

GEORGE RIVER RDI HISTORICAL REFERENCE LIST

ITEM	AUTHOR	YEAR	REPORT NAME
1	Bureau of Land Management	1985	Alaska's Kuskokwim Region: A History, M. Brown, Extract.

EXTRACT* OF

**ALASKA'S
KUSKOKWIM RIVER REGION**

A History

By

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* The original document is over 800 pages in length. This extract was compiled to support the State of Alaska's Recordable Disclaimer of Interest Application for the George River. The font type and paragraph spacing has been modified to reduce paper. A full version of this document is available through the Alaska Resources Library & Information Services (ARLIS).

EDITOR'S INTRODUCTION

The U.S. Bureau of Land Management (BLM) is currently transferring title to about 145 million acres of land to the State of Alaska Native corporations in compliance with the Alaska Statehood Act of 1958 and the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act of 1971, respectively. A serious impediment to the conveyance of land title is the unknown acreage and location of nontidal navigable waters in Alaska.

By authority of the Statehood Act of 1958 and the Submerged Lands Act of 1953, the State of Alaska owns the beds of tidal waters and nontidal navigable waters unreserved as of January 3, 1959, the date of Alaska Statehood. Submerged land acreage of navigable waters unreserved as of this date may not be charged against the State's entitlement under the Statehood Act; and by virtue of the fact that ownership of these submerged lands passed to the State in 1959, may not be included in conveyances of land title. On the other hand, lands underlying nonnavigable waters as well as those submerged lands in a reserved status in 1959, remain in the public domain or in trust for the riparian owner.

During the 1960s the BLM made determinations of navigability for water bodies on lands to be conveyed to the State. After the passage of the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act and the subsequent promulgation of regulations requiring, among other things, the BLM to make navigability determinations for waterways on lands to be conveyed to the Native corporations and to account for the submerged land acreage, the State quickly asserted its claim to potentially navigable waters on ANCSA-selected lands by two methods. First, the State provided the BLM with its definition of navigable waterways and a set of maps known as Water Delineation Maps illustrating waterways on ANCSA-selected lands that the State considered to be navigable. Second, the State routinely notified Native corporations in the instance of a proposed conveyance that the BLM may be attempting to convey lands underlying navigable waters owned by the State since 1959. Well aware of the differences between the BLM and State definitions of navigability, and the State's position that these differences must one day be resolved by the courts, many corporations excluded in their selection applications most waterways identified by the State as navigable. Consequently, whenever the BLM made a determination of navigability contrary to the State's claim and charged the submerged land acreage to the corporation's land entitlement, the corporation appealed to the Alaska Native Claims Appeal Board for a ruling on the question whether the submerged lands were in fact Federal lands or State lands in

1959. In the late 1970s, as the BLM prepared to resume land conveyances to the State and to accelerate conveyances to the Native corporations, the BLM and the State agreed that there was a need for more information about the physical character and history of waterways as routes of travel and transportation. This information would satisfy BLM's need to make timely determinations of navigability; and it would facilitate the BLM's and the State's need to develop test cases of navigability for the courts. Thus, in 1977, the BLM let a major contract to the University of Alaska to research pertinent information from the literature about Alaska waterways. Completing the project in early 1979, the contractor provided BLM with a great deal of valuable information about Alaskan water bodies, information that was and is used to support determinations of navigability in the land conveyance programs. However, the contractor provided insufficient information about many minor waterways, some of them located on lands to be conveyed to the State or the Native corporations. The need for additional documentary research and possibly field investigations was apparent.

In 1979, representatives of the BLM and the State of Alaska met several times to discuss and decide upon methods by which: 1) the BLM could make timely determinations of navigability in connection with the land conveyance programs; 2) the BLM and the State could reach agreement on what waterways were clearly navigable and nonnavigable under BLM and State criteria; and 3) the BLM and the State could identify water bodies that best reflect differences in the BLM'S and the State's criteria of navigability for the purpose of litigation. The decisions that were made then are still valid today, although some have been modified as necessary to take into account unexpected developments.

