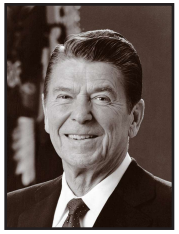
## The Legacy of Homesteading

Alaska's homestead experience represents the final chapter in the longer Homestead Era that began in 1862 in American history, five years before Alaska even became a part of the United States. Relatively few homesteads were awarded in Alaska between its start in 1898 and end in 1986 when Ronald Reagan was President. Homesteading remains important to many Alaskans today, and many homesteaders or their families still own original claims. Nationwide, over 1.6 million homesteads were granted in 30 states, with hundreds of thousands of homesteaders and their families getting an economic boost in America through receiving federal land for "free" as homesteads. The terms for granting homesteads in certain states other than Alaska left the federal government with ownership of the mineral subsurface or other special land management situations. Homesteading truly played an important part in creating the Nation we have today. Some remains of older homesteads are now being managed as historic archaeological sites.



*President Ronald Reagan*

Photo courtesy Robert E. King

For further information on the history of homesteading in Alaska
visit us on the Internet at:
www.blm.gov/ak/st/en/prog/cultural.html
or contact us at:
Bureau of Land Management
222 W. 7th Ave. #13
Anchorage, AK 99513-7504
(907) 271-5960

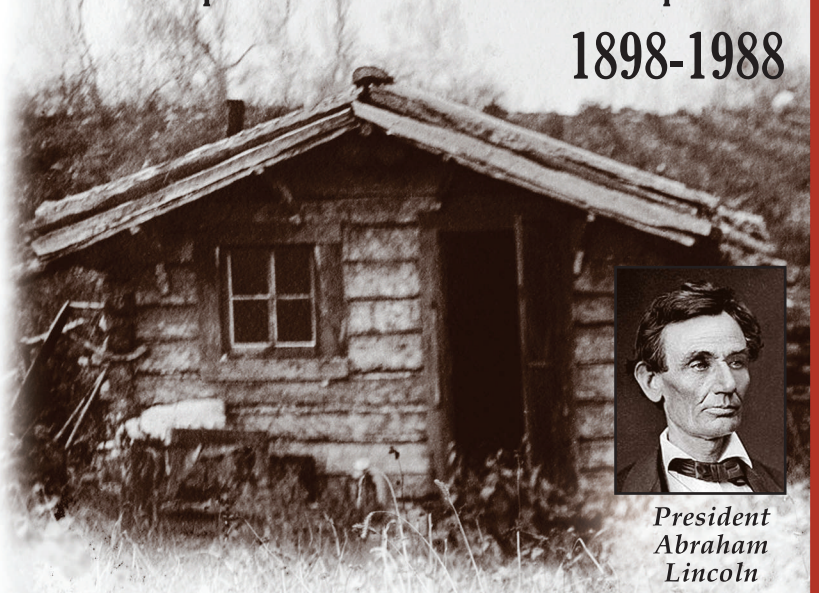
BLM/AK/GI-12/011+8152+9310

Front cover base photo © Alaska Railroad Collection, Anchorage Museum, AEC.G998

# History of Alaska Homesteading

## The Last Chapter in America's Homestead Experience

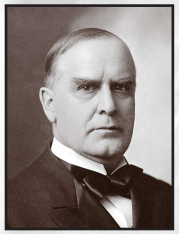
## 1898-1988



*President Abraham Lincoln*

### Commemorating America's Homestead Past

Homesteading in America began when President Lincoln signed the 1862 Homestead Act enabling over 1.6 million people to claim federal land intended for small farms. Homesteaders included men, women, freed slaves, 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.



*President William McKinley*

### 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 Alaska.

BLM

Alaska

## What was homesteading?

Homesteading was a way people could obtain federal land virtually free if they met certain requirements, including living on the land and cultivating a portion of it. Homesteading has not been possible on federal lands in Alaska since Oct. 21, 1986, although it was allowed for 88 years before that. Congress passed the original homestead law in 1862 to provide small farms to anyone over age 21, the head of a family, or to immigrants willing to become citizens. The purpose was to help settle the country and provide new opportunities. From the start, women, minorities, and immigrants were allowed to homestead.

