

Alaskans / Pioneers

By Jennifer Houdek and Leslie Oh

Sydney M. Laurence

1865-1940







Alaska State Library - Historical Collections

The artist became the subject for this formal photo portrait by Robert J. Wells. Alaska State Library.

Collection Name:

[Alaska State Library Portrait File. Photographs. ASL.](#)



 **Identifier:** [ASL-Laurence-Sydney-2](#)
 **Title:** [Sydney Laurence](#) in his [studio](#).
 **Description:** [Formal portrait](#) of the [artist](#) in his [studio](#), with [canvas](#) on an [easel](#).
 **Creator:** [Wells, Robert J.](#)



Alaska State Library - Historical Collections

Laurence was frequently the man behind the lens in the early part of the twentieth century. Photos of the artist/photographer are not common.

Alaska State Library.

Collection Name: [Alaska State Library Portrait File. Photographs. ASL.](#)
 **Identifier:** [ASL-Laurence-Sydney-2](#)
 **Title:** [Sydney Laurence](#) in a [field](#) of [wildflowers](#).



Alaska State Library - Historical Collections

Laurence poses with two framed paintings and another on an easel in his Anchorage studio. For the last twenty years of his life, he split his time between Anchorage, Seattle, and Los Angeles. Alaska State Library.

Collection Name:

[Alaska State Library Portrait File. Photographs. ASL.](#)



Identifier:

[ASL-Laurence-Sydney-1](#)



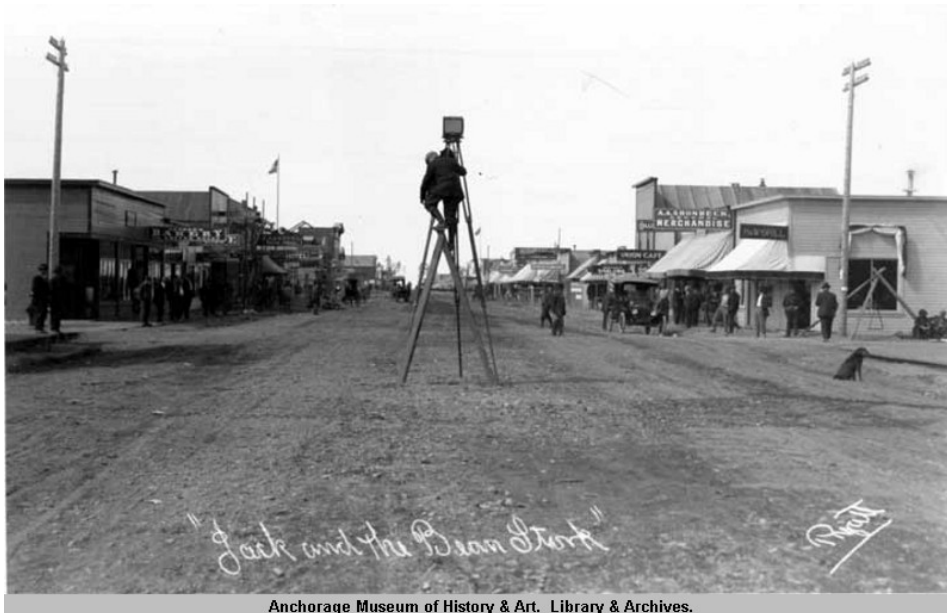
Title:

[Sydney Laurence](#) in his [studio](#).



Description:

[Formal portrait](#) of the [artist](#) in his [studio](#). [Two framed paintings](#) and another on an [easel](#).



Anchorage Museum of History & Art. Library & Archives.

The Alaska Digital Archives holds many photographs in which Sydney Laurence cataloged Anchorage's birth and its first residents. Here, another photographer, Alberta Pyatt, took a picture of Laurence climbing a tripod to photograph Fourth Avenue near C Street. It is titled "Jack and the Bean Stork." Anchorage Museum of History and Art, Library and Archives.

