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Eagle - Fort Egbert

A Remnant of the past

Preserved through the cooperative efforts of
the Bureau of Land Management and the Eagle Historical Society & Museums

A BLM Alaska 'Adventures in the Past' Series, No. 5

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Photo from the Anchorage Museum of History & Art

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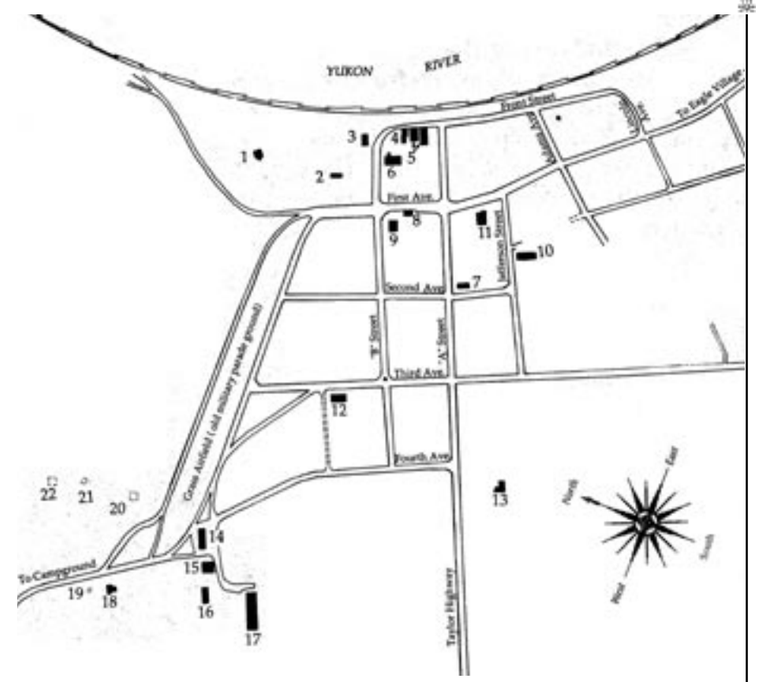
Modern Eagle – Points of Interest



Fort Egbert about 1907,
looking northwest to the Yukon River and Eagle Bluff.
(Photo from the Stout Collection, courtesy of the Anchorage Museum of History & Art)

1. Yukon Charlie National Park Headquarters
2. Eagle city Hall
3. Church
4. Customs House Museum
5. Site of former Northern Commercial Company Store and Warehouse
6. Taylor Building
7. Eagle Public Library
8. Wellhouse
9. Wickersham Courthouse
10. Post Office
11. Eagle Roadhouse (no longer operating)
12. Redmen Hall
13. Original Eagle schoolhouse
14. Army Quartermaster Storehouse
15. Water Wagon Shed
16. Granery
17. Mule Barn
18. Non-Commissioned Officers Quarters
19. Bakery Site
20. Barracks Site
21. Gymnasium Site
22. Signal Corps Barracks

Traders and Miners

(Photo from the Stout Collection, courtesy of the University of Alaska Fairbanks)

In Eagle, the lives of whites and Indians, soldiers and civilians, and traders and miners were interwoven. Three distinct but dependent communities evolved side by side: Eagle Village, Eagle City and Fort Egbert. Each group learned to live with the other in the severe and isolated environment.

At the time of white contact the Native people in the area were Han Indians, a branch of the Athabascans. The Han were subsistence hunters and fishermen and became aggressive traders when the Hudson Bay Company established Fort Yukon in 1847 and Fort Reliance in 1874.

The Belle Isle Trading Post, built around 1880 near what is now the city of Eagle, was used intermittently for the next 18 years. The Han later established Johnny's Village by what is now the site of the village cemetary, two miles upriver of the trading post.

Disgusted with restrictive Canadian mining laws, miners crossed the Yukon River to the Alaska Territory. Downriver from the Belle Isle Trading Post, 28 miners organized a community in 1897. They named the town Eagle for the majestic birds that nested on a nearby bluff.

Early cabins were primitive. Built of unpeeled logs, they measured no more than 15 by 18 feet. White cheesecloth was used for windows. Sod roofs often sagged under the weight of winter snows.

