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Thirty Years of Historical Archeology in Skagway, Alaska

Introduction

Klondike Gold Rush NHP, in Skagway, is one of the most popular attractions in Alaska, offering tourists a chance to see restored Gold Rush era buildings and exhibits. Even though archeological testing has regularly been associated with the preservation and restoration of historic buildings since 1978, the role of archeology in the development of the park is not widely known. Among the major results of thirty years of historical archeology in Skagway is a ten-volume series of reports that document the town's colorful past. They serve as an example of how historic preservation laws and regulations can be a driving force and, together with good historic archeology, can result in the enrichment of our knowledge about the Gold Rush era and its aftermath for the benefit of scholars and park visitors alike.



Broadway, looking north, in Skagway, Alaska. (NPS photo)

The Gold Rush in Skagway

While the quest for gold first attracted prospectors and miners to Alaska in the late 1870s, it was not until the winter of 1897-98 that the world became riveted on discoveries of gold along the Klondike River in Canada's Yukon Territory. These discoveries set off a series of dramatic gold rushes, and Skagway, by virtue of its location as a gateway to the interior, quickly turned into a boom town. By the spring of 1898, the population of Skagway had reached 8,000, with about 1,000 stampedeers passing through each week (Spude 1983: 41) on their way to neighboring Dyea and up the Chilkoot Trail to the goldfields. The construction of the White Pass and Yukon Route railroad in 1899, connecting Skagway to northwestern Canada and interior Alaska, began transforming the town into a settled railroad and supply center. By 1900, the population of Skagway had declined from its rowdy heyday and people settled down to the business of running their new community.

In 1908, Skagway could boast of churches, fraternal halls, and a school. Ornate hotels, shops, offices, and saloons lined Broadway by the end of the following year. By 1918, the number of residents had dwindled to 600 or less. Skagway could no longer claim to be the pre-eminent population center in Alaska, but there were well tended buildings and well dressed businessmen in a town quickly emerging as an important tourist destination (Spude 1983: 43-44). Even as automobiles made an appearance, train tracks ran through the middle of town until 1943, when they were finally removed.

Skagway and the NPS

Although the historic value of the Chilkoot Trail became apparent to the citizens of Skagway as early as the 1930s, it was not until the 1950s that the NPS first became interested in Skagway's historical and architectural resources (Norris 1996: 52-55). In 1959, Skagway was included in the National Survey of Historic Sites and Buildings and, by 1962, Skagway Historic District and White Pass was designated a National Historic Landmark. Congress authorized the creation of Klondike Gold Rush NHP in 1976. It included a visitor center in Seattle; a 14-block historic district in Skagway; a 15.5 mile Chilkoot Trail unit; a portion of the abandoned Gold Rush town site of Dyea; and the upper portion of the White Pass Trail.

The importance of Skagway, Dyea, and the Chilkoot Trail cannot be overestimated in Alaska's self-image as rugged individualists. Beginning in 1998, the state celebrated the centennial of the gold rush with a special license plate, intending to discontinue the plate at the end of the year. It was so popular that it continued to be issued through 2004 (Nicholson 1998 - 2007). Today, Klondike Gold Rush NHP is a bustling place again. Park statistics show that the number of visitors has increased annually, reaching almost 900,000 in 2005 (Grant Crosby: 2007 personal communication).

Archeology in Klondike Gold Rush NHP

When Klondike Gold Rush NHP was created, many of the best preserved buildings of the Gold Rush era had, unfortunately, reached a state of severe disrepair and needed immediate stabilization. Restoration work began in 1978, with the depot and office building for the White Pass and Yukon Route Railroad being one of the first buildings to receive attention. It now serves as the visitor center for the park. Two of the earliest structures in Skagway, the Moore Cabin and the Moore/Kirmse House are also open as interpretive centers for visitors, as is the ground floor of the Mascot Saloon. Another of the restored buildings is the Peniel Mission, used as park housing for its seasonal employees. Other buildings owned by the Park are

leased to individuals for retail stores. The former Pantheon Saloon is one example of a lease-back structure.

Archeological testing, mandated by Section 106 of the National Historic Preservation Act, began in 1978 as part of the construction package for the rehabilitation of several historic structures. For the first few frustrating years, NPS archeologists carried out compliance testing in scattered locations around town, barely keeping ahead of construction. They often struggled to convey the importance of archeological testing to project administrators, but forged ahead despite the shortages of funding for analysis and report-writing. Their early efforts were criticized by academic archeologists more familiar with research-oriented rather than compliance-driven fieldwork. The situation improved once additional archeologists were hired at the Alaska Regional Office in Anchorage and as part of the permanent staff in Skagway. Crucial to the success of the program were a few key individuals, notably Catherine Blee (now Spude), Paul Gleason, Karl Gurcke, and Doreen Cooper, who kept the projects rolling and the reports written over the years.

The tangible result of the efforts of these archeologists, along with others who contributed to their research and publications, is a ten-volume series of archeological investigations *Archeological Investigations in Skagway, Alaska*. The volumes document fieldwork and analyses at the Depot and General Office Buildings of the White Pass and Yukon Route Railroad, the Moore Cabin and Moore/Kirmse House, the Mill Creek Dump and Peniel Mission, Father Turnell's Trash Pit, the Pantheon Saloon, the Mascot Saloon, and Blocks 37 and 39 in downtown Skagway. The pages of these reports document many stories, but there is only space here to recount a few.

