

Government / Military

Fort Egbert and Eagle City, Alaska

By Jason Wenger

In August of 1897, rumors of lawlessness among the miners of Alaska had reached the United States government. The Secretary of War commissioned Captain P.H. Ray and Lt. Wilds P. Richardson to lead an infantry into the Interior and investigate whether the miners and traders were capable of governing themselves. After implementing order, the Secretary charged Captain Ray and his enlisted men to research communication possibilities and the need for supplies or labor assistance among the new inhabitants. Many migrants were said to be starving in the towns of Dawson, Yukon Territory, and Circle City, Alaska. They were building shabby, makeshift structures that were not meant to be permanent.

In February 1898, Captain Ray recommended that U.S. military help govern the Interior. He concluded that too many of the inhabitants were nomadic, coming and going with climate changes and new rumors of gold in other districts. And yet the people of the region had not yet felt the full effects of the Klondike gold rush. The inhabitants were still predominantly Native fishermen and fur traders. Word of the Klondike riches reached them well before it swept across the nation, and those who hadn't already bolted for the Yukon knew that with the coming wave of stampedes, the importance of their location on the river near the Canada border would be magnified.

Ray suggested that the U.S. establish three military posts along the Yukon: one at St. Michael, at the mouth of the Yukon, another centrally located post at the confluence of the Tanana and Yukon Rivers, and a third at the junction of the Yukon and Mission Creek. The site for Fort Egbert, the easternmost fort on the Yukon, was chosen because it was so close to the border, which would aid officials in controlling smuggling. Also, timber was plentiful, and the site was advantageously high above flood level.

By May 1898 miners were settling near the Native village. They named the city “Eagle,” likely after the bald eagles that nested in the area. When Ray returned in 1899, now holding the rank of major, he found a community of miners living in semi-permanent log homes.

That same year, Major Ray charged Lt. Wilds P. Richardson with supervising the building of Fort Egbert, as well as Fort Seward in Haines. Major Ray included Eagle within the military reservation in light of the lack of an established civil government. Richardson rushed to construct the first buildings of the fort. The inhabitants welcomed the soldiers with much chagrin, particularly when thirty-eight local cabin sites were included in the boundaries of the fort. As winter neared, Major Ray returned to Eagle to find Fort Egbert far from completion. The barracks, officers’ quarters, commissary, hospital, sawmill, bakery, and storehouse were all built by the end of the year. Those first buildings were so hastily built that they were poorly constructed and needed refurbishing just one year later.

Civil and military relations were continually strained until Capt. Charles S. Farnsworth was transferred to Fort Egbert. The fort was capable of supporting sixty men, nearly half of the 102 soldiers it held in 1900. Farnsworth spearheaded new efforts, first building an administration building, a guardhouse, an icehouse, two more officers’ quarters, a stable, quarters for civilian employees, and a post exchange. By 1906, Fort Egbert had nearly forty buildings.

On April 22, 1901, Judge James Wickersham christened Eagle’s first courthouse as headquarters for the Third Judicial District. The community had a fluctuating population of around 500 citizens. They elected a city council and mayor. Unfortunately, soon after the completion of Eagle’s first schoolhouse, the permanent residents of the town found it extremely difficult to retain teachers and city officials. Miners were leaving quickly, driven by the discovery of gold in Fairbanks.

During his tenure, Captain Farnsworth also began construction of the Washington-Alaska Military Cable and Telegraph System (WAMCATS), with Eagle City as construction headquarters. It was left to Lt. William “Billy” Mitchell to complete the 1,497-mile-long telegraph line, which he accomplished on June 29, 1903.

Within the next decade, however, wireless communication proved faster and more efficient. Eagle and Fort Egbert’s population began to decline. The community was overshadowed by the growing popularity of Fairbanks, which had sprouted from virtually nothing thanks to a gold discovery in 1902. Also, through a quiet political agreement with Fairbanks’ founder E.T. Barnette, Judge James Wickersham chose to move the seat of the Third Judicial District from Eagle to Fairbanks, further squelching Eagle’s future.

On December 5, 1905, the dwindling town received surprising exposure when a famous Norwegian explorer drove his dogsled into Eagle. Roald Amundsen had negotiated the first successful Northwest Passage and located the magnetic North Pole. Amundsen stopped for two months in Fort Egbert, the nearest place to report his success. Suddenly, the community was internationally famous, as Amundsen wired his accomplishments from the fort. He had used his own finances to fund the majority of his expedition. His predecessors had failed before him, even with various government supports.

