

America's Glory Road

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America's Glory Road

by Richard F. Weingroff

In 1942, 75 years ago, construction crews worked under frigid conditions to complete one of the most challenging engineering projects of World War II. Here's the story of the Alaska Highway.



Courtesy of Office of History, Headquarters, U.S. Army Corps of Engineers

Because of the urgency of opening the Alaska Highway for trucks in 1942, most bridges built on the initial “pioneer road” were made from nearby timber. Many of the bridges disappeared over the winter. The report by the Public Roads Administration (FHWA's predecessor) described the fate of a 272-foot (438-kilometer)- long timber bridge with a 10-foot (3-meter) clearance: “The ice at that time was more than 15 feet [5 meters] thick and the bridge had been swallowed up completely.”

By the time Secretary of State William H. Seward arranged to acquire Alaska from Russia in 1867, the

territory's fur trade was no longer profitable, and Russia wanted to end the drain on its treasury. Secretary Seward saw economic opportunities in fish, timber, whales, and, he hoped, gold. President Andrew Johnson signed the treaty on May 28.

Although skeptics at the time referred to the deal as "Seward's Folly," the acquisition was generally seen as advantageous, and more so after gold discoveries began in 1886. Following the transfer, however, Congress took little interest in Alaska, neglecting to pass land laws, fund roads, establish courts, or even provide a means for marriage.

The problem, or one of them, was how to get there.

Getting There

Nearly halfway through the 20th century, a practical land route from the contiguous United States to Alaska did not exist. All transportation was by sea. By the 1940s, an airline had begun operating between Seattle, WA, and Alaska, but the airplanes carried what Alaska's nonvoting delegate to Congress, Anthony J. Dimond, called "an almost infinitesimal fraction of the transportation service needed for the Territory."

By land, connecting roads from the U.S. border went only as far as Dawson Creek in British Columbia, Canada, about 1,400 miles (2,250 kilometers) short of Big Delta (near modern-day Delta Junction), AK. Canada had not built a connecting road across the rugged topography of its lightly populated northwest. The railroad companies saw no profit in bridging the distance, which was challenging even for the airplanes of the day in the absence of fueling stations. As Dimond explained, Alaska was connected to North America by land, but was "almost as much an island as is Puerto Rico."

Beginning in the 1930s, two presidentially appointed commissions that included Canadian representatives had debated the best route for a road to Alaska. However, neither country was ready to approve a link, in part because the benefits that advocates spoke of

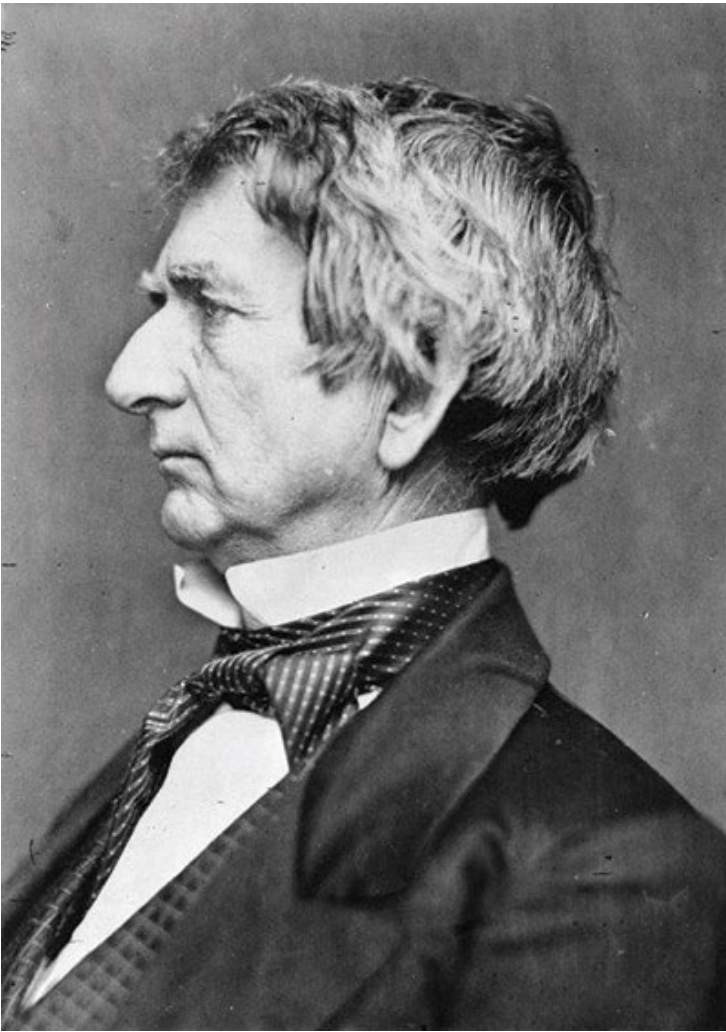
did not appear to outweigh the high cost of building and maintaining a road across the rugged frozen terrain of Canada.

