

Definition: **Alaska** from *The Hutchinson Unabridged Encyclopedia with Atlas and Weather Guide*

Alaska	
Nickname	The Last Frontier
State anthem	'Alaska's Flag'
Motto	'North to the Future'
Capital	Juneau
State emblems and symbols	animal: moose
	bird: willow ptarmigan
	flower: forget-me-not
	tree: Sitka spruce
Date entered the Union	3 January 1959

articles

Alaska



Summary Article: **Alaska**

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Image from: [Alaska in Philip's Encyclopedia](#)

State of the USA, separated from the rest of the country by Canada and bordered to the south by British Columbia, to the east by the Yukon Territory, to the north by the Beaufort Sea on the Arctic Ocean, to the northwest by the Chukchi Sea and Bering Sea, and to the west by the Gulf of Alaska on the North Pacific Ocean; area 1,481,346 sq km/571,951 sq mi; population (2010) 710,231; capital Juneau. Alaska is the largest state in the USA and one of the least populated. Situated on the northwest extremity of North America, it is separated from Russian East Asia by the 80 km-/50 mi-wide Bering Strait. Alaska's Aleutian Island chain extends in a long east–west arc across the North Pacific from the Alaska Peninsula. The name Alaska is derived from the Aleut 'alaxsxaq', meaning 'the mainland'. Historically and commercially the state has been associated with mineral exploitation, and Alaska continues to produce oil, natural gas, coal, lead, silver, zinc, and gold. The lumber, fur, and tourist industries are also important; tourists outnumber the resident population each year. Fishing and canning, particularly salmon, are key activities. The port of Anchorage on the Gulf of Alaska is the most populous city; other major ports are Seward; Skagway; Ketchikan, Revillagigedo Island; Kodiak, Kodiak Island; the former Russian fur trading capital of Sitka, Baranof Island; Dutch Harbor, Unalaska Island, Whittier, Wrangell, and Valdez. Nome, the main port on the Bering Sea, is blocked by ice in winter. Notable cities include the landlocked former gold town of Fairbanks, home to the University of Alaska; Kenai on the Kenai Peninsula; Wasilla, north of Anchorage; Bethel on the Bering Sea; and Barrow on the Arctic. American Indian peoples, including Aleut and Inuit, make up about 15% of Alaska's population. Alaska was admitted to the Union on 3 January 1959 as the 49th US state.

Physical Alaska has four main areas of land: the Pacific Mountain system, the Central Uplands and Lowlands, the Rocky Mountain system, and the Arctic Coastal Plain.

The Pacific Mountain system stretches from the Aleutian Islands to the mainland coast in the southeast, and includes several mountain ranges: the Aleutian Range; Alaska Range; the St Elias Mountains, with Mount Saint Elias; the Wrangell Mountains, with Mount Bona, Mount Blackburn, and Mount Wrangell, an active volcano; the Chugach Mountains, with Mount Fairweather; the glacier range of Talkeetna Mountains, north of Anchorage; and the Alaska Range on the Alaska Peninsula, with Mount McKinley (Denali), the highest peak in North America at 6,194 m/20,320 ft, and Mount Foraker. The Pacific Mountain system has two notable lowland areas: the Copper River Basin, a forested canyon; and the Susitna-Cook Inlet, extending north and east from Anchorage. The Aleutian Islands, extending 2,560 km/1,600 mi towards the Asian continent, are included within the Pacific Mountain system. There are 14 major islands and 55 minor islands. The islands are volcanic and several are active; the Katmai National Park occupies the Valley of Ten Thousand Smokes, a huge basin formed by the collapse of Katmai Mountain when it erupted in 1912.

The Rocky Mountain system consists of the rugged glacial peaks of the Brooks Range and Baird, De Long, and Endicott mountains. Some geographers consider the Alaska, St Elias, and Wrangell ranges to be the northernmost section of the Rocky Mountains.

