



# Crown Jewel of the North:

An Administrative History of  
Denali National Park and Preserve, Volume 1





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Denali National Park and Preserve

Volume 1 – General Park History to 1980

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Front cover: This rustic arch, erected by the Alaska Railroad in 1926, was located just a few yards away from the McKinley Park Station railroad depot. Situated at the beginning of the park road, it welcomed thousands of tourists to Mount McKinley National Park during the years prior to World War II. DENA 39-1, Denali National Park and Preserve Museum Collection

Back cover: Skinner Collection, 44-5-117, Alaska State Library

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# Preface

By any definition, the area surrounding North America's highest peak is vast. Between 1917 and the late 1970s, Mount McKinley National Park was America's second largest national park (only Yellowstone was bigger), and since 1980, Denali National Park and Preserve—at more than 6,000,000 acres—has been almost twice as large as any “Lower 48” national park unit and it is exceeded in size by only the Gates of the Arctic and Wrangell-St. Elias park units, both located in Alaska. These two Alaska park units, however, are fairly young; both were born during a tumultuous 1970s-era statewide planning effort, and they were not established until President Jimmy Carter, in December 1980, signed the Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act. The area that began as Mount McKinley National Park, by contrast, is almost 90 years old. It was Alaska's first national park, and for much of its history, the staff headquartered near McKinley Park Station represented virtually the only National Park Service presence in America's northernmost territory.

Given the park's enormous size, its long history, and its statewide importance, records related to Mount McKinley National Park and its successor, Denali National Park and Preserve, are far more numerous than those associated with any other Alaska park unit. The historian hoping to write the management history for most Alaska park units has a reasonable expectation of incorporating most of the pertinent records about that unit into a single-volume study. But such is not the case as it relates to the Mount McKinley/Denali park unit. Because an administrative history is the designated bureaucratic vehicle that melds together a broad variety of historical themes in a single work, the obvious question presents itself: should this history attempt to offer the same level of detail as other Alaska park histories, or should completeness be sacrificed for brevity's sake? Depending on various circumstances, NPS historians have had wildly differing interpretations of their mandate; a recently-published Grand Canyon National Park administrative history, for example, is just 116 pages long, while an administrative history of tiny Pipe Spring National Monument, also in Arizona, runs a daunting 847 pages.

The author of this study has attempted to steer a middle course between these two extremes. It was felt important to compile a broad range of the essential details relating to this park's histori-

cal development, but it was also recognized that too much detail would make the study unwieldy and largely unusable. Given that middle course, the history of the Mt. McKinley/Denali unit is longer than most park histories, and for that reason it is being printed in two separate volumes. Volume 1, containing eight chapters, is a general park history for years up until 1980; it is thus a history of Mount McKinley National Park, although four specific historical themes—interpretation, resources management, mountaineering, and minerals management—have been omitted. Volume 2, containing the remaining six chapters, will be a general history of Denali National Park and Preserve (for the years 1980 to the present), plus a detailed look at the four themes noted above. It is anticipated that Volume 2 will be published in 2007.

Despite the greater-than-average length of this study, it is readily admitted that hundreds if not thousands of key documents were overlooked during its preparation. Given those omissions, many key events have certainly, if inadvertently, been discussed only briefly or have been altogether ignored. The sheer volume of these bypassed records—some known, others as-yet-unearthed—is naturally an open invitation for future researchers who, it is fervently hoped, will continue the process of providing a comprehensive, dispassionate view of the park's history. To assist tomorrow's historians, a brief guide to potential research avenues has been included in a bibliographic note near the end of this volume.

# Acknowledgements

History, by necessity, is a highly collaborative effort. And in the case of this study, I have been singularly fortunate to have gained information from, and worked with, a superb group of committed people—some in the Park Service, some not—who have gone to great lengths to supply the author with information in order to ensure that this story would be told, and told well.

Among those to whom I am most indebted are William E. Brown, the author of the park's historic resource study; Kristen Griffin, who collected scores of park historical files before the research for this study began; Jane Bryant, a longtime park employee who knows the answer to virtually any park-related question; Steve Carwile, a park employee since the pre-ANILCA days who is somehow able to unearth seemingly lost source materials; and William Nancarrow, a Denali-area legend who started working at the park in 1948 and has stories about the park's staff, concessioners and visitors that truly connect the park's challenging past with its equally challenging present. I have heavily relied on the source materials, opinions, anecdotes, and critical observations that all five of these individuals have offered (though many of these contributions are not reflected in the endnotes), and the present study would have been far poorer without their help.

I am indebted to two park employees for the graphics contained in this report. GIS specialist Jon Paynter has laboriously, and cheerfully, prepared all maps for the report; the sole exception was the Native languages map, prepared by Judy Kesler in the Alaska Regional Office. Ms. Bryant, noted above, is also single-handedly responsible for selecting, placing, and captioning the volume's photographs. I gratefully appreciate her efforts.

