

Preliminary Report on the Work Conducted at Saint Michael Old Russian Cemetery

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Department of Military and Veterans Affairs Alaska Army National Guard October, 2022

Mission

Graves are eroding out of cemeteries and into oceans and rivers every year in Alaska. Increasingly so with climate change. There is no state or federal agency that provides any support or relief for that, unless and until an emergency is declared by the governor. An emergency was declared by the governor in the wake of the Merbok storm. With the funds and resources allocated for that, I was sent to Saint Michael to address a request from the citizens there for support and relief for observed bones eroding from the Old Russian Cemetery.

Results

Upon my arrival in Saint Michael, village leaders convened to discuss how to approach, handle, recover and rebury any remains that were present. I then recovered the skeletal remains of three people, plus one additional unrelated bone, from the portion of the Old Russian Cemetery that was impacted heavily by the storm. My reconnaissance of the entire coast line and interior areas in the village indicates that all remains were identified and retrieved. Those remains have been wrapped to meet the wishes of the village, and are currently stored in the clinic morgue per their guidance. The village will rebury them at their convenience.

Detailed report to follow

The process of working with human skeletal remains is complicated involving state laws and the communication and recordation with a variety of people and government agencies. This preliminary report provides a snapshot of where we are in this as of yet unfinished process. I will be performing more duties to comply with these requirements. I will be reporting in detail on the results of this work by, as anticipated, the end of the calendar year.

Recommendation

The erosion of the Old Russian Cemetery from the impacts of the storm Merbok is also an unfinished process. The earth is actively moving, falling onto the beach bit by bit and sometimes in large chunks every day, to reach a state of stabilization after the storm. This will go on for some time, and continue to impact, expose, and drop burials. My recommendation is that emergency funds and resources be set aside now to address this continuing process that is the direct result of this storm. I can assist in providing guidance on developing a plan to address this problem at this particular cemetery.

Coffin that dropped from above

Coffin behind slumping earth that is ready to drop

Coffin exposed and ready to drop



Artifacts scattered along the beach

History and Context in Saint Michael

- Alaska Native people lived in this area for thousands of years.
- Russians moved into this land in 1833 in an attempt to expand their trading empire in Alaska. This strategic location is the closest deep water port to the mouth of the Yukon River, facilitating control over all movement from the Alaska interior to/from the Bering Sea.
- They built a small fort, the Mikhailovskii Redoubt, with a church nearby. They established the cemetery now referred to as the Old Russian Cemetery.



- The nearby Yupik village Tachik continued to thrive throughout Russian and American developments.
- Americans bought Alaska in 1867. The Russian empire left, but some Russian people stayed.
- When the gold rush started in Canada and Alaska, people, materials and gold moved in/out along the entire length of the Yukon River. Many steam powered paddlewheel ships came and went through Saint Michael. Those ships were stationed and over-wintered in Saint Michael.



- The US Army built a fort in 1897 to attempt to control the wild west here.
- Approximately 10,000 lived here in the first decades of the 1900s.



- Alaska built a railroad line from Seward to Fairbanks. As a result, the lower reaches of the Yukon River were cut off by the railroad's cheaper and faster movement of people and materials into and out of the interior. Saint Michael became less strategic and less frequented.
- The US Army abandoned the area in 1922.
- The US government facilitated the removal of the older buildings during the Civilian Conservation Corps work there in the 1930s.
- The population dropped to around 300, mostly Alaska natives. Population is currently 400.
- Physical remains of the Russian fort are nonexistent. Some bits remain from the US Army time. The shoreline is littered with tons of rusty metal debris from the dozens of shallow draft paddlewheelers that once cruised from the mouth to the upper reaches of the Yukon River.



Consultation and Coordination

Many people from many agencies were involved in a variety of ways in this work. Every one contributed to the successful outcome of this work. Many of those listed here will be receiving this preliminary report and a final report later.

Saint Michael

Native Village of Saint Michael (IRA, federally recognized tribe)

Tribal Coordinator Paulene Myomick
Darlene, Michelle, Robin, Andrea, Deloris, Kyle,
Charlie Fitka, Jr., John Lockwood, Charlene Kobuk,
Frank Myomick

City of Saint Michael

Mayor Flora Matthias
Administrator Virginia Washington
Clerk Richard
Treasurer Albert Matthias

Saint Michael Native Corporation

Norbert Otten, Jr., James Niksik, Sr., Richard Elachik, Sr.,
Diane Thompson, Milton Cheemuk, Vera Niksik,
Allen Atchak, Sr.

