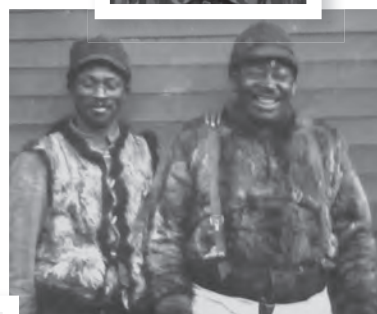


Black History in the Last Frontier



by Ian C. Hartman

With a Foreword by Ed Wesley

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(Barrow)

Kotzebue

Nome

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ALASKA

Bethel

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Juneau

Living through History:

A Foreword and Reflections

by Ed Wesley

I arrived in Alaska in February 1973 to serve my country as a military police soldier (MP) in the U.S. Army. I was stationed at Fort Greely, just outside of Delta Junction and deep within Alaska's interior. It was a far cry from where I grew up in Mississippi, and it was certainly different from my teenage years in Chicago. But my story and how I got to Alaska might not be too different from the tens of thousands of others who have made their way to the Last Frontier.

I grew up in the Mississippi Delta during the era of segregation, the civil rights movement, and the blues. The juke joints in Shelby and Clarksdale were the training ground for blues singers like B.B. King and Muddy Waters. Music was the sharecropper's temporary escape from the miseries of field labor under the brutal Jim Crow system. My family lived six miles from Mound Bayou, Mississippi, an independent black town established in 1887 by former slaves of Confederate president Jefferson Davis and his brother Joseph Davis. Mound Bayou's founding is most associated with Isaiah Montgomery, a formerly enslaved man who in freedom led a long career as a Republican politician. Another Republican politician, Teddy Roosevelt, once referred to Mound Bayou as the "Jewel of the Delta"—a moniker that's stuck. In the 1950s and 1960s Mound Bayou had also become known as the cradle of the civil rights movement and a haven for activists such as Medgar Evers and Fannie Lou Hamer. Here, I crossed paths with many notable figures and learned about the history of African Americans in this country. In fact, I lived it!

My biological father, Henry Ward, and many of my closest relatives came of age in Mound Bayou. My cousin Darryl Johnson Jr. served as a mayor, and Uncle Harold Ward was a circuit judge. Darryl's father, Herman Johnson Sr., also resides in the town and even has a typewriter and desk that the slain civil rights hero Medgar Evers used when he worked as an insurance agent for Magnolia Mutual Insurance, then owned by Dr. T. R. M. Howard, the famous black entrepreneur and activist. Herman replaced Medgar Evers at the

insurance company when Dr. Howard sent Evers to become Mississippi's state field secretary for the NAACP (National Association for the Advancement of Colored People).

Although not many know Dr. Howard's name or his contributions, he was a prominent leader in the civil rights movement. He organized boycotts against Mississippi gas stations where the owners prohibited black folks from using public restrooms. He helped bring to light the murder of fourteen-year-old Emmett Till by two white men in Money, Mississippi, on August 28, 1955. Black newspapers published the picture of Till's mutilated face in an open casket. The photograph generated outrage throughout the country and propelled the civil rights movement. Eight years later, hundreds of thousands participated in the March on Washington. During her visit to Anchorage in 1982, I spoke with Rosa Parks, and she told me Dr. Howard inspired her to resist giving up her seat on the bus, the action that culminated in the famous bus boycott in Montgomery, Alabama.

My mother, Minnie, and stepfather, Prentiss, both worked as sharecroppers—or what some call tenant farmers—on a plantation. By age thirteen, I was chopping cotton for twelve hours a day—laboriously using a garden hoe to remove weed from around the cotton plants—at a pay rate of three dollars a day. In the hot Mississippi sun, my family and I worked the fields, tended to animals, and pumped water for drinking, cooking, and bathing. Like many families along the Delta, debt was a part of life, and it usually got worse over time. At the end of the year you never had enough money to pay off what you borrowed the previous year. They called it “settling up”—the ability to actually free yourself from all of that debt—and it was all but impossible to get out from under. That was by design. The white landowners in the South never intended blacks to gain economic or political freedom. They rigged the system and made sure you could never balance the finances, let alone get ahead.

So in 1965 we did what we had to do to escape the debt and poverty of Mississippi. We left for Chicago and joined a great migration to the north just as so many other blacks had done throughout the middle of the twentieth century. We moved in with some relatives who arrived earlier and took up residence on the South Side, one of the nation's most famous black neighborhoods. Our apartment was on Forty-sixth Place and Vincennes, immediately south of the commercial district on Forty-seventh Street and a block from the Regal Theater. At the Regal the Motown Revue was more often than not a coming attraction. I went to Forestville High School and took up football before an injury ended my playing days. Around that time, my stepdad insisted that I contribute to the household finances.

You had to grow up fast in the city. To help support our family, I took a job at the Empire Room in downtown Chicago, a place known for its celebrity appeal. I worked as a busboy and encountered star performers, including Jimmy Durante, Ethel Merman, Vikki Carr, Phyllis Diller, Alan King, and Tony Bennett. Chicago in the late 1960s was the place to be. There was always something happening. I witnessed the police riots on the young people protesting the 1968 Democratic National Convention at Grant Park (the most famous of whom became known as the Chicago Eight). The Black Panthers organized in and around my neighborhood. So, too, did other youth street clubs like the Blackstone Rangers and the Disciples. The Nation of Islam sold bean pies and the latest issue of *Mohammed Speaks*, their widely distributed newspaper, on the street corners. Even though the media described these clubs as “gangs” there wasn’t the violence you see today. Teenagers spent summer days at the park, on the beach at Lake Michigan, or over at the Brookfield Zoo on Sundays. As a sports fan, Chicago was—and still is—a great town. The Bears had Gale Sayers; Ernie Banks played for the Cubs; and the Bulls had Bob Love and Jerry Sloan.

I took an interest in politics around that time, too. In 1969 I participated in a protest organized by the Reverend Jesse Jackson. We marched on the Illinois State Capitol in Springfield under his umbrella organization, Operation Breadbasket. This was part of the Illinois Campaign to End Hunger and was rooted in the Poor People’s Campaign that Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. initiated before he was assassinated a year earlier. During those same years, a Chicago Democratic Party precinct captain named Glosson Mahorn took me under his wing and taught me about Mayor Richard Daley’s political machine. I learned about organizing voters and that any successful political campaign must start at the most local level, the neighborhood. I’ve considered myself an activist ever since.

In the fall of 1970 I met Frances, the woman I’d soon marry. We went on dates throughout the city as we continued our education at the Central YMCA Community College on West Wacker Drive. I look back on those years and realize how blessed I was to experience such change and transformation in our society. Not only did I meet my future wife and make lifelong friends, I learned the value of community organizing and acting locally to get things done. My aunt Val Grey Ward reinforced this message. She believed in the power of the performing arts to shape the lives of young people. She founded a nonprofit called Kuumba and ran art workshops for hundreds of South Side-area youth. Meanwhile, the campus activism at the Central YMCA Community College around the Vietnam War strengthened my belief in the cause of the anti-war movement. There were so many rallies and workshops; I couldn’t attend them all.

Despite any opposition I may have had toward the war, Uncle Sam drafted me into the army in 1972. This was what brought me to Alaska. After basic training in Fort Polk, Louisiana, I went to Fort Gordon, Georgia, for advanced training in my military occupation specialty. Then it was off to Fort Greely, Alaska, to serve as an MP. By then the Vietnam War was winding down. I considered myself fortunate not to be sent overseas, but Fort Greely was still like no place I'd ever been. I experienced temperatures that routinely dipped to forty degrees below zero during the long winters. One night the temperature plummeted to seventy-five degrees below. Those are life-threatening temperatures, even for someone used to winter in Chicago. But there was still an appeal to Alaska and the open space and wilderness. The military introduced me to the vastness of the state and a lifestyle I came to appreciate. I earned some accolades along the way; I was twice recognized as post soldier of the month at Fort Greely. At the end of my service, I had to figure out what to do next. Like some of the men who served in Alaska, I decided to stay for a little while. That "little while" turned into nearly fifty years!

I made the right decision. Remember, Alaska was on the cusp of a great oil boom in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Humble Oil and Atlantic Richfield discovered the largest oil reserves in North America on the North Slope at Prudhoe Bay in 1968. However, they needed to transport it over eight hundred miles to the southern end of the state and ship it from a deepwater port. That's where the Trans Alaska Pipeline came in. And I was in the right place at the right time as one of the nation's most ambitious construction projects got off the ground.

As soon as I completed my service in the military, I found a temporary position with Loomis Security at Delta Camp, not far from where I was based as an MP at Delta Junction. It was the fall of 1974, before construction started. A couple months later, I went to Fairbanks for additional training in security and accepted a promotion to a permanent supervisory position at Wackenhut Security. This position came with considerable responsibility, and as a twenty-four-year-old I had to supervise men and women much older than me. Some were former police officers, military retirees, and other professionals who came to Alaska to make a fast buck. I supervised an average of eight to ten security guards with day and night shifts at Pump Station 9 and at the Delta Camp in Delta Junction, where construction workers stayed along the pipeline's route.

These were union laborers and construction workers from the Lower 48 who made the camp their temporary home. The men in the welder's union, Local 798 from Tulsa, Oklahoma, were known to start trouble from time to time. They traveled all over the world welding pipe, and they had a reputation

for bullying men in the other unions. They also refused to hire black workers. Eventually a lawsuit settled the matter. The 798ers, as they called themselves, caused so many disputes that we wanted them to go back to Oklahoma. They may have had a lot of power, but our union—Laborers' Local 942—also negotiated strong contracts with excellent pay. We had to work for it. We'd be on the job for nine weeks at a time, working twelve-hour shifts seven days a week, and then we would have two weeks off before starting the next nine-week stretch.

Without question, I earned more money in Alaska in the 1970s than I could have just about anywhere else given my experience and background. It was a bonanza, which is why people came from all over the country. The party never stopped, and it seemed like the paydays wouldn't either. I earned enough to purchase a house and thirty-five acres in Delta Junction. But by 1977, with the pipeline nearly complete, it was time for a change. I took time off to travel, and then my wife and I eventually moved down to Anchorage, where we raised five children, Wendell, Cynthia, Chairita, Kiala, and Tamika.

There's always work and activism to pursue here in Anchorage. Since I've lived here, I've worked as a union laborer and as a real estate and insurance broker, and I've continued to participate in politics and volunteer. I've served as president of the African American Business Council, the Anchorage NAACP, and the Alaska Black Leadership Conference. I've served on the Alaska Veterans Administration Hospital Volunteers' Committee, the American Legion (General "Chappie" James Post 34), the Anchorage Council of PTAs, the Municipality of Anchorage Zoning Board of Examiners and Appeals, the Alaska Retirement Management Board (as a trustee), and the Alaska Democratic Party (as a national committee person). There always seems to be something new happening around the community.

I'm particularly proud of my time on the African American Business Council. We provided greater access to banking for Anchorage's black population and opened up new avenues of investment. The business council's board of directors included B. Kaleem Nuriddin, an insurance broker; William Browner, a pediatrician; Mayfield Evans, owner of Mayfield's Cleaners; Johnny Gibbons, an attorney; Conrad Worthy, an insurance agent; and Ret. Sgt. Maj. Bill Cobbs from the U.S. Army. One of our most notable successes was facilitating a contract between Lawry Seasoning, a national brand with broad distribution, and Roscoe's BBQ, a local barbeque spot in Anchorage. We also recruited high school and college students to fill entry level and intern manager's positions at First National Bank and the National Bank of Alaska. Some of these students stayed in finance and have assumed leadership positions. As a result, Anchorage's black community has greater representation in business and politics, but we always have more work to do.

Learning and writing our history is one way to do this work. We must know our history and our struggles. Knowledge grounds us and provides a way forward. Over a year ago, the HistoryMakers, an educational institution and digital archive committed to preserving and making accessible the history of African Americans, identified ten “unsung heroes” to interview in Alaska. I was honored to be among them. Based in Chicago, the HistoryMakers conducts oral interviews and documents the black past. Shortly after their visit, some of us who sat for interviews partnered with the Rasmuson Foundation and the University of Alaska Anchorage to support access to the HistoryMakers Digital Archive through the university’s library. This was where I met Dr. Ian Hartman. Since then, I have developed a collaborative relationship with him on this book. To illustrate how small and interconnected the world we live in is, I’d also relate that while my aunt Val Gray Ward directed Kuumba, in Chicago, she mentored Julieanna Richardson, the founder of HistoryMakers. Those connections and coincidences might be seen as one of the central themes of this book. Black history is interconnected: It is the story of movements, migrations, and community formation. It is people coming together to relay their wisdom and create a better, more just world.

African Americans who came to Alaska did so for reasons similar to mine. Many came through the military; others traveled north for an opportunity they believed they couldn’t find in other parts of the country. Alaska has long had a transient population, and most of the black men and women who have come up have left. But others have stayed for generations, put down roots, and have no plans to leave. My family has made it home. It’s a far cry from Mississippi, or even Chicago. But like those places, here in Alaska we’ve fought for justice, honored our ancestors, shared our history, and spoken our truth. That’s what this book aims to do. It doesn’t tell us everything, but it’s a start. I hope you’ll take away some of its key lessons and together we’ll make Alaska an even more inclusive place for everyone.

INTRODUCTION:

Black History in Unlikely Places

From John Muir's late nineteenth-century descriptions of pristine wilderness to the ubiquity of today's reality television programs, Alaska has long fascinated the American public. Presented in popular culture, Alaskans often fall into a few predictable stereotypes: the rough and tumble fortune seeker or perhaps the maladjusted loner looking for refuge in the isolation of Alaska's unbounded wilds. Still another is the crude image of the "Eskimo," a one-dimensional representation of Alaska Natives frozen in time and subsisting amid the world's harshest conditions. Yet these portrayals of Alaska and its people ignore the complex history as well as the diverse population found in the nation's forty-ninth state. In just over a century the state's largest city, Anchorage, has become Alaska's cultural and economic center as it has transformed itself from a railroad hub into a modern metropolis and home to some of the nation's most multicultural communities and schools. Other areas of Alaska—from its rural villages accessible only by air to smaller towns on the road system—have undergone equal levels of change.

However, fitting neither the stereotype of a white-settler-turned-sourdough nor an Alaska Native whose culture has been connected to the land and sea for generations, the state's black population has been largely ignored. African Americans have traveled to Alaska for over 150 years, well before statehood and earlier even than the Klondike gold rush. Black men and women have actively participated in Alaska's politics, economic development, and culture. They hunted for whales, patrolled the seas, built roads, served in the military, opened businesses, fought injustice, won political office, and forged communities. This book presents their stories and documents a seemingly improbable topic: the history of black settlement and life in Alaska.

Black History in the Last Frontier maps some of the trials and challenges African Americans have faced in America's northernmost territory and then state. It also presents a series of biographical sketches of notable black men and women who passed through or settled in Alaska and meaningfully contributed to the politics, culture, and social life in the so-called Last Frontier. Most of the early whalers, prospectors, and men and women in uniform did not stay long. Others put down roots and lived out their lives in Alaska. This book showcases the achievements and contributions of Alaska's black community, while demonstrating how Alaska's black population has endured racism and fought injustice. In sum, Alaska's history of race relations and civil rights reminds the reader that the currents of discrimination and its responses—self-activity, activism, and perseverance—are American stories that might be explored in the unlikeliest of places.

The first chapter, "Black Exploration and Arrival in the Icy Northwest," takes a broad, introductory view by recounting the history of black participation in Alaska from the middle of the nineteenth through the early twentieth century. This era straddles the Treaty of Cession between the United States and Russia, whereby the 663,000 square miles known as Alaska came under American control in 1867. The first documented presence of black men in Alaska's waters and perhaps on land occurred as early as the 1840s as whalers set out from New Bedford, Massachusetts, and other New England ports and plied their craft in the icy waters of the North Pacific and the Arctic. Some of these crews established temporary settlements in Point Hope and Point Barrow. Evidence suggests these men arrived as free people of color in the North; other documentation suggests some had been enslaved and fled to freedom. They believed a life at sea was preferable to a life in bondage.

Though scant documentation remains of these men and their activities, more evidence exists from the gold rush era of the late 1890s and early 1900s as described in chapter 2, "Black Life in the Gold Rush Era." This chapter showcases the first well-documented period of U.S. control of the territory. During these years, black men and women came by the hundreds—some through the military, others to prospect or set up businesses in support of mining activity. In any case, by the first decade of the twentieth century, a permanent and growing black population called Alaska home. Blacks who arrived after the Treaty of Cession are among the most understudied populations in Alaska; yet they contributed mightily to Alaska's culture and economy in ways that historians have yet to fully record.

Due to federal legislation, world wars, and the nation's worst economic depression, immigration from abroad slowed from 1916 through the 1950s. However, those same years correspond to what historians have called the "Great Migration"—the mass movement of Americans from the South to the North and West. This included millions of African Americans. Alaska did not attract black men and women on the scale of Chicago, New York, or California; although, thousands nonetheless arrived through the armed forces and on their own accord. The world wars shaped and redefined Alaska unlike any other events.

Chapter 3, "World Wars and a Changing Alaska," highlights the war years and demonstrates the numerous ways that global conflict at once provided new opportunities for Alaska's black population and limited them from pursuing others. Black men helped build the Alaska Highway, served in the Aleutian Islands Campaign, and were stationed across the territory. Notably, the 383rd Port Battalion landed on Attu and helped retake the island from the Japanese. In addition, the 93rd Engineers, whose labor had proven so pivotal on the Alaska Highway, joined the fray in the Aleutian Islands Campaign and served on Adak Island. Others served at the Army Air Corps bases at Cold Bay and on Umnak Island.

Despite these contributions, African Americans faced discrimination, most notably from the military commander of Alaska Territory, Lt. Gen. Simon Bolivar Buckner Jr. In the face of mistreatment, black men nonetheless served valiantly and with distinction. Consequently, the U.S. military would never be the same and neither would Alaska. The actions of black troops and citizens throughout the territory presaged and arguably facilitated the integration of the U.S. armed forces and helped launch one of the nation's great social movements. Chapter 3 thus recasts World War II-era Alaska as not only a critical staging ground to the global conflict but also an early battleground in the movement for civil rights.

Chapter 4, "Statehood and the Cold War," details the years between the end of World War II and Alaska's statehood in 1959. The Southcentral region emerged as the economic and population center of the territory and eventually the state in the 1950s and '60s. The onset of the Cold War and the geopolitical significance of the circumpolar North and Pacific ensured Alaska would receive copious levels of defense appropriations. This rapid expansion of Anchorage—and to a lesser extent, Fairbanks—in the postwar decades offered the possibility of establishing a life anew in ways not possible in the older cities of the Lower 48. But like their counterparts elsewhere, black Alaskans

continued to experience racism on personal and structural levels. As Alaska grew, its white residents at times restricted prospective black homeowners from purchasing property; this was particularly true in urban Alaska. These discriminatory policies effectively froze African Americans as well as other minority families out of much of the housing market. As a result, people of color settled on the edges of town or outside Anchorage's official boundaries, often in poorly built homes on marginal land. Discrimination and neglect from the city's political leadership fed a spirit of community action and spurred a wave of civil rights mobilization.

Chapter 5, "Civil Rights Under the Northern Lights," delves further into discrimination in urban Alaska and the opportunities that black men and women forged through the 1960s and '70s. And though Alaska is not considered a focal point of civil rights activity, a vibrant sense of activism and identity took hold. As in the rest of the United States, Alaska's black population took to the streets to assert their rights and call out the various forms of injustice they faced. Barriers to equal employment and fair housing remained primary concerns. While Alaska certainly experienced racial conflict before the 1960s, this decade marked a series of victories for the black community. Through hard-won battles in the courts and on the streets, black Alaskans opened up new job opportunities and accessed better housing; several black men and women rose to prominence in the local business community and in state politics. These successes fostered a relatively open and inclusive state by the 1970s. Yet patterns of discrimination remained stubbornly persistent.

The conclusion, "Black History in Alaska at Century's End," documents race relations in Alaska in the 1980s and 1990s. Over a decade after the 1968 discovery of oil on Alaska's North Slope, thousands of newly arrived residents called the forty-ninth state their home. These men and women came to expect the services and accommodations they grew up with in the Lower 48. Not surprisingly, Alaska faced the growing pains of a rapidly expanding population. However, as local and state government expanded to accommodate a growing population, the African American community was at times excluded. This lack of an institutional presence limited black advancement and presented hurdles to enter Alaska's white-dominated political and civic life.

At the same time, a new generation of community leadership emerged to confront the disparities that remained after the height of the civil rights movement. A new generation of black leaders opened new pathways to

advance in business and politics. But by 1985, the price of oil plummeted and triggered a statewide recession. The influx of residents who arrived in the 1970s included many men and women from the American South; they tended to be more religious than previous generations of migrants and more conservative. Some still clung to the days of segregation and, in at least some cases, resented the advances made during the civil rights movement. Black Alaskans reported increases in racial animosity in these years. Hate crimes and divisive rhetoric underlined the fractured dialogues between white and black residents. This required a new wave of activism among blacks and allied white citizens to confront the resurgent currents of racism.

Black history in Alaska is reminiscent of black history in the continental United States more generally. For certain, Alaska has mostly lacked the history of racism that defined slavery and the Jim Crow era in the American South that existed from Reconstruction to the 1960s and was defined by racial segregation, violence, and strict limits to black advancement. Likewise, Alaska's remote location created some exceptional patterns of behavior and public policies that are not replicated elsewhere. Yet Alaska's race relations appear similar in many ways to the rest of the nation. This is most true when examining housing policy, segregation, and discrimination in the decades following World War II, a period of unprecedented growth. Alaska's urban areas, and the white citizens who have formed the majority of the population, have implemented the same types of discriminatory policies associated with postwar America. This has imprinted a legacy of racial tension that must be confronted and addressed.

Nonetheless, Alaska's black population has cultivated a vibrant sense of community and built civic institutions that have endured into the present. The vitality of these institutions belies the comparatively small number of people who have created them. This reveals how successful black Alaskans have been at carving out social and cultural spaces in an unlikely part of the country. Indeed, black men and women have taken part in every facet of Alaska's economic, cultural, and political development for well over a century. This book details some of the participants and their contributions.

Black History in the Last Frontier should be viewed as an interpretation informed by some key sources. I build on the findings of Everett Louis Overstreet's *Black on a Background of White: A Chronicle of Afro-Americans' Involvement in America's Last Frontier, Alaska*, and George Harper's collection left to the Archives and Special Collections at the University of Alaska Anchorage/Alaska Pacific University Consortium Library. Both Overstreet

and Harper chronicled black history in Alaska; the research for this book is deeply indebted to the efforts of these men, and I owe much gratitude to their labor.

I also relied on George Harper's collection and insights in the development of the timeline of black history and the biographical sketches. Regretfully, it is not possible to have included everyone who deserves recognition for their achievements. There are undoubtedly people whom I have overlooked and others on whom I did not locate enough information to warrant inclusion. When putting together the biographical sketches, I attempted to identify notable members of the black community who have taken on leadership positions in business, culture, politics, or education. Some of the men and women included are historical figures who passed away decades ago; others are still very much active in their respective professions and communities. But in any case, this is a list that will inevitably grow in the future, and it is my hope that historians will use this appendix as a reference point to build upon in their own research.

I would like to thank Ed Wesley for providing many of the names and information encountered in the text and the appendix. Ed has also proofread the manuscript and has been indispensable in his knowledge of black history here in Alaska. Without his encouragement and counsel, this book would be missing some key details and highly influential people. He has resided in Alaska for nearly fifty years, and he's proven to be a fountain of knowledge. It has been an honor to work with him in the development of this project. I greatly appreciate his efforts. His foreword has enriched this book.

I relied on an array of primary source material, oral histories, and existing scholarship to deliver a study of black life in the forty-ninth state. For certain, it is not comprehensive and should be viewed more as an invitation for additional research than as a final word on the topic. Black history in Alaska provides an extraordinarily rich line of inquiry, and there is much still to know and document. In that spirit, I hope the reader will at once find enjoyment in this illustrated study, but more importantly may the reader find inspiration to research and write the next volume of Alaska's black history.

Finally, this work has received generous funding from the National Park Service and the University of Alaska Anchorage. Historian Janet Clemens and anthropologist Rachel Mason, both with the NPS, have provided insightful comments. It's truly been a collaborative effort, and their knowledge and feedback have meaningfully contributed to my research. I've also been fortunate to discuss the topic of black history in Alaska with Eleanor Andrews.

Eleanor, a longtime resident of Anchorage, provided photos for the book and offered many valuable insights. She's pointed out the contributions of many whom I would have otherwise overlooked. Furthermore, I am grateful for the support provided by the Selkregg family and the Center for Community Engagement and Learning at UAA. This project is rooted in community and should be viewed as a chronicle of community in Alaska as much as it is an academic history. I have had the privilege to develop this project with the assistance of UAA students. As such I'm grateful for the contributions of Erika Coker, Hannah Dorough, Danielle Holness, Zakiya McCummings, Olivia Petroccia, and Michael Squartsoff. Kaylene Johnson-Sullivan edited the text with great care and precision; she also provided valuable feedback. Susan Elliott proofread the book. David Freeman offered his skills as a graphic designer and assembled the text in preparation for publication. David Reamer has long worked with me as a researcher and collaborator on this project and others. He has developed a keen interest in Anchorage's diverse communities and has authored some of the very strongest scholarship on the history of race in Alaska. David also assisted in writing chapters 4 and 5 and was critical in compiling the biographical sketches and providing greater depth to the research. Without the assistance of these individuals and community partners, this book would not be possible. While I have been incredibly fortunate to receive such assistance and the wisdom of numerous people, any errors are my own.

CHAPTER ONE:

Black Exploration and Arrival in the Icy Northwest

Starting in the 1870s William T. Shorey ascended the ranks of whaling crews and eventually worked his way up to captain by the early 1900s. He led voyages on whaling barks, such as the *Emma F. Herriman*, the *Andrew Hicks*, and the *John & Winthrop*, which traversed the Pacific Ocean. It was a notable feat for a man of African descent born to formerly enslaved parents on a sugar plantation in Barbados. Shorey's status as one of the era's most skilled whalers was as unlikely as it was remarkable. After leaving Barbados for greater opportunity in New England, Shorey took his maiden voyage as a whaler in 1876 when he was not yet twenty years old. On one notable expedition, a sperm whale nearly capsized the boat, endangering the lives of the crew. A crewmate threw a makeshift bomb at the whale, saving the ship and the men from almost certain death. Shorey, undeterred, stuck with the industry and became a boat steerer and captain. He quickly recognized that sailing the high seas in search of the world's largest creatures could be an adventurous and capricious profession.

As the industry shifted from the North Atlantic to the Pacific, Shorey found himself whaling ever farther from his adopted home in Boston, Massachusetts. The *Herriman* crossed the Atlantic to the Cape of Good Hope, off the coast of southern Africa, and reached the waters of the Indian and the South Pacific Oceans. The men aboard kept watch for the bountiful whale populations, prized for their blubber and oil. Eventually, the *Herriman's* crew navigated the ship north to the Gulf of Alaska and the Arctic before heading back south to San Francisco. These icy waters would be a focus of the whaling industry from the 1880s through its decline in the first decades of the twentieth century.

Meanwhile, Shorey had come a long way from his childhood in the Caribbean—touching down in Australia, the islands of the South Pacific, and the waters of the Bering Sea. He viewed the Arctic Ocean from the Territory of Alaska and from just beyond the shores of eastern Russia. By then the *Herriman's* port of call was San Francisco, and Shorey was promoted to first officer. By 1886 Shorey had become first in command and was among the most skilled whalers to ply his trade in the Pacific. The industry had become more diverse as many native-born white men looked elsewhere for employment and viewed whaling as a declining industry, typified by brutal working conditions. Both of these assumptions were true as Herman Melville famously relayed in *Moby Dick*. The whaling industry's rise to prominence began in the seventeenth century, and its apogee lasted from the 1830s through the 1850s. But beyond the heyday of whaling in the middle of the nineteenth century, the ships of the West Coast continued to employ men of color, economic castaways from the Far East, Europe, and Africa, many of whom were drawn to a job that offered a level of meritocratic advancement in an era otherwise rife with discrimination. Shorey's success provided evidence of this.

Historians have come to refer to the last quarter of the nineteenth century and the early twentieth as a nadir in race relations, a time when Reconstruction came to a violent end, and the policies of Jim Crow dominated the U.S. South. Rampant discrimination also occurred throughout the North and West; exclusionary laws prohibited people of Asian and African descent, as well as indigenous people, from gainful employment and decent housing. In this context, whaling became a refuge for black men. It was one of the few jobs to offer decent pay and a chance to move up in rank. Still, the turnover was high and the conditions exceedingly dangerous.

However, William Shorey was not the first African American to sail through the Gulf of Alaska and the Bering Sea, but his story reveals how and why a black man reared in the Caribbean, a region thoroughly defined by racial slavery, ended up in the northern latitudes, if only briefly. Early black history in Alaska thus began at sea, as some men escaped slavery and, later, the punishing brutality of segregation in the American South. Others, like Shorey, a free man of color, believed the open seas provided the best opportunity for advancement. Shorey ultimately served as a master of a whaling ship until 1908, a thirty-two-year career at sea that led to prosperity for him and his family—a career and life that was almost certainly better than what was available on land.

This chapter details some of the first African Americans to arrive in Alaska and its waters. Though a mass migration into the region never occurred, hundreds of African Americans and Afro-Caribbeans came north. Most of these arrivals remained at sea, but some came ashore. A small number stayed in Alaska and made it their home. The majority of men who arrived in Alaska did so with the whaling industry, especially if they came before



William Shorey and his wife, Julia Ann Shelton Shorey, and daughters, Zenobia Pearl and Victoria, c. 1890s. (National Park Service, NPS SAFR P00.2178x). Accessed at <https://www.nps.gov/safr/learn/historyculture/africanamericanhistory.htm>.

the 1890s. But smaller numbers of African Americans came north with the military, as prospectors, and as businesspeople. Regardless of their pursuits, blacks shaped the early history of non-native settlement in ways historians have failed to acknowledge.

Fugitive Slaves and Free Blacks in the Civil War Era

Before William Shorey sailed through Alaska waters, the whaling industry had long been known as a haven for runaway slaves and free blacks in the North. Amid the crisis between the slave states of the American South and the free states of the North, thousands of enslaved people assumed great risk and fled servitude. These fugitive slaves, as they were called, trekked north to cities such as Philadelphia, New York, and Boston. They also fled to smaller towns like New Bedford, Massachusetts. This coastal town and its deepwater port became the center of the nation's whaling industry in the 1820s. With a population of about twenty thousand in 1850, New Bedford enjoyed its status as the nation's wealthiest city per capita for several years after the War of 1812. Fueled by the whaling industry, New Bedford drew women and men from across the young nation. Others migrated from western Europe, the Azores, and Cape Verde off of the Atlantic coast of west Africa. Some came from as far away as the islands of the South Pacific.

New Bedford was home to several notable African Americans who distinguished themselves in the cause of abolition and others who took lead roles in the business of the era. Paul Cuffe, who at the time of his death in 1817 was one of the wealthiest men in the nation, hailed from New Bedford. Cuffe built his fortune in the shipping and whaling industries and later led efforts to settle escaped slaves and free people of color in Sierra Leone, on the western coast of Africa. American revolutionary Crispus Attucks lived briefly in New Bedford as did the famous abolitionist Frederick Douglass. Lewis Temple, the inventor of the toggle harpoon, also called New Bedford home.

Thousands of whalers claimed residency in New Bedford through the 1840s and '50s. Historian Kathryn Grover has estimated that in these years 18 percent of the New Bedford whalers, many of whom were likely fugitives or runaways, arrived from slaveholding states. Other blacks arrived from Portugal and its colonies in the Azores and Cape Verde. These men provided the backbone for the whaling industry as it shifted focus from the Atlantic and the nearly extinct right and sperm whales to the North Pacific and Arctic Oceans. There, whalers targeted the plentiful and oil-rich bowheads. It's

possible that not only were they the first African Americans to make their way to Alaska but they may have been the first men from the United States to see the vast territory.

The number of the fugitive slaves who fled the South and ended up whaling in Alaska's waters is impossible to know, but extensive records found in captain logs in New Bedford provide insight. Documentation reveals whaling ships bound for the North Pacific as early as the 1830s. These ships scoured the waters off the Pacific Northwest and British Columbia; some made their way as far as Kodiak Island and toward the Aleutians. However, these ships did not come to shore. To do so would have risked conflict with the Russian American Company, which was then in control of much of the southern and eastern coasts of Alaska. A breakthrough occurred when Captain Thomas Roys and his crew aboard the bark *Superior* left Sag Harbor on Long Island, New York. After months at sea, Roys navigated through the Bering Strait and into the Arctic in the summer of 1848. An ardent student of the voyages of the famous navigators James Cook and Frederick William Beechey, Roys was determined to sail where no other English-speaking captain had gone before and locate waters stocked with enough whales to ensure a fortune. Historian John Bockstoe has called Roys's voyage through the Bering Strait "not only the most important whaling discovery of the nineteenth century [but . . .] one of the most important events in the history of the Pacific."

The expedition set into motion more than seven decades of whaling in the Arctic, the Bering Strait, and the northernmost reaches of the Pacific. Off the coast of Alaska, whalers hunted the bowhead dangerously close to extinction. By the 1920s, they had depleted the stock from about thirty thousand to under three thousand. As Kathryn Grover concluded, "The real window of opportunity for the settlement of fugitive whalers in Alaska is quite small, from roughly 1842 to 1859." Furthermore, these men also had to settle beyond the jurisdiction of Russia's holdings in the Aleutians, along the coast of the Gulf of Alaska, and in the southern panhandle. This meant settlements in Alaska were likely confined to its northern coasts, close to or above the Arctic Circle.

Still, hundreds of ships set sail for Alaska's waters; expeditions lasted between one and four years with stopovers across the Pacific. To note one example, representative of others, the ship *Arctic* sailed from Fairhaven, Massachusetts, on December 9, 1850. It eventually made its way to the port of Lahaina on the Hawaiian island of Maui before heading north; by then it

had been at sea over a year. The men of the *Arctic*, true to its name, sailed to the Arctic Ocean through the Bering Strait. The *Arctic* also sailed to the Sea of Okhotsk off the coast of Russia. Stephen Hascell and John Stillwell, both of whom were black, were two of the crewmen entered into the logbook. Each man was identified by his skin tone and texture of hair. Logbooks recorded black men with the letter D for dark or a B for brown and also noted “woolly” hair, marked with a W in another column. In addition, logbooks recorded where the whalers last resided, but for obvious reasons it would not have been prudent for a man who escaped enslavement to document the town he fled. Many ships and barks bound for the whaling grounds of the Northwest and the *Arctic* had crewmen with these characteristic identifications. These ships sailed with a crew of at least fifteen to twenty men, and some crews had a majority of men described as dark, brown, or woolly.

Most whalers sailed back to their port of call or simply abandoned whaling in San Francisco or Hawaii, two popular stopovers. Some whalers, however, spent significant time in Alaska. As Grover has meticulously researched, one man of African descent, John Davis, signed up for a whaling crew bound for Alaska in 1848 on the ship *Marengo*, around the same time Roys’s *Superior* left port. In contrast to the *Superior*, the *Marengo* sailed to the Northwest coast and then to the Gulf of Alaska and into the Prince William Sound. Davis listed his place of residence as Salem, New Jersey, at the home of Abigail Goodwin. Goodwin was a known Quaker abolitionist who worked with a community in nearby Philadelphia to assist fugitives. While one cannot be certain if he was the first, Davis was among the earliest black men to see the shores of Alaska.

Then again, we might look to Reuben Winslow and Robert Eliot, who in 1843 joined the crews of the *Lagoda* and the *Cossack*, respectively, which were bound for the Northwest coast. Like Davis, there is no absolute proof that Winslow or Eliot was the first black man or fugitive slave to reach Alaska. Nonetheless, both men show up in the logbooks as “no proofs.” This category indicated they were not white and probably arrived in northern port cities under ambiguous circumstances, likely as fugitive slaves or fleeing their circumstances for one reason or another. Reports demonstrate whaling crews had a desertion rate as high as 30 percent. Still other whalers—many of whom were men of color, fugitive slaves or otherwise—arrived in New Bedford or other ports, set sail, and reached San Francisco, Hawaii, or the islands of the South Pacific before deserting. Their whereabouts and final destinations may never be known. Following the discovery of gold in California in



It was common for whalers to spend the winter in Hawaii before heading north toward the Gulf of Alaska, the Bering Sea, and the Arctic. Honolulu Harbor in 1857. Lithograph by F. H. Burgess, Hawaii State Archives.

1848, desertion rates spiked further. San Francisco emerged as a boomtown popular with fortune seekers and land speculators but also deserters and fugitive slaves. Undoubtedly, the hope of a gold strike enticed several whalers. Desertion in San Francisco developed into such a problem that whaling captains bypassed the city altogether by early 1850s and wintered in Hawaii or elsewhere in the South Pacific.

In any case, black men reached Alaska's southeast panhandle via whaling ships by the early 1840s and sailed through the Bering Strait and into the Arctic by the late 1840s and early 1850s. The names of the barks and ships include the *Arctic*, *Bartholomew Gosnold*, *Cambria*, *Caroline*, *Cherokee*, *Copia*, *Hercules*, *Janus*, *Magnolia*, *Minerva*, *Roman 2d*, *Samuel Robertson*, and the *William Hamilton*, among others. The crews on all of these included men with "woolly" hair and dark skin. In some cases, more than a quarter of the men on the voyages identified as black or dark skinned. According to Grover, 74 percent of the black men to have joined these crews claimed to have come from a free state. The rest arrived from slave states; it is likely that a high percentage of those who claimed to have come from free states did so to avoid detection or arouse the suspicions of slave catchers. As soon as President Millard Fillmore signed fugitive slave legislation as part of the 1850 compromise measures, slave raiding ramped up in the North, particularly in

the border states of Maryland and Delaware. Not surprisingly, the heyday of the Underground Railroad and the movement of black men into shipping, whaling, and other maritime professions increased during that pivotal decade.

Before the Civil War, at least several African Americans arrived in Alaska and its waters, well before the United States purchased the territory from Russia, and a century before it entered the union as the forty-ninth state. Though Alaska was certainly not a stop on the Underground Railroad, whaling in the Pacific provided an untold number of men—certainly in the hundreds and possibly the thousands—one avenue to find work after escaping bondage in the American South. Other free blacks sought employment in the whaling industry due to its reputation for less discrimination than most land-based industries. And yet others may have been impressed into service on whaling ships under the fear or threat they would be caught and returned to the South. A life at sea, while harsh, nonetheless ensured refuge from the slave catchers who increasingly roamed the nation's northern cities and towns by the 1850s. This presented the most enticing reason to sign up aboard a whaling ship.



Black whalers posing for a photo at Point Barrow, c. 1900s. Alaska and Polar Regions Collections and Archives, University of Alaska Fairbanks (66-10-136n).

Black Settlement and Whaling in Alaska after the Treaty of Cession

Hundreds of black men who joined the whaling crews found an alternative to life in bondage in the South or the daily discrimination visited upon them in Northern cities. These men risked much to pursue opportunities in a climate and conditions radically different from anything they had previously known. In another sense, that has been the story of black life in Alaska writ large. For certain, successive migrations in the latter decades of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries had nothing to do with escaping chattel slavery. The whalers who arrived and plied their trade in the frigid waters of the North Pacific nonetheless revealed the hopes and aspirations of a people who believed life in the Far North provided more opportunity. Sometimes they were right, but not always.