Many others have helped along the way. One was longtime Denali-area resident Tom Walker, who has written a number of books and articles about the park's cultural and natural history. Ann Kain, the park's cultural resource manager, has patiently steered me through more than one bureaucratic thicket and is thoroughly conversant with the park's history. The staff at Loussac Library (particularly Bruce Merrell), the Alaska Resource Library and Information Services, and the Anchorage Daily News library (both Sharon Palmisano and Lynn Hallstrom) have taken a keen interest in the study and guided me to a passel of little-known sources. The staff at the National Archives and Records Administration facilities in Anchorage, San Bruno, and College

Park have freely aided and abetted me in my quest for obscure memos and files. Michelle Curran graciously allowed me to use portions of her dissertation pertaining to the work of the Board on Geographic Names. And a broad range of NPS personnel—at the park, in Washington, and in the regional office—have provided answers to questions and supplied key bibliographic materials.

I wish to single out for praise the cooperation I have received from a number of park superintendents: all the way from George Hall, who served at the helm during the 1960s, to the present chief, Paul Anderson. All of these gentlemen gave freely of their time for interviews, and I'm thankful for the forthright, honest explanations that they provided to the many questions pitched in their direction. I'm likewise thankful for the observations of two superintendents' sons, Jan Dick and Scott Ruesch; their comments provided a window into the accomplishments of their fathers and, in addition, they provided a refreshing view of the park from an adolescent's point of view. I greatly appreciate the assistance of my two supervisors, Sande McDermott (now in the Intermountain Region office in Denver) and Ted Birkedal, who provided major managerial guidance, and I'd also like to thank my editorial advisors: Paul Anderson, Joe Van Horn, Ann Kain, Jane Bryant, and Steve Carwile, all at Denali National Park and Preserve. These five experts, taken together, have more than a hundred years of on-the-ground experience at the park; they graciously shared that experience with their innumerable suggestions and much-needed course corrections, and for that I am grateful.

AD – Assistant Director

AEC – Alaska Engineering Commission

AHC – Alaska Historical Commission

AKF – Alaska, Fairbanks Land Office

# Abbreviations

AKRO – Alaska Regional Office (NPS)  
AKSO – Alaska Support Office (NPS)  
ANC – Anchorage (National Archives facility)  
ANCSA – Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act  
ANILCA – Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act  
APG – Alaska Planning Group  
ARA – Automatic Retailers of America  
ARC – Alaska Road Commission  
ARCC – Alaska Region Curatorial Center  
ARLIS – Alaska Resources Library and Information Services  
ARR – Alaska Railroad  
ASA – Alaska State Archives  
ATCO – Alberta Trailer Company  
BLM – Bureau of Land Management  
BP – Before Present  
BPR – Bureau of Public Roads  
CAA – Civil Aeronautics Authority/Administration  
CCC – Civilian Conservation Corps  
CCF – Central Classified Files  
CP – College Park, Md. (National Archives facility)  
CR&NW – Copper River and North Western (railroad)  
D&C – Design and Construction  
DCP – Development Concept Plan  
DENA – Denali National Park and Preserve  
DES – Draft Environmental Statement  
DNC – Domestic Names Committee  
DNR – Department of Natural Resources  
DOI – Department of the Interior  
DSC – Denver Service Center (NPS)  
ECW – Emergency Conservation Work  
EIS – Environmental Impact Statement  
E.O. – Executive Order  
ERA/FMC – Economic Research Associates/Fawcett, McDermott, Cavanagh, Inc.  
FAA – Federal Aviation Administration  
FB&M – Fairbanks Base and Meridian  
FES – Final Environmental Statement  
FY – Fiscal Year  
GLO – General Land Office  
GPO – Government Publications Office  
GVEA – Golden Valley Electric Association  
HB – House Bill (state)  
HFC – Harpers Ferry Center (NPS)  
H.R. – House of Representatives Bill (federal)  
HRS – Historic Resource Study  
ICOMOS – International Council on Monuments and Sites  
JFSLUPC – Joint Federal-State Land Use Planning Commission  
MOA – Memorandum of Agreement  
MOMC – Mount McKinley National Park  
NARA – National Archives and Records Administration  
NPCI – National Park Concessions, Inc.  
NPS – National Park Service

NR – Natural Resources  
NRHP – National Register of Historic Places  
OHA – Office of History and Archaeology  
ONPS – Operations/National Park Service  
PCP – Project Construction Program  
PLO – Public Land Order  
PNRO – Pacific Northwest Regional Office (NPS)  
R4 – Region IV (NPS’s western region, 1937-1962)  
RCR – Cultural Resources Division (in the NPS’s Alaska Regional Office)  
RD – Regional Director  
RG – Record Group  
S – Senate Bill (federal)  
SAR – Superintendent’s Annual Report  
SB – San Bruno, Calif. (National Archives facility)  
SB – Senate Bill (state)  
SCR – Senate Concurrent Resolution  
SMR – Superintendent’s Monthly Report  
SOI – Secretary of the Interior  
TAC – The Architects Collaborative  
TIC – Technical Information Center (NPS)  
TVRR – Tanana Valley Railroad  
UAF – University of Alaska Fairbanks  
UBC – University of British Columbia  
U.C. – University of California  
UNESCO – United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization  
USGS – U.S. Geological Survey  
USNR – U.S. Natural Resources, Inc.  
USO – United Service Organizations  
WODC – Western Office of Design and Construction (NPS)  
WR – Western Region (NPS)  
YCC – Youth Conservation Corps



