

Statement of Significance

Willow-Fishhook Road

Prepared for

**Alaska Department of
Transportation and Public
Facilities**

December 2014

*DOT&PF Note October 2015:
Rept does not address integrity;
NRHP eligibility status not determined*

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Prepared by



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1. Introduction

This statement of significance was prepared as a component of the Applied Historic Context of Alaska Roads Project completed in 2012-2014 for the Alaska Department of Transportation and Public Facilities (DOT&PF). The project began with the development of the *Alaska Roads Historic Overview: Applied Historic Context of Alaska's Roads* (Roads Overview) (February 2014) and the *Methodology for Assessing National Register of Historic Places Eligibility* (Roads Methodology) (December 2014).

For the project a select number of roads with potential for individual National Register of Historic Places (National Register) eligibility were identified for evaluation of significance. This study is limited to the evaluation of the road's significance. If a road meets one or more areas of significance, identification of essential physical features and an assessment of integrity needs to be completed to determine National Register eligibility. These statements of significance apply the Roads Methodology and utilize contextual information from the Roads Overview. The Roads Methodology outlines that the entire length of a road should be considered when evaluating significance. The entire length of the road was considered in the development of this statement of significance.

This report identifies and describes the important historic themes associated with Willow-Fishhook Road. It summarizes these important themes to place the development of Willow-Fishhook Road within an appropriate historic context to evaluate its historical significance.

2. Description of the Road

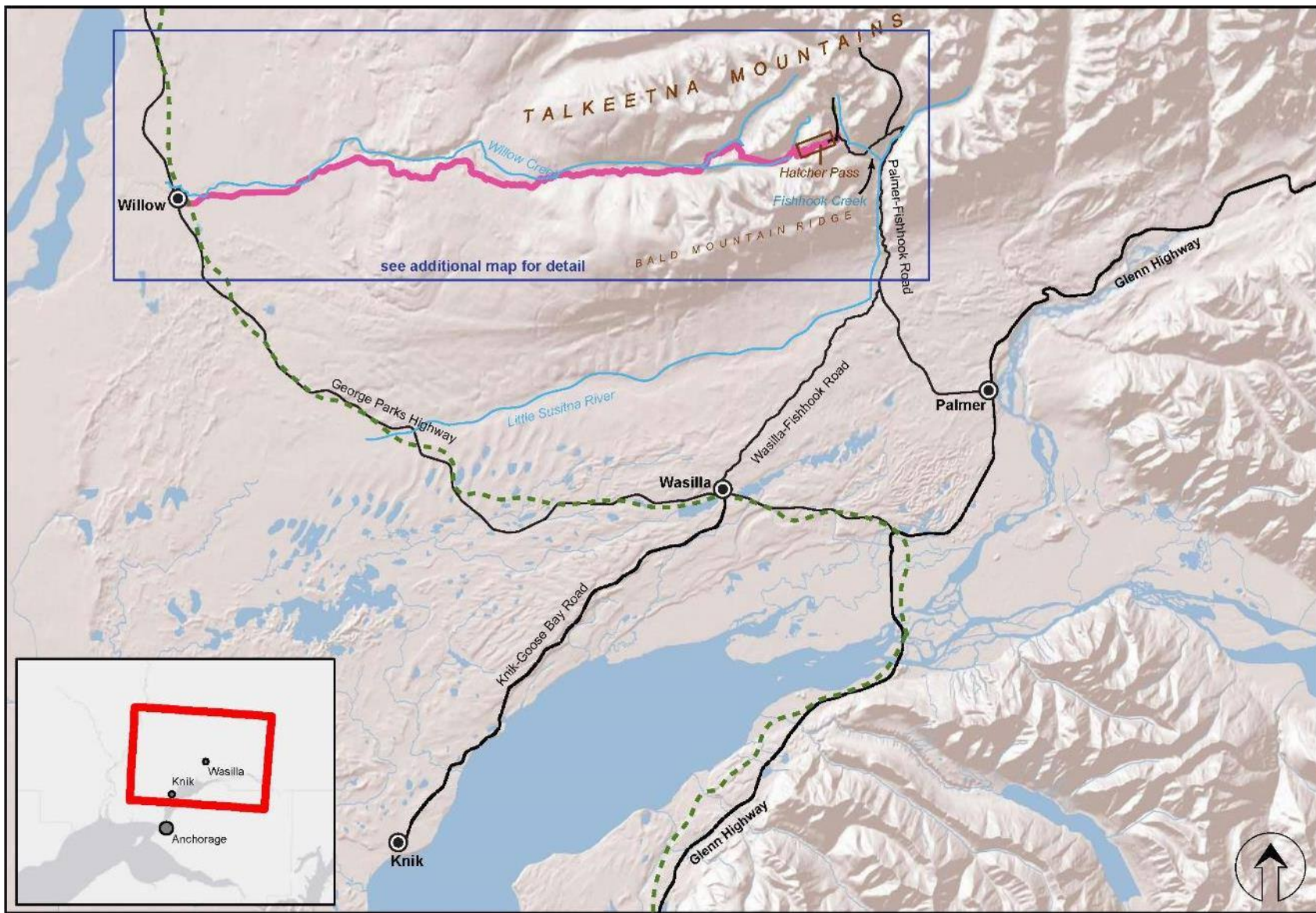
The Willow-Fishhook Road (Alaska Heritage Resources Survey [AHRs] numbers ANC-03418 and TYO-00328; Coordinated Data System [CDS] number 137700) is located in the Matanuska-Susitna Borough and is owned by the Alaska DOT&PF. The road as currently defined in the Alaska DOT&PF's CDS as approximately 31 miles long and runs from Gold Cord Road west to the Parks Highway. The Willow-Fishhook Road runs east-west on the southern edge of the Talkeetna Mountains. The eastern portion of the road traverses a mountainous area; at its highest point, the road runs through Hatcher Pass. The road follows the approximate course of Willow Creek for much of its length, while Fishhook Creek is located on the eastern end of the road. Willow Creek flows west from Hatcher Pass, while Fishhook Creek flows southeast, emptying into the Little Susitna River.