Before the Treaty of Cession, no serious effort to tabulate the precise number of settlers—let alone runaway slaves—in Alaska took place. The demographic picture became clearer once the United States exerted control over its newly acquired territory after 1867. By the 1870s American census takers counted 391 non-native civilians living in Sitka. Six modest army posts dotted the territory; each one was hastily constructed to house servicemen and provide the United States with a permanent presence in Alaska. These early census records document six black individuals. James Walker, Tom Steward, and Albert Richter, from the Caribbean and Central America, worked as cooks or bakers in Sitka. Walker married a black woman named Maria. In addition to these four, Thomas and Martha Groves were listed as a “Colored couple, freshly married.” Another black woman, Mary Fitzgerald, arrived as a servant with an army family in 1874. Under the guardianship of Jenkins Fitzgerald, an army physician, Mary allegedly contracted a venereal infection, was fired, and returned to Portland. Little else is known about the circumstances that brought these men and women to Alaska, or what their ultimate fate may have been.

By 1900 the census offered a fairly comprehensive portrait of Alaska’s population, which exceeded sixty-three thousand. Indigenous people formed a majority, though the white population boomed as a result of the gold rushes. In sum, 168 black settlers lived among the territory’s population: 151 men and 17 women. Of the total black population, 98 lived in Skagway. Most of the blacks who arrived in the 1890s were in service to the United States military and kept order as prospectors and gold miners passed through on their way to Dawson. The census counted no black children.

Once the Klondike Gold Rush entered its fourth and fifth years (1900–1901), 484 non-native men resided on Alaska’s western coast and several hundred more settled along the southeastern portion of the territory. Most of these settlers simply passed through to the goldfields of Canada’s Yukon Territory. Four whaling stations remained along the northwest coast and marked the location where whalers settled for the season. The majority of these men were white according to the census, but ninety-seven were “all other [races] . . . negroes, mulattoes, Hawaiians, Malays, and Portuguese mulattoes from the Cape Verde Islands.” The census justified its lack of precision by asserting the effort to count everyone was “inadvisable, partly on account of their small number, but chiefly because they all belong to the class of temporary and transient residents of Alaska, being nearly all engaged in the whaling industry.”

While these newcomers had little interest in permanently settling in coastal Alaska, there were exceptions. Within that population of ninety-seven non-white whalers spread across the western coast, at least seven identified as black. Thomas C. George remains the best documented of this group and an example of a man who stayed in the territory for several years. George, born in 1864 in St. Thomas, Virgin Islands, made his way north to the United States as a boatsteerer, or harpooner, on whaling vessels. According to Jim Allen, one of his shipmates, George “arrived at Point Hope only a week before I did, but he found himself a place to live.” By the early 1900s George had organized his own whaling crew and married an Iñupiat woman named Owngachuck. The couple raised three children. George settled in Point Hope, north of the Arctic Circle, and developed a relationship with the Alaska Natives who lived in the area.

Thomas George’s cordial relations with the Native community contrasted with a whaling industry that had long been at odds with Alaska’s indigenous people. Commercial whaling devastated the local bowhead population and later the walrus population, both of which were vital to the subsistence of the Iñupiat and Yupik of coastal Alaska. For this reason the Iñupiat seldom welcomed the whaling crews. Conflict sometimes broke out between indigenous whalers and their commercial rivals. As John Bockstoe has reported, captains complained about Alaska’s native people and viewed them as stubborn and to be dealt with coercively. One whaler, John W. Kelly, referred to the Iñupiat as “a band of hypocrites and shylocks, possessing a large share of brazen effrontery.”



Whaling in icy waters, c. 1880s. Photo courtesy of the New Bedford Whaling Museum, reprinted in the Pacific Marine Environmental Laboratory, National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration.

Such perceptions sometimes led to violence. In July 1877 the brig *William H. Allen* sailed from Honolulu through the Bering Strait between the Diomed Islands and Cape Prince of Wales. Capt. George Gilley described a fight that broke out as a trading deal fell through between his crew and the Iñupiat who lived in a coastal village on the cape. Gilley claimed that treachery and drunkenness on the part of the Native men led to a deadly gunfight. Gilley and his crew of Hawaiians, African Americans, and Cape Verdeans killed thirteen Alaska Natives; one of Gilley's crew died in the scuffle. The episode reverberated for years, and trust between the whalers and the Native population around Cape Prince of Wales never recovered.

In the final decades of the nineteenth century and into the twentieth, whalers pushed farther into the Arctic and very nearly exhausted the bowhead population. All the while, the crews retained their multicultural characteristics, encompassing men from around the world. But in 1924, the last whaling ship set sail from New Bedford. By then, whaling was no longer central to the economy. Petroleum, coal, and electricity powered the nation. Still, it was a landmark moment. While commercial whaling continued in a limited capacity in the United States through the early 1970s—subsistence whaling still occurs in Alaska—the multiracial crews of drifters, runaway slaves, freedmen, and immigrant laborers from the around the world were no longer prevalent.

Whaling brought more blacks into contact with Alaska and the Pacific Northwest than any other industry during the latter half of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. At the same time, the United States exerted more influence in Alaska's waters and on land as a result of two events: First, the end of the Civil War followed by the Treaty of Cession and the conquest of the American West renewed the nation's commitment to more thoroughly police its waters and western lands. Second, gold strikes in Canada's Yukon and Alaska's interior brought thousands of additional people north and west. Beginning in 1896 and lasting over fifteen years, the gold rush era demonstrated Alaska's potential for resource extraction. Together, the military and extraction industry have continued to provide a base of employment in Alaska. Then, as today, black men and women have arrived through these sectors, including one of the most skilled captains and seamen in the nation's maritime history: Michael Healy.

Michael Healy and the U.S. Revenue Cutter Service

After the Treaty of Cession, the U.S. Revenue Cutter Service—the forerunner to the U.S. Coast Guard—patrolled Alaska waters and maintained a presence along the coast; it was among the first federal institutions to do so. No captain assumed as large a role in the region as did Michael Healy, a man of mixed African and Irish descent. After the Civil War, Healy developed a reputation as a skilled navigator and as a man who demanded much from his crew. Born in Georgia in 1839, Healy was the son of an Irish-born slaveholder and a



Michael Healy's USS Revenue Cutter *Bear*, c. 1900s. Fox Farms in Southeast Alaska Photograph Collection, Alaska State Library, (P331-018).

black woman enslaved on the plantation. More than a few white slave owners fathered children with black women they held as property, but it was unusual for enslaved and free people of color to receive an education and travel about the country as Michael Healy did in his youth.

After the Civil War, however, Healy faced limits to his advancement, and it remained nearly impossible for a light-skinned, mixed-race man to become anyone other than a second-class citizen in the South. But Healy's skin tone and education allowed him to pass as white in other parts of the country, an opportunity he seized upon. Like other black men, Healy looked to the United States armed forces for employment. But unlike the Freedmen's Bureau, where thousands of black men served in the years after the Civil War, the U.S. Revenue Cutter Service prohibited African Americans from enlisting. Therefore, Healy kept his status as a man of African descent hidden as he sought a commission at sea. Over the next thirty years, he ascended the ranks of maritime law enforcement in the Pacific. Claiming the identity of a white Irishman, Healy understood whites received access to better jobs and housing, a fact he shrewdly leveraged.

As soon as Secretary of State William H. Seward finalized the terms of the 1867 Treaty of Cession with his Russian counterparts, the Revenue Cutter Service provided the bulwark of American defense and ensured the nation's standing along twenty thousand miles of Pacific coastline from California to Alaska. In addition to patrolling choppy waters, Healy and others in the Revenue Cutter Service aided ships, whalers, and commercial fishermen in distress and maintained law and order on the high and tumultuous seas of the North Pacific.

In 1883 Healy became a captain and solidified his standing as one of the most skilled navigators of the North Pacific's notoriously treacherous waters. As captain of the cutter *Rush*, Healy and his crew had proven themselves to be the most reliable—and sometimes the only—federal presence in the more than three thousand nautical miles from San Francisco to Barrow, on Alaska's North Slope. The whalers who operated off Alaska's coast viewed Healy as an adept seaman and a potential lifeline. In one notable instance, Healy and his crew aboard the *Bear* persevered in the face of gale-force Arctic winds off the coast of Point Barrow to save 160 men stranded amid the icy sea. That same year, aboard the *Corwin*, Healy and Lt. George Stoney mapped the Kobuk River for the Revenue Cutter Service. While the Iñupiat people had used the river for generations to fish and travel through Alaska's interior, Healy and



Captain Michael A. Healy on the deck of the U.S. Revenue Cutter *Rush* with passengers, c. 1900s. John Taylor White Photography Collection, University of Alaska Fairbanks Archives (76-2-225n).

Stoney were most likely the first non-native men to set their sights on the Kobuk Valley and the western edge of the Brooks Range. Today it is a national park.

Healy also developed relations with Alaska Natives who lived along the Bering and Chukchi Seas. These communities relied on marine mammals for subsistence but had a distrustful relationship with commercial whalers. As whalers arrived in greater numbers after Roys' trip through the Bering Strait, Healy served as an arbiter between outsiders who hunted the bowheads for profit and indigenous people who relied on them for food. In Healy's travels, he noted that indigenous men and women on the Russian side of the sea in Siberia supplemented their diets with reindeer, or domesticated caribou. They herded the animals on the tundra and used their hides to provide shelter and clothing and their meat as a source of protein. Though Alaska's indigenous people had long hunted caribou in the wild, reindeer herding offered an alternative and reliable means of subsistence. Healy teamed up with missionaries, most notably Sheldon Jackson, to introduce reindeer herding to the region. By the 1890s, the Iñupiat on the Seward Peninsula increasingly looked to reindeer for food.

While Healy generally got along with Alaska Natives, not everyone appreciated his skills at sea or the lifestyle of the men he commanded. The Women's Christian Temperance Union (WCTU) viewed masculine seafaring

culture as rife with the excesses of drink and debauchery. Healy, in particular, offended the sensibilities of temperance leaders. The WCTU described Healy as a man who succumbed to his addictions, namely “demon rum.” The temperance union demanded that the young men who left their homes for work in the whaling industry, protecting the coast, or laboring in other dangerous jobs in the North Pacific have “a temperate and humane man” as a boss. Healy, they believed, was neither temperate nor humane.

To bolster the allegations of the WCTU, Captain Healy handled his crew with harsh discipline that bordered on abuse and was fueled by alcohol-induced rage. In two instances Healy’s behavior landed him in trouble. He appeared in court after being accused of drunkenness, recklessness, and failure to meet the protocols of the Revenue Cutter Service. He got off both times, but his reputation suffered. That he was never stripped of his rank, according to maritime historians Dennis Noble and Truman Strobridge, demonstrated his value to the service and adeptness at sea. His nickname, Hell Roaring Mike Healy, suggested a man with a short temper. Few, however, disputed his skills as a captain or his ability to brave harsh conditions.

At the peak of his career Healy knew Alaska’s icy waters better than any other single individual. As evidence of his reputation as a sailor, Healy led several men, including John Muir, the naturalist and cofounder of the Sierra Club, up the Alaska coast in the 1880s and ’90s into what is today’s Glacier Bay National Park. Though the 1899 Harriman Expedition is sometimes credited with delivering greater awareness of Alaska’s natural beauty and its geologic features to a popular audience, Healy’s work with John Muir set the stage.

Conclusion

Healy’s steely grit and the men and women like him who set off for the goldfields shaped Jack London’s perception of Alaska and the Yukon in the late nineteenth century. London’s 1904 novel, *The Sea-Wolf*, conveyed the drama of life in the circumpolar North and portrayed the men at sea as a particularly hardy, steadfast bunch. Healy relentlessly navigated the waters of the North Pacific and mastered them as much as possible given the limits of his era. As a result, the Revenue Cutter Service’s successor, the U.S. Coast Guard, later recognized his achievements and burnished his legacy by naming an icebreaker (among the more technologically advanced ships in the fleet) after him, the USCG *Healy* in 1999, ninety-five years after his death.

The story of Michael Healy and his achievements must, of course, be understood in context. As a man who fled the South and passed as white, few at the time interpreted Healy's accomplishments through the lens of black advancement; his African ancestry remained hidden and seldom noted publicly. Still it is imperative to note the long journey Healy made as the son of an enslaved woman in Georgia to become a captain who commanded crews on the Pacific's turbulent waters. Indeed, the majority of blacks could not pass as white, let alone find work with a nascent federal agency like the revenue cutters. But that did not stop hundreds of black men and women from coming to Alaska. Some arrived because they believed whaling might provide a decent life. Others, like Healy, served their nation as it expanded into the Pacific. In either case, black history in Alaska began at sea. But it did not stay there. According to historian George Harper, at century's end blacks resided in Cape Smythe, Point Barrow, Point Belcher, Port Clarence, and likely elsewhere. Not long after, black men served as military law enforcement in the stopover towns en route to the goldfields after the famous strike along Bonanza Creek in Canada's Yukon. Black women started businesses and participated in the gold rush too. The next chapter captures their stories.

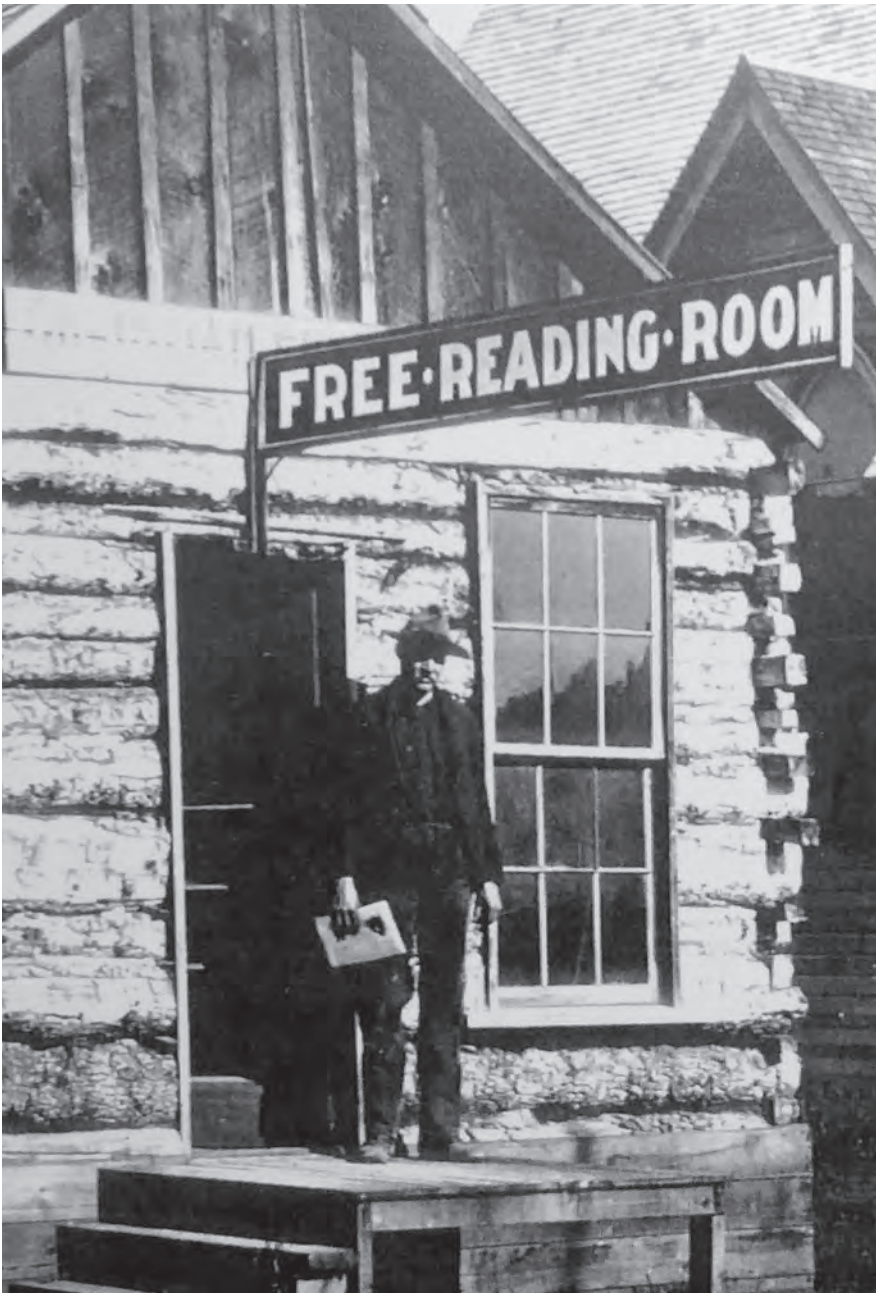
CHAPTER TWO:

Black Life in the Gold Rush Era

Like Michael Healy, Melvin Dempsey was born enslaved. The son of a Cherokee plantation owner from North Carolina, Dempsey escaped the bloody collapse of the Republican-led Reconstruction government in his home state and the violence associated with Jim Crow rule. In contrast to whalers or the men who sailed to Alaska to live life on the high seas, Dempsey caught gold fever and came north to prospect. He was among the many thousands who flooded Alaska and Canada's Yukon in search of gold.

In contrast to the hardy, bearded, and white sourdough miner of popular culture, Dempsey was among a small but notable group of black men who traveled north and called Alaska home. Dempsey first arrived in Valdez, via Alaska's Prince William Sound, aboard the ship *Alliance* in February 1898, more than a year into the gold rush. But Alaska was not his first stop after leaving North Carolina. He first traveled to Denver in the early 1880s, where he staked some claims along the Front Range of Colorado's Rocky Mountains. But as silver and gold mining declined, he moved on. Arriving in Alaska at the relatively old age of forty, Dempsey's strength had begun to wane. Miners and prospectors, after all, worked their bodies relentlessly and could not expect to maintain such a brutal pace for more than ten or fifteen years.

Recognizing his physical limitations, Dempsey had little interest in working the goldfields along the Yukon River and Bonanza Creek. He knew the life of a prospector well enough to understand its grueling conditions and the luck it took to walk away a rich man. Indeed, he had grown weary of the life of a miner. Still, Dempsey knew other ways to earn a living. Miners required basic services and entertainment. In response, Dempsey opened a restaurant and inn in Valdez, the fledgling town with an ice-free port and



Melvin Dempsey standing in the doorway. Dempsey organized the Valdez branch of the Christian Endeavor Society on April 24, 1898, and was elected as town trustee. Blacks in Alaska History Project records, Archives and Special Collections, Consortium Library, University of Alaska Anchorage.

rivers and mountain passes that provided access to the interior of Alaska and the Yukon. Additionally, he intermittently worked some small claims along the Chisna and Chistochina Rivers, north of the town.

While running his business and operating a few claims took most of his time, Dempsey also established a Christian Endeavor Society, a nondenominational organization that promoted a “Christian life among its members.” Not only a place to worship, the society housed a small reading room and provided a gathering space for the community. Dempsey later became the postmaster of the tiny settlement known as Chisna. One may recognize his surname from the Dempsey River and a settlement west of the interior town of Paxon, both named after him. He also became a town trustee in Chisna and built a home along the river, close to his claim. Dempsey kept his Alaska home until he died in an accident crossing a river in 1915. Unlike many who came to Alaska during the 1890s and early 1900s, Dempsey never viewed it as a place to make money and then leave; indeed, by all accounts he loved the land and the lifestyle.

That Dempsey arrived in Alaska later in life was atypical among the men who came north during the gold rush. So too was the fact that he was a black man, born enslaved in North Carolina. Still, his life sheds some light on the black experience in Alaska. Like Shorey and Healy, Dempsey looked west for a space in which to escape and start over. Moreover, Dempsey’s name attached as it is to a town and river demonstrates the reputation he built. Despite his age and status, Dempsey’s story is not wholly divergent from many others, regardless of race. Like the majority of settlers who traveled northwest during the final years of the nineteenth century and early twentieth, African Americans did so in hopes of striking it rich or to at least make a decent living. Many first served in the American South during the 1860s and ’70s with the Freedmen’s Bureau. After that, they deployed to the western plains as so-called Buffalo Soldiers during the Plains Indian Wars. In Alaska, the black soldiers built makeshift settlements to host men and women who were traveling to the goldfields. Alaska’s history at the turn of the twentieth century thus cannot be disentangled from the gold rush, a fact that remained true for Alaska Natives as well as settlers, including African Americans, who arrived from a variety of backgrounds.

A Gold Rush in the North

In 1896 George Carmack and Skookum Jim struck gold along Bonanza Creek, a tributary of the Klondike River in Canada's Yukon and about a hundred miles east of the Alaska border. A rush into Alaska and the Yukon ensued. The story is familiar to those who know the history of Alaska, the Yukon, and the American West. Like other gold rushes in North America, tens of thousands of young men—and some women, too—arrived from around the world. Most of them left within a year or two and did so poorer than when they arrived. Only a few struck it rich. At the peak of the Klondike Gold Rush in 1898, the town of Dawson, in the Yukon, swelled to nearly forty thousand residents. Other towns that hosted prospectors, argonauts, swindlers, and those who sought a payday also experienced rapid growth. Seattle emerged as the key transport point in the Pacific Northwest en route to the northern goldfields. Thousands of others eventually made their way to Skagway and Dyea, towns in Alaska's southern panhandle that served as entry points to the Yukon.

Seattle was better equipped than the two Alaska towns to handle the people who arrived in advance of their expedition north. Skagway and Dyea had neither the infrastructure nor the accommodations to support thousands of miners. Both towns lacked law enforcement, and the young men who came through often clashed with the local indigenous population and showed little respect for the surrounding environment. Making matters more complicated, the Northwest Mounted Police—now the Royal Canadian Mounted Police—required all who crossed the border into the Yukon to do so provisioned with at least one year's worth of food and supplies. As a result, gold rushers needed to haul roughly one ton of goods up the steep and unforgiving Chilkoot Trail or the less steep but equally treacherous White Pass.

The Klondike Gold Rush thus facilitated the largest migration of settlers into Alaska since the United States signed the Treaty of Cession with Russia. As thousands of men and women set out from Seattle, San Francisco, or other locales, the setting became increasingly dangerous and lawless the farther north they traveled. The federal government soon sent troops to patrol Skagway and Dyea; barracks already existed in the vast territory in such places as Fort Saint Michael, Fort Gibbon, Fort Egbert, Fort Davis, and Fort Liscum with detachments in Rampart and Circle. Reports of crime and violence increased as prospectors arrived with thousands of pounds of personal belongings and valuables. One patrolman from the Northwest Mounted Police

declared, “Skagway was little better than hell on earth, about the roughest place on earth.”

Black soldiers were among the first members of the U.S. military to arrive in these towns. The *Seattle Post-Intelligencer* proclaimed, “Colored Troops to Relieve Soldiers at Wrangell and Dyea” on May 14, 1899. Some of these men saw combat in the wars of conquest against the Sioux, Apache, Cheyenne, and Comanche through the 1870s and ’80s. In the midst of these battles, some Native Americans had taken to calling the black troops Buffalo Soldiers, noting their tenacity and will to fight. One contingent of troops, Company L of the Twenty-Fourth Infantry was organized amid the Reconstruction efforts in the South. Formed in 1869, Company L was a largely black regiment, most of whom were formerly enslaved. Company L and the Twenty-Fourth Infantry eventually maintained its home base in the Presidio of San Francisco but deployed several times. They fought on the Great Plains, established order in Alaska, served on the Mexican border, and eventually battled Spanish forces in Cuba and the Philippines. They deployed to Dyea and then Skagway, where fifty-seven soldiers arrived on July 28, 1899. But Dyea had mostly emptied out after prospectors and settlers fled a forest fire.

By 1900 migrants increasingly traveled through Skagway and made their way over Chilkoot Pass, and soon after, Dyea became little more than a ghost town. In the year before Company L arrived, the area’s reputation for lawlessness revealed the need for trained, professional enforcement. The thousands of men who trampled through the soggy grounds around the inlet disturbed a fragile ecosystem and instigated conflict with the Chilkat Tlingits, who had lived in Southeast Alaska for thousands of years. Fracas broke out between Alaska Natives and the settlers who treated them with disrespect and, in some cases, violent contempt. Aside from these tensions, the prospectors—the majority of whom were young men looking to get rich quickly—engaged in a variety of illegal and disruptive behavior. Gambling, prostitution, drunken revelry, and brawling were common pursuits in the makeshift settlements.

Before Company L arrived in Skagway, one notorious outlaw, Jefferson Randolph “Soapy” Smith, fixed card games, extorted greenhorns, and terrorized those who ran afoul of him and his gang. Smith’s shady ways caught up with him, and he wound up on the wrong side of a gun during an infamous shootout on Juneau wharf. In defense of his manly honor, Smith agreed to a duel with Frank Reid, a onetime member of Smith’s gang and a bartender who worked in a Skagway saloon. After their partnership collapsed, Reid

and Smith agreed to settle their dispute through the time-honored tradition. Though he fired the shot that killed Smith, Reid died soon after, presumably from Smith's shot. The death of Soapy Smith in the summer of 1898 marked a turning point and represented the peak of Skagway's frontier days.

Under the command of Capt. Henry Walter Hovey, Company L arrived in early 1899, not long after Soapy Smith's death, and some semblance of law took root. The company provided food and built permanent structures to shelter the throng of men who came through en route to Dawson City. Over a hundred served in the company and built infrastructure such as roads and bridges to connect the town with its outlying settlements. Most of Company L served in Skagway, but forty-six men served in Fort Wrangell and others deployed to Sitka. The company remained in Alaska until May 1902. The Twenty-Fourth Infantry Regiment then deployed to the Philippines, followed by deployments to the Mexican border. After having been dissolved during the Korean War in 1951, the military reorganized Company L and the Twenty-Fourth Infantry. Most recently, the army merged the Twenty-Fourth into the First Brigade Combat Team and has garrisoned the troops in Alaska at Fort Wainwright, outside of Fairbanks.



Company L, Twenty-Fourth Infantry, Skagway, July 4, 1899. Paul Sincic Photo Collection, Alaska State Library (P75-144).

But in the midst of the gold rush, some men from Company L decided life in the military was a poor alternative to mining. The meager salary of a black infantryman led at least twenty-five from the company to develop a case of gold fever. Some abandoned their post, or dutifully served the duration of their enlistments before escaping to Canada or the interior of Alaska. As one example, Corporal Benjamin Green received his discharge from the army after his service in Skagway. But Green's time in Alaska had just begun. He remained in the territory for another four decades until he died of a stroke in Fairbanks in 1940 at the age of sixty-four. It is not clear whether Green ever struck gold, but at one point he shined shoes by day and became best known as a performance singer by night. Green traveled with a "Negro minstrel troupe" and graced his audiences with his thundering bass voice.

Eugene Swanson, another veteran of Company L, traveled through Alaska and the Yukon in search of opportunity. Known as "Nigger Swanson," Eugene persisted through the racial epithets and settled in the Yukon River town of Rampart. A veteran of the Spanish-American War and the charge up San Juan Hill, Swanson arrived in Skagway with the Twenty-Fourth and stuck around after his discharge in 1902. After Skagway he traveled to Dawson for "a couple of years, then went to Nome and finally in 1904, settled in Rampart," he reported to the *Fairbanks News-Miner* in 1942. He worked a claim on Hunter Creek for the next thirty-five years and apparently did so effectively enough to earn a living and hire workers to assist his efforts.

Swanson's story was not singular. The regiment's First Sergeant, Robert O'Connor, stayed in Alaska long enough to bring up his wife, Susie, from Louisville. Another veteran of the Twenty-Fourth, Peter Brown, left Skagway after his service and moved to the small mining town of Porcupine, Alaska, to open a saloon. O'Connor and Brown were among ten black men from Kentucky who enlisted in Company L, Twenty-Fourth Infantry; the Bluegrass State sent more black men than anywhere else to serve in Alaska. Historian George Harper has uncovered other African American soldiers who arrived around the time of the gold rush but served outside of Skagway. Clifford Hancock and Capt. C. S. Farnsworth arrived in Dutch Harbor in 1899. They led a group who were later stationed at Fort Gibbon along the Tanana and Yukon Rivers. Eventually, they settled at Eagle City, Alaska, presumably to prospect.

Not all African Americans who came to Alaska during the gold rush did so through the military. St. John Atherton and William T. Ewing, neither of whom served in the army, were nonetheless among the most successful of

any of the prospectors. Atherton, born enslaved on a plantation near Atlanta, Georgia, cashed in over \$30,000 (roughly \$750,000 adjusted for inflation in 2019 dollars, according to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics) in gold after a few months' labor in 1897, an impressive fortune at the time. Atherton left after just a few months, despite plans for a longer stay. Meanwhile, Ewing staked a lucrative claim in the Tanana Valley, not far from Fairbanks. He arrived around 1900 and mined for six years before returning to Tacoma, Washington, with enough money to then purchase a ranch in California and live out his days in comfort. He died in 1923 after having amassed a fortune of nearly \$150,000 (over \$2 million in 2019 dollars) in addition to real estate holdings in the Bay Area. Ewing left most of his fortune to Booker T. Washington's Tuskegee Institute (later, Tuskegee University) in Alabama.

Though exceptions, the accomplishments of Atherton and Ewing were not total aberrations in the history of gold mining or even of blacks in the West. Instead, it would be accurate to position the two men in a broader context of notable black miners, prospectors, and businesspeople who traveled across the continent. As far back as the California Gold Rush of 1849, African Americans participated in and made modest fortunes in the goldfields. Black men and women could be found in mining booms elsewhere, from Colorado to Montana to Idaho. Closer to Alaska, fifty black men traveled to British Columbia in early 1873 to mine in the Cassiar region. Most notably, Henry McDame, a black prospector and veteran of the California Gold Rush, struck gold on the Dease River, sparking still another small stampede. The camp became known as McDame. A few years later in 1880, prospectors struck gold in Juneau. Two black men reportedly made their way to the perimeters of the gold camp and set up shop as barbers. The prospectors relayed their satisfaction with the services the barbers provided, but little else is known about their identities. This was fairly common as men and some women came and went, often with little trace or even a partial accounting of their day-to-day whereabouts or itinerary.

For certain the allure of isolation enticed some black men to Alaska. It could not have been a more radically different setting than the congested cities of the North or the rural and agricultural South. One man, R. H. Creecy, passed through Fairbanks and staked some claims along the Kuskokwim River and in the Endicott Range in 1900. Twenty-eight years later, Creecy returned to Fairbanks for medical treatment and found it "as big a city as I want to see." During those intervening years, Creecy had apparently never encountered a woman or an automobile; he also took to calling the latter "porcupines." When



Six African American soldiers with three halibut, 1896–1913. William Norton Photo Collection, Alaska State Library (P226-867).



Members of Company L, Twenty-Fourth Infantry join locals at Warm Pass, just outside of Skagway, after a successful hunt, 1901. Laura M. Hills Collection, University of Alaska Fairbanks.

he returned to Fairbanks, he marveled at the opportunity to stay in a hotel and “sit in the window and eat some fruit and watch feminine beauty and the porcupines go by.”

However, Creecy’s desire never to see a city larger than Fairbanks belied the dangers posed by isolation and a forbidding climate. Dave Colgate mined gold, operated a roadhouse, and ran a dog team to transport goods between his isolated homestead along Dorothy Creek and Nome. Nome was still removed enough as to present a rather precarious and independent existence in the event of an emergency. In 1947 Colgate died of exposure while running his dogs in to Nome. The man who found Colgate, alongside his deceased dogs, estimated that he had not eaten for probably two or more weeks before his death

Other black miners suffered similar fates. Frank J. “Fortymile” Smith likely died of exposure in his cabin on Big Eldorado Creek. Another man, Ronald Griffin appeared to have died while taking a bath. A fellow prospector found him frozen to the floor, perhaps weeks after he died. Mrs. M. E. Cooper, a woman who ran a restaurant that served Southern favorites, died alone as she attempted an abortion on herself. Walter Preston, a prospector who roamed between Dawson City and Paxon, fell on hard times and experienced legal troubles in the 1920s and ’30s. By the 1940s, Preston had disappeared,



Black miners working a claim on Dominion Creek, c. 1890s. Bassoc Photograph Collection, University of Alaska Fairbanks.

never to be heard from again. Violence and quick tempers sometimes prevailed and cost still other lives, especially in the days of the gold rush. In one notable instance Benjamin Starkie and Minnie Jones, both of whom were black, lived just miles from the home of the local judge. A white man named Tim Callagan demanded entrance into Starkie's cabin for an unknown reason. Starkie refused, and a fight broke out. As Callagan forced entry, Starkie struck him in the face with an axe. The judge declined to file charges against Starkie, ruling that he was protecting his home.

While it was notable that a black man did not receive a punishment for defending himself against a white aggressor, color-blind justice did not always prevail in the mining camps and towns of the far northwest. Another black prospector named Willie Hooper was "brutally assaulted by some person whose identity is not yet fully established," according to a newspaper report. Authorities eventually made an arrest, but the outcome of the case is not known. In September 1899, the deputy marshal of Skagway charged two men with an attempt to murder an "area Negro." These stories remind us of the hardship and isolation faced by the men and women who came



Black gold rushers, c. 1900s. Blacks in Alaska History Project records, Archives and Special Collections, Consortium Library, University of Alaska Anchorage.

north in search of fortune or simply a better, more peaceful life. Violence and tragedy did not discriminate by race or nationality, and men and women of all colors, faiths, and persuasions faced indescribable hardship in Alaska's harsh environment. Nonetheless, racially motivated violence persisted in Alaska and in the Yukon even as the levers of justice appeared more evenhanded, though not fully balanced.



Bessie Couture, c. 1900s. Bessie Kendall Couture Collection, Bob and Evangeline Atwood, Alaska Resource Center, Anchorage Museum (B1987.2.44e).

Women, Entertainers, and the Service Economy of the Gold Rush Era

As tens of thousands of men looked to the north for fortune, women also realized that opportunities might be found in Alaska. In 1896, just as the gold rush began, Bessie Couture opened her Black and White Restaurant in Skagway. Her modest restaurant was the first known black-owned business in Alaska. While thousands of men participated in the gold rush, a small group of women contributed as well. They may be among the most overlooked of all the participants, but they left an indelible mark on their respective settlements. Some labored in Alaska throughout their lives, but most made quick money and moved on.

Mary B. Mason, one of the first blacks to reach the Yukon, left Seattle in early 1897 and briefly staked a claim at Hunter Creek, not far from the Southcentral settlement of Knik. The records do not indicate where Mason was born or where she came from, but she migrated to Seattle in the mid-1890s with the intention of traveling north to Alaska. She eventually returned to Seattle in August 1898 and brought with her over \$5,000 in gold dust. Another black woman, Mrs. G. B. Verden, never worked a claim but prospered nonetheless. Instead of mining she operated a hotel just outside of Nome at Gold Run. Prospectors rented rooms for \$109 a month, a large sum for the early twentieth century. When she returned to her hometown of Des Moines, Iowa, after a thirteen-year stay in Alaska, the local paper proclaimed, "Negress returns from Alaska—with a million." Arriving in Iowa "fashionably clad, with jewels and gold nuggets galore," Verden's sojourn to Alaska afforded her a comfortable lifestyle that she extended to her parents. After growing up enslaved in the South, Verden's mother and father would no longer do without and lived the duration of their lives in affluence.

Charles and Lucile Hunter traveled from the American South to Fort Wrangell on the Stikine River in 1897. Lucile Hunter was nineteen years old and nine months pregnant when they arrived in Alaska. She named her child Teslin after the lake next to where she gave birth. Her husband died months later, but Lucile Hunter decided to stay in the Yukon and brave the conditions as a single mother. She worked a claim just outside of Dawson and a silver claim in Mayo. She also opened the Cozy Lunch Room, an eatery that served bread, sandwiches, and desserts. Another black woman, Sarah Robinson, operated a chicken ranch and laundry in Eagle along the banks of the Yukon

River. And Madame Jones opened the first beauty salon in Fairbanks in 1905. Her business competed with that of another African American, John Taylor, who cut hair just down the road. There is no disputing the entrepreneurial spirit these women displayed. They may not have mined gold—though some, like Mason and Hunter did—yet they contributed to their respective communities and led productive lives providing various services that new arrivals urgently needed or desired.

Stories like those of Verden, Mason, and Hunter might, however, mask the danger and vulnerability that women faced in the male-dominated world of the gold rush era in Alaska. This was especially true for women of color who made their way through the lawless frontier towns at the turn of the century. One woman, a white madam known as Mrs. Mattie Silks, who grew wealthy through her business pursuits during the Colorado gold rushes, decided to travel to Skagway to expand her operations. She stayed in the Occidental Hotel, not far from the deputy marshal's post. Silks claimed to have overheard the notorious Soapy Smith hurling racial slurs and confessing to have murdered and robbed a black woman who had come through town. Assuming that she would report the crime to authorities, Smith and his gang then allegedly planned to murder Silks. She immediately left Skagway and sought protection from law enforcement. The *Seattle Times* published a story on the murder, but Smith denied any wrongdoing and even launched a lawsuit against the newspaper for defamation. And though Soapy Smith met his demise months later, he never faced charges for the murder that Silks believed he committed.

Silks' story recalls the crime and danger that typified life in Alaska during the gold rush. Those who came traveled great distances and expected a greater payoff, and they stopped at nothing to secure it. This sometimes led to violence and ensured a market for vice; Soapy Smith's gang was only one example. Plenty of other men and women viewed the mining camps as fertile ground to make quick money; anyone could be a target of fraud or theft. Pugilism, gambling, drinking, and prostitution proliferated throughout the mining camps and frontier settlements. As towns sprang up quickly, without law enforcement, young men were free to fight, drink, steal, and generally wreak havoc upon one other. Boxing was among the most popular forms of entertainment.

One man, known as the Black Prince, was a widely feared and respected boxer who entertained hundreds with his fists in Dawson City. Other fighters such as Edward "Chicago Ed" Posey and Peter Jackson challenged Black

Prince in what became must-see entertainment in and around Dawson's mining camps during the 1890s and early 1900s. Posey also developed a reputation among the Northwest Mounted Police as a con man. He worked irregularly at Dawson's Fairview Inn hotel, but he also sold household items and reportedly cased Dawson City homes and sold the information to would-be robbers. Mounties arrested him for selling floor plans to a band of thieves. Posey received a sentence of six months' imprisonment with hard labor. The townsfolk of Dawson reported great satisfaction upon seeing Black Prince take to the ring with Chicago Ed and deliver him a knockout punch.

While tales of charlatans, boxers, and miners conjure a frontier spirit often associated with the Wild West, so too does the world's oldest profession. And like most remote outposts where men vastly outnumbered women, prostitution flourished during the gold rush and beyond. Few knew the business better than Mattie "Tootsie" Crosby, an African American woman who came to Alaska from the booming metropolis of Chicago in the early 1900s. After a brief stay in Skagway, Crosby hiked the Chilkoot Trail to Dawson City. After a few years in Dawson City, Crosby moved to the small settlement of Iditarod in 1910 where she lived for nearly fifteen years. In violation of federal alcohol prohibition Crosby established a bootlegging operation. She served a six-month jail sentence in Fairbanks once the prohibition enforcement officers caught up with her in 1925.

