

Alaska History Day Lesson Plan:

Rights and Responsibilities in History

“A 45,000-Dollar Typo Expedited Telegraph Construction in Alaska”

Contents:

Summary and Background Information	Pages 1-5
Teacher’s Lesson Plan Details	Pages 5-8
Student Packet	Pages 9-25
Additional Resources	Page 26

Summary:

One of the fundamental rights we enjoy as American citizens is freedom of speech. Although free speech is constitutionally protected, some words and actions are not entitled to protection, and it’s a citizen’s responsibility to communicate effectively, accurately and respectfully. For the right of free speech to be effective, it must be safeguarded by those responsible to be mindful of their words and willing to carefully listen to others. Freedom of speech is only effective when people are willing to hear and scrupulous in communication.

In this lesson, we will focus on the advancing of the right of free speech as demonstrated by the opening of telegraph communication in Alaska. It’s a unique example of the need for communication at a time of growth and turmoil in our state. Messages needed to get through, action needed to be taken, but it was a costly enterprise, in both finances and labor. The heroic signal corps telegraph linemen opened Alaska’s communication network at the turn of the century, and then operated telegraph stations that played a significant role in Alaska’s early development as a territory.

Historical Background:

Lt. Billy Mitchell (later known as Brigadier General Billy Mitchell) was sent to Alaska to coordinate construction of the Washington Alaska Military Cable and Telegraph System (WAMCATS) in the hostile wilderness. Before his arrival, telegraph construction teams had only been able to build one mile of line out of Valdez. Relying on his wilderness expertise and savvy motivation strategies, Mitchell was able to support completion of all 1,497 miles of the line in the next 3 years, connecting St. Michael’s on the Bering Sea with Washington, DC via the Canadian telegraph line.

At Fort Egbert, Lt. Mitchell ran out of money, and requested funds from his superior, General Greely. A telegram relayed the news that Congress had allocated \$50,000 to the project. This

was a huge relief, and allowed the telegraph crew to keep going, working to connect Alaska to Canadian lines. Three months later, when the actual warrant came through, Lt. Mitchell was shocked to find that there had been a mistake in the message. The US Treasury had only granted \$5,000 for Signal Corps use! The operator who had relayed the telegram message over the Canadian telegraph had mistakenly added a 0. The extra 45,000 dollars had already been spent. Lt. Mitchell estimated that it would have delayed telegraph construction by more than a year if they hadn't received the extra money when they did. The added 0, a transmission mistake, caused a lot of stress, but in the end expedited telegraph construction.

Key points about the Alaskan Cable System:

Military Purpose:

The primary driver behind the Alaskan Cable System was the need for reliable communication for the U.S. military.

Government Involvement:

The U.S. government, particularly the Signal Corps, played a key role in developing and maintaining the Alaskan cable system, marking a significant government contribution to Alaskan infrastructure.

Remote Communities:

The cable system provided a lifeline for remote Alaskan communities based on telegraph technology, enabling them to communicate with the outside world, including during emergencies like the 1925 diphtheria epidemic in Nome. (Though portions of this message would have been sent by wireless, which soon replaced the fragile cable system.)

Impact on Development:

The availability of reliable communication through the cable system facilitated the development of Alaska by enabling better coordination and information sharing across the territory.

Background: Free Speech under the First Amendment

“Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances.”

-Amendment 1, US Constitution

In case students ask about what is meant by the First Amendment

Free Speech is the right:

-Not to speak (specifically, the right not to salute the flag). *West Virginia Board of Education v. Barnette*, 319 U.S. 624 (1943).

-Of students to wear black armbands to school to protest a war (“Students do not shed their constitutional rights at the schoolhouse gate.”). *Tinker v. Des Moines*, 393 U.S. 503 (1969).

-To use certain offensive words and phrases to convey political messages. *Cohen v. California*, 403 U.S. 15 (1971).

-To contribute money (under certain circumstances) to political campaigns. *Buckley v. Valeo*, 424 U.S. 1 (1976).

-To advertise commercial products and professional services (with some restrictions). *Virginia Board of Pharmacy v. Virginia Consumer Council*, 425 U.S. 748 (1976); *Bates v. State Bar of Arizona*, 433 U.S. 350 (1977).

-To engage in symbolic speech, (e.g., burning the flag in protest). *Texas v. Johnson*, 491 U.S. 397 (1989); *United States v. Eichman*, 496 U.S. 310 (1990).

Freedom of speech does not include the right:

-To incite imminent lawless action. *Brandenburg v. Ohio*, 395 U.S. 444 (1969).

-To make or distribute obscene materials. *Roth v. United States*, 354 U.S. 476 (1957).

-To burn draft cards as an anti-war protest. *United States v. O'Brien*, 391 U.S. 367 (1968).

-To permit students to print articles in a school newspaper over the objections of the school administration. *Hazelwood School District v. Kuhlmeier*, 484 U.S. 260 (1988).

-Of students to make an obscene speech at a school-sponsored event. *Bethel School District #43 v. Fraser*, 478 U.S. 675 (1986).

-Of students to advocate illegal drug use at a school-sponsored event. *Morse v. Frederick*, ___ U.S. ___ (2007).

Learning Objectives:

- Interpret primary and secondary sources to understand a few of the processes involved in developing the telegraph line, and some of its impacts in Alaska.
- Discuss the tremendous effort of the US Army Signal Corps, especially General Greely and Lt. Billy Mitchell, in opening communication to Alaska.
- Explore primary sources to discover how a mistaken communication expedited the construction of Alaska's telegraph system.
- Experiment with constructing and decoding a message in Morse Code.
- Provide an introduction to Alaska History Day and National History Day project resources and thesis development.