Collection Name:



Identifier:

[AMRC. General Photograph File](#)

[AMRC-b83-146-93a](#)



Title:

[Jack](#) and the [bean stork](#).



Description:

[Title taken](#) from [front](#). [View](#) of [Sydney Laurence](#) standing on a [tripod](#) photographing [4th Avenue near C Street, Anchorage, Alaska](#). [Businesses shown include Lennon's Bakery and Coffee House, H & W Grill, Shonbeck General Merchandise, Union Cafe, Merchant Tailors, The Fairbanks, Polley Bros., and Carstens Packing Co. 1910-1919.](#) [Photographer: Alberta Pyatt.](#) [Original photograph size: 3 3/8" x 5".](#)
[Pyatt, Alberta](#)



Creator:



Anchorage Museum of History & Art. Library & Archives.

Laurence's name is misspelled on Anchorage's first billboard along the trail to Seward: "The Sydney Lawrence Company, Commercial and Pictorial Photography." Anchorage Museum of History and Art, Library and Archives.

Collection Name:

 **Identifier:**

 **Title:**

 **Description:**

[AMRC. General Photograph File](#)

[AMRC-b78-75-1](#)

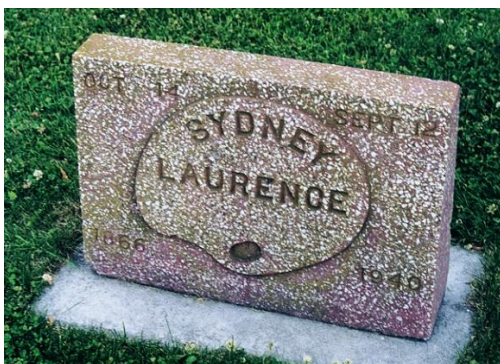
[Sign](#) on [trail](#) to [Seward, Alaska](#).

[Sign](#) advertising some Anchorage businesses, located on a [trail](#) to [Seward, Alaska](#). Businesses advertised include [Pioneer Sheet Metal Works](#), [Terminal Exchange](#), [Theophele H. Pichette Yukon Groceries](#) and [Hardware](#), [Anchorage Sash and Door Co.](#), [Carrol and Co.](#), [The Sydney Lawrence Company, Commercial and Pictorial Photography](#), [E. T. Wilkes & Wilson Signs](#), [Knik Transfer](#), and [Wood Barges](#) and [Dock](#). 1910-1919. Original photograph size: 8" x 10".



Mount McKinley tops the beautiful gravestone of Jeanne and Sydney Laurence in Anchorage Memorial Cemetery.

<http://www.findagrave.com/cgi-bin/fg.cgi?page=pis&GRid=7446336&PIgrid=7446336&PIcrd=191762&PIpi=558224&>












Laurence was buried in Anchorage Memorial Cemetery in 1940. His grave can be found in Tract 10, Row 16, Lot 6.



© UA Museum of the North











This Laurence oil painting, titled "Alaska Cache," is part of the University of Alaska Museum of the North Collection. It measures 23" x 30.75".

Title:	Alaska Cache
 Creator:	Laurence, Sydney Mortimer, 1865-1940
 Contributors:	IBM, Mr. Evans, Branch Manager (Donor)
 Collection Name:	Fine Arts
 Identifier:	UA1967-4-1
 Description:	Laurence, Sydney M. (painter) . Oil on canvas . Size: 23 x 30.75 in. Signed lower right. Working title, " Southeast Scene of Boat and Totem Pole with Cabin (Cache?)."
 Subject.TGM:	Art objects Oil paintings Caches
 Region:	Southeast Alaska
 Time Period:	1913 to 1939
 Date.original:	undetermined



© UA Museum of the North

Austin "Cap" Lathrop donated this McKinley painting to the University of Alaska collection in 1936. The frame reads "Mount McKinley by Sydney Laurence. Painted in 1919. Presented by A. E. Lathrop." A new frame was added in 1953, and it was cleaned and varnished by Alaskan artist Rusty Heurlin in the same year. University of Alaska Museum of the North.

