother from there who wed a soldier during World War II—or a father or grandfather who was drafted into the armed services, was stationed there, and never returned, having wed a Native woman and raised a new family. Many researchers, of both part and full Native origin, need documentation to qualify for

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government benefits. And others, with no ancestral interest in the area, seek historical records of Alaska's indigenous population for purely academic or medical reasons. Whatever the need, significant records exist to effect a search.

This article attempts to acquaint inquirers with the major sources available. Emphasis is upon the holdings of the Archives and Manuscript Section of the Alaska and Polar Regions Department, Elmer E. Rasmuson Library, University of Alaska Fairbanks (Post Office Box 756808; Fairbanks, AK 99775-6808). Most of the materials mentioned in this paper may be consulted there.

THE NATIVE PEOPLE

Alaska is home to unique and diverse groups of indigenous people who are jointly called Alaska Natives and who represent some 14.6 percent of the state's total population (circa 85,700 out of 587,800 in 1990).² The major groups, categorized by broad linguistic and cultural similarities, are as follows:

ESKIMOS (INUIT), the largest representation at about 34,000 people, have occupied villages along the Bering Sea and the Arctic Ocean and are divided ethnically between the Southern Eskimos (Yup'ik) and the Northern Eskimos (Inupiat).

INDIANS, the second-largest of the Native groups, are ethnically divided between the *Interior Indians* (Athabascans), a nomadic people who have occupied the vast inland regions of Alaska in widely scattered clusters; and the *Southeast Coastal Indians* (Tlingit, Haida, and Tsimshian), of whom the Tlingit and Haida settled in permanent villages—developing a culture rich in art—while the Tsimshian migrated from Canada to Metlakatla in 1887.

ALEUTS, the third-largest Native population, have traditionally lived in villages along the Alaska Peninsula, the Aleutians, the Pribilofs, and Kodiak Island.

Many of the people continue to reside in their hereditary villages along the major rivers and Alaska's coastline, where they follow traditional life-styles that center upon hunting, fishing, and trapping. However, advances in transportation, communication, and other services to remote areas have greatly altered life in bush villages. Many Natives have moved to the larger urban areas—principally in the Greater Anchorage area, with large numbers also in Fairbanks and Juneau. Countless others have migrated to Seattle.³

Beginning in the 1900s, the Bureau of Indian Affairs started to send young Alaska Natives to schools outside the territory for vocational training and education. Although most returned, some did acquire work away from Alaska and their Native roots. During World War II, a number of Native men were drafted into the armed services and served worldwide; many married non-Native women and settled in communities throughout the United States. Countless Native females who married non-Native servicemen have also dispersed, following their husbands to residences elsewhere. As a rule, however, it appears that until the mid-1900s, most of the region's Natives were born, reared, and buried, in Alaska.⁴

THE RECORDS

There are few genealogical sources created by Alaska Natives, although the people have long taken great pride in ancestors and family relationships. Traditionally living in small groups spread over vast distances, they recounted lineages orally. Only the last hundred years have seen the active development of orthographies and literacy for the more than twenty-one Alaska Native languages and those who speak them. Linguists are only now defining writing systems for some indigenous tongues spoken primarily by the elders.

This combination of oral tradition and decentralized subsistence living has created a dependency on records created by non-Natives—teachers; missionaries; and government officials at local, state, and federal levels. Five basic types will be covered in this paper: census returns, church records, claims settlements, general archival resources, and miscellaneous publications.

CENSUS RETURNS

Alaska was first included on the U.S. decennial census in 1880; but (the Sitka area excepted) personal data are available for only the twentieth century. The 1880 return for most settlements counted people but recorded no individual details; the 1890 enumeration, as with most states and territories, suffered destruction. The 1900, 1910, and 1920 data sheets have been microfilmed for public availability, but post-1920 U.S. censuses for all regions remain sealed. As with other areas, Alaska's data sheets are only as accurate as the information supplied by individuals and recorded by census marshals; and people who moved during the course of the counting may be listed on two or more sheets.

Alaska Natives have been included also in special censuses. The nature of those enumerations has varied widely—from municipal population counts to incarceration rolls—but often these lists are the only possible sources for information within their time frames and locations. Unless other whereabouts are stated, the following returns are available at the Rasmuson Library.

