

Alaska Archaeology Month Commemorates the 150th Anniversary of the Homestead Act 1862-2012

The Archaeology of Alaskan Homesteads

Some early 20th century homesteads already have been the focus of archaeological research in Alaska. These include remains of homestead structures located on military bases, which have resulted in studies valuable for better understanding this period in Alaska's past and the artifacts associated with it.



Photo courtesy Robert L. Ray

The History of Alaskan Homesteaders

For over 50 years, stories about homesteading in Alaska have found their way into print. They reveal intriguing information about how homestead structures were built, typical supplies and tools found on them, and clues as to what became of the structures. Such accounts greatly enrich the archaeological knowledge of these homesteads while providing fascinating real-person stories to fulfill the goal of better understanding Alaska's homestead past. The six stories below illustrate great diversity in Alaska's homestead history.



Commemorating America's Homestead Past

Homesteading in America began when President Lincoln signed the 1862 Homestead Act enabling over 2 million people to claim federal land originally intended for small farms. Homesteaders included freed slaves, women, and European settlers. During the homestead era, about 270 million acres of federal land were claimed in 30 states, from Florida to Michigan to Alaska. This is over one-tenth of all the land in America. Descendants of homesteaders today are estimated at about 93 million Americans, with many thousands still living on farms claimed by their ancestors.



Preserving Alaska's Homestead Heritage

Homesteading began in Alaska when President William McKinley signed 1898 legislation extending homestead laws to the then District of Alaska. Few homesteads were claimed until after Alaska became a territory in 1912, with most after WWII. By the time the last homestead claims were made in the 1980s, around 3,500 people had received land in many parts of the state.

For further information about Homesteading in Alaska 1898-1988 please visit: www.blm.gov/ak/st/en/prog/cultural.html



John M. Beady



Photo © Alaska National Cemetery
Anchorage Museum, AK, 2008

John M. Beady (1849-1920s), a native of Indiana, came by boat to Alaska in 1899 during the gold rush, and mined with a partner in the Jack Wade Mining District northeast of Fairbanks, Alaska. In 1909, he was working as a miner in the Juneau area. By 1915, he was employed at nearby Thane by the Alaska Gold Mining Company. In the later 1910s, Beady resumed his pre-Alaska occupation of farming and filed for a homestead near Wasilla, Alaska. On March 12, 1922, a few months before his 73rd birthday, he was awarded title to a 160-acre homestead.



Thomas J. Wilson



Photo courtesy
Wendy Smith & Ken Ray

Thomas J. Wilson (1876-1957), a native of Minnesota, arrived in Alaska by boat in 1930 with his family to escape the Great Depression. In 1932, he filed for a homestead on land that had been abandoned by an earlier would-be homesteader. Wilson worked for the Alaska Road Commission, and drove a grader building roads in the Matanuska Valley. On February 6, 1939, Wilson was awarded title to a 160-acre homestead near Wasilla. His original homestead house was burned in the 1950s to make way for a newer structure nearby.



George S. R. Harbeson, Sr.



Photo courtesy
George Harbeson, Jr.

George S. R. Harbeson, Sr. (1920-1985), a native of New Jersey and World War II veteran, drove to Alaska in 1954 in a Chevy CarryAll with his family, to teach at Wasilla High School. In 1959, Harbeson filed for a homestead on land overlooking Cook Inlet near the old town of Knik, south of Wasilla. On February 5, 1964, he was awarded title to a 31.55-acre homestead, which his family still owns today. The story of the family's homestead adventures are told in a book by his son, George Harbeson, Jr.



Clyde W. Lovel



Photo courtesy
Loree Smith & Robert Ray

Clyde W. Lovel, a native of Missouri and Air Force veteran, drove the Alaska Highway in 1963 with his family in a 3/4 ton pickup pulling a 32-foot trailer. In 1964, the family bought a ramshackle house from a would-be homesteader along the Alaska Railroad at Sherman, north of Carry, and filed on the land for their own homestead. Lovel worked for the Alaska Railroad for some years. On April 30, 1974, he was awarded title to a 77.41-acre homestead, which he still owns today. Stories of the family's adventures are told in two books by his wife, Mary T. Lovel.



Elizabeth M. Smith



Photo courtesy
Elizabeth M. Smith & David Smith

Elizabeth M. Smith, a native of Nebraska and granddaughter of Nebraska homesteaders, flew to Alaska in 1950 to work as a nurse in Fairbanks. In 1974, she was among a group of 10 people, including her son William J. Smith, who filed for homesteads west of Big Delta, Alaska. All received patents, with Mrs. Smith, a widow, awarded title to her 116.32-acre homestead on Oct. 18, 1984, which she still owns. She was the last woman in America to receive a homestead.



Kenneth W. Deardorff



Photo courtesy
Kenneth W. Deardorff

Kenneth W. Deardorff, a native of California and Vietnam veteran, flew to Alaska in 1973. He filed for a homestead in 1974 on a remote tract of land on the Stony River near Lime Village in southwestern Alaska. Access was only by airplane, boat, or foot, which caused delays in surveying the tract that further delayed issuance of the patent. At times he did trapping and worked in construction. On May 5, 1988, Deardorff was awarded title to a 49.97-acre homestead but no longer owns it. He was the last person in America to receive a homestead.