

RECORDS OF THE BUREAU OF PUBLIC ROADS

RECORD GROUP 30

The Bureau of Public Roads had its origins in an act of March 3, 1893, that authorized the creation of an Office of Road Inquiry in the Department of Agriculture. After a number of changes in title, the office became the Bureau of Public Roads in 1918 and retained that designation until 1939 when it became the Public Roads Administration as part of the Federal Works Agency. On July 1, 1949, Congress renamed the agency as the Bureau of Public Roads and transferred it to the new General Services Administration. Subsequently, by Reorganization Plan No. 7 of 1949, Congress transferred the Bureau to the Department of Commerce. And, by an act of October 15, 1966, the Bureau was transferred yet again, this time into the Department of Transportation where its functions were assigned to the Federal Highway Administration.

Under the Federal Aid Road Act of 1916, the Bureau supervised federal-state cooperative programs for road construction, reconstruction, and improvement. It also administered the highway beautification program and was responsible for developing and administering highway safety programs, constructing defense highways and roads in national parks and forests, expanding the interstate highway system, and providing assistance to foreign governments.

By an act of January 27, 1905 and as a direct result of the Gold Rush, Congress created a Board of Road Commissioners for Alaska as an agency within the War Department. Although congressional neglect had been near-total since Alaska's purchase in 1867, the Gold Rush focused world attention on the territory. Among the many governmental programs begun about this time, Congress appropriated funds to construct a system of wagon roads and trails to aid miners and other travelers and to attract a permanent population. The Board was directed to plan, build, and maintain a road system linking the territory's principal settlements. By an act of June 30, 1932, Congress reorganized the Board and relocated it into the Department of the Interior, where, by Departmental Order No. 605, on December 3, 1932, it officially became the Alaska Road Commission.

From 1905 until the start of a massive six-year construction program in 1949, the Alaska Road Commission remained a small, underfunded organization constructing comparatively low-standard roads. The first major road completed was the 318-mile Richardson Road which evolved into a modern thoroughfare from a rude trail connecting the gold rush port of Valdez with the placer fields of Fairbanks. For years, the Commission maintained an extensive system of roads and flagged trails used in the winter by dog teams and horse sleighs. From 1905 to 1932, the Commission built and maintained an elaborate system of more than 10,000 miles of trails and sled roads designed to serve the needs of the military and postal service as well as those of itinerant fishermen, trappers, and miners. Eventually, it abandoned this system and built airfields. In 1949, largely at the urging of the military, the Commission began an accelerated, six-year road construction program to link major Cold War-era military installations with paved highways and access roads. Among the new projects was the 71-mile Turnagain road, which connected Seward with the Kenai Peninsula; the 120-mile long Sterling Highway extending down the Kenai Peninsula from the western boundary of the Chugach National Forest to Kenai, Kaslof, Ninilchik, and Homer; the reconstruction of the Livengood Road northwest from Fairbanks; and the construction of the 150-mile long Denali Highway from Paxon Lake to Mount McKinley National Park. Other roads included the opening of the 128-mile Seward Highway which connected Seward and the Kenai Peninsula to Anchorage; extension of the Taylor Highway northward from Fairbanks to Eagle with a branch road to Dawson, Yukon Territory; paving of the Alaska portion of the Haines Highway; and startup work on the 160-mile long Copper River Highway.

By 1956, the Alaska Road Commission had developed an integrated network of roads and trails, bridges, ferries, tramways, and airfields throughout Alaska. There were a thousand miles of all-weather paved highways linking the ice-free ports of Seward, Valdez, and Haines with the rest of the United States via the Alaska Highway through Canada. The principal road system included the Alaska, Glenn, Haines, Richardson, Seward-Anchorage, Steese, and Sterling Highways. In addition, a 2,500-mile network of secondary and local roads connected farming and mining areas with the principal system and to other isolated areas serviced by air, rail, or water transportation.