## When did homesteading begin?

Homesteading originated with President Lincoln signing the original Homestead Act on May 20, 1862. Starting on January 1, 1863, people began filing land claims at Land Offices in the Midwest and West. Later, homesteading was allowed in all 30 states or territories with federal land, from Florida to Michigan to California. Homesteading was not allowed in Alaska until May 14, 1898, when President William McKinley signed legislation extending various homestead laws to Alaska.

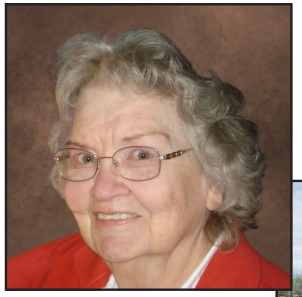
## When did homesteading end?

Homesteading officially ended on October 21, 1976 with the passage of the Federal Land Policy and Management Act of 1976. On that day, all homestead laws were repealed nationwide, however, a 10-year extension was allowed in Alaska since it was a new state with fewer settlers. The last time anyone could file any type of homestead claim in Alaska was on October 20, 1986. After that day, no more new homesteading was allowed on federal land in Alaska.

## How did a person get a homestead in Alaska?

When homesteading started in Alaska on May 14, 1898, people were required to stake their land selection and register it at the nearest Land Office. Those offices existed at different times in one or more of these places: Sitka, Juneau, Anchorage, Fairbanks, Nome, St. Michael, Rampart, Weare (near Tanana) and briefly even in Circle City, Alaska. Later, only Juneau, Fairbanks, and Anchorage would have such offices, with Juneau's office also now closed. To register their homestead claims, people paid a small filing fee at the Land Office and could continue to "prove up" the claim by meeting certain specific homestead requirements. After July 16, 1946, all homestead claims were filed with the Bureau of Land Management (BLM), with the General Land Office functions were absorbed into that newly created agency.





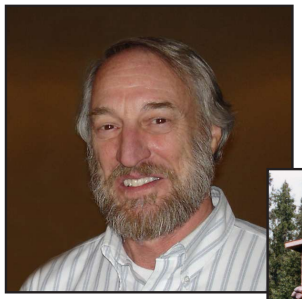
**Elizabeth M. Smith**
America's last woman homesteader
1984
near Big Delta, Alaska

Photos courtesy
Elizabeth M. Smith
& Smith family

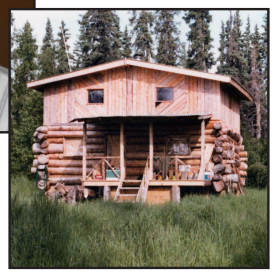
## The last female and last male homesteaders in Alaska

The distinction of being Alaska's and America's last female homesteader to receive a homestead requiring cultivation of the land, goes to Elizabeth M. Smith. She received a homestead patent on Oct. 18, 1984 for 116.32 acres of land near Big Delta, Alaska. She was among a group of 10 homesteaders, including her son William J. Smith, who filed adjoining homestead claims in 1974 on land west of the Richardson Highway. All received patents to their homesteads in 1984, with Elizabeth Smith the only woman in the group. All people who got homesteads later in Alaska were men.

The distinction of being Alaska's last male homesteader, and the last homesteader in the entire nation to receive a homestead requiring cultivation of the land, goes to Kenneth W. Deardorff. He received a homestead patent on May 5, 1988 to 49.97 acres of land on the Stony River near Lime Village in southwestern Alaska. He filed his homestead claim in 1974, but its remoteness caused delays in his receiving patent to the land until the spring of 1988.