Suddenly a High Priority

Then Japan attacked the United States at Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941, propelling the country into World War II. Suddenly, a land route to Alaska became a high priority—and the sooner the better. The high priority stemmed from the fact that the Aleutian Islands off southwest Alaska were closer to Japan than was any other point in North America. If the Japanese established forces in Alaska, they would be within bombing range of U.S. cities.

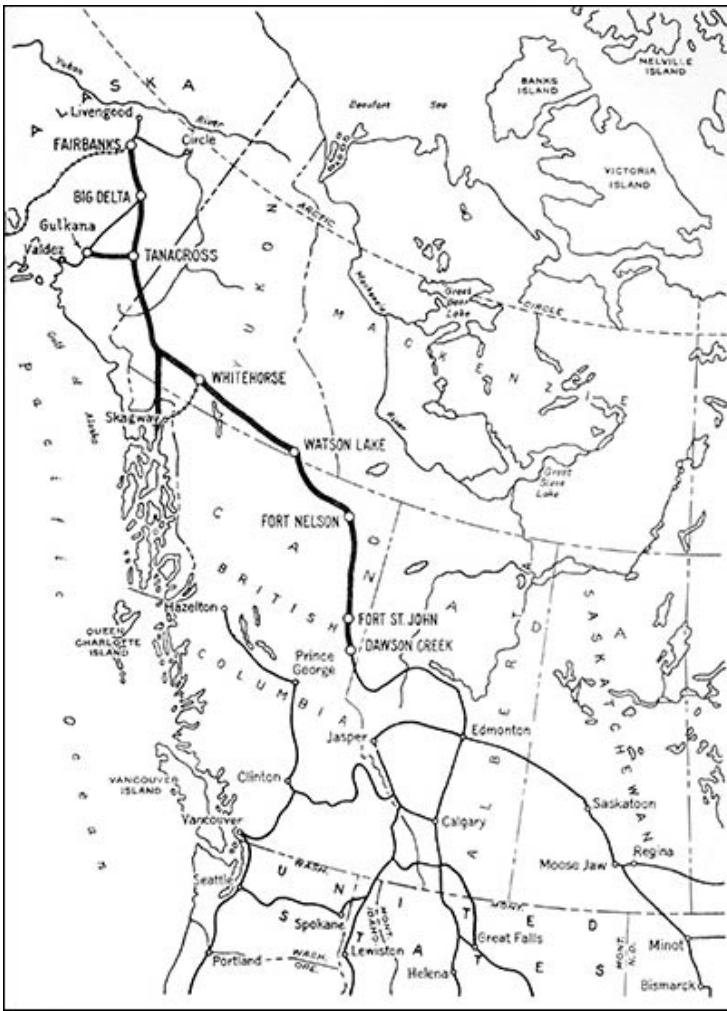
Officials began the perilous task of sending supplies to Alaska by sea and air. According to Heath Twichell's 1992 book *Northwest Epic: The Building of the Alaska Highway*, intelligence reports during the 60 days after Pearl Harbor "listed fifty-eight visual sightings or radio fixes on hostile ships or aircraft" off the West Coast of the United States and the Gulf of Alaska.

A less risky way to Alaska was urgently needed to meet military needs. The solution was a road across Canada to Alaska with a nearby pipeline system, to be known as Canol (short for Canadian American Norman Oil Line or simply Canadian Oil), to service a chain of airfields for refueling along the way. President Franklin D. Roosevelt approved the road project on February 11, 1942, and Canadian officials agreed to U.S. construction across their land on March 18.



Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division

In 1867, Secretary of State William H. Seward (1861–1869) reached agreement with Russia to pay \$7.2 million for Alaska, a bargain at 2 cents an acre (less than 1 cent per hectare).



This map of the Alaska Highway is from the Public Roads Administration's report on its role in the project.



Harold W. Richardson, courtesy of Engineering-News Record

Before an inspection tour of the Alaska Highway in 1942, Commissioner Thomas H. MacDonald (left) of the PRA met with Joseph S. Bright, engineer in charge of PRA's work on the project.

Officials considered four routes that had been studied prior to the war before settling on a hybrid course that linked seven airfields built by the United States and Canada in 1941 before Pearl Harbor, with “equipment laboriously brought over frozen winter trails or by river barge and portage during warmer weather,” according to Twichell.

The Alaska Highway would stretch northwest from Dawson Creek, where usable roads and rail lines from the south ended, through Fort Nelson and Whitehorse in Canada, and via Tok to Big Delta southeast of Fairbanks, AK. At Big Delta, traffic could use the Richardson Highway to connect with Fairbanks and Alaska’s road network.

In this early stage, planners had to take it on faith that they could build the road across the Rocky Mountains between Watson Lake and Whitehorse, where no one had ever seriously considered placing a road, or between Watson Lake and Fort Nelson, where all the details that road builders would need were unknown.