After her release, Crosby relocated to Flat, where she catered to the area miners as a madam and bootlegger. Miners recalled her outsized presence and her "reputation for making the best whiskey in the whole area." One of these men, John Miscovich, noted that once Crosby settled in Flat, she tried to avoid trouble despite the illicit nature of her businesses. She had mixed results. In 1947 an arsonist burned her home to the ground. According to Miscovich, "a pimp set it on fire with a smoking pipe or cigar that fell on the davenport that he slept on." Only a minor setback, Tootsie Crosby rebuilt and opened what became affectionately known as The Crosby. Throughout the 1940s and '50s, Crosby advertised her business as the "finest bathhouse in Alaska." It provided massages and bath parlors as well as "medicated, mineral vapor, steam, tub, salt, and fresh water baths." Patrons could also receive "electric and faradic massage treatments by expert attendants." Miscovich estimated as many as a dozen prostitutes and hundreds of men came through The Crosby during the years. He believed Crosby employed "very decent prostitutes" who kept the business out of view from area children and others who objected to the nature

of the work. Crosby ran her business for decades before she moved to the Sitka Pioneer Home where she died in 1972 at the age of ninety.

By these accounts, Crosby did well enough to support herself. She took in several men who in turn offered her protection and performed chores around her property. In addition to sex work, Crosby provided basic services and shelter to the transient men who came through Flat, many of whom were down on their luck or failed to earn the fortune they expected. Even as Crosby's services remained high in demand, she lived at the margins of the community and always on the edge of acceptance. One of the men who mined in the area camps reported, "Tootsie was not ostracized like the prostitutes, but she was a loner."

Crosby may have been the most notable black woman to run a brothel, but others practiced the trade and even gained local fame. These figures included women like Black Kitty in Circle City, Black Alice in Nome, and Snake Hips Lulu in Dawson City. These women set up shop across the various



Snake Hips Lulu, a "Klondike Dance Hall Girl, 1898." Blacks in Alaska History Project records, Archives and Special Collections, Consortium Library, University of Alaska Anchorage.

goldfields in Alaska and the Yukon. Rarely did they dedicate themselves solely to prostitution. Black Alice of Nome, for example, established her business in proximity to the lucrative claims along Anvil Creek. She cooked and laundered clothes; meals ran about five dollars, a handsome sum even for miners in far-flung Nome. Enterprising women were among the wealthiest people in the gold camps and surrounding towns, and many of them never handled a pickaxe, shovel, or pan.

In Seward a woman named Elnora Jones gained a reputation first as a prostitute then as a madam; she arrived in the late 1930s and was known as the town's only black prostitute. According to Annaliese Jacobs Bateman, author of a report on prostitution in Seward, Jones worked alternatively in the sex trades, as a laundress, and as a restaurant owner. The home where she worked as a prostitute doubled as a barbeque joint in the late 1940s and '50s and had a following in the community. However, a restraining order shut down her business in 1954. Jones was arrested on two other occasions in the following three years. Bateman reports that Seward's vice squad arrested her and transported her to Anchorage in 1957. The documents fail to record her whereabouts thereafter.

Clifford C. Hancock's Alaska

Too often we are unable to access the voices of the women and men described in the previous pages. Instead what is known about these figures has been mediated through the memories of others, in newspaper accounts, or even from law enforcement records. But sometimes an unexpected voice provides a fresh and direct perspective. In 1899 Clifford C. Hancock traveled from Chicago to Fort Gibbon, Alaska. He lived at the confluence of the Tanana and Yukon Rivers and worked as a butler and family assistant to Capt. Charles S. Farnsworth, the commanding officer at the fort. Hancock penned an article for the *Colored American Magazine* in August 1903. Hancock's article, "Alaska: Unalaska and Other Points of Interest," stands as the earliest known firsthand account of the territory written by an African American. He made his way from Chicago by rail and then traveled to the Aleutians by a steamship operated by the Alaska Commercial Company, reaching the interior via the Yukon River and viewing settlements and communities as far as Eagle.

Reporting on his journey to Fort Gibbon, Hancock found Unalaska "a pleasant little town." He predicted the Aleutians would someday rival California and Oregon as a center for agriculture and cattle grazing. "The

two great pioneers of civilization—the church and the school—were in full evidence” in Unalaska. Not all towns, however, shared Unalaska’s level of advancement, according to Hancock. “The dirtiest alley of civilization” wrote Hancock, “could not be compared to St. Michael.” There he found gravesites with bodies not fully buried, a muddy landscape, and the days impossibly wet and dreary. He was happy to leave the settlement aboard a steamer bound for the Upper Yukon. There he found “Eskimos” and “Alaskan Indians” who at times allied with “the white race” and “acquired more readily the habits of the Anglo-Saxon.” But in their love for a nomadic life, “they resemble the American Indian.” Both populations were “filthy and very hardy, living in tents as the temperature dropped to sixty or seventy below zero. They can endure more cold than the average animal in the United States.” As a black writer, Hancock provided an unlikely voice to explain the relationship between indigenous people and white settlers. His observations recall the words of white ethnologists, the works of whom Hancock referenced. Hancock never remarked upon his own subjectivity as a black man. Indeed, the complexity of racial classifications and notions of advancement remained unaddressed topics throughout the article.

Instead, Hancock basked in the endless summer light and braved the darkness of the winter; he marveled at the size and scope of the land. He presented as poetic a description of the northern lights as one might ever read: “I find myself at a loss for words to express the grandeur of the electrical display as they begin each night to play tag with each individual star in the firmament, returning to their mysterious hiding places to come forth again with colors far more beautiful than those of the rainbow.” He concluded, “The beauty of Alaskan scenery is so grand and varied that to call it the Norway of America would convey a faint idea of its magnificence.” The reader gets a distinct impression that Hancock’s experience in Alaska was transformative. His account is conversant with the naturalists of the day and at times conjures John Muir and others who found inspiration from the landscape.

Whether it’s Hancock’s firsthand account or the secondhand accounts from soldiers, miners, trappers, sex workers, innkeepers, and pugilists, all convey the disparate ways in which black men and women contributed to the social and cultural life of Alaska at the turn of the twentieth century. This suggests a more multiracial territory than many assume. Like most western outposts one could find vice, prostitution, and illicit businesses in Alaska’s goldrush boomtowns. Here too, African Americans made their mark on Alaska.

CHAPTER THREE:

World Wars and a Changing Alaska

In 1900 sixty-four-year-old John Conna sailed from Tacoma, Washington, to Alaska. His destination was the small frontier town of Eagle, deep in Alaska's interior along the Yukon River. He journeyed with his friend, the newly appointed federal judge of Alaska's Third District, James Wickersham. Both Wickersham and Conna developed influence in Washington State's Republican Party, particularly around Puget Sound. Conna's political evolution began early in his life. Born enslaved in Texas, Conna later fought for the Union in the Civil War. He was part of an all-black regiment of escaped slaves and freemen based out of Louisiana, and after the war he relocated to the Pacific Northwest. He participated in Republican politics in Washington at the time the territory became a state in 1889 and led a small black population to exert some influence in Tacoma politics.

Like others who came to Alaska, Conna experienced the nationwide economic bust of the 1890s and was lured north by the gold rush. But as he advanced into his sixties, already having surpassed the average life expectancy of American men at the time, Conna was not in the physical shape to labor with pick and axe for hours a day in the goldfields. He tried briefly to do so in the Tanana Valley near Fairbanks before he acknowledged the limitations of his body. After failing to strike gold, Conna asked James Wickersham for a job at the courthouse; the judge hired him as a custodian and to perform various jobs on the property. As a black man, the best work he could initially find was menial labor. But with steady employment and some political connections, Conna also worked in real estate and put aside some money. Unlike many who had come in search of a quick fortune and never planned to stay, Conna lived out his days in Fairbanks and grew more involved in local and state politics.

He was likely among the 209 African Americans counted in the 1910 census of Alaska and had by then become a well-known fixture in local elections. In 1912 Conna ran for the territorial senate, and in 1914 for the Fairbanks city council. He ran as a Socialist after breaking with the Republican Party; the discrimination he faced provided a radical tinge to his politics even as he accumulated some wealth from his property.

At the time of his death in 1921, Conna was eighty-five and had spent the final twenty-one years of his life in Alaska's interior. He owned six homes in and around Fairbanks and held a stake in some mining companies. His life bridged the gap from Alaska's gold rush era to that of the world war era. His status as a Civil War veteran was, for certain, not representative of the typical Alaskan settler who arrived in the twentieth century. However, that he served in the military was quite typical of the men of who arrived in Alaska between the 1920s and '40s. At the time of his death, the territory had undergone major transformations, and it would continue to do so over the next twenty years.

This chapter explores the lives of black men and women who, like Conna, arrived in the early to middle decades of the twentieth century and lived in the territory through the tumult of two world wars. Few events have shaped Alaska like these conflicts, and perhaps no single institution has shaped Alaska as thoroughly as the military. Not surprisingly, many African Americans who settled or simply came through Alaska during these years arrived as participants in the war effort. Others migrated north to take advantage of an expanding economy spurred by copious levels of federal investment. Their history showcases opportunity and perseverance on the one hand, but many also encountered discrimination and systemic racism on the



John Conna, c. 1900s. <http://www.blackpast.org/aaw/conna-john-n-1836-1921>.

other. Some, like Conna, arrived around the time of the First World War. Most blacks, however, came to Alaska in the late 1930s and '40s, amid the Second World War. These men constructed a mighty highway through the boreal forests, assisted in the effort to retake the Aleutians from the Japanese, and worked in support of the war effort. In any case, African Americans left an indelible imprint on Alaska's history during the war years.

From the Great War to the Great Land: Thomas Bevers and the Founding of Anchorage

Like many ambitious and adventurous young men, Thomas Stokes "Tom" Bevers looked west. He came to Alaska following the completion of his service in the Great War—or World War I, as it is known today—and contributed mightily to early Anchorage. Most everything about life in the nation's northernmost territory looked rather different from what Bevers experienced in his home state of Virginia. His father, William, farmed land on the Dan River in Pittsylvania County, a stretch of the American South shaped by tobacco plantations and chattel slavery. William Bevers developed a relationship with a white woman named Mary Ellen, and both of them lived under constant fear of intimidation, violence, or worse. It was against Virginia law for a black man to marry or have a relationship with a white woman, let alone father racially mixed children. Nonetheless, Mary Ellen and William Bevers raised ten kids in violation of Jim Crow-era restrictions; Tom was the seventh.

In 1917 at the age of twenty-eight (or possibly twenty-nine), Thomas Bevers left Virginia to enlist and fight in the war. Perhaps as a means to leave the South, Bevers joined the segregated army; however, it is not clear from the records whether or not he saw combat. Bevers completed his service and never returned to Virginia. Like millions of others, Bevers participated in the Great Migration and sought a better life elsewhere. Nearly three thousand miles from his birthplace, Bevers took up metallurgy in Seattle for a year before packing up for an even more remote destination: Alaska.

In 1921 Bevers arrived in the fledgling town of Anchorage. There he found opportunities that had evaded him in Virginia and Seattle. In those years, the federally owned and operated Alaska Railroad held great sway over Anchorage's economy. In fact, federal officials in Woodrow Wilson's administration founded Anchorage just six years earlier as a hub for a new railroad. Wilson and his allies believed a government-owned railroad would

safeguard Alaska's abundant natural resources from private ownership or reckless exploitation to benefit short-term business interests. In turn, the territory's strategic position in the North Pacific could be more effectively defended, and some of the blunders of development in other western territories and states could be avoided.

Before the federal government set up the Anchorage townsite, the Dena'ina used the area as a seasonal fish camp and referred to the site as Dgheyaytnu. The non-native settlers who arrived in 1915 to construct the railroad were exclusively white; many were European immigrants. No documents suggest a black population present during Anchorage's first years. The first reference to a black individual in the newly established town occurred in the *Anchorage Weekly Times* on January 4, 1918. Town authorities arrested a black woman named Anna West for violating Alaska's prohibition law; it is not clear what happened to West after her arrest. Two years later the labor activist Frank Jenkins—a member of the International Longshoremen's Association and its successor, the International Longshoremen's and Warehousemen's Union—lived in Anchorage for a year before he left to organize dockworkers in Seattle. Jenkins later became a civil rights activist in the Pacific Northwest. Aside from West and Jenkins, Bevers was the most notable African American to call Anchorage home. But like Michael Healy, another light-skinned, mixed-race African American, Bevers lived his life in the West passing as a white man, thus allowing him easier entrance into Anchorage's civic life. He worked as a blacksmith, and after several years of volunteering as a fireman, Bevers served as the Anchorage Fire Department's first paid chief from 1927 to 1940.



Thomas Bevers, fourth from the left, hand raised to chest c. 1920s, Carl Lottsfeldt Collection, Bob and Evangeline Atwood Alaska Resource Center, Anchorage Museum, Anchorage, AK (B1978.111.25).



Anchorage townsite, October 1915. Bob and Evangeline Atwood Alaska Resource Center, Anchorage Museum, Anchorage, AK (B1963_016_006).

Bevers also took an interest in fur farming and along with several other investors purchased eight acres of land between Tenth and M Streets, now part of Anchorage's downtown. His fur farm and trading post soon became a key center for Alaska's fur trade. Two decades later, Bevers worked with Anchorage boosters and the Chamber of Commerce to formalize an annual fur trading exposition, an event Alaskans recognize today as Fur Rendezvous. By the early 1940s, Bevers had won a seat on the City Council and served two terms. Tom Bevers died tragically while on a hunting trip in 1944. By then he had worked his way to the top of Anchorage's social ladder and was a revered member of the community. The *Anchorage Daily Times* eulogized his death: "Anchorage has lost one of its best friends and leaders." It is hard to imagine a newspaper in Bevers's native Virginia publishing an obituary for him. Then again, we do not know if Bevers would have enjoyed such prestige in Anchorage if his friends and neighbors knew of his African ancestry. Evidence suggests Bevers never spoke openly about his upbringing in Virginia, and given the pervasive nature of racism in the United States during the 1920s and '30s, Bevers made a rational choice to conceal that part of his identity.

After Bevers died, some were surprised to find out his family members were black. Only after his sister, who reportedly had darker skin, came to settle his finances and prepare his body to be returned to Virginia did

Anchorage residents learn about his background. By then Thomas Bevers had accumulated the goodwill of his adopted community. Members of both the local Elks Club and the Masons lobbied to keep his remains in Anchorage and provide a proper burial, to which his sister agreed. The Masons read the burial rites and laid Bevers to rest at the Anchorage Memorial Park Cemetery.

Bevers likely recognized the United States was an exceedingly difficult place to be black in the 1920s. Anchorage shared much of the racial antipathy of other American cities. Whether one was African American or Alaska Native, Anchorage and its surrounding communities wavered between ambivalence on the one hand and hostility on the other. If racism appeared lower on the list of social ills afflicting the newly established town, it was almost certainly due to a low minority population. But that too resulted from public policy decisions. In fact, townspeople strongly desired Anchorage to be a white-only town. Anchorage historian Charles Wohlforth and others have noted that the town founder and head of the Alaskan Engineering Commission, Andrew Christensen, excluded the Dena'ina from settling with white residents. Christensen displayed racist attitudes toward people he deemed inferior, a population that included Alaska Natives and African Americans.

Even as the federal government established Anchorage as the hub for the railroad, the nation soon experienced its most severe economic depression. Alaska encountered roughly two decades of stagnation as residents did what they could to find work; the territory's population declined between the 1910s and mid-1930s, only to rebound on the eve of World War II. Still, there were creative schemes to incentivize population and economic growth in the interwar years, the most famous of which was an idea hatched in the Franklin D. Roosevelt administration to relocate farmers who had fallen on hard times. The ideal candidates, the administration believed, hailed from the Upper Midwest. These men and women were "hardy Scandinavians," reflected Robert Sheldon, president of the Fairbanks Chamber of Commerce and postmaster of Alaska in the 1930s. As a result, white midwesterners were believed to be uniquely suited to the conditions of Alaska's Matanuska-Susitna Valley. Organized within the Department of the Interior by the Secretary Harold Ickes, 203 families settled around the town of Palmer and became known as the colonists. This history is well documented and has been the subject of scholarly inquiry.

However, it is less well known that around the same time a small group of black activists calling themselves the United Congo Improvement

Association (UCIA), proposed a similar scheme to relocate to Alaska four hundred black families from the American South. The plan at first called for two hundred farmers to settle in the Kenai Peninsula and two hundred more to settle in either the Mat-Su Valley or Iliamna. Dr. Joe Thomas, a medical doctor and the man widely responsible for planning the relocation with UCIA, envisioned a day where millions of blacks would call Alaska home. Thomas believed the presence of black farmers would at once provide a population and economic base for the floundering territory and also contribute toward its defense. Ernest Gruening, who then served President Roosevelt as the director of the Division of Territories and Island Possessions, quickly shot down the plan. Thomas, undeterred, scaled back the scope of the black migration and requested that black families be included among the white colonists who set out for Palmer. This idea, too, received no traction. Gruening, who later voiced strident opposition to an effort to shelter thousands of Jewish refugees in Alaska, expressed little interest in disrupting what he believed was the optimal demographic of the territory: northern European.

Through the 1920s and '30s Alaska held a white majority in and around the larger settlements of Anchorage, Juneau, and Fairbanks; Alaska Natives far outnumbered whites across the hundreds of rural villages. The black population grew in these years but not appreciably until the 1940s. In this regard, Bevers and Conna remained exceptional figures in a territory with no black community. But as Alaska's strategic location became clearer in advance of the Second World War, the demographics of the territory changed dramatically. At least since the 1940s, the black population of Anchorage has fluctuated between 4 and 10 percent; so too has the black population of Fairbanks. These demographics are comparable to major cities in the Pacific Northwest such as Seattle, Portland, and Spokane; Tacoma has historically had the largest black population in the region. Yet even these relatively modest numbers belie the contribution of African Americans in Alaska during and after World War II. Their actions in the territory anticipated a broader civil rights movement in the years to follow.

World War Comes to Alaska

The Second World War shaped Alaska's history like no other event. The war once again showcased the territory's strategic significance to American policy makers and required an enormous logistical commitment to defend its shoreline, waters, and land. Alaska's sheer size and its remote location at

once made it a target for the Japanese Empire. At the same time, given its proximity to the Pacific theaters of war and the eastern half of the Soviet Union, the United States and Allied commanders recognized the opportunity that development of an extensive military presence in the territory would have on the war effort. As a result, even before the attack on Pearl Harbor, the U.S. military decided Alaska should serve as a location for new army and air bases. Once the nation entered the war, these plans grew more ambitious.

The construction of Fort Richardson and Elmendorf Field in Anchorage and Fort Wainwright, Eielson Field, and Ladd Field in Fairbanks and other installations in Southeast Alaska, Kodiak, and the Aleutians led to a flurry of activity. The military, of course, remained segregated, and its presence in Alaska was no different. In fact, the head of the Alaska Defense Command, Lt. Gen. Simon Bolivar Buckner Jr., believed in the inherent inferiority of non-white soldiers, whether they were Alaska Native, African American, or of Asian descent. The son of a Confederate army general from Kentucky, General Buckner exerted a strong influence on Alaska throughout the war. Under his command, Fort Richardson grew from 780 soldiers in July 1940 to over 6,000 by the end of 1941. A staunch white supremacist and adamant segregationist, he forbade African Americans from residing in Alaska's towns and settlements. He believed the prevailing wages were too high, and job opportunities might entice black men to travel north. If that happened, Buckner asserted, "The natural result would be that they would interbreed with the Indians and Eskimos and produce an astonishingly objectionable race of mongrels which would be a problem here from now on."

At the same time, President Franklin D. Roosevelt consulted with members of his so-called black cabinet, men including Benjamin O. Davis, William O. Hastie, and Campbell C. Johnson, all of whom served in the War Department. Mary McLeod Bethune, a close friend of Eleanor Roosevelt, vociferously advocated for greater black participation in the war effort as well. The black cabinet requested the use of black troops in both combat and non-combat roles; the plan became known as "segregation without discrimination." It called for 10 percent of every branch in the United States military to be staffed with African Americans. The selective service also mandated 10 percent of inductees be black. The plan received immediate pushback from top brass in the military, including the Army Chief of Staff George Marshall, who opined that the war effort must not be viewed as opportunity to advance black soldiers or disrupt the conventions of Jim Crow. In response, black leaders called for a Double V strategy—victory against fascism abroad and victory at home against racism and segregation.

Once the Japanese invaded the Aleutians and gained a foothold in the Pacific in 1942, the urgency of the war effort necessitated black involvement, regardless of the uneasiness of Buckner and his colleagues. Over the next three years black soldiers demonstrated valor on and off the battlefield, despite being targets of derision and bigotry. As with all enlisted troops, black personnel took the army general classification test to measure their aptitude. But those who had little or no formal education, as did the majority of black enlistees, scored poorly and ended up in the bottom categories, classes IV and V. While white troops who scored in similarly low categories advanced into combat roles, black troops were sent to the service units, usually the engineer general service regiments, to perform menial tasks. This reinforced the assumption on the part of many white citizens that black soldiers could not be trusted on the battlefield.

Meanwhile, the Japanese continued their invasion of the Aleutians, even as they accepted a brutal naval defeat at the Battle of Midway. The chain of roughly 150 islands stretching into the North Pacific constituted the sole North American theater of the war. American military commanders long recognized the vulnerability of Alaska's fifteen-thousand-plus miles of coast, and it came as little surprise when the Japanese occupied the islands of Attu and Kiska, two of the most remote islands in the Aleutians. Just a mere 650 miles from the Japanese base at Paramushiro, the capture of Attu provided Japan with a strategic, albeit temporary, victory. Japanese advances on the Aleutians intended to ease pressure on their supply lines farther to the south, pull American resources away from critical Japanese interests in the South Pacific and East Asia, and prevent oil from reaching Alaska by sea. The Japanese may have briefly achieved these objectives, but the Americans gained the momentum in the Pacific.

Concurrently, the United States looked to the Soviet Union as a key ally in the fight against fascism in Europe. The Soviets, however, badly needed armaments and supplies if they were to confront Nazi Germany. Thus, by 1942 American commanders used Alaska as an intermediary point in the lend-lease system to transfer weaponry and supplies to the Soviet Union as it engaged in a brutal conflict on Europe's eastern front. Despite its strategic location and enormous mass, one could only access Alaska by sea or air, making it difficult to defend. As Gen. Billy Mitchell, an outspoken war hawk and advocate for an aggressive American posture in the Pacific, proclaimed, "For whoever holds Alaska will hold the world." Only the construction of a land route to connect Alaska to the Lower 48 would turn Alaska's strategic liability into a strategic asset. Black troops would be pivotal in building it.

Black Soldiers and the Alaska Highway

In the winter of 1943 Froelich Rainey wrote an impressive twenty-five-page exposé on the Alaska Highway; he referred to it as an “engineering epic.” Although it was the most comprehensive coverage of the highway yet received, Rainey nonetheless left out critical details of the story. While he noted cursorily early in his essay that both “black and white” soldiers assisted in the construction, Rainey provided the black engineers only three references and failed to detail their contributions. Not a single photo in the essay featured a black soldier. One might be excused for assuming that only white soldiers toiled amid the frozen tundra and northern wilderness to complete the continent’s largest wartime infrastructure project. Black regiments performed the most grueling work, and they did so in segregated units with inferior equipment and lodging. Froelich Rainey thus missed a central plotline in the story of the Alaska Highway, or maybe he simply left it out so as not to highlight the contributions of the black soldiers.

Regardless, a more accurate report would have started in 1940 when black regiments assembled in the American South. Men like Fred Spencer



Fred Spencer (bottom row, center) and fellow soldiers pose for their picture after they completed basic training in Louisiana. Their next stop was the Alaska Highway. Lael Morgan Collection, Elmer E. Rasmuson Library, University of Alaska Fairbanks (UAF-2012-71-308).

in the 93rd Engineer Battalion gathered in the piney woods of Louisiana at the newly created Camp Livingston; the 388th Regiment reported to Camp Claiborne, also in Louisiana; and the 95th Regiment trained at Fort Bragg, North Carolina. Other black troops trained in Camp Lee, Virginia. The officers of these battalions were white, men like Tim Timberlake, who hailed from a middle-class family and possessed a freshly minted degree in mechanical engineering from the University of Maryland. Timberlake was among the few white servicemen to lead thousands of black troops through Canada and Alaska. Enlisted men, on the other hand, like Willie Lavalais and Fred Spencer, were sons of sharecroppers and laborers and grew up in the rural South. At the time of their enlistment, these men did not know they would be shipping off to Alaska, and for most it was their first time away from home.

Tim Timberlake wrote to his girlfriend that the Ninety-Third boarded a train on April 12, 1942, on the Rock Island Railroad bound for an unknown destination. The train rambled northwest through the high plains, traversed the mountain passes of the Rockies, and then entered Canada. The officers instructed the black troops aboard the trains to keep the blinds drawn so the townspeople along the way would not see them. But apparently word got out that thousands of African Americans had been transiting through the country. Curious Canadians greeted the train and caught what for many was their first sight of a black person. The trains crossed back into the United States and left the troops off at Camp Murray, not far from the Puget Sound in Washington. From there, the men boarded well-provisioned ships and made their way to Skagway, Alaska.

The idea to connect Alaska to the Lower 48 via Canada went back at least a decade. The Canadians built a staging route for their military from Edmonton through British Columbia and terminating in Whitehorse, Yukon Territory. This route could presumably extend into Alaska, but it would take a significant effort to blaze a suitable path through the taiga and muskeg. The United States and Canada also desired a means by which to transport oil into Alaska via a pipeline. The result, the Canadian Oil pipeline (Canol, for short), moved light crude from Canada's Northwest Territories into Alaska. The road and pipeline were the largest North American infrastructure projects undertaken during the war and the most ambitious since the Panama Canal thirty years earlier.

A herculean task, the construction of what was soon dubbed the Alaska-Canada Highway involved ten thousand troops, four thousand of whom were black. All labored intensively for nearly nine months in 1942 to

blaze a passable road through fifteen hundred miles of boreal forest. The men lived in drafty pup tents and faced extreme temperatures and brutal working conditions. The 93rd and 95th deployed to northern British Columbia and the Yukon; the 97th worked from Alaska, and the 388th received their orders in northern Alberta and the Northwest Territories. The white officers who commanded the black troops expressed disdain for the men they led. Gen. William M. Hoge, for example, looked at his men in the 97th with contempt as he iterated racial slurs and questioned their work ethic. In one exchange Hoge recalled, “Those niggers just looked at all that snow—it was all white . . . I told them . . . the only way you’re going to get home—back to Alabama or Georgia is to work down south. Head down south and keep working.” Hoge’s bigotry belied the accomplishments of the troops who built key sections of the highway, including the most difficult stretch, a bridge that crossed the Sikanni Chief River. Located 160 miles from Dawson Creek in Canada, the river raged three hundred feet across, icy rapids threatened the soldiers, and there was no way to reroute the road around the water.

Making matters more challenging, many of the white commanding officers did not permit the black troops to use heavy mechanical equipment. Racist logic dictated that black men possessed brute strength and were biologically suited to muscular work, a trope rooted in the nation’s history of enslavement. Instead, white officers provided black men with hammers, saws, and axes. These men tolerated icy water and worked around the clock, singing work songs as if they were in a chain gang. Col. Heath Twichell Sr.,



Black troops hold a roadside church service, 1942. Lael Morgan Collection, Elmer E. Rasmuson Library, University of Alaska Fairbanks (UAF-2012-71-192).

a white commanding officer who bucked senior command, recognized the achievement of the men. He ordered his white soldiers to share space in the dining hall with their fellow black soldiers.

The Ninety-Seventh completed another important section of the road in the Yukon near Beaver Creek. One man, Corp. Refines Sims Jr., received permission to operate a bulldozer over a rough, twelve-mile stretch. There, Corporal Sims met Pvt. Alfred Jalufka, a white man with the Eighteenth Engineers. The two men completed the final segment of the road and shook hands in a show of solidarity and a shared sense of accomplishment. The soldiers achieved what many thought impossible: the construction of an overland route from Alaska to the Lower 48. Men like Corporal Sims, Fred Spencer, Willie Lavalais, and thousands of others helped construct the largest wartime project in North America. By the time the road opened for military use in 1943, thirty-three men, black and white, died in the effort to complete it. Temperatures reached ninety degrees Fahrenheit in the summer and plunged to seventy degrees below zero in winter. Black troops lived in segregated camps without the amenities of their white counterparts, and they worked mostly by hand while white troops constructed the road with



Soldiers of the African American Ninety-Fifth General Services Regiment at the Sikanni Chief River Bridge, British Columbia, 1942. NWCS/H Reed, National Archives and Records Administration, College Park, MD. Photo No. 111-SC-139940.

mechanical tools. Some took notice of these disparities, including Harry S. Truman, who later became president. The construction of the Alaska Highway undermined white supremacist arguments that black soldiers were somehow inferior to whites. Countless other moments in Alaska also revealed the absurdity of racist logic in the military and elsewhere.

Herbert Frisby, a war correspondent for the Baltimore *Afro-American*, one of the nation's largest black papers, spent time in Fairbanks and Anchorage. He noted many Alaskans took to calling the Alaska Highway, the "Negro Road." And although one of the men Frisby interviewed claimed, "several colored persons live here," the correspondent located only three blacks in Fairbanks. Therefore, it seemed that few black men stayed in Fairbanks at the conclusion of the project. The high cost of living accounted for one reason few African Americans stayed in Fairbanks after the war. Frisby quipped, "There's nothing fair about Fairbanks but the name." To find a job, stay well fed, and keep a roof over one's head, Frisby calculated a cost of \$2,500 to start, a large amount for someone to have on hand in the 1940s. But as the years went by, the black population of the Interior increased, especially after the integration of the military in the late 1940s. Since then thousands of black soldiers have served at Eielson Air Force Base and Fort Wainwright.

Secretary of War Henry Stimson lauded the so-called Negro Road and those who "pushed forward at the rate of eight miles a day, bridged 200 streams, laid a roadway 24 feet between ditches, [and] at the highest point, between Fort Nelson and Watson Lake, reached an altitude of 4,212 feet." The Alaska Highway not only served the purposes of war, it opened to the public in 1948 and adventurous civilian travelers could drive through western Canada into Alaska. Motorists by the thousands continue to travel the highway each year. The Canol Project, on the other hand, fared significantly worse. It never viably transported oil to Alaska, and it became the focus of a Senate investigation led by Missouri senator Harry S. Truman. Truman burnished his credentials when he concluded the pipeline was a waste of money and a burden on the public treasury; the government soon decommissioned it. Truman's bolstered reputation led to his selection by Franklin Roosevelt to serve on the ticket as vice president in the 1944 election. Truman assumed the presidency upon the death of Roosevelt in April 1945.

From the Alaska Highway to the Aleutian Campaign

In addition to their contribution to the Alaska Highway, several thousand black troops arrived or stayed in the territory through the war years. Some, like those in the Ninety-Seventh Army Corps of Engineers, briefly deployed to Fairbanks only to be redeployed after military commanders complained that a breach in segregation might occur if they stayed in town. As a result, most ended up serving in the Aleutians. Despite Lieutenant General Buckner's request that black men not be stationed at ports or close to towns where racial mixing might occur, wartime necessity dictated that the segregated units—including the 372nd, 373rd, and 383rd Port Battalions—as well as the 1st and 2nd Battalions of the 93rd Engineers deployed to population centers on the Alaska Peninsula and the Aleutians during the summer of 1943. The 364th Infantry Regiment served in the Aleutians after experiencing racial violence and attacks in Phoenix, Arizona, and then at Camp Van Dorn, Mississippi.

In Alaska, however, a level of what one might call incidental integration occurred, and race relations could be described as comparatively cordial. The first battalion of the Ninety-Third traveled from the newly built highway to Cold Bay, a small settlement on the Alaska Peninsula. The second battalion of the Ninety-Third included six hundred men who were stationed at Fort Glenn on Umnak, part of the Fox Islands in the Aleutian chain. By that time, the Japanese had sustained their invasion of the Aleutians and attacked Dutch Harbor; Cold Bay and Umnak thus served as staging areas for a counteroffensive. At Cold Bay, the black engineers with the Ninety-Third built warehouses, expanded the water and sewage systems, improved the airstrips and road system, and assisted on the construction of a hospital and medical facilities. Nine of the men with the Ninety-Third were sent to Adak, farther down the Aleutian chain, where their knowledge and skills could be put to use. After having spent eight months in the brutal cold and harsh conditions along the Alaska Highway, one member of the battalion referred to his new station as "the balmy Aleutians."

Still, service in a theater of war was hardly fun and games, as service members learned quickly. On Umnak Island at Fort Glenn, the engineers with the 93rd worked alongside the white 802nd Engineer Aviation Battalion to surface runways, build airplane hangars, and put up huts for men to take up residence. Yet black men remained housed in a segregated encampment labeled "N" on maps of the military installation, presumably for "Negro." According to archaeologist Chris Roe, up to six hundred black men on

Fort Glenn ate in a segregated mess hall in barracks apart from their white counterparts. The isolated encampment was set along a marsh and stream at a distance from the white troops, likely a response to Buckner's desire to maintain rigid segregation. However, the troops labored together to complete Cape Field, the westernmost airfield established on the North American continent by the army.

Military historian Charles Hendricks has written that members of the 383rd Port Battalion arrived in Adak and Attu and immediately worked eighteen-hour shifts unloading cargo in preparation to retake the islands. A hundred black soldiers served as litter bearers during combat on Attu, and others came under sniper fire. In a notable but tragic instance, black soldiers in the 364th Army Infantry Regiment went into combat on Kiska Island after having gone through training in Louisiana. Matthew Little, an infantryman with the 364th, recalled how he and others charged Kiska from the south as "Alaskan scouts were to attack it from the north side . . . and when we met we thought each other were the enemy." He continued, "Some of the people were killed actually . . . the Japanese had done, escaped, left everything intact, hospitals, ships, and everything else." Little noted that if the war persisted beyond the spring of 1945, men in the 364th were prepared to invade Japan from the North Pacific. Though the outcome was obviously not desirable, the very fact that the black troops were sent in to combat roles represented something of a turning point.

Brig. Gen. Harry Thompson believed the black troops who served in the Aleutians carried out their orders "nearly as efficiently" as the white troops but had proven to be more diligent. Even as white commanders openly disparaged or only tepidly approved of their performance, African Americans in Alaska never openly rebelled as they had in other deployments where they faced dehumanizing segregation and racism. In fact, one reason may be that the color line at times collapsed as black and white troops worked together in a few capacities. At other moments, as the deployment of 364th demonstrates, white commanding officers afforded black soldiers limited opportunities to perform in combat roles like their white counterparts. Morale in the Aleutians among African American servicemen at least exceeded that of other spots in the United States, if not overseas.

This was particularly true in Adak where a small number of black soldiers deployed. As a far-flung location in the remote—albeit vitally strategic—North Pacific, a deployment to Adak was not viewed as prestigious or desirable. Historian and World War II veteran Reese Palley served in the



This photo of black troops was taken on May 20, 1943, nine days after the invasion of Attu Island on Massacre Bay, Attu, Aleutian Islands. Photographs of American Military Activities, ca. 1918–ca. 1981. National Archives and Records Administration, Record Group 111: Records of the Office of the Chief Signal Officer, 1860–1985.

Aleutians and recalled those who ended up in the Aleutians typically fell into one of three categories: “troublemakers, homosexuals, and P.A.F.s.” P.A.F. stood for Premature Anti-Fascists, a moniker given to outspoken leftists who were sympathetic to the Russian Revolution, civil rights, and organized labor and supported the Republican faction in the Spanish Civil War that raged through the late 1930s. Not surprisingly, a relatively large contingent of black troops ended up in this theater of war as well.

Dashiell Hammett was, however, likely the most famous figure to enlist and serve in the Aleutians. He was there for nearly two years, from 1943 to 1945. Hammett, who had become a celebrated novelist, known for his works of noir and crime fiction, enlisted in the army as a corporal at the age of forty-nine. His left-wing political views often clashed with the values of the army, and his age and lifestyle rendered him less than optimal for the rigors of life in the service. In addition to his open sympathies with the Communist Party, Hammett drank heavily and viewed the hierarchy of the U.S. military at odds with the freewheeling life of a writer. He also championed civil rights and fiercely criticized fascism in all of its forms. Nonetheless, his skills as a writer,



Hammett with the integrated Staff of the *Adakian* c. 1942–43. Diane Johnson Collection, Harry Ransom Center, University of Texas.

publisher, and editor led the army to accept him into the signal corps. By the summer of 1943, over fifty thousand troops deployed across the islands, mobilizing to expel the Japanese. Hammett assembled a group of men to write training manuals, organize variety shows and lectures for the radio, and print a newsletter, entitled the *Adakian*, for the troops to read about the war's progress. They eventually published *The Battle of the Aleutians*.

Despite the U.S. Army's policy of segregation, Hammett recruited two black men into the operation, Don Miller, a Jamaican-born illustrator, and Alva Morris, a printer. Hammett leveraged his outsized personality and flouted the army's rules. He never received permission to include the black soldiers, but together they formed a relationship that lasted through the conflict. Though it may be viewed as a minor detail in the scope of such an enormous conflict, the inclusion of Miller and Morris in Hammett's signal corps made it an integrated division in the Jim Crow military. Just as soldiers challenged the color line during the final phase of construction on the Alaska Highway, so too did it come under duress in the Aleutians. In sum, the military's record on race relations in Alaska should best be viewed as a bundle

of contradictions. Lt. Gen. Simon Bolivar Buckner remained an unrepentant white supremacist. So, too, did many who operated below him. Yet troops at times worked together in common cause along the construction sites and on the islands. Three years after the war, President Harry Truman issued an executive order to desegregate the armed forces. Alaska during wartime anticipated his bold step and presaged the changes to come.

A New Alaska Emerges

By the end of the war, Alaska's culture, economy, and demographics had forever changed. Thousands from the Lower 48 arrived in the territory to serve in the nation's war effort. Still thousands of others who already lived in Alaska moved to other parts of the territory or enlisted with the armed forces; some served abroad. The sheer size and vulnerability of Alaska ensured copious levels of federal spending to protect its borders, land, and coast. The military presence quickly turned Southcentral Alaska into a population center, and the interior city of Fairbanks grew precipitously as well. Overall, Alaska's population nearly doubled from the late 1930s through the early 1950s; it reached over a quarter million by the 1960 census. Without the investment by the federal government in infrastructure and military installations—first in World War I, then World War II, and throughout the Cold War—Alaska's population and economy would have no doubt stagnated. Instead, robust growth occurred.

Throughout these years, African Americans played a pivotal if underappreciated role. While the black population never exceeded 10 percent, their contributions remained outsized. From John Conna's role in Fairbanks to Thomas Bevers, a revered figure in early Anchorage, African Americans assumed leadership roles throughout the territory. This was especially true on the Alaska Highway where the black labor force stood at 40 percent, and the men constructed some of the most treacherous sections. Likewise, black troops deployed to the Aleutians where they defended the islands and assisted the counteroffensive against the Japanese invasion. Most of these soldiers left the state immediately after the war. If not, Alaska's black population may have increased to 10 percent or more. Today, the black population statewide is between 3 and 4 percent, with higher numbers in Anchorage and Fairbanks. But again, these numbers fail to capture the influence and impact African Americans have had on Alaska during and between the world wars.