The treeless Arctic Coastal Plain in northern Alaska is covered in permafrost and tundra with a wide variety of lichens providing fodder for caribou (descended from 2,000 reindeer imported from Siberia in the early 1900s), and wild flowers in the spring. Almost a third of Alaska is forested and birch, spruce, aspen, and cottonwood are only some of the state's many kinds of tree. Alaska supports a wide range of wildlife, including musk, oxen, brown bears, polar bears, grizzly bears, deer, elk, moose, mountain goats and sheep, ducks, geese, and grouse. Alaska's coastline extends for 10,686 km/6,640 mi, and mainly borders the Pacific. Its shores are rich in salmon, halibut, clams, cod, crabs, herring, and shrimp, and the world's largest seal colonies live on the Pribilof Islands in the summer. The southern coast is dominated by the Gulf of Alaska, Prince William Sound, and Cook Inlet, with Bristol Bay and Norton Sound opening into the Bering Sea on the west side of the Aleutian Islands.

The islands of the Alexander Archipelago lie close to Alaska's eastern coast in the Pacific. Prince of Wales Island is the largest and is where many of Alaska's American Indian Haida still live. The islands have two significant ports, Ketchikan and Sitka. Other large islands in the group include Admiralty, Chichagof, and Kupreanof.

The Yukon is Alaska's biggest river and the fifth largest river in the USA, flowing 3,185 km/1,979 mi to the Bering Sea; it is ice free from June to October, allowing river traffic. The Kuskokwim is Alaska's second longest river and also empties into the Bering Sea. The Koyukuk, Kuskokwim, Tanana, and Yukon drain the Central Uplands and Lowlands. Other rivers include the Colville, the Noatak and Kobuk, the Susitna and Matanuska, and the Copper River, which flows into the Gulf of Alaska. The Matanuska Valley is Alaska's only significant agricultural area. The Alsek, Stikine, and Taku flow from Canada across the Alaska Panhandle into the Pacific. Iliamna Lake on the Alaska Peninsula is the most notable of Alaska's thousands of lakes.

Glaciers are a common feature in the state and Malaspina Glacier, in the St Elias Mountains, is the largest in the USA. Alaska has a continental winter in the interior (as at Fairbanks) and Arctic winters in the north. The state's uppermost third, which lies above the Arctic Circle, experiences complete

darkness for long parts of the winter. The Alaska Panhandle and Alexander Archipelago have mild winters relative to the rest of Alaska, because of the warming effects of higher rainfall levels and ocean currents.

Alaska has 23 national parks, including Glacier Bay National Park, a marine reserve; Kenai Fjords National Park; Katmai National Park; and Denali National Park (24,000 sq km/9,300 sq mi), surrounding Mount McKinley. Wrangell-St Elias National Park is the largest in the USA. National forests are Chugach, along the southern central coast, and Tongass along the southeastern coast.

Features Alaska's historic coastal towns and magnificent mountain scenery draw many thousands of tourists every year. Traces of earlier Russian settlements in the Alexander Archipelago islands offer historic and cultural interest, including the Russian Bishop's House in Sitka (formerly Novaya Archangelsk or New Archangel, capital of the Russian Alaska), and the St Nicholas Russian Orthodox Church (1894) in Juneau, dating from a period when Russian Orthodox priests were brought in to convert indigenous Alaskan peoples.

Reflecting Alaska's Inuit heritage, Ketchikan, in the Alexander Archipelago islands, has collections of totem poles at Totem Bight state historical park. A Totem Heritage Center and Inuit settlements also exist on the far northern Arctic coast at Barrow. In Anchorage the Alaska Native Heritage Center features five outdoor traditional village sites, artefacts, tools, ceremonial objects, qayaqs (kayaks), canoes, and household tools among its exhibitions drawing on the diversity of several native Alaskan cultures.

The gold rush town of Nome is well preserved and the Gold Rush National Park is located in the Skagway historic district on the British Columbian Canadian border. Juneau is home to the Alaska State Museum and library, and Anchorage has a museum of history and art and the Living Museum of the Arctic. The Alaska SeaLife Center in Seward is an important tourist attraction, affiliated to the University of Alaska and dedicated to understanding and maintaining the integrity of Alaska's marine ecosystem. The numerous state and national parks and forests provide access to a wide range of glacial, volcanic, island, coastal, rainforest, Arctic, and mountain scenery.