The waterfront was the heart of activity in Eagle. Businesses on B Street included the Chamber of Commerce in the saloon on the left and the Northern Commercial Company on the right.
(Photo from the Stout Collection, courtesy of the Anchorage Museum of History & Art)

Preserving the past

The noncommissioned officers quarters was built in 1900 at a cost of $1,786.30. Two additions came later. One of three NCO houses that stood in the area, it was occupied in 1902 by the post quartermaster and the hospital steward. A second house built in the same style is on the waterfront in Eagle, housing the Customs House Museum. The third was dismantled after the fort closed, and its materials were used for local building projects.

The original outhouse for the NCO quarters, still functional, has been moved to a clearing south of the stables.

The interior of the NCO quarters is furnished with items from the Fort Egbert era. Although the building is not open to visitors, its windows provide a glimpse at past living conditions of the soldiers and their families in the far north.

The NCO quarters in 1910.
(Photo courtesy of the Anchorage Museum of History & Art)

Restoration work stabilized the foundation of the NCO quarters.

Sen. Ted Stevens, R-Alaska, was a prime mover for the preservation of Fort Egbert. Stevens gave the keynote address at the dedication of the fort on August 9, 1980.

BLM crews stabilized and restored Fort Egbert's buildings from 1974 until 1979. A dedication ceremony commemorated that work and the important role Fort Egbert played in Alaska's history.

Keynote speaker was Alaska's U.S. Senator Ted Stevens, who was instrumental in obtaining funds for the project. Also in attendance were Major General T. G. Jenes, commander of the 172nd Infantry Brigade, BLM-Alaska State Director Curtis McVee, Eagle residents and visitors.

The BLM continues stabilization efforts to save the Fort Egbert buildings from the ravages of time and weather. The BLM and the Eagle Historical Society & Museums cooperatively manage Fort Egbert to preserve the cultural resources as an inalienable component of the Eagle Historic District.

Years after Eagle's incorporation as a city, the Eagle Historic District still retains its unique and charming atmosphere. Enjoy your visit. Walk through Eagle's unpaved streets; picnic on the lawns of Fort Egbert. Absorb Alaska's history and share in this small but authentic chapter of Alaska-Yukon history.

Preserved much as it was in 1899, the small, isolated community of Eagle offers visitors a rare glimpse into Alaska's past.

Francois Mercier established Belle Isle as one of the first trading posts on the Yukon River in Alaska's interior in 1880. Eagle City was later built adjacent to it.

Gold was discovered on the Fortymile River and at Circle in 1886, and on the Klondike near Dawson in 1896. Eagle's strategic location made it the center of transportation, trade and communications for Interior Alaska and Canada's Yukon Territory.

Eagle was formally organized by miners in 1897. By 1898, a population of 1,700 was housed in more than 500 cabins and tents.

That same year, the Secretary of War set aside a military reservation that included Eagle City "until such time as some form of civil government may be established." Construction began on a military camp, later named for Brigadier General Harry C. Egbert, who had been killed in Manila.

Soon the infant city boasted four major trading companies, a post office, a newspaper and a federal court, presided over by Judge James Wickersham.

Eagle seemed destined to become the mining center for the upper Yukon River in Alaska, but some of the miners drifted westward to Nome by 1901, then to Fairbanks in 1904. Judge Wickersham's court moved to Fairbanks. In 1911, Fort Egbert was abandoned except for an Army Signal Corps contingent, which operated the telegraph and wireless station until about 1925.

Steamboat "Susie" at Eagle in 1904.
(Photo from the Stout Collection, courtesy of the Anchorage Museum of History & Art)

Eagle retains the charm of its early days. Evidence of the early military and gold rush eras is still present and visitors are reminded to "take nothing but pictures–leave nothing but footprints."

Congress passed criminal and civil codes for Alaska in 1900 that provided for taxation, licensing, incorporation and three judicial districts. On July 23, 1900, the War Department decided that civilian government could protect life and property in Eagle, and martial law ended.

Eagle's first judge, James Wickersham, arrived a few weeks after passage of the civil codes. The third judicial district stretched from the Arctic Ocean to the Aleutian Chain, covering half of the state or about 300,000 square miles.