**Kenneth W. Deardorff**
America's last homesteader
1988
near Lime Village, Alaska



Photos courtesy
Kenneth W. Deardorff

## First Homesteads in Alaska

**1st Man who had rights to an Alaska homestead:** This destinction may go to William J. Abbott. Abbott assigned his rights to a 9.92-acre homestead on the Kvichak River about 270 miles west of Anchorage, to the Horse Shoe Fishing and Mining Company. The company received a patent to the land under the 1862 Homestead Act on February 27, 1901. Abbott was probably a military veteran, which is why he could have received his rights prior to that date.

**1st Women who had rights to an Alaska homestead:** Three orphaned sisters, Mary Belle, Carrie Irene, and Lillian Dee, inherited rights to their deceased father James H. Sackett's 29.72-acre homestead on Taku Inlet, about 20 miles southeast from Juneau. On Jan. 13, 1908, the sisters assigned the land to the Northwest Fisheries Company.

## Homesteading in Alaska at the extremes

- **Most northern homestead:** James L. Langton
  (May 23, 1955 patent): 106.88-acre homestead in the Brooks Range mountains on Wild Lake, about 60 miles west of Wiseman, Alaska and 100 miles north of the Arctic Circle.
- **Most southern and most western homestead:** Charles H. Hope
  (April 12, 1961 patent): 4.87-acre homestead on Captains Bay on Unalaska Island in the eastern Aleutian Islands, about two miles southwest of Unalaska, Alaska.
- **Most southern homestead on mainland Alaska:** Philip Kelley
  (Jan. 20, 1908 patent): 34.53-acre homestead on Mink Bay of Boca de Quadra inlet, about 70 miles southeast of Ketchikan, Alaska and less than 40 miles from the southernmost part of mainland Alaska.
- **Most eastern homestead:** Nikolas Kristovich
  (April 25, 1939 patent): five-acre homestead on Tombstone Bay off the Portland Canal that divides the USA from Canada, about 60 miles south of Hyder, Alaska.

## Is "homesteading" allowed anywhere in Alaska today?

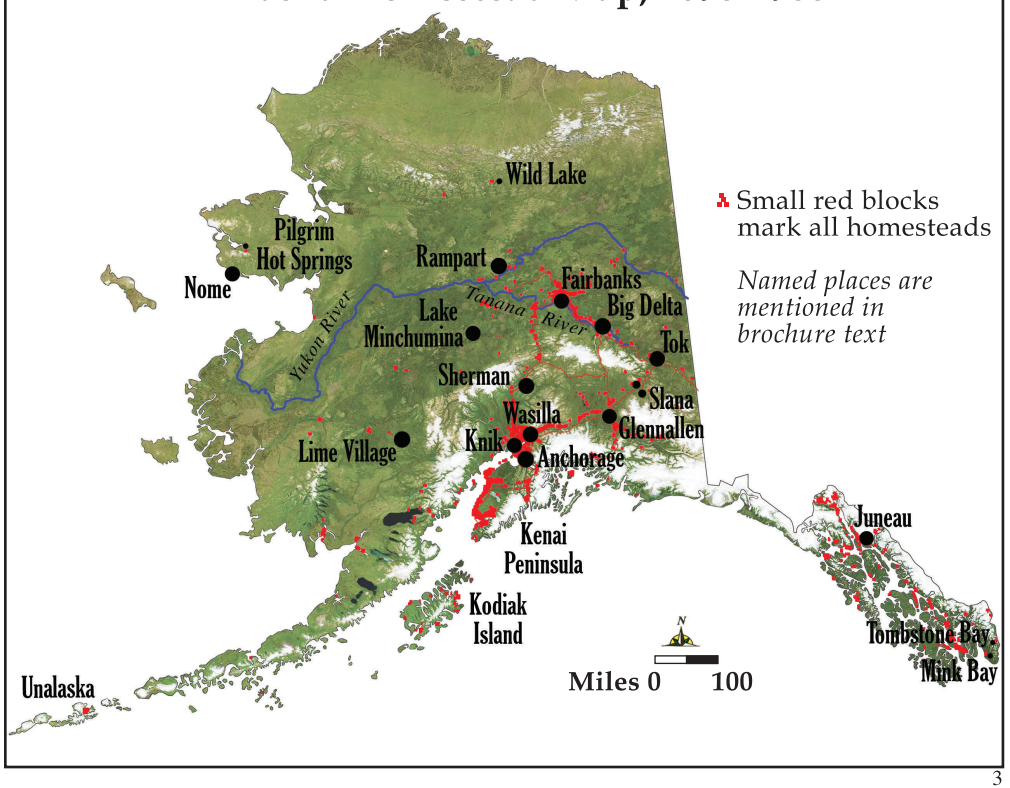
No. Homesteading ended on all federal lands on October 21, 1986. The State of Alaska currently has no homesteading program for its lands. In 2012, the State made some state lands available for private ownership through two types of programs: sealed-bid auctions and remote recreation cabin sites. The Alaska Department of Natural Resources has information on its website about these programs.