The Willow-Fishhook Road as defined currently is comprised of several road segments constructed by the Alaska Road Commission (ARC) between 1923 and 1938 as part of an earlier road network in the Matanuska-Susitna Valley connecting the Willow Creek Mining District and population centers along the Alaska Railroad.¹ The portion of the current Willow-Fishhook Road from Gold Cord Road through Hatcher Pass to the Gold Bullion Mine was completed in 1924. The remaining portion of the road west from Gold Bullion to the Alaska Railroad was completed by 1938, when the entire route was surfaced with gravel. Beginning in the 1960s, improvements to the road included asphalt surfacing at both ends of the Willow-Fishhook Road, including an 84-foot portion west from Gold Cord Road and an 11-mile segment east of the George Parks Highway. The remainder of the route is gravel surfaced, and, with the exception of a 3-mile segment through Hatcher Pass, is open year-round.

Maps illustrating the location of Willow-Fishhook Road in relation to other major features and the earlier road network are provided on the next page.

¹ The road east of Gold Cord Road (historically part of ARC Route 35D) is part of the Palmer-Fishhook Road and was not evaluated for significance in this document.

Section 2
Description of the Road

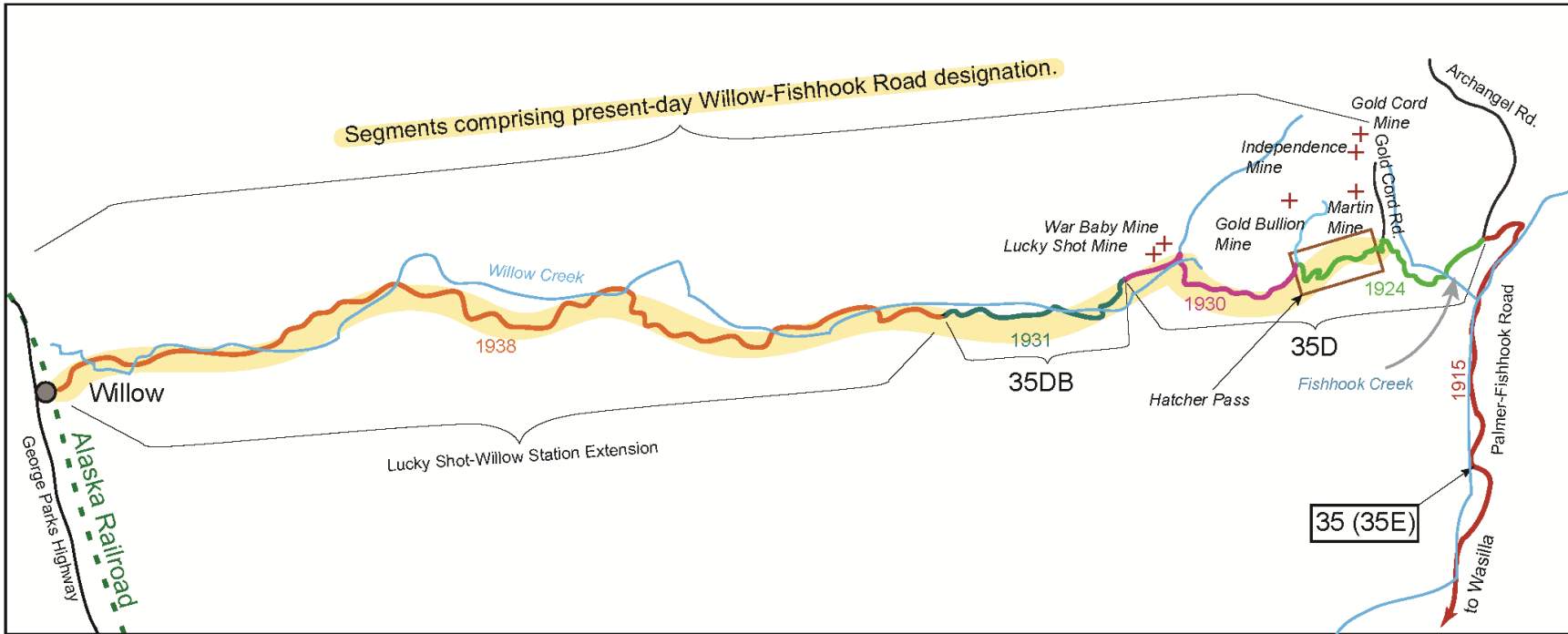


0 2 4 8 12 16 Miles

- Willow-Fishhook Road
- - - Alaska Railroad

Base map Sources: Esri, DeLorme, NAVTEQ, TomTom, Intermap, increment P Corp., GEBCO, USGS, FAO, NPS,

Section 2
Description of the Road



Development of ARC road network in the Willow Creek vicinity showing historic-period route designations.

3. Historic Context