Aleutian Islands

Two sets of records from March 1878 enumerate inhabitants of Unalaska and other Aleutian settlements. The first—which includes 1,383 individuals (675 males, 708 females) of Akun, Akutan, Attu Island, Atka Island, Avatanak Island, Chernofski, Korovinski, Makushin, Nikolaievsky village, Nikolski village, Unalaska, and Unmak Island—apparently originated with the Unalaska Russian Church and was later hand copied by one A. Greenbaum, agent of the Alaska Commercial Company. The second return canvasses Belkofski, Korovinsky (now Korovin Island), Nikolaevsk (Nicholayefsk) village, Peregrebnoy or Vorznesensky (now Vosnesenski) Island, Protassof (or Morzhovoi), and Unga Island.³

The general arrangement is the same for both groups of records. Heads of households are listed randomly for each village, under such broad headings as

"Church officials and families," "Widows and Orphans," "Russians," "Aleuts," and "Creoles" (a term used then and there to mean offspring of Russian fathers and Native mothers). The first group of records usually includes only the name of each father, with additional individuals identified merely as "his wife," "his son," or "his daughter," with a corresponding age. However, the entries are not consistent; and some households are fully identified.

Anaktuvuk Pass (Northern Alaska)

Special census records of Anaktuvuk Pass originated for modern medical purposes. They have been compiled on a regular basis since radiation ecology studies of 1962–64 indicated that various age groups of this region showed important differences in their radioisotopes of cesium (^{137}CS) body burdens. Census entries are arranged alphabetically by family name, citing sex, date and place of birth, marital status, and relationship to head of household—as well as explanatory notes on such matters as marriages and adoptions.⁶

Ketchikan (Southeast Alaska)

An enumeration of the town of Ketchikan (just north of the U.S. border) and individuals residing within a radius of two miles of the town, was taken from 15 May through 5 June 1906, amid increasing demands to accord Alaska territorial status. Declared by the Common Council to be an official census of the population, this list is alphabetical by surname and includes name, age, sex, color, and occupation. It does not include Natives; but two special listings at the end cover the Japanese population and children of white male citizens who had married Indian women.

Saint Paul and Saint George Islands

These Pribilof Islands have been the focus of several special counts, beginning in the early-twentieth century. The 1914 and 1917 annual reports of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service append censuses of Saint Paul and Saint George Natives. Residents are grouped by families, citing age at last birthday and place of birth.⁷

Sitka

This southeastern region is an exception to the previous generalization about the statistical, nonpersonal nature of the 1880 federal census in Alaska. Actually begun on 1 February 1881, but still classed as part of the Tenth Census of the United States, this enumeration consists of three parts. Part A, covering the town of Sitka, records 394 individuals, with details for each that include name, sex, marital status, nationality, occupation, literacy (whether the individual read, wrote, or spoke English), and age groups of children (under five, under ten, and under twenty years). Part B, canvassing the Indian village of Sitka, names only the chief of each lodge; cites his occupation and state of English literacy; then tallies the number of males, females, and children by age category (under five and under ten). Part C offers for both villages the statistical summary that is common for the rest of Alaska.⁸

CHURCH RECORDS

Many denominations have come to Alaska since the Russian Orthodox Church established its foothold in 1794. Initial competition between them was more or less resolved in 1880 when leaders of different Protestant denominations met to parcel the region into informal jurisdictions as follows:

Baptists	Kenai Peninsula (later given the Methodists), Kodiak Island
Episcopalians	Yukon River area
Methodists	Alaska Peninsula, Aleutian Islands, (later) Kenai Peninsula
Presbyterians	Southeast Alaska

Subsequent assignments added

Moravians	Kuskokwim River area
Quakers	Kotzebue area
Swedish Covenanters	Seward Peninsula base

Not all records of these missionary activities have survived the ravages of nature and time—though many have—and not all church records created on the Native population have been retained in the state. Some denominations have established centralized historical repositories elsewhere. The following briefly surveys the major religious groups that have shaped Alaskan Native society.

Covenant Church

Two Swedish Covenant ministers, Axel E. Karlson and Adolph Lydell, first established a mission among the Tlingit Indians in Yakutat in 1887. Later, Karlson moved northward to work with Eskimos, met the leader Nashalook, and was invited to his settlement at Unalakleet—where Karlson would establish a strong following. In 1899, the work was formally transferred to the Evangelical Mission Covenant Church of the United States.⁹

Many records of this denomination still remain in the individual churches, but researchers will also want to investigate the holdings of two other facilities:

COVENANT AND HISTORICAL ARCHIVES; Evangelical Covenant Church of America; 51255 Spaulding Avenue; Chicago, IL 60625-4987, which houses the national archives of this denomination.