## Where did people homestead in Alaska?

People could stake a homestead claim on federal land in most parts of Alaska, except federal lands previously withdrawn for other purposes such as National Parks and Monuments. National Forests were mostly unavailable for homesteading, although later legislation in 1906 allowed filings in areas deemed suitable for agriculture. The 1906 legislation resulted in only eight homesteads patented in Forests. By the time homesteading ended in 1986, the majority of homesteads had been patented south of the Alaska Range mountains, while many were in other locations. These included numerous homesteads in areas around Delta Junction and Fairbanks, Alaska, and others off the Richardson and Parks highways. Additionally, homesteads were established within the Tanana River and Yukon River drainages. For example, part of the gold rush town of Rampart on the Yukon River was homesteaded. Other homesteads were on the Seward Peninsula, Kodiak Island and in western Alaska. Probably the most northern homestead claim in Alaska was for a special non-agricultural type of homestead (later called a "homesite"). It was patented in 1975 in the Brooks Range mountains at Wild Lake above the Arctic Circle.

**Alaska Homestead Map, 1898-1988**



## What were the requirements for acquiring a homestead in Alaska?

When homesteading started in Alaska in 1898, the general requirements were that a person had to:

1) live on the claimed land for most of five consecutive years,
2) live in a habitable dwelling (a tent would not count), and
3) cultivate at least one-eighth of the land.

At different times in Alaska's history, these requirements changed. People who served honorably in the Armed Services could apply a portion of their service time to substitute for the homesteading time requirement for living on their land. The land had to be surveyed before a claimant could get a homestead. Starting in 1918, special legislation for Alaska allowed settlers to enter homestead claims on un-surveyed lands, with the option of either waiting for a government survey at no cost, or paying for one themselves as a way of expediting receiving patent to the land. Further, special legislation in 1926 allowed settlers to have irregular shaped homestead claims with natural boundaries such as meandering streams, lakeshores, or other land features. Previously, only rectangular homesteads were allowed.

### Early Homesteader:

***John M. Heady (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, Heady 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.***

Photo © Alaska Railroad Collection, Anchorage Museum, AEC.G998



manufacture sites. The combined totals for North Slana and South Slana were: 119 homesite patents, 30 headquarter site patents, and eight trade and manufacture site patents. The Lake Minchumina area had fewer numbers of these types of land patents. Initially, several thousands of people throughout the U.S. and even some foreign countries expressed interest in these areas, including many who wrote to the BLM for more information. A 1986 Oprah Winfrey TV show discussing the "end of homesteading in Alaska" helped prompt the onslaught of interest. Also, the late Paul Harvey discussed this historic milestone in a nationwide radio broadcast. In this way, homesteading ended in Alaska (and in America's history), with some unexpected twists involving popular culture that would have been impossible to predict when homesteading began over a century earlier.