Subjects & Topics:

Right to free speech comes with the responsibility for accurate communication

Responsibility of government to establish communication lines to connect remote areas in the US

Right to use communication devices, responsibly listen and utilize information accurately

Ideas on how to begin a History Day project, consider sources, and begin a thesis statement

Curriculum:

Alaska History Day, National History Day

This is an example of a primary source research project that could be adapted to an Alaska History Day or National History Day project.

Grade: 6-8

Time frame:

Two or more class periods. Adjust number of primary sources, response requirements and activities as needed for grade level and time allowed.

Period 1: Discussion of Rights and Responsibilities; introduction to 2024-2025 theme and project examples. Background information and document analysis. Activities 1 and 2.

Main Idea: With the right of free speech comes the great responsibility to communicate accurately and fairly.

Period 2: Students decode Morse Code messages, and create a message to swap with a fellow classmate to decode. Finally, students have the opportunity to quick-write a thesis statement for a potential History Day project.

Main Idea: Appreciate how easy it would be to make a mistake sending an encoded message.

Methods of evaluation:

Participation in discussion; oral or written analysis of Primary Sources; participation in creating and decoding messages in Morse Code; quick-write for NHD thesis ideas

Alaska Content Standards:

6-8.RH.1 Literacy in History Key Ideas and Details: Cite specific textual evidence to support analysis of primary and secondary sources.

6-8.RH.7 Integration of Knowledge and Ideas: Integrate visual information (e.g., in charts, graphs, photographs, videos, or maps) with other information in print and digital texts.

Information about Alaska History Day/National History Day:

This lesson provides an example of research that could lead into a project for National History Day. After the lesson, give students an opportunity to brainstorm ideas for their own project, and complete a quick-write creating a project thesis.

There are 5 types of projects: performance, website, paper, exhibit, and documentary. (Performance, website and documentary projects have individual and group (up to 5 students) categories. Students may compete in the junior (6-8) or senior (9-12) divisions. Consult Alaska History Day's website for more details.

[Categories and Sample Projects – Alaska History Day](#)

Key Dates:

Registration Period: March 1, 2025 - March 26, 2025

Judging: April 3, 2025 - April 9, 2025

Results Announced: April 11, 2025

National Contest: June 8, 2025 - June 12, 2025

National History Day provides clear information about how to choose a topic, begin research, and understand project categories:

[Get Started on Your Project - National History Day](#)

Lesson Plan Details:

Teacher Preparation:

- Plan introductory statements and questions based on students' interests and access to communication devices. (A few suggested comments are included.)
- Review materials, decide which portions of the lesson to include, based on the amount of time available and students' interests. Print out documents and duplicate copies as necessary for student analysis and writing activities.
- Determine if students will work individually or in teams.
- Decide if primary sources need to be printed or will be viewed digitally.
- Print student packets, including primary sources if using individually, number of primary source analysis documents, and thesis quick-write template.

Note: The decoded final message says, "COMMUNICATION IS KEY."

Background:

One of the most precious freedoms we have as American citizens is the right to free speech. This fundamental right includes the liberty to use communication technology to share our thoughts. Along with this right comes the responsibility to use our words wisely. Mistakes, whether accidental or intentional, can cause misunderstandings or serious conflict. Inaccurate communication isn't unconstitutional, but it can have a far-reaching impact. One of the most important responsibilities that comes with the right of free speech is listening, and relaying what we hear accurately.

Though it's best to avoid mistakes, sometimes those failures work out for good. In this lesson, we will discover how a telegraph operator's mistake expedited construction of the line between Ft. Liscum and Ft. Egbert during the opening of Alaska in 1903.

Class Opener:

How many messages have you sent or received just today? In a world of IM's, DM's, reels, snaps, texts, threads, emails, be reels, Tiktoks, voice calls, and more... imagine if it took a whole year for you to get a message through! That's exactly the situation faced by outposts in Alaska in the early 1900's.

Discussion: What are some important reasons we communicate now, and why would communication have been so important in the Alaskan territory?

Some student responses could be:

- to combat isolation
- to communicate with family
- to organize military orders
- to enforce justice in the case of prospectors or other settlers
- to coordinate business transactions

Think about it: If you were expected to send or receive a message in Morse code, how reliable would you be?

Activity 1: Photographs as Primary Sources

First, let's look at some photos of the construction of the telegraph in Interior Alaska, focusing on McCarty Station at the Tanana River crossing.

These sources document the work, challenges, and ingenuity involved in constructing just one area of the telegraph line. Study the images. "Interview" the source, discussing in groups or filling out the "Document Analysis" forms.

Ask: Who took it? When was it created? Where was it created? What is it saying?

What can you infer about the construction process based on viewing images of this one camp?

The following image links direct readers to Alaska's Digital Archives. Use links if viewing online as a class. Otherwise, printable images and source information follow in the student packet.

Source 1: Tripod poles typical of Interior Alaska

<https://vilda.alaska.edu/digital/collection/cdmg21/id/24783/rec/51>

Source 2: Camp at McCarty Station

<https://vilda.alaska.edu/digital/collection/cdmg11/id/825/rec/23>

Source 3: WAMCATS camp along the Valdez-Fairbanks Trail

<https://vilda.alaska.edu/digital/collection/cdmg2/id/925/rec/48>

Source 4: Structure to assist telegraph crossing at the Tanana River

<https://vilda.alaska.edu/digital/collection/cdmg11/id/780/rec/19>

Source 5: Lineman examines bear tracks in newly cleared right-of-way

<https://vilda.alaska.edu/digital/collection/cdmg11/id/807/rec/20>

Source 6: Delivering Supplies to McCarty Station

<https://vilda.alaska.edu/digital/collection/cdmg11/id/827/rec/28>

Source 7: Aerial view taken from McCarty Bluff

<https://vilda.alaska.edu/digital/collection/cdmg11/id/821/rec/20>

Activity 2: Documents as Primary Sources

We have studied images as primary sources. Now let's read some quotes from people who were part of telegraph construction. (Refer to quotes on page 18.)