Prospectors discovered placer gold on Willow Creek in 1897, but mining activities were limited until 1906, when prospector Robert Hatcher discovered lode gold at a location on upper Fishhook Creek. At that time, the area had a limited number of trails and sled roads, making it difficult to bring in the heavy equipment required for this type of mining.² Until the construction of the Alaska Railroad beginning in 1915, the majority of freight up the Cook Inlet landed at Knik, which was the northernmost point of navigation on the Knik Arm.³ All supplies and equipment were then hauled over one of two routes from Knik. Both of these routes followed the coastline northeast from Knik for roughly 10 miles before diverging. The lesser used route was a trail that ran due north over Bald Mountain Ridge to Willow Creek, while the other was a wagon road that follows the approximate route of the present-day Wasilla-Fishhook Road, continuing northeast beyond Knik and then following Fishhook Creek north to the Independence Mine (located along what is now known as Gold Cord Road).⁴ The wagon road, known as the Carle Wagon Road, was constructed in 1909 by miner J.S. Carle in order to reach his claim on upper Fishhook Creek, and around that same time Hatcher built a wagon road branching from the Carle Wagon Road and continuing west to cross the mountain pass that now bears his name (located on what is now known as the Willow-Fishhook Road).⁵ Hatcher's claims developed into the Alaska Free Gold Mining Company, and within a year of his initial discovery both the Gold Bullion Mining Company and Alaska Gold Quartz Mining Company also located claims nearby. The latter company installed the district's first stamp mill in 1908, and by 1912 all three were crushing ore. Two years later, an additional mine was operating, and work was underway at 11 additional prospects.⁶