## Homesteading in Alaska before the 1970s

Farming was possible in some parts of Alaska, like portions of the Matanuska and Tanana river valleys, and around Delta, but was hard or impossible in many other areas, one reason why few homesteads were awarded based on cultivating the land. Other factors facing Alaska homesteaders included remoteness, cold weather, short growing seasons, high expense for supplies, problems marketing crops, and for many twentieth century Alaskan settlers, a lack of desire to become farmers. After railroads were built in Alaska in the early 1900s and the Alaska Highway opened in 1947, increased accessibility in some areas spurred more homesteading. For the first time, people could come to Alaska by car, hauling trailers, to begin homesteading. Better roads in Alaska after the 1950s, including to the Kenai Peninsula, also encouraged new homestead claims. Yet the lack of roads didn't prevent some early homesteaders from filing claims in remote areas with limited access. Over 100 years ago, Henry Beckus claimed the only homestead on the Seward Peninsula. His 319.96-acre homestead on the Pilgrim River, including Pilgrim Hot Springs, was 70 miles north of Nome. He received patent on September 24, 1908, at a time when 320-acre homesteads were possible before World War I, and less than a decade after the start of the Nome Gold Rush.

## The final years of homesteading in Alaska

Very little land had been available for homesteading for more than a decade before Oct. 21, 1986, when no new homesteads could be filed in Alaska. Tens of millions of acres of federal land were withdrawn from homestead entry to allow the State of Alaska and Alaska Native corporations to select millions of acres under terms in the 1958 Alaska Statehood Act and the 1971 Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act. Other federal lands that had not been evaluated as suitable for cultivation by the BLM remained closed to homestead entry.

## Non-agricultural "homesteads" in Alaska

*President Calvin Coolidge*

*President Franklin Roosevelt*

The 1898 law allowing homesteading in Alaska was amended on March 27, 1927, under President Calvin Coolidge. It created a new category of land claim also called "homestead."A further amendment under President Franklin Roosevelt on May 26, 1934 added additional terms. Under these laws, people could claim up to five acres without doing any cultivation of the land. Two types of claims were possible. One was for a dwelling called a "homestead" and the other was for business purposes. To receive the five-acre dwelling type "homestead" (later called a "homesite"), claimants had to live on the land for three years, have a habitable dwelling, and pay $2.50 per acre at the end of the proving up process. For the business site five-acre claim (sometimes also called a "homestead" but later termed "headquarters site"), people had to show that the full amount of land (up to five acres) was needed for business purposes. Claimants also paid $2.50 per acre and could not receive title to the land until three years had passed during which they were using the land for business needs. People were also allowed to get one each of both types of five-acre special "homesteads" by meeting requirements for both, for a total of up to 10 acres.

## The last areas in Alaska opened to homesteading- Lake Minchumina, North Slana and South Slana

In the early 1980s, the BLM opened 40,250 acres of public lands in three final blocks of federal lands to a form of homesteading. One area near Lake Minchumina, northeast of Mount McKinley, had three land openings in 1981-1983, allowing potential settlement on a total of 30,000 acres. The other two areas near the old village of Slana were two tracts separated by the Tok Cutoff, part of the Glenn Highway. These were the North Slana and South Slana settlement areas opened in 1983 that added another 10,250 acres to federal lands available for homesteaders. These three settlement areas, the last in America to be opened for homesteading by the federal government, remained open for homesteading claims until October 21, 1986. Only two unusual forms of non-agricultural homesteads created under special 1927 and 1934 legislation for Alaska were possible. These were claims for homesites (for personal dwellings), or for headquarter sites (for businesses). Both types were not to exceed 5 acres in size. Additionally, non-homestead claims up to 80 acres for trade and manufacturing purposes were allowed for business needs. After the three settlement areas closed for new claims on October 21, 1986, relatively few five-acre non-agricultural homesteads were eventually patented along with only a few trade and



## Changes in homestead requirements in Alaska

**#1** Homestead size: From May 14, 1898, to March 2, 1903, people could only claim up to 80 acres for a homestead. From March 3, 1903 until July 7, 1916, they could claim up to 320 acres. From July 8, 1916 through the 1980s, the maximum size for a homestead was 160 acres.