While leading the men who were constructing the line between Ft. Liscum and Ft. Egbert, Lt. Billy Mitchell had an interesting experience. Analyze the following primary source and consider the consequences of a typo. (Refer to final primary source from Mitchell's diary on page 19.)

Study the quotes. "Interview" the source, discussing in groups or filling out the "Document Analysis" forms.

Activity 3: Create and Decode Morse Code Messages

Pretend you are stationed at a Signal Corps station along the trail, and are responsible for sending and receiving messages on the telegraph. Using the Morse Code table, construct a message for a fellow classmate. Then swap messages and work to decode one another's messages. Decode the final message.

Activity 4: Connect to History Day Theme and Thesis Quick-Write

Use the research on this topic and consider its relevance to this year's theme, "Rights and Responsibilities in History." Take a moment to discuss project ideas. In a quick-write, prepare a thesis statement that could be used for a NHD project on this topic.

Student Packet follows on next pages: Print as needed for student activities.

Primary Source Images, Documents, Source Information

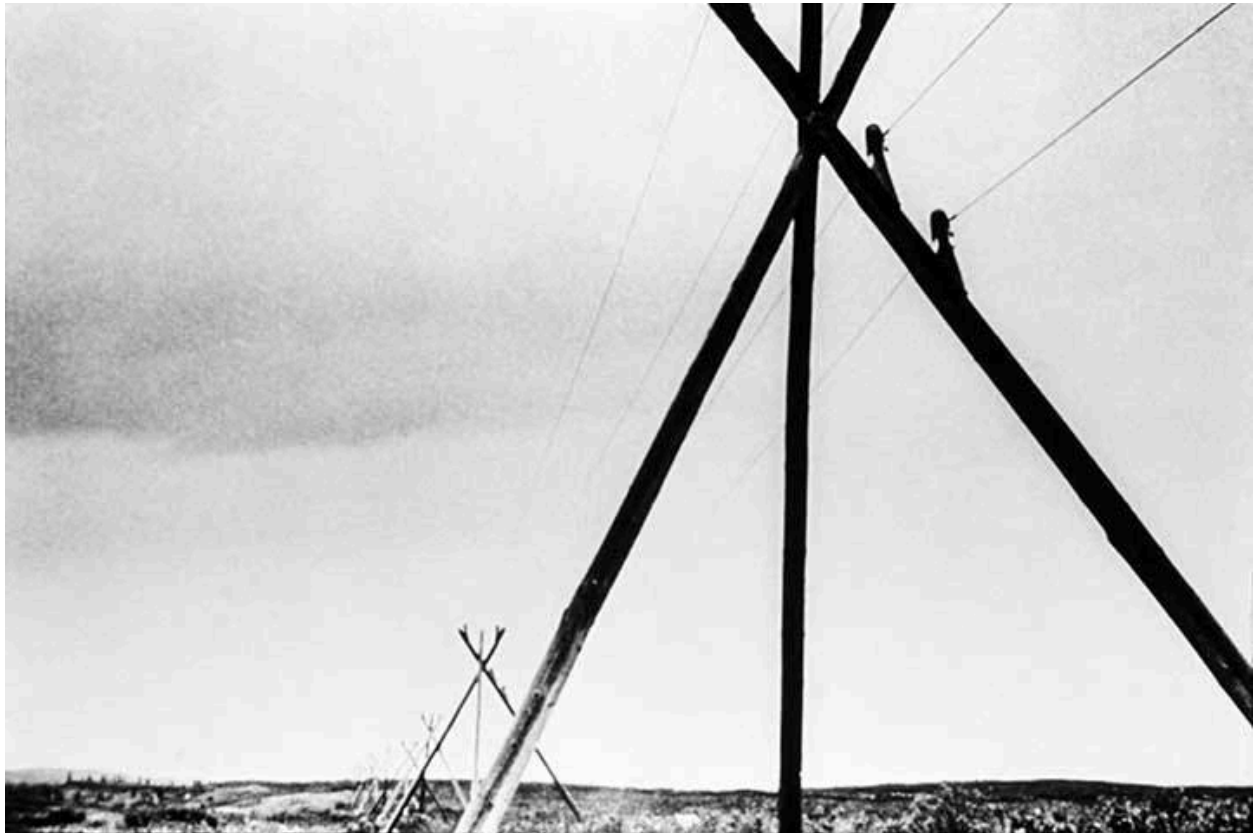
Analysis Guides from the National Archives

Morse Code Decoder and Activity Charts

Thesis Quick-Write Template for History Day Project

Source 1: Tripod poles typical of Interior Alaska

<https://vilda.alaska.edu/digital/collection/cdmg21/id/24783/rec/51>



Tripod telegraph poles in Interior Alaska

Item Description

Title

Tripod telegraph poles in Interior Alaska

Identifier

ASL-P008-18

Collection Name

U.S. Army, 172d Infantry Brigade, 1867-1975, ASL-PCA-008

Description

Line of tripod telegraph poles. Tundra visible at bottom of picture. Additional description from finding aid - Alternate freezing and thawing causes conventional telegraph poles to lean and fall. Tripods were typical of the WAMCATS line in the tundra country between Broad Pass and Fairbanks in 1948.