Title:	McKinley
 Creator:	Laurence, Sydney Mortimer, 1865-1940
 Contributors:	Lathrop, A. E. (Donor 1/1/36)
 Collection Name:	Fine Arts
 Identifier:	UA1974-70-4
 Description:	Laurence, Sydney Mortimer (artist) . Frame reads "Mount McKinley by Sydney Laurence. Presented by A. E. Lathrop." New frame added 1953, and cleaned and varnished by Rusty Heurlin in same year.
 Subject.TGM:	51 x 72 inches, oil Mountains Oil paintings
 Location:	McKinley, Mount (Alaska)
 Region:	Interior Alaska
 Time Period:	1913 to 1939
 Type:	Oil paintings Physical Object



© UA Museum of the North

Laurence painted "Mount McKinley from the Tokacheetna River" in 1924. It is oil on canvas and measures 22" x 27".

[Mt. McKinley, Tokacheetna River](#)

Title:



Creator:

[Laurence, Sydney Mortimer, 1865-1940](#)



Contributors:

[Weston, Dr. and Mrs. John \(Donors\)](#)



Collection Name:

[Fine Arts](#)



Identifier:

[UA1983-9-5](#)



Description:

[Laurence, Sydney M. \(painter\)](#). [Oil](#) on [canvas](#). [Size: 22 x 27 in.](#) Signed lower left. [Light crazing](#) to [paint surface](#) throughout, [heavier crazing](#) just above [middle, left](#). [illegible notation](#) by [artist](#) on [back of picture](#).



Subject.TGM:

[Art objects](#)

[Oil paintings](#)

[Mountains](#)



Time Period:

[1913 to 1939](#)



Date.original:

[1924](#)



Type:








[Physical Object](#)

[Oil paintings](#)



© UA Museum of the North










"Storm over Alaska's Coast" measures 11.25" x 15.5" and is oil on canvas board. University of Alaska Museum of the North.

Title:	Storm over Alaska's Coast
 Creator:	Laurence, Sydney Mortimer, 1865-1940
 Collection Name:	Fine Arts
 Identifier:	UA951-1
 Description:	Laurence, Sydney Mortimer (artist). Size: 11.25 x 15.5 in. Medium: Oil on canvas board Signed lower right .
 Subject.TGM:	Oil paintings Oceans Storms
 Date.original:	Undetermined
 Type:	Oil paintings Physical Object



© UA Museum of the North

Laurence used oil on masonite to paint "Northern Lights," which measures 17.5" x 21.5". University of Alaska Museum of the North.

Title:	Northern Lights
 Creator:	Laurence, Sydney Mortimer, 1865-1940
 Contributors:	Weston, Dr. and Mrs. John (Donors)
 Collection Name:	Fine Arts
 Identifier:	UA1983-9-6
 Description:	Laurence, Sydney M. (painter) . Oil on Masonite . Size: 17.5 x 21.5 in. Signed lower right.
 Subject.TGM:	Art objects Oil paintings Auroras Cabins
 Time Period:	1913 to 1939
 Date.original:	undetermined
 Type:	Physical Object Oil paintings



Jeannie Laurence, right, poses with Neva Egan, Alaska's former First Lady, at a 1974 event celebrating the fiftieth anniversary of Wien Air Alaska. Anchorage Museum of History and Art, Library and Archives.

Collection Name:

[AMRC. Wien Collection](#)

Identifier:

[AMRC-b85-27-2259](#)

Title:

[Neva Egan](#), [Jeannie Laurence](#).

Description:

[Title taken](#) from [verso](#). [Pictured](#) from [left](#) to [right](#) are [Jeannie Laurence](#) (wife of [painter/photographer Sydney Laurence](#)) and [Neva Egan](#) (wife of [Governor William Egan](#)) at [Wien Air Alaska 50th anniversary reception](#), possibly in [Anchorage, Alaska](#), with others in [background](#). 1974. Original photograph size: 5" x 7".