Village Peace Officers

Jake Selakoff
Dennis Chiskok

Saint Michael Clinic

Kendra

Citizens of Saint Michael

Brent, Bertha, Nick, Lorena,
Benjamin, Marie, Harold and Chuck

Vitus Terminals

Petey, Dominick

Alaska Commercial Company contractors

Scott, Wade, Ryan

Around the state

State Division of Homeland Security and Emergency Management

Andrew Davies
Jennifer Wallace
Claude Denver
Angela Laflamme
Bryan Fisher

Alaska Army National Guard

Captain Jennifer Dieken
MSgt Robert Williams

Alaska Army National Guard Construction Facility Management Office

LTC Eric Marcellus
Don Flournoy
Steve Smith

State Troopers*

Trooper Raferty

State Medical Examiner*

Melissa
Anne Waisanen

State Health and Vital Records*

Charlotte
Rebecca

State Office of History and Archaeology*

Richard VanderHoek

Kawerak

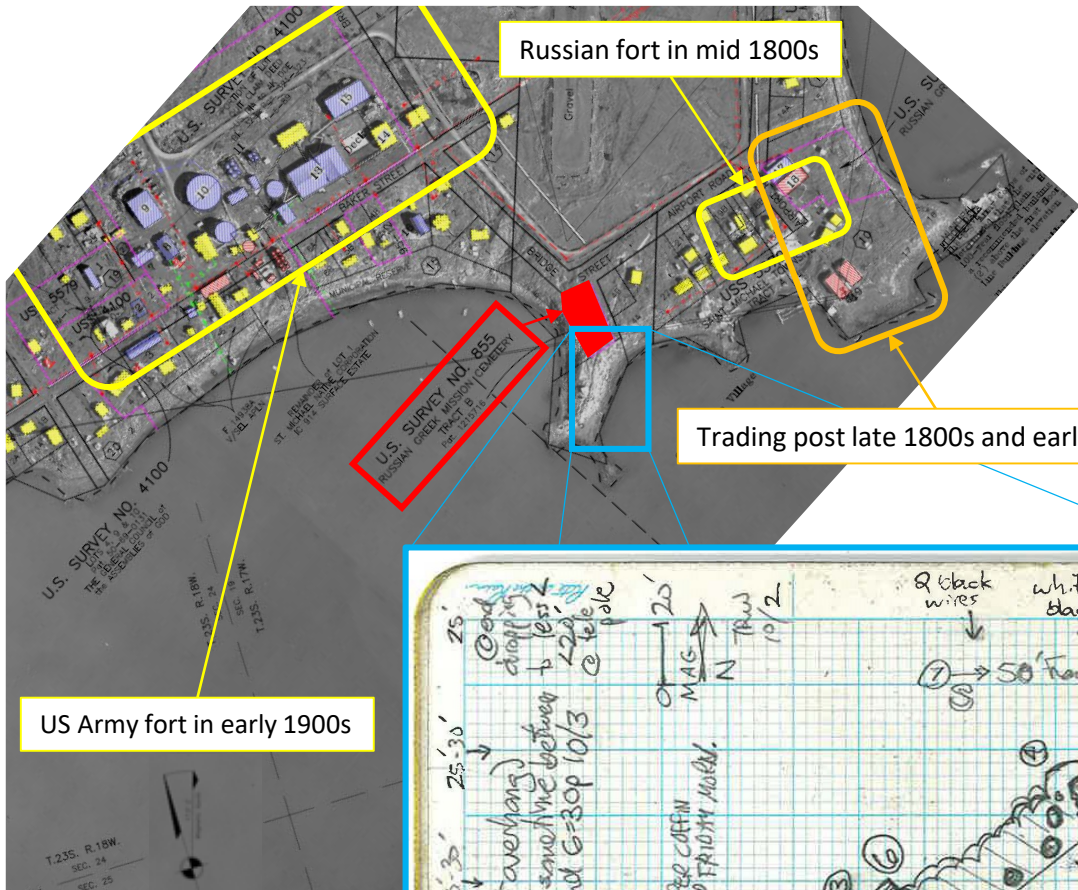
Anahma Shannon
Sean McNight

State Division of Geological and Geophysical Surveys

KC Horen



*It is required by state law to coordinate, obtain permits and report to these agencies when working with human skeletal remains. See Alaska Statutes 11.46.482, 41.35.200, 12.65.005, and 18.50.250.