Creator

U.S. Army Alaska

Subject.TGM

Utility poles

Corporate Name

Washington-Alaska Military Cable and Telegraph System

Location

Broad Pass (Alaska)

Fairbanks (Alaska)

Region

Interior Alaska

Time Period

1939 to 1959

Date.original

1948

Type

Image (Photographs)

Related Materials

Alaska Library Catalog Collection Record : [https://jlc-web.uaa.alaska.edu/client/en_US/asl/search/detailnonmodal/ent:\\$002f\\$002fSD_ILS\\$002f\\$002fSD_ILS:1740691/one](https://jlc-web.uaa.alaska.edu/client/en_US/asl/search/detailnonmodal/ent:$002f$002fSD_ILS$002f$002fSD_ILS:1740691/one)

Ordering & Use

https://library.alaska.gov/hist/vilda_rights.html

Holding Institution

Alaska State Library - Historical Collections, PO Box 110571, Juneau AK 99811-0571; <mailto:asl.historical@alaska.gov>

Source 2: Camp at McCarty station



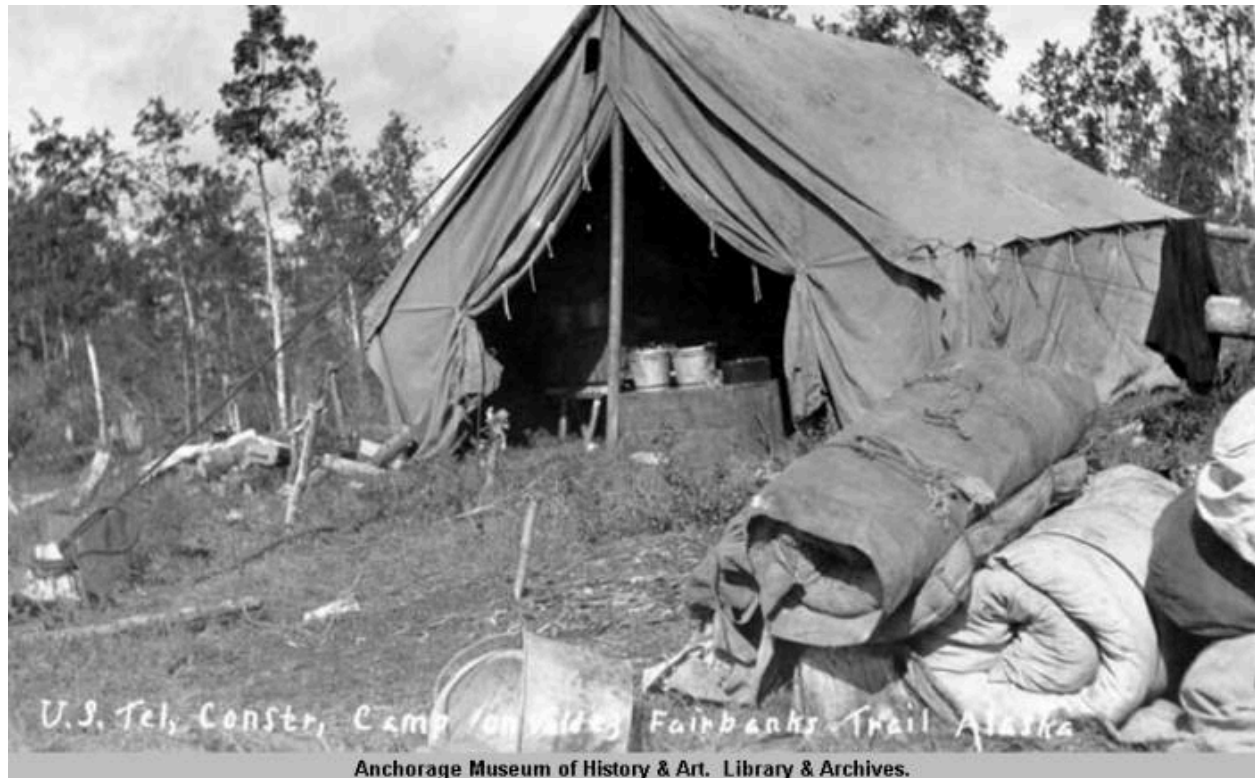
Archives, University of Alaska, Fairbanks

Item Description
Collection Name
Edward R. McFarland Photographs
Identifier
UAF-1974-130-73
Title
Camp at McCarty station
Description
Title taken from caption.

Photograph of the WAMCATS camp at McCarty station. Visible in photograph are tents, a fenced garden and the back end of a wagon.

Creator
Woods, George M.
Subject.TGM
Construction camps
Tents
Carts & wagons
Gardens
Fences
Subject.LCSH
Telegraph lines -- Construction
Corporate Name
Washington-Alaska Military Cable and Telegraph System
Region
Interior Alaska
Time Period
1896 to 1913
Type
Collection
Image (Photographs)
Ordering & Use
For information on ordering and using this material: <https://library.uaf.edu/aprca/services/reproductions>
Holding Institution
Alaska and Polar Regions Collections, Elmer E. Rasmuson Library, University of Alaska Fairbanks.; mailto:UAF-APR-reference-Service@alaska.edu --(907) 474-2791--PO Box 756808, Fairbanks, AK 99775-6808.

Source 3: WAMCATS camp along the Valdez-Fairbanks Trail



<https://vilda.alaska.edu/digital/collection/cdmg2/id/925/rec/48>

Item Description

Collection Name

AMRC. CIHS Hall Collection

Identifier

AMRC-b69-13-5

Title

U.S. Tel[egraph] Constr[uction] camp on Valdez-Fairbanks Trail, Alaska.

Description

Title taken from front. Tent at WAMCATS (Washington-Alaska Military Cable and Telegraph System) construction camp, Valdez-Fairbanks Trail, Alaska. n.d.

Photographer: J.N. Randall. Postcard. Original photograph size: 3 3/8" x 5 3/8".

Creator

Randall, J. N.