In the interest of speed, officials decided to build the road in two phases. In 1942, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers would carve a pioneer road out of the difficult terrain as close to the permanent line as possible. Supply trucks would use the pioneer road by year’s end. Meanwhile, contractors working for the Public Roads Administration (PRA)—as FHWA’s predecessor was called in the 1940s—would follow the troops to begin work on the permanent road. In 1943, with trucks flowing, PRA would complete the permanent road on the best alignment, using as much of the pioneer trail as practical.

(Initially, the project was referred to as the Alcan Highway, but on July 19, 1943, Canada and the United States exchanged diplomatic notes formally naming it the Alaska Highway.)

Getting Underway

By March 1942, the Corps and PRA survey teams

were in the wilderness, some traveling on snowshoes or by dog team, while others in airplanes explored mountain passes and river courses. According to a PRA report, "There were mountains everywhere, linked and overlaid with illimitable forests. Sprawling river systems, scores of glaciers, vast swamp areas and a multitude of lakes presented problems seldom encountered in a similar undertaking."

Meanwhile, Army engineer troops began arriving. The first, the 35th Engineer Regiment, after an arduous 2,000-mile (3,200-kilometer) trip from Fort Ord, CA, began work on the Alaska Highway on April 11, 1942.

A week later, PRA established a headquarters office in Seattle, WA, on April 20, headed by Joseph S. Bright, to begin assembling contractors. Bright would soon move to Edmonton, Canada, to improve communications with his forces.



Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division

Although much of the Alaska Highway construction occurred during the warmer months, this photograph of one of the first camps to be set up on the project illustrates the challenging conditions. A sawmill supplied building materials and wood for fires.

PRA rushed a force of 500 engineers and aides into

the field for the surveys, while negotiating with four engineering firms to act as project managers. These firms recruited 52 construction contractors who began moving men and materials to the job along three main routes: by rail via Edmonton to Dawson Creek; from Seattle via the inland water route to Skagway, Canada, then on the narrow-gauge railroad to Whitehorse, Canada; and from Seattle by inland water route, across the Gulf of Alaska to Valdez, AK, followed by the Richardson Highway to the job. More than 6,000 civilian workers moved into Alaska. It was, PRA Commissioner Thomas H. MacDonald said, the largest civilian workforce ever to work on a single highway job.

The Black Troops

With so many soldiers needed to fight the war in the European and Pacific theaters of operation, the Army Corps of Engineers needed men. The initial units designated for the Alaska Highway project would not be able to complete the job in the 8 months allotted for the pioneer road before construction would stop with the onset of winter. More units would be needed during those 8 months.



Courtesy of Office of History, Headquarters,
U.S. Army Corps of Engineers

One of many survey crews that decided the routing of the Alaska Highway.

African-American troops were the solution. Since approval of the Selective Training and Service Act of 1940, they had been drafted on the same terms as white troops, but as Twichell explained, "Segregation's legacy of bigotry and prejudice severely limited the possibilities" for the work they would be delegated to do. In general, "black soldiers were assigned to more than their share of units engaged in low-tech, high-sweat duties in the Engineers and Quartermaster Corps." Even in these units, the black soldiers generally had fewer bulldozers and more shovels than white units.

Three black units—the 93rd, 95th, and 97th Engineers, all commanded by white officers—would be shipped to Canada to supplement the white units assigned to the job. (A fourth black unit, the 388th, was assigned to the related Canol pipeline project.) The Corps brought 10,670 men to the job, including 3,695 black troops. Most of the black troops had never been out of the South or experienced snow, much less the severe weather of Alaska. (At the time, they were usually referred to as Negro or colored troops; the term "black," used in this article, came into common use in the 1960s.)



William E. Griggs, Courtesy of Office of History,
Headquarters, U.S. Army Corps of Engineers

At a workbench, two black soldiers carve branches into poles for use in surveying.

Twichell explained that “Most white officers, especially careerists conscious of the risks to their professional reputation, looked upon duty with black troops as an experience to be avoided if at all possible.” They considered the black troops, most educated in segregated Jim Crow schools, to be not just uneducated but “slow learners.”

All troops and contractors faced similar problems, including the cold and the ever-present mosquitoes, as well as the unforgiving land. The black troops faced unique problems, such as less desirable equipment and the persistence of segregated latrines that the Army had banned worldwide in October 1942, but that remained in use along the Alaska Highway project. They were a reminder of the separate-but-not-equal conditions the soldiers thought they had left behind when they chose to serve their country.

The 93rd and 95th units worked on the Canadian section of the Alaska Highway. The 97th was the only Corps unit to work on the section in Alaska south to Canada. However, because the route between Big Delta and Tok was near white settlements, the Corps

assigned this section to PRA's white contractors. The 97th was assigned to the more isolated section from the small community of Tok to the border.