**#2** Time on the land: From May 14, 1898 until June 5, 1912, people had to live on their homesteads for five years, with some allowance made for short stays off their claims for medical reasons, short-term work, or short vacations. On June 6, 1912, the requirement dropped to three years. By the 1950s, the time requirements to live on the claim for each of those three years was reduced to a minimum of not less than seven months.

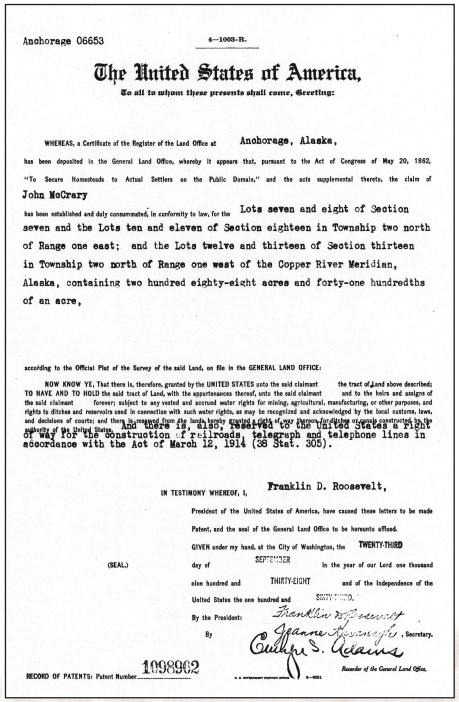
**#3** Required cultivation & veterans' preference: While the standard rule when homesteading started in Alaska in 1898 was for a settler to do some type of farming on not less than one-eighth of the land, after World War II, certain war veterans could get special exceptions. Under certain circumstances until June 18, 1954, it became possible for veterans with over 19 months of military service to get a 160-acre homestead in a year without doing any cultivation. After that time, it was possible for veterans who met special circumstances to cultivate just one-sixteenth of the claimed land. Overall, after World War II, veterans were customarily given first preference for a certain amount of time to claim homesteads in areas opened for homesteading.

## Commuting or "buying out" a homestead

The original 1862 Homestead Act allowed homesteaders under certain conditions to get title to their claims faster than their time requirement to live on the claim (five years, later three years). This was a process called "commutation" of a claim, or "commuting" a claim. When commuting a claim, the homesteader still had to live on and cultivate the claim for 14 months. The homesteader usually paid $1.25 per acre for the land. Many "commuted homesteads" were also patented in Alaska, with title documents indicating that they were acquired by purchase and not under homestead laws for "free." One of these "commuted homesteads" was near the community of Chicken in northern Alaska, around 60 miles north of Tok. The homestead was patented in 1972.

## Were there restrictions to claiming a homestead on federal land in Alaska?

Similar to homesteading in the contiguous Lower 48 states, federal land in Alaska had to be officially open to homestead entry before homestead claims could be filed. Prior to 1918, the land had to be surveyed to register claims with the General Land Office. Even so, people who settled on land before an official opening or survey generally had preference rights to file a claim on their land. Early newspapers in Alaska often carried information on new land openings. For instance, a notice in the Valdez, Alaska paper on August 11, 1912 reported that the "first surveyed township in Alaska will be thrown open to entry next Thursday, Aug. 15." It was for land near the Copper River. The article also stated: "Actual settlers on the land prior to the survey thereof are allowed a preference right of ninety days in which to present their filings." In that way, many settlers from the early 1900s got homesteads but with patent dates long after their original settlement on the land, sometimes 20 or more years later. For example, John McCrary, an early settler at Copper Center, Alaska in 1902 finally received patent to his homestead claim in 1938. *See document at right issued by the General Land Office in Washington, D.C.*



Anchorage 06653 4—1003-R.