Subject.TGM

Camps

Camping

Construction camps

Construction

Telegraph industry

Tents

Pails

Corporate Name

United States. Army

Washington-Alaska Military Cable and Telegraph System

Region

Southcentral Alaska

Time Period

1896 to 1913

Type

Image (Photographs)

Image (Photographic postcards)

Ordering & Use

<https://www.anchoragemuseum.org/collections/rights-reproductions/>

Holding Institution

Anchorage Museum at Rasmuson Center. 625 C Street Anchorage, AK 99501 mailto:resourcecenter@anchoragemuseum.org

Source 4: Structure to assist telegraph crossing at the Tanana River



Archives, University of Alaska, Fairbanks

<https://vilda.alaska.edu/digital/collection/cdmg11/id/780/rec/19>

Item Description
Collection Name
Edward R. McFarland Photographs
Identifier
UAF-1974-130-31
Title
Tanana River crossing fixture at Delta
Description
Title taken from album caption.
Photograph of a structure designed to aid the WAMCATS telegraph line in crossing the Tanana River.
Creator
Woods, George M.
Subject.TGM
Utility poles
Telegraph lines
Rivers
Subject.LCSH
Telegraph lines -- Construction
Corporate Name
Washington-Alaska Military Cable and Telegraph System
Location
Tanana River (Alaska)
Region
Interior Alaska
Time Period
1896 to 1913
Type
Collection
Image (Photographs)
Ordering & Use
For information on ordering and using this material: <https://library.uaf.edu/aprca/services/reproductions>
Holding Institution
Alaska and Polar Regions Collections, Elmer E. Rasmuson Library, University of Alaska Fairbanks.; mailto:UAF-APR-reference-Service@alaska.edu --(907) 474-2791--PO Box 756808, Fairbanks, AK 99775-6808.