UNALAKLEET COVENANT CHURCH; Post Office Box 209; Unalakleet, AK 99684, which maintains the birth, baptism, marriage, and funeral records for the most-significant congregation of this faith in Alaska.

Among major collections at the Elmer E. Rasmuson Library are

Evangelical Covenant Church Records, Unalakleet, 1880s–1900s. This collection, which more precisely ranges from 1888 to 1981, includes records of marriages, baptisms, deaths, births, yearly meetings, conferences, membership rolls, yearly school reports, and family records. Many of the entries are for residents of other villages—e.g., Egawik, Hooper Bay, Klickatarik, Koyak, Marshall, Mount Village, Nome, Nunivak Island, Scammon Bay, Shaktoolik, and White Mountain.

Unalakleet Mission Daybooks and Logbooks, 1892–1915. This unindexed collection includes the English and Swedish daybook of missionary David Johnson, 1893–95; the Swedish daybook of Axel E. Karlson, 1894–97, and an unindexed logbook of the Covenant mission in Unalakleet, kept by various individuals. These resources detail funerals, marriage ceremonies, prayer meetings, visitors, and other information relating to members of the church, duties of the mission, and activities of the school.

Episcopal Church

In response to England's efforts to develop western Canada, Episcopal Archdeacon Robert McDonald established a mission at Fort Yukon in 1862. Later, he was joined by three priests from the English Church Missionary Society and by Bishop William Mapps from the Canadian Episcopal Diocese of Selkirk. Reverend Octavius Theodore Parker, supported by the Episcopal Church Foreign Missionary Society, settled in Anvik. The work of these men among the Athabascans along the Yukon River was augmented by an American Episcopal group in cooperation with the Methodist William Duncan—who, in 1887, established the Metlakatla settlement for the Tsimshian Indians on Annette Island in southeastern Alaska.¹⁰

Major archival collections that the researcher will want to consult are found at the following locations:

ARCHIVES OF THE EPISCOPAL CHURCH, USA; 606 Rathervue Place; Austin, TX 78768, being the national archives of this denomination.

EPISCOPAL CHURCH COLLECTION; Alaska and Polar Regions Department, Rasmuson Library; University of Alaska Fairbanks (previously cited), being the official archives of the Episcopal Church in Alaska.

Materials in the latter facility extend from the 1880s through the 1980s and are especially rich for the middle half of the twentieth century. Finding aids have been prepared for portions of this extensive collection, particularly for the sacramental records of the various churches. Among the major resources are

Arctic Village Journals, which offer materials created by Albert E. Tritt, an Episcopal minister serving in Arctic Village, Venetie, and Chalkyitsik from 1923 to the 1950s. Included are correspondences, lists of Natives living in the three villages in 1955, and journals recording his ministry throughout the area—including records of services, baptisms, marriages, and funerals, as well as his own life history and genealogy.

Parish Records, which cover Allakaket (1953–80), Anvik (1900–72), Bethel (1960–69), Chena (1904–63), Eagle (1904–63), Fairbanks (1971–89), Fort Yukon (1899–1971), Huslia (1956–78), Ketchikan (1951–58), Nenana (1904–73), Nome (1898–1912), Point Hope (1908–63; including villages of Candle, Deering, Kivalina, Kobuk, Kotzebue, Noatak, Nome, Point Lay, Wainwright, and White Mountain), Shageluk (1904–70), Sitka (1905–81), Tanacross (1931–36), and Valdez (1902–78). The cited dates are for the entire parish collection and do not mean that sacramental registers are available for each year; researchers must consult the specific parish finding aid for the exact coverage.

Two denominational periodicals supply other material valuable for research—*The Alaskan Churchman* (1906–80) and its successor, the *Alaskan Epiphany* (1980–).

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Moravian Church

The Moravian Church, headquartered in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, sent ministers Henry Hartman and William Weinland in 1884 to consider prospects for launching a mission in Alaska. They recommended that an industrial school be established at Nushagak in Bristol Bay, even though the Russian Orthodox Church already was active there. About one year later, five missionaries arrived in the area (which they called Bethel) to construct a church, school, and housing. In later years, the Moravian Church extended its activity over the Kuskokwim River Valley.¹¹

Primary facilities for research on Moravians in Alaska are

MORAVIAN ARCHIVES; 41 West Locust Street; Bethlehem, PA 18018, being the official national repository.

ALASKA MORAVIAN CHURCH; Post Office Box 545; Bethel, AK 99559, being the official state repository.