Effective September 16, 1956, the Commission transferred its functions to the Bureau of Public Roads of the Department of Commerce as one effect of Alaska having been included in the Federal-Aid Highway Act. This act eliminated much of the uncertainty about future highway funding, but it also led to the demise of the Alaska Road Commission. After Alaska became a state

in 1959, many of the old Commission's responsibilities and the roads it built were transferred to the State of Alaska. The Bureau of Public Roads continued to operate in Alaska as a separate Federal agency of much reduced responsibility.

RECORDS DESCRIPTION

Dates: 1894-1969. Volume: 380 cu. ft.

Records of the Juneau headquarters Office, Juneau, Alaska, 1894-1969. The records concern project planning, funding, and completion. There are records for projects constructed in Alaska and for maintenance projects relating to the American section of the Alaska Highway.

The bulk of the records consist of construction project case files (ca. 1919-1957) which include plans and specifications; proposals and contracts; labor and materials statements; cost reports; vouchers and related records pertaining to project funding; narrative progress, inspection, and final construction reports; correspondence; maintenance agreements; and occasionally photographs of construction activities. These case files relate to the planning, design, construction, or improvement of streets, roads, highways, bridges, dikes; power lines; and maintenance facilities throughout the Territory. Included are 54 cubic feet of project field books, diaries, and location surveys (1931-1959) for the Alaska and Whitehorse, Yukon sections of the Alaska Highway; sections of the Alaska Forest, Angoon, Copper River, Crow Creek, Denali, Douglas and N. Douglas, Fish Creek-Douglas, Gartina, Glacier, Glenn, Grartena, Kenai River, Mitkof, Tongass and N. Tongass, White Pass, and Wrangell Highways; sections of the Auke Bay, Byron and Portage Glacier, McKinley Park, Mendenhall Loop and Spur, Snug Harbor, and Stephens roads; and for numerous bridges and other projects.

There are administrative records including directives files (1931-1956); information, public relations, and legislation files (1928-1958); project planning and research correspondence (1894?-1958); other project correspondence (1916-1960); and Federal aid project (FAP) case files (1959-1969).

The annual reports of the Alaska Road Commission (1918-1928, 1930-1943, and 1946-1956) and for the Anchorage District (1945-1956), Fairbanks District (1945-1956), Haines Sub-district (1945, 1947, and 1950-56), Nome District (1945-1954, and 1956) and Valdez District (1945-1950 and 1952-1955) are included in the project correspondence (1916-1959). Also included in this record series are monthly situation reports for the Anchorage District (1946-1957), Chitina District (1933-1938), Fairbanks District (1933-1940 and 1947-1957), Haines Sub-district (1930-1932, 1935, 1938-1939, and 1948-1956), Juneau District (1957), Nome District (1945-1958), and the Valdez District (1937-1939, 1948-1951, 1953-1955, and 1957-1958).

Nontextual records include engineering drawings; right-of-way maps and other cartographic

records; occasional photographs; and a separate series of construction project drawings and tracings (ca. 1932-1958).

The regional archives holds no records of district offices of the Alaska Road Commission or the Bureau of Public Roads. However, these headquarters records of the Alaska Road Commission contain copies of correspondence, reports, and other related items originated by the individual districts.

RELATED RECORDS

RG 406 (Records of the Federal Highway Administration)

RG 111 (Records of the Chief Signal Officer) and RG 342 (Records of U.S. Air Force Commands, Activities, and Organizations) for records relating to the Alaska Communications System.

RG 322 (Records of the Alaska Railroad)

RELATED MICROFICHE/FILM

J87 Annual Reports of the Office of the Governor, Alaska

M430 Interior Department Territorial Papers: Alaska, 1869-1911

M939 General Correspondence of the Alaskan Territorial Governor, 1909-1958

FINDING AIDS

Series title list.

Folder and box lists.

Preliminary Inventory of the Records of the Bureau of Public Roads (1962) [PI-134]