Source 5: Lineman examines bear tracks in newly cleared right-of-way

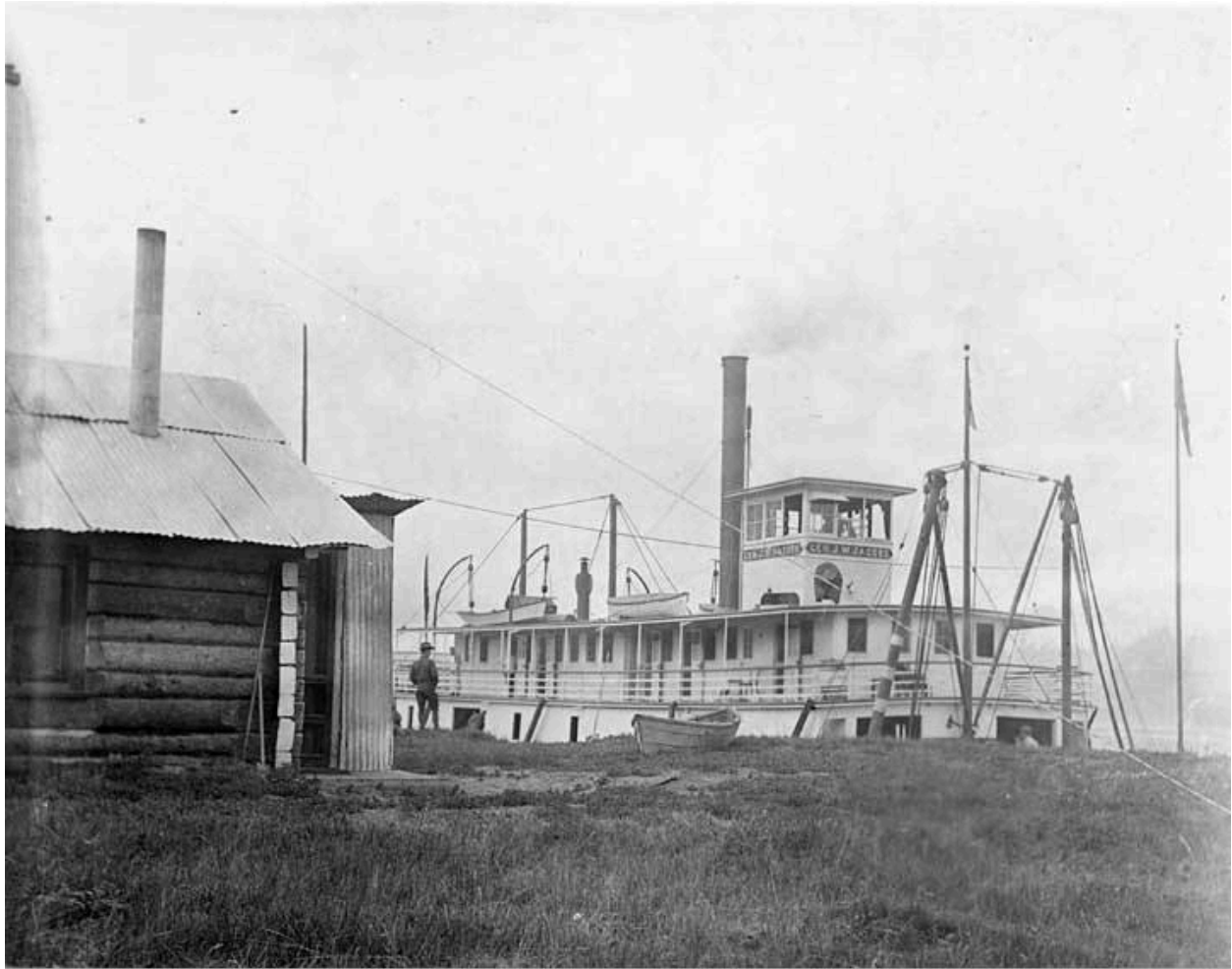


Archives, University of Alaska, Fairbanks

<https://vilda.alaska.edu/digital/collection/cdmg11/id/807/rec/20>

Collection Name
Edward R. McFarland Photographs
Identifier
UAF-1974-130-55
Title
Old line cleared out and straightened near McCarty
Description
Title taken from caption.
Photograph of a man standing on the WAMCATS right-of-way cut. A hand written note below the caption states: The dust in the wheel track at my feet was well padded down by bear tracks; evidently a she-bear & couple of cubs. McF[McFarland].
Creator
Woods, George M.
Subject.TGM
Telegraph lines
Utility poles
Clearing of land
Men
Subject.LCSH
Telegraph lines -- Construction
Corporate Name
Washington-Alaska Military Cable and Telegraph System
Region
Interior Alaska
Time Period
1896 to 1913
Type
Collection
Image (Photographs)
Ordering & Use
For information on ordering and using this material: <https://library.uaf.edu/aprca/services/reproductions>
Holding Institution
Alaska and Polar Regions Collections, Elmer E. Rasmuson Library, University of Alaska Fairbanks.; mailto:UAF-APR-reference-Service@alaska.edu --(907) 474-2791--PO Box 756808, Fairbanks, AK 99775-6808.

Source 6: Delivering Supplies to McCarty Station

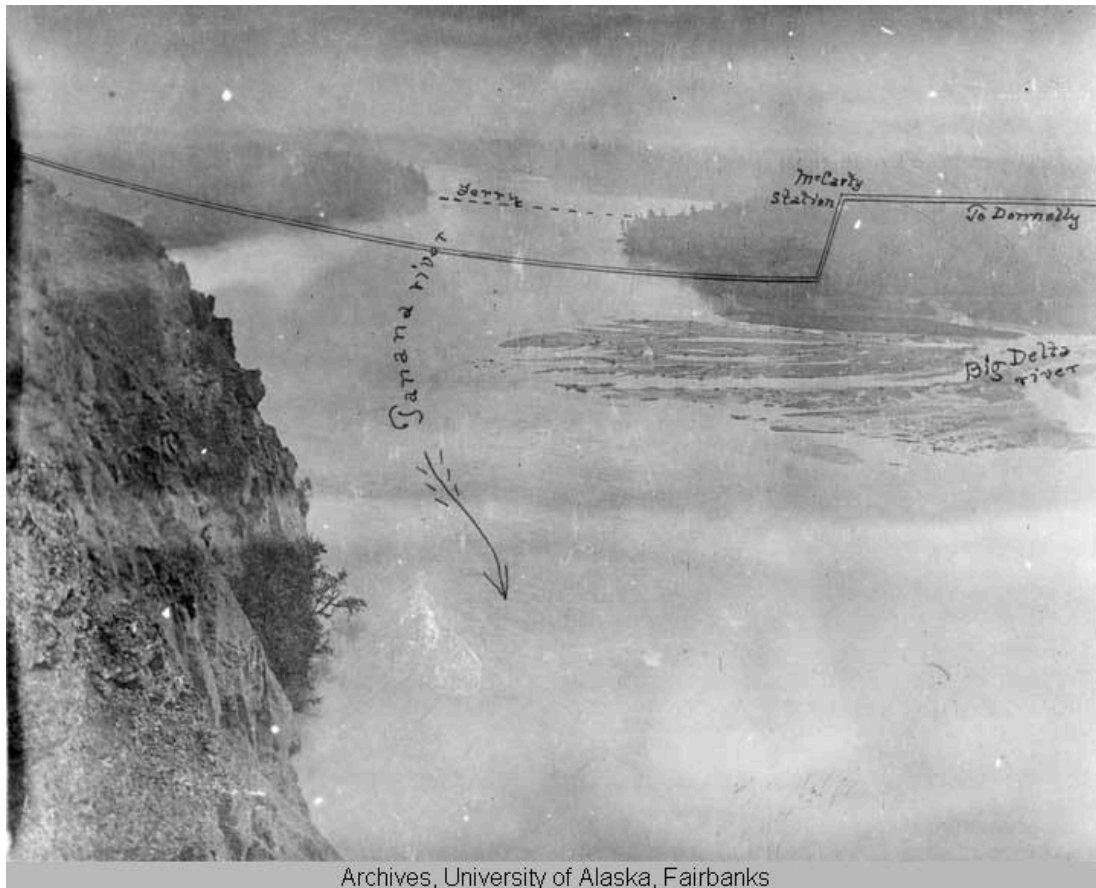


Archives, University of Alaska, Fairbanks

<https://vilda.alaska.edu/digital/collection/cdmg11/id/827/rec/28>

Collection Name
Edward R. McFarland Photographs
Identifier
UAF-1974-130-75
Title
U.S. River Transport Gen. J. W. Jacobs at McCarty station
Description
Title taken from caption.
Photograph of a log cabin with a corrugated metal roof and arctic entry. Also visible is a sternwheeler transport that may be delivering equipment for the WAMCATS construction and upgrade.
Creator
Woods, George M.
Subject.TGM
Log cabins
Stern wheelers
Shipping
Men
Flagpoles
Subject.LCSH
Telegraph lines -- Construction
Corporate Name
General J. W. Jacobs (Ship)
Washington-Alaska Military Cable and Telegraph System
Region
Interior Alaska
Time Period
1896 to 1913
Type
Collection
Image (Photographs)
Ordering & Use
For information on ordering and using this material: <https://library.uaf.edu/aprca/services/reproductions>
Holding Institution
Alaska and Polar Regions Collections, Elmer E. Rasmuson Library, University of Alaska Fairbanks.; mailto:UAF-APR-reference-Service@alaska.edu --(907) 474-2791--PO Box 756808, Fairbanks, AK 99775-6808.