Subject.TGM:

[Women](#)
[Celebrations](#)
[Anniversaries](#)
[Receptions](#)
[Airline industry](#)
[Men](#)

Personal Name:

[Portrait paintings](#)
[Egan, Neva M.](#)
[Laurence, Jeanne](#)

Corporate Name:

[Wien Air Alaska, Inc.](#)

Region:

[Alaska](#)

Time Period:

[1959 and later](#)

Date.original:

[1974](#)

Type:

[Image \(Photographs\)](#)

More about Sydney M. Laurence:

Sydney Mortimer Laurence is famed for his dramatic landscape paintings of Alaska, as well as his role as one of the first professionally trained artists to live in the Territory. Laurence painted a variety of Alaskan scenes in a long and prolific career, among them sailing ships and steamships in Alaskan waters, totem poles in Southeast Alaska, dramatic headlands and the quiet coves and streams of Cook Inlet, cabins and caches under the northern lights, and Alaska Natives, miners, and trappers engaged in their often solitary lives in the northern wilderness.

The image of the great Mount McKinley, however, became Laurence's trademark. It is this image more than any other that distinguishes him from other famous Alaskan artists. Laurence's paintings were unique in that he would choose landscapes at dawn or dusk, autumn, winter, or spring because the light at those moments was natural but exaggerated. There were rarely any people in the scenes, but more a sense of human beings overwhelmed by nature, defining the image of Alaska as "The Last Frontier." Today, more than sixty years after his death, he is still celebrated as one of Alaska's most beloved artists.

Laurence was born October 14, 1865, in Brooklyn, New York, the son of an English couple. He was a student at Peekshill Military Academy until the age of seventeen. From 1882-89, Laurence lived with his mother, also an accomplished artist, and attended Art Student League in New York. During those years, he met Alexandrina Fredericka Dupre, a student at the National Academy of Design, and the couple married on May 18, 1889. Four days later, they sailed to Cornwell, England.

The Laurences' trip to England and Paris was supposed to be a honeymoon, however they stayed abroad for a decade, spending the first year of their marriage painting at St. Ives. In May 1890, they both exhibited at the Paris Salon, and Sydney's work was shown at the Royal Society of British Artists.

The spotlight was shining on Laurence. He received an honorary membership to the Cheltenham Fine Arts Society, and was elected to the Royal Society of British Artists. He won several awards in the Paris Salon. So extraordinary was Laurence's talent that he won an award for a painting that he hated. He disliked the piece so much that he used it for a roof on a bicycle shed. One day, however, he refurbished the painting, titled it

“Setting Sun on the Coast of Cornwall,” and submitted it for a Paris Salon competition. The painting won an award called the *Hors de Concours*, which translates as “beyond competition.”

Laurence was becoming renown for his work throughout France and England, but he was unsatisfied. In 1904, at the age of thirty-eight, Laurence left his wife and two young sons in England and moved to Alaska, lured by adventure as well as stories of gold. During the artist’s first eight years in Alaska he painted very little. Rather, he moved around Alaska, prospecting and doing odd jobs as well as professional photography.

After unsuccessful mining stints in Tyonek, the Dutch Hills, Talkeetna, and Valdez, Laurence’s life took a dramatic turn in 1912 when a near-fatal boating accident cost him everything he owned, and nearly resulted in the amputation of both legs. It was during his recovery in a Valdez hospital that he somehow convinced friends to fund a trip to Mount McKinley. He would resume his career as a painter.

When Laurence could walk again, he made a monumental journey: a four-hundred-mile trek to McKinley with a dog team and sled. He broke trail for the dogs, walking ahead with snowshoes to pack down the snow. It took at least four relay trips to move supplies and equipment to his camp on the southern side of McKinley. Then, using his dogsled as an easel, Laurence sat in front of his tent to study the way light struck the mountain at different times of day. In all, he painted about forty sketches of McKinley in oils that year, then almost lost them all in another boating accident while returning to Valdez.