In response to miners' demands for improved freight routes, the ARC built Route 35 from Knik north to the Willow Creek district, terminating near Fishhook Creek. Completed in 1915, the route replaced the Carle Wagon Road.⁷ A year earlier, Congress authorized the construction of a government-funded railroad to connect Interior Alaska with the Pacific coast in order to improve access to Alaska's mineral wealth in the interior. In 1917 the railroad traveling on the west side of the Willow Creek Mining District reached Willow Creek from the south, and the small settlement of Willow developed near the newly established railroad station. Miners cut a sled trail from the railroad station at Willow eastward up the Willow Creek valley to transport freight in the winter, although this was not upgraded to a wagon road.⁸ Vehicular access was possible only at the eastern side of the district, via Route 35. The ARC described

² Richard G. Ray, *Geology and Ore Deposits of the Willow Creek Mining District, Alaska*, U.S. Geological Survey Bulletin 1004 (Washington, D.C.: US GPO, 1954), 35.

³ Board of Road Commissioners for Alaska, *Report Upon the Construction and Maintenance of Roads, Bridges, and Trails, Alaska*, from Annual Report of the Chief of Engineers, 1924 (Washington, D.C.: US GPO, 1925), 114.

⁴ Stephen R. Capps, *The Willow Creek District, Alaska*, U.S. Geological Survey Bulletin 607 (Washington, D.C.: US GPO, 1915), 21-22.

⁵ Rolfe G. Buzzell, *Willow Fishhook Road Cultural Resource Survey, Mile 17.4-Mile 25.0, Hatcher Pass, Project No. 55137*, Office of History and Archaeology Report Number 106, prepared August 2004, 24.

⁶ Capps, 50, 69-78.

⁷ Buzzell, 19; Capps, 22.

⁸ Buzzell, 24.

Route 35 as a 34-mile route that “reaches a most promising quartz mining district...with strong indications of great increase and long life.”⁹

The Gold Bullion Mine was acquired by Willow Creek Mines in 1916 and the new operators expanded the mining and milling operations rapidly, so that within a year it was the largest producing mine in the district. In 1918 prospectors discovered the Lucky Shot prospect, the district’s richest ore vein, and over the next two years developed the main vein and a large offshoot into the Lucky Shot and War Baby Mines, which were acquired by Willow Creek Mines in 1921. Beginning the following year, the company operated the mines year-round, the first company to do so in a district that typically was active only in the summer months.¹⁰

When the Alaska Railroad was completed in 1923, the main line ran north to Fairbanks on the western side of the Willow Creek Mining District, while a spur line through the Matanuska Valley passed through Palmer near the eastern side of the district. The main rail line intersected Route 35 at Wasilla, and traffic on the southern half of Route 35 was greatly reduced as Anchorage began to supersede Knik as a commercial center due to its location on the new railroad.¹¹ The northern half of Route 35 (later redesignated Route 35E), between Wasilla and Fishhook Creek, remained important as a link between the railroad and the gold mining district; it became known as the Wasilla-Fishhook Road. In 1923 the ARC began work on an 11-mile wagon road branching from the Wasilla-Fishhook Road at Mile 20, continuing west over the summit at Hatcher Pass, replacing the earlier route constructed by Robert Hatcher. Designated Route 35D, this road was completed the following year with its western terminus at the Gold Bullion Mine; the western portion of this road would become the earliest portion of the Willow-Fishhook Road.¹²

By 1924 over 2,000 tons of freight reached the mines at Willow Creek and Archangel annually via the road system from Wasilla.¹³ In order to better serve the mines near Hatcher Pass, the ARC reconstructed a portion of Route 35D in 1929 to improve the alignment and surfacing. By 1930 Route 35D had been extended to a total of 13.5 miles, and a separate road had been constructed branching off to the north to reach the Gold Cord Mine (now known as Gold Cord Road).¹⁴ By 1931 a new road, Route 35DB,

⁹ Board of Road Commissioners for Alaska, *Report Upon the Construction and Maintenance of Military and Post Roads, Bridges, and Trails, Alaska*, from Annual Report of the Chief of Engineers, U.S. Army, 1918 (Washington, D.C.: US GPO, 1918), 16.