Culture Alaska has a highly distinctive Inuit and American Indian, Russian, and Norwegian heritage. Heritage festivals include the Alaska Folk Festival in Juneau in April; the summer World Eskimo-Indian Olympics in Fairbanks; a Russian-style Christmas, celebrated throughout the state in early January; the Athabaskan Fiddle Festival in Fairbanks, and a Little Norway Festival in Petersburg. Alaska Day Celebration in Sitka commemorates the transfer of Alaska from Russia to the USA in 1867. The Midnight Sun Festival in mid-May in Barrow, 'northern lights' festivals, the September Equinox Marathon in Fairbanks, and the famous Iditarod dog-sled race reflect Alaska's unique outdoor environment. Kodiak's Crab Festival pays tribute to Alaska's highly specialized fishing industry. Music events include the Jazz and Classics Festival in Juneau and the Sitka Summer Music Festival. Wilderness activities, however, most clearly define the state's culture of rugged outdoor life, with hiking, mountaineering, kayaking, birdwatching, and fishing attracting thousands of participants each year.

Government**Alaska's state constitution** When Alaska entered the Union in 1959, it was the first new state in 47 years. The present-day constitution was adopted in 1956.

Structure of state government The legislature consists of a 20-member Senate and a 40-member House of Representatives, with each senator serving a four-year term and the representatives a two-

year term. Alaska has three electoral votes in presidential elections and elects two senators and one representative to the US Congress.

The state Supreme Court is the highest court, with five justices, and a chief justice elected by the other justices, who serves a three-year term. The court of appeals has three judges appointed by the Alaska Judicial Council and the superior court has 30 judges appointed by the governor.

The governor of Alaska, the state's chief executive, is elected to a four-year term and serves no more than two terms in a row. Republican Sean Parnell took the governorship in July 2009.

Alaska voters have traditionally supported the Republicans in presidential elections and sent Republicans to the US Congress. Only once, in 1964, did it support a Democrat presidential nominee, Lyndon B Johnson. The state has a strong Libertarian tendency, supporting individual liberties and opposing state interference, and the Alaskan Independence Party favours secession from the USA.

Half of Alaska is divided into 16 organized boroughs (units of local government) of which the top administrative officer is a chair elected by the people. The remainder of the state is unorganized and is governed by the legislature. Alaska's cities have elected city councils and either a mayor-council or city-manager form of government.

Ted Stevens (1923–2010), senator of Alaska from 1968 to 2009, was the longest-serving Republican senator in the USA. In 2006 Republican Sarah Palin (1964–) became Alaska's youngest and first female governor.

Economy Alaska has a unique economy in which personal income tax and sales tax revenue are entirely absent and petroleum companies pay state production taxes and royalties. Around 80% of state revenue is derived from the petroleum industry. Much of Alaska's land use is federally controlled and reserved for state parks and forests, and it imports most of its foodstuffs and general goods. Alaska's chief products are oil, natural gas, coal, gold, fur, seafood (salmon, cod, pollock), and lumber. The fur trade remains an important million-dollar industry; beaver, lynx, marten, mink, wolf, and wolverine pelts are taken. Fishing is a dominant economic activity; Alaska has the highest fishing catch per year of any state in the USA. Tourism and the service industry continue to grow, with tourists annually outnumbering residents in the state.

History**American Indians and early exploration** Migrants from Asia first crossed the Bering land bridge about 15,000 years ago, and the Inuit began to settle the Alaskan Arctic coast from Siberia around 3000–2000 BC. The Aleut settled the Aleutian archipelago about 2,500–1000 BC. Other American Indian groups indigenous to Alaska include the coastal Tlingit, Haida, and Tsimshian, and the Athabascan in the interior, who were caribou hunters and expert fishers.

Geographically close, Russia showed an early interest in the region, and Russians sailed through Alaskan waters as early as 1648. The first European to visit Alaska was the Danish navigator Vitus Bering in 1741, who led a Russian team of explorers. The Bering Sea and Bering Strait are named for his pioneering journeys. Expeditions from England, France, and Spain soon followed. The first permanent European settlement was founded in 1784. Russia established a fur hunting and trading monopoly in the region, founding the Russian-American Company in 1799, with headquarters at Novaya Archangelsk (New Archangel, now Siktá) in the Alexander Archipelago, close to the Canadian border.

Sale to the USA Russia signed separate treaties with the USA and the UK in 1824 and 1825 in which

the southern boundary of Russian territory in North America was recognized at a latitude of 54° 40'. The USA and the UK consequently gained trading rights along Alaska's Pacific Coast. Russia was unable to make a success of its whaling or shipbuilding industries in Alaska, and a decline in its fur trade, combined with the effects of economic hardship after the Crimean War (1853–56), encouraged Russia to sell Alaska to the USA in 1867 for \$7.2 million. US secretary of state William H Seward oversaw the purchase, which was met with some consternation by the majority of the American people and was widely referred to as 'Seward's Folly'.