John Virtue, in his 2013 book *The Black Soldiers Who Built the Alaska Highway*, wrote that the 97th had been given "the worst assignment of any of the seven regiments on the highway: the worst weather, the most mountainous terrain and the greatest isolation." First, the 97th had to build a supply road from Slana, AK, 200 miles (322 kilometers) north of Valdez, north to Tok through the rugged Wrangell Mountains.

Progress was slow. Virtue wrote: "The reasons were many: the snow delayed the start of their work; their heavy equipment arrived ten weeks after they did; the terrain was the most challenging of any regiment's." They were delayed by mudslides, washouts, and flooding. "Glacial ice had to be removed by pickaxe or dynamite."



Courtesy of Office of History, Headquarters,
U.S. Army Corps of Engineers

From John Virtue's *The Black Soldiers Who Built the Alaska Highway*: "Members of the 95th Regiment, who bet white soldiers their paychecks that they could build a bridge across the Sikanni Chief River in fewer than five days, carry logs for the construction." The 95th beat the deadline by a day and a half.



Courtesy of Office of History, Headquarters,
U.S. Army Corps of Engineers

The permanent Sikanni Chief River Bridge, midway between Fort St. John and Fort Nelson, represented “spectacular work,” according to PRA's report. “Three 140-foot [43-meter] deck trusses were erected. Douglas fir timbers and hardware for the trusses were prepared ready for erection at Vancouver, BC and Portland, OR, and shipped by rail to Dawson Creek.” When it opened on April 25, 1943, it was the first large permanent structure to be completed. It is shown here with the temporary bridge still standing.

After 2 months, the 97th completed work on the 78-mile (126-kilometer) road north from Slana. When they finally reached Tok, the 97th was still “one hundred wooded and swampy miles [161 kilometers] from the Canadian border.” With winter not far off, the Corps decided that the 97th in Alaska and the white 18th regiment in Canada would work from opposite directions toward the border to close the gap with a one-lane trail that trucks could use until PRA upgraded it in 1943.

The Japanese Invasion

Meanwhile, fears of a Japanese invasion of Alaska

became reality in June 1942, when Japan attacked the Midway Atoll (midway between North America and Asia) and the Aleutians. The Battle of Midway began on June 4, but U.S. forces under Admiral Chester W. Nimitz repelled the Japanese on June 7.

Perhaps to divert attention from Midway, the Japanese had invaded the naval base at Dutch Harbor in the Aleutian Islands on June 3. The Japanese gained control of the mainly uninhabited islands of Kiska and Attu in the Aleutian chain after the only battles of the war fought in North America.

The invasion demonstrated the urgent need for the Alaska Highway. Only 150 miles (240 kilometers) of the pioneer trail had been built by then. If the highway was to serve as a route to rescue China from Japanese control, aid the Soviet Union—an ally in the war—and block Japanese attacks on the 48 States from bases in Alaska, progress would have to accelerate.

(In May 1943, U.S. troops regained Attu Island. In August 1943, American forces discovered that the Japanese had secretly evacuated Kiska Island that month.)

The Pace of Work

The slow progress at the time of the invasion had many causes, including weather, the spring thaw, and the difficulty of getting troops, contractors, and equipment to the site. In May 1942, survey parties were still in the field, with supplies sent to them by canoe, float plane, and packhorse.

By then, the Corps realized that its troops would not be able to clear a path through 1,400 miles (2,250 kilometers) of virgin forest to complete the pioneer trail before winter conditions would shut down operations. To meet its urgent goal, the Corps asked for help from PRA's contractors to open the pioneer trail to trucks on time.

Therefore, in early August, the Corps and PRA abandoned the original division of labor. Instead of

focusing on the permanent road, PRA's contractors would now work with the Corps to complete the pioneer trail. Under the new plan, PRA contractors would widen, grade, and surface trails that the Corps had opened.

With PRA contractors and Army engineering units working on segments of the Alaska Highway, gaps began to close. By the end of September, only the most difficult sections, through eastern Alaska and the southwest corner of the Yukon Territory, remained to be completed. The black 97th Engineers completed the one-lane winter trail in Alaska and crossed into the Yukon, while the white 18th, perhaps the fastest of the units, was bogged down in 100 miles (161 kilometers) of permafrost that, according to Virtue's book, "required the time-consuming placement of layers of insulating foliage topped off by logs laid side by side in corduroy fashion."



Courtesy of Office of History, Headquarters,
U.S. Army Corps of Engineers

This 1942 photograph shows a stretch of the Alaska Highway.