Overall, black history in Alaska maps onto some general trends in the territory. Once the war concluded, African Americans around the nation mobilized and posed tough questions about the implications of the war they had just participated in. What did it mean to fight fascism and white supremacy elsewhere if those forces persisted at home? How could one justify fighting a war to expand democracy and freedom in other nations while these same ideals remained unfulfilled in the United States? Black men and women took up these weighty questions as they faced new and old forms of discrimination. The next two chapters discuss black history in postwar Alaska. The territory's race relations often mirrored those in the Lower 48, but not always. Yet discrimination and its great countervailing force—a civil rights movement dedicated to equality and justice for all—found expression in Alaska as it built on and contributed to the landmark struggles that defined the 1950s and '60s.



Meeting of bulldozers at Beaver Creek, Yukon Territory, October 25, 1942. On the left, Corp. Refines Sims Jr., (Philadelphia, PA), Ninety-Seventh Engineers, and to the right, Pvt. Alfred Jalufka (Kenedy, TX), Eighteenth Engineers. Though the photo depicts a moment of racial harmony and a breakdown in the official policy of segregation in the U.S. armed forces, greater battles for civil rights loomed on the horizon. Courtesy of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, Office of History.

CHAPTER FOUR:

Statehood and the Cold War

“As a colored-American living in Anchorage, Alaska, you would be living ‘high on the totem pole’—race relations wise,” reported the *Negro Digest* in late 1963. The *Negro Digest* was among several publications to have summarized and taken an interest in black life in Alaska during the 1950s and 1960s. Most did so in positive terms. *Ebony*, the monthly magazine with the nation’s largest African American readership, twice featured stories about the good fortune black migrants might find in Alaska. On the eve of statehood in 1958 the publication declared, “Alaska is a land of opportunity for hardworking pioneers with definite skills to offer.” The article included the voice of banker and philanthropist Elmer Rasmuson, who claimed Alaska’s largest city, Anchorage, wanted to attract people “progressive in outlook and conscientious in endeavor” to contribute to the city’s economic, political, and cultural life.

Alaska’s congressional delegate and soon-to-be senator Bob Bartlett told *Ebony*, “The same opportunities open to anyone in Alaska are open to Negroes.” Yet *Ebony* was not so naïve as to suggest Alaska remained free from the racial animus that regularly made national news. The article revealed that the booming commercial fishing industry in Ketchikan excluded black men; African Americans and Alaska Natives reported high levels of housing segregation in Juneau, Anchorage, and Fairbanks. A high-profile case of a public hanging took place in the territory’s capital city, Juneau, in 1948 and once again in 1950, the last recorded instance of the death penalty in Alaska. Both men were African Americans accused and found guilty of a 1946 robbery and murder on flimsy evidence and sentenced to death. On balance, however, the coverage of Alaska remained mostly positive in the black press, particularly in comparison to other states that experienced racial violence.

But did this coverage accurately portray life in the north for the black men and women who made the move? The postwar years witnessed new forms of discrimination against people of color, but new forms of activism and greater levels of political involvement among the black community also took root. This chapter highlights the contradictions of black life in Alaska. African American men and women found new and lucrative opportunities, but these same men and women nonetheless reported persistent racism and unequal treatment. Institutional power in Alaska remained firmly in the hands of white men, despite a growing and increasingly diverse population. The complexity of Alaska's postwar history has at times been defined by progress and other times by regress.

A Bonanza for Blacks?

A few years later, *Ebony* posed the question "Is Alaska a Bonanza for Blacks?" The question was answered with a generally enthusiastic response. Workers could expect to find wages 25 percent higher in Anchorage and a bit higher still in Fairbanks. Unfortunately, the higher cost of living offset the wage differential, the publication conceded. Even so, according to *Ebony*, African Americans found skilled work through the many unions in town. The article also reported that oil field lease sales brought in "\$900 million—as much money as the total worth of all the gold ever found in the state and an amount almost 150 times the \$7,200,000 the U.S. paid Russia for Alaska." With just 270,000 people in the state at the time the magazine hit the shelves in 1969—"a number equal to the size of the crowd in the March on Washington in 1963"—*Ebony* concluded that Alaska may be fertile ground for black advancement.

Ebony writer Steven Morris and photographer Hal Franklin arrived in Anchorage and quickly located a few people who seized the famed opportunities the forty-ninth state allegedly offered. But none had achieved the wealth and status of Zula Swanson, dubbed by *Ebony* as "Alaska's Richest Black." Morris's report on Swanson showcased an enterprising woman who captured the frontier spirit of the Wild West. Born in Alabama at the height of the Jim Crow era in the early twentieth century, Swanson grew "disgusted" with the South and moved first to Portland, Oregon, and then to Alaska. She arrived in the territory in 1929 and invested \$2,000 in a burned-out building on land east of downtown Anchorage. Once renovated, Swanson's Rendezvous Building became a popular gathering spot for Anchorage's eastside residents.

Though the piece in *Ebony* did not go into detail, Swanson soon invested in other properties. She capitalized on the nascent city's appetite for nightlife; not surprisingly, this included vice. Some of her properties, like the Polar Hotel, doubled as places of prostitution and gambling. Yet, Swanson developed a reputation as a confident woman with a high acumen for business. For better or worse, she provided the establishments and entertainment that residents demanded. Her stature increased among the city's business and political community. By the 1950s, she was involved in Anchorage's chapter of the NAACP and had several real estate holdings in downtown and her Goose Lake home near what has become the University of Alaska Anchorage. Upon her death in 1973 at age eighty-one, Swanson had acquired over \$500,000 in real estate holdings (about \$3 million in 2019 dollars), and the Anchorage Recording District showed Swanson in possession of four downtown lots. It would be hard if not impossible to imagine any scenario whereby Swanson achieved a similar level of wealth, property, and status in her native Alabama.

Swanson's story, though exceptional, nevertheless highlights how African Americans accessed opportunities as Anchorage rapidly grew from an isolated railroad town to a modern city. George C. Anderson arrived after World War II to work as a linotype operator for the *Anchorage Daily News*. Soon after, he started Anchorage's first black newspaper, the *Alaska Spotlight*. Anderson also penned a feature article for the nationally distributed magazine *Color* in April 1953. The piece described Alaska's "Negro pioneers" who found economic and political success in their adopted home territory. He referred to Anchorage as the "Chicago of Alaska" and a hub for black migration. Anderson stated that many black residents worked in jobs that paid more than two dollars an hour, a decent sum for the early 1950s and higher than what black workers typically earned elsewhere.

However, Anderson cautioned, though "wages are considerably higher than can be earned Outside . . . they do not begin to come up to the fantastic figures which Stateside rumors give them." Anderson also addressed the questions of whether Anchorage, and Alaska more generally, suffered from the racism and prejudice so pervasive nationally. "No sensible person would deny that there is prejudice in Anchorage," Anderson wrote. Still, he concluded, "There's no more [racial discrimination], and certainly less, than that found in the most liberal Stateside communities."

Anderson's article also described several institutions that strengthened black civic and religious life in Anchorage. As he wrote in 1953, some of the

more significant gathering spots included an Elks Lodge and two churches, Shiloh Baptist Church and the Greater Friendship Baptist Church. Like many of the other reports and articles, Anderson struck an optimistic tone; he discussed black-owned businesses and employers who had a reputation for hiring African Americans from inside as well as outside of the territory. As one example of a black business in Anchorage, Anderson cited the Green Acres Lodge, owned and operated by Richard and Helen Burge.

However, Anderson failed to note that Green Acres, the very development where the Burges established their business, was in fact one of the few places black men and women could settle and own a home in Anchorage during the 1950s. More generally, Anderson's article for *Color*, as well as the *Ebony* pieces, glossed over some deeper patterns of racial discrimination found throughout Alaska. While George Anderson and Zula Swanson successfully navigated the predominantly white business, media, and real estate community, further analysis uncovers some familiar patterns of discrimination and puts Anchorage more squarely in line with other postwar American cities in the North and West. As such, Anderson's interpretation of urban Alaska might be viewed as overly optimistic if one delves more deeply into the systemic levels of discrimination that lurked just below the surface.



Governor William Egan signs the Human Rights Act with Willard Bowman and Maria Bowman, top right. William A. Egan Papers, Elmer E. Rasmuson Library, University of Alaska Fairbanks, (UAF-1985-120-555).

In fact, doing so reveals equal or greater levels of discrimination present throughout the territory and state during these same years; however, much of the strongest documentation and oral histories exist for those who spent most of their time in Anchorage.

Discrimination in Urban Alaska

No consensus exists around the extent of racial discrimination in Alaska during the postwar decades, but anti-Native and anti-black views were prevalent. True, George Anderson claimed, “Anchorage is remarkably free from racial discrimination, both in matter of employment and public accommodation . . . most cases reported are strictly of the hearsay variety.” Although taking into account oral histories and testimonials, city housing and court records, and an array of documented employment practices and criminal justice figures, one finds that discrimination existed on a far greater scale than simple anecdotes or “hearsay.”

If Anderson concluded that Alaska’s “Negro pioneers” encountered a territory open and accessible, his contemporary, Willard L. Bowman, a black state employee who moved to Alaska in 1949, disagreed. Bowman emerged as a vocal critic of what he believed was the racism transiting through Alaska. In 1963 racial tension, or at least the threat of, became ubiquitous enough that Governor William A. Egan assembled a Human Rights Commission to investigate in the newly admitted state and invited Bowman to participate. Bowman’s assessment of Alaska stood at odds with both George Anderson’s as well as the writers at *Ebony*. In one report, Bowman concluded: “The Eskimo, Indian, and the Negro Alaskan is not a full member of any of these agencies, be they federal, state, local, or private. Nowhere in Alaska does he enjoy full employment opportunities. That is a cold hard fact which you must accept, and I make this statement without fear of contradictions.”

Bowman explored three aspects of economic life in and around Anchorage: publicly contracted construction jobs, the retail sector, and the city’s fledgling financial institutions. According to Bowman, Carrs grocery store refused to hire qualified African Americans to fill management positions; meanwhile construction firms that contracted with the city and the state passed over qualified black and Alaska Native workers in favor of whites. Taking issue with the hiring policies of Alaska’s largest homegrown bank, Elmer Rasmuson’s National Bank of Alaska, Bowman recalled, “Only after

months of talking and appealing . . . [was] the first Negro girl hired in a banking institution last fall.” He continued, “Nor is it by chance that Negro or native tourists cannot find lodging in a surprisingly large number of motels and apartment buildings. . . . Make no mistake about it,” Bowman concluded, “this is just as discriminatory as lunch rooms and hotels of the South.”

Bowman’s research on Southcentral Alaska led him to advocate for the creation of a subcommittee of the Citizens Council for Community Improvement (CCCI), a research group to act under the authority of Governor Egan’s Human Rights Commission. Bowman led the CCCI and developed a comprehensive survey on discrimination in Alaska, with an emphasis on the Southcentral region. The CCCI reported high levels of housing segregation and concluded that white residents deliberately excluded minorities from the housing market and relegated them to the least desirable land. To gather information, the CCCI sent out questionnaires to real estate brokers and salesmen. They asked agents and brokers “If they sold to minorities [or] if they would sell or rent to minorities in various designated districts such as Fairview, Mountain View, Spenard, Etc.” Bowman received a low response rate; of the several dozen real estate brokers contacted, twenty returned the questionnaire. Despite the small sample size only two stated, they “would sell or rent to [prospective minority home buyers or renters] anywhere.”



Willard L. Bowman, c. 1971. Bowman became the first black to be elected to the Alaska State Legislature when he became a representative from South Anchorage in 1970. Willard L. Bowman papers, Archives and Special Collections, Consortium Library, University of Alaska Anchorage.

Bowman's survey revealed that white property owners would not accept Alaska Native and African Americans in most parts of Anchorage or the surrounding developments beyond the city limits. Bowman learned how deeply restrictive the area housing market had been over the previous decades. Indeed, the first racially restricted housing covenants appeared in June 1941, a year after construction began on Fort Richardson. Abutting downtown, the affluent South Addition neighborhood was expanding to its modern, southernmost edge. The Coffey Subdivision, developed and sold by Dan Coffey, included housing covenants with its properties. One stated: "No race or nationality other than those of the White or Caucasian race shall use or occupy any dwellings on any lot, except that this covenant shall not prevent occupancy by domestic servants of a different race or nationality, if such servants are employed by an owner or tenant."

When the Alaska Highway opened to the public in 1947, migrants from the Lower 48 drove through Canada and into Alaska by motor vehicle. This corresponded with a federal commitment to defend and militarize Alaska in the midst of an emerging Cold War. As Alaska's population increased through the late 1940s and 1950s, developers used racial covenants primarily on new housing, often to profit from the city's burgeoning military population. In 1945 not a single developer or home seller submitted to the local recorder's office a racially restrictive deed. But in 1946 twelve of these deeds were submitted. And in 1947 developers submitted twenty-nine. By 1950, racially restricted covenants were in place throughout the new neighborhoods at the expanding edge of southern Anchorage. These covenants approximated the language found from housing contracts around the country; however, the specific wording varied slightly from development to development.

Each developer, or their lawyers, found a different way to effectively segregate area housing. One subdivision illustrates how covenant language evolved to achieve its desired effect. Over the course of three filings with the local recorder's office, Nicholas and Else Weiler, a couple who arrived in the 1930s, crafted language to limit property ownership on their land to whites only. A July 29, 1947, deed in the Weiler subdivision proposed, "Said lots shall never be sold, rented to, or occupied by any person of negro descent." Three months later, the Weilers filed a corrected deed for this lot for the sole purpose of clarifying the racial covenant. The new covenant proclaimed, "That the Grantees, their heirs, administrators and assigns, are restricted and prohibited for the period of fifty (50) years from the date hereof from selling, conveying, leasing, letting or otherwise granting the said described property

or any interest or use therein to any person or persons other than Caucasians.” Then, by November 1947, new deeds in the Weiler subdivision amended the second covenant by removing the “period of fifty years,” forbidding the sale of the property to minorities in perpetuity. That the Weilers revised the deed on three separate occasions highlights the degree to which developers, sellers, and purchasers shaped language to exclude non-whites from otherwise new and desirable communities. Or, conversely, the covenants demonstrated a belief among developers that the desirability of a community was hinged on its ability to exclude people of color.

Rogers Park, located south of Fairview and across Chester Creek, developed explicitly as a white-only neighborhood. So too did the neighborhood to the northeast, Airport Heights, named for its proximity to the airstrip at Merrill Field. In Rogers Park, the restrictive covenants governing housing sales relayed: “The property hereby conveyed shall not be sold or alienated in any manner whatsoever to anyone other than Americans of the white race.” Likewise, an Airport Heights covenant from 1953 stated plainly: “No race or nationality other than those of the White or Caucasian race shall use or occupy any dwelling on any lot in said Subdivision, except that this covenant shall not prevent the occupancy by domestic servants of a different race or nationality, if such servants are employed by an owner or tenant.”

Many newcomers looked for property beyond the city limits to points south and west of downtown Anchorage. A scenic area around Sand Lake, almost seven miles southwest of downtown, became a popular spot to purchase land and build homes. Here too, would-be homeowners in the Sundi Lake subdivision of the new Sand Lake community signed warranty deeds subject to many restrictions. The very first such deed, filed in 1948, required of its inhabitants: “The premises herein concerned shall not be sold or alienated in any manner whatsoever to anyone except Americans of the white race.”

Even in Spenard, long known for its share of outcasts, misfits, and troublemakers, minority homebuyers received a cold shoulder. In what would become Spenard’s Kirchner Addition, Geraldine and John Kirchner purchased land in 1949 from Clifford and Joan Schofield. The deed nonetheless subjected the sale of the land to several conditions and restrictions. The third restriction required “the Vendee(s), their heirs and assigns, are restricted and prohibited for the period of fifty (50) years from the date hereof from selling, conveying, leasing, letting, or otherwise granting the said described property or any interest or use therein to any person or persons other than Caucasians.” If this

deed remained in place throughout its stated duration, the plot of land would have stayed segregated until at least the turn of the twenty-first century.

However, as the Kirchners purchased the land to develop, the U.S. Supreme Court struck down the legality of restrictive covenants and discriminatory warranty deeds in the landmark case *Shelly v. Kraemer* (334 US 1). Though the far-flung nature of Alaska made it a particularly difficult place to catch violations, neither law enforcement nor Alaska's courts enforced the ruling. Ocea Mae Curry's attempt to buy a home a couple of years after the ruling illustrates just one example of how discrimination continued to occur. Curry relocated to Alaska in 1951 but quickly discovered "opportunities for blacks was very, very poor, very poor." Even though Curry held a job with the Postal Service and had some savings, she was "flatly denied" when she tried to purchase a home. The agent told her the home "is not for sale to you. . . . Go to your people and buy property if you want property." It was, of course, clear to Curry what the man meant by "your people." She conveyed a feeling of anger but ultimately "drove away," acknowledging that the agent would face no recriminations for openly turning her away from her choice of homes.

Minority homebuyers like Ocea Mae Curry faced structural barriers to ownership, but sometimes a black family circumvented the restrictions, went to court, and secured a loan. In which case, white residents often took it upon themselves to engage in violence and intimidation to keep black families out. In one extreme instance, arson seemed to be the preferred method of intimidation. Undaunted by the legacy of the restrictive covenants and racial exclusion, Alvin and Mary Lee Campbell, an African American couple, purchased land in Rogers Park in 1950. After successfully making a legal claim to the property, the Campbell family encountered a man in the neighborhood who threatened, "You might finish the house, but you will never enjoy living in it." Not long after, on October 15, 1950, the house burned to the ground as the fire department responded but failed to put out the blaze. The Anchorage *Daily Times* reported the incident: "Fire of undetermined origin last night destroyed a house under construction on Snow Cap Avenue in the Rogers Park subdivision." The article noted, "The house, being built by Alvin Campbell, was the focal point in a recent court suit involving the racial issue." The "racial issue" referenced by the Times was of course a black family who sought to move into a neighborhood on higher ground with newer, superior housing.



Alvin C. Campbell, February 1969. Alaska Railroad Collection, Bob and Evangeline Atwood Alaska Resource Center, Anchorage Museum (B1979.002.1909).

The suspicious fire led to a flurry of activism. It culminated with the creation of the Anchorage branch of the NAACP in 1951. Anchorage's NAACP soon became a hub of civil rights mobilization. Men and women, such as John W. Thomas, Blanche McSmith, Clarence and Flossie Coleman, Joseph (Joe) M. Jackson, John S. Parks, and Richard Watts, were a few of the names associated with the early days of the NAACP. These same men and women would assume central roles in a number of positions at the city and state level over the next thirty years.

The Rise and Fall of Alaska's Largest Black Neighborhood: Eastchester Flats

As the Campbell family demonstrated, purchasing a home and settling in a white community in postwar Anchorage was a treacherous proposition. In fact, African Americans could reliably find housing only beyond city limits in non-incorporated neighborhoods. And even these were at times restricted. In addition, non-incorporated communities lacked the tax base to provide routine services such as road maintenance, fire and rescue, and sewage. These neighborhoods and subdivisions included Nunaka Valley and Green Acres at the respective eastern and southeastern edges of greater Anchorage. But the

largest concentration of African Americans settled in Eastchester Flats, known simply as the Flats.

The name, Eastchester Flats, referred to the surrounding geography, a relatively level parcel of marginal, mosquito-infested land along the east fork of Chester Creek. “When I came back here in 1950 I went to every real estate dealer in town trying to buy a house in town,” recalled one black resident. “Not any would sell me any property. They all referred me to Eastchester Flats.” This resident was not alone. By 1952, Anchorage’s newly formed NAACP estimated three-quarters of the area’s black population lived in the Flats, likely the result of having been denied access to other neighborhoods. No other neighborhood in Alaska contained such a concentration of African American families throughout the 1950s and ’60s.

Making matters more challenging, building materials were scarce and expensive, and construction in Eastchester Flats was cumbersome. One early settler recalled, “There were a lot of shacks and very poorly built houses, small houses, and there was no sewage, no water. They had one or two wells, and people secured the water there.” Another resident “rented a lot with twelve-foot space for \$25.00 a month, and this was just ground space with the privilege of bathing once a week in this lady’s house. That’s how bad it was. There were four of us, and we cooked our meals in the yard out of a tent.” What homes existed in the area stood haphazardly, built from materials salvaged from military sites, the railroad, and junkyards.

Eastchester Flats came to be viewed as a “colored quarter organized by and for colored people,” according to the journalist Herbert Frisby, who spent significant time in Alaska covering World War II, the Cold War, and Arctic issues for a largely black readership in the Lower 48. Residents received none of the sanitary services available in Anchorage proper but were also outside the jurisdiction of city laws. “It was no police” in the Flats, recalled Joe Jackson, a resident through the 1950s. Without inspectors or building codes, ramshackle homes stood alongside bars, improvised entertainment venues, and piles of debris. The area also featured black-owned businesses, including Alaska’s only known black-owned and operated grocery store. There were real estate offices, launderers, a beauty parlor, hotel, cafés, and barbershops in Eastchester Flats. Jackson noted proudly, “We were a small city within our own selves.”

Not surprisingly, as with many low-income communities that are forced to live on the margins of social and economic acceptability, Eastchester Flats doubled as a red-light district known for its vice but also its entertainment.

Bar owner Zelmer Lawrence recalled: "You could go to the Flats and find things you couldn't find any other place in the state. . . . At one time there were any number of cocktail bars running full blast in the Flats, you could get Schenley's [a Canadian whisky], you could get the finest vodkas and wines and everything, no liquor licenses. There must have been twenty to thirty of them. Just a no-man's land." According to Joe Jackson, "It was shacks all over the place, and it was prostitution and gambling, and everyone that was down there had some kind of a what they call a club." Jackson relayed a conversation with Anchorage's chief of police who estimated the illicit businesses in Eastchester Flats brought in over \$3 million throughout the 1950s. Ben Humphries, a longtime labor and civil rights activist, remembered the scene in similar terms: "But there were a lot of clubs, where, if you wanted to find the real action, you went to an area, uh, in the early fifties, we called it Eastchester Flats, and those clubs of course they weren't legitimate in terms of being licensed and meeting all the strict codes of law, but there was more fun there than you find anywhere else. Action happened there." Herbert Frisby wrote that the neighborhood developed such a reputation for trouble that by the early 1950s the officers at Fort Richardson and Elmendorf Air Force Base prohibited their soldiers from visiting.

Meanwhile, Anchorage officials understood the value of augmenting the city's tax base and aggressively sought to incorporate the new population that spread out to the south beyond the city limits. For their part, Eastchester residents were of a mixed mind on annexation. Most residents wanted to connect to city sewer and water lines. "Our most serious problem is water pollution and the need for immediate action," claimed an Eastchester Flats advocate in 1951. Anchorage city manager Robert Sharp informed residents in 1952 that the only path to acquiring a sewer system was through annexation. Moreover, without access to city firefighters, it cost residents significantly more to insure their homes in Eastchester; annexation would presumably alleviate this, according to a report in the *Anchorage Times*. After more than three years of divisive public hearings, a legal challenge, and an election, Anchorage annexed Eastchester Flats in 1954. However, some black residents claimed that Anchorage leadership stacked hearings with landlords who favored annexation. Though they owned property in the Flats, these landlords had little interest in the long-term well-being of the community.

The advocates of annexation failed to live up to most of their promises. By 1965, more than ten years after annexation, Eastchester was not connected to Anchorage's sewer system. Despite higher taxes, Eastchester had no

running water, paved roads, or sidewalks. Without regular sanitation, junk piled up as it had before. The city allowed the construction of a trailer court uphill from Eastchester, but its open cesspools flowed down to the Flats. Residents repeatedly petitioned the city for services but were denied, even as higher quality infrastructure bypassed the community for wealthier, white developments. Ocea Mae Curry, the postal worker who had been denied housing elsewhere in Anchorage, settled in Eastchester Flats and reported the disparity: “[The city] continued to say to us; there wasn’t any way to improve the flats. . . . They would not be able to put city water in down here.” She concluded that despite much effort, Eastchester Flats “did not get improvements” the city had long promised.

Then again, it may be that Anchorage city officials never intended to bestow Eastchester Flats the benefits of annexation in the first place. More likely, they viewed annexation as an opportunity to craft the area for their own purposes. The process by which a city expends tax and federal dollars to redevelop entire communities, usually under the guise of improving neighborhoods or expanding transportation networks or public works, has become known as urban renewal. One result is very often the displacement of poorer residents. Anchorage, hemmed in by mountains to the east, water to the west, and military installations to the north, had limited options to expand. City officials thus looked to the northeast and south. Eastchester developed at the fringe of downtown, southeast of the city limits. As construction stretched from Anchorage’s original townsite, Eastchester Flats represented not only an eyesore to developers but also a barrier to connect downtown with new, wealthier subdivisions to the south. Mostly low income and relatively powerless, Eastchester residents were indeed vulnerable to the machinations of Anchorage’s power brokers, and their community was an ideal candidate for urban renewal.

The speed with which Anchorage grew during the postwar decades increased the need for housing and infrastructure. The city’s swelling population surpassed the available housing supply, and it exceeded the capability to construct new homes and roads. The dearth of qualified builders and a construction season limited by Alaska’s climate aggravated the situation. A non-comprehensive 1960 survey reported that 17 percent of the housing stock was “substandard and dilapidated.” This percentage would have been higher if it included numerous trailer parks, many of which were “similarly unfit for use as dwellings.” A 1963 analysis of Eastchester Flats claimed only two dwellings satisfied the building codes; the same study classified dozens

of others “unfit for continued occupancy.” The Fairview neighborhood, a community with slightly better housing stock, stood adjacent to the Flats. By the 1960s some black residents migrated to Fairview after having found few alternatives to relocate without fear of discrimination. Unfortunately, another study calculated 66 percent of Fairview’s housing stock was in “fair” or “poor” condition. By contrast, more than 60 percent of Anchorage area homes overall were “new or in good” shape.

In the summer of 1961, the Anchorage City Council passed a resolution authorizing the Alaska State Housing Authority (ASHA) to implement urban renewal in Eastchester Flats. The ASHA intended to convert the neighborhood, described as “blight,” into a higher density residential community with easy access to downtown. Plans called for the land directly abutting the creek to be expanded into a greenbelt, and large sections of Eastchester Flats would be demolished altogether to make way for a bypass road. The city eventually made way for a multiuse sports arena and constructed a series of roads and highways to connect downtown to housing a few miles south. Anchorage developers sought to complete the renewal of Eastchester Flats by the late 1960s. While not all of the plans materialized, the city expanded its greenbelt and the Seward Highway, constructed the additional multilane roads, and in the early 1980s built an ice arena (known as the Sullivan Arena and named after Anchorage mayor George Sullivan). Today, northbound A Street and southbound C Street, in addition to the Seward Highway, provide a functional barrier separating the more affluent west side of Anchorage’s downtown from its lower-income east side. The sum of these construction efforts drove a stake through the heart of Eastchester Flats and led to the ultimate demise of the neighborhood by the end of the 1970s, but not before some unforeseen challenges.

As Anchorage’s municipal officials tapped federal funding to redevelop Eastchester Flats, the 1964 Good Friday Earthquake struck. The most powerful earthquake ever recorded in North America devastated downtown Anchorage and the neighborhood of Turnagain, southwest of downtown; it killed over 130 people statewide. But Eastchester Flats withstood the shaking. *Jet* magazine’s coverage of the disaster wryly proposed, “housing discrimination (against Negroes, not Eskimos) spared the brothers up in Anchorage, Alaska, the wrath of the city’s recent violent earthquake.” The article reasoned, “Negroes are systematically barred from the exclusive areas near the business center—the area hardest hit by the cataclysm.” George Anderson, the publisher of the *Spotlight*, the state’s first black newspaper,

wrote to the *Pittsburgh Courier* and described the earthquake as a “Passover.” Anderson noted, “There are no Negro sections anywhere in the disaster area,” and no black residents were killed or injured; however, the municipality failed to restore power in the neighborhood for two weeks. Eastchester Flats was “earthquake proof” according to residents.

That Anchorage’s black community escaped the brunt of the earthquake is easily explained. Perhaps unknown at the time to residents and city planners alike, Eastchester Flats stood upon more solid ground than the wealthier neighborhoods to the west with their sweeping views of Cook Inlet, Turnagain Arm, and the Chugach Mountains. The experience of black Alaskans during the 1964 earthquake complicates the conventional, typically correct assumption that people of color are more affected by natural disasters. Indeed, as scholars have readily demonstrated, natural disasters have deeply shaped the experiences of millions of African Americans. Black families endured incommensurate exposure to the 1927 Mississippi River flood; the 1948 Vanport flood outside of Portland, Oregon; and more recently in 2005 with Hurricane Katrina along the Gulf Coast, to name only a few examples.

Alaska’s largest black neighborhood withstood the earthquake, but it did not withstand urban renewal. In contrast to a natural disaster, dismantling a community through public policy takes years or decades, rather than minutes, hours, or weeks. But the outcomes are similar: displacement, destruction, and loss of community. In this regard, Anchorage appears similar to other American cities that underwent redevelopment between the 1950s and 1970s. As historian Richard Rothstein has shown, local and municipal leaders enticed, or just as often coerced, low income residents to accept urban renewal with promises of fresh investments such as parks, schools, safer neighborhoods, and civic improvements—but they seldom followed through. Instead, upending minority neighborhoods more likely facilitated the construction of highways to more efficiently serve suburban residents. This led to the rapid decline of historically black and ethnic urban enclaves and devastated downtown commercial centers. In Detroit, Camden, Miami, Los Angeles, Chicago, and many other cities, minority neighborhoods were demolished and cleared for interstate highways, and sometimes for green spaces and sporting venues. Appealing to white residents and an ascendant suburban culture organized around the automobile took priority.

Though not fully equivalent to what occurred in minority communities throughout the Lower 48, Eastchester Flats nonetheless represented a scaled down version of renewal in the context of urban Alaska. But again, like cities

elsewhere, some residents contested the process, and divisions existed within the community. Compounding the confusion, proponents of renewal did not always act in good faith. In one example, the Alaska State Housing Authority (ASHA) printed two different guides that described what to expect as urban renewal took place. One guide targeted community members and residents of Eastchester. This text was direct and minimal, describing the appraisal process, deadlines, and payment schedules for residents who agreed to take buyouts for their properties. The guide used few words and oversimplified complicated legal proceedings; it portrayed the overall process as minimally disruptive with positive results.

The ASHA distributed a more detailed description of renewal plans to a non-Eastchester audience, primarily would-be developers and investors. In this second guide, the ASHA blamed Eastchester's so-called blight on the residents themselves. The ASHA claimed that the lack of "paved streets, or sidewalks, or sewers or water or any other improvements" in Eastchester was at the behest of residents. "Most of the people in Eastchester then, didn't complain about this," said the ASHA. "Most of all they wanted to be let alone. They were." The documents justified any impending disruption of the community as an opportunity for investment that would improve Anchorage in the long term.

Some Alaskans viewed the ASHA plans with well-founded suspicion. Blanche McSmith of the NAACP invoked James Baldwin's dictum of "negro



Blanche McSmith c. 1960. Alaska State Library Portrait File, Historical Collections.

removal” to explain urban renewal. McSmith was generally correct in her assessment. She predicted the policy would displace Anchorage’s black community for the convenience of the area’s white residents. McSmith pointed out the city repeatedly denied the requests for services, and banks denied residents loans to improve their properties. “I thought it would have been nice if they would have given us a chance to improve, you know, would give people loans and things they could have built decent homes and things,” said one resident. Joe Jackson, a real estate agent, could not recall a single black man or woman in Anchorage who ever received a “big bucks” loan. In contrast to the guide distributed by the ASHA, residents desired infrastructural improvements, and they were even willing to incur risk and debt to invest in the community. But they were never given the chance.

Despite the divisions within the community over the issue of urban renewal, a united front against dismantling the Eastchester Flats never emerged. After McSmith, then president of the local NAACP chapter, protested the project at a public hearing, several black Eastchester residents challenged her leadership and disagreed with her opposition to redevelopment. These men and women accepted the pronouncements of the housing authority and believed that the redevelopment would bring necessary changes and new investment. Most everyone, after all, wanted clean water, public safety, and passable roads; the disagreement was over how to obtain these necessities. Meanwhile, the city’s two newspapers, the *Anchorage Times* and the *Anchorage Daily News*, publicized stories about internal power struggles within the NAACP and inflamed divisions between activists opposed to urban renewal and some of the residents who favored it.

Divisions within Eastchester Flats hindered meaningful resistance to urban renewal and provided Anchorage city leaders a relatively easy path to implement their plans. And as McSmith predicted, many of the residents who were displaced could not so easily afford new homes close to where they had lived; as such these men and women spread across the city. One former resident, Ocea Mae Curry, had to move and start over. “A city government is supposed to see after all of its people . . . and if you aren’t going to see after me, then I see after myself. So, I just moved into a new neighborhood,” she proclaimed. Ben Humphries, a black activist who opposed the project, emphasized the black-owned and -operated businesses in Eastchester Flats that closed. According to Humphries, “They ruined it. Urban renewal ruined it, ruined it, yeah they ruined the Flats.”

In the following years, African Americans in Anchorage lost a geographic center and had less visibility in city politics. Prior to the unification of the greater Anchorage area into the Municipality of Anchorage in 1975, residents could vote for a black candidate from any part of the city. The new municipality restricted voting to districts. As one resident stated, “But now with the changes, you can vote only for someone in your own district. This makes it difficult for a black person to depend on the black vote.” Resident Frank Austins suggested, “We don’t have the luxury of a ghetto.” The words may sound counterintuitive, but his point referred to how diluted the black vote had become with the dismantling of Eastchester Flats. Anchorage’s black community, which even at its most powerful was perhaps only modest in its political influence, would never form a voting bloc or appeal as an electoral force. In fact, only in 2008 did Elvi Gray-Jackson become the first African American elected to the Anchorage Municipal Assembly, more than thirty years after Anchorage morphed into its current borders and political structure.

Ugly Patterns Prevail in Urban Alaska

In 1967 the city passed a fair housing code, a year before President Lyndon B. Johnson signed the 1968 Fair Housing Act. The local NAACP seized the moment as a victory for equal rights. But as Willard Bowman previously noted in his study, the presence of anti-discrimination laws had seldom been the primary issue. After all, in 1945 Alaska became the first American state or territory to pass an anti-discrimination act. Yet, the act did not prevent the proliferation of racially restrictive housing covenants or allow people of color to live wherever they chose. As the next chapter will show, Alaska’s Anti-Discrimination Act could not be meaningfully enforced until the territorial legislature crafted a fix to the original language. Bowman imagined the authors of such acts and laws celebrating their achievements. He supposed that lawmakers said breezily, “Let’s enact this legislation and be on about our affluent way” without providing any true means of enforcement.

Today, Alaska’s largest city bears similarities to the rest of urban America with its share of chain restaurants, big box stores, and rush hour traffic. While it has never had a sizable black population, people of African descent who have relocated to the forty-ninth state share some common history and experiences with their counterparts in the Lower 48. Beyond the northern lights, moose, and bears depicted in popular culture, housing and

employment discrimination also shaped daily life in Alaska for many African Americans.

At the same time, Alaska has stood out for some notable reasons, and there have even been some rather surprising firsts. Take the Greater Friendship Baptist Church in the Fairview neighborhood, for example. Here, many black Alaskans worship in an area not too far from what used to be Eastchester Flats. Today, Fairview is one of the most diverse neighborhoods in the nation. Fairview contains one of the highest percentages of black residents in Anchorage and throughout the state; although its ethnic diversity also includes Asian and Pacific Islander communities in addition to high numbers of Alaska Natives and whites. No single demographic predominates, and integration rather than segregation prevails.

In 1951 black men and women gathered in the basement of the First Baptist Church. Once the congregation grew, they separated and met at nearby Pioneer Hall. Soon after, the men and women raised money and constructed their present house of worship, calling it the Greater Friendship Baptist Church. They composed Alaska's first black congregation. But more



Greater Friendship Baptist Church, a longtime site of worship and activism in Anchorage's black community. Photo courtesy of David Reamer, 2018.

striking, the church later joined the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC), a conservative and, for generations, white-only alliance of Baptists who differed from the National Baptist Convention, with whom most black congregations had affiliated. In 1965 Greater Friendship pastor Leo Josey Sr. became the first black pastor to represent the SBC at a state Baptist convention. Soon after, the Greater Friendship Baptist Church joined the SBC and thus effectively integrated the convention. It remains a central hub in the area's religious community. There were, of course, other such moments in Alaska's black history. Men and women fought for justice and equality, and they persisted in the face of discrimination. The next chapter details some examples of Alaska's black freedom struggle and sheds still more light on this little-known history.

CHAPTER FIVE:

Civil Rights Under the Northern Lights

In the midst of the Second World War, Beatrice Lee Chisolm moved to Seattle where she met Robert Coleman. The two eventually married and moved again, first to Juneau and then to Fairbanks. They were among the many black men and women who arrived as a result of a construction boom from the war effort or through the military. At the end of the conflict, the two decided to stay in Alaska and call Fairbanks home. After all, there seemed to be opportunities to explore in the sparsely populated but growing territory, and Beatrice found the Native culture of Alaska familiar to her after having grown up on an Indian reservation in Idaho. But one evening in October 1946, the couple went on a date to the Lacey Street Theater and saw Joseph Kane's western, "Dakota", starring John Wayne. They extended the evening and went for a drink at the bar across from the theater, Hill's Cocktail Lounge.

The two entered, took a seat, and waited. Then they waited longer. After several minutes, the bartender approached the couple and explained they would not receive service. Beatrice Coleman recalled the events and detailed the conversation between her husband and the bartender and owner, Rudy Hill. Hill iterated, "I have a license that gives me the right to refuse service to anyone I see fit to not serve . . . and my reason for not serving you is because you are colored." Hill insisted the couple exit the bar and not return. The incident sparked a two-year legal battle, revealed a weakness in Alaska's pioneering civil rights law, and laid bare a territory only tenuously if at all dedicated to equality. For the purposes of this study, Beatrice and Robert Coleman also illustrated how the postwar generation of black Alaskans fought for civil rights. True, it was not the Deep South or the large cities of the Lower 48, but the battle for civil rights under the glow of the northern lights

demonstrates a continuity in the nation's black freedom struggle, be it in the North, the South, or Alaska. The struggle for equality transcended latitude and distance, and in Alaska as elsewhere the black community forged one of the nation's greatest social movements.

Beatrice and Robert Coleman Fight for Justice

The Alaska territorial legislature passed the Anti-Discrimination Act in 1945. The animating forces behind it were the indomitable Roy and Elizabeth Peratrovich. The couple had long been reputable activists in Southeast Alaska's Tlingit community; Elizabeth Peratrovich served as president of the Alaska Native Sisterhood, and Roy Peratrovich served as president of the Alaska Native Brotherhood. Elizabeth, however, is probably best known for her eloquent testimony before the legislature on behalf of the act. It was a pivotal moment in the history of Alaska's race relations and in the making of a broader Native coalition to challenge white dominance. But the story usually ends optimistically with the passage of the legislation and a well-deserved celebration of Elizabeth Peratrovich as an Alaska civil rights icon. The truth, however, grows considerably murkier once we include the story of Robert and Beatrice Coleman. In fact, without activism from the Colemans, the Anti-Discrimination Act of 1945 would have remained largely ceremonial.