¹⁰ Buzzell, 14-16.

¹¹ Alaska Road Commission, *Annual Report Fiscal Year 1923* (Juneau, Alaska: Alaska Road Commission, 1923), 54; Board of Road Commissioners for Alaska, Board of Road Commissioners for Alaska, *Report Upon the Construction and Maintenance of Roads, Bridges, and Trails, Alaska* (1924), 1924, 114.

¹² Board of Road Commissioners for Alaska, *Report Upon the Construction and Maintenance of Roads, Bridges, and Trails, Alaska* (1924), 113.

¹³ Board of Road Commissioners for Alaska, *Report Upon the Construction and Maintenance of Roads, Bridges, and Trails, Alaska* (1924), 114.

¹⁴ Alaska Road Commission, *Annual Report Fiscal Year 1935* (Juneau, Alaska: Alaska Road Commission, 1935), 61, 63.

extended west from Route 35D for 6 miles to the west of the Lucky Shot Mine down Willow Creek, and construction was underway to continue extending the road west to the railroad station at Willow.¹⁵ Deep snows in the Hatcher Pass through much of the year made it difficult to access the mines west of the pass, and the completion of an east-west road to connect to the railroad would facilitate access to these areas for a longer portion of the year. The Willow Creek Mines Company contributed a small amount of funding for the project, and in addition to new construction, the ARC continued to improve surfacing on the existing Route 35D.¹⁶ The extension of the road further west from the Lucky Shot Mine was one of the principal projects in the ARC's Southwestern District. Construction of the road continued over the next several years as they continued to upgrade the route for use by trucks, resulting in the completion of Route 35DB in 1931 and the Lucky Shot-Willow Extension in 1938.¹⁷ The completed road, comprised of the western portion of Route 35D, Route 35DB, and the Lucky Shot-Willow Station extension (extension of Route 35DB), is now known as the Willow-Fishhook Road. Gravel surfacing was finally completed in 1938, providing the western portion of the mining district with direct access to the railroad without having to use the route through the Hatcher Pass.¹⁸

The construction of roads to supplement the Alaska Railroad made it easier to move freight into the district, and more modern mill equipment replaced the earlier stamp mills at the mines in the area. Although lode gold production suffered a sharp drop in the late 1920s, when the Gold Bullion and War Baby Mines were worked out, activity elsewhere in the district rebounded quickly. New equipment was installed at the Lucky Shot mill, and operations at the mine continued throughout the 1930s. In 1934 the federal government increased the price of gold from \$20.67 per ounce to \$35 per ounce, further stimulating mining activity.¹⁹ In the years before World War II, the Willow Creek district was the second largest gold-producing district in Alaska.²⁰ Between 1934 and 1942, at which point World War II curtailed nonessential mining operations, the district reached its peak, producing well over \$1 million worth of gold each year, much of which came from the Lucky Shot Mine. Some mines reopened after the war, although production remained small in comparison with the pre-war years.²¹ The mines on the west side of Hatcher Pass never reopened, although the Independence and Gold Cord Mines operated on a limited basis in the early 1950s.²²

¹⁵ Board of Road Commissioners for Alaska, *Annual Report of the Alaska Road Commission Fiscal Year 1931*, (Juneau, Alaska: Board of Road Commissioners, 1931), 50.

¹⁶ Board of Road Commissioners for Alaska, *Annual Report of the Alaska Road Commission Fiscal Year 1931*, 51.

¹⁷ Alaska Road Commission, *Annual Report of the Alaska Road Commission, Fiscal Year 1933* (Juneau, Alaska: n.p., 1933), 10; Alaska Road Commission, *Annual Report of the Alaska Road Commission, Fiscal Year 1935*, 2; Alaska Road Commission, *Annual Report of the Alaska Road Commission, Fiscal Year 1936* (Juneau, Alaska: n.p., 1936), 7.