The final gap was closed on October 25, 1942, south of Lake Kluane in the Yukon. Malcolm MacDonald, British high commissioner to Canada, described the

final moments:

“The final meeting between men working from the south and men working from the north was dramatic. They met head on in the forest. Corporal Refines Sims, Jr., a Negro from Philadelphia [of the 97th Engineers] . . . was driving south with a bulldozer when he saw trees starting to topple over on him. Slamming his big vehicle into reverse he backed out just as another bulldozer driven by Private Alfred Jalufka of Kennedy, TX, broke through the underbrush. Jalufka had been forcing his bulldozer through the bush with such speed that his face was bloody from scratches of overhanging branches and limbs. That historic meeting between a Negro corporal and white private on their respective bulldozers occurred 20 miles [32 kilometers] east of the Alaska-Yukon Boundary at a place called Beaver Creek.”

A photographer captured the image of the two men standing on the bulldozers while shaking hands. The photograph would appear in newspapers around the country and remains a staple of books and articles about the Alaska Highway.

The *Atlanta Daily World*, a black newspaper, published an article about the event under the headline: “Reveal Negroes Help Build Alaska Highway.” This headline revealed one of the gripes of the black troops in Alaska: They were rarely mentioned in government press releases or news reports.

Lt. Colonel James L. Lewis, the 93rd’s white leader, wrote, “Most of the news articles in magazines about the construction of Alaska Military Highway failed to give Negro regiments much credit for their share of the completion of that project. Enlisted men of this regiment feel this deeply and their friends back home ask them why this is true.”

On November 20, more than 200 dignitaries, guests, and journalists from the United States and Canada, including PRA Division Engineer Bright, arrived at Soldiers’ Summit on the south end of Lake Kluane in the Yukon to mark completion of the pioneer trail. The temperature was -15 degrees Fahrenheit (-26 degrees

Celsius), and snow was falling as four soldiers held the red, white, and blue ceremonial ribbon: Corporal Sims and Private Jalufka, who had closed the last gap, and Master-Sergeant Andrew Doyle (white) and Corporal John Reilly (black). Alaska's Secretary of State E. L. "Bob" Bartlett and Canada's Minister of Pensions and National Health Ian MacKenzie used scissors engraved in Alaska gold to cut the ribbon.

As trucks began to roll on the Alaska Highway, winter ended all but maintenance operations on the road.

The Press Reacts

The press recognized the achievement.

It was "America's Burma road," "the new Northwest Passage," a military "life-line," and the "Highway to Russia." Articles called it "Alaska's Short Cut to Tokyo," a "Six-Month's Miracle" of "modern engineering and human tenacity," "One of the Greatest Road-Building Jobs of Our Day," and "one of the biggest and toughest jobs . . . since they built the Panama Canal." It was "an Army triumph" that created "a dagger aimed at the heart of Japan, a helping hand outstretched toward Siberia in case of a Japanese attack on Russia, a bulwark against a Japanese offensive on the North American continent."



Much of the Alaska Highway was graded, as in this section of the road, then paved with gravel.



Courtesy of Office of History, Headquarters,
U.S. Army Corps of Engineers

On October 25, 1942, a bulldozer driven by Corporal Refines Sims, Jr., an African American, and one driven by Private Alfred Jalufka, a white soldier, broke through the forest from opposite directions near Beaver Creek, closing the last gap in the Alaska Highway. This photograph, taken by Harold W. Richardson of *Engineering News-Record*, was widely reprinted in newspapers and magazines at the time.

Engineering News-Record began a three-part series in December 1942 on “Alcan—America’s Glory Road.” Only last spring, the author wrote, experts said the highway “could never be built in time to be of use in this war.” They failed to understand “the fortitude of men—officers and soldiers, engineers and contractors—and the stamina of American construction equipment that built 1,636 miles [2,633 kilometers] of new route and rebuilt 162 more miles [261 kilometers] of old trail, all in one short construction season.”

National Geographic covered what it referred to as “an Engineering Epic.” The builders faced unusual

obstacles such as mosquitoes, mud that swallowed even tractors, swirling dust, “jellylike muskeg,” and “ravenous gnats.” The article noted, “Black men and white have cursed the country in a score of American dialects, and many have remarked at one time or another that if the Japs conquered the country it would only serve them right.” The “ingenuity, the morale, and the toughness” of the men who built the Alaska Highway should reassure Americans that the inevitable confusion at the start of the war would “speedily give way to efficiency and to a successful outcome of the war.”

Finishing the Alaska Highway

The plan had been for PRA to design a road to standards for park and mountain roads—a well-drained, stabilized roadbed with an overall width of 36 feet (11 meters) to allow for two 12-foot (3.7-meter) surfaced lanes, 3-degree curves in prairie terrain and 16- to 19-degree curves in mountain sections, with maximum 5-percent grades in the lower levels and 7percent in the mountains. The surface was to be 18 inches (46 centimeters) of gravel or rock.



Courtesy of Office of History, Headquarters,
U.S. Army Corps of Engineers

At Soldiers' Summit on the south end of Lake Kluane, officials from the Corps, PRA, the United States, and

Canada met on November 20, 1942, in frigid conditions to celebrate the opening of the pioneer truck route of the Alaska Highway, with speeches and a ribbon cutting.