Gold and the fight for statehood Alaska languished for the next 17 years without any further development, and was administered by various departments of the US military. In 1878 US entrepreneurs opened salmon canneries, pioneering Alaska's fishing industry. More significantly, gold was discovered in 1880 in the Yukon River basin, near Fairbanks, and the Seward Peninsula, near Nome; Alaska's population quickly doubled as adventurous prospectors flooded into the state in what was known as the Gold Rush. In 1884 Congress passed an act providing Alaska with a governor, code of laws, and a federal court. A federal judge, James W Wickersham, argued for increased powers of self-government for the Alaskan people and was subsequently elected to Congress. Alaska gained territorial status with limited legislative powers in 1912, and the Alaska Railroad, from Seward to Fairbanks, opened up the interior. Meanwhile the Alaska Native Brotherhood (ANB) was formed in 1913 to pursue civil rights for Alaska's American Indian peoples. The ANB persuaded Wickersham to campaign on their behalf for a settlement of American Indian lands and, although his claims failed at the time, the campaign paved the way for the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act of 1971. During the 1930s Depression, a government experiment in farm settlement created Palmer and other communities in the Matanuska Valley.

World War II and statehood Alaska continued to push for statehood although many of its bills did not even receive a hearing in Congress. World War II, however, brought Alaska's strategic position to the fore. Japanese forces occupied Attu, Agattu, and Kiska – the only parts of the USA to be occupied – and bombed Dutch Harbor in the Aleutians. The Alaskan Highway and Northwest Staging Route were created to bring troops, supplies, and planes into position to aid the USSR and prepare for an assault on Japan. The Aleut were forced to evacuate the Aleutian islands at the time, and were interned in camps on the mainland for two years, where many lost their lives; their mistreatment provoked a United Nations' reprimand in 1959, and compensation was paid by the US government in 1990. Having had its strategic importance made clear, Alaska now demanded statehood and campaigned hard from the mid-1940s until 1958, when the US Congress voted to admit Alaska to the Union as the 49th state. It entered the Union on 3 January 1959.

Alaska struggled to shoulder the cost of its public services but benefited from federal grants and raised funds through the leasing of lands, a measure protested by Inuit and other American Indian groups whose livelihoods and way of life depended on maintaining their hunting and fishing rights in the region. This conflict of interests spurred the formation of the Alaska Federation of Natives (AFN) in 1966. In 1968 Alaska's financial troubles ended when the Atlantic Richfield Company announced the discovery of a giant oil field at Prudhoe Bay on the Arctic Coastal Plain, the largest reserve of oil in North America. The Trans-Alaska oil pipeline was constructed, running from Prudhoe Bay to the port of Valdez, and completed in 1977, allowing oil production to begin. Alaska was able to create the Alaska Permanent Fund, through which a quarter of all mineral profits was to be devoted to the Alaskan people. Individual state taxes were eventually abolished and the Permanent Fund began to pay dividends to many eligible

Alaskans.

A Congressional act of 1980 gave environmental protection to 421,000 sq km/162,000 sq mi of Alaskan territory. Valuable mineral resources have been exploited from 1968, especially in the Prudhoe Bay area to the southeast of Point Barrow. In 1989 an oil spill from the tanker *Exxon Valdez*, which ran aground in Prince William Sound, caused great environmental and economic damage.

The Arctic National Wildlife Refuge in northeastern Alaska has been the subject of political debate since the early 1970s. Rich oil reserves in the region have led to movements for drilling, which have to date been thwarted by environmental activists and government opponents.

Famous people **the arts** Jewel Kilcher (1974–), musician

science Vitus Bering (1681–1741), Danish explorer

politics and law Aleksandr Baranov (1747–1819), trader and public official; 'Bob' Bartlett (1904–1968), public official and US senator; William Egan (1914–1984), state governor.

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Alaska

Denali: Alaska's Great Wilderness

In the Beginning Was the Word

Prehistory of Alaska

images

Alaska – flag

Alaskan volcano

Augustine volcano, Alaska

Denali National Park

glacier in Alaska

gold rush

pancake ice

totem poles, Alaska

Yahtse glacier

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Harvard

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