In his 1927 memoir, *My Life as an Explorer*, Amundsen wrote, “We arrived at Fort Egbert on December 5, 1905. I remember that the thermometer was sixty degrees below zero. Fort Egbert was the northernmost post of the United States army and at the end of the telegraph line. I was greeted with flattering enthusiasm by the commander at the post, who overpowered me with congratulations and with invitations to make a protracted stay as his guest. I did not feel that I could do this, but I did accept with deep gratitude his offer to send out my telegrams. I wrote out about a thousand words which were at once put on the wire. By an odd freak of circumstance, they had no sooner been sent than the cold somewhere on the line broke the wires, and it was not until a week later that they were repaired and I received confirmation that my telegram had reached the outer world. . . . During this week of waiting and the subsequent weeks of recuperation I was the guest

of Mr. Frank N. Smith, the resident manager of the Alaska Commercial Company, to whom I shall ever be grateful for his hospitality. I left Fort Egbert in February of 1906.”

The exposure from Amundsen’s expedition spurred only brief energy into Fort Egbert and Eagle. In 1911, the last of the U.S. Army left the fort, with only a caretaker to watch over the property. The town’s population sharply declined over the next several decades. By the 1920s there were fewer than 200 residents. In 1953, Eagle was connected to the highway system with the building of the Taylor Highway. Still, by 1954 there were so few people that the remaining fifty-five citizens closed the community’s only schoolhouse.

Eagle City and Fort Egbert had become rundown and desolate from years of neglect and abandonment. Many of the old buildings had been sold or salvaged, and only a handful remained. In 1975, through the urging of concerned Eagle residents, the National Trust for Historical Preservation of the United States and the federal Bureau of Land Management funded a restoration project for the town and post that was once so crucial to Alaska’s development.

In the plan proposing the restoration, John L. Frisbee summarized the historical importance of the civilian and military sites: “Eagle and Fort Egbert both played a significant role in the turn of the century development of the Alaskan interior. Because of its location on the Upper Yukon near the Canadian border, Eagle assumed an important role as a customs station on Alaska’s most important highway, the Yukon River. Its location gave it temporary prominence as a commercial center, supplying the Upper Yukon miners, until new gold discoveries elsewhere siphoned off the miners and prospectors. Following enactment of the criminal and civil codes in 1900, Eagle was the logical location for the first headquarters of the Third Judicial District. Eagle was the first incorporated community in the Interior and the second within the territory.”

By 1977 the major renovation was complete. In all, workers had fortified and refurbished the non-commissioned officers' quarters, as well as four other remaining structures that had long been neglected.

Eagle City was added to the National Register of Historic Places in 1970 and became a National Historic Landmark in 1975, as did Fort Egbert. Today the Fort Egbert National Historic Landmark is overseen by the Bureau of Land Management. The City of Eagle continues to partner with the BLM to improve and protect these and other historic properties. The area is a popular destination and the city offers many services catering to visitors, including a two-hour walking tour, led by members of the historical society. Each summer visitors come in droves—by road, by air, or by river—to get acquainted with Eagle, the community that refused to become a ghost town.

LINKS:

More about Fort Egbert:

<http://www.alsap.org/FortEgbert/FortEgbert.htm>

More about Eagle City:

<http://www.eagleak.org/city.htm>

<http://fairbanks-alaska.com/eagle-city.htm>

More about Lt. William “Billy” Mitchell:

<http://www.gi.alaska.edu/ScienceForum/ASF7/751.html>

More about Lt. Wilds P. Richardson:

<http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/facility/fort-richardson.htm>

More about Roald Amundsen:

<http://odin.dep.no/odin/engelsk/norway/history/032005-990461/index-dok000-b-n-a.html>

VISIT THE LIBRARY FOR MORE INFORMATION:

Alaska's libraries include plenty of audio, visual, and written material about the Fort Egbert and the frontier town of Eagle. Visit your local library or go online to see what's available in holdings all over the state. Take these simple steps:

1. Access **SLED** (State Library Electronic Doorway) at <http://sled.alaska.edu/library.html>.
2. Click on the listing for **ALNCat** (the Alaska Library Network Catalog) to view the Basic Search window.

Go to the Keyword field, and type in **EAGLE ALASKA** or **FORT EGBERT**.

MORE READING:

Amundsen, Roald. *The North West Passage: Being the Record of a Voyage of Exploration of the Ship Gjøa, 1903-1907*. London: A. Constable and Co., Ltd., 1908.