¹⁸ Alaska Road Commission, *Annual Report of the Alaska Road Commission, Fiscal Year 1938*, 7.

¹⁹ Ray, 2, 26.

²⁰ Buzzell, 21.

²¹ Ray, 36.

²² Buzzell, 21.

As of 1954 the Willow-Fishhook Road was still only linked to the rest of the local road system from the eastern end. By this time major mining operations along Willow Creek had all been shut down or abandoned.²³ The ARC maintained the roads within the Willow Creek Mining District during the summer season from early June to October, after which they were impassable to vehicles unless mining companies chose to plow at their own expense.²⁴ The railroad still provided the only connection to the western end of the Willow-Fishhook Road until 1955, when the ARC began to construct a new road from Wasilla northwest to Talkeetna via Willow. The ARC annual report for 1955 noted that the route via the Hatcher Pass from the Wasilla-Fishhook Road limited access to the district, which was “served by a sub-standard mountain road only open four months a year.” The new road northwest from Wasilla was to provide a low-level alternative, connecting with the western end of Willow-Fishhook Road.²⁵ A 1957 Bureau of Public Roads (BPR) map shows a new road running northwest from Wasilla to Willow. This road was completed as far as the western terminus of the Willow-Fishhook Road in 1959, and helped to open the adjacent areas for hunting and homesteading. This new route facilitated vehicular access to the Willow area at the western end of the road and was an easier route to Willow than the Willow-Fishhook Road. The Alaska Department of Fish and Game (ADF&G) noted in 1959 that hunting emphasis in the south-central area appeared to be shifting from the Palmer area to the Willow vicinity as roads were constructed to provide access. With the western end of the Willow-Fishhook Road now more easily accessible, a number of people took up homesteads along the western portion of the Willow-Fishhook Road in the next few years. Known locally as “59’ers,” many settled along the westernmost 10 miles of the road.²⁶ As these settlers patented their homesteads, they began to subdivide and sell portions of their property in the 1970s, and a number of residential subdivisions developed near the western terminus of the Willow-Fishhook Road.

The road from Wasilla to Willow was superseded by the Parks Highway, completed in 1971, which created a major arterial route between the state’s two main population centers of Anchorage and Fairbanks and became the western terminus of the Willow-Fishhook Road. The Willow-Fishhook Road continues to serve tourists, residents, and other recreational traffic, and portions at either end have been widened and paved since the late 1960s and early 1970s, although much of the middle portion between settled areas and the Hatcher Pass is still narrow and gravel-surfaced.²⁷ The Independence Mine, located on Gold Cord Road, was listed in the National Register of Historic Places in 1974 and was designated a State Historical Park in 1980.²⁸ The eastern end of the Willow-Fishhook Road provides access to other recreational destinations, including Summit Lake and a number of hiking, cross-country skiing, snowboarding, and snowmobile trails.²⁹

²³ Ray, 83.

²⁴ Ray, 5.

²⁵ Alaska Road Commission, *Annual Report for the Fiscal Year Ended June 30 1955* (Juneau, Alaska: Department of the Interior, Office of Territories, 1955), 35.

²⁶ Buzzell, 22.

²⁷ Buzzell, 23.

²⁸ Alaska Department of Natural Resources, Division of Parks & Outdoor Recreation, “Independence Mine State Historical Park,” <http://dnr.alaska.gov/parks/units/indmine.htm> (accessed 2 July 2014).

²⁹ “Hatcher Pass East Management Area,” brochure, <http://dnr.alaska.gov/parks/brochures/hatcherpassbrochure.pdf> (accessed 2 July 2014).

4. Significance

The Roads Methodology provides guidance on the application of the National Register Criteria for Evaluation, identifying areas of significance, and evaluating significance under *Criteria A, B, C, and D*.

The significance of the Willow-Fishhook Road (designated from Gold Cord Road to the Parks Highway, including the western portion of Routes 35D and 35DB) is the focus of this significance evaluation. Other trails and roads in the vicinity of the Willow-Fishhook Road should be evaluated for historical significance as a separate properties. These include Route 35D east of Gold Cord Road, which is designated as the Palmer-Fishhook Road, and Hatcher's original wagon road over the Hatcher Pass and earlier trails that have been bisected by the construction activities of the Willow-Fishhook Road.