Like Elizabeth Peratrovich, Beatrice Coleman knew well the laws of the territory, and she knew equally well the racism she and her husband experienced daily. Unfortunately, few lawyers wanted to take on a discrimination lawsuit against Hill, a figure who enjoyed prestige in the community as a business owner and entrepreneur, although a Fairbanks police officer believed the bar owner violated the law by refusing to serve the Colemans. After complaints about his behavior, Rudy Hill received a misdemeanor and a fifty-dollar fine. But on an appeal, Hill seized on an apparent loophole, and a judge overturned his conviction. Hill claimed that the Anti-Discrimination Act only prohibited business owners from issuing a discriminatory policy in writing; Hill and his council contended that it was perfectly acceptable to vocalize discriminatory views and refuse service on whatever basis the business owner deemed fit.

According to the law: "Any person . . . who shall display any printed or written sign indicating a discrimination on racial grounds of said full and equal enjoyment, for each day for which said sign is displayed shall be deemed guilty of a misdemeanor." Since Hill voiced his discrimination rather

than having posted it in print or writing, he pleaded not guilty. If Hill got off, Beatrice Coleman concluded that the Anti-Discrimination Act was “not worth the paper it is written on.” Determined to strengthen the law and eliminate the gaping loophole, Coleman approached Warren Taylor, a veteran of the territorial legislature and a sympathetic legal voice in Fairbanks. He believed a civil trial would be the best way to fix the law and compel Hill to pay his misdemeanor fine.

For her part Beatrice Coleman believed the intent of the Anti-Discrimination Act was clear. Specifically, she pointed to other verbiage—“To provide for full and equal accommodations, facilities and privileges to all citizens in places of public accommodations within the jurisdiction of the Territory of Alaska; to provide penalties for violations”—as the language to advance the case. The Colemans also recruited Emma Roberts, a black Fairbanks resident, to testify against Hill. Roberts also claimed to have been barred from the tavern on the basis of her race. With strong evidence piling up to suggest that Hill routinely violated the law, the U.S. attorney filed a warrant for his arrest. Hill would have his day in court in November 1946. Next to the rich tradition of Alaska Native activism, one might locate the roots of Alaska’s civil rights movement in that Fairbanks courtroom. But in a rather stunning turnaround, Rudy Hill convinced Taylor to represent him rather the Colemans, and he convinced Taylor that the Colemans had a pattern of belligerent behavior and had threatened the bar’s white patrons. Hill continued his defense: drunken and menacing behavior—not racism—led him to throw the young couple out of his bar. While Hill managed to change Taylor’s mind, he did not convince the U.S. attorney. Hill was then ordered to pay the fine.

But the case was not yet over. Warren Taylor, now representing Rudy Hill, appealed and argued that regardless of the reason, Hill had the right as the property owner to deny service to anyone for any reason. Not content with this rationale, Beatrice Coleman wrote to the territorial governor, Ernest Gruening, to request his intervention. Gruening and Attorney General Ralph Rivers openly noted that while the law had a “good psychological effect,” there was no guarantee the Colemans could prevail in court. In short, even two of the most influential politicians in the territory expressed little confidence in the ability of the Anti-Discrimination Act to prohibit discrimination in public places.

This time the court sided with Hill and dismissed the case a year after the ordeal began, in November 1947. Historian Ross Coen has written

that in the days after the court's decision, the local paper failed to cover the case but ran a feature advertisement for Hill's bar and its "Generous Atmosphere." According to Beatrice Coleman, the case exposed the cynical depths of discrimination in Fairbanks. In a meeting with the NAACP, Coleman reported, "The trial ended and things are much worse for the colored people." In response, Beatrice and Robert Coleman endeavored to fully document discrimination in Fairbanks businesses. They interviewed area bar and restaurant owners and found all but two confessed to refusing service to African Americans and Alaska Natives. These owners felt little pressure to change their behavior. Moreover, even if the law could be enforced, a misdemeanor with a relatively small fine would not deter them from maintaining an all-white clientele. Meanwhile, the black and Native population of Fairbanks reported poor treatment, high prices, and intimidation. On the rare occasion that Beatrice Coleman received service in Hill's bar, she expressed disgust over a server who overcharged her two dollars for soft drinks.

With the courts unwilling to intervene, Beatrice Coleman turned to the legislature. Alaska territorial senator Edward Anderson of Nome observed a notable omission in the legislation that he himself helped to author in 1945. During the next session, Anderson and his colleagues introduced a bill to amend the Anti-Discrimination Act by removing the phrase "for each day for which said sign is displayed." This effectively closed the loophole and provided the language to prosecute cases of discrimination in public accommodations, regardless of whether it was verbal or written. The amendment passed unanimously in the Senate; the House of Representative passed the revised Anti-Discrimination Act, 18-3. Warren Taylor, then serving in the House, cast one of the three no votes.

The legislative fix improved the 1945 legislation. Curiously, however, when Ernest Gruening penned his 1954 manifesto advocating Alaska statehood, aptly entitled *The State of Alaska*, he audaciously claimed the original 1945 Anti-Discrimination Act paved the way for lasting equality. Gruening portrayed Alaska as place that had overcome discrimination. "Not an untoward incident was reported subsequent to the enactment of the 'equal-treatment bill,'" the governor proudly stated, without apparent reflection or mention of the activism carried out by the Colemans. Gruening knew better. He reportedly met with Beatrice and Robert Coleman, and he must have recognized that racism could not be papered over by a single law. Rather it took mobilization and action to forge a movement dedicated to equality for those Alaskans for whom it had long been denied.



Beatrice and Robert Coleman prepare for a date night in Fairbanks, c. 1946. Photo courtesy of Theresa Lenear.

Activism Heats Up Urban Alaska

The territorial legislature may have fixed the Anti-Discrimination Act, but as the previous chapter explored, discrimination stubbornly persisted. Arguably, it grew worse. Housing discrimination intensified in urban Alaska. Neighborhoods surrounding Anchorage resembled redlined communities in the nation's North and West. In a 1965 speech that expressed his frustration with entrenched segregation in Alaska, Willard Bowman asked his audience: "Do you know that in another 5 to 10 years [Fairview] will be completely substandard, the houses overcrowded, the crime rate and welfare cases soaring, while officialdom wringes [sic] its hands and hurriedly plans another urban renewal project to rid the blight?" Bowman cited the extensive literature about housing segregation and direly forecasted the rebellions and riots of seemingly far-off places like Watts and Harlem may well emerge in Alaska. "We are allowing the same seeds to take root in Anchorage," Bowman proposed, "and we are just as assuredly going to reap the same crop as Los Angeles did."

Blanche McSmith, an activist and soon-to-be state representative, put it in equally stark terms. According to McSmith, Anchorage's ballyhooed moniker as an "All-America City" in 1956 and then again in 1965 did not reflect the well-being of the city's black and Native communities. "Persons driving south, past 15th Avenue, on Gambell Street, cannot escape a view of vast swampy lowlands, dotted with several bar signs, small houses, and piles of junk and debris," she wrote in the *Alaska Spotlight*, a black newspaper. McSmith called Eastchester Flats an "All-American City twilight zone . . . neglected by 'City Fathers.' All of the improvements benefiting a thriving, growing city: water, sewers, sidewalks, paved streets, FHA approved and mortgaged houses, are conspicuously absent." She added, "Ninety-nine percent of the people who live and own businesses here are Negroes." McSmith, like Willard Bowman, opposed the annexation of Eastchester Flats in 1954. And she facetiously declared that since annexation, residents have "had the privilege of paying higher taxes [for] an abundance of police surveillance." The water mains, McSmith added caustically, "benefited" the community when one of them routinely "overflowed and the filth flooded the yards."

Despite documented housing segregation in Alaska's largest cities and the turbulent experience of urban renewal, Anchorage remained peaceful throughout the 1960s; so too did Fairbanks and Juneau. Uprisings on the scale of Watts, Detroit, Harlem, or Washington, D.C., never occurred. Still, rumors of an imminent civil disturbance spread across Alaska. And to be certain, activism increased. In the summer of 1967, as riots broke out across dozens of major American cities, Governor Walter J. Hickel prepared for possible local unrest. In one document tellingly labeled "Riot Memo," Hickel addressed rumors that "outside agitators" had flown into Anchorage to instigate the black community to take up arms against whites. "If we find any outside influence involving a criminal element we will move quickly," the governor said. Elsewhere, Alaska media mogul Robert Atwood called Anchorage's Police Chief John Flanigan to inquire about "reports of an influx of outsiders, Muslims, [Stokely] Carmichael . . ." The chief tried to assuage Atwood and reported "no influx of colored people." Nevertheless, the Anchorage Police Department apparently took the issue seriously enough to detain several city residents and even stake out area gun retailers to make sure that rumors of black men stocking up on arms and ammo were not true.

No evidence suggests that activists ever planned a large or small-scale uprising. Further, fanciful rumors that the Student Non-Violent Coordinating

Committee (SNCC) chairman Stokely Carmichael or the Black Muslims wanted to come to Alaska to foment resentments, organize poor people, or initiate an armed insurrection shed more light into the psyche of the state's white civic and political elite than anything else. And though the militancy and violence that gripped other American cities never materialized in Alaska, residents took to the streets and demanded their voices be heard. One notable example occurred at the Carrs grocery store in Anchorage's Fairview neighborhood. As men and women demanded service at the segregated lunch counters in the Jim Crow South and others marched and boycotted discriminatory practices in the public and private sector, so too did black citizens of Anchorage.

In the summer of 1962, African Americans and other area activists joined together to picket Carrs, Alaska's largest grocery store chain. Clarence Coleman, branch president of the Anchorage NAACP, wrote to Roy Wilkins at the national office in New York City: "The first picket line in the history of the Anchorage NAACP began its task of protesting the hiring policies of Carrs Food Center here in Anchorage today 31 July 10 am Alaska Standard Time." Coleman's statement was not quite true. Five years earlier, Joseph M. Jackson and James E. Owens organized area workers and set up a picket outside of the Local 341 Laborers and Hod Carrier Union Hall. They and others sought an inclusive union for African American and Alaska Native workers, they wanted greater transparency in promotion guidelines. Owens stated that direct action "was the only way we're going to get equality."

The picket of Carrs was a watershed moment in the history of civil rights in Alaska. Many in the black community took issue with the grocery store's apparent refusal to hire African Americans to work in any capacity beyond sanitation and other so-called menial, low-level jobs. In one correspondence Bernard J. Carr Sr., an owner of the grocery store chain, conceded he had "two Negro employees," a garbage collector and a janitor. But he continued, "The time is not right to hire a Negro checker." The NAACP suggested the grocer benefited from a base of African American patrons. At its Fairview store, over 30 percent of the clientele was black; yet not a single African American worked in management or any position that interfaced with the public.

In response, men and women took to the picket line outside of Carrs to raise awareness. One participant, Pat Berkley, recalled the scene. Though she was seven months pregnant, she helped organize the picket and led the women to march on the line during the day; the men walked in the evening.

Cars and pedestrians “booed and laughed at [us],” Berkley remembered. Despite some negative reaction, the picket worked; owners agreed to hire a more diverse workforce. Organizer Joseph Kline summarized the terms of the agreement: Carrs grocery would “hire one person immediately. The second within thirty days and the third sixty days after the first.” These positions were supposed to include a sales clerk, cashier, or grocery checkers, all of which afforded a greater possibility for advancement than the menial positions that the picketers accused Carrs of reserving for black workers.

Unfortunately, Carrs failed to hire three African Americans within the agreed upon sixty days, but the grocery store eventually complied after the NAACP kept up its pressure. Richard Watts was the first man Carrs hired as a result of the picket. He became the first African American bagger at the store and stayed with the grocer for over forty-five years. In accordance with what the activists envisioned, Watts did not remain a bagger for long. He ascended the chain of management; by the end of a long and distinguished career Watts had become a district manager and participated in the local business community as a member of the board of directors for the Anchorage Chamber of Commerce.

Beyond the Carrs boycott, activists protested and organized against mistreatment and discrimination elsewhere during the early and mid-1960s. Blanche McSmith, then acting in her role as branch president of the NAACP, inquired into the treatment of minority civilian workers at Fort Richardson and Elmendorf Air Force Base, Anchorage’s two military installations and one of the largest employers in the city. The military had a rocky relationship with Alaska’s black and Native community. Most obviously, during World War II, General Buckner refused to allow black and Native troops to serve at the base for fear they would “mix” with the white population. For her part, McSmith wrote to Maj. Gen. George A. Carver, a successor to Buckner, to express concern over the treatment of people of color at the quartermaster’s laundry, one of the few places one could find black service members and civilians in the 1950s and early ’60s.

McSmith detailed more than a dozen examples of discriminatory behavior ranging from hiring and promotion infractions to specific instances of verbal and even physical abuse. She concluded, “The problems have become progressively worse and apparently directed toward an explosive situation unless preventative measures are taken.” Thomas Davis, a colonel in the U.S. Air Force disputed McSmith’s claims and contended they were overblown if not totally baseless. But tellingly, amid McSmith’s other criticisms, she

demanded an explanation as to why “Negroes are addressed by first names” while white men and women “are addressed by Miss or Mrs. or Sir.” Only to affirm her accusations, Colonel Davis opened his letter curtly, “Dear Blanche.”

The *Midnight Sun Reporter*, another black newspaper launched by George Anderson, the editor of the *Spotlight*, further documented the reasons civil rights organizations had long harbored an antagonistic relationship with the military bases: “Leaders of the Negro community charge that of the 1,600 civilians employed at Elmendorf only 80-odd are minority group members.” In response, a consortium that included the NAACP, New Hope Baptist Church, First Christian Methodist Church, and other civil rights and labor activists had prepared to picket the bases in October 1964. Just days before the protest was to take place, air force officials met with community members and the action was called off. In return, the military agreed to hire additional African Americans and Alaska Natives and more thoroughly address claims of racism and abuse. At the same time, President Lyndon B. Johnson signed legislation to sanction and punish contractors who engaged in discriminatory and racist practices. Here again, the demands of the Anchorage movement intersected with marquee federal legislation, and its activists were deeply in tune with civil rights mobilization nationwide.



Senator Bob Bartlett shakes hands with Willard Bowman, 1968. Edward Lewis Bartlett Papers, Rasmuson Library, University of Alaska Fairbanks (1990-176-137).

In March 1965 more than a thousand men, women, and children marched from the Anchorage Police headquarters to city hall (the NAACP noted that Police Chief John Flanigan joined them) in solidarity with those who had marched from Selma to Montgomery in what became a defining moment in the civil rights movement. Like their fellow activists in Alabama, the Anchorage marchers also urged Congress to pass the Voting Rights Act of 1965. In contrast to many of their Southern counterparts, the Alaska delegation of Senator Ernest Gruening (D), Senator Bob Bartlett (D), and Representative Ralph Rivers (D) voted to do so.

The Carrs boycott and the proposed picket of the military bases demonstrated the ways in which men and women responded to conditions specific to Southcentral Alaska. But at the same time, the march in solidarity with Martin Luther King Jr. and thousands of others in the American South highlights the interconnectedness of the movement culture of the 1960s. Whether it was Alaska or Alabama, a common cause of equality united these men and women and animated their actions. And while it may not have received the same attention as did protests in the Lower 48, Alaska's patterns of racism on one hand and social activism on the other fit squarely within the broader national story. An observer is struck not by the allegedly exceptional qualities of Anchorage—or even Alaska more generally—but rather the common struggle shared by men and women who fought for justice, regardless of their location.

Beyond Marches and Pickets

Marches, pickets, and other protests, unfortunately, failed to dismantle subtle forms of racism and an entrenched legacy of discrimination in Alaska's criminal justice system and business community. The Alaska Black Caucus made this precise point in one study. Among its findings, drawn largely from the 1978 meeting of the Governor's Commission on the Administration of Justice, the Black Caucus uncovered the following: "Blacks and Natives convicted of fraud, forgery or embezzlement received sentences 450 percent longer than whites convicted of the same crimes. Blacks and Natives convicted of burglary, larceny, or receiving stolen goods received sentences 277 percent greater than whites convicted of the same crimes." More staggeringly, the results of the study concluded: "Black drug offenders received sentences 467 percent greater than whites. . . . In fraud, forgery, embezzlement, and bad check cases defendants with a public defender or court appointed counsel received a 683 percent longer sentence." The disproportionate percentage of

those reliant on public defenders and court-appointed counsel were black and Native men.

Meanwhile, Willie Ratcliff, coordinator of the Alaska Minority Business Task Force, located strikingly high levels of discrimination in the Anchorage and Fairbanks business communities, particularly in the contracting system. Ratcliff surmised, “The Anchorage minority business community suffers from economic distress in part due to receiving disproportionately low percentages of Municipal contract awards.” In fiscal year 1977, Ratcliff found that Anchorage awarded \$28 million in contracts; however, “fewer than \$237,000 or 8/10 of 1 percent have gone to businesses known to be owned and controlled by minorities.” At the time, African Americans comprised roughly 6 percent of the city’s population, and people of color overall encompassed 15 percent. Fairbanks, he supposed, looked similar in its discrimination directed at black- and Native-owned businesses. In both cities, contracts went to white-owned businesses and construction firms about 99 percent of the time, Ratcliff found.

In Anchorage, the assembly passed an ordinance in 1979 that ensured minority-owned businesses equal consideration for construction contracts. Three years later only \$7.7 million of the \$77.5 million of the city construction budget went to minority-owned businesses. But the \$7.7 million figure included female-owned businesses, which were still white. In fact, nearly \$6 million of that \$7.7 million went to one firm. Four minority-owned firms earned about \$1 million in contracts, and thirty other minority-owned firms divided what remained. A similar review revealed that only five of eighty-eight major construction contracts went to minority-owned firms. One was black-owned; Alaska Native contractors secured the four others. For over twenty years the NAACP, the Alaska Black Caucus, and state representatives such as Blanche McSmith had loudly pointed out these discrepancies.

Ratcliff ultimately took up his case against the head of the Small Business Association in Anchorage (SBA), Frank Cox, and an investigation followed. *Black Enterprise*, a magazine about black entrepreneurs, published the results. Soon after, the U.S. House of Representatives intervened and concluded that Cox accepted bribes, kickbacks, and gifts on behalf of clients. He favored white-owned businesses at the expense of black- and Native-owned businesses. In addition, Cox and the SBA denied equal opportunity loans to minority clients and flouted federal regulations that prohibited discriminatory business practices. Most damning, Cox put together a blacklist of names for local banks. He urged them to deny loan requests on the basis that they were credit risks, but the investigation revealed the men who landed

on the list had no record of financial mismanagement. Many had a record of political advocacy, and all were led by African Americans, Asian Americans, or Alaska Natives. Ratcliff himself learned that Cox and the SBA denied him access to contracts for federal projects, a decision that had serious financial implications on his business.

Cox allegedly told two black businessmen from Fairbanks who sought assistance from the SBA that “blacks just don’t have the know-how or the history of running a business” and discouraged them from opening a clothing boutique. The Equal Employment Opportunity offices in Anchorage released a report in 1980 that spotlighted the lack of minority participation in state government and business. Promises by the state to hire an additional 516 minority individuals in 1981 were followed by the actual hiring of only 136. Eventually, the investigation forced Cox to resign, and the SBA came under new leadership, thanks in large part to the efforts of Ratcliff, among others. Cox remained unrepentant and even exclaimed to the *Anchorage Daily News* that any discrimination mattered little since “they only represent two and half percent of the state,” referring to the black population (an inaccurate number in any event). Ratcliff’s organizing, along with reporting in the *Daily News* and *Black Enterprise* led to some internal reforms at the SBA. And future black businesses would no longer need to deal with Frank Cox.

The organizing activities and advocacy of Ratcliff, McSmith, Watts, and others yielded results, but a lot of work remained. Speaking to an interviewer in the early 1980s, Richard Watts proclaimed, “So far as economics is concerned, we haven’t caught up.” Sounding a tone of optimism, Watts concluded, “We’ve made tremendous progress, but we haven’t caught up.” Once again, Anchorage echoed much of the country in its race relations. The pivotal legislation of the 1960s—the Civil Rights Act of 1964, the Voting Rights Act of 1965, and the Fair Housing Act (1968)—had a positive impact on the lives of millions of African Americans. Nonetheless, deep-seated disparities remained well after the height of the civil rights era; this was as true in Alaska as it was in most any other place in the Lower 48. Watts’s remarks could conceivably stand in for the black experience in Alaska writ large. African Americans had come north in search of more favorable circumstances. Many arrived after overcoming the depths of injustice elsewhere, and some found what they were looking for in the forty-ninth state. However, while life in the northern latitudes obviously lacked the heat and humidity of the places many of the men and women had fled, it was not immune to the maladies of racism and discrimination. The marches and

pickets demonstrated this, but so too did the workaday activism of black community and business leaders who demanded equity.

The last quarter of the twentieth century also brought what might best be considered incremental levels of change and modest, perhaps uneven, amounts of inclusion. An observer who located a growing number of African Americans in leadership roles throughout the state may have overlooked the systemic forms of racism noted above. In 1970, for instance, voters sent two black men to the Alaska legislature. Willard Bowman, long a fixture in Alaska politics and an advocate of racial justice, joined Joshua Wright, an Anchorage dentist with an impressive résumé of professional success and political potential. Both men hailed from Anchorage and arrived in Juneau with an eye toward improving the lot for minority residents in the state. As mentioned, Blanche McSmith was the first black woman and first African American to serve at the state level in 1960, having been appointed by Governor William Egan to fill the seat John Rader vacated upon his appointment to serve as attorney general.

In 1972 Fairbanks sent its first black representative to Juneau when voters elected Selwyn Carrol. Carrol, a junior high school teacher who



Selwyn G. Carrol, c. 1972. Carrol became the first black to represent Fairbanks in the Alaska State Legislature when he was elected in 1972. Alaska State Library and Historical Collections.



Col. William Campfield Jr., commander of the Twenty-First Air Base Group at Elmendorf Air Force Base from June 1976 to June 1979. Office of History, Alaska Air Command, Joint Base Elmendorf-Richardson.

also worked in the Alaska Department of Health and Welfare, ran as a Republican and served a single term in the House of Representatives. Other African American men and women served locally, mostly on school boards in Anchorage and Fairbanks. In 1974 Governor Egan appointed John Alexander to serve as Alaska's commissioner of labor—another first. A year later, Col. William Campfield Jr. became the first black man to hold rank as a commander at Elmendorf Air Force Base. Campfield's rise in the air force should be viewed as a bold counterpoint to Lieutenant General Buckner, head of the Alaska Defense Command and an unrepentant racist who exerted such influence on the territory of Alaska in the early 1940s.

As Ratcliff uncovered the biases of the Small Business Association, other black men and women earned seats in the boardrooms of businesses and assumed leadership roles around the state. Ben Humphries, a longtime Anchorage activist, received an appointment to the board of directors for the National Bank of Alaska in 1978; he was the first black man to hold a position on a financial board. Richard Watts continued to rise through the ranks at Carrs after having been hired a decade earlier; he eventually entered the ranks of upper management. Indeed, race relations in Alaska and around the country moved apace in contradictory and uneven ways. Researchers like Bowman located structural racism, embedded in national, state, and local institutions even as individual black men and women ascended to impressive positions of authority in both politics and business. The civil rights movement thus highlighted and rendered unacceptable the most overt and virulent forms of discrimination, but black advancement in Alaska had limits.

The Pipeline Boom and Rising Tensions

Following the discovery of oil in Prudhoe Bay on Alaska's North Slope in the late 1960s, it became clear that Alaska's future would be driven by the extraction of the resource. The land surrounding Prudhoe Bay, it turned out, contained the largest oil reserves in North America. Getting it to market required the state to settle land claims with the Alaska Native population on whose land the natural resources would be extracted. The effort to drill for oil also required vast infrastructure to transport the resource to the ice-free port of Valdez, located on Prince William Sound in southern Alaska. To address the latter concern, the state and its corporate partners constructed a pipeline. Known as the Trans Alaska Pipeline, the construction project dominated Alaska's economy throughout the mid- to late 1970s.



Florine Walker, the first black woman to work on the pipeline c. 1976. Pipeline Construction and Impact Photo Collection, Alaska State Library (asl_p17_8277).

In a decade of persistent economic turbulence, defined by stagnant wages and high inflation, the pipeline enticed thousands of men and women to Alaska. Laborers, truckers, bartenders, entertainers, and various other workers earned greater sums of money in Alaska performing their respective jobs than they could have perhaps anywhere else in the country; the pipeline created an economic boom like no other during the 1970s. On screen, the 1976 film “Pipe Dreams” depicted the construction effort. Gladys Knight made her film-acting debut in the movie. She played Maria Wilson, a young woman who traveled to Valdez with the promise of a supervisory job. But upon her arrival, she learned no such position existed. To make ends meet she took a job as a bartender at a rowdy roadhouse in town; she eventually worked her way into a management position and demonstrated her superior competence. Though the movie’s plot primarily revolved around Knight’s character reconciling with her husband, “Pipe Dreams” nonetheless touched on such themes as gender and racial discrimination and portrays in the lead role a dynamic black woman who navigated the male-dominated world around her with confidence, savvy, and skill.

Aside from Gladys Knight’s fictional representation of a black woman in Valdez during the height of pipeline construction, some African Americans indeed came north to participate in the booming Alaskan economy. Florine Walker was the first known black woman hired to work on the pipeline. She earned a living as a culinary worker and food server in the camps along the construction route. Life on the pipeline could be grueling with long hours to

accompany the high pay. Women such as Walker had the added pressure of negotiating the hypermasculine environment of one of the decade's largest construction projects.

"Pipe Dreams" showcased some of the very real racial tension that was associated with the construction effort. A white laborer who worked on the pipeline, Ed McGrath, detailed his experience in a book he wrote about working on the megaproject. Though he did not work alongside black men or women, he "heard rumors" of black welders and apprentices who encountered racism, and he reported discriminatory attitudes among his many white coworkers. Many of these white laborers came from the South where much of the oil industry was based, and they brought a history of exclusionary policies and a conservative brand of politics. The Pipeliners Union Local 798, based out of Tulsa, Oklahoma, earned a notorious reputation for its members' heavy drinking, fighting, and racial antagonism. The 798ers, as they called themselves, eventually went to court to settle claims of racist hiring practices in Alaska. The white welders from Oklahoma had become such a nuisance to many in Alaska that they were glad to see them leave. In one memorable moment, McGrath relayed his horror at seeing a bus driver brutally attacked, beaten, and left by the side of the road by a group of white pipeline workers. The driver, who was white, allegedly defended the right of a black laborer to sit wherever he chose on the bus ride to the construction site. McGrath recorded the "constant racist statements" by fellow white laborers, something that apparently made him uncomfortable. The African Americans who worked on the pipeline, he proclaimed, faced "intolerable" and "vicious" conditions and treatment from their coworkers.

For certain, some blacks indeed persevered despite the hostile climate. Ed Wesley first arrived in Alaska with the military and served at Fort Greely, just outside of Delta Junction. After his service, he and his family stayed in Alaska, and he took a supervisory and security position at Pump Station 9 on the pipeline. Wesley recalled several black workers, typically affiliated with Laborers Local 942 based in Fairbanks, who played key roles in the union and on the construction effort. One man, Willie Lewis, took a leadership role in the union and defended his men against the discrimination that came from the contingent of outside workers, most typically the welders. The pipeline ushered in an era of growth and prosperity for Alaska. Black men and women joined the effort, but the industry's conservative roots in the American South, recalled Wesley, meant that all too often white men received priority for the most lucrative jobs and promotions.

That did not stop African American men and women from tracking down opportunity, and some, nonetheless, found work on the pipeline a novel, lucrative experience. Opalanga D. Pugh may have been among the most unlikely women to join the pipeline's construction effort. Pugh was born in Denver, Colorado, in 1952. After the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr. in 1968, Pugh grew more politicized and rallied in support of civil rights and black power. She took a job in the Outward Bound School program in Denver before going to college at the University of Colorado Boulder and then the University of Wisconsin–Milwaukee. While at the University of Wisconsin–Milwaukee, Pugh studied abroad in Lagos, Nigeria. She stayed in Nigeria after graduation to work as a journalist for the Second World Black and African Festival of Arts and Culture. Pugh eventually returned to the United States in the late 1970s, and at the prompting of an old college roommate, she took a job on the Alaska pipeline.

Pugh's friend explained, "Girl, I'm making more money than we ever made." Pugh conceded she was "just seeing dollar signs, ching, ching!" She arrived in Fairbanks in January 1977 and took up residence a few miles away in North Pole. There Pugh lived in a cramped two-bedroom apartment with seven adults and three kids. They had come to cash in on the pipeline. Unfortunately, Pugh's job application and processing papers were held up for over six weeks in Juneau. Pugh recalled how she and others in the apartment did their best to avoid taking handouts at the Salvation Army but eventually had to relent to fight off hunger. She and her roommates took home an assortment of Alaska dietary staples: "moose meat, and you know, there were other vegetables." Deviating from her vegetarian diet, Pugh's friend "worked that moose meat and barbequed it up, girl, it was chicken licken." So it was that a Denver-born woman who previously spent a couple of years in West Africa came to learn the culinary delicacies of Alaska.

Once her paperwork went through, Pugh worked at a communications center on the pipeline. It was important work that ensured open lines of communication across the vast spaces of wilderness through which the pipeline had to pass. "I had air-ground communication, you know, with the helicopters, the medics, the security. I had four-channel based CB [citizens band] radio, 'Breaker, breaker 1-9, you got that brown sugar here,'" Pugh relayed with laughter in an oral history interview. She continued, "And so I talked for twelve hours a day, seven days a week, nine weeks on, two weeks off." Pugh and friends traveled into Fairbanks during their downtime. They frequented the clubs not with the best entertainment but with the "best

electrical hitching posts in their parking lot so that you could plug your car up and it would keep the radiator hot—warm while you went in and party.” Otherwise, Pugh reasoned, “every hour, hour and a half you gotta put on your coat, your gloves, and everything, come back, start your car so that the block doesn’t freeze. . . . It was just funny, just living there.”

Ultimately, however, Pugh and her friends who worked on the pipeline viewed the peculiarities and challenges of life in Alaska’s interior worth the trouble. She earned over \$35,000 a year, a large sum in the mid- to late 1970s (roughly \$150,000 adjusted for inflation in 2019 dollars). With her money, Pugh generously provided gifts of a hundred dollars to her family and friends during the holidays; she purchased an organ for her musically inclined mother, and treated herself to a new car.

Though associated with prosperity and a local economy buoyed by oil revenue and high-paying pipeline jobs, the late 1970s and early 1980s marked a tenuous time in Alaska’s race relations. The demographics of the state rapidly changed as thousands of oil and pipeline workers and executives from Oklahoma and Texas moved in, some temporarily but many permanently. Vernellia Ruth Randall was among the thousands of women and men who traveled to Alaska in these years. Born in Texas, Randall moved to Seattle and then to Alaska with her husband in 1979. She worked in the Department of Health and Social Services after having completed degrees in nursing and law; Randall later became a professor of law at the University of Dayton in Ohio. But before trekking back to the Midwest, she spent five years in Alaska, split between Fairbanks and Juneau.

As a black woman from Texas, she did not fit the profile of a typical laborer who came to earn a living working on the pipeline. Still, according to Randall, “Alaska taught me a lot about the nature of racism . . . that it’s about numbers and threats.” She asserted that the relatively small population of African Americans ensured that most whites did not view them as a threat, at least not enough to warrant the deep hostility she experienced in the American South. However, Randall revealed that she witnessed anti-Native attitudes in Juneau, which her white counterparts tried to co-opt her into adopting. Randall’s experience demonstrated the complex currents of race and discrimination coursing through Alaska during a period of economic transformation.

Anti-black racism remained entrenched even as Alaska’s black population slowly declined in number relative to the other demographics. A few high-profile police shootings sowed deeper divisions between white and



Ed Wesley working as a security guard along the Trans Alaska Pipeline, not far from Delta Junction, 1978 (photo courtesy of Ed Wesley).

black Alaskans. In 1979 Alaska State Troopers shot and killed a black man named Phillip Moore under contested circumstances in Anchorage. Just after midnight on January 17, Moore fled an attempted traffic stop after driving over a snow berm. During a foot pursuit, Moore and the trooper, Erich Feichtinger, separated from the trailing officers. After catching up to Moore, Feichtinger wrestled him to the ground and apparently clutched his gun in one hand and subdued the suspect with the other. During the struggle, the police report stated that Moore repeatedly reached toward his ankle. Presuming a hidden weapon, Feichtinger fired at point-blank range, killing Moore on the spot.

Moore, though unarmed at the time of the pursuit, possessed an unlicensed firearm in his abandoned vehicle. He was later found to have had cocaine in his system and was on probation in Washington, D.C. But what troubled many who followed the case, and prompted a subsequent investigation, was the way in which the officers provided conflicting—and even contradictory—statements. After the shooting, Feichtinger claimed to have removed a bag of marijuana from Moore's left sock. However, another trooper who arrived on the scene shortly after located the marijuana

concealed around Moore's torso; he later changed his story to agree with Feichtinger's. Evidence of force on Moore's shoulder did not line up with the trooper's description of the struggle and raised the possibility that it may not have occurred as the officers testified. The report of the shooting noted, "The red area on Moore's right shoulder might have been caused by pressure from Trooper Feichtinger's right arm as he held Moore from behind with this right arm around Moore's neck, held his revolver in his left hand and fired it into Moore's torso." This undermined the official explanation of the event and cast suspicion on the officers involved.

Nevertheless, the internal investigation absolved Feichtinger of any wrongdoing. A subsequent investigation by the Department of Public Safety and the Alaska chief prosecutor found no evidence of impropriety. But the report concluded that the case deepened the "extent of the suspicion and lack of confidence in the minority community with regard to law enforcement generally." Questions about the investigation galvanized Anchorage's black community. One letter in the *Anchorage Times* referred to community activists as "militant blacks" who sought to "intimidate" investigators. Journalist E. Louis Overstreet responded by noting that the activists included members of the NAACP, the Alaska Black Caucus, local ministers, and an assortment of concerned citizens. Though contentious, the hearings remained peaceful.

Almost two years to the day after Moore's death, Anchorage police responded to calls of gunshots in the Mountain View neighborhood, northwest of downtown Anchorage. After they arrived, an hour-long standoff ensued with a twenty-four-year-old black man named Cassell Williams. Williams had fired several shots into the air over the course of the afternoon and then four shots in the direction of the officers. After Williams seemingly engaged the officers, Sgt. Dave Goode gave the order to fire on Williams. After a single shot to the head, fired by an officer, Williams died at the scene. But like the shooting of Phillip Moore, the circumstances around the death of Cassell Williams troubled many in and around Anchorage. Williams had just recently been fired from his job after having displayed a pattern of troubling behaviors. His mother, girlfriend, and landlord reported that he had long experienced mental health issues. He spent time institutionalized the previous year after having claimed to have heard voices in his head that he later described as witches. Given the gravity of his mental health crisis, those closest to Cassell Williams wondered why the police resorted so quickly to lethal force.

Though Williams failed to communicate with the police, the officers, for their part, failed to contact his girlfriend or mother, de-escalate the confrontation, or inquire into the status of his mental health. The police notified both women only after Williams was pronounced dead. Anchorage chief of police Brian Porter, who was not at the scene, defended his officers even as he noted a breakdown in basic protocol. The officers did not attempt to cut the electricity to the apartment or provide a trained hostage negotiator, as was typical in such a standoff. When asked if a black officer could have somehow communicated with Williams, Porter responded: “Some [blacks] might even take offense” at such a maneuver. Anchorage District Attorney Larry Weeks promised an inquest in addition to an internal police investigation. However, Weeks stated the day after the shooting, “There is no question that [the killing] was justified.” Not surprisingly, he quickly lost credibility among those who had demanded the investigation in the first place.

The *Anchorage Times* dismissed activists who raised issues around the handling of the incident and its immediate aftermath as “an over-aggressive attempt by some to inject a racial element into this incident.” Nearly all of the letters on the topic that the *Anchorage Times* printed expressed support for the officers. One woman proclaimed the officers who shot Williams were “intelligent, warm, and caring people.” Another woman said, they were “doing a good thing and making our town a little safer.” Some in the community responded more directly toward Williams and stated he “deserves to be shot.” Another man wrote, “We should thank the Lord that this criminal has been taken out.” Most of Anchorage, it seemed, rallied to the side of the Anchorage Police Department, but not everyone. Reverend Alonzo Patterson, a black faith leader in town, chided those who failed to stand for Williams, a man who Patterson believed did not deserve to die at the hands of the police. Without any organized resistance, Patterson intimated, “The policeman is not afraid because he knows you’re not going to do anything.”

Many activists, however, adamantly spoke out against the high-profile shootings and what they believed was a lack of balance in the subsequent investigations. Less than a day after her son’s death, Cynthia Williams attended a meeting of the Anchorage Equal Rights Commission (AERC) and demanded justice. At a later public hearing chaired by the AERC, black leaders openly discussed what they viewed as an endemic level of police injustice against black men. The *Anchorage Daily News* reported on one testimony: “It seems that every two years we in the black community find ourselves reacting to some kind of police violence.” Many of the attendees expressed their

frustration at the lack of a police representative at the hearing; yet, they did not act surprised.

Eventually, a jury composed exclusively of whites exonerated the officers involved of any wrongdoing in the shooting of Williams. The AERC submitted a list of recommendations to Mayor George Sullivan. Hoping to ease relations between the Anchorage Police Department and the black community, the AERC called for a federal investigation into the shooting. The commission then recommended a review board to provide oversight of the Anchorage Police Department and maintain open lines of communication with the black community. In addition, the AERC also called for psychological evaluations of officers and a rule that police notify mental health professionals in the event of a standoff or hostage situation. AERC executive director Vince Casey reported a “cool reception” from Mayor Sullivan and the municipal assembly to the commission’s recommendations but a willingness to continue the dialogue, nonetheless.

The activism did provide some concessions. The assembly and community activists reached an agreement whereby regular meetings between police and minority representatives would occur. In August 1981 Ed Wesley, then serving as president of the NAACP, led efforts with representatives from the Alaska Black Leadership Conference and the Alaska Native Caucus to assemble a thirteen-point agreement with the Anchorage Police Department. Wesley also worked with a contact at the Civil Rights Division in the Justice Department to mediate the agreement. The purpose of the document was to ease relations and curb the use of deadly police force, deployed disproportionately against people of color. According to the *Anchorage Daily News*, “The talks were the direct result of a massive outpouring of public sentiment from Anchorage’s black community.”

The mobilization of black Alaskans pushed the Anchorage Police Department to increase their transparency and clarify their policies. In addition, it ensured a means by which black community leadership had a place at the table to present their views in the event of tension or crises. But even as community activists implemented some limited police oversight, the shootings of Moore and Williams nonetheless eroded trust between many in Anchorage’s black community and law enforcement. In combination with the destruction of Eastchester Flats and stagnant to decreasing levels of black participation in local and state politics, the racial climate of urban Alaska could be described as tense in the 1970s and 1980s.

