

United States Commissioner's Cabin McCarthy

Property Description:

The U.S. Commissioner's Cabin is a historic, privately-owned structure located within the heart of Wrangell–St. Elias National Park & Preserve, in downtown McCarthy, Alaska. The cabin was circa 1908 (verification of exact date is pending). Oral history indicates it was constructed before most of the other buildings in town. It is the last of its kind in McCarthy, Alaska.


A classic frontier log cabin approximately 20 feet wide and 47 feet long, the first floor contained an office and kitchen area, and the second floor a living area. The first floor is made from spruce logs that were logged in the McCarthy area; once hewn and placed, the majority of logs measure roughly 7-10 inches high by 9-12 inches wide, with varying lengths averaging 16-18 feet. The lowest two tiers of the cabin contains even larger logs. The second floor is constructed of cottonwood planks that were also likely cut and milled onsite. It has a unique Dutch barn-shaped roof, comprised of cottonwood, that is estimated to be 30 feet tall at its peak, giving it a distinct appearance. The cabin has maintained its integrity over its 112-year-history

Property history:

At the beginning of the 20th Century, the area was home to one of the largest copper operations in the world. A former McCarthy railroad station master said this cabin had originally been the office for the Mother Lode Mining Co., which started operations (active in 1908) before the Copper River & Northwestern Railway reached Kennicott (just over four miles away) in 1911. In 1914 and 1915, the Mother Lode Mining Co. constructed the Mother Lode Powerhouse, as well as a tramway and on behalf of the National Park Service on February 6, 2000; it was accepted the Alaska State Historic Preservation Officer on March 8, 2000. This document cites the following properties and associated historic contexts: electrical lines to the Mother Lode Mine 12 miles away; in 1919, severe avalanches destroyed them. Facing financial difficulties, Mother Lode Mining Co. entered into a joint venture with Kennecott Mines, who assumed control of operations after buying a significant interest of the company; around this time, its office was vacated and the Mother Lode Powerhouse shut down. The cabin began its next chapter.

The cabin is believed to be affiliated with numerous historical figures (Barrett, Paul. "A brief history of the U.S. Commissioners in Alaska." *The Alaska Bar Rag* Sept.-Oct. 2002: 16-17. Print.). Files located at the McCarthy – Kennicott Historical Museum contain documents that tell a limited occupancy history of the cabin. Since the U.S. Commissioner was also the Ex Officio Justice of the Peace, the Commissioner's signature was required for writs and other actions of the U.S. Marshal's Office. Records (limited years available) reveal that between 1919-1932 U.S. Commissioners, Deputy U.S. Marshals, and U.S. Marshals conducted their business in this historic cabin (see Figure 2). U.S. Commissioners were thought to reside here as well.

McCarthy-Kennecott Mines operated until 1938. After the mines closed, McCarthy, Alaska became a ghost town. The cabin was likely abandoned. In 1979, Jim and Jeannie Miller became owners of the cabin. Wrangell-St. Elias National Park was then established in 1980; the property and the McCarthy Township became an inholding. The Millers resided in cabin from 1980-1985. Philip (Jay) McCarthy, Jr. and Mariclaire Tomek became its owners in 1986 and have occupied it seasonally ever since (particularly while living in Anchorage for a decade).



Historian Geoffrey T. Bleakley, of Wrangell-St. Elias National Park & Preserve submitted a National Register of Historic Places Multiple Property Documentation Form (National Register Bulletin 16B) The document expounds upon the historical significance of any “office” associated with mines such as the “Mother Lode Mine on McCarthy Creek” which it references (all documents cited in this nomination are available upon request), in relation to the associated historic context of “Copper Mining in the Wrangell Mountain Region, 1898-1938.” Under these contexts, this property is noteworthy for its association with significant events bearing on “mineral development” within the current confines of Wrangell-St. Elias National Park & Preserve, including its association with persons important to local mineral development. On June 15, 2000, the Keeper of the National Register approved this listing as a basis for evaluating related properties in the National Register.

Why is property endangered?

The McCarthy Creek floodplain has changed over time and threatens the U.S. Commissioner’s Cabin. Immediate threats to this property include catastrophic structural damage caused by flooding. Changing weather patterns may also be a factor increasing the risk of flooding events, both in terms of their frequency and magnitude. This historic property has already incurred minor flooding and groundwater intrusion. When McCarthy Creek rose in the past, so did the water table, flooding the cabin’s root cellar; consequently, support beams for the root cellar collapsed, necessitating replacement of floor beam. The property now faces escalating risk, as water reaches higher levels than ever before (see Figures 3 and 4).

Activities under way to save property:

An application was submitted in January 2020 to the State of Alaska’s Department of Natural Resources Division of Parks and Outdoor Recreation, Office of History & Archaeology, Grants for Pre-Development Projects, to tap Historic Preservation Funds to explore the structural integrity of the U.S. Commissioner’s Cabin, toward flood adaptation and future preservation efforts. In particular, that project seeks to assess whether raising the cabin (or moving it to another location on the same property), is desirable (and possible), to protect it from imminent flooding. Steps are also being taken to pursue a nomination on the National Register of Historic Places (paperwork is in progress).

The urgency to preserve historic elements of the U.S. Commissioner’s Cabin became evident through public meetings, written comments, and studies. Examples of local citizens and agencies frequently expressing concerns in recent years have been documented through: (a) May 2019 National Park Service letter written by Wrangell-St. Elias National Park and Preserve Geologist to the McCarthy Area Council President, underscoring McCarthy Creek’s threat to historic properties and natural catalysts; (b) March 2019 McCarthy Area Council meeting minutes, wherein McCarthy Creek flooding was discussed and ideas/solutions were brought forth by the council

and community members; (c) March 2019 open letter regarding McCarthy Creek, in response to community questions soliciting expertise in assessing existing site conditions and proposing fixes; (d) March 2019 hydrologist letter, addressed to the McCarthy Area Council, suggesting approaches on the geomorphic setting and time, hydraulic design, bridge design, responsibilities, and tasks going forward; (e) Research report prepared for the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) Natural Resources Conservation Service in Fairbanks, Alaska [Inter-Fluve, Inc. (2005). McCarthy Creek Floodplain Management Study (RFQ AK-04-019)], concluding that flooding is due to a combination of watershed scale and reach scale physical processes; (f) Cabin owners working with the District USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service in Wasilla, in the hopes that an updated report can be issued, providing more details on their recommendations, including construction specifications and costs; (g) USDA District Conservationist/Central Hub Leader and Natural Resources Conservation Service State Conservation Engineer planning to visit the property in spring 2020 for initial site assessments; (h) Geotechnical report prepared for the Alaska Department of Environmental Conservation by the McCarthy Area Council [Hecht, B. & LaChapelle, E. (1999). Hydrologic and Hydrogeologic Factors Affecting Aquifer Protection, McCarthy Area, Alaska (Grant C9000652-94-0)], detailing related McCarthy Creek issues which are affecting the town's drinking water supply; (i) Local citizens exploring the Alaska Association of Conservation Districts as an avenue to fiscally support further studies and solutions, toward protecting all threatened historic properties in the area; and (j) Other grassroots efforts to raise funds for flood mitigation measures.



Kennicott Historical Museum photo, presumably U.S. Commissioner E.E. Chamberlin standing outside the U.S. Commissioner's Cabin (note that sign indicates his post/home), snapped by "Hilda" with her box camera, circa 1927-1932