A. *Criterion A: Events*

To meet the threshold for significance under *Criterion A*, a road must possess a direct and important association in one or more supplemental areas of significance as identified in the Roads Methodology in addition to *Transportation*. This evaluation of significance under *Criterion A* considered all potential areas of significance identified in the Roads Methodology. Based on research and context development, only the applicable areas of significance for this road are addressed below.

Transportation

The Willow-Fishhook Road has an association with *Transportation* because it provided local access following its completion in 1938. When the road reached the Alaska Railroad near Willow, it provided the first year-round vehicular link to mining operations west of Hatcher Pass, enabling access from the railroad at the western terminus of the road during the majority of the year that the pass was closed due to snow. The period of significance for *Transportation* will relate to the historical purpose this road had in the conveyance of people and goods as defined in one or more supplemental areas of significance that meet *Criterion A*.

Industry

The Willow-Fishhook Road is significant at the local level for its association with lode gold mining in the Willow Creek district in the 1930s and 1940s. Transportation of heavy machinery was critical to the establishment and expansion of lode mining operations, which require mills to crush ore, aerial trams to transport ore from mines to the mills, and the construction of facilities to house machinery. Compared to placer mining, lode mining requires more infrastructure to establish even initial operations, making freight transport crucial. The Willow Creek district, in particular the Lucky Shot Mine, was one of the state's leading producers of lode gold in the late 1930s and early 1940s, and the Willow-Fishhook Road was the main vehicular road through the district, forming the spine to which shorter access roads linked to individual mines. The road was constructed to provide vehicular access to the mines west of Hatcher Pass, including the Lucky Shot, as well as direct access to the railroad, and was completed from Gold Cord Road to Willow Station on the Alaska Railroad in 1938. The period of significance is 1938-1942, beginning with the completion of the ARC's route to Willow Station and ending with the cessation of large-scale mining operations in the district, many of which failed to reopen after the government halted gold mining during World War II.

The current route of the Willow-Fishhook Road also includes the western section of Route 35D completed in 1924. This portion of Route 35D from Gold Cord Road west to the Gold Bullion Mine possesses significance at the local level for its association with the earlier local road network that supported early mining activities within the Willow Creek Mining District. The period of significance for this earlier route ends at 1938, marking its incorporation into the Willow-Fishhook Road. The eastern portion of Route 35D (east of Gold Cord Road) is now part of the Palmer-Fishhook Road and was not evaluated as part of this document, but may also possess the same significance at the local level for its association with earlier local road network that supported early mining activities within the Willow Creek Mining District.

Entertainment/Recreation and Conservation

The Willow-Fishhook Road does not meet the requirement for significance in the area of *Entertainment/Recreation and Conservation*. This area of significance focuses on the specific use of roads to provide critical and direct access to important entertainment or recreational facilities or conservation activities. The road was developed to provide access to gold mining operations. Following its construction, recreational facilities, tourism, and areas of scenic, natural, and historical importance were developed by the access provided by the Willow-Fishhook Road. However, many regional and state highways in Alaska frequently led to the development of recreational activities and points of interest due to the access a transportation corridor could provide. Research did not reveal that the road provided critical access to important entertainment or recreational activities or areas deemed critical for the management of natural resources subsequent to its construction that transcends normal recreational activities to meet National Register significance in the area of *Entertainment/Recreation and Conservation*.

Community Planning and Development

The Willow-Fishhook Road does not meet the requirement for significance in the area of *Community Planning and Development*. This area of significance focuses on roads that play a crucial role in the development pattern within a community. The communities in the district developed as mining camps before the road was constructed, served by established connections provided by local wagon roads and trails. While the community of Willow developed at the western terminus, its establishment is related to the railroad rather than the vehicular road, and subsequent postwar residential development was the direct result of the expansion of road system northwest from Wasilla more than two decades after the Willow-Fishhook Road was completed. Research did not reveal that the Willow-Fishhook Road was constructed to directly improve the physical structure within specific communities or that it subsequently lead to direct and important changes. While the Willow-Fishhook Road did impact the growth of individual communities by facilitating access this is related to *Transportation* and represents a common function of roads transporting goods and services.