Renting a furnished cabin, the judge began to establish a court system. Wickersham built a courthouse and jail in 1901. The charter making Eagle the first incorporated city in Interior Alaska was federally approved the same year.

Eagle residents recognize the uniqueness of their community and continue efforts to preserve it. A restoration project on Wickersham's courthouse began in 1975. The Eagle Historical Society & Museums displays exhibits and maintains local museums in the courthouse and other historic buildings, and residents conduct museum tours during the summer months.

Eagle Courthouse
(Photo from the Farnsworth Collection, courtesy of the University of Alaska Fairbanks)

The quartermaster storehouse is the oldest surviving structure at Fort Egbert. Built in 1899 of local material and remodeled in a 1905 face-lift, it was used to store a six-month food supply for those living at Fort Egbert.

Quartermaster Storehouse

The first floor of the mule barn, or quartermaster stables, was completed prior to May 1900 at a cost of $550 for materials. It housed 53 animals. Some of the mules' names hang above the stall doors. The hay loft was built in 1901. The barn was used until 1911. Today it contains exhibits from the past: a blacksmith area, sickbay stall, mule harnesses and hardware, old wagons, mining and agriculture memorabilia, boats and dog sleds.

Nineteen sled dog kennels were added to the south side of the stables to house Billy Mitchell's team. In 1901 Mitchell bought 80 dogs, 40 sets of harness and 16 sleds. The dogs pulled equipment and supplies for the military men as they explored and marked the route for hundreds of miles of telegraph line across the last frontier. The present kennels were reconstructed by BLM in 1977.

Mule Barn
(Photo from the Stout Collection, courtesy of the Anchorage Museum of History & Art

"The first dog I obtained was a McKenzie husky leader called 'Pointer.' Pointer was the greatest dog I ever seen. He weighed about one hundred and twenty pounds and was perfectly sure on the trail. He would face the worst of storms and pull me out of places where I had broken through the ice, when it looked all but impossible. He became tremendously attached to me, and from that time on during every trip, including the longest one ever made in Alaska, Pointer was my constant companion and friend."
-Lieutenant Billy Mitchell, *The Opening of Alaska,* Pictorial Histories Publishing Company, 1982

The water wagon shed provided shelter for the fort's fire system and water supply wagons. The structure was originally located about 50 yards north of its present location.

Water Wagon Shed

Water Wagon
(Photo from the Stout Collection, courtesy of the Anchorage Museum of History & Art)

One of the water wagons, a Studebaker purchased for $225, had a tank capacity of 400 gallons. Water for the fort was initially drawn from a well near the sawmill and stored in a tank. It was then delivered daily by the water wagon to the officer quarters, kitchens and barracks for cooking and drinking. The wagon could be removed from its wheels and put on sled runners in the winter.

The granary, erected in 1903, holds timeless stories about the cavalry in the north. Precious grains shipped on steamboats from the "outside" were stored here. It also housed a bowling alley prior to the construction of the gymnasium.

The Granary

By the early 1900s, the Alaska Commercial Company, the North American Trading and Transportation Company, the Alaska Exploration Company and the Seattle Transportation Company, plus several smaller, locally owned businesses, had flourishing trades. U.S. Customs records show that scores of riverboats vied for trade along the North's most populated riverbanks. Serving Yukon towns from Saint Michael to Whitehorse, the Mississippi-style sternwheelers operated an international trade route unique in United States history by serving towns in the United States and Canada. Eagle was a major landing for these boats.

Eagle was and is a port of entry for crossing the Alaska-Canada border. The old Customs House, a twin to the noncommissioned officers quarters still standing at Fort Egbert, was moved to its present site about 1915. Today it is one of the Eagle Historical Society & Museums' five museum buildings that contain exhibits preserving remnants of the past.

The merchandising of supplies was a vital part of Eagle's economy. The Paulson and Ott Independent Store, established in 1898, later became Ott and Scheele General Merchandise. The building also housed a tin shop and a carpenter's shop and served other purposes throughout the years. Some of the wood stoves still in use in Eagle today were constructed by Ott and Scheele.