US Army fort in early 1900s

Russian fort in mid 1800s

Trading post late 1800s and early 1900s

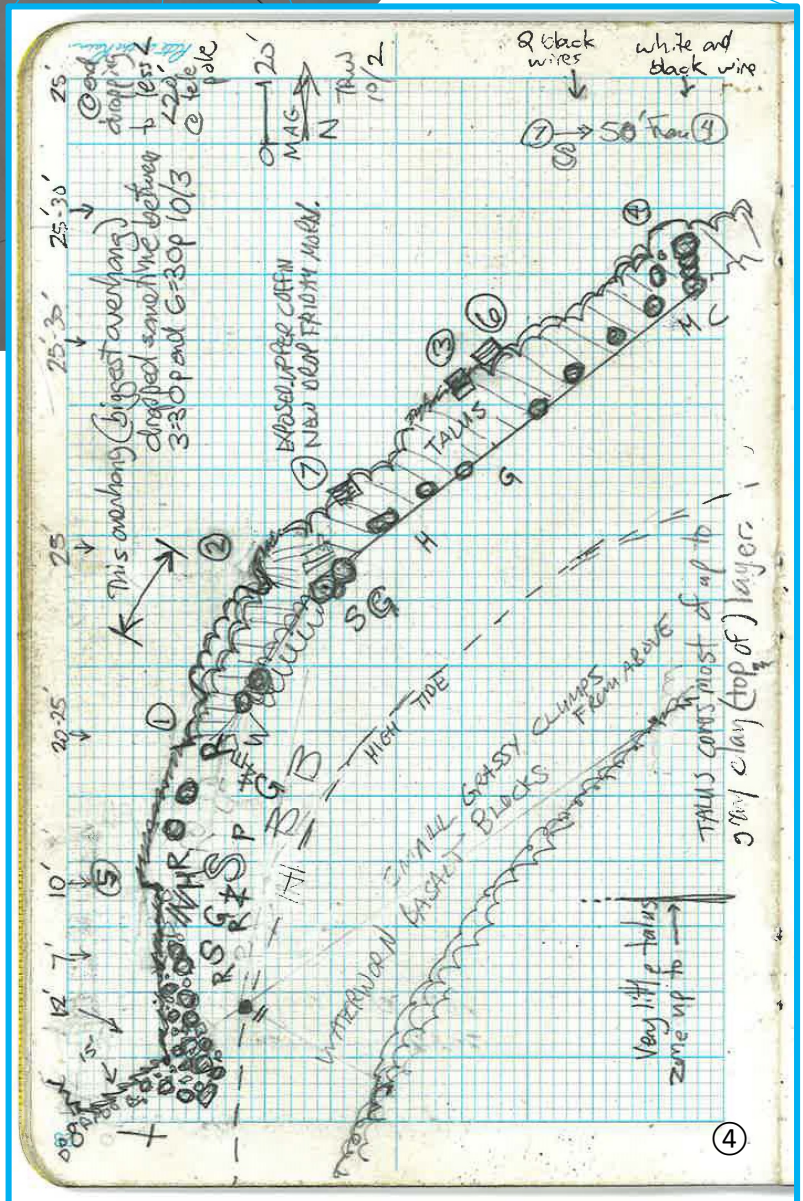
Work was conducted on the bluff within the Old Russian Cemetery (in red on map above), and at the base of the bluff on the beach.

Potential burial areas were identified in seven locations (map on right).