The End of an Era

As Ed McGrath's experiences on the pipeline revealed, Alaska in the 1970s could be disorderly and rough. Money came easily to those who worked on the pipeline, but rising social tensions accompanied the booming economy. Enticed by lucrative wages, thousands of workers traveled to Alaska, and they brought with them their politics and racial assumptions. Some of these new arrivals viewed blacks with suspicion or even outright hostility. This could be seen in the day-to-day interactions on the pipeline but also in the souring relationship between many African Americans and law enforcement. This complicates a celebratory history of civil rights in Alaska. For certain, African Americans and Alaska Natives at times made dramatic advances during the postwar decades. Of course, Alaska Natives mobilized on behalf of a land settlement with the still relatively young forty-ninth state, and the result—the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act, or ANCSA, signed into law in 1971 by Richard Nixon—represented a landmark piece of legislation and marked a departure in how the federal government dealt with the nation's indigenous people.

The 1960s and 1970s were also the peak of the civil rights movement. Alaska showcased differences from the rest of the nation but also many similarities. Housing and employment discrimination, a lack of political representation, a distrust of law enforcement, and general inequality could be found at high levels in Anchorage and Fairbanks, where the majority of Alaska's black residents lived by the 1960s. Therefore, it should not be surprising that men and women stood up to these inequities and demanded their voices be heard. This was true in Alaska, just as it was throughout the country.

Black men and women were agents of social change and participated in Alaska's political and economic life in postwar decades. At the same time, the very real progress cannot be overstated without noting the equally real limitations. On the one hand, Frank Cox used his position at the Small Business Association to discriminate against minority-owned businesses, but on the other hand, Blanche McSmith and Willard Bowman raised awareness and organized on behalf of the black community. Opalanga Pugh and Ed Wesley, who came to Alaska in the 1970s, successfully navigated a fraught racial landscape and thrived amid the booming economy, even as others who prospered on the pipeline were not always so tolerant. Men like Wesley

and women like Pugh and Florine Walker leveraged Alaska's high wages to secure a comfortable life and attain a material well-being beyond the reach of most Americans in the late 1970s. But for each step forward, Alaska's black community also encountered adversity and discrimination as the instances of police violence suggest. Even in the midst of these tensions the conclusion highlights the progress black men and women have made in Alaska at the end of the twentieth century.

CONCLUSION:

Black History in Alaska at Century's End

By the early 1980s, Anchorage was flush with oil wealth. Well-compensated workers completed the pipeline a few years earlier, and residents collected an annual check, known as the permanent fund dividend, from the investment earnings of the state's oil wealth. Many of those who stayed in Alaska increasingly expected the amenities found in the Lower 48. In response, legislators and city officials earmarked millions of dollars to upgrade the city's parks, recreation, and cultural institutions in an effort known as Project 80s. By century's end, Anchorage was home to a museum, an all-purpose arena, a new convention center, and community and transit centers in several neighborhoods, all of which revealed the sizable budgets made possible by oil revenue. But at the center of Project 80s, Anchorage mayor Tony Knowles announced plans for an ambitious performing arts center to anchor the downtown commercial and entertainment district. Some city leaders and members of the African American community proposed that the new performing arts center bear the name of slain civil rights leader Martin Luther King Jr. The Anchorage Assembly met throughout the summer of 1986 and concluded it was a good idea. They voted 10 to 1 to affix King's name to the new venue.

Despite a few high-profile police shootings and frayed relations with law enforcement, the black community had reasons to be optimistic in the 1980s as well. Bettye J. Davis, an ardent defender of public education, won a seat on Anchorage's school board in 1982. That same year, Governor Bill Sheffield appointed Eleanor Andrews to a position in the Department of Administration. During her time in state government, Andrews oversaw Alaska's Division of Labor, Finance and Motor Vehicles. One part of the job required her to review the Small Business Association and the disbursement of

federal and state contracts. She advocated on behalf of minority businesses as part of the state's affirmative action policies and saw to it that they could access the bidding process in ways that Frank Cox had long denied them. Indeed, it would seem to be a new day for Alaska's minority-owned businesses and workers. In Juneau, Rosalee Taylor Walker became the first black woman to serve on the Juneau City Council in 1984.

However unexpected, given the overwhelming vote in support, the naming of the performing arts after Martin Luther King Jr. reignited simmering racial conflict. A vocal contingent of conservative white residents, led by former assemblyman and activist Don Smith, pushed back on the name of the center. Smith mobilized a group of over five hundred like-minded men and women to oppose the performing arts center's name and canvassed the city for additional signatures on a petition to overturn the assembly's decision. Smith and his supporters reasoned that a performing arts center named in honor of King was "awfully oriented toward the minority community and not representative of Anchorage." By November, Smith's coalition submitted a petition with more than eleven thousand signatures (twice as many as required). The petition drive overrode the assembly's vote, and the assembly withdrew King's name from consideration pending a citywide ballot referendum the next year. Smith confessed, "I just don't have the feeling about Martin Luther King that some people in the community do."



In 1984 Rosalee Taylor Walker became the first black elected to the Juneau City Council. Blacks in Alaska History Project records, Archives and Special Collections, Consortium Library, University of Alaska Anchorage.



Eleanor Andrews with Governor Bill Sheffield, 1986. Courtesy of Eleanor Andrews.

As an alternative, Smith suggested that the Fairview community center would be a more appropriate facility to name after King. After all, Smith reasoned, African Americans had long lived in or around that eastside neighborhood; thus, it was more proper to place the iconic civil rights leader's name on a local landmark in the black community rather than one with such high visibility within the city as a whole. For Smith and his supporters, Martin Luther King Jr. and, by extension, his accomplishments simply did not warrant city or statewide recognition. The *Anchorage Daily News* reported the controversy over what to name the arts center throughout the latter half of 1986 through 1987. In October 1987, city residents went to polls on the day of the referendum and voted by a 3 to 1 margin to affirm the petition and reject naming the facility after King. The acrimony reached its peak when during the debate, one assembly member claimed to have "heard the word 'nigger' more times in the past three weeks than in the past 25 years."

One month after the referendum, the Ku Klux Klan, emboldened by the city's decision to reject King's name, opened a recruiting office in town. This was the second time in the decade that the hate group attempted to set up shop in Alaska. David Duke, a former Louisiana politician and a Grand Wizard of the Klan, viewed Alaska as a potential recruiting ground. Duke claimed that white Alaskans would be receptive to his ideas since "you have a lot of Native interest groups up there and a lot of whites have a growing seed

of concern because of the favoritism that's being shown [to] some of these Indian and Eskimo organizations." Duke proposed an Alaska chapter of the National Association for the Advancement of White People (NAAWP) to "preserve the white race and white heritage;" otherwise Duke feared, "we're going to resemble a Third World country instead of the United States that we used to have."

While Duke's effort to establish a NAAWP in Alaska failed, the controversy over the naming of the performing arts center further disturbed the racial fault lines that have characterized Alaska throughout much of its history. For certain, African Americans came to the nation's northernmost territory and then state in search of well-paying jobs and a better life that had evaded them in other parts of the nation. And indeed, black advancement in Alaska has occurred in many aspects of daily life. But as the naming controversy illustrates, a sizable percentage of Alaska's population has embraced racial intolerance and has failed to foster an inclusive and welcoming state.

Consider still another example of how black advancement occurred alongside concrete instances of discrimination. A few years after David Duke launched his campaign in Alaska, Fairbanks elected James C. Hayes as mayor, the first black man to hold the position in any of Alaska's major cities. He ran unopposed as a Democrat in 1992 and won with the support of the town's mostly white electorate. The national press took note, and *Ebony* sent reporters to discuss the meaning of Fairbanks electing a black mayor. Hayes claimed, "In Fairbanks, people tend to accept you as you are. They just want to hear your platform and hear what you believe in, and then see you go out and work really hard." He arrived in Alaska in the 1960s with his divorced mother, who remarried a Baptist minister in Fairbanks. Hayes graduated from the University of Alaska, worked as a teacher and on the construction of the pipeline, volunteered in the community, served on the school board, and even earned an appointment in Governor William Egan's administration in the 1970s when he was in his early twenties.

Hayes boasted a career of public service and gained the respect of many in Fairbanks and beyond. In an interview with the *Fairbanks News-Miner*, Hayes proclaimed, "I tell my kids, 'You're crazy to leave this state. Get a good education, put God first in your life and you can do anything in this state.'" Yet statistics and nuance complicate the narrative, and we are left with reason to celebrate the achievements of men like Hayes, even as we reconcile the underlying structural racism that has dogged Alaska. In fact, the same *Ebony*

piece that profiled Hayes in October 1993 also pointed out that the local NAACP had undertaken an investigation over reports of racial discrimination and harassment at the Fort Wainwright and Eielson Air Force Base.

The successes and opportunities that African Americans have forged in Alaska showcase their determination in overcoming intolerance from conservative elements within the state. In fact, while Alaskans have applauded themselves for a streak of independence and a general disdain for “how they do things Outside,” its history of racial discrimination on the one hand and civil rights mobilization and activism on the other exposes more commonality with other places than it does exceptional patterns of openness. Thus, this historic context has explored the ways that black Alaskans have cultivated community, resistance, and resiliency in the face of varying degrees of discrimination and opposition to their presence. Returning to the naming controversy of the Center for the Performing Arts then serves as fitting place to conclude this study.

The Anchorage Assembly and community activists did not abandon their commitment to Dr. King because of a failure at the ballot box. Soon after the vote, the coalition formed to memorialize King chose a prominent location along the western side of downtown’s Delaney Park Strip as a site for a permanent marker. Immediately, these men and women banded together to raise funds for an impressive public landmark dedicated to the iconic reverend and civil rights leader. A few years later, on a clear and bright Saturday in early December 1996, residents gathered to dedicate the memorial to King. The event had been more than a decade in the making and recalled some of the most acrimonious moments in Alaska’s tumultuous racial history. Indeed, ten years earlier, black activists and a few city leaders lobbied to rename a stretch of downtown’s Ninth Avenue after the visionary leader; a few years later this same group proposed naming the performing arts center after King. In both cases, those who were neither interested in the achievements of the nation’s black population nor in the iconic activist won the debate in a city where racial tensions simmered just below the surface, boiling up now and again.

Like the rest of the nation, Alaska has benefited from an influx of people from various backgrounds, African Americans among them. In fact, as sociologist Chad Farrell has found, Alaska, along with its largest city, Anchorage, “has found itself on the vanguard of America’s diversity trend.” The state has drawn people of African descent but also people from Southeast Asia, the South Pacific, Latin America, and elsewhere. Many of these men, women, and families settled in Dutch Harbor, Nome, Juneau, or Kodiak;

but most reside in the urban centers of Anchorage or Fairbanks. And like the rest of the nation, Alaska's immigrants are more likely to start their own businesses, become medical professionals, and boost economic growth. Although it certainly is not the sole nor even most significant cause, it is not a coincidence that Alaska's economy has expanded almost continuously over the previous generation, at a time when the state's demographics have grown ever more diverse.

Nonetheless, native-born Alaskans and many of those who have come north from the Lower 48 have not always greeted these international arrivals with open arms, despite what contemporary boosters may sometimes proclaim. In this regard, anti-black racism must be viewed alongside and in conversation with discrimination against minority communities throughout the state. And though many Alaskans may prefer to see themselves as free from the biases of other parts of the country, the historical record indicates otherwise. From restrictive covenants and urban renewal to legally dubious employment practices to tensions with law enforcement and a criminal justice system that has disproportionately ensnared men and women of color, Alaska has reflected, and in some cases, exceeded, national patterns of discrimination.

But despite the troubling statistics, thousands of men and women have come to Alaska to better their station, and they have succeeded. The first ones arrived as whalers before the United States and Russia agreed to the Treaty of Cession in 1867. These were the first men of African descent to view the North Pacific and Arctic Oceans. Most did not occupy Alaska for long or even walk upon its shore. Some, however, did stay and settled in some of the most far-flung regions of the world, thousands of miles from where they were born and raised. Evidence suggests some black men intermarried with indigenous women and started families of their own. The gold rush brought thousands of other black men and women to Alaska; few broke even and fewer still struck it rich. But some, like St. John Atherton, for example, earned a quick fortune and a legendary status. A man born into slavery who fled the South, traveled north, and discovered wealth beyond his wildest imagination wrote one story of the black experience in Alaska. He was an exception but nevertheless revealed what could happen.

On the other end of the spectrum might be Ronald Griffin, who froze to death in a tub, alone in a cabin set back in the woods. Griffin's tragic demise spoke to the lonely isolation that many others encountered in their travels north. For most, however, neither the experience of Atherton nor Griffin adequately conveyed a "typical" life for black men and women who arrived

during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Instead, like other settlers, fortune seekers, and runaways who viewed Alaska as a place to start anew, a plethora of experiences prevent generalizations.

The same point would be just as true in a discussion of black history during the hundred years since the gold rush. Thomas Bevers highlights advancement during the 1920s and '30s in Anchorage, but one might note the brutal public execution of two Juneau men in 1948 and 1950 to emphasize the tremendous imbalances in the territory's criminal justice system. In regard to civil rights in Alaska, one may well know the story of Elizabeth Peratrovich and the Anti-Discrimination Act. But to know the whole story, one must include an addendum on the work of Beatrice and Robert Coleman. Only after the couple faced humiliating discrimination in a Fairbanks bar did legislators provide a meaningful enforcement mechanism. Likewise, women such as Blanche McSmith advocated for civil rights and equal opportunity on the state and local level. All the while, Zula Swanson accumulated highly valued property, and Richard Watts ascended the corporate leadership of Carrs after activists picketed the grocery store and demanded that the company promote the careers of well-qualified people of color. Mahala Ashley Dickerson grew up in Alabama, attended law school at Howard University in Washington D.C., and then briefly practiced in Indianapolis. However, life in the Midwest lacked



Mahala Ashley Dickerson, c. 1996. Mahala Ashley Dickerson Papers, 1958–2007, David M. Rubenstein Rare Book & Manuscript Library, Duke University.

the excitement Dickerson desired. She long dreamed of homesteading and eventually claimed 160 acres of land in the Matanuska Valley. She also became the first black attorney in Alaska, passing the bar and opening a law office in 1959. A friend of Rosa Parks, Dickerson advocated for racial and gender equality in Alaska and beyond.

At the turn of the twenty-first century, Alaskans sent African Americans to the state's legislature and its Superior Court. Larry Card served on Alaska's Superior Court for twelve years between 1993 and 2005. Card's tenure on the bench blazed a trail for other black jurists to follow. Pamela Scott Washington served on the Anchorage District Court, Kari McRea served as an Anchorage magistrate judge, and more recently, Herman Walker received an appointment to the Alaska Superior Court in 2015. Meanwhile, financial and lending institutions had long demonstrated discrimination and failed to provide equal access to credit among the black community; many never invested in black-owned businesses. However, the founding of the African American Business Council by Ed Wesley—an activist who long sought more opportunities for young African Americans—in the early 1990s created new pathways for blacks to work at the First National Bank and the National Bank of Alaska. This led to greater representation in one of the state's key economic sectors.

Black men and women have indeed assumed leadership roles in communities big and small throughout the state. Black professionals have forged careers in corporate management, the nonprofit sector, medicine, law, and academia. They have established social networks more common in larger cities, with much larger black populations. In Anchorage, for example, men and women proudly promote their affiliation with the Divine Nine, a nationally known group of fraternities and sororities long associated with the black middle class and elite. In addition, other social welfare and uplift groups have maintained and expanded their presence in Alaska. Some of these have included the Links, Jack and Jill of America, and the Boulé. One common denominator might be that Alaska has provided more opportunities than the places these men and women left. All of those who made the sacrifice to travel north did so at great personal risk. And for that their histories deserve to be told.

Alaska has developed, grown, and changed mightily over the past 150 years. Millions have called Alaska their home, and they have contributed to its colorful history. African Americans featured prominently in the story, even as historians have too often left out their pivotal roles. Accordingly, we must

at once recognize the myriad ways African Americans have created a more open and inclusive Alaska even as they met resistance from those who failed to share their vision or accept their presence. This makes their contributions all the more laudable and worthy of our attention and scholarship. George Anderson, editor of Alaska's first black newspaper, the *Alaska Spotlight*, may have overstated the case when he proclaimed that his adopted home state constituted a "frontier in every respect, with all of the opportunities and more, that were ever offered [to the] pioneers of other days." But for many, the opportunities were at least as real as the limitations. And understanding these limits and obstacles faced by black Alaskans—but more importantly, the freedom they have seized—provides a richer and more complete sense of the forty-ninth state's history.



The Martin Luther King Jr. Memorial, downtown Anchorage, 2018.
Courtesy of David Reamer.

150 Years of Black History in Alaska: A Timeline

1840s–50s Whalers, including several hundred African Americans and people of African descent, reach Alaska and the Arctic.

1867 Alaska is sold to the United States following the Treaty of Cession with Russia.

1875 Michael Healy begins his service in and around Alaska waters.

1896 The Klondike Gold Rush begins. Thousands of men and women from around the world, including African Americans from across the nation, come to Alaska and the Yukon.

1898 Melvin Dempsey establishes a homestead and opens a business outside of Valdez.

1899 The men of Company L, Twenty-Fourth Infantry, arrive in Skagway during the gold rush.

1910 Mattie “Tootsie” Crosby settles in Iditarod, Alaska, and establishes a successful inn and brothel.

1912 Alaska becomes a U.S. territory as a result of the Second Organic Act.

1914 Congress authorizes construction for the Alaska Railroad. Thousands of workers, including at least a few African American families, travel north for the construction effort.

1921 Thomas Bevers arrives in Alaska and later rises to the position of chief of the Anchorage Fire Department.

1927 John Cleveland becomes the first black graduate from Alaska Agricultural College, later known as the University of Alaska and today known as the University of Alaska Fairbanks.

1929 Zula Swanson arrives in Alaska and settles in Anchorage.

1930 Zula Swanson purchases the Rendezvous Building in Anchorage and goes on to assemble real estate holdings that will make her among the wealthiest people in the territory and then state.

1942–43 The Alaska Highway is built. Nearly four thousand black engineers and troops construct some of the most challenging stretches of the fifteen-hundred-mile road.

1942–43 Japan invades the Aleutian Islands of Attu and Kiska. Some of the black troops who built the Alaska Highway are sent to the Aleutians to repel Japanese advancement and assist in the counteroffensive.

1942–45 Herbert Frisby comes to Alaska to report on the war and relay the black experience in the military to the national black press.

1945 Elizabeth and Roy Peratrovich, Alaska Natives, lobby on behalf of the territory's Anti-Discrimination Act of 1945. Though it passed in the territorial legislature, there remained significant loopholes.

1946–47 Robert and Beatrice Coleman, a black couple, test the Anti-Discrimination Act of 1945 after a racist encounter at a bar in Fairbanks. They successfully lobby the legislature to strengthen the act and provide it with meaningful enforcement language.

1948 George Anderson arrives in Anchorage and starts the *Alaska Spotlight*, the territory's first black newspaper.

1950 An arsonist burns down the home of Alvin and Mary Lee Campbell, a black couple who purchased a home in Rogers Park, a neighborhood restricted to whites only. The Anchorage branch of the NAACP is established in response months later.

1950 Eugene LaMoore, a black man convicted on disputed evidence, is hanged in Juneau, the last execution to have occurred in Alaska.

1959 Alaska becomes the forty-ninth state.

1959 Mahala Dickerson becomes Alaska's first black attorney. She had already become the first black homesteader in the Matanuska-Susitna Valley in 1958.

1959–60 Governor William Egan appoints Blanche McSmith to fill a vacancy in the Alaska House of Representatives. McSmith becomes the first African American to hold a legislative office in Alaska.

1960s Mobilizations, marches, boycotts, and picket lines occur in Anchorage and Fairbanks over access to housing, employment, and public accommodations.

1962 The civil rights movement comes to Anchorage. Black men and women picket Carrs grocery store over discriminatory hiring and advancement policies.

1963 Governor William Egan appoints Willard Bowman to head up the Alaska Commission on Human Rights.

1964 Pete Aiken is elected to the Fairbanks North Star Borough Assembly; he is the first elected black official in Alaska's interior.

1970 Willard Bowman and Joshua Wright are elected to the Alaska legislature from Anchorage; they are the first black men to be elected to state office.

1972 Selwyn Carrol wins elections to the Alaska legislature, becoming the first black man elected to hold state-level office from Fairbanks.

1974 Construction on the Trans Alaska Pipeline begins. Several African Americans take part in the effort as laborers and in support services.

1976 Col. William Campfield assumes the role of air base group commander at Elmendorf Air Force Base.

1976 The movie “Pipe Dreams” is released. In Gladys Knight’s acting debut, the film depicts black men and women who came to Alaska during the construction boom of the Trans Alaska Pipeline System.

1982 Bettye Davis is elected to Anchorage School Board, becoming the first black woman to serve in that role.

1988 Everett Louis Overstreet publishes *Blacks on a Background of White*, the first comprehensive book on the history of African Americans in Alaska.

1990 The Martin Luther King Jr. monument is created and funded privately by Alaska residents who raised over \$250,000.

1990 Bettye Davis becomes the first black woman to be elected (and second to serve) to the Alaska House of Representatives and later elected to the Alaska State Senate.

1993 James C. Hayes is elected mayor of Fairbanks. He is the first black man to hold the mayoral office in one of Alaska’s three major population centers.

1993 Larry Card becomes first African American to serve on the Alaska Superior Court.

2000s Several Anchorage zip codes and communities have become among the most diverse in the nation.

For additional dates and another black history timeline, see George Harper’s timeline at http://ftpcontent.worldnow.com/ktuu/black_history/BlackHistory.html, accessed on May 28, 2018.

Biographical Sketches

Velma “Miss Wiggles” Adkerson (1922–2012)

Better known by her stage name, Miss Wiggles, Velma Adkerson worked much of her life as a dancer, comedian, and adult entertainer. An expert at risqué and acrobatic routines, Miss Wiggles cultivated a fan base around Anchorage as she promoted herself as a “marvel in motion.” She was also a dedicated humanitarian who spoke on behalf of women and took on an active role in the community.

In all likelihood Adkerson was born in Atlanta, Georgia, in 1922. But she had a fondness for telling stories and often quipped that she was from South Africa and moved to the United States after her father was trampled and killed by an elephant. Nonetheless, Adkerson traveled throughout the country as a dancer and contortionist before making her way to Anchorage in the 1960s. After a coming of age in New Orleans in the 1930s and '40s, Adkerson worked in Texas, first in San Antonio and then Dallas. There she claimed to have been present at Jack Ruby’s club when President John F. Kennedy was assassinated. She also reported her role as a “break-in” act at predominantly white clubs; she usually performed relatively short opening dances and burlesque shows before the headlining entertainment, typically white women, took the stage. Women like Adkerson paved the way for integrated entertainment in the South during the 1950s and '60s.

Once in Alaska, Adkerson performed at several of the adult bars and clubs, mainly in the Fairview section of Anchorage, an area known for its nightclubs and entertainment. Some of the clubs she performed at included the Brief Encounter, the Idle Hour, and Le Pussycat Lounge (predecessor to the Crazy Horse Saloon). A skilled dancer and self-taught contortionist, Miss Wiggles never danced nude but developed quite a following for her stripteases and acrobatic performances. *Ebony* magazine reported in the early 1960s that she earned \$700 a week (almost \$6,000 in 2019 dollars) to perform.

Beyond her storied career as an entertainer, Adkerson was a known advocate for women who had fallen on hard times. She took in women who fled domestic abuse and sheltered homeless women and abused children. She was also a prodigious seamstress who sewed clothes for friends and performers. Despite a childhood battle with polio that left her with lifelong chronic pain, Adkerson remained dedicated to performance and was known to put on a show for friends and neighbors even into her eighties. Adkerson

should be recognized as Miss Wiggles but also as a feminist who sought to empower women in whatever careers they chose.

Further reading

Mike Dunham, "Mourners recall the humanitarian side of 'Miss Wiggles,'" *Anchorage Daily News*, October 22, 2012.

Pete and Velma Aiken

Pete William Aiken (1942-1988) was a longtime Fairbanks resident, activist, politician, and club owner. Born in South Carolina, he was raised in California. During World War II, he was wounded as he served in Pacific theater with the U.S. Army. After the war, he returned to California and worked as a freelance journalist for some of the leading African American magazines such as *Jet* and *Ebony*.

He first visited Alaska while in the army but returned with his new wife Velma in 1951. The two made the Fairbanks area their lifelong home. The Aikens homesteaded outside the city where they built a two-story log cabin. Pete was a carpenter by trade and worked several years at Fort Wainwright before entering the entertainment business. He operated several clubs around Fairbanks, including the Caribou Country Club, Root Cellar, City, and Bare Affair.

In 1953, the Aikens were founding members of the Fairbanks NAACP chapter. Pete served the Fairbanks NAACP as publicity chairman, vice president, and president. In 1958, he successfully advocated for changes to Fairbanks city hiring practices, including an explicit anti-discrimination provision. In 1958 and 1968, he unsuccessfully ran for the Alaska House of Representatives. In 1963, he unsuccessfully ran for North Star Borough chairman. In 1964, he successfully won a seat on the North Star Borough Assembly, becoming the first African American in Alaska elected to public office. In office, he advocated for increased services for rural Fairbanks area residents. In 1966, tired of poor service, he led a payment strike against the local telephone provider.

Velma Aiken, nee Lewis, also grew up in California. In Fairbanks, she was a longtime employee of the University of Alaska, now University of Alaska Fairbanks, in the registrar's office. She was a member of several organizations, including the NAACP and local Girl Scout council. She also hosted the NAACP Reporter, a fifteen-minute weekly segment that ran on Fairbank's KTVF television station from 1956 to 1960.

Further reading

- Pete Aiken. Letter to Editor. *Fairbanks Daily News-Miner*, December 27, 1966, 4.
“Assemblyman Aiken Files for State House.” *Fairbanks Daily News-Miner*, May 29, 1968, 1.
“Black Leader in Fairbanks Dies.” *Daily Sitka Sentinel*, January 22, 1988, 6.
Margaret Hornbeck, “Hiring Policies Outlined.” *Fairbanks Daily News-Miner*, March 18, 1958, 1, 3.
“Political Candidates Cite Views.” *Fairbanks Daily News-Miner*, August 22, 1958, 6.
“Receive Charter.” *Fairbanks Daily News-Miner*, April 27, 1953, 2.

George C. Anderson (d. 1969)

George C. Anderson, a self-described pioneer and one of Alaska’s most influential writers and news reporters, created two separate newspapers that catered to black Alaskans. He highlighted many issues related to Alaska’s black community at a time when most Alaskans dismissed such topics as racism, discrimination, and inequality as peripheral to their experiences.

Anderson arrived in Alaska after World War II and worked as a newspaper linotype operator for the *Anchorage Daily News*. But not long after he was hired, Anderson started his own newspaper, the *Alaska Spotlight*, Anchorage’s first black newspaper.

Anderson also published an article, “Alaska Frontier . . . Attracts Negro Pioneers,” in the national magazine *Color* in the spring of 1953. The piece described pioneers in Alaska who found economic and political success in the territory. He referred to Anchorage as the “Chicago of Alaska,” a hub for black migration and culture. Many black residents, according to Anderson, worked well-paid jobs, higher than what black workers typically earned elsewhere in the Lower 48 states. Anderson’s paper highlighted black civic and religious life in Anchorage and Alaska more generally.

Anderson also developed another paper, the *Midnight Sun Reporter*, which explored the civil rights movement. The paper documented why some black-led organizations had long harbored an antagonistic relationship with Anchorage’s two military bases. In response, civil rights and labor activists, including those in the NAACP, the New Hope Baptist Church, and the First Christian Methodist Church, prepared to picket the bases in October of 1964. Just days before the protest was to occur, air force officials met with community members and agreed to hire additional African Americans

and Alaska Natives and to address claims of racism and discrimination. At the same time, President Lyndon B. Johnson signed legislation to sanction contractors who engaged in discriminatory and racist practices.

Anderson's contributions to Anchorage as a newspaperman and journalist who reported on both the positive and negative aspects of black settlement in Alaska made him an important figure in the state's history.

Further reading

An incomplete inventory of the *Alaska Spotlight* and *Midnight Sun Reporter* is found in the Blacks in Alaska History Project records available in the Archives and Special Collections of the Consortium Library, University of Alaska Anchorage.

Eleanor Andrews (b. 1944)

A native of Compton, California, Eleanor Andrews attended college in Southern California before moving to Fairbanks in 1965. She then relocated to Anchorage in 1967, where she has lived for over fifty years.

Andrews has held a number of notable positions, including as a counselor at McLaughlin Youth Center and as an employee representative for the Alaska Public Employees Association and the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers. She later took a job as director of employee relations for the Municipality of Anchorage.

Andrews later moved into a position as deputy commissioner in the Alaska Department of Administration. In that capacity, she implemented affirmative action plans and assisted underrepresented people to secure contracts and positions across the state. Aside from her positions in municipal and state government, she started the Andrews Group in 1987. The Andrews Group provided logistics, information, technology, and support services for the U.S. government, primarily the Department of Defense, the U.S. Army, and the U.S. Air Force. Within five years of starting her business, she was named Alaska contractor of the year for her work with the army. In 1994 she earned recognition from the YWCA as a Woman of Achievement. A year later, Andrews won the prestigious ATHENA award for women's leadership in business and community advocacy. And in 1998 the Small Business Association (SBA) recognized her achievements as small businessperson of the year; the SBA received over four hundred nationwide nominations. In 2001 the U.S. Air Force recognized Andrews's contributions as a contractor

and made her an honorary commander of the 381st Intelligence Squadron. *Forbes* magazine has twice recognized her success in the private sector.

Beyond her roles in business and government, Andrews has served in a civilian capacity on several boards. As a representative on Alaska's Judicial Council, Andrews reviewed applications for judges to serve in the Alaska court system. She has served on the board of the Anchorage Chamber of Commerce, the Anchorage Urban League, and the Anchorage Neighborhood Health Clinic. Andrews also participated in the Anchorage Neighborhood Housing Service, where she worked to open up twelve hundred units of affordable housing, something sorely needed in the municipality. In addition, Andrews has been a key contributor to advisory boards for the University of Alaska, Providence Alaska Foundation, Commonwealth North, and the Anchorage Parks Foundation and served as director of Tryck Nyman Hayes Inc. and Eyak Technology.

The University of Alaska Anchorage awarded her an honorary doctorate for her contributions to the community and the state. Throughout her life and in all of her pursuits, Andrews has worked tirelessly as an advocate for quality schools, affordable housing, and economic justice for underserved communities. Her successful career in business has demonstrated versatility and adaptation in the face of economic change and a deep commitment to civic advocacy. Thanks in large part to the efforts of Eleanor Andrews, Alaskan institutions at the local and state level and in the public and private sector have become more inclusive. Andrews is an exemplar of Alaskan activism and civic mindedness.

Further reading

See Eleanor Andrews's entry and induction into the Alaska Women's Hall of Fame at <http://alaskawomenshalloffame.org/alumnae/name/eleanor-andrews/>, accessed May 24, 2018.

Eleanor Andrews has also been featured in Bloomberg, accessed June 6, 2019, <https://www.bloomberg.com/research/stocks/private/person.asp?personId=9846607&privcapId=6451550>.

Margo Bellamy (b. 1951)

Margo Bellamy was born and raised in Miami, Florida and attended college in Albany, New York at the State University of New York (SUNY), where she graduated in 1972. She then stayed at SUNY Albany to obtain a master's

degree a year later. Ms. Bellamy later returned to school at the Alaska Pacific University and the University of Southern California to pursue doctoral work. She obtained a second master's degree in Educational Leadership from the University of Alaska Anchorage in 1986. She and her husband, Howard, have raised two children and have two grandchildren.

Bellamy is most known as an advocate for public education in Alaska. But more recently she has also received the Human Rights Champion Award from the Immigration Justice Project in 2016, and in 2014 Margo Bellamy received the Alaska United Methodist Women Racial/Social Justice Humanitarian Award. She's also earned recognition from the Ford Motor Company as a "Freedom Sister." She has maintained affiliations and memberships in the NAACP, Clare House, and Anchorage's Promise Kids Day Planning Committee. She has also been a former board member on the YWCA Alaska and the Anchorage Community Police Relations Taskforce. Bellamy is currently active in the local chapter of the Alpha Kappa Sorority Incorporated and teaches courses on educational leadership at the University of Alaska Anchorage.

However, much of her forty five year career was defined by her work in education. She has through the years worked in clerical support, as librarian, teacher, assistant principal, principal, and executive director in Alaska's public schools. She has also served as the executive director for the Anchorage School District's Compliance and Equal Opportunity Office. The emphasis has been to ensure that the public school system in Anchorage is able to navigate complex federal and state regulations and demonstrate leadership on issues related to equity and diversity in education.

Since she has retired, Bellamy has continued her advocacy for public education. Most notably, she won an election to the Anchorage school board in 2018. She has supported the right of teachers to collectively bargain, resisted efforts to privatize education, and consistently spoken on behalf of students from diverse backgrounds and low income households.

Further reading

This biographical sketch is based on publicly available information provided by Margo Bellamy at: <https://www.margobellamy.com/why-margo>, accessed on June 25, 2019.

On Bellamy's run for the Anchorage School Board, see, <https://www.ktuu.com/content/news/Margo-Bellamy-ahead-for-Seat-A-on-the-Anchorage-School-Board-508085251.html>, accessed on June 25, 2019.

Charlie Mae “Pat” Berkley (1920–1999)

Charlie Mae Berkley, or Pat, the name she preferred, was long active in Alaska’s civil rights struggles and community organizations. Originally from San Francisco, Berkley traveled the Alaska Highway and settled in Anchorage’s Government Hill neighborhood in the summer of 1956. Nearly as soon as she arrived in Alaska, Berkley began volunteering throughout the community. As a mother of five, she was actively involved in Anchorage’s Parent Teacher Association (PTA) and took on a role administering Head Start programs during the 1960s.

Noted civil rights activist Willard Bowman recruited Berkley and several other black women from the Northern Lights Civic and Social Club into the Anchorage branch of the NAACP in the early 1960s. Soon after, she assumed an important role in the picket of Carrs grocery store. She recalled that the women would typically march during the day, and the men came in the evening. Those on the picket line faced verbal abuse from onlookers and passersby. Even though Berkley was seven months pregnant she marched. Ultimately Carrs did indeed hire and promote some black workers.

Beyond her activism on behalf of civil rights, Berkley also volunteered her time or worked for the American Cancer Society, March of Dimes, the Alaska Black Leadership Conference, the Alaska Women’s Commission, and the Municipal Grants Task Force, and she was an advocate of Planned Parenthood. Though she was initially disappointed with the dusty roads and frontier atmosphere of some parts of Anchorage in the 1950s, she was impressed with its natural beauty and went on to actively contribute to the good of her community.

Further reading

Obituary, *Anchorage Daily News*, March 21, 1999.

Charlie Mae “Pat” Berkley, interview by Bruce Melzer, c. 1982–1983, Bruce Melzer oral history interviews, Archives and Special Collections, Consortium Library, University of Alaska Anchorage.

Thomas Stokes Bevers (1889–1944)

Thomas Bevers was born along the Dan River in Pittsylvania County, Virginia, in 1889. The son of an African American sharecropper and a white woman, Bevers knew well the virulent racism of the American South and sought a better life in the West.

In his late twenties, Bevers left Virginia to enlist as a soldier in the First World War at a time when the nation's armed forces remained segregated. Bevers completed his service and forged a new life in the West, settling in Seattle in 1920. In 1921 Bevers relocated to Anchorage. Perhaps fearing the town's settlers would treat him harshly if they knew of his ancestry, Bevers kept his identity as a mixed-race black man to himself. He was certainly among the earliest African Americans to arrive in Anchorage and one of the few who seemed to have stayed. Active in Anchorage's civic life, volunteering as a firefighter, and working as a blacksmith, Bevers earned the respect of the local townspeople. In fact, his fellow firefighters elected him as Anchorage's first paid chief, which he served as from 1927 to 1940.

In addition to fighting fires, Bevers took an interest in fur trading and, along with several other investors, he purchased eight acres of land between 10th and M Streets, now a part of downtown Anchorage. Bevers' fur farm and trading post culminated in Anchorage becoming a key center for the state's fur trading industry. Two decades later, Bevers, along with others in the young community, initiated an annual fur trading exposition, an event Alaskans recognize today as Fur Rendezvous. In the early 1940s, Bevers won a seat on the city council and served two terms. By the time of his death in 1944, Tom Bevers had ascended Anchorage's social ladder and was revered throughout the community. The *Anchorage Daily Times* eulogized his death: "Anchorage has lost one of its best friends and leaders."

After his death, many in town were surprised to find out that his family was black. It was only after his sister, who reportedly had darker skin, arrived in Anchorage to settle his finances and prepare his body to be returned to Virginia did Anchorage residents learn he was mixed-race. By that time, though, Tom Bevers had accumulated the goodwill of his adopted community. His friends in Alaska lobbied to keep his remains in the territory and provide him a proper burial, a proposition to which his sister agreed. Bevers was laid to rest at the Anchorage Memorial Park Cemetery, where one may find his gravesite today.

Further reading

Blacks in Alaska History Project records, box 5-36, Archives and Special Collections, Consortium Library, University of Alaska Anchorage.

William H. Wilson, "The Founding of Anchorage: Federal Town Building on the Last Frontier," *Pacific Northwest Quarterly* 58 (July 1967): 130–41.

"Thomas S. Bevers Buried in City," *Anchorage Daily Times*, October 23, 1944.

Willard L. Bowman (1919–1975)

Born in Grand Rapids, Michigan, Willard Bowman soon relocated with his family to Toledo, Ohio, where he spent his childhood. He moved to Alaska in 1950 after having served in the U.S. Navy from 1938 to 1945. He described his reason for joining the navy as an escape from “the ghetto of Toledo.” He served aboard the USS Honolulu, which was moored in Pearl Harbor when the Japanese attacked in December 1941. Bowman went on to serve honorably in the Pacific during World War II.

Upon his arrival in Alaska, Bowman worked as a labor-management consultant with the territory during the 1950s. He later served in Governor William A. Egan’s administration in the early years of statehood as a director of the Alaska Commission on Human Rights, a position he held from 1963 to 1970. As director, Bowman spoke candidly about the prevalence of racial discrimination in the newly admitted state and proposed solutions to address the inequities.

Bowman’s work with the Human Rights Commission led him to advocate on behalf of people who faced discrimination when seeking to buy a home and in the workplace. He documented how an area grocery store refused to hire qualified African Americans in management positions during the 1950s and 1960s. He also provided evidence that city and state contracts bypassed qualified black and Alaska Native workers and skilled tradesmen in favor of whites. Financial institutions failed to extend loans on an equal basis as well. Bowman also investigated what he described as conditions reminiscent to servitude among seal harvesters in the Pribilof Islands and the racist hiring practices in the oil industry on the North Slope.

Bowman’s experiences led him to develop the Citizens Council for Community Improvement (CCCI), a research group that acted under the authority of Governor Egan’s Human Rights Commission. With his elevated profile, Bowman then ran as a Democrat and was elected to the Alaska House of Representatives in 1970. As a representative, Bowman continued to give a voice to the people who remained on the margins. Bowman passed away in December of 1975, in the midst of his third term as a state representative.

Governor Egan memorialized Bowman with a proclamation: “His contributions to the long-range welfare of the state will long be remembered.” The Anchorage School District dedicated an elementary school in his name in 1991. Willard Bowman’s contributions place him among the thousands of perhaps lesser-known activists who fought for civil rights at the local level

throughout the United States during the height of the civil rights movement from the 1950s through the early 1970s.

Further reading

See the collection of his work in the Willard L. Bowman Papers, Archives and Special Collections, Consortium Library, University of Alaska Anchorage.