Back in town, Laurence made an enormous painting of Mount McKinley for the friends who had paid for his trip. Some doubt remains as to how big this canvas actually was. Depending on the source, stories about the painting set its size from 6’ x 12’, up to nearly 20’ x 30’.

That first field trip to sketch McKinley’s many faces set the stage for a long-running love affair with the mountain. Laurence would return again and again, battling mosquitoes, pneumonia, broken river ice, and hazardous winter conditions. Throughout his life, Laurence painted Mount McKinley so often and so beautifully that the two became entwined in reputation, known as “the Man and the Mountain.” He developed his

uniquely personal style by applying the “tonalist” techniques he had learned in New York and Europe to Alaska’s wilderness.

“ . . . by 1915 he was gaining a reputation as the first ambitious painter of the Alaskan landscape, and his 6- by 8-foot canvas of Mount McKinley had been acquired and exhibited by the Smithsonian Institution's National Collection of Fine Arts,” writes artist and author Kesler Woodward in *Sydney Laurence: Painter of the North*.

In 1915, when Anchorage was brand new, Laurence established his studio in the lobby of the Anchorage Hotel and took an upstairs apartment. Doing business as The Sydney Laurence Co., he engaged in commercial photography as well as painting. He is responsible for recording many of the earliest images of Anchorage, from its days as a tent city, to the public auction of city lots, to the first snowfall on the new city’s main street.

Next door to Laurence was an eye doctor named Dr. Lloyd Hines, who later recalled his neighbor in a collection of stories titled *Fond Memories of Anchorage Pioneers*. Hines had given Laurence glasses for his vision problem. Laurence would comment later that they were the finest fit he had ever had—even better than those he’d received in Europe. Another pioneer and Anchorage Hotel neighbor, Frank Reed, also warmly remembered Laurence and his encouraging ways:

“Personal memories include selling [Laurence] pencil drawings,” Reed wrote. “If he really liked one, he paid me ten cents; otherwise a nickel. As I grew older, I delivered his newspaper. My mother took Sydney’s paintings, upon which she thought he placed too low a value, and moved them to the hotel parlor and raised the prices to around \$250, selling many of them for him. One Easter she took an Easter lily into his studio for him; that afternoon he emerged with a far more lasting gift, a painting of the lily for her. I especially admired a sailboat painting that I termed ‘mine.’ One day when I came from school, it was missing, mother said it was ‘sold,’ and so it had been—to my parents for my Christmas gift.”

Anchorage was still in its infancy—as was the auto industry—when Laurence test drove his new car, a vision that Frank Reed never forgot: “Once Sydney bought a new Model T Ford from A.A. Shonbeck. Syd seemed to be having a rollicking good time driving his car around the block in the presence of many witnesses. He was shouting and

gesturing, but it wasn't jubilation. Syd was yelling for help—he didn't know how to stop the car.”

Not long after Laurence arrived in Anchorage, he married a second time, to a fellow artist named Jeanne, who specialized in painting Alaskan wildflowers. By 1920, Laurence's paintings had become so famous that he was considered Alaska's most prominent painter and in the years that followed, he split his time between Alaska, Seattle, and Los Angeles.

In a strange ending to an illustrious life, Laurence prophesied his own death. He woke on September 11, 1940, and informed his wife and friends that he was going to die that day. He had his hair cut, delivered paintings that were commissioned, and checked into an Anchorage hospital that evening. He died the next morning, on September 12. Forty years later, at Jeanne's passing, she was buried next to Sydney in Anchorage Memorial Cemetery.