Three alternatives in establishing priorities for administrative determinations of navigability were identified: 1) make determinations only for water bodies on land to be conveyed to the Native corporations and the State on a township-by township basis; 2) make determinations for all nontidal water bodies in Alaska on a regional or subregional basis; or 3) make determinations for nontidal water bodies on a township-by-township basis as well as on a regional or subregional basis.

It was decided to adopt the third alternative. This entailed the formation of three independent but interacting teams: one in the BLM State Office to make navigability recommendations in connection with the State and ANCSA land conveyance programs; the others in the BLM State Office and State Department of Natural Resources to prepare

factual reports on waterways in a region or subregion. These highly detailed reports, based upon the best information available, are useful to the BLM in making recommendations for waterways on land to be conveyed to the Native corporations and the State. Once the final draft of the report has the approval of the State and other parties as a technically adequate document, the BLM will have the means to make reliable and consistent determinations for entire waterways. This in turn will give the State the opportunity to identify waterways that best illustrate differences in BLM and State criteria of navigability for development of test cases. As these differences are settled by the courts, the BLM and State criteria will eventually be the same. Whatever decisions are reached by the courts, the BLM will have a source document on which to rely in reviewing the validity of previous determinations in light of the courts decisions.

While the first alternative would have met the immediate need for determinations in land conveyance programs, it would have in the long run generated many problems of an administrative and legal nature. With an accelerated land conveyance program, it would have been impossible to collect and analyze a great deal of information about water bodies, much less to prepare thoroughly documented and well-reasoned rationales for determinations. The high probability that incorrect and inconsistent determinations would be made, and that disputes over the fact relating to a waterway would be taken to the courts, was all too clear. In this eventuality, the BLM would have been repeatedly forced to research and write reports to defend (or change) determinations of navigability for the use of the Regional Solicitor. On the other hand, the second alternative, which would entail the preparation of reports on a watershed, subregional, or regional basis, would not have met the pressing need for navigability determinations on State- and ANCSA-selected lands. Without a much larger staff, the BLM would not have been able to research, analyze, and synthesize a great deal of information into written reports needed to determine navigable and nonnavigable waters on these lands. These lands are scattered throughout Alaska, and involve many waterways--too many to be covered adequately in a short time frame. Yet it is clear that these reports will be needed more and more as questions of navigability are brought before the courts, and as land managers reviewing proposed actions on a waterway attempt to determine ownership of the submerged lands.

Alaska's Kuskokwim River Region is the third such report issued by the BLM. Researched and written by the lead historian in the BLM Alaska State Office with the assistance of Joan Antonson, the report summarizes

geographic knowledge about the region and its water bodies; traces the history of explorations, mining, hunting, fishing, and trapping activities, as well as communities; describes in detail water and land transportation developments in the region; and finally describes the process by which the BLM reached a determination of navigability for water bodies on land conveyed or in the final stages of being conveyed to the State or Native village and regional corporations. The BLM has relied upon some of the information in this report in making navigability determinations for water bodies on land conveyed or to be conveyed; it will continue to consult the report as needed in future conveyances. Later, the report will be revised to take into account public comments and to include information from the BLM land records pertaining to those water bodies about which little or nothing is presently known.

C. Michael Brown

Lead Historian

INTRODUCTION

This report is designed to aid government land managers in the identification of navigable waters in the Kuskokwim River region. The report describes the geography and history of exploration in the area, presents an historical overview of the mining industry, identifies the principal settlements, and traces the history of water and land transportation developments in the region. In addition, the report summarizes the steps by which the U.S. Bureau of Land Management (BLM) reached navigability determinations for water bodies in the region.

Under the provisions of the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act, Native village and regional corporations selected most of the land along the Kuskokwim River and Bay. Most of these lands have been conveyed or are in the last stages of being conveyed to the corporations. This means that the BLM has made navigability determinations for title purposes for most tributaries of the Kuskokwim River and rivers and creeks emptying into Kuskokwim Bay. This report identifies the navigable waters in the region; it does not include a discussion of every river, creek, or lake that the BLM considers or determined to be nonnavigable. Only those nonnavigable water bodies about which there is documentary information, is described in the report. Thus, if the water body is located on land selected by or conveyed to a Native village or regional corporation, and if it is not specifically mentioned in Chapter Six of this report, the reader is correct in assuming that the BLM considers the water body to be nonnavigable.