Larry Card (b. 1947)

Born in Kansas, Larry Card grew up poor. His father died when he was eight, and his mother struggled to make ends meet. Despite this Card persevered, graduating from Wichita State University in 1969 and obtaining his law degree in 1976 from the University of Kansas. He joined the U.S. Air Force and attained the rank of major, primarily handling legal defenses. Like many others, Card arrived in Alaska through the military.

After leaving the air force, Card entered into private practice in Anchorage and later joined the local U.S. Attorney's office as a federal prosecutor in the late 1970s and '80s. He served as an assistant U.S. attorney from 1989 to 1991 before transitioning back to private practice. In 1993 Card applied for a state judicial position. Alaska's Judicial Council recommended only three of the twenty-three candidates to Governor Wally Hickel, Card among them. However, Governor Hickel found the candidates "too liberal" and requested more nominees from the council. The council refused to break with procedure, and Hickel's refusal to name a judge threatened a constitutional crisis. Eventually Hickel relented and selected Card, as the council had recommended.

At age forty-five, Card became a superior court judge for the Third Judicial District. Card was also the first black judge in Alaska's history. He served on the Alaska Superior Court from 1993 to 2005. Card prided himself on his courtroom atmosphere. He proclaimed, "I believe that I bring a positive perspective to the bench." As a judge, he passed two retention reviews, which granted him the highest marks for his "understanding and compassion." In retirement, he continued to volunteer and teach the basics of law to schoolchildren, college students, and future attorneys. And though compassionate and empathetic, one Anchorage resident stated, "I suggest to anyone who is contemplating such a heinous crime, think again. Judge Larry Card may be your judge, and God bless him."

Looking back on his career, Card noted, “I think this says that poverty alone is not enough to stop you.” He paved the way for Pamela Scott Washington, an Anchorage District Court judge; Kari McRea, an Anchorage magistrate; and Herman Walker, an Alaska Superior Court judge.

Further reading

“23 Apply for 2 Judge Positions,” *Anchorage Daily News*, March 30, 1993.

“Judicial Nominee List Falls Short of Hickel’s Expectation,” *Anchorage Daily News*, July 21, 1993.

“Card gets Superior Court Seat,” *Anchorage Daily News*, August 14, 1993.

“First Black Judge Is Appointed in Alaska,” *Jet*, November 29, 1993.

“Alaska Digest,” *Anchorage Daily News*, December 3, 2005.

“Card to Retire from Judging Alaska Crime,” *Anchorage Daily News*, December 28, 2005.

Beatrice Lee Coleman (d. 1982)

Beatrice Lee Coleman, born Beatrice Lee Chisolm in Lewiston, Idaho, moved around the West Coast before marrying Robert Coleman (d. 1963) and eventually settling in Alaska in 1945. She grew up on an Indian Reservation in Idaho in a French-speaking household, having family who arrived in the United States from Barbados, then a French colony.

Theresa Lenear, daughter of Robert and Beatrice, reported that her mother and father had experienced race-based discrimination throughout their lives. Beatrice Coleman’s background as a black woman with roots in the Caribbean left her well outside the white American mainstream; her upbringing in Idaho provided her a familiarity with Native Americans in the West. Still, the young woman set out to make a life for herself and worked in blue-collar jobs, including the naval shipyards in and around Seattle; she later worked civil service jobs for the air force. Around the time of the World War II, Beatrice met Robert, and after much discussion, the two decided to relocate from the Puget Sound to Alaska, first to Juneau then to Fairbanks. Upon arriving in Fairbanks, the Colemans noted they were among the few African Americans in town, despite the heavy presence of the military. And though Fairbanks lacked a sizable black community, the African Americans who did reside in town faced discrimination. The black troops who served in the military typically stayed in the segregated quarters on the base.

Beatrice and Robert Coleman’s activism propelled the legislature to close the loopholes in Alaska’s Anti-Discrimination Act of 1945. After having

been refused service at a bar in Fairbanks, the two insisted that the language and intent of the preexisting law be tightened up to ensure that it would offer protections from verbal and written forms of discrimination. In addition, Beatrice Coleman was the first African American woman to enroll at the University of Alaska.

Further reading

Ross Coen, "How Alaska's Equal Rights Law Was First Put to the Test," *Anchorage Daily News*, updated December 2, 2017, <https://www.adn.com/alaska-life/2017/01/14/how-alaskas-equal-rights-law-was-first-put-to-the-test-in-fairbanks/>.

Material related to Beatrice and Robert Coleman may also be found in the NAACP, Western Regional Collection in the Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley.

Mattie "Tootsie" Crosby (1884–1972)

Born in Aroostook County, Maine, Mattie "Tootsie" Crosby (sometimes referred to as Mattie Tola Crosby) came to Alaska during the early 1900s. Following a brief stay in Skagway, Crosby took the Chilkoot Trail bound for Dawson City. She stayed in Dawson briefly before heading to the small settlement of Iditarod in 1910. In addition to Iditarod, Crosby resided in Flat, Sitka, and Fairbanks. During her time in Iditarod, Crosby established a bootlegging operation in violation of federal alcohol prohibition. Her operation was broken up by law enforcement in 1925, and Crosby served a six-month jail sentence in Fairbanks.

After her release, Crosby moved to Flat, a small town south of Iditarod in western Alaska. There she stayed for several decades and became well known to the area miners as a madam and a business owner. Her business establishment, a hotel and brothel she dubbed "The Crosby," served as a hub of entertainment and vice. Throughout the 1940s and 1950s, The Crosby was the "finest bathhouse in Alaska," according to Tootsie Crosby. By one estimate, as many as a dozen sex workers and probably hundreds of men came through The Crosby. Crosby ran her illicit business for decades before she moved to the Sitka Pioneer Home, where she passed away at age ninety in 1972.

Crosby supported herself and even took in several men who in turn offered her protection and performed chores around the homestead in exchange for cash or a place to live. Crosby lived at the margins of the

community and on the edge of acceptance. Other women traveled north to the gold camps and settlements but none accumulated quite the notoriety as did Mattie “Tootsie” Crosby.

Further reading

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Ocea Mae Curry (1910–1992)

Ocea Mae Curry grew up in Louisiana before moving west in the 1940s. She first relocated to Oakland, California, during World War II and then moved to Alaska in 1951. She spent her career in the U.S. Postal Service and was among the first black postal workers in the territory of Alaska. Curry was an active citizen who participated in many Anchorage civic organizations, including the Anchorage Senior Center and Ladies’ Auxiliary for the Veterans of Foreign Wars, the senior center’s Lioness Club, and the American Association of Retired Persons (AARP). Curry was generous with her time and served on the Fairview Community Council in addition to her volunteer work with the Food Bank, the Blood Bank, Bean’s Café, Brother Francis Shelter, and the Muscular Dystrophy Association.

Curry experienced racial discrimination after she moved to Alaska and lived in a tent for several days because she had been denied loans for a home and insurance, despite showing the necessary income and savings. In response, she grew more involved in the cause of civil rights. For her efforts, the Alaska Black Caucus recognized her with an award for community relations. Ocea Mae Curry was also active in politics and volunteered on the campaigns of prominent Alaska Democrats, including Tony Knowles, Bill Sheffield, and Dave Walsh.

Further reading

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Ocea Mae Curry, interview by Bruce Melzer, c. 1982–1983, Bruce Melzer oral history interviews, Archives and Special Collections, Consortium Library, University of Alaska Anchorage.

Bettye J. Davis (1938–2018)

Bettye Davis was born in Louisiana during the Great Depression. She attended Grambling State University before coming to Alaska in 1970. She briefly left Alaska but returned two years later and completed her education at the University of Alaska, where she earned a degree in social work and a certificate in nursing. Davis was a social worker until her retirement in 1986.

After retirement, Davis launched a second career in politics and public service. In the past thirty years, Davis took on a variety of roles in public life. She was elected president of the Alaska Federation of Business and Professional Women and actively participated in the Alaska Women's Political Caucus, the League of Women Voters, and the YWCA. In addition, Davis served or volunteered with the Children's Caucus, the Alaska Black Caucus, and the National Caucus of Black School Board Members.

Some of her most notable contributions have come through her political roles in the state. Davis has consistently been among the most influential women in Alaska. Starting in the 1980s she served non-consecutive terms on the Anchorage School Board and was an outspoken advocate for minority students and for the role of minority leadership in city and state government. Davis served three terms in the Alaska House of Representatives and two terms in the Alaska State Senate. During her tenure in state government—lasting through much of the 1990s and early 2000s—Davis served on or chaired several committees, including the Education Committee, the Health Committee, and the Education and Social Services Committee. She was also a proponent of the reinstatement of the Commission on the Status of Women, which explores some of the unique roles, problems, and circumstances that Alaska women face. In 2010 Bettye Davis was inducted into the Alaska Women's Hall of Fame.

Further reading

See Bettye J. Davis's entry and speech for the Alaska Women's Hall of Fame ceremony at <http://alaskawomenshalloffame.org/alumnae/name/bettye-davis/>, accessed May 18, 2018.

Melvin Dempsey (1857–1915)

Melvin Dempsey was born into slavery in North Carolina in the years before the outbreak of the Civil War. As an adult Dempsey fled the American South and went to Denver where he prospected claims along the Front Range of the Rockies. By age forty, he had become an experienced prospector and looked for new opportunities beyond Colorado. He arrived in Alaska during the gold rush and settled not too far from Valdez, north of Prince William Sound. He was among a small but notable group of black miners and early businessmen who called Alaska home in the early twentieth century.

In Alaska, Dempsey avoided the goldfields and instead opened a restaurant and inn in Valdez to serve those bound for Dawson. However, he still staked claims along the Chisna and Chistochina Rivers. Dempsey also established a chapter of the Christian Endeavor Society to promote Christianity among the settlers. Later Dempsey became Chisna's postmaster. Readers may recognize his name from the Dempsey River and a settlement west of Paxon, both of which bear his name. Later in his life Dempsey became a town trustee. He died while crossing a river near his home in 1915. Never one to view Alaska only as a place to make money and flee, Dempsey settled and developed a true love for the land and its people.

Further reading

Jim Lethcoe and Nancy Lethcoe, *Valdez Gold Rush Trails* (Valdez, AK: Prince William Sound Books, 1996).

George Harper, "Melvin Dempsey," *Anchorage Daily News*, February 13, 1997.

Mahala Ashley Dickerson (1912–2007)

Mahala Ashley Dickerson was born in Montgomery, Alabama, and graduated from Tennessee's Fisk University in 1935. She obtained a law degree in 1945 from the Howard University School of Law in Washington, D.C., one of the nation's foremost and prestigious black universities. Dickerson returned to Alabama where she became the first black female lawyer in the state in 1948. She spent the next six decades in the legal profession and made a name for herself representing people who faced discrimination.

After three years of practicing law in Alabama, she relocated to Indiana in 1951. There, she became the second black woman admitted to the bar. A few years later, Dickerson took a vacation to Alaska, where she grew enamored with the landscape and natural beauty. After a brief return to Indiana,

Dickerson decided to make the move. After filing a claim for a 160-acre homestead in the Matanuska-Susitna Valley near Wasilla, Dickerson became the valley's first black homesteader in 1958. A few months later, Dickerson passed the bar and became Alaska's first black lawyer. Though Dickerson faced discrimination in Alaska as she had elsewhere, she nevertheless decided to stay and eventually opened law offices in Wasilla and Anchorage.

Aside from standing up for herself in court, she won a precedent-setting case for female faculty members at the University of Alaska by demonstrating the pay gap between men and women. Dickerson received many legal honors throughout her career. She was president of the National Association of Women Lawyers from 1983 to 1984, and in 1985 she won the Zeta Phi Beta Award for distinguished service in the field of law. In 1995 Dickerson received the Margaret Brent Award from the American Bar Association, an honor recognizing the most outstanding American female lawyers. Dickerson boasted, "Ruth Bader Ginsburg got hers before me, but I got mine before Sandra Day O'Connor." In addition to her courtroom accolades, Dickerson published an autobiography, *Delayed Justice for Sale*, in 1998. She claimed, "In my life, I didn't have but two things to do. Those were to stay black and die. I'm just not afraid to fight somebody big." As Dickerson ascended the heights of the legal profession, she raised triplet sons and practiced her Quaker faith. Her accomplishments stand among the elites of not only Alaska's history but also the history of the legal profession, civil rights, and women's activism.

Further reading

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Mahala Ashley Dickerson, *Delayed Justice for Sale* (Anchorage: Al-Acres, 1998).

Mahala Ashley Dickerson, "Mahala Ashley Dickerson," in *We Alaskans: Stories of People Who Helped Build the Great Land*, ed. Sharon Bushell (Homer, AK: Road Tunes Media, 2001).

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Mayfield Evans (b. 1935)

Mayfield Evans is an Alaska entrepreneur and retired member of the U.S. Air Force. Born in Greensboro, Alabama, Evans enlisted in the air force in 1955. He served at Anchorage's Elmendorf Air Force Base from 1976 through 1983 where he retired as a Senior Master Sergeant. From 1977 to 1979, Evans was the Alaska Air Command Superintendent. During his military career, he was awarded the Air Force Commendation medal, National Defense Service Medal with three oak leaf clusters, and the meritorious service medal.

In 1978, he cofounded E&S Diversified Services, an Anchorage-based custodial, food service, and warehouse service. Evans and his partner, Willie O. Sims, fulfilled their air force duties in the daytime before working at night with their two sons. In 1985, he bought Sims' shares and became the sole owner of the business. In 1994, he opened Mayfield's Quality Cleaners, an Anchorage dry cleaning and laundry service. Evans has served on two Alaska Governor transition teams and with several community organizations, including the African American Business Council and NAACP. In 1996, the National Society of Fund Raising Executives, Alaska Branch, named Evans that year's Outstanding Volunteer in Philanthropy

Further reading

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Eric Burnett, "Philanthropy Awards Announced." *Anchorage Daily News*, November 18, 1996, D2.

"Mayfield Evans Biography." *HistoryMakers*, 2018. Accessed June 5, 2019, thehistorymakers.org/biography/mayfield-evans.

Kim Fararo, "Doing Business Family Affair: Son's Dream of Owning a Van Helps Make Father's Business a Reality." *Anchorage Daily News*, August 17, 1992, C1.

Herbert M. Frisby (1886–1983)

As a young boy growing up in poverty in Baltimore, Herbert Frisby was drawn to the story of Matthew Henson, also from Maryland. Henson was the first black man to reach the North Pole. He did so with the Robert Peary expedition in 1909, though Henson's role was largely overlooked until recently. Frisby viewed the polar expeditions of Henson as a landmark in black achievement and grew enamored with the circumpolar north, Alaska specifically.

Frisby worked his way out of poverty and graduated from Howard and Columbia Universities. Never forgetting the Arctic travels of Matthew Henson, Frisby wanted to publicize Henson's achievement and travel to the Far North himself. In 1956 Frisby joined a special air force flight to the North Pole as a reporter. When they were over the Arctic Circle, Frisby dropped a memorial for Henson. Because of Frisby's continued efforts, Maryland dedicated April 6 as Matthew Henson Day in 1961. A plaque was mounted in the main hall of the Annapolis statehouse, recognizing Henson as a "co-discoverer of the North Pole."

Before traveling to the North Pole, Frisby served as a war correspondent for the *Baltimore Afro-American*, one of the nation's leading black newspapers, during World War II. He embedded with the Ninety-Fifth Engineering Regiment, a unit of African American soldiers who deployed to Canada and Alaska. He also reported on the construction of the Alaska Highway and then toured military installations from the Aleutians to Nome. While in the Aleutians, Frisby met President Franklin Roosevelt.

Writing for the *Afro-American*, Frisby emphasized what day-to-day life was like for black men serving in the military and as civilians in faraway places like Alaska. He interviewed and wrote about prominent community members such as Anchorage business mogul Zula Swanson, frontier businesswoman Tootsie Crosby, and Anchorage club owner Zelmer Lawrence. Frisby was the only black person in attendance at the ceremonial signing of the Alaska Statehood Act at the White House in 1959. When Frisby died in 1983 at age ninety-seven, he had completed twenty-one trips to Alaska. All the while, he worked as a science teacher at Douglass High School in Baltimore. He often traveled to other schools to make presentations on Henson and Alaska. Such was his fascination for the North that he made his home into an igloo and museum for Henson and his own adventures.

Further reading

Herbert Frisby's papers are housed at the Banneker-Douglass Museum in Annapolis, Maryland.

Walter Furnace (b. 1943)

Walter Furnace was born on New Year's Eve 1943. He grew up in Ennis, Texas, and enlisted in the U.S. Air Force after his high school graduation in 1962. From there, he made his way to Anchorage, serving at Elmendorf Air Force Base until 1966, when he was honorably discharged from the service and soon after enrolled at the University of Alaska Fairbanks where he completed a degree in 1972.

Even before he graduated, Furnace accepted a position as a management trainee at the National Bank of Alaska. He quickly assumed the role of assistant vice president and branch manager. He held this position for nearly a decade before moving on to other pursuits. Throughout the 1970s, Furnace was a member of the Anchorage Parent Teacher Association and developed a passion for education advocacy. He ran for and won a seat on the Anchorage School Board and began to lobby state politicians in Juneau on behalf of several educational initiatives. *Jet* magazine ran a brief story on his accomplishments in the February 14, 1980, issue and again on May 23, 1983.

In 1982 Furnace ran for a seat in the Alaska House of Representatives. He won the election and became Alaska's first black Republican to hold office. During his four terms, his emphasis remained on issues related to education and Alaska's business community. Furnace was a spokesman for economic development and a member of the Alaska Federation of Business, the Minority Business Opportunity Committee, the Alaska Black Caucus, and Junior Achievement of Alaska. He also served as executive director of the Alaska Business Development Center.

With a quarter century of experience in business and politics, Furnace left Alaska in 1998 to work for the American Airlines Federal Credit Union in Dallas. The move brought him closer to his childhood home and Texas family. His work for the credit union was recognized in 2014 when he accepted the Paul Revere Award for Outstanding Grassroots Advocacy from the National Association of Federal Credit Unions. Furnace is among a distinguished group of African Americans to have held elected office in Alaska and to have found success in business both in and outside of Alaska.

Further reading

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Walt Furnace was interviewed by the HistoryMakers on September 15, 2017.

A brief biography is available at <http://www.thehistorymakers.org/biography/walter-furnace>.

Elvi Gray-Jackson (b. 1953)

An Anchorage public servant for more than thirty years, Elvi Gray-Jackson moved to Alaska from New Jersey in 1982. She has worked with several community service organizations, including Identity Inc., the ARC of Anchorage, Big Brothers/Big Sisters, and the Boys and Girls Clubs of Alaska. In 1983 she took a job with the Municipality of Anchorage's Public Transit Department, and in 1988 she served Anchorage as an administrative assistant for the Office of the Assembly Budget Analyst. Gray-Jackson was promoted to senior budget analyst in 1992 and as director of the Budget and Legislative Services Office in 2001.

In 2008 Gray-Jackson was elected to the Anchorage Municipal Assembly, representing the city's Midtown District. Anchorage voters twice reelected Elvi Gray-Jackson, and term limits ended her tenure with the assembly in 2017. As an assembly member, she continually fought to maintain and improve Anchorage's public safety. Gray-Jackson supported pay raises for police officers and firefighters, fought cuts to snowplow service, advocated for solutions to homelessness, and fought to preserve the safety of the city's many parks. She also supported revisions to the city's outdated housing codes, which had allowed for apartments without built-in heating. She has long been a proponent for labor and minority rights. In 2015 she supported the city's LGBTQ+ community through a ballot initiative that banned discrimination. The measure succeeded after decades of opposition.

Without campaigning, Gray-Jackson was nominated for and won the vice-chair position within the assembly in 2014. After a unanimous secret ballot of assembly members in 2016, she became the first black woman to serve as the assembly chair, the highest legislative position for the city. As chairwoman, she organized the assembly's committees and administered its meetings. In November 2018 Elvi Gray-Jackson was elected to serve in the Alaska Senate; her election marks the next phase in an ongoing and successful political career.

Throughout her public service career, Elvi Gray-Jackson has advocated for greater public participation in the city government. "People should get more involved because you have an opportunity to make decisions for our community; an opportunity to vote for people you think share your values, and who are going to do a good job on behalf of all of us," said Gray-Jackson in a 2016 interview. As chairwoman of the Anchorage Assembly, she would pick one of the onlookers to lead the Pledge of Allegiance before meetings. She has implored Anchorage residents to reverse the city's low electoral turnout:

“Voting for your assembly representatives makes a difference, because these are the people who are making decisions for all of us at a local level. These are the people that are approving not only the school budget but the city’s budget.”

Further reading

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Elvi Gray-Jackson, “Vote to Support Social Justice in Anchorage,” *Anchorage Daily News*, March 10, 2017.

George Harper (1930–2004)

George Harper, born in Depression-era Atlanta, served in the U.S. Navy and U.S. Air Force during the Korean War. He rose to the rank of master sergeant before concluding his service in 1966; he then furthered his education and earned a degree in Ohio. After retiring from the military, Harper became a computer programmer for the Bureau of Land Management, a position that brought him to Alaska in 1981 after brief stints elsewhere in the Pacific Northwest.

While George Harper gained a reputation as a skilled computer programmer and educator, his animating passion was always for black history and the role that people of color have played in shaping Alaska. Harper spent more than seven years in the late 1990s and early 2000s crafting his Blacks in Alaska History Project and curating his research into an archival collection and traveling exhibit. Today, Harper’s collections include more than six hundred historical photographs, newspaper items, and various reference material, all of which chronicle black life in Alaska as far back as the 1860s and 1870s.

Harper put together his first exhibit about Alaska’s black history in February 1989 for the Bureau of Land Management. Three years later, he gave lectures in Alaska communities to highlight the black engineers who built the Alaska Highway. And in the following years he took his exhibit to six locations around the state. Until then, the role of black men in the building of the Alaska Highway was relatively unknown and overlooked. That same year, Harper started a nonprofit known as the Blacks in Alaska History Project Incorporated.

In addition, Harper conducted thorough research on black involvement in the Yukon and Bonanza Creek Gold Rushes and mapped the travels of African Americans from nearly every corner of the state. His collection of papers includes detailed biographical information on several black Alaskans who fought for social justice in the state, established businesses, or went into politics. Harper's diligent research has cast light on the extent to which people of color have shaped Alaska's history as a territory and state. This very project is indebted to Harper's efforts and his collection of sources, housed at the Consortium Library, University of Alaska Anchorage.

Further reading

See George Harper's papers and the Blacks in Alaska History Project papers in the Archives and Special Collections of the Consortium Library, University of Alaska Anchorage.

Michael Healy (1839–1904)

Born in Georgia in 1839 and the son of an Irish-born slaveholder and a black woman, Michael Healy grew up amid the tumult of sectional conflict and Civil War. Though enslaved, his mixed-race heritage provided him with opportunities most black children in the South could never have imagined. His father, a wealthy plantation owner, sent Healy north to receive an education; a white father sending a mixed-race son away for schooling was not unheard of in the antebellum era.

After the Civil War, it remained nearly impossible for Healy, despite his light skin, to become anyone other than a second-class citizen in much of the United States. Yet Healy's skin tone and education allowed him to pass as white in other parts of the country, namely the American West. Healy served in the U.S. Revenue Cutter Service, the precursor to the U.S. Coast Guard, and headed toward the Pacific coast. While the Revenue Cutter Service prohibited African Americans from enlisting, Healy kept his African descent hidden and managed to ascend the ranks.

Following the 1867 Treaty of Cession, the Revenue Cutter Service maintained a presence along the Pacific coast and into the Bering Sea and Arctic. Healy became a captain in 1883 and solidified his standing as one of the most skilled navigators of the North Pacific's treacherous waters. As captain of the cutter *Rush*, Healy and his crew were a reliable presence along the more than three thousand nautical miles of coastal waters from San

Francisco to Barrow. Healy and his crew aided distressed ships, and in one instance, his crew on the cutter *Bear* conquered gale-force winds off the coast of Point Barrow to save 160 men stranded at sea.

Beyond patrolling the seas, Healy and Lt. George Stoney were the first non-native men to map the Kobuk River and its attendant valleys. Healy also built relations with Alaska Natives who lived along the Bering and Chukchi Seas. These communities relied on marine mammals for subsistence but had a distrustful relationship with the commercial whalers. Healy served as an arbiter between outsiders who hunted the bowheads for profit and indigenous people who required them for food. As whalers took ever more bowheads, Healy encouraged the region's Iñupiat to herd reindeer as an alternative means of subsistence.

While Healy cultivated ties with Alaska Natives, he offended the sensibilities of the Women's Christian Temperance Union (WCTU). After a couple of high-profile instances of drunken and disorderly behavior landed in West Coast newspapers, the WCTU concluded Healy had succumbed to his addiction to "demon rum," corrupted the morals of young men, and was generally unfit for his job. Healy was known for his short temper as evidenced by his nickname, Hell Roaring Mike Healy. Nonetheless, few disputed his skills as a captain and his tenacity in the face of adversity. At the peak of his career, Healy knew the North Pacific and Arctic waters perhaps better than anyone. Healy even led the naturalist John Muir to Alaska and into what is now Glacier Bay National Park during the 1880s. These trips brought greater awareness of Alaska's rugged beauty to a national audience. To memorialize Healy's accomplishments, the U.S. Coast Guard named an icebreaker (among the more technologically advanced ships in the fleet) the USCG *Healy* in 1999, ninety-five years after his death.

Further reading

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Douglas Kroll, *A Coastguardsman's History of the U.S. Coast Guard* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 2010), 52–55.

Dennis L. Noble and Truman R. Strobridge, Captain “*Hell Roaring*” Mike Healy: *From American Slave to Arctic Hero* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2009).

James M. O’Toole, *Passing for White: Race, Religion, and the Healy Family* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2003).

Carolyn E. Jones (b. 1941)

Born and raised in upstate New York, along the Hudson River, Carolyn Jones displayed intellectual promise early on, despite encountering prejudice. Her grade school teachers recognized her talents and encouraged her to earn a college degree. Jones received a full academic scholarship to Stanford University and graduated with distinction in 1963. Next, Jones was accepted into Yale Law School, also on a fully funded scholarship, and completed her degree in three years. While at Yale, Jones was the first woman president of the Yale Law School Student Association.

Carolyn Jones began her legal work in Alaska in 1975, taking a position for the Alaska State Commission for Human Rights. She served as an assistant attorney general and a supervising attorney for the State of Alaska until her retirement in 1998. During these years, Jones earned recognition for her service through the Alaska State Commission for Human Rights Award for Distinguished and Dedicated Service in 1984 and the Alaska Bar Association Distinguished Service Award 1990.

Even as she developed an impressive legal career for the state and a reputation as an advocate for children and global human rights, Jones has long volunteered in the community and well beyond. Notably, the Rotary Club invited Jones to join in 1987, the first year women were allowed to do so. However, Jones declined after determining that the invitation was half-hearted. Eventually, however, she not only joined the Rotary Club but earned a spot on the board and then became the president of the Rotary Club of Anchorage East. In 1997, Jones won the governorship of Rotary District 5010, a district that included Alaska, Yukon, and eastern Russia; this was the largest Rotary District in the world by distance.

Jones’s service to the Rotary led her to Russia three times as a volunteer to teach students with developmental disabilities and twice as a visiting faculty member in Russian universities. For her service in the Rotary Club, Jones received the Rotary International Service Above Self Award in 2001 and the Rotary Foundation Distinguished Service Award in 2009. Jones also

received recognition by the Alaska Bar Association and the Russian Children's Foundation. But among her accomplishments with the Rotary Club, one stands out as arguably the most impressive. According to her biography in the Alaska Women's Hall of Fame: "In 2005 Jones became the first woman in the world to be appointed as trustee to "The Rotary Foundation" (2005 -2009). In that position she worked with and spoke to Rotary clubs around the world [and] served as president's representative to districts in Italy, Canada and the U.S., and is currently vice chairperson of the Rotary Foundation Peace Centers Committee."

Carolyn Jones has compiled a list of achievements and educational accolades that few could match. Her career in Alaska as a human rights lawyer has provided a voice of compassion in the legal and non-profit worlds. She has brought an intellectual rigor to her endeavors and has gained recognition as a leader and humanitarian in the various capacities in which she has served.

Further reading

See Carolyn E. Jones's entry in the Alaska Women's Hall of Fame, accessed at <http://alaskawomenshalloffame.org/alumnae/name/carolyn-jones/>.

Carolyn E. Jones's acceptance speech for the Alaska Women's Hall of Fame may be accessed at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Xi4uBDfKAs8>.

James "JP" Jones (1912–2002)

James "JP" Jones grew up in Houston, Texas, during the Jim Crow era and during the civil rights movement. Jones was dedicated to equality and speaking out against racism in all of its forms. He recalled the intimidation and violence he and his family faced in Texas, including an instance where his mother found a stick of dynamite placed on the front door of their home. Jones decided to leave the South, and in 1951 he arrived in Fairbanks, Alaska. Upon arrival, Jones joined a labor union and participated in the territory's postwar construction boom. Eventually he started his own convenience store and, later, an ice factory.

Jones was well known around Fairbanks for his outspoken views and a dedication to equality. His daughter, Gege, has claimed the P in his name stood for "persistent, persevered, pro-willed." Although Jones spent his life working in a number of fields, he remained active in the community. Most notably, Jones led Alaska's NAACP for fifteen years, from the 1970s into the 1980s. Friends and family lobbied to rename the Fairbanks Southside

Community Center in his name, and just a week before he died, the efforts paid off. Today the facility is known as the JP Jones Community Development Center. Jones is among the longest serving presidents of Alaska's NAACP and is remembered as a voice of justice in Alaska's interior.

Further reading

See the brief biography of Jones on the website of the JP Jones Community Development Center <http://www.jpjonescdc.com/about-james--jp--jones.html>, accessed September 20, 2018.

Jewel Jones (b. 1943)

Jewel Jones was born in Oklahoma at a time when the state remained heavily segregated. She spent much of her youth in Harlem, New York, with her paternal grandparents. Her mother's side of the family hailed from the Oklahoma City area, on land that produced considerable amounts of oil wealth. This afforded the family opportunities atypical for blacks in Oklahoma during the 1940s and '50s. Her grandfather, unable to formally open or own a franchise due to his race, nonetheless established a soda company that sold its product to the black community. Jones has reported that this instilled in her a belief that anything could be possible.

Jones arrived in Alaska in 1967 and promptly found work in local government. She worked for the City of Anchorage and then the Municipality of Anchorage (after the 1975 merger) for thirty-two years and has served in executive management for the Social Services Department and the municipality's Department of Health and Human Services. In those positions, Jones mentored hundreds of men and women from underrepresented backgrounds, preparing them for careers in public service. Jones was an influential voice and advocate for Anchorage's municipal health system and the Anchorage Senior Center.

After leaving her position with the municipality, Jones consulted for local groups and later took a job as the interim executive director of the Anchorage Community Land Trust in 2007. While there, Jones led revitalization efforts in Mountain View, a low-income neighborhood in Anchorage with a high minority population. Throughout her six years with the land trust, Jones worked to convert abandoned buildings into office space, affordable housing, and locations for artists, entrepreneurs, and activists. As a result of these efforts, investment returned to Mountain View.

Jones has also taken on active roles in several community groups and nonprofit boards, including Commonwealth North, the United Way of Anchorage, and the Alaska Center for the Performing Arts. As chair of the board of the Alaska Housing Finance Corporation, Jones actively lobbied for senior housing across Alaska. She has also been active in the Anchorage NAACP, Alaska Black Caucus, and Anchorage Urban League. These institutions have empowered young men and women of color and facilitated relationships in business and government. Jones has received recognition for her efforts from the YWCA and the Anchorage Chamber of Commerce. She also received an ATHENA award for her achievement in advancing female excellence. The National Association of Social Workers, Alaska Chapter, awarded her Citizen of the Year in 2001, and she was inducted to the Alaska Women's Hall of Fame in 2013.

Jones can proudly look back at a career that has consistently put the people of Anchorage first. Her focus on low-income and working Alaskans has been a hallmark of her pursuits. Jewel Jones stands among an impressive cadre of black women who have excelled in public service and improved the lives of many Alaskans.

Further reading

See Jewel Jones' entry and speech for the Alaska Women's Hall of Fame at <http://alaskawomenshalloffame.org/alumnae/name/jewell-jones/>, accessed May 29, 2018.

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Blanche McSmith (1920–2006)

Born Blanche Louise Preston in Marshall, Texas, on May 5, 1920, Blanche McSmith went on to have one of the most distinguished careers of any Alaskan. Educated at Wiley College, the historically black college in her hometown, and then the University of Southern California, McSmith determined early on to lead a life in public service.

While working toward her master's degree in social work at USC, Blanche Preston met and soon married William McSmith, a Los Angeles businessman. The two moved to Kodiak in 1948, where they lived for a year before moving to Anchorage. As soon as the couple arrived in Anchorage,

McSmith made a mark as an organizer and activist in the black community. She led the newly formed branch of Anchorage's NAACP in 1951 and actively lobbied local and state governments to address the institutional racism that people of color in Alaska too often faced. She argued before policy makers that a stronger civil rights law was necessary to address the shortcomings of the Anti-Discrimination Act of 1945.

Her efforts came to the attention of Alaska's first state governor, William A. Egan, who appointed McSmith to serve in a vacant seat in the Alaska House of Representatives. She became the first African American to hold the position. As a legislator, McSmith advocated on behalf of Alaska's minority and working-class populations. These families too often lacked decent housing and employment. And while she did not achieve fair housing legislation at the state level, she did shepherd a fair housing ordinance through the Anchorage Assembly in 1967. She was a vocal critic of urban renewal efforts in Anchorage, believing it would displace residents in Eastchester Flats and Fairview, two neighborhoods with a high percentage of African American and low-income residents.

In the early 1970s, McSmith accepted a position as the director in the Office of the Governor for the Public Employment Program. After her retirement, Blanche McSmith continued her work as an activist and raised awareness about the continuing inequality across Alaska and the United States. As an editor for the *Alaska Spotlight*, one of Alaska's black newspapers, McSmith demonstrated a gift for communication and biting commentary; she never failed to use her pen or her voice to call out injustice. As Alaska's first black legislator, McSmith will always hold a place in the history of the forty-ninth state.

Further reading

See two brief biographical sketches on Blanche McSmith at the Alaska

Women's Hall of Fame website, <http://alaskawomenshalloffame.org/alumnae/name/blanche-mcsmith/>, accessed May 25, 2018; and her entry at BlackPast.org, May 15, 2007, <http://www.blackpast.org/aaw/mcsmith-blanche-1920-2006>.

Blanche McSmith also has records showcasing her activism in the Blacks in Alaska History Project records, accessible in the Archives and Special Collections, Consortium Library, University of Alaska Anchorage.

Everett Louis Overstreet (b. 1941)

An engineer by education and trade, Everett Louis Overstreet would become the first man to document and write a history about black Americans in Alaska. Born in DeKalb, Mississippi, in 1941, his family moved to Ohio when he was a child. There he finished his schooling and worked as a block captain for Carl Stokes' famous mayoral campaign in Cleveland. Stokes was elected in 1967 as the first black mayor of a major American city. That same year, Overstreet earned an undergraduate degree in engineering from Ohio University. Soon after, in 1973, he earned his master's in engineering from Carnegie Mellon University. While in Pittsburgh, he worked for the Port Authority of Allegheny County.

He moved to Alaska in 1975 where he promptly found work as an engineer for the Alyeska Pipeline Service Company. In Alaska, as he had elsewhere, Overstreet took an interest in politics and history. He served as a founding member of the Alaska Black Caucus, which, over the years, investigated judicial and economic injustice. Overstreet helped to publicize the findings, and the group frequently advised the state's leading politicians. Overstreet left his position on the pipeline in 1978 for Contra-Tech, an Anchorage business that he cofounded. In 1986, the Anchorage School District hired Overstreet as the executive director of Facilities, Maintenance, and Operations. From this position, he oversaw the district's various multimillion-dollar operating and capital projects. He was the highest-ranking black official with the district and one of the most prominent members of Anchorage's black community. After a series of politicized battles with the school district's leadership, Overstreet returned to the private sector and eventually left Alaska in 1992. He received numerous awards for his civic service, including the Citation Award in 1988 from the Anchorage Municipal Assembly for his role in reducing racial tensions, and he received acknowledgments and appreciation from three Alaska governors and a 1992 National Builder Award from the National Black Caucus of State Legislators.

During the 1980s, Overstreet authored more than two hundred articles for the *Anchorage Times* and the *All-Alaskan Weekly*. His topics frequently dealt with race relations and included topics such as police violence, the need for a Martin Luther King Jr. holiday, and the history of African Americans in Alaska. In 1988 he published *Black on a Background of White: A Chronicle of Afro-Americans' Involvement in America's Last Frontier, Alaska*. Aside from this volume, Overstreet's book remains the only extended treatment of the topic.

Everett Louis Overstreet has long emphasized the importance of knowing one's history in order to ensure that the future can be better than the past.

Further reading

Everett Overstreet, *Black on a Background of White: A Chronicle of Afro-Americans' Involvement in America's Last Frontier, Alaska* (Anchorage, AK: Alaska Black Caucus, 1988).

John S. Parks (1907–1995)

When he passed away in April 1995 in Pasadena, California, the *Anchorage Times* wrote, “in a very real sense, John S. Parks was Anchorage’s first black activist.” Parks arrived in Alaska at a time when Anchorage boomed with a heavy influx of Cold War military spending. Hearing that the territory provided high wages for men who were willing to learn a skilled trade, Parks, who grew up in Oklahoma and California, moved to Anchorage in 1951. Although Parks had little formal education, he was a skilled carpenter and quickly found work through the Local 1281 Carpenter’s Union where he was an active member from 1951 to 1968.

Aside from his carpentry, many in town knew John Parks for the petitions he drafted to lobby the city for public services, particularly in his neighborhood of Fairview. He went from site to site in search of signatures, and he spoke to fellow Anchorage citizens about the issues they cared about most deeply. Some of his biggest concerns included making sure that Fairview residents had paved streets and timely snow removal. He worked tirelessly to build community-police relations and improve public safety. In addition, he worked to get a post office in the Eastchester neighborhood as well as parks for area youth. Parks also served on the Alaska State Housing Authority to advance the cause of low-income housing throughout the city and state. He believed that all men and women must have access to an affordable home in safe neighborhoods. For his efforts, many called him the “unofficial mayor, mentor, and one-man Chamber of Commerce of Fairview.”

His most notable accomplishment was his tireless lobbying to get Anchorage to develop a public transportation network. The People Mover, as it's known today, was the culmination of a campaign led by Parks to secure a budget that included funding for a bus line. Today, thousands of residents rely on the People Mover to get to work and school and from one end of town

to the other. Parks was also active in Alaska's Democratic Party and attended state and national conventions. He ran for city council and the Alaska House of Representatives. Parks also served as an NAACP branch president during the 1970s, a period when the organization grew rapidly.

Further reading

See biographical information on John Parks in the Blacks in Alaska History Project records, Archives and Special Collections, Consortium Library, University of Alaska Anchorage.

