

RESEARCH GUIDE

ALASKA

by ANDREW KOCH



ALASKA IS A LAND OF EXTREMES: BITTER COLD temperatures, driving blizzards, and devastating earthquakes. The state is even “extreme” in size, as Alaska is 2.5 times larger than Texas, where “everything’s bigger.”

But Alaska is also a land of extreme beauty: the northern lights, pristine wilderness, and eight magnificent national parks. Here’s how to research your ancestors who braved Alaska’s harsh climate and beheld its great wonders.

A HISTORY OF “THE LAST FRONTIER”

What is now Alaska has been populated for as many as 15,000 years. In fact, historians have long believed that ancestors of all the Americas’ indigenous peoples crossed the then-frozen Bering Strait from Asia and traveled south through Alaska. The Inuit, Athabaskan, Unangan (Aleuts), Tlingit, Ypuiit (Yupik) and Haida are just some of the indigenous groups who continue to live there.

Europeans first came into contact with “The Last Frontier” in 1728, when Tsar Peter I of Russia commissioned Vitus Bering to explore his empire’s far eastern border. Traveling from Russia’s Kamchatka, Bering didn’t reach North America until a second expedition in 1741. But he was able to determine that just a narrow strait (now named the Bering Strait, after him) separates the two continents. Furs attracted early Russian settlers, who founded the first European settlement in 1784 at Three Saints Bay.

But Russians never flocked to Alaska. Even at its peak, Russian Alaska had only a few hundred immigrant residents. Still, Alaska formed the largest part of Russia’s North American holdings, which at one point extended as far south as California and even (briefly) out to Hawai’i.

In the late 1850s, Russia was defeated in the Crimean War by the United Kingdom and its allies. To divest some of its expenses (and create a buffer between it and British-held Canada), Russia sold Alaska to the United States for just two cents per acre in 1867. William Seward, the US secretary of state at the time of the sale, faced criticism for purchasing the supposedly useless land.

But “Seward’s Folly,” as it became known, paid off handsomely. Discoveries of gold in the late 19th century drew prospectors from around the world. An 1896 find by Tlingit man “Skookum Jim” in the nearby Yukon drew some 100,000 prospectors to the region in the Klondike Gold Rush.

Interest in the area prompted Congress to expand the Homestead Act to the Territory of Alaska in 1898, opening public land more widely to settlers. In fact, the last homestead to be awarded was in Alaska—in 1988. In those 90 years, homesteaders had been given 360,000 acres, less than 1% of the total land in Alaska.

Alaska remained strategically important, but somewhat sparsely populated after the gold rush ebbed. Japan invaded Alaska’s Aleutian Islands in 1942 as part of World War II, prompting a buildup of US military forces. The United States retook the islands in the May 1943 Battle of Attu, the only land battle fought on American soil during the conflict.

Decades of disagreements over land between indigenous groups and the US and Alaskan governments led to the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act of 1971. The act relinquished some 44 million acres of US-held land to indigenous groups in exchange for a renouncement of pre-existing indigenous claims in the state. Today, roughly 15% of Alaskans identify as indigenous. Alaska’s population has grown steadily

FAST FACTS

STATEHOOD:
1959

FIRST FEDERAL CENSUS:
1900

BIRTH AND DEATH RECORDS BEGIN:
1913

MARRIAGE RECORDS BEGIN:
1913

CONTACT FOR VITAL RECORDS:
AK Bureau of Vital Statistics

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since World War II, but (with just 730,000 residents) still ranks among the nation’s least-populated states. Alaska today is known for its stunning landscapes and abundant natural resources, including salmon, oil and natural gas.

LIVING IN THE LAND OF MIDNIGHT SUN

Birth, marriage and death records weren’t mandated in Alaska until 1913, after the region became an organized territory. Even then, widespread compliance wasn’t achieved until the 1940s.

The Bureau of Vital Statistics <health.alaska.gov/dph/VitalStats/Pages/default.aspx> holds records from 1913 forward. For privacy reasons, access to records is restricted for a number of years to only the people named in them or (in some cases) direct family members and other entitled parties: 100 years after the event for birth records, and 50 years after the event for death, marriage and divorce records. (The latter were kept by the government beginning in 1950.)

FamilySearch <www.familysearch.org/search/collection/2216300> and Ancestry.com <www.ancestry.com/search/collections/61458> are each publishing Alaska vital record indexes and images as they become available. The Alaska State Archives has a downloadable index to the FamilySearch collection, complete with links to images <archives.alaska.gov/genealogy/genealogy.html>.

Church records can serve as substitutes for civil records of early vital events. Some are included in the aforementioned collections of vital records at FamilySearch and Ancestry.com, and you can reach out to the relevant diocesan or parish archives for information on other possible documents.



COUNTING ALASKANS

Though part of the United States since 1867, Alaska was generally not included in the federal census until 1900. (Most records for the villages that were enumerated have largely been lost.) The western Alaskan islands of St. George and St. Paul were enumerated several times in the colonial and territorial eras from 1868 through 1929; records are on Family History Library microfilm.