B. Criterion B: Persons

As outlined in the Roads Methodology, a road is not likely to qualify for National Register significance under *Criterion B* for association with a significant person. To qualify under *Criterion B*, the road would need to best exemplify a person's contribution to history. Mere association with a road, such as involvement in design or construction, or roads named for an individual that is commemorative in nature, would not render a road significant under *Criterion B*. No individuals were identified through research to have played a significant role in the Willow-Fishhook Road that would qualify it under *Criterion B*.

C. Criterion C: Design/Construction

The Roads Methodology explains how a road would meet the threshold for significance under *Criterion C*. Roads will generally reflect patterns of features common to a particular road type, and under the Roads Methodology this does not convey significance on its own. In order to possess significance, a road must also reflect other important or distinctive design features and/or construction practices or be a surviving example of a rare road type.

The construction of the Willow-Fishhook Road occurred in a period when the ARC had already established a body of institutional knowledge of road construction in Alaska. The route was constructed between 1923 and 1938, by which time the ARC had constructed a substantial local road network in the Matanuska Valley.

A review of the ARC's annual reports and other materials from the period in which the highway was constructed yielded no evidence of any engineering design or construction features important in road engineering that serve to distinguish it from other roads. The highway's design and construction appear to fall within the ARC's established standard practices of the time. Nothing in the literature noted any engineering significance and therefore it does not appear to represent innovative developments in highway construction or that there are segments of the road that are a surviving example of a rare road type. The Willow-Fishhook Road does not meet the threshold for significance in the area of *Engineering*.

D. Criterion D: Information Potential

Criterion D is most often applied to archaeological properties. As outlined in the Roads Methodology, roads in vehicular use are not likely to be significant under *Criterion D* for the ability to yield information. The Willow-Fishhook Road is in vehicular use and remains an above-ground property type. No evidence was found for potential significance under *Criterion D*.

5. Recommendation

The Willow-Fishhook Road possesses significance at the local level under *Criterion A* for its direct and important association with *Transportation* and under the supplemental area of significance of *Industry*. The Willow-Fishhook Road has an association with *Transportation* because it provided the first year-round vehicular link to mining operations west of Hatcher Pass, enabling access from the railroad at the western terminus of the road during the majority of the year that the pass was closed due to snow.

The Willow-Fishhook Road is significant in the area of *Industry* for its association with lode gold mining in the Willow Creek district. The Willow Creek district, in particular the Lucky Shot Mine, was one of the state's leading producers of lode gold in the late 1930s and early 1940s, and the Willow-Fishhook Road was the main vehicular road through the district, forming the spine to which shorter access roads linked to individual mines. The road was constructed to provide vehicular access to the mines west of Hatcher Pass, including the Lucky Shot, as well as direct access to the railroad, and was completed from Gold Cord Road to Willow Station on the Alaska Railroad in 1938. The period of significance is 1938-1942, beginning with the completion of the ARC's route to Willow Station and ending with the cessation of large-scale mining operations in the district, many of which failed to reopen after the government halted gold mining during World War II.

The Willow-Fishhook Road does not possess significance under *Criteria B, C, or D*.

The western portion of Route 35D Gold Cord Road west to the Gold Bullion Mine possesses significance at the local level in the area of *Industry* for its association with the earlier local road network to support early mining activities within the Willow Creek Mining District. The period of significance for this earlier route ends at 1938, marking its incorporation into the Willow-Fishhook Road. The eastern portion of Route 35D (east of Gold Cord Road) is now part of the Palmer-Fishhook Road and was not evaluated as part of this document.

The western portion of Route 35D does not possess significance under *Criteria B, C, or D*.

Since the Willow-Fishhook Road and the western portion of Route 35D possess significance under *Criterion A*, identification of essential physical features and an assessment of integrity is needed to determine their National Register eligibility.