ROMIG FAMILY COLLECTION; Archives and Manuscript Section, Alaska and Polar Regions Department, Rasmuson Library, University of Alaska Fairbanks (already cited), an extensive collection containing diaries, photographs, and other materials from several members of the Romig family during their service as missionaries.

Presbyterian Church

Returning from his missionary duties in the Sandwich Islands in 1829, the Presbyterian J. S. Green visited Alaska to explore the possibilities of missionary work. It was not until 1877, however, that the denomination expressed interest in a potential Alaska mission, sending the Reverend John Mallory to Wrangell in Southeast Alaska. To Mallory's surprise, he found a well-established Christian group being led by an Alaska Native, Phillip McKay aka Clah. A follower of the Wesleyan Methodist mission established in British Columbia by William Duncan, Clah had come to Wrangell when the Methodists acquired a contract to cut wood there; at the end of the contract, he stayed on to teach "the Word of God" to his fellow Natives and to establish a school. Reverend Mallory took charge of the work, but lasted only a month. His replacement over the next decade expanded Presbyterianism beyond the Wrangell mission to include a school at Sitka (now Sheldon Jackson College) and various enterprises in the Klondikes (which they mistakenly assumed to be in the United States, not Canada) before the first presbytery was established in 1899.

Primary repositories for Alaska's Presbyterian records are:¹²

PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH (USA); Department of History Library; 425 Lombard Street; Philadelphia, PA 19147, which holds records from the 1800s through 1965.

PRESBYTERY OF ALASKA; 5750 Glacier Highway, no. 14; Juneau, AK 99801-9543, whose jurisdiction covers all of southeastern Alaska.

PRESBYTERY OF THE YUKON; 616 West Tenth Avenue; Anchorage, AK 99501, whose jurisdiction covers the central and northern portions of the state. Since 1977, this presbytery also has published a periodical, *The Alaska Presbyterian*.

Roman Catholic Church

Roman Catholic explorers celebrated a mass at Bucareli Bay on Prince of Wales Island (Southeast Alaska) in 1779, but it was not until 1862 that the church began sporadic efforts to convert the Natives. Oblates of Mary Immaculate proselytized in the early 1870s at Fort Yukon and along the Yukon River Delta. In 1879—one hundred years after the first mass—Father John Althoff established the church's first resident mission at Wrangell, under the Canadian diocese of Vancouver.

From that time, a number of Roman Catholic orders launched religious work in Alaska. An 1886 effort by Vancouver Bishop John Seghers failed when he personally led a missionary party into Alaska and was murdered by his hired men; the accompanying priests, from the Society of Jesus's Rocky Mountain Mission, returned to the United States. One of them, Father Pascal Tosi, secured an appointment as vice-superior of the Jesuits in Alaska; and by 1892 he had attracted thirteen Jesuits to the territory. The Saint Ann Sisters began their work in 1888 with the Mission of the Holy Cross in Interior Alaska; eleven years later, they opened a school in Nulato. Sisters of Providence followed in 1902—establishing hospitals in Anchorage, Fairbanks, and Nome, as well as schools in the last two cities.¹³

There is no central depository for Catholic sacramental records. The original registers of baptism, confirmation, marriage, and burial are now transferred annually to the diocesan level; copies are usually retained by each parish. Researchers who know of Catholic ancestors in a specific locale, but are unsure of the parish that served the area, might forward limited requests to the appropriate diocese for routing. Those dioceses, and their jurisdictions, are

CATHOLIC DIOCESE OF JUNEAU; 419 Sixth Street, no. 200; Juneau AK 99801, which serves Southeast Alaska.

CATHOLIC DIOCESE OF FAIRBANKS; 1316 Peger Road; Fairbanks, AK 99701, which serves northern Alaska.

CATHOLIC ARCHDIOCESE OF ANCHORAGE; 225 Cordova Street; Post Office Box 102239; Anchorage, AK 99510-2239, which serves southern Alaska.

Records of Jesuit activity in Alaska are owned by the Oregon Province of the Society of Jesus, which has supervised the order's Alaskan work since 1932. Their original materials are housed in the

ALASKAN MISSION COLLECTION; Crosby Library; Gonzaga University; East 502 Boone Avenue; Spokane, WA 98258.

The Crosby Library material is a valuable trove for genealogists and historical researchers—comprising 49,816 pages compiled by Jesuits in Alaska from 1886 to 1955. Microfilm copies are available at major libraries in Alaska, with a published guide that should be consulted by anyone who plans to use the records.¹⁴ In brief, the collection consists of