Ancestry.com has an index to census substitutes and territorial censuses for Alaska in the 19th century <www.ancestry.com/search/collections/3532>. Ancestry.com, FamilySearch <www.familysearch.org>, MyHeritage

PATRICK FEDER/UNSPASH

TIMELINE

1728

Vitus Bering explores the Bering Strait on behalf of Russia

1784

Russian fur traders found Three Saints Bay, near Kodiak

1867

The United States purchases Alaska from the Russian Empire in “Seward’s Folly”

1884

Alaska administrative control transfer from the US military’s control to civilian appointees

1896

The Klondike Gold Rush begins, attracting tens of thousands of prospectors



Denali National Park and Preserve

<www.myheritage.com> and other sites have federal census records through 1950.

OTHER RECORDS

Despite being a “young” state, Alaska has a variety of genealogical resources at your disposal.

As you dig into them, it will be helpful to know that Alaska is one of just two US states that do not have counties. Instead, the state is divided into (as of 2019) 19 boroughs that have varying levels of autonomy, plus one “Unorganized Borough” (which is divided into comparable “census areas”). As such, many “county”

resources are held at the borough or jurisdictional court level.

Here are some key kinds of records to investigate.

● **Land Records:** Alaska is a public-land state, meaning (for the purposes of tracking legal land rights) the US government was the original owner of land, and sold patents directly to individuals. Notable dates to know include 1884 (when land laws from Oregon were applied to Alaska) and 1898 (when Alaskan land was opened to homesteaders). Find original land patents through the Bureau of Land Management’s General Land Office <glrecords.blm.gov> and case files through the National Archives <www.

1912

The Territory of Alaska is incorporated

1942

Japan occupies three of the Aleutian Islands; the U.S. increases its military presence in Alaska

1959

Alaska is admitted as the 49th state

1964

The Alaska legislature establishes administrative boroughs, instead of traditional counties

1971

The US government turns over 44 million acres to indigenous groups to settle decades-long land claims

TOOLKIT

Websites

AKGenWeb Project <akgenweb.com>

Alaska Digital Archives <vilda.alaska.edu>

Alaska's Digital Newspaper Project blog <akdnp.wordpress.com>

AlaskaWeb.org <www.alaskaweb.org>

Cyndi's List: Alaska <www.cyndislist.com/us/ak>

FamilySearch Research Wiki: Alaska <www.familysearch.org/en/wiki/Alaska,_United_States_Genealogy>

Linkpendium: Alaska <www.linkpendium.com/ak-genealogy>

Project Jukebox (University of Alaska Fairbanks Oral History Program) <jukebox.uaf.edu>

Publications

Alaska: A History, third edition by Claus M. Naske and Herman E. Slotnick (University of Oklahoma Press)

The Alaska Native Reader: History, Culture, Politics edited by Maria Sháa Tláa Williams (Duke University Press)

Alaska People Index by Connie Bradbury, David A. Hales and Nancy Lesh (Anchorage Historical Commission)

Alaska Place Names by Alan Edward Schorr (Denali Press)

Archives & Organizations

Alaska Historical Society <www.alaskahistoricalsociety.org>

Alaska State Archives <archives.alaska.gov>

Alaska State Library <library.alaska.gov>

Anchorage Genealogical Society <www.anchoragegenealogy.org>

National Archives at Seattle <www.archives.gov/seattle>

University of Alaska Fairbanks, Elmer E. Rasmuson Library <library.uaf.edu/home>

archives.gov>. Subsequent land sales (e.g., between private individuals) were documented at the office of the district recorder in the relevant judicial district.

- **Newspapers:** The Alaska State Library is spearheading the Alaska Digital Newspaper Project <library.alaska.gov/hist/newspaper/newspaper.html>, which as of writing has digitized 310,000 pages of historical Alaskan newspapers at the free Chronicling America site <chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/newspapers>. (Follow the project's progress at <akdnp.wordpress.com>.) Historical newspapers are also available through subscription sites Newspapers.com <www.newspapers.com> and GenealogyBank <www.genealogybank.com>.

- **Military Records:** From 1867 to 1877 and 1879 to 1884, Alaska was overseen by the War Department, and the military has long had a steady presence in the region. Note that Alaska was not part of the United States until after the Civil War, so its contemporary residents wouldn't have served in it. However, you can find records related to military posts dating back to the late 1860s through the National Archives. Information about Alaskans who served in World War I can be found on Fold3 <go.fold3.com/wwi> and the veterans index compiled by the Alaska State Archives <archives.alaska.gov/genealogy/genealogy.html>. FamilySearch has free WWII draft registration cards and statements of service.

- **Naturalization Records:** Alaskans wishing to become US citizens filed their paperwork in judicial district courts. The Alaska State Archives has an index to the pre-1959 naturalization records under its purview at <archives.alaska.gov/genealogy/genealogy.html>, and the National Archives holds copies of naturalization documents filed after the process was federalized in 1906 (as well as some earlier records not indexed by the Alaska State Archives). Note that those living in Alaska at the time of the purchase from Russia could automatically become US citizens.

- **Directories:** The Family History Library has various directories for Anchorage (where some 40% of Alaskans live today) from 1959 to 1985; find more publications in the FamilySearch Catalog <www.familysearch.org/search/catalog>. The Library of Congress <www.loc.gov> has digitized 20th-century telephone directories ("white pages") for Anchorage, Fairbanks, Juneau and more.

- **Court and Probate Records:** In 1884, the federal government appointed a single judge (in Sitka) to administer all civil and criminal cases in Alaska. Additional judicial districts were created in 1903 and 1909, for a total of four: Juneau, Nome, Valdez (now Anchorage) and Fairbanks. These courts also handled probate cases until statehood. The Alaska State Archives hold most court and probate records from the territorial era.

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