The rush to complete a truck road in 1942 resulted in the road being too narrow, not well surfaced, and containing many wooden bridges that did not survive the winter. Truck traffic after the opening ceremonies was limited. The section around Nisutlin Bay was nearly impassable until the ground froze, while the 400-mile (644-kilometer) section across the Rockies from Summit Lake to Teslin included steep grades, narrow widths, and sharp curves.

PRA sent surveying parties to decide the best location for the permanent highway. They completed most of their work in December 1942, but a few crews continued field operations through midwinter despite temperatures as low as -40 degrees Fahrenheit (-40 degrees Celsius). In general, the crews identified locations with long sight distances, easy curves, and gentle grades.

By the time the 1943 construction season began, PRA had its contractors ready, but initially they made slow, unsatisfactory progress because of rain, mud, frozen ground, a shortage of equipment and repair parts, washed-out temporary bridges, and bottlenecks at river crossings. In July, with these problems behind them, the contractors were ready for the hard work ahead, but as PRA's annual report put it, "And then nature delivered the most serious blow since the beginning of construction." A "tremendous downpour of rain" on July 9 and 10 took out many of the temporary bridges and washed out long sections of the pioneer road. The contractors had reopened the pioneer road by July 20.



Courtesy of Office of History, Headquarters,
U.S. Army Corps of Engineers

After the opening ceremonies, this weapons carrier led a convoy to Fairbanks, 460 miles (740 kilometers) and 24 hours away. As shown by the signs on the front, the truck also had been the first to drive from Dawson Creek to Whitehorse.

The contractors kept the pioneer trail in service while building the permanent road, much of it on new locations. By mid-July 1943, 81 contractors were on the job, employing about 14,000 civilian workmen operating 6,000 units of heavy equipment, including scrapers, power shovels, elevating graders, trucks, motor graders, gravel plants, and sawmills. About 1,850 PRA employees were on hand. Working two shifts of 10 hours each day, PRA and its contractors completed the major portion of the work between mid-July and the end of October.

The Alaska Highway crossed only three major rivers: the Peace, Liard, and Tanana. However, the total length included 133 bridges of 20 feet (6 meters) or more in length, of which 64 were more than 100 feet (30 meters) long, while 69 ranged between 20 and 100 feet (6 and 30 meters). Many presented unique problems because they would have to be designed to survive icy conditions during the winter and spring. When work ceased on October 31, 1943, PRA had

completed 99 bridges, while 34 were incomplete or had not been started due to late approvals by the Army Corps.

Even with work remaining on the permanent bridges, the highway was passable for its entire length. On October 31, PRA turned the Alaska Highway over to the Corps to maintain for the duration of the war. The Corps also took over remaining contracts.

Twichell summarized PRA's contribution: "Of the 1,420 miles [2,280 kilometers] of highway across Canada to Alaska that were opened to the public after World War II, about two-thirds (970 miles [1,560 kilometers]) consisted of the original Army pioneer road, all of which had been substantially improved and upgraded by the PRA. Another 450 miles [720 kilometers] of the highway were new—and strictly PRA-built. Here the Army's pioneer road had served its original purpose as an access route and was abandoned thereafter. The wartime cost of the Alaska Highway came to a seemingly modest \$138 million—less than \$100,000 per mile."

The Post-War Highway

In 1944, the Corps turned over maintenance of the Alaskan portion of the highway to the territorial Alaska Road Commission, but maintained the Canadian portion until April 1, 1946. On that date, dignitaries gathered in Whitehorse to celebrate transfer of the Canadian portion to Canada.

Professor Ken Coates, in *North to Alaska!* (1992), described the ceremony as "decidedly less electric" than the November 1942 celebration of the completed pioneer trail, but "the appropriate pomp and circumstance" occurred.

Ceremony aside, one of the Canadian engineers summarized what had just happened: "We took over a strange unknown ribbon of road covered with snow." The Corps left behind vehicles and equipment that "needed immediate replacement." Given the state of the equipment, the task of maintaining and repairing the road "looked hopeless."

The drive along the Alaska Highway was sufficiently rugged that travelers needed to obtain a permit. With accommodations widely spaced, each vehicle had to have enough gas to reach the next service station, as well as spare tires, an axe and shovel, sleeping bags, and proper clothing in case of breakdowns.

During these early years, the trip was not for tourists. In June 1946, the traffic control board in Edmonton approved 616 permits for "essential travel," but refused two to three times more applications by sightseers. A year later, officials warned that they would not issue permits "to those who wish to travel on the highway for a holiday."

"Almost imperceptibly," Coates wrote, "a new society emerged along the Alaska Highway," as accommodations, even small communities, grew. The road, built in haste and little improved during the war, "was interminably long, excruciatingly dusty at times, rough and ragged." He quoted a traveler in 1947 who observed, "The highway is literally covered at the side with signposts: Slow– Steep Hill– Winding Road– Turn– Dumps– Danger– Falling Rocks– Slow– Washout– Detour."