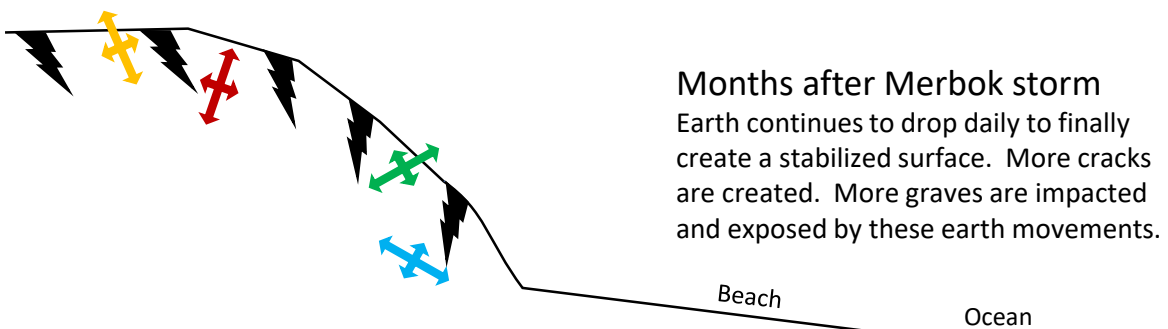
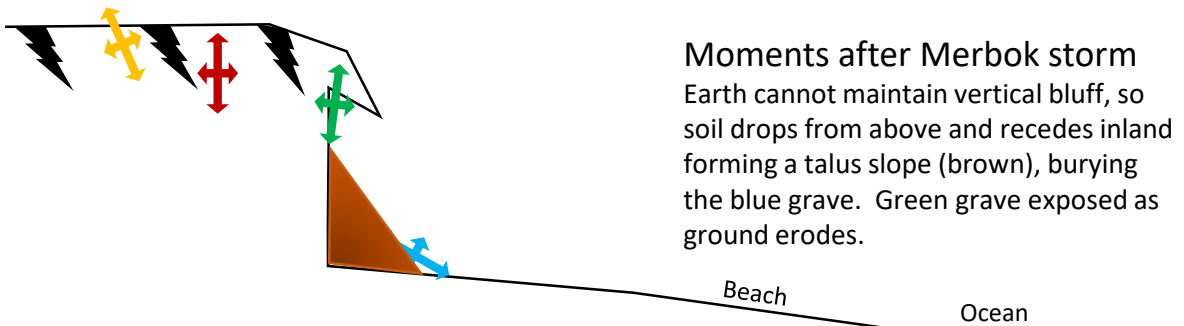
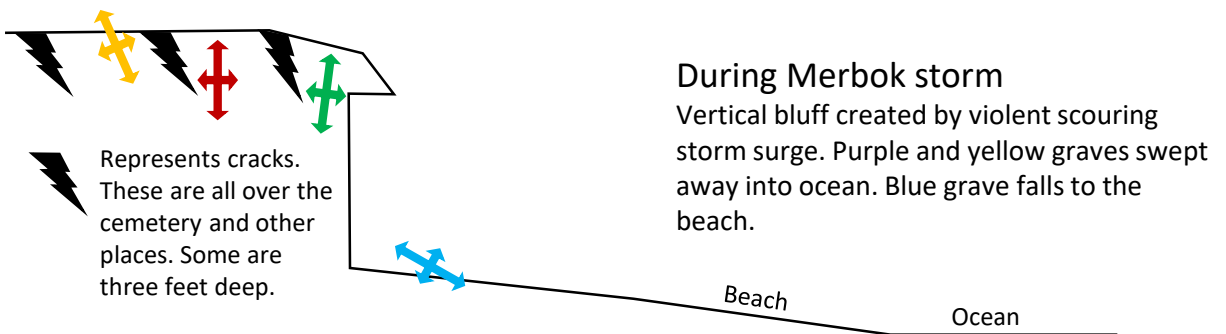
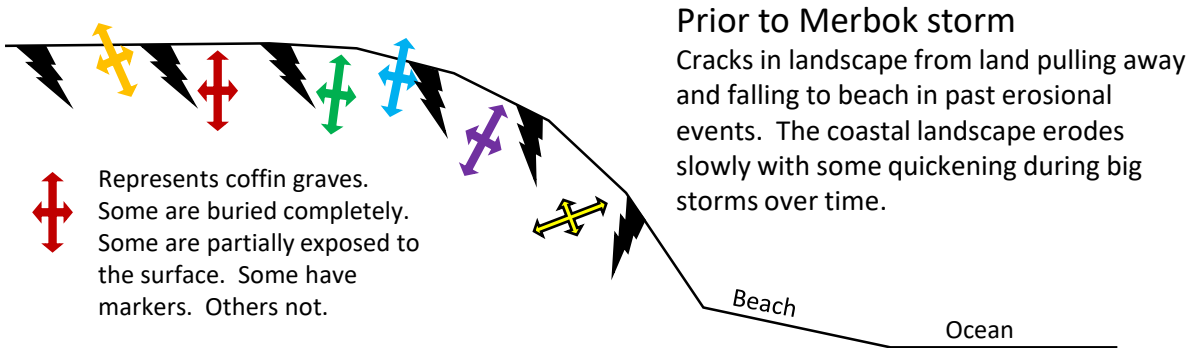
Graves were ultimately securely identified at locations ② ③ ⑥.

Many artifacts from prehistoric Yupik occupation and Russian occupation were observed on the beach.

Details on other locations and artifacts will be forthcoming in a final report.



How the storm Merbok will continue to expose graves for some time to come at Saint Michael



This cycle continues with each storm. The earth continues to be lost to the ocean.



Work in October, 2022 was conducted here on the south side of the cemetery.

Drastic erosion also took place here, encroaching on the western side of the Old Russian Cemetery.

To do

- Follow up and continue conversations with
 - Tribal and City governments in Saint Michael
 - For-profit and non-profit corporations associated with Saint Michael
 - Health and Vital Records, State Trooper, Medical Examiner, State Archaeologist
 - Homeland Security and Emergency Management, Alaska Army National Guard
- Write up a site form for the newly discovered prehistoric Yupik site under the Old Russian Cemetery
- The community in Saint Michael will rebury the wrapped bodies on their schedule
- Write detailed report on the findings
 - Procedures conducted (methodology)
 - Results of field analysis of human skeletal remains (age, sex, trauma, size, coffin, associated artifacts)
 - Recommendations for future work
- Disseminate final report



Other relevant information

- Two cross made of metal dropped from the cemetery to the beach.
- The prehistoric artifacts that were recovered from beneath the cemetery layer in the exposed bluff, and from the beach were donated to the school in Saint Michael.
 - There is evidence of other non-cemetery activities along this section of the bluff-beach including burning and trash disposal.

Those recovered were:

- A three to four year old child
- A ten to eleven year old girl
- A 35 to 50 year old man

All appear to have been Russians.