The report incorporates much of the information presented in a report on the upper Kuskokwim basin which the BLM released on May 6, 1980. Researched and written by the lead historian in the BLM Alaska State Office, the upper Kuskokwim report was originally intended to include the entire Kuskokwim basin within its scope. However, following the BLM's decision to convey lands to MTNT, Incorporated and Doyon, Limited, the Native corporations appealed many of the BLM's determinations of navigability in the area to the Alaska Native Claims Appeal Board. This action, together with a recent decision of the Board on the navigability of the Nation and Kandik rivers in central Alaska, which significantly modified Departmental navigability criteria, spurred the BLM to reconsider its position on the navigability of water bodies in the area. Research on the lower Kuskokwim region was thus suspended and the report on the upper Kuskokwim basin written. This report was used to make additional navigability determinations for water bodies in lands selected by the Native corporations.

From early 1980 to mid-1981, Joan Antonson researched and wrote a draft report on the middle and lower Kuskokwim areas before terminating her employment with the BLM. The lead historian subsequently merged the upper Kuskokwim report with Antonson's report, and expanded the report with information obtained from BLM land records.

This report draws upon a wide variety of sources. Local newspapers, Geological Survey bulletins, records of the Coast and Geodetic Survey, Alaska Road Commission, Corps of Engineers, and the BLM, and the pioneering works of Wendell H. Oswalt, proved to be the most valuable sources of information. The papers of the Territorial governors, the Fish and Wildlife Service, and the Alaska Department of Fish and Game were examined but not researched to completion. These records, in addition to those of the BLM pertaining to Native allotments, headquarters, and trade and manufacturing sites, and small tracts, may yield additional pertinent information about use of water bodies in the region for the purpose of travel.

Many people contributed their time and skills to the preparation of this report. The librarians of the Alaska Resources Library, the Z. J. Loussac Library, and the librarians of the Alaska at Anchorage and Fairbanks, aided the writer in locating rare books. Joan Antonson's research notes and draft report greatly facilitated the writer's task. Chapter Four is largely her work. James Ducker and Dwight Tuttle provided constructive criticisms and encouragement. Last, and most important, the secretarial staffs of the BLM Division of Resources and Division of ANCSA and State Conveyances gave exceptional service in typing the various drafts.

CHAPTER ONE
THE KUSKOKWIM RIVER REGION

(See page 25 of original document)

Draining an area of fourteen hundred square miles, George River flows southwesterly for a distance of seventy-five miles to empty into the Kuskokwim River at rivermile 263. One of the larger northern tributaries of the Kuskokwim River, the George heads in a small group of low hills only a mile or two from the headwater tributaries of the Iditarod and Takotna rivers. For much of its course the river flows in multiple channels across a relatively broad, flat, and marshy valley. At rivermile 13 the river is joined by the East Fork. Heading near Granite Mountain, the East Fork meanders southwesterly in a narrow, lake-studded valley. Cutting through a canyon, the East Fork is joined by the South Fork at rivermile 7. Below the confluence of the East Fork, George River passes through a series of canyons to empty into the Kuskokwim River. Except at its mouth, the river is very swift with numerous small rapids.

26/

Chapter One -- The Kuskokwim River Region

26. Alfred G. Maddren, "Gold Placers of the Lower Kuskokwim, with a Note on Copper in the Russian Mountains," in A. H. Brooks, et al., Mineral Resources of Alaska, Report on Progress of Investigations in 1914, U.S. Geological Survey Bulletin 622 (Washington, D.C.: GPO, 1915), p. 308; Capps, The Southern Alaska Range (Bull. 862), p. 11; Cady, The Central Kuskokwim Region, p. 11.