Still, the Alaska Highway had its compensations. Coates wrote: "The scenery never stopped: the grand vistas from Steamboat Mountain, the river scenes along the Liard, the rocky hillsides along Muncho Lake, the stunning beauty of Teslin and Marsh lakes, the breath-taking landscape portrait that filled the windshield on approach to Haines Junction, the chilling blues of Kluane Lake, the marshy tracks south of Northway, the broad views of the Tanana Valley were almost too much to absorb."



Courtesy of Office of History, Headquarters,
U.S. Army Corps of Engineers

According to author Heath Twichell, black troops on the Alaska Highway project were more likely to be “engaged in low-tech, high-sweat duties” than their white counterparts. Clearing the forest to make way for the highway was a typical low-tech job.

The Alaska Highway, Coates concluded, “did not impress many travelers in the years between 1946 and 1964—except for those who noted its ruggedness, propensity toward dust, and its twisty, seemingly illogical course.” In the early 1960s, officials in Alaska, which became a State in 1959, and Canada began thinking about the future of the Alaska Highway.

Shakwak

On April 1, 1964, Canada’s Department of National Defence transferred the Alaska Highway to the Department of Public Works, the highway agency. Although reconstruction of the highway and its paving seemed inevitable, the fact was that more Americans than Canadians used the highway. Canada stretched out the paving of its section over the years, with a focus on improvements in the more populated area from Whitehorse south.

Alaska had paved its section of the Alaska Highway by

the early 1960s, but the sub-Arctic climate took its toll on the asphalt surface. One traveler wrote, "We found this 'paved' stretch so wrenched by frost-heaves, so full of sharp chuckholes that, despite its lack of dust, it offered no more comfortable or rapid travel than the gravel." By the 1980s, Coates wrote, after repaving, "the Alaskan portion of the highway was in first-rate condition, matching southern highways of similar size and importance."

In the early 1970s, U.S. and Canadian officials began discussing a plan to pave a 205-mile (330-kilometer) portion of the Alaska Highway from the Yukon settlements to the Alaska-Canadian border, as well as the Haines Highway from the port at Haines in Alaska to Haines Junction in the Yukon. At the time, the Haines Highway, sometimes called the Haines Cutoff, was the only direct land link between Fairbanks and the population centers in southeast Alaska. The Corps had built the highway in 1943, partly as a route for getting supplies to the Alaska Highway.



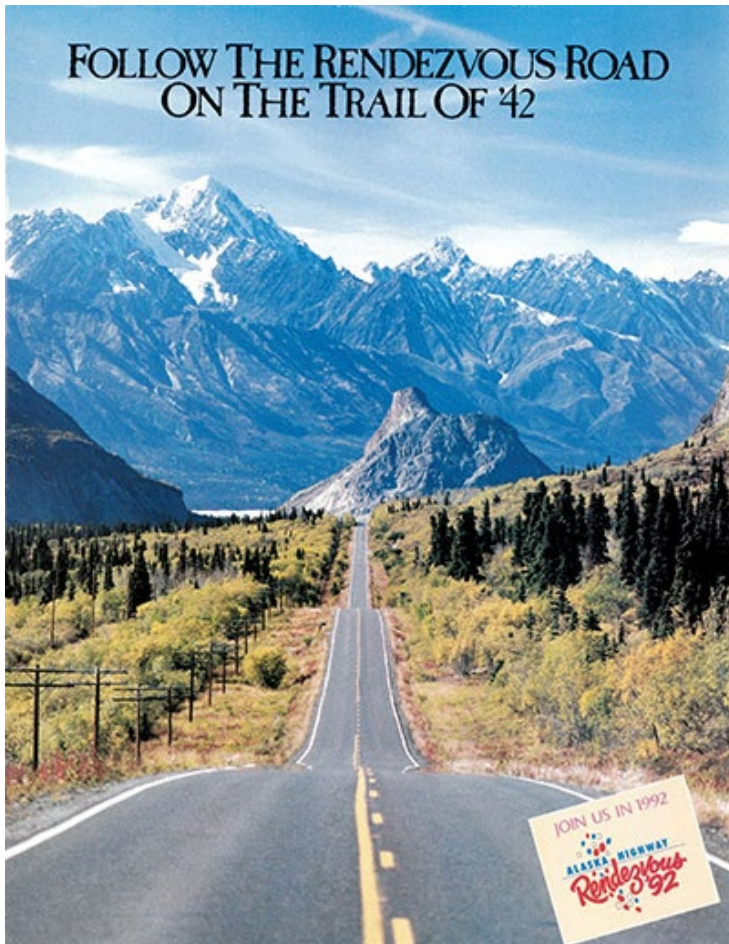
The U.S. and Canada approved the Shakwak Project to improve the Alaska Highway from the Alaska border to Haines Junction in Yukon Territory and from there a portion of the Haines Highway, the only land link to southeastern Alaska. On August 15, 1978, officials gathered for the groundbreaking ceremonies at Haines Junction. In the lead is FHWA's Region 10

environmental review, officials held a groundbreaking ceremony on August 15, 1978, at Haines Junction.

