



African American History Month

2012



Let America be America, where equality is in the air
we breathe." Langston Hughes Writer



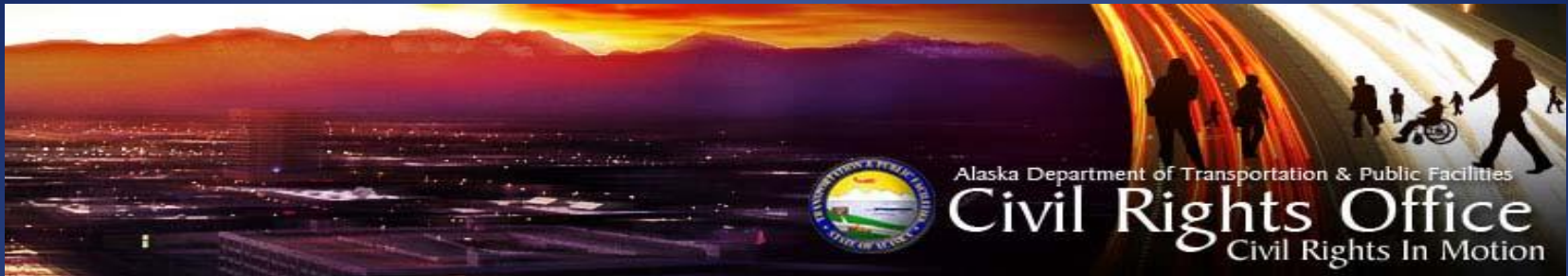


Alaska State Library - Historical Collections

After the Civil War, many of the black men who migrated to Alaska were seafarers who worked in the whaling and fur trade in the North Pacific and who remained to take up residence in the Alaska territory. The discovery of gold brought more blacks to Alaska.

For four years, the one hundred fifty-eight black members of Company L, 24th Infantry, US Army were stationed at Dyea and Skagway to preserve law and order and to show the flag. Some members stayed. World War II brought an influx of blacks to Alaska as the military began work on the Alaska Highway and to fortify Alaska. Black military engineers and port battalions were assigned to Alaska. More than 3,000 black engineers worked on the Alaska Highway. Black battalions were also assigned to the Aleutian Islands during the Aleutian campaign.

Since statehood, many blacks in Alaska have been associated with the military. They have been stationed at Elmendorf Air Force Base, Fort Richardson (Anchorage), Eielson Air Force base, Fort Wainwright (Fairbanks), Fort Greely (Delta Junction) or with the Coast Guard in Juneau, Ketchikan or Kodiak. Many members of the military select Alaska as their place of permanent residence and choose to remain in the state when retiring. Over the years, the African-American population levels have fluctuated with the number of military personnel assigned to each base in Alaska.



1942 Scenes from the Alcan Highway



In 1942, the only way to reach Alaska was by air or sea. Following the attack on Pearl Harbor, and fearing an invasion of Alaska, President Roosevelt authorized the building of a road that would link Alaska to the continental US through Canada.

The highway, originally called the Alaska-Canada Highway or Alcan, stretches 1,520 miles from Dawson Creek, British Columbia, Canada to Delta Junction, Alaska.



More than 10,000 soldiers from the Army Corp of Engineers were assigned to the project, including four regiments of African American Engineers from the 93rd Engineer General Service Regiment, the 95th Engineer General Service Regiment, the 97th Engineer General Service Regiment, and the 388th Engineer Battalion, which was assigned to the oil pipeline that was needed to supply gasoline to planes, military vehicles and construction equipment.



The Alaska Highway, as it is called today was completed in just over eight months and is considered one of the biggest and most difficult construction projects ever undertaken



**Captain Michael A. Healy
An Alaskan Pioneer in Ice
and Polar Operations**

Michael Augustine Healy was an African American born near Macon, Georgia in 1839. His father, Michael Morris Healy, was an Irish immigrant, and his mother, Mary Elisa Smith, a former slave.

In 1854 Michael Healy signed on the East India clipper *Jumna* as a cabin boy. Healy's abilities immediately stood out. It was not long before he became Expert Seaman Healy, and then an officer on other merchant vessels. In 1864, after signing on as a cabin boy, Officer Healy applied for and received a commission in the United States Revenue Cutter Service. He was the first African American to command a ship of the United States government.

Captain Healy began his military career as a Third Lieutenant on cutters operating out of Boston, Massachusetts. He began his Alaskan tour as the Second Officer of the cutter *Rush*. By 1877, he was serving as the commanding Officer of the cutter *Chandler*. Recognizing Healy's talents and abilities, the Revenue Service made him a captain in 1883 and a year later, he took over command of the cutter *Thomas Corwin*. During this time, the Revenue cutter was the United States Government in Alaska. Captain Healy patrolled 20,000 miles of the Alaskan coast for more than 20 years. He brought America's judicial and/or law, postal, lifesaving, medical and environmental services to Alaska.

When commercial fishing depleted Alaskan's whale and seal populations, Captain Healy and Sierra Club founder, John Muir, introduced reindeer from Siberia to help prevent starvation among the native Alaskans.



Captain Healy rose to meet the North Pacific's challenge in such a manner as to make America one of the foremost authorities for ice operations and polar transit missions. His seamanship and navigational skills became the standards for the time, and his leadership still personifies the capabilities required by all captains who continue to challenge one of Mother Nature's most demanding maritime environments. The skills he possessed enabled a young nation to carry its flag successfully and secure its interest in one of its most demanding territories. Healy earned the respect and devotion of his crew, his nation, and the international community. In 1886, Captain Healy would take command of the cutter *Bear*. As Captain, he successfully carried out his missions and met the harsh demands of the Alaskan marine environment as well as the essential needs of the citizens of the Alaska territory. This enabled the United States to establish a firm foothold and led to its successfully settling and developing the resources of this rich territory as the forty-ninth state.

It is fitting that the Coast Guard's new scientific icebreaker [Commissioned in 1999, the research icebreaker [USCGC Healy \(WAGB-20\)](#)] was named in his honor.

“I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character.”

Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.



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