CHAPTER THREE

MINING

(See page 119 of original document)

Two prospectors named Anderson and Kleland discovered placer gold on Julian Creek in July 1909. Strikes were subsequently made on other tributaries of George River, including Michigan, Spruce, Dorothy, and Beaver creeks. These strikes sparked a minor gold rush, and prospectors staked claims along the George River itself. More than thirty men were said to be working the creeks during the winter of 1911. In 1914, USGS geologist Philip S. Smith reported that few miners were working in the George River basin. No one in fact was mining on Julian Creek, site of the original strike. A few men worked the gravels of Julian Creek during the late 1910s and 1920s, however. In the 1930s, two miners named Miscovich and Rodman annually employed seven men on an open-cut hydraulic mine on Julian Creek. Harry Steen and Steve Stenberg operated this mine at least from 1950 to 1953. According to the Alaska Division of Mines and Minerals, Jack Egnaty and John Murphy mined on the river during the years 1966 to 1971. 44/

Chapter Three -- Mining

44. Sleem, "Great Kuskokwim," p. 298; Fairbanks Weekly Times, January 11, 1911; Iditarod Nugget, March 29, 1911; Philip S. Smith, Mineral Resources of the Lake Clark - Iditarod Region, U.S. Geological Survey Bulletin 622 (Washington, D.C.: GPO, 1915), pp. 261-262; Philip S. Smith, The Mineral Industry of Alaska in 1937, U.S. Geological Survey Bulletin 910-A (Washington, D.C.: GPO, 1939), p. 60; Max G. White and P. L. Killeen, Reconnaissance for Radioactive Deposits in the Lower Yukon - Kuskokwim Highlands Region, Alaska, 1947, U.S. Geological Survey Circular 255 (Washington, D.C.: GPO, 1953), p. 16; and Alaska Division of Mines and Minerals, Annual Reports, 1959-1975 (College: Alaska Department of Natural Resources).

CHAPTER SIX

WATER TRANSPORT

(See page 395 of original document)

Following the gold rush of 1909-10, George River became one of the customary routes of travel to mining developments along the river. In 1910, D. H. Sleem reported that men in boats ascended the river for a considerable distance. In the same year, a local newspaper reporter, commenting on the recent discoveries of gold on Julian Creek and the North Fork, wrote that poling boats could be taken up George River to the new strikes. 316/ When, in 1914, Philip S. Smith of the USGS visited Georgetown, he learned that under ordinary conditions the river could easily be ascended in poling boats for an airline distance of probably twenty-five to thirty miles. 317/ Evidently the use of boats on the river as far as Julian Creek continued for many years, for in 1935 Stephen R. Capps of the USGS reported that miners shipped supplies up George River to Julian Creek in poling boats with outboard motors. 318/

Conducting a raptor survey, Richard A. Dotson and David P. Mindell floated down the East Fork and George River to the Kuskokwim River in an Avon Redshank raft from July 31 to August 2, 1979. Beginning the trip at 62°11'16" N., 156°57'43" W. , the two men covered a distance of about sixty miles. Few details about this trip are available. They described the river as "relatively slow," flowing through a generally wide and flat valley and a tall and dense white spruce forest, mixed locally with birch or balsam poplar. Willow and alder thickets occurred regularly along the river. In addition, they noted that the "George River and East Fork George are seasonally navigable by small motorized craft." 319/

In the same year, Diane Gudgel-Holmes of the Alaska Department of Natural Resources interviewed Glenn Bass of McGrath about his use of the river. Bass owned placer claims on Michigan Creek and traveled from Flat to the claims during the winter; he trapped along Michigan and Doherty creeks, tributaries of George River, and along Ruby and Bonanza creeks, both tributaries of Iditarod River. Bass told Gudgel-Holmes that he ascended the river to Eldorado and Willow creeks with a twenty-four-foot boat and propeller unit in the spring. He also ascended the river during the fall hunting season, apparently in the same boat but equipped with jet units. Bass also stated that for a long

time Willy Pitka operated a trapline up George River to Little Waldren Creek and thence down the East Fork George River on an old "cat trail," but he did not indicate how Pitka reached the area. [320/](#)

The BLM first considered the navigability of George River in connection with the land selections of Georgetown Native Corporation under the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act. On December 11, 1975, the BLM easement task force recommended that the river be determined navigable through the selection area. This recommendation was based upon a report on the river prepared by a BLM realty specialist. He described the river as being about forty feet wide at Julian Creek and water depths ranging from two to six feet. The river winds through a mountain valley with steep slopes one thousand feet above the river. Steep banks are found on river bends and marshy areas on wide benches. He wrote that the river was "useable" in the spring and at high water stages. Small barges (20' x 60') loaded with fuel were known to have been taken up the river as far as Julian Creek. Snowmachines were also used on the river during the winter. [321/](#)

In addition, the task force recommended easements for existing trails from Sleetmute to Julian Creek and along the South and East forks of George River, an easement for a site in Section 1, T. 22 N., R. 46 W., Seward Meridian, and a trail on the right bank of the river and extending westerly. A proposed streamside easement on both banks of the river was also approved. According to Bob Vanderpool of Georgetown, the Sleetmute - Julian Creek trail was used about 1955 to "skid" equipment to the Julian Creek mine. [322/](#)

The Kuskokwim Management Corporation objected to the proposed streamside easement. Glenn W. Fredericks, president of the corporation, wrote that the river "in some cases is navigable and the river and hill make it impractical for the 25 foot easement on both sides of the river." He also objected to the proposed Sleetmute - Julian Creek trail easement as the trail was no longer used by local residents. [323/](#)

Following the issuance of easement regulations, the BLM deleted the proposed site and trail easement in Section 1, T. 22 N., R. 46 W., Seward Meridian, and the proposed streamside easement. George River and its East Fork were proposed to be determined major and navigable waterways. In the case of George River, the BLM claimed that the river was historically used as a "water supply route to mining areas north of the village selected area. The river was traversed throughout the selection area by a BLM field crew in a 20-foot inboard jet boat in 1979. This boat has a load capacity of 1,765 pounds and is capable of hauling 1,000 pounds of freight." In addition, the East Fork is

"traversable throughout the selection by outboard equipped boats. The river is similar in physical characteristics to the main branch. The area drained by the East Fork has high potential for minerals." 324/

The Kuskokwim Corporation and the State of Alaska subsequently agreed to the proposed Sleetmute - Julian Creek trail easement. No comments were made by these parties concerning the proposed major waterway and navigability determinations. Accordingly, on September 29, 1982, the BLM determined that George River and the East Fork in the conveyance area were navigable waterways. The South Fork in T. 22 N., R. 45 W., Seward Meridian, was determined to be nonnavigable. 325/

The South Fork in T. 21 N., Rs. 43-44 W., Seward Meridian, is also located in the area selected by Red Devil Village. Since 1975, the BLM considered the river to be nonnavigable-, and since 1980, a non-major waterway. The BLM has not yet formally determined the river in these two townships to be nonnavigable or navigable. 326/

Chapter Six -- Water Transportation

316. Sleem, "Great Kuskokwim," p. 298; Iditarod Pioneer, September 18, 1910.
317. Smith, The Lake Clark - Central Kuskokwim Region (BuR. 655), p. 33.
318. Stephen R. Capps, The Southern Alaska Range, U.S. Geological Survey Bulletin 862 (Washington, D. C. : GPO, 1935), p. 19.
319. Dotson and Mindell, Raptor Surveys, pp. 4, 11.
320. Gudgel-Holmes, Ethnohistory, p. 63.
321. Rhett S. Wise, "Navigability Field Report - George River," November 25, 1975, file F-14860-EE, ANCSA file.
322. Rhett S. Wise to File, November 25, 1975, Patrick C. Beckley to Files, January 6, 1976, Curtis V. MeVee, "Notice of Proposed Easement . . . Georgetown," March 28, 1977, file F-14860-EE, ANCSA file,
323. Glenn W. Fredericks to Land Use Planning Commission, April 16, 1977, file F-14860-EE, ANCSA file.
324. Terry R. Hassett to Ron Swanson, April 30, 1981, file F-14860-EE, ANCSA file.

325. Martin L. Karstetter and Robert E. Hiller, Jr. , to Files, May 17, 1982, Edward J. McNamara to Bob Arnold, July 20, 1982, Decision to Issue Conveyance, September 29, 1982, file F-14860-EE, ANCSA file.
326. Horace D. Sanders to Files, April 19, 1976, Curtis V. McVee, "Notice of Proposed Easement . . . Red Devil," December 23, 1976, Garold T. McWilliams to State Director, May 7, 1980, Terry R. Hassett to President, The Kuskokwim Corporation, June 22, 1981, Robert D. Arnold to Chief, Division of ANCSA and State Conveyances, August 27, 1982, file F-14924-EE, ANCSA file.