Today, the Alaska Highway and the Haines Highway are paved except for a section of bituminous surface treatment on the Alaska Highway near the Alaska/Canada border at Beaver Creek. This section has not been paved due to permafrost challenges.

The Story They Forgot To Tell

According to historian Douglas Brinkley, the Alaska Highway was “not only the greatest engineering feat of the Second World War; it is a triumph over racism.” He explained: “When [Corporal] Refines Sims, Jr., a bulldozer technician with the 97th Engineers, converged with Private Alfred Jalufka, lead driver of the white 18th Engineers, on 25 October 1942, a major construction gap was closed. But the symbolism was even greater: blacks and whites working together for a common cause. Before long the U.S. Army would become integrated [by President Harry S. Truman’s Executive Order 9981 on July 26, 1948], a major step in the African American struggle for racial equality.”



For the road's 50th anniversary, brochures invited visitors to celebrate the Alaska Highway. Much of the celebration neglected the black troops who made a major contribution to construction of the pioneer truck road in 1942.

Many years after the war, the black soldiers who helped build the pioneer trail received recognition for their accomplishment, largely thanks to Professor Lael Morgan of the University of Alaska-Fairbanks. As she researched a planned article on the highway, she became fascinated by the black regiments. The Army, she found, did not have troop lists or regimental directories. Histories of the project barely mentioned them. They had never held a reunion. She told a reporter in 1990, "You go through all the souvenir books of the Alaska Highway and all the old news clippings, you never see a single black face. Nor did any historian know the whereabouts of these people. So I started looking."

Initially, she said, she was told she would search in vain “because black men don’t live as long as white men.” In cooperation with author Heath Twichell and James Eaton of the Black Archives Research Center and Museum at Florida A&M University, she located 70 veterans. An article by Professor Morgan was the cover story in an August 1992 issue of *Anchorage Daily News Magazine*, with the cover calling it “The Story They Forgot to Tell: How Black Soldiers Overcame Racism to Build the Alaska Highway.”

In 1992, most of the celebrations of the 50th anniversary of the Alaska Highway’s pioneer trail neglected the black soldiers. They were, in Eaton’s words, “A lost page in history.”

However, Morgan’s efforts had prompted interest in the subject. On July 4, 1992, the city of Anchorage invited several of the former black troops to participate in the city’s parade.

Two of them, Albert E. France and Donald W. Nolan, Sr., were retirees from Baltimore. Ann LoLordo of *The Baltimore Sun* interviewed them. They both recalled the cold. France said, “It was awful cold and it snowed for days.” Nolan added, “We’d take galoshes, rubber galoshes—we called them ‘Arctics’—and we’d wear three, four pairs of socks. We would double up on pants. We slept on the ground in pup tents.”

Food was never plentiful, especially when the climate cut off supply routes. Nolan recalled, “We’d kill a bear, a huge black bear . . . and those chops were delicious.” Snow was bad enough, but in the summer, LoLordo wrote of their recollections, “The rains started and the rivers swelled. In summer, mosquitoes droned like airplanes and the ‘muskeg,’ a uniquely Alaskan bog, swallowed tractors.”

Looking back, Nolan said he was glad to have served on the project. “You have something to tell your kids.”

Remembering the Alaska Highway

A 2011 guide to the Alaska Highway called it “the last great overland adventure left in North America.” The

road “provides a path to some of the most thrilling outdoor recreation opportunities in North America.” The guide recommended good tires “to absorb some of the strain imposed by errant driving or less-than-efficient road crews,” and “a complete tune-up done by a competent mechanic.” Travelers should “carry a basic set” of tools “for minor repairs at roadside.”

The Alaska Highway, the author stated, “leads you back in time.” The author was referring to “a simpler place, a wilder place, and, to some, a more enchanting time.” That may be, but nothing about its construction was simple. The Alaska Highway was built in the desperation of war, at a time when the outcome of that war could not be known, by men stressed to their limit by the challenges of an unforgiving environment. It was built in part by black soldiers who faced the same challenges common to all workers on the project, but also the prejudices of the day, their role little known during the project, and forgotten for decades.

Today, 75 years later, the Alaska Highway remains a tribute to the soldiers, white and black, and civilians who overcame multiple challenges to build it. It also is a reminder of a bygone era that feels alien to our lives in the 21st century, but that must not be forgotten.

Richard F. Weingroff, information liaison specialist, is FHWA’s official historian. To read more of his history articles, including all his Public Roads articles, go to www.fhwa.dot.gov/infrastructure/history.cfm.

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