**The United States of America,**

To all to whom these presents shall come, Greeting:

WHEREAS, a Certificate of the Register of the Land Office at Anchorage, Alaska, has been deposited in the General Land Office, whereby it appears that, pursuant to the Act of Congress of May 20, 1862, "To Secure Homesteads to Actual Settlers on the Public Domain," and the acts supplemental thereto, the claim of John McCrary has been established and duly consummated, in conformity to law, for the Lots seven and eight of Section seven and the Lots ten and eleven of Section eighteen in Township two north of Range one east; and the Lots twelve and thirteen of Section thirteen in Township two north of Range one west of the Copper River Meridian, Alaska, containing two hundred eighty-eight acres and forty-one hundredths of an acre,

according to the Official Plat of the Survey of the said Land, on file in the GENERAL LAND OFFICE:

NOW KNOW YE, That there is, therefore, granted by the UNITED STATES unto the said claimant the tract of Land above described; TO HAVE AND TO HOLD the said tract of Land, with the appurtenances thereof, unto the said claimant and to the heirs and assigns of the said claimant forever; subject to any vested and accrued water rights for mining, agricultural, manufacturing, or other purposes, and rights to ditches and reservoirs used in connection with such water rights, as may be recognized and acknowledged by the local customs, laws, and decisions of courts; and there is reserved from the lands hereby granted a right of way thereon for ditches or canals constructed by the authority of the United States. And there is, also, reserved to the United States a right of way for the construction of railroads, telegraph and telephone lines in accordance with the Act of March 12, 1914 (38 Stat. 305).

IN TESTIMONY WHEREOF, I, Franklin D. Roosevelt, President of the United States of America, have caused these letters to be made Patent, and the seal of the General Land Office to be hereunto affixed.

GIVEN under my hand, at the City of Washington, the TWENTY-THIRD day of SEPTEMBER in the year of our Lord one thousand nine hundred and THIRTY-EIGHT and of the Independence of the United States the one hundred and SIXTY-THIRD.

(SEAL.)

By the President: Franklin D. Roosevelt

By Jeanne Kavanagh, Secretary.

Eugene S. Adams

Recorder of the General Land Office.

RECORD OF PATENTS: Patent Number 1098962

U. S. GOVERNMENT PRINTING OFFICE 4—8031

Photo © Alaska Railroad Collection, Anchorage Museum, AEC.G998



*Eugene E. Swanson was an African-American and a Spanish American war veteran. He homesteaded at the former Gold Rush town of Rampart, Alaska in 1928, using this house (shown). Samuel Heeter had previously built the house in 1903 when Rampart was a booming community.*

Photo courtesy Robert E. King

## Homestead statistics for Alaska

Before 1910, around 20 homesteads had been patented in all of Alaska, with under a thousand before 1940. This was a very small number compared to the rest of the country.

Between 1901 and 1988, fewer than 3,500 homestead patents were awarded to individuals in Alaska based on farming a portion of the land. Beginning in the 1930s, Alaska-only legislation prompted several thousands more patents for five-acre homesteads, also called "homesites" and "headquarter" sites, that didn't require any cultivation. These 5-acre, non-agricultural "homesteads" required living on the land for most of three years. Claimants also paid $2.50 per acre. Technically these homesteaders "bought" the land instead of getting it for "free" by traditional homesteading. The last few of these unusual types of small-size "homestead" claims were still being patented near Slana and Lake Minchumina in the early twenty-first century, with some filed as recently as the 1980s.

## The first homesteaders in Alaska

When the 1862 Homestead Act was extended to Alaska in 1898, veterans had special rights to obtain homesteads faster than the normal homesteading requirements. As early as 1901, some veterans were selling their rights to homesteads to fish companies who then received homestead patents in coastal areas of Alaska. By 1903-1908, a few Alaska homesteads were patented to people who apparently actually met the 1862 Homestead Act requirements of living on the land for most of five years, building a habitable dwelling, and cultivating a portion of the claim.