

# Fort Rousseau Causeway State Historical Park

*Master Interpretive Plan* – PUBLIC MEETING SYNOPSIS and TRANSCRIPT

7/16/2009



<b>Attendees:</b>
Travis Clemens
William DeArmond— <i>Sitka Historic Preservation Commission</i>
Jeff Feldpausch— <i>Sitka Tribe of Alaska</i>
Bob Gorman
Peter Gorman – <i>Sitka Historic Preservation Commission</i>
Matt Hunter
Annemarie LaPalme— <i>USFS, Sitka Ranger District</i>
Deborah Lyons— <i>Sitka Trails Works, Inc.</i>
Michelle Mahoney— <i>Sitka Tribe of Alaska</i>
Lynne McGowan— <i>City and Borough of Sitka, Parks and Recreation</i>
Ronald Pflum— <i>U.S. Army Corp of Engineers, Alaska District</i>
John Sherrod
Linda Speerstra— <i>U.S. Army Corp of Engineers, Alaska District</i>
<b>Facilitators:</b>
Kathlene Rowell— <i>Alaska State Parks/Project Planner</i>
Gina Javurek— <i>Alaska State Parks/Project Planner</i>

## SYNOPSIS

**What are the important stories that should be shared with causeway visitors?**

- Sitka's role in defense of nation in WWII
  - effects on communities
  - WWII structures
  - drastic change to Sitka
  - personal stories
- Russian history of area
  - first navigation aid
  - names of islands
- Engineering of Causeway
- "Defending the Home"
  - Tlingits and Russians
  - U.S. and Japanese
- Construction accidents
- Defense triangle (map)—Biