



Moore Homestead



J.B. Moore Collection, Archives, University of Alaska Fairbanks, 76-35-03N; KLGO MR5-24

Captain William Moore and his son J. Bernard (Ben) Moore settled in this valley to capitalize on a future gold rush. Their struggles to adapt to the changes brought by an overwhelming tide of people reflect the huge impact of the Klondike Gold Rush on the local scene.

A Bold Prediction

In 1887, Captain Moore first visited this quiet valley that the local Tlingit Natives call “Shghagwei,” which means rugged or windy place. Due to the numbers of prospectors working in Alaska and the Yukon, Moore predicted that there would be a major gold strike and foresaw the importance of this valley as a gateway to the interior gold fields.

To make money on this future gold rush, he and his son Ben homesteaded 160 acres here and began making improvements to the land. Over the next ten years they built a wharf and sawmill to support their homestead claim and began opening the White Pass Trail. Their 1887 log cabin, still preserved next to the Moore House, remains the oldest structure in Skagway.

Cultures Merge On The Frontier

While making improvements to the land and working in canneries around southeast Alaska to earn money, Ben met his future wife, Klinget-sai-yet Shotridge. She came from a prestigious Tlingit family, and their marriage in 1890 provided the means for an alliance and friendship with the Native peoples of the area. The couple moved to Skagway in 1896 and lived in the one-room log cabin for a short period of time.

Shotridge, whom Ben renamed “Minnie Elizabeth Moore,” bore them three children: Bernard Jr. (“Bennie”), Edith Gertrude, and Frances Flora.

While relations between the Moores and the local Native community were strengthened by this marriage, relations between Ben and his father were strained by it. Captain Moore did not approve of the marriage, and this tension was an early sign of more difficult times ahead.

A Growing Family In a Growing Town

In 1897 Ben and Minnie built a new one-and-a-half story wood frame house directly in front of their original cabin. They enlarged the house several times over the next few years as their family size and personal wealth increased. By 1904 the house had evolved to its appearance in the above photograph, which helped guide its future restoration by the National Park Service.

The growth of the house and the family mirrored the growth of Skagway. As the gold rush boomed, more than 10,000 people flocked to Skagway on their way to the gold fields. The Moores profited from their investments, selling timber to stampedeers from their sawmills and charging ships to dock at their wharf. Their bank accounts were further enhanced by settlement of a land claim lawsuit against the city, partially reimbursing them for land taken away by stampedeers in the early days of the gold rush.

New Struggles

Ben Moore and his family faced new pressures as a result of the gold rush. New Skagway residents brought their prejudices with them, and looked down upon the Moores' interracial marriage. The Moores were rarely invited to social events in town and the children were sent to boarding schools in Washington State, perhaps to avoid the racial epithets they likely heard around town. Ties with Ben's father weakened as Captain Moore filed a lawsuit against Ben to gain title to part of the land. Meanwhile, relations with Minnie's Tlingit family were dissolving as Minnie adopted Victorian clothing and attempted to raise her children in Victorian society.

Ben and his family eventually sold their interests in Skagway and moved to Washington State, but could not escape the trouble that followed them. Ben and Minnie divorced in 1909, and Ben died in 1919 after losing most of his fortunes in poor real estate investments. Minnie remarried but took her own life in 1917. While her life ended in tragedy, she deserves respect for the hurdles she overcame and empathy for leaving behind family ties and her Tlingit heritage.



Klinget-sai-yet (Minnie Moore) with her three children (l-r): Bennie, Frances, and Edith Gertrude, 1898

J.B. Moore Collection, Archives, University of Alaska Fairbanks, 76-35-08

Restoration and Interpretation

In a newspaper interview in 1901, Ben Moore predicted that his log cabin would someday "probably grow into a museum that tourists will be glad to visit." Indeed, his vision has been realized today. Local jeweler Herman Kirmse purchased the house in 1910, and the house remained in his family until 1977, when it was purchased by the National Park Service. The Park then began a period of archaeological, architectural, and historical investigations in order to determine how best to restore and interpret the house to the public.

The National Park Service purchased and restored this house because of the importance of the Moore story to Skagway's history. The restored homestead enables visitors to better understand the rapid changes faced by the Moores during Skagway's development, from the rough log cabin to the Victorian house complete with piano and electricity. This change was not an easy one, and ties to their past are reflected in their interior decorations, including the furs, Native slippers, and beadwork found on the walls of their home. Seeing these items inside the house today helps the visitor better understand the challenges faced by this family caught in a quickly-changing environment.

Ben's Bedroom, 1904. Note Tlingit slippers on the wall and fox furs hanging from the wardrobe.

The Moore Cabin was restored in 1985-86 in time for its 100th birthday, and the house was restored in 1995-1997 in time for the City of Skagway's 100th anniversary. Several interior rooms have been restored based on photographs taken by the Moores in 1904, such as the one below. The Park continues to restore the landscape surrounding the Moore House and Cabin to the 1904 period.

A visit to the restored Moore House today shows us how one family dealt with the gold rush, and their triumphs and tragedies remind us of the struggles faced by those dealing with a rapidly changing society.



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