Alonzo B. Patterson Jr. (b. 1937)

Born in New Orleans, Louisiana, amid the Great Depression, Alonzo Patterson's life has long been centered in the religious community of Alaska's Baptist Church. Like many others, Patterson came to Alaska with the military and arrived in 1962, just three years after statehood. Ordained as a minister in 1960, Patterson presided over the Corinthian Baptist Church in Fairbanks for seven years before moving to Anchorage to become the pastor of Shiloh Baptist Church in 1970.

He led the congregation at Shiloh Baptist Church for forty-seven years. In that time, he witnessed Anchorage change from a town dominated by a white population with a rather small black minority to one of ever-increasing diversity. The Shiloh Baptist Church, located in Fairview, has long been a central institution in Anchorage's black community, thanks in large part to his stewardship.

Patterson has served as president of the Alaska NAACP. In 1996 he and Anchorage mayor Rick Mystrom founded the Bridge Builders, which connected Alaskans and forged harmonious communities within Anchorage's increasingly diverse population. Patterson also chaired the Martin Luther King Jr. Foundation in Alaska. In 2017 Patterson stepped down from his role as lead pastor at the Shiloh Baptist Church, but he has remained active in and around Anchorage and continues his outreach with an emphasis on black men who have been historically underrepresented in the local economy, state and local politics, and business. Thanks in large part to his efforts, Shiloh Baptist Church remains an indispensable institution. For his part, Patterson stands among the most recognizable figures in Alaska's faith-based community.

Further reading

See the entry for Dr. Alonzo B. Patterson Jr. on the American Baptist Home Mission Societies website at <http://abhms.org/about-us/staff/dr-alonzo-b-patterson-jr/>, accessed May 25, 2018.

Michelle Theriault Boots, "After 47 Years, an Anchorage Pastor Takes the Pulpit One Last Time," *Anchorage Daily News*, November 7, 2017, <https://www.adn.com/alaska-life/2017/11/06/after-47-years-an-anchorage-pastor-takes-the-pulpit-one-last-time/>.

Jim Posey (b. 1948)

Born and raised in Beaumont, Texas, Jim Posey grew up with a fascination for life in Alaska. Once he learned that the forty-ninth state was more than twice as large as Texas, he was determined to visit. However, it took another twenty years for Posey to achieve his longtime goal of making it to Alaska. He arrived in 1979, and with his wife, Sandy, raised five children over the next forty years. Posey attended Lamar University in Beaumont but joined the U.S. Air Force after completing his first year. He served as a combat crewmember in Wichita, Kansas, and enrolled at Wichita State University to complete his undergraduate degree. Upon completing his service in the air force, Posey earned a law degree at the University of Kansas and soon after took a position in ARCO's (Atlantic Richfield Company) land department in Dallas. ARCO briefly sent him to Prudhoe Bay on Alaska's North Slope, where he witnessed Alaska's oil boom in the late 1970s. However, his first Alaska sojourn was cut short when ARCO transferred him to Denver. After a year in Colorado, Posey strongly desired to return to Alaska. He even quit his job when it seemed as though ARCO would not be able to relocate him, but in 1979 ARCO developed its Kuparuk River Oil Field, and the company asked him to return to Alaska. Posey accepted the offer, and his family headed back to Alaska a week later.

During Posey's time with ARCO, he assisted with the operation of the Kuparuk River Oil Field and served as a liaison to the North Slope Borough. He proudly notes that his efforts allowed for the village of Nuiqsut to gain access to natural gas from the nearby Alpine Field. Posey credited ARCO with giving him the valuable experience of working with local and municipal governments. In 1995 when ARCO requested to relocate the family to California, Posey declined and left the company. He quickly found work with the administration of the newly elected governor, Tony Knowles.

Governor Knowles appointed Posey to the Alaska Public Utilities Commission, now known as the Regulatory Commission of Alaska. Posey remembered that at the time he took the position, the local utilities experienced much growth but also turmoil as they went from public to private control. Posey managed the sale of the Fairbanks utilities, which included water, sewer, and power. He also worked with Anchorage leaders to put together the sale of the Anchorage Telephone Utility to Alaska Communications Systems (ACS). He served out his term at APUC and then took a break to assist in the homeschooling of his children. The family was instrumental in the formation of the Family Partnership Home School. Affiliated with the Anchorage School District, the Family Partnership Home School provided Anchorage families an alternative to traditional public schooling.

Posey returned to work in 2000 and joined the administration of Anchorage mayor George Wuerch. Mayor Wuerch initially expected Posey to run Anchorage Municipal Light and Power, but he was unable to due to restrictions stemming from his previous stint in the utilities sector. However, Posey accepted a position as director in the Cultural and Recreational Services Department, overseeing the operation of parks, libraries, swimming pools, the convention center, and museum. Posey affectionately referred to his place of work as “the Department of Fun,” for the various recreational functions that operated under the purview of his department. Posey’s career in Alaska spanned an impressive four decades, taking him from the oil fields of the North Slope to the halls of power in Alaska’s telecom industry, into state and local government.

Further reading

Shehla Anjum, “Iconic Alaskan: Jim Posey,” *Alaska Business*, April 2014.

Walter Sapp (b. 1944)

Walter Sapp was born on March 31, 1944, in St. Augustine, Florida. He graduated as the class valedictorian from Richard J. Murray High School in 1961 and enlisted in the U.S. Coast Guard. Sapp traveled with the Coast Guard to Cape May, New Jersey, where he was selected to join the Honor Guard and participate in official marches, inspections, and demonstrations for various world dignitaries, including John F. Kennedy. Sapp eventually achieved the rank of a Petty Officer and Third Class Radioman (RM3-E4).

Sapp served on the U.S. Coast Guard cutter *Pontchartrain* in Long Beach, California. His primary mission was safety of life and property at sea. The *Pontchartrain* patrolled the waters of California, Oregon, Washington, Alaska, and Hawaii. In addition, Sapp traveled to duty stations in Japan, Newfoundland, the Philippines, Florida, and Massachusetts between 1962 and 1970. In 1970 Sapp received orders to deploy with the USCG *Squadron Three* in Da Nang, Vietnam. There, he saw combat with the navy's Coastal Surveillance Forces, and he and others engaged and destroyed enemy trawlers and stopped guns from being smuggled in banka boats from North Vietnam into South Vietnam.

Beyond his service in Vietnam, Sapp served in Chile and made trips with the Guard to Antarctica aboard an icebreaker. He also traveled to New Zealand and the Arctic. During Sapp's service in the Coast Guard, he earned a degree from the University of the District of Columbia and a graduate degree from George Washington University. As a result of his efforts and education, Sapp served as the deputy chief of the Military Equal Opportunity Division in the late 1970s. At the Office of Civil Rights Sapp investigated discrimination in the Coast Guard and served as a Senate aide during Jimmy Carter's inauguration.

In August 1983 Sapp reported to duty as deputy comptroller at the Coast Guard Support Center in Kodiak, where he managed federal funds for the Guard and taught accounting at Kodiak College. He also studied to become a master Mason with Pillar Mountain Lodge No. 5, Prince Hall Affiliation in Kodiak, and worked his way to the position of worshipful master, Pillar Mountain Lodge No. 5 within a few years.

Sapp retired from the Coast Guard in 1986 as a lieutenant commander and made Kodiak home. In retirement, he picked up work as a field auditor for Alaska's Department of Labor and Workforce Development and worked part time for the Kodiak Area Native Association. Meanwhile, he continued his other part-time position as an accounting instructor at Kodiak College and even managed to start two businesses: Synergetics Business Services and Alaska Software Design. In 1989 Sapp was elected to the Kodiak Electric Association Board of Directors, on which he served for eighteen years. During these same years, he also served on the board of directors for the North West Public Power Association, an association with a service area that included cooperatives throughout the Pacific Northwest, California, and Idaho.

In 2007 Sapp took a position as finance director for the City of Valdez, where he worked until 2013. Throughout Sapp's various careers, he remained active in the Prince Hall Masons, Kappa Alpha Psi fraternity, Veterans of Foreign Wars, American Legion, Moose International, B.P.O.E. Elks, and the NAACP.

Further reading

Walter Sapp provided the above information to Edward Wesley on December 9, 2018. Transcription of the interview is in the possession of the author.

Zula Swanson (1891–1973)

Zula Swanson was born in Jackson Gap, Alabama, on February 26, 1891. Unwilling to accept the racism of the Jim Crow South, Swanson left Alabama in the 1920s and moved first to Oregon and then relocated farther north to Alaska. She arrived in Alaska in the spring of 1929, just months before the stock market crash. At the time, Anchorage's population barely exceeded three thousand. The economic boom that resulted from the construction of the Alaska Railroad had waned years earlier. But Swanson, who had saved money throughout her early life, proved to be a savvy businesswoman and purchased the Rendezvous Building at the corner of the Fifth and D Streets in downtown Anchorage for a bargain price.

Swanson opened a hotel, bar, and club in the building and called it the Rendezvous Hotel. She recognized that Anchorage had far more men than women, and many of the men wanted female company. The Rendezvous soon became a well-known spot for entertainment and vice, including gambling and prostitution. It also emerged as a center for black social life as newly arriving African Americans made connections, heard about job opportunities, and fostered community ties.

The Rendezvous Building later became the site of several legal battles that dragged on through the 1970s, well after it was torn down in 1971. In addition to the famed building, Swanson purchased several other properties, including a home overlooking Goose Lake near the present-day University of Alaska campus and one adjacent to Anchorage's downtown park strip. She purchased some of her properties for less than a thousand dollars, and they appreciated considerably over time, making Swanson a wealthy woman. Despite the nature of her businesses and some accompanying legal battles,

most Alaskans embraced Swanson as an enterprising woman with an acute sense for business and real estate.

Swanson witnessed Anchorage grow from a remote outpost, dominated by the Alaska Railroad, to a burgeoning city on the cusp of a great oil boom. Over the years, she was a member of the city's business community and a spokesperson for civil rights. Throughout her long career, Swanson participated in the Daughters of the Elks, the NAACP, and the Northern Lights Civic and Social Club. She once claimed that Anchorage "was no utopia," but she believed she made the right choice to come north. Indeed, she paved the way for other black women to play greater roles in Anchorage and Alaska politics and business in the following years. At the time of her death, Swanson owned over \$500,000 in property and an additional sum in assets; she was among the wealthiest people in Anchorage.

Further reading

"Alaska: Bonanza for Blacks?" *Ebony*, November 1969.

John Thomas Sr. (1904–1983)

Born in Natchitoches, Louisiana, John Thomas made his way to Alaska at the age of thirty-eight during the Second World War. The territory demanded skilled laborers as it became a focal point in the war effort, and Thomas found work on the construction of Elmendorf Air Base and ascended the ranks of his union, Carpenters Local 1281. He soon became the business agent for the union and maintained active interest in Anchorage and Alaska politics.

In the early 1950s, after an arsonist torched the home of a young black family in Anchorage's Rogers Park neighborhood, black activists, including Thomas, founded the Anchorage branch of the NAACP. Thomas volunteered to serve as the first president and was the face of the early civil rights movement in Anchorage. Among other actions, Thomas helped organize a picket of a Carrs grocery store over their failure to hire and promote black workers. At the time of his death in 1983, the *Anchorage Daily News* wrote that he left behind "a reputation as the first equal rights warrior in Anchorage for his people, a fiercely loyal Democrat and a senior citizen activist."

Beyond his civil rights activism, Thomas was a prominent figure in Anchorage's faith-based community and was a charter member of the First Christian Methodist Church. He served as a counselor for the Older Person's Action Group, and he worked for the municipality as an inspector-estimator

in the Housing and Community Services Division. The *Anchorage Daily News* reported he was the oldest employee on the city payroll, working in the division right up to his death. As evidence of his lofty reputation in the community, Anchorage mayor Tony Knowles and former governor Bill Egan attended his funeral and offered words of praise. Thomas is well remembered even today for his activism across causes and his dedication to civil rights.

Further reading

“John Thomas, Pioneer,” *Anchorage Daily News*, June 17, 1983.

John Lindback, “Anchorage Civil Rights Leader Mourned by Friends,” *Anchorage Daily News*, June 17, 1983.

Richard Watts Jr. (b. 1947)

Born and raised in Alaska, Richard Watts was among the first hired as a result of the Carrs picket. Watts became the first African American bagger, and he stayed with Carrs for over forty-five years. In accordance with what the activists envisioned, Watts did not remain a grocery bagger for long. He climbed the chain of management, and by the end of a long and distinguished career, Watts had served as a district manager for the growing company and participated in the local business community as a member of the board of directors of the Anchorage Chamber of Commerce. The community activism that Watts engaged in at Carrs was conversant with the aims of the civil rights movement. Though it may not have received the same attention as places in the contiguous United States, job discrimination in Anchorage fit squarely within patterns found nationwide in the 1950s and 1960s. Anchorage was a seat of civil rights activism, despite often being overlooked for more explosive and dramatic examples in larger cities. Watts’s illustrious career stands as a testament to this. His entrepreneurial spirit demonstrated what black men could achieve if given the opportunity to do so.

Further reading

Joseph H. Kline Jr. to Roy Wilkins, March 3, 1963. Papers of the NAACP, Part 27: Selected Branch Files, 1956–1965, Series D: The West, ed. John H. Bracey Jr., Sharon Harley, and August Meier. Available on microfilm at the Consortium Library, University of Alaska Anchorage.

Anne Hillman, “Freedom Summer Marks 50th Anniversary,” *Alaska Public Media*, September 1, 2014, <https://www.alaskapublic.org/2014/09/01/freedom-summer-marks-50th-anniversary/>.

Ed Wesley (b. 1951)

Like many others, Ed Wesley traveled north to Alaska in search of opportunity. With family roots in Mound Bayou, Mississippi, often referred to as the cradle of the civil rights movement, Wesley is steeped in black history and activism. Before moving to Alaska, Wesley lived in Chicago and served in the U.S. Army. He has called Alaska home for over forty years. In that time, he worked on the Trans Alaska Pipeline and in the insurance industry and business community.

Throughout his life, Wesley has been a strong proponent of black equality and achievement. He has served as president of the Anchorage NAACP and as a community activist and organizer. He and his wife, Frances, raised five children. Wesley has been actively involved in Anchorage's Parent Teacher Association and has advocated for strong public schools. He served on the volunteer committee at the Alaska VA Hospital and the Municipality Zoning Board of Examiners and Appeals. Wesley has also served as vice president for the Anchorage Board of Realtors and as president of the Alaska Black Leadership Conference. In the 1990s, Wesley founded the African American Business Council, an organization that placed over twenty black interns at First National Bank and the National Bank of Alaska, thus increasing representation of African Americans in the state's largest financial institutions.

As a result of his copious volunteer work and leadership roles in Anchorage, the Alaska State Legislature and the National Association of Black State Legislators have recognized his efforts with a distinguished award for community service. Wesley has long been active in politics at the local, state, and national level. He has served as Democratic Party National Committeeman and is an influential player in Anchorage politics. Throughout his four decades in Alaska, Wesley may proudly look back on a successful career, dedicated to service and advocacy on behalf of people who are too often excluded from the halls of power.

Further reading

The above information is drawn from discussions with the author and from Ed Wesley's biographical information found at <http://www.alaskademocrats.org/our-leadership/>, accessed May 25, 2018.

Cal Williams (b. 1941)

Cal Williams has long been a leader in Anchorage's black community. A veteran of the Vietnam War and an outspoken advocate for civil rights, Williams has fought injustice in Anchorage and in the Lower 48 throughout his life. Born in Monroe, Louisiana, at the outbreak of World War II and at a time when Jim Crow laws prohibited African Americans from voting, holding elected office, serving on juries, or participating in public life, Cal Williams developed a keen sense of injustice. During his early life in Louisiana, Williams graduated from the Little Flower Academy and then attended Grambling State University, one of the nation's most prestigious historically black colleges and universities. At Grambling State, Williams majored in speech and drama and television production.

While at Grambling State, Williams got involved in the civil rights movement in Monroe, Louisiana, and joined the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE). He was among the hundreds of African American men and women who campaigned for integration of public accommodations, including Northeast Louisiana State University. He left Louisiana for Alaska in 1965 after violent confrontations in the American South. In his fifty-plus years as an Alaskan, Williams has held several jobs in media, including production manager for KTUU, the local NBC affiliate. He has produced and hosted "Cross Cultural" on Anchorage's public television station, KAKM. During his time on public television, Williams interviewed several national civil rights luminaries, including Julian Bond, Benjamin Hooks, and Dick Gregory. For a brief period of time in the early 1970s, Williams even worked in Hollywood in media and production.

Williams has long been politically active in Alaska. He's been involved with the Anchorage branch of the NAACP and served as a delegate to the National Democratic Convention in 2000. Williams has also taken an active role in Anchorage's arts and cultural scene. He has taught and presented African folktales and discussed black history with audiences in schools, libraries, and churches throughout Alaska. Williams has run community programs that get youth involved in acting and performance. These volunteer projects have included free acting courses in Fairview and Mountain View, two of Anchorage's most diverse neighborhoods. Other projects that Williams has taken on during his decades in Alaska include anti-domestic violence campaigns, community councils, and awareness campaigns on institutional racism embedded in the nation's criminal justice system. He is also a well-known historian of the black experience in Alaska and a tireless champion of education and the arts.

Further reading

Cal Williams was interviewed by the HistoryMakers, May 24, 2018. At the time of publication, the interview had not been made public on the HistoryMakers archive.

Eleanor Williams (1937–2011)

A pioneer in the field of aeronautics, Eleanor Williams inspired many in her life. One of six children, she was born in 1937 in College Station, Texas. Though she did not complete a degree program, Williams briefly attended Texas A&M University. In 1963, she, her husband, and their seven children moved to Alaska where she began a federal career as a stenographer in Anchorage.

Williams believed a career in aviation opened pathways of mobility for others. By 1968 the qualification restrictions for the field were amended, striking previous experience as a military controller or pilot from the list of requirements for air traffic controllers. With this alteration, Williams could enter the field of air traffic control (ATC), and by 1971 she had completed the test with top marks and was certified as an air traffic control specialist, the first black woman to do so at Anchorage Air Traffic Control Center.

After serving in Anchorage for eight years, Williams advanced to the position of supervisor, then analyst, and finally management positions between 1976 and 1993. In 1994 Williams relocated to Oberlin, Ohio, as the first black female manager at Cleveland ATC, at the time one of the nation's busiest ATC facilities. Three years later, Williams shifted from ATC to an executive management position for the regional administrator at the FAA Great Lakes Regional Office in Chicago, serving the FAA Central Region of Iowa, Kansas, Missouri, and Nebraska. She retired at the end of 1997. However, she kept a home in Anchorage, as well as her native Texas, and visited both until her death in 2011.

Aside from her professional legacy, Williams advocated for greater representation and equality, both for African Americans and women in the field of aeronautics and air traffic control. She was a proud member of many organizations, including the NAACP and the National Black Coalition of Federal Aviation Employees. Her community engagement reached beyond professional groups with strong support for underprivileged youth. One admirer wrote of Williams: "Through hours of community efforts with young people who feel that doors are closed to them, she has single-handedly provided skills, nurtured hope, and in many cases launched aviation careers."

She has been a change agent in these young lives and left them with a motto: ‘Be an agent of change, not a victim of change.’” In a speech celebrating the accomplishments of Martin Luther King Jr. in 1996, Williams left her audience with these words: “It is easy to say it’s not my problem, but I pledge to make a positive difference every day of my life for the rest of my life. . . . I challenge you to make the same pledge.”

Further reading

See George Harper’s Blacks in Alaska History Project records, box 6, folder 31, Archives and Special Collections, Consortium Library, University of Alaska Anchorage.

Theresa L. Kraus, “From Humble Beginnings to Making History,” https://www.faa.gov/about/history/people/media/Eleanor_J_Williams.pdf.

Joshua Wright (1929–2017)

Joshua Wright grew up in Georgetown, South Carolina. As a young man with emerging intellectual curiosities, Wright attended Howard University in Washington, D.C., where he studied zoology, chemistry, and dentistry. Eventually he settled on dentistry and earned a degree as a doctor of dental surgery from Howard’s College of Dentistry.

Not long after, Wright took a position with the Public Health Service Hospital in Mount Edgecombe in Alaska in 1956. In 1958 Wright and his wife, Lillie, relocated to Anchorage and lived in Green Acres, a small black settlement on the edge of town, where he purchased multiple tracts of property. Wright practiced dentistry for the next fifty-five years. He served on the Anchorage School Board from 1969 to 1972 and as president of the Alaska Dental Society from 1967 to 1968. More recently, Wright served as president of Anchorage’s Brotherhood, Inc., from 2006 until his passing in 2017. He actively participated in the First Presbyterian Church for over fifty years.

However, his highest profile position was in politics, where he served a term in the Alaska House of Representatives from 1970 to 1972. In so doing, Wright, a Democrat, became one of the first black officeholders in the state. During his term in the House, he was a member of the House Finance Committee just as Alaska entered its oil boom. Wright was a longtime voice in Alaska’s black community and was well regarded across party lines for his knowledge of business, health care, and finance.

Further reading

Obituary, *Anchorage Daily News*, November 7, 2017, <http://www.legacy.com/obituaries/adn/obituary.aspx?pid=187164311>.

Some brief biographical information on Wright appears on the webpage of the Alaska State Legislature, http://www.legis.state.ak.us/basis/mbr_bio.asp?id=1552, accessed June 8, 2018.

Black Soldiers in Alaska

The military has played an outsized role in shaping Alaska's demographics, culture, and economics. The armed forces are also responsible for introducing sizable numbers of black men to the territory, then state. In particular, three occasions brought African Americans in relatively large numbers: the gold rush of the late 1890s, the construction of the Alaska Highway in the early 1940s, and the defense of the Aleutians in 1943. Beyond these occasions black men and women arrived through the military and a variety of other contexts, but the concentration of black labor associated with these events nonetheless stands out as remarkable.

Company L, Twenty-Fourth Infantry Arrive during the Gold Rush, 1899–1901

Black soldiers were among the first members of the U.S. military to arrive in Alaska after the Klondike Gold Rush. They came from Seattle and San Francisco to Wrangell and Dyea in May 1899. Many were already combat veterans, having fought in the American West against the Sioux, Apache, Cheyenne, and Comanche through the 1870s and '80s; the indigenous people of the Great Plains had called them Buffalo Soldiers for valor on the battlefield. Other men in Company L fought in the Philippines and in the Spanish-American War in Cuba.

Officially formed in 1869, Company L was a largely black regiment, composed mostly of freedmen from the American South. But in the years after the Civil War, when not deployed, Company L and the Twenty-Fourth Infantry maintained a base in the Presidio in San Francisco. However, after the gold rush began, the company deployed to Alaska to maintain order. Dyea was the first stop for the men, but it had mostly emptied out after a forest fire swept through the town. By 1900 Company L relocated and constructed a base

at Skagway. This became the first stop for prospectors, miners, and others who sought their fortune in the goldfields of Canada's Yukon.

The men of Company L served under the command of Capt. Henry Hovey and imposed order on Skagway as well as the greater Taiya Inlet region in 1899 and 1900. The area developed a reputation for lawlessness as thousands of young men with gold fever flooded the town. The gold rushers instigated conflict with the indigenous Chilkat Tlingit, a people who had lived in Southeast Alaska for generations. In addition, the prospectors entertained themselves through gambling, prostitution, drunken revelry, and brawling, all common pursuits in the remote frontier towns.

More than a hundred men served in Company L and imposed order on the town. The company provided food and built permanent structures to shelter the prospectors who passed through on their way to Dawson City. The men of Company L also built infrastructure such as roads and bridges to connect Skagway to outlying settlements. While most of Company L served in Skagway, a few went to Fort Wrangell and Sitka. After Company L completed their deployment in Alaska, many of the men continued their service in the Philippines and then quelled skirmishes along the Mexican border. The U.S. Army dissolved Company L, Twenty-Fourth Infantry during the Korean War in 1951, but they were later reorganized and merged into the First Brigade Combat Team, currently garrisoned in Alaska at Fort Wainwright, outside of Fairbanks.

Today, arguably no single institution has had as large an impact on Alaska as the U.S. military. The men who served in Company L, Twenty-Fourth Infantry might thus be seen as among the first soldiers who initiated a long, deep relationship between the military and Alaska.

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Alaska Highway Engineers, 1942

Following the bombing of Pearl Harbor by Japan in 1941, the fear of a military invasion in North America increased. Alaska—isolated, remote, and poorly defended—was of particular concern. Vulnerable to attack, with no major road systems and only a hastily constructed string of airfields known as the Northwest Staging Route to connect the territory, the U.S. armed forces sought to fortify and connect Alaska to the nation's contiguous states. Thus, the military decided to complete a highway from Alaska through Canada and into the Lower 48. The project soon became known as the Alaska-Canada Highway, or simply the Alcan.

Construction of the highway was scheduled to begin in March 1942. The army set out to construct an operable road within a year, a feat few thought possible. At the start of the project, four white regiments of the Army Corps of Engineers—the 18th, 35th, 340th, and 341st—deployed to Alaska. They cleared the boreal forests that spanned roughly eighteen hundred miles from Dawson Creek, British Columbia, to Delta Junction, Alaska. Construction faced delays due to spring snow and then a series of floods in early June. But once the Japanese attacked and occupied some of the Aleutian Islands in June 1942, pressure ramped up to complete the project. Until this point, black regiments in the segregated military served in subordinate positions to their white counterparts, under the belief that they could not be trusted under fire, in combat, or even to work heavy machinery. But the demand for additional workers was so high that the military reversed some of its discriminatory policies to allow black troops to participate in the construction effort. The 93rd, 95th, and 97th regiments and the 388th battalion, deployed to Alaska and Canada to complete the highway.

The troops encountered strenuous conditions, including unreliable supplies of food and necessities and frequent equipment failures. The heavy construction vehicles had to be transported overland for hundreds of miles in freezing temperatures, and the ice and mud often resulted in broken axles or immovable trucks. The winter of 1942 brought cold snaps of forty and fifty degrees below zero for days at a time. In the summer workers dealt with swarms of mosquitoes and temperatures around ninety degrees.

From the Deep South, most of these African American soldiers had never encountered anything approaching the harsh conditions of the Far North. Moreover, since black troops were not typically permitted to use heavy machinery, they used picks, shovels, and axes. In addition, white officers

prohibited black troops from entering towns. Still, the black regiments built northward from Dawson Creek, while the white regiments built southward from Fairbanks. By the time the two met, the black soldiers had completed a longer stretch of the road than their white counterparts, despite their lack of power tools and machinery. The soldiers worked day and night, without recreation or relief.

Despite these brutal conditions, the project provided black soldiers with a singular opportunity. Not only was the Alcan project unique in stationing black soldiers beyond stateside jobs, it also provided a means for them to learn new skills and highlight their indispensable contribution to the war effort. Due to the exhausting pace of work performed by these soldiers, the road was completed by December 1942. And though it was rough, the road served the military's needs, and the ten thousand soldiers remained the next year to make improvements.

Following the war, the United States military opened the Alaska Highway to civilian use and later paved and improved it to make it less treacherous for motorists. In light of their impressive performance, black troops made the segregation of the military appear increasingly at odds with the stated aims of the Allied forces fighting fascism and totalitarianism in World War II. Indeed, the U.S. Army eventually became the first government agency to integrate in 1948, a move that is credited in part to the laudable work of the soldiers who built the Alaska Highway.

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Aleutian Campaign, 1942–43

In 1942, black troops, including those in the 372nd, 373rd, and 383rd Port Battalions and the First and Second battalions of the 93rd Engineers, deployed to the Alaska Peninsula and the Aleutian Islands to defend and retake land occupied by the Japanese Empire. Japan was the first foreign power to land on American soil since the British during the War of 1812.

Some of these men—like those in the First Battalion of the 93rd—had previously worked on the Alaska Highway. They now traveled to Cold Bay, a small settlement located on the Alaska Peninsula, in advance of retaking the islands from the Japanese. The Second Battalion of the 93rd included six hundred men who were stationed at Fort Glenn on Umnak Island. Together, Cold Bay and Umnak Island served as staging areas for a counteroffensive against the Japanese after they attacked Dutch Harbor and occupied some of the westernmost islands of the Aleutians. At Cold Bay the black engineers with the Ninety-Third built warehouses, expanded the water and sewage systems, improved the airstrips and road system, and assisted on the construction of a hospital and medical facilities. Nine men with specialized knowledge of logistics deployed to Adak, farther down the Aleutian chain.

On Umnak Island at Fort Glenn, the 93rd worked with the 802nd Engineer Aviation Battalion to prepare airstrips; they constructed airplane hangars and set up the ubiquitous Quonset huts. Black troops assisted with the construction of Cape Field, the nation's westernmost airfield. Over six hundred black troops in the Aleutian theater remained housed in a segregated encampment and ate in a segregated mess hall, apart from the white troops stationed at Fort Glenn.

Meanwhile, the 383rd Port Battalion arrived in Adak and Attu and worked eighteen-hour shifts in preparation to retake the islands. Black soldiers took sniper fire as they prepared for the counterassault. These men turned the tide of the battle and soon retook the islands. However, white commanders disparaged the performance of the black troops, even as it became clear that they were indispensable to the war effort. And even though the military remained officially segregated, black and white troops at times worked together in breach of protocol; Adak was perhaps the best example of this and put pressure on military segregation.

By the fall of 1943, the United States and Canada had driven the Japanese out of the Aleutians and had retaken the islands of Kiska and Attu. These battles were among the most brutal and hard fought of the entire war.

The rate of battlefield fatalities and casualties stands alongside such deadly and well-known engagements as the Battle of Iwo Jima and Guadalcanal. Black troops provided key support and took fire as the United States reclaimed the land at great cost. Leaders of the nascent civil rights movement would note the contributions of black troops as they mobilized in the years after World War II.

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Sources by Chapter

Introduction

As an example of the popularity of Alaska in culture, see the recent explosion of reality television that has garnered millions of viewers, including the Discovery Channel's *Alaska: The Last Frontier*, *Alaskan Bush People*, *Bering Sea Gold*, *Deadliest Catch*, *Gold Rush: Alaska*, *Ice Road Truckers*, and MTV's *Slednecks*. The relationship between Alaska's indigenous population and white settlers from Russia or the United States would, however, yield a far different history. This one would indeed include bouts of coerced labor, extreme violence, and cultural genocide. For a survey on the white-indigenous relations, see Maria Sháa Tláa Williams, ed., *The Alaska Native Reader* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2009), especially, part 2, "Empire: Processing Colonization."

Chapter One

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Chapter Four

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Ethnicity and Disasters in the United States: A Review of the Literature,” *Disasters* 23, no. 2 (1999): 156–73; Alice Fothergill and Lori A. Peek, “Poverty and Disasters in the United States: A Review of Recent Sociological Findings,” *Natural Hazards* 32, no. 1 (2004): 89–110; Darwin Bond Graham, “The New Orleans That Race Built: Racism, Disaster, and Urban Spatial Relationships,” *Souls* 9, no. 1 (2007): 4–18. Jason David Rivera and DeMond Shondell Miller, “Continually Neglected: Situating Natural Disasters in the African American Experience,” *Journal of Black Studies* 37, no. 4 (2007): 518–19.

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Chapter Five

Special thanks to Theresa Lenear, who recalled growing up in Alaska as the daughter of Beatrice and Robert Coleman. She shared details of her life and her parents’ activism with the author on June 20, 2019. In addition, the Colemans’ case against Rudy Hill is detailed by Ross Coen, “How Alaska’s Equal Rights Law was First Put to the Test in Fairbanks,” *Alaska Dispatch News*, December 2, 2017. The article is available online through the *Anchorage Daily News* at: <https://www.adn.com/alaska-life/2017/01/14/how-alaskas-equal-rights-law-was-first-put-to-the-test-in-fairbanks/>. For more on Elizabeth Peratrovich and the Alaska Anti-Discrimination Act of 1945, see Nora Marks Dauenhauer and Richard Dauenhauer, *Haa Kusteeyí, Our Culture: Tlingit Life Stories* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1994); Peter Metcalfe, *A Dangerous Idea: The Alaska Brotherhood and the Struggle for Indigenous Rights* (Fairbanks: University of Alaska Press, 2014), 116. For Ernest Gruening’s take on the Anti-Discrimination Act of 1945, see his book *State of Alaska* (New York: Random House, 1968), 419.

Willard Bowman took on an increasingly strong role in civil rights in Alaska. See his “Remarks before the Citizens Council for Community Improvement,” box 1, folder 6, Bowman Papers at the UAA/APU Consortium Library, Special Collections. Blanche McSmith’s “The Shame of an Alaska ‘All American City,’” *Alaska Spotlight*, November 28, 1964 tackled the racism that she witnessed through the state. As some of the black activists took on more vocal roles, white leadership in the community grew anxious that an ascendant brand of militarism might take hold in Alaska. As evidence, see then Governor Walter Hickel’s fears as expressed in a document entitled, “Riot Memo,” August 11, 1967, box 7, folder 17, Robert B. Atwood Papers, at the UAA/APU Consortium Library, Archives and Special Collections. See the response from Anchorage’s Chief of Police, John Flanigan in Robert B. Atwood, “Memo re: telephone conversation with Chief John Flanigan, Anchorage Police Department, August 11, 1967,” box 7, folder 17, Atwood Papers.

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Charlie Mae “Pat” Berkley sat for an interview with Bruce Melzer, c. 1982–1983. This is available in the Bruce Melzer oral history interviews. For a brief report on Richard Watts’ career at Carrs, see Christine Kim, “Carrs’ First Black Worker Recalls His Rise through the Ranks,” February 19, 2010 on KTUU. For the announcement of Watts on the board of directors for the Anchorage Chamber of Commerce, see “Anchorage Chamber’s 2013–14 Board of Directors Announced,” *Alaska Dispatch News*, September 12, 2013. This is accessible through the *Anchorage Daily News* at: <http://www.adn.com/article/20130912/anchorage-chambers-2013-14-board-directors-announced>. For more on Watts, see his oral history housed at the Alaska State Library Historical Collection, *Oral HX, Blacks in Alaska*, 1984 with Sheryl Bailey and Latrice McBeth. On the campaign to picket Fort Richardson and Elmendorf Air Force Base, see “Protest Group Sets Oct. 12 Demonstration Date,” *Midnight Sun Reporter*, October 3, 1964. This was at least the second time that activists marched in solidarity with fellow activists in the South. In May 1963 a small group took to the streets in solidarity with the Birmingham Campaign. For more on that demonstration, see “12 Negroes Picket Here: It’s ‘Sympathy’ Demonstration,” *Anchorage Daily News*, May 17, 1963.

The Alaska Black Caucus organized on behalf of minority business owners. This documentation is found in a report known as the “Need for Assistance.” This effort culminated in a Governor’s Commission on the Administration of Justice, July 1978. The records may be found in box 3, folder 7 of the Alaska Black Caucus, Inc., Records at the UAA/APU Consortium Archives and Special Collections. Another source detailing the efforts is the “Statement of Willie Ratcliff, coordinator of the Alaska Minority Business Task Force Calling for Greater Representation of Minorities on City Contracts,” reprinted in *New Horizon*, October 21, 1977, 3. *The North Star Reporter* published some articles on the mobilization from February through April 1983.

For sources relevant to this study on the Alaska pipeline, see Ed McGrath, *Inside the Alaska Pipeline* (Berkeley, CA: Celestial Arts Publishing, 1977), 36. The author gained much insight from Ed Wesley, interviewed on September 23, 2018 in Anchorage, Alaska. The HistoryMakers digital oral history archive contained some powerful testimonies of black men and women who worked on the pipeline. For example, see Opalanga D. Pugh (the HistoryMakers A2008.120), interviewed by Denise Gines, November 3, 2008, the HistoryMakers Digital Archive. Session 1, tape 5, story 6, Opalanga D. Pugh recalls working on the Trans Alaska Pipeline System. See also, Vernellia Randall (the HistoryMakers

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Conclusion

For reporting on the controversy over the naming of the Performing Arts Center, see David Postman, "Smith Seeking to Overturn Arts Center Name," *Anchorage Daily News*, September 19, 1986; David Postman and Don Hunter, "Baker Signs Petition to Overturn Naming of Arts Center for King," *Anchorage Daily News*, October 9, 1986; David Postman, "Assembly Ready to Tackle the King Issue," *Anchorage Daily News*, November 18, 1986; "Opinion," *Anchorage Daily News*, October 8, 1987. On the rise of the white backlash and the interest of hate groups in recruiting in Alaska, see David Postman, "KKK Recruits in Anchorage," *Anchorage Daily News*, November 20, 1987; Peter Spivey, "Ex-KKK Man Tries to Form Group Here," *Anchorage Daily News*, December 24, 1980.

For more on Hayes, see "James C. Hayes: Alaska's First Black Mayor," *Ebony*, October 1993, 64-65. For certain, this trust eroded as whispers of corruption dogged his administration, and after his tenure, James Hayes' wife faced allegations of embezzlement of church funds where he had become a minister. A common bumper sticker affixed to many vehicles in Alaska proclaims, "We don't give a damn how they do it Outside." For an expression of this

attitude, see Frank Dahl, "Los Anchorage: Longing for the Good Old Days," *Anchorage Press*, October 29, 2015. This is accessible online at: <http://www.anchoragepress.com/opinion/los-anchorage>.

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Newspapers

Two newspapers have dominated Anchorage for much of the city's history. The *Anchorage Times* was the first newspaper published in Anchorage and operated until 1992. The *Anchorage Daily News* began circulation in 1946 and is published to this day. Between 2014 and the end of 2017, the paper changed its name to the *Alaska Dispatch News* (ADN). The most recent years of the ADN are available online. ADN issues from 1985 to the present are available through the Anchorage Library system. The University of Alaska Anchorage/Alaska Pacific University Consortium Library received a grant from the Atwood Foundation to digitize the full run of the *Anchorage Times*, from 1915 through 1992.

Back issues of both papers are available on microfilm at the city's Loussac Library and the University of Alaska Anchorage/Alaska Pacific University Consortium Library.

Anchorage also has a history of black newspapers. The *Alaska Spotlight*, published by George Anderson, was the first such paper; it ran periodically from 1952 through the late 1960s. The *Midnight Sun Reporter*, also published by Anderson, ran off and on from 1962 until 1966. The *Crusader* ran throughout 1974. The *New Horizon* ran from 1976 through at least 1978. The *Vox Populi* ran from 1978 through at least 1981. The *North Star Reporter* ran from 1982 through 1983. The *Anchorage Gazette* was published intermittently from 1992 to 1995. The *Anchorage Town Crier* ran from 1994 through 1995. Many issues from these papers have been lost. Some of the surviving issues are available on microfilm at the University of Alaska Anchorage and at the University of California Berkeley in the Bancroft Library's collection of material related to the NAACP, Western Regional Papers.

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Black History in the Last Frontier

provides a chronologically written narrative to encompass the history of African Americans in Alaska. Following an evocative foreword from activist and community organizer, Ed Wesley, the book begins with a discussion of black involvement in the Pacific whaling industry during the middle and late-nineteenth century. It then discusses how the Gold Rush and the World Wars shaped Alaska and brought thousands of black migrants to the territory. The final chapters analyze black history in Alaska in our contemporary era. It also presents a series of biographical sketches of notable black men and women who passed through or settled in Alaska and contributed to its politics, culture, and social life. This book highlights the achievements and contributions of Alaska's black community, while demonstrating how these women and men have endured racism, fought injustice, and made a life and home for themselves in the forty-ninth state. Indeed, what one then finds in this book is a history not well known, a history of African Americans in the last frontier.

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