Moore Cabin and Moore/Kirmse House

The log cabin built by Captain William Moore and his son Bernard (Ben), beginning in 1887, was the first one of its kind in Skagway. It was not occupied for several years, until the Moores, including Ben's wife and two children, returned to take up residence in 1896, just shortly before the rush to the Klondike began. It only served as their primary residence for a short time because Ben soon began construction of additions which evolved into the Moore House. The cabin additions were removed and the cabin moved west of the new house in 1900 (Cooper 2001: A 1-2). The cabin itself, functioning primarily as an outbuilding for decades, is the "most outstanding artifact of the pre-1897" Skagway on the Moore lot (Cooper 2001:89).



Archeology at Moore Cabin, Skagway. (NPS photo)

In 1985, archeologists mapped artifacts from this era on the attic floor of the Moore Cabin, recovering roof shakes, nails, and several pieces of clothing used for chinking. The identified pieces were mostly items of women's clothing, including a mutton-chop sleeve and dress bodice. Cathy Blee (1988: 223) interpreted the clothing as belonging to Minnie Moore, Ben's wife. Her detailed analysis shows that some of the old and battered discards used for chinking were hand-stitched or mended and made from inexpensive materials, reinforcing the picture of a hard-working frontier family at the turn of the 20th century.

The Moore House was only occupied by the original family on a permanent basis until 1904 (Cooper 2001). The Kirmse family, whose livelihood was made by selling jewelry and tourist curios, moved into the house in 1910 and maintained it as their residence for the next 65 years, installing privies, then plumbing, and doing a number of structural improvements over the years. Archeologists investigated the Moore House property on numerous occasions (Higgs 2005). During one of the most intensive period of testing from 1993 to 1995, they discovered two privies, one right on top of the other. The lower one was attributed to the Moore residence and the upper one to the Kirmse residence, dating to before 1917, when indoor plumbing was installed. Separating the contents of the two privies proved to be challenging archeologically, but palynological studies helped clarify the division. Historic photos show that Moore kept goats, pigs, poultry, and horse on his property. Dung fungal spores from grazing animals were found in the Moore privy deposits, but not in the Kirmse levels (Cooper 2001: 176 -177).

The personal artifacts recovered from the privies give us detailed glimpses of the lives of both families. The Moore privy contained 56 whole medicine bottles, mostly colorless and many still sealed with cork stoppers. The only embossed ones were cobalt blue Bromo-Seltzer bottles. Although medicine bottles were also found in the Kirmse privy, the family disposed of many fewer medicinally-related artifacts but more pertaining to grooming and hygiene. The quantity of medicine bottles in the Moore privy might relate to the turn-of-the-century attitude about these medicines, which are high in alcohol and opiates. They offered women a socially acceptable alternative to visiting saloons (Cooper 2001: 139). Medicinal use might also be attributed to the presence of children in the Moore household at a time period of high infant and child mortality rates.

Peniel Mission

Careful analysis of glassware, particularly bottles, was important to the interpretation of collections from a dump site near the Peniel Mission, built in 1900 by Christian missionaries.

The building was occupied by these missionaries until about 1911, then was bought and sold numerous times over the years (DePuydt et al. 1997: 5-8). The dump site was a branch of Mill Creek, where, according to site stratigraphy and artifact dating, nearby residents disposed of their trash from 1897 to 1899. Diane Rhodes classified the large quantity of bottle glass shards into two categories based on color: aqua and colorless glass were placed in the food storage class, while brown and green glass were put in the beverage storage class (Rhodes 1988). The latter was further separated by type of beverage: olive green indicated wine and champagne, while brown glass held beer or strong spirits (Rhodes 1988: 491). Rhodes concluded that the beverage of choice during the Gold Rush heyday of 1897 – 1899, as indicated by glass in the dump, was champagne and wine.



Assortment of bottles and glassware from excavations in Skagway. (NPS photo)

Further excavations around the Peniel building enabled archeologists to refine the stratigraphy of the site and recover artifacts from other sections of the dump. They found that a portion of the deposits post-dated 1900. The predominant form of beverage artifacts in this assemblage were strong spirits and beer bottles (DePuydt et al. 1997: 115- 116). These new data reinforce the fact that additional testing and analysis at a site sometimes results in a more complex, but more accurate, portrayal of the past. Catherine Spude's (1991) dissertation on samples of glass in these assemblages provided additional information about the nature of this dump site. After statistical analysis, she concluded that families and, perhaps, saloons were the primary depositors of the earlier portion of the dump, while female Peniel missionaries were the probable contributors to the post-1900 assemblage (Spude 1991: iv).

Pantheon and Mascot Saloons

Archeologists also tested around and under buildings once housing the Pantheon and Mascot Saloons, both associated with lots of drinking, for at least part of their histories. As one would expect, glass bottle fragments figure prominently in the assemblages, but a wide variety of other recovered artifacts represent other types of indulgences of the men who frequented these drinking establishments at the turn of the 20th century. For examples, dice and poker chips were recovered from the Pantheon and smoking pipes from the Mascot Saloon.

While Skagway may be the best known Gold Rush boom town in Alaska, it is by no means the only one. Juneau, the capital; Fairbanks, Alaska's second largest city; and notorious Nome can attribute their beginnings and growth to the quest for gold. Over the last three decades, there has been an increased interest in the archeological value of properties associated with the Gold Rush. The extent of archeological research in Skagway is unique among Alaska's Gold Rush boom towns, and its archeologists have paved the way for the investigations at other Gold Rush communities across the state.

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Volumes of the series Archeological Investigations in Skagway, Alaska can be requested (free of charge) from the Alaska Regional Office by contacting the Dael Devenport, dael_devenport@nps.gov.

By Becky M. Saleeby, Archeologist, NPS Alaska Regional Office

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