Mrs. Scheele, her girls and Mr. Ott.
(Photo from the Stout Collection, courtesy of the Anchorage Museum of History & Art)

A New Mission

A new mission was given to Fort Egbert in 1900: construct the first telegraph line in Alaska. The War Department realized the Army needed good communications to be effective in Alaska. It recommended construction of an "all-American" road and telegraph line from Valdez to Fort Egbert.

After exploring the possibilities for a telegraph line in Alaska, General A. W. Greeley, chief of the Signal Office, appealed to Congress for construction funds. On May 26, 1900, $450,000 was appropriated for the construction and operation of a Washington-Alaska Military Cable and Telegraph System, known as WAMCATS.

The line was to extend from Nome in the west to Fairbanks in the Interior and on to Fort Egbert in the east, with another line extending from Fort Egbert to Fort Liscum, near Valdez. Underwater cable lines were to be laid from Valdez to southeast Alaska and on to Seattle.

Captain Farnsworth and his men completed the first leg of the 1,506-mile WAMCATS line in October 1900. Extending from Fort Egbert into Canada, it met the Canadian line from Dawson City. Messages could now be telegraphed from Fort Egbert to Dawson and Whitehorse, carried overland to Skagway, sent by mail ship to Seattle, then telegraphed to any part of the contiguous United States. Fort Egbert could receive messages from the United States in five days at 56 cents per word.

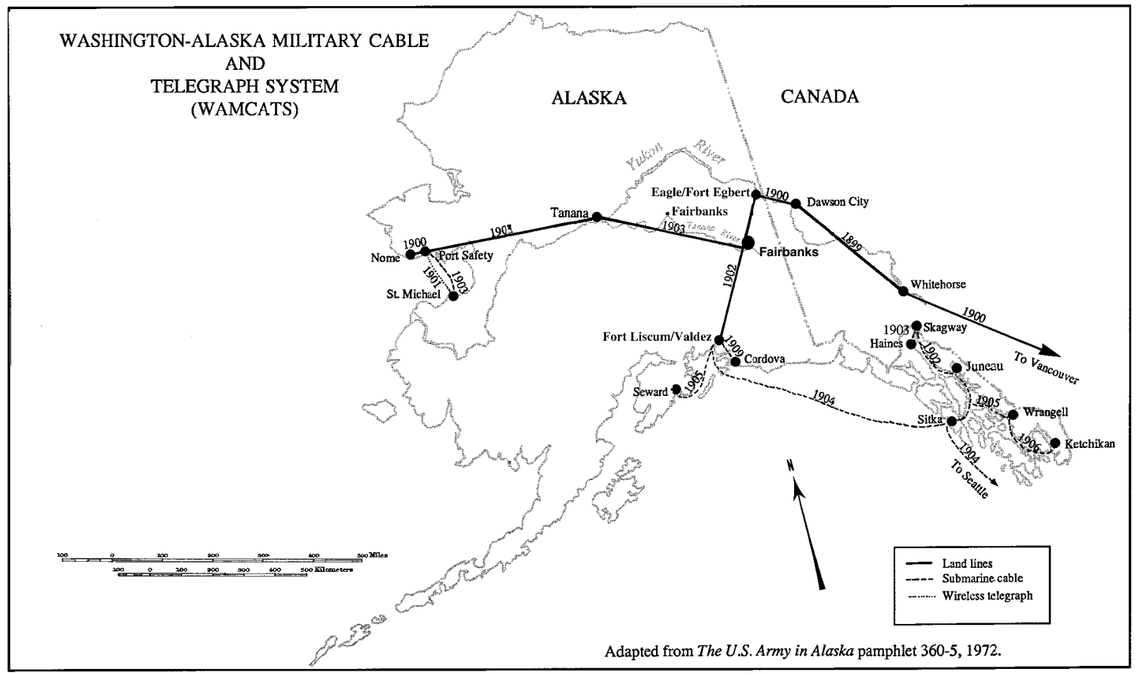
Telegraph construction from Saint Michael and Nome eastward progressed well, but great difficulties were encountered in the Eagle-Valdez line. Lieutenant William "Billy" Mitchell arrived in the summer of 1901 to expedite construction.