Generations later, Laurence's art has retained its popularity and increased in value. In 1990, a selection of his paintings from 1905 through 1911 and beyond were exhibited in a yearlong traveling retrospective. Alaskan artist Kesler Woodward wrote the text for the illustrated exhibition catalog. In 2006, one of Laurence's McKinley paintings titled “An August Afternoon” sold for \$224,000. A portfolio of six free prints given to National Bank of Alaska customers in 1973 is today valued at about \$1,000.

Laurence's original oils are in collections or on display nationally and internationally. In Alaska, his paintings, prints, and lithographs are in the collections of the Anchorage Museum of Art, the Alaska State Museum, and various libraries, hotels, airlines, businesses and private homes throughout the state.

LINKS:

Sydney Laurence, Braarud Fine Art:

www.sydneylaurence.com/

Sydney Laurence, Alaska State Museum:

www.museums.state.ak.us/TemporaryExhibits/Collecting_Alaska/pages/laurencepainting.htm

University of Alaska Fairbanks, Cultural Connections:

www.uaf.edu/museum/depts/fineart/index.html

Laurence Paintings Return to Alaska, *Resource Library Magazine*:
www.tfaoi.com/aa/3aa/3aa562.htm

“Art of the North,” Anchorage Museum of History & Art:
www.anchagemuseum.org/aon_details.asp

Visit the library for more information:

Alaska’s libraries hold audio, visual, and written material about Sydney Laurence, the gold rushes he followed, and the early years of Anchorage. 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 **SYDNEY LAURENCE** or **ALASKA ART**.

More Reading:

Francisco, Cyrus Peter. *The Man and the Mountain: Sydney Laurence's Mt. McKinley*. Upland, CA: Lynn F. Casella Communications, 1990.

Jones, Helen Wendy. *The Man and the Mountain: The Life of Sydney Laurence plus an anthology of Alaskan prose and poetry*. Anchorage. Alaskan Publishing Co. and Graphic Arts Press, 1962.

Jones, H. Wendy. *Man and The Mountain Life of Sydney Laurence, Alaskan Painter*. Anchorage, AK: Alaskan Publishing Co., 1962.

Laurence, Sydney. *Sydney Laurence, an Alaskan Impressionist*. Exhibition, February 28-March 30, 1975. Anchorage, AK: Anchorage Historical and Fine Arts Museum, 1975.

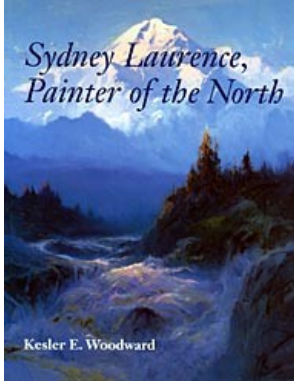


Laurence, Jeanne. *My Life with Sydney Laurence*. Seattle, WA: Salisbury Press Book, 1974.

Shalkop, Robert L. *Sydney Laurence, His Life and Work: The Collection of the Anchorage Historical and Fine Arts Museum*. Anchorage, AK: The Museum, 1982.

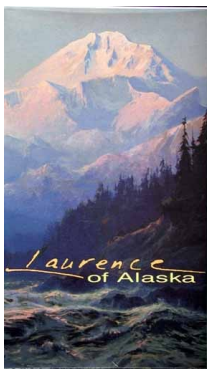
Walmsley, Michael, photographer. *Sydney Laurence: Anecdotes, Myths, Opinions, A Collection of Laurence Paintings for Sale*. La Conner, WA: Braarud Fine Art, 1996.

<http://www.keslerwoodward.com/sydney.html>



Woodward, Kesler E. *Sydney Laurence, Painter of the North*. Seattle, WA: University of Washington Press in association with the Anchorage Museum of History and Art, 1990.

VIDEO:



“Laurence of Alaska,” VHS (58 minutes). Anchorage, AK: KAKM-TV. Anchorage Museum of History & Art gift shop:

www.anchoragemuseum.org/Merchant2/merchant.mvc?Screen=PROD&Store_Code=AMS&Product_Code=812&Category_Code=VID