Source 7: Aerial view taken from McCarty Bluff



<https://vilda.alaska.edu/digital/collection/cdmg11/id/821/rec/20>

Collection Name
Edward R. McFarland Photographs
Identifier
UAF-1974-130-69
Title
Looking up-river from McCarty bluff
Description
Photograph of the Tanana River at the mouth of the Big Delta River with that specific information written on the photo as well as the WAMCATS route, the ferry route and the direction to Donnelly. Photo was taken from atop the McCarty Bluff.
Creator
Woods, George M.
Subject.TGM
Rivers
Deltas
Subject.LCSH
Telegraph lines -- Construction
Corporate Name
Washington-Alaska Military Cable and Telegraph System
Location
Tanana River (Alaska)
Region
Interior Alaska
Time Period
1896 to 1913
Type
Collection
Image (Photographs)
Ordering & Use
For information on ordering and using this material: <https://library.uaf.edu/aprca/services/reproductions>
Holding Institution Alaska and Polar Regions Collections, Elmer E. Rasmuson Library, University of Alaska Fairbanks.;
mailto:UAF-APR-reference-Service@alaska.edu --(907) 474-2791--PO Box 756808, Fairbanks, AK 99775-6808.

Analyze a Photograph

Meet the photo.

Quickly scan the photo. What do you notice first?

Type of photo (check all that apply):

- | | | | | |
|--------------------------------------|------------------------------------|---|---------------------------------|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Portrait | <input type="checkbox"/> Landscape | <input type="checkbox"/> Aerial/Satellite | <input type="checkbox"/> Action | <input type="checkbox"/> Architectural |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Event | <input type="checkbox"/> Family | <input type="checkbox"/> Panoramic | <input type="checkbox"/> Posed | <input type="checkbox"/> Candid |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Documentary | <input type="checkbox"/> Selfie | <input type="checkbox"/> Other | | |

Is there a caption? ☐ yes ☐ no

Observe its parts.

List the people, objects and activities you see.

PEOPLE	OBJECTS	ACTIVITIES

Write one sentence summarizing this photo.

Try to make sense of it.

Answer as best you can. The caption, if available, may help.

Who took this photo?

Where is it from?

When is it from?

What was happening at the time in history this photo was taken?

Why was it taken? List evidence from the photo or your knowledge about the photographer that led you to your conclusion.

Use it as historical evidence.

What did you find out from this photo that you might not learn anywhere else?

What other documents, photos, or historical evidence are you going to use to help you understand this event or topic?



Materials created by the National Archives and Records Administration are in the public domain.

Activity 2: We have studied images as primary sources. Now let's read some quotes from people who were part of telegraph construction:

Brigadier General James Allen, Chief Signal Officer (Officer who replaced General Greely)

1906 Annual Report:

Operation of 44 telegraph offices and six cable offices in Alaska. WAMCATS is a full-fledged, multi-disciplined communication system consisting of 1,375 miles of land lines, a 107-mile wireless system across Norton Sound, and 2,347 miles of submarine cables.

Congress, House, "Report of the Chief Signal Officer." Annual Reports of the War Department for the Fiscal Year Ended June 30, 1906 (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1906), vol. 2, Armament, Transportation and Supply, pp. 174-175, 59th Cong., 2d sess., H. Doc. 2.

Lieutenant Billy Mitchell

The Opening of Alaska, p. 100

"At last my wire crossed the Sal[ch]acket River. I made the last connection of the land lines of the Alaska system myself on June 27, 1903.

Then from St. Michael and Nome on the Bering Sea, clear through to New York and Washington, the electric current transmitted our messages with the speed of light. Alaska was open to civilization. No longer was it the land of the unknown, sealed tight by the God of Everlasting Snow and Frost. We had broken the portal... We had worked straight through his coldest winters, over his highest ridges, down his broadest rivers, both in winter and summer. His mosquito scourge had failed to stop us, and we not only had surmounted all the difficulties, but had grown intensely fond of this wonderful country. America's last frontier..."

Mitchell, William. *The Opening of Alaska*. Edited by Lyman L. Woodman, Cook Inlet Historical Society, 1982.

The final printed primary source is from a Signal Corps report written while the Alaska cable telegraph was in full operation:

The Alaskan Cable System

Prepared Under the Direction of the Chief Signal Officer of the Army

Washington

Government Printing Office

1925

The completion of the Alaskan Cable System in 1904 marked one of the most noteworthy achievements of the Signal Corps of the Army and one which has accomplished much toward the settlement and development of the Territory of Alaska and for the contentment and well-being of its inhabitants. This cable was laid primarily to connect the telegraph systems of the United States with those of Alaska for the transmission of official messages in connection with the administration of military, judicial, and territorial affairs. Due to the great influx of people to Alaska after the discovery of gold at Cape Nome, the military Department of Alaska was created by the War Department in 1900 for the purpose of safeguarding life and property and directing and coordinating the making of surveys and explorations. In order to facilitate this work, Congress, in the act approved May 26, 1900, and in subsequent acts, provided for a comprehensive system of military telegraph and cable lines in Alaska.

[History of the Atlantic Cable & Submarine Telegraphy - The Alaskan Cable System \(1925\).](#)

Conclusion:

In less than 5 years, the US Army Signal Corps connected military outposts and settlements in Alaska with headquarters in Washington, DC.

The telegraph line established necessary infrastructure in Alaska, linking remote communities with the outside world for the first time.

Analyze a Written Document

Meet the document.

Type (check all that apply):

- | | | | | |
|---|------------------------------------|--|--|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Letter | <input type="checkbox"/> Speech | <input type="checkbox"/> Patent | <input type="checkbox"/> Telegram | <input type="checkbox"/> Court document |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Chart | <input type="checkbox"/> Newspaper | <input type="checkbox"/> Advertisement | <input type="checkbox"/> Press Release | <input type="checkbox"/> Memorandum |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Report | <input type="checkbox"/> Email | <input type="checkbox"/> Identification document | | <input type="checkbox"/> Presidential document |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Congressional document | <input type="checkbox"/> Other | | | |

Describe it as if you were explaining to someone who can't see it.