Soldier with a surveying tool called a measuring wheel, about 1900.
(Photo from the Stout Collection, courtesy of the Anchorage Museum of History & Art)

WAMCATS

Lieutenant William "Billy" Mitchell.
(Photo courtesy of the Anchorage Museum of History & Art)

Insulators on WAMCATS line.
(BLM Photo)



Adapted from *The U.S. Army in Alaska* pamphlet 360-5, 1972.

The New York Times.

CAPTAIN AMUNDSEN TELLS THE STORY OF THE NORTHWEST PASSAGE AND THE MAGNETIC POLE

New York Times,
Sept. 30, 1906.
(Photo courtesy of the University of Alaska Fairbanks)

Wireless station at Fort Egbert, about 1912.
(Photo from the Tom Scott Collection, courtesy of University of Alaska Fairbanks)

Lieutenants Billy Mitchell and George C. Burnell met at Tanana Crossing, now Tanacross, August 24, 1902, to complete the 420-mile Fort Egbert to Fort Liscum line.

The Saint Michael–Nome line encountered trouble in following the Yukon River to Eagle, so Mitchell rerouted it up the Tanana River. Mitchell made the last connection on the Alaska Telegraph System southeast of Fairbanks on the banks of the Tanana River June 27, 1903, just three days before funding expired. Two thousand miles of wire now stretched from Nome to St. Michael to Fort Egbert to Fort Liscum. Mitchell later wrote, "Alaska is now open to civilization."

The goal of an all-American communications system was finally realized when cable lines were laid from Seattle to Valdez in 1904.

Eagle became the temporary headquarters for the famous Norwegian polar explorer Roald Amundsen in 1905. He mushed approximately 500 miles by dog sled from his ice-locked sloop off Alaska's arctic coast to Eagle. Using Fort Egbert's telegraph system, he announced to the world his successful crossing of the Northwest Passage. Amundsen stayed two months as a guest of the post manager of the Northern Commercial Company while waiting for his boat to be freed from the ice.

Fort Egbert was expensive to maintain and the wireless telegraph gradually replaced the old land lines. By 1911, the infantry companies were no longer needed to maintain the telegraph lines, so the Army pulled out its infantry troops. The small Signal Corps detachment remained to operate the radio station, which burned to the ground in 1925. The detachment then withdrew from Eagle.

John H. Hoeppel, telegraph operator at Eagle.
(Photo courtesy of the University of Alaska Fairbanks)

Harness shop at Fort Egbert in 1905.
(Photo courtesy of the Anchorage Museum of History & Art)

Gardening in the far north.
(Photo from the Stout Collection, courtesy of the Anchorage Museum of History & Art)

The Fort Egbert Sawmill was built in 1900. The military allowed the Department of Justice to use the sawmill to make lumber for the town's courthouse and jail.
(Photo courtesy of the Eagle Historical Society & Museums)

Fort Egbert

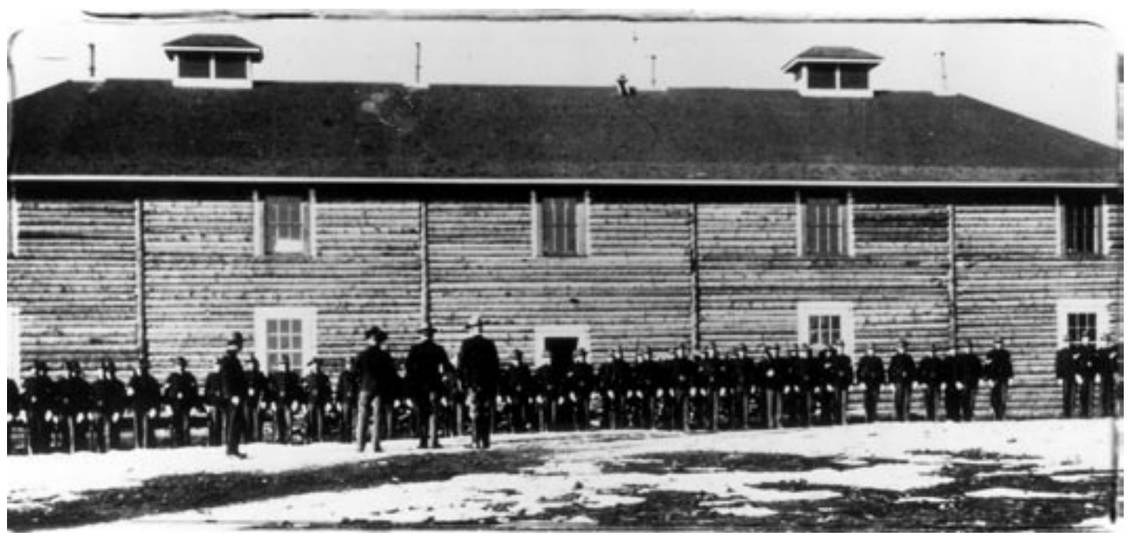
As trading and mining flourished in Alaska, the Army expanded its role on the frontier. The 1897 gold rush to the Klondike and the mushrooming trade on the Yukon River created a need for more knowledge about the state. Captain P. H. Ray, a veteran explorer of Alaska, was sent to investigate conditions on the Yukon that fall.