Amundsen, Roald. *Roald Amundsen: My Life as an Explorer*. Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, Page & Co., 1927.

Eagle Historical Society & Museums. *Eagle-Fort Egbert: A Remnant of the Past*. Fairbanks, Alaska: Bureau of Land Management, 1999. Rev. 2003.

Eagle Historical Society & Museums. "Lucile Emily Hanigan." *Eagle Wireless* newsletter, Vol. XXVII, No. 1, Spring 1999. Between 1908-1909, Major Henry Hanigan was the Commanding Officer at Fort Egbert, Eagle, Alaska. Lucile Hanigan and her three preschool children accompanied their husband and father during this assignment. In her daily diary, Mrs. Hanigan provides the readers with an intimate view of family life at this farthest north army post. The Hanigans were a very active family who participated in many of the year-round post and city activities.

Mitchell, William, Lyman L. Woodman. *The Opening of Alaska*. Anchorage, Alaska: Cook Inlet Historical Society, 1982. Second edition, Missoula, Mont.: Pictorial Histories Publishing Co., 1988.

National Trust for Historic Preservation in the United States. *Fort Egbert and Eagle, Alaska: A Preservation Plan*. Washington, D.C.: The Trust, 1976.

Scott, Elva R. *Jewel on the Yukon, Eagle City: Illustrated*. Eagle City, Alaska, Eagle Historical Society & Museums, 1997.

Shinkwin, Anne D. *Fort Egbert and the Eagle Historic District: Results of Archeological and Historic Research, Summer 1977*. Tok, Alaska: The Area, 1978.

ARCHIVAL MATERIALS:

Fort Egbert Construction and Activities, 1899-1912. Alaska State Library. This album consists primarily of 78 black-and-white photographs taken during the construction of Fort Egbert, near the town of Eagle, Alaska, ca. 1899-1912. The images show construction, transportation and arrival of goods by steamer, activities and personnel around Fort Egbert, views of Eagle, Nome, and St. Michael. F.H. Nowell took some of the photographs. Many of the images were numbered by an unknown photographer.

Charlie J. Patton Collection, 1915-1957. Alaska State Library. The Charlie J. Patton collection includes 313 photographs, including two scrapbooks, of the Yukon River area, Tanana, Ruby, Fort Gibbon, Fort Liscum, Cordova and Tonsina, Alaska. Many are captioned. Images of roadhouses, the Valdez-Fairbanks Trail, Copper River and Northwestern Railroad, Alaskan Native culture, and portraits are also included in the loose photographs. A photograph album contains images of Charlie Patton, his family and friends and their various activities including amateur theater. An oversize scrapbook contains both clippings and photographs of various Alaskan subjects. Patton also collected articles and newspaper clippings on Alaska and the Pacific Northwest-related events that are filed in folders by subject.

George L. Harrington Photograph Collection, 1909-1917. Alaska State Library. Volume 1, a U.S.G.S. scrapbook compiled in accordance with the survey order, primarily concerns geological formations and includes views of Ruby, Long City, Fort Gibbon, Fort Yukon, Anvik Mission, Eagle, Tolstoi, Holy Cross, Russian Mission, Marshall-Fortuna Ledge, Candle, Teller. Also included are views of Simel's Store and Sawmill on the Dishna, the steamer *Oil City*, the schooner *Silver Wave*, the gasboat *Standard*, *Mayflower of St. Michael*. Vol. 2 is a personal photo album and contains commercial postcards & original photos of the Alaska Boundary Survey in 1909 & 1912, the Boundary Survey crew, Athabascans, birch-bark canoes, fish drying operations, a fish wheel at Ruby, Fort Yukon, the White River, Nation River, Porcupine River, riverboats. The album also includes pictures of Asa Baldwin.

Plan of Guard House at Fort Egbert, Alaska. B.T. Scher and E.H. Plummer, U.S. Army, 3rd Infantry, 1900s. Anchorage Museum of History and Art, Library and Archives. Includes one architectural plan for the Guard House, Fort Egbert, Alaska, photocopied onto two sheets. Includes northeast elevation and section drawings, and floor plan.

Lieutenants' Quarters No. 3, Fort Egbert, Alaska. J.S. Evans and C.S. Farnsworth, U.S. Army, 7th Infantry, 1900. Anchorage Museum of History and Art, Library and Archives. Includes three architectural plans for Lieutenants' Quarters Number 3, Fort Egbert, Alaska. Includes front elevation and section drawing, floor plan for first floor, and floor plan for second floor.