Think about: Is it handwritten or typed? Is it all by the same person? Are there stamps or other marks? What else do you see on it?

Observe its parts.

Who wrote it?

Who read/received it?

When is it from?

Where is it from?

Try to make sense of it.

What is it talking about?

Write one sentence summarizing this document.

Why did the author write it?

Quote evidence from the document that tells you this.

What was happening at the time in history this document was created?

Use it as historical evidence.

What did you find out from this document that you might not learn anywhere else?

What other documents or historical evidence are you going to use to help you understand this event or topic?



Materials created by the National Archives and Records Administration are in the public domain.

Activity 2 continued: While leading the men who were constructing the line between Ft. Liscum and Ft. Egbert, Lt. Billy Mitchell had an interesting experience. Analyze the following primary source and consider the consequences of a typo:

(Discuss your thoughts and/or use the primary source worksheet to analyze the document.)

William “Billy” Mitchell

The Opening of Alaska, page 48

“When I was convinced that the wages had to be raised and more money was required to meet current expenses, I wired General Greely, by way of the Canadian lines through Dawson, that we needed additional funds. He telegraphed back that he was sending me all the money available under the current appropriation, which, the telegram stated, was \$50,000. This was very encouraging and I immediately obligated it on equipment, salaries and services.”

“Three months after I received the telegram, a warrant came through the Treasury. But it was for \$5,000 instead of \$50,000! The telegraph company, in transmitting the message had made a mistake in the figure; instead of sending the word for “five”, they had sent the word for “fifty”. Of course I was responsible for the other \$45,000. That did not worry me very much, because I did not have it. Had it been \$450 or something like that, they probably would have taken it out of my pay. If you get a large enough amount up against you and it has been properly spent, you need not be alarmed. I wired back to General Greely, telling him what had occurred and he made a personal appeal to Congress, with the result that a supplementary appropriation was passed at once covering the amount in question.”

Mitchell, William. *The Opening of Alaska*. Edited by Lyman L. Woodman, Cook Inlet Historical Society, 1982.

Activity 3: Pretend you are stationed at a Signal Corps station along the trail, and are responsible for sending and receiving messages on the telegraph. Using the Morse Code table below, construct a message for a fellow classmate. Then swap messages and work to decode one another's messages.

Note: If you want to sound your messages rather than write them, remember to say the dots as “dit” and the dashes as “dah”. For example: to sound an A, you would say: “dit dah”.

Standard letters

A	■ ■■	N	■■■ ■
B	■■■ ■ ■ ■	O	■■■ ■■ ■■
C	■■■ ■ ■■ ■	P	■ ■■ ■■ ■
D	■■■ ■ ■	Q	■■■ ■■ ■ ■■
E	■	R	■ ■■ ■
F	■ ■ ■■ ■	S	■ ■ ■
G	■■■ ■■ ■	T	■■■
H	■ ■ ■ ■	U	■ ■ ■■
I	■ ■	V	■ ■ ■ ■■
J	■ ■■ ■■ ■■	W	■ ■■ ■■
K	■■■ ■ ■■	X	■■■ ■ ■ ■■
L	■ ■■ ■ ■	Y	■■■ ■ ■■ ■■
M	■■■ ■■	Z	■■■ ■■ ■ ■

https://www.electronics-notes.com/articles/ham_radio/morse_code/characters-table-chart.php

Your message in Morse Code:

Workspace to translate your fellow student's message:

[illegible]

Activity 4: Connecting to a History Day Project

Write a thesis statement based on the research from this lesson that could be used for a History Day Project. Consider the main ideas from this lesson. What historical argument could you make about rights and responsibilities as demonstrated by early telegraph communication in Alaska?

Who was involved?
When and where did it happen?
How did the world change because of it?

Thesis Statement Quick-Write:

Lesson Extension for brainstorming your 2025 History Day project:

This lesson is an example of the kind of research and analysis you could conduct as you consider a History Day topic. As you begin your project, here are some suggestions:

Find a topic that catches your attention, and makes you ask questions like: “Who was there? Why did it happen like that? What else was going on in the world at the time? Where was it? When did it occur? What changed because of this event?”

Look for a high-interest topic that involves an event from your community or someone you know.

Search out primary sources that spark your interest.

Begin your research, and write a thesis statement based on what you have learned so far. This statement is your guiding idea, and can help you weed out information that doesn’t fit or could water down your main historical argument. This statement will likely change as you continue to research.

Free Write Idea:

We value many rights, but can tend to grumble about the responsibilities that go along with that right.

In an imaginary world, we could drive a car and never have to be responsible to fuel it up or change a flat tire.

Think about some rights that you have that you feel are worth the responsibility necessary to protect them. Jot down your thoughts here:

Sources and Additional Resources:

Books:

Mitchell, William. *The Opening of Alaska*. Edited by Lyman L. Woodman, Cook Inlet Historical Society, 1982.

Websites:

Archives.gov

www.archives.gov/files/education/lessons/document-analysis/english/analyze-a-photograph-intermediate.pdf

www.archives.gov/files/education/lessons/document-analysis/english/analyze-a-written-document-intermediate.pdf

[Industry > Media and Communications > WAMCATS: The Washington-Alaska Military Cable and Telegraph System](#)

[www.uscourts.gov What Does Free Speech Mean?](http://www.uscourts.gov/What-Does-Free-Speech-Mean/)

www.electronics-notes.com/articles/ham_radio/morse_code/characters-table-chart.php

[Write Your History Day Thesis 2023](#)

<https://historyhappens.org/document/thesis-and-organizing-the-project/>