The Army established military posts in Alaska to provide law and order, protect commerce, care for impoverished miners, build roads and trails, and especially to develop communication facilities.

Lieutenant W. P. Richardson and his men began construction of Fort Egbert in 1899. Major Ray, Captain Wright, 99 enlisted men and a detachment of the Hospital Corps arrived at Fort Egbert in July. Barracks and officer quarters were hastily erected before winter. Both soldiers and civilians faced adjustments to frontier living: limited and expensive supplies, cold, isolation and loneliness. Mutual aid became the key to survival.

Fort Egbert's mission decreased when the Army's jurisdiction over Eagle ended in 1900. Disharmony between enlisted men and townspeople ensued.

Captain Charles E. Farnsworth assumed command in August 1900, and morale and interaction with the citizens of Eagle improved.



Muster of Company L, 7th Infantry, March 1900.
(Photo from the Eagle Historical Society & Museums, Anchorage Museum of History & Art)

Frontier Heritage

Eagle and Fort Egbert provide a unique opportunity in Alaska for the preservation of our frontier heritage. Local community and general public interest led to legislation and funding that guaranteed that preservation.

The BLM in Alaska has actively worked for the protection and preservation of cultural resources since the late 1960s.

In 1970, the Alaska State Division of Parks nominated Eagle to the National Register of Historic Places. The Eagle Historic District includes the town and the BLM-managed Fort Egbert. With funds obtained through the efforts of the people of Eagle and the Alaska congressional delegation in 1975, BLM began a historic preservation project on Fort Egbert. This effort was assisted by the National Trust for Historic Preservation.

This project is one of the first major efforts of its kind in Alaska. State, federal and local groups have shown strong interest in this historical undertaking and the cooperative effort is continuing within the historic district.

Of 45 Fort Egbert buildings, only five remain at the site. Historic structural information on portions to be reconstructed was recorded by a consulting architect from the National Trust for Historic Preservation. He recommended stabilization techniques and helped prepare a restoration proposal for the Eagle Historic District.

All of the Fort Egbert structures, except the granary, had severe structural damage. In some cases foundations, roofs and walls had to be torn down and replaced. Little but ruins was left of the hospital; stabilization work has been minimal.

(BLM Photo by Howard Smith)

Original Post Hospital, 1900. Few remnants remain of this structure, and the ruins are considered hazardous to explore. One wall is still standing (photo above), but visitors are cautioned to view at a distance.
(Photo at left courtesy of the Eagle Historical Society & Museums)

Officers' Row.
(Photo by C. L. Andrews, University of Oregon Library)

Government Dog Team

Despite their isolation, Eagle residents began to replace material goods left behind when they came to the gold fields. The Presbyterian minister, James Wollaston Kirk, freighted in a piano, baby organ, church bell, sewing machine, feather bed, linen, china, silver, carpets, books and dried food. The Reverend Kirk held his first church service in a saloon, but he and his wife later shared one room of their two-room house for community gatherings.

Eagle had many social clubs. The Improved Order of Redmen Lodge was established in 1904 as a service organization. Its members sponsored social events, Friday night dances, holiday parties and memorial services. They also provided sick and burial benefits for lodge members.

Improved Order of Redmen in the Redmen Lodge.
(Photo from the Stout Collection, courtesy of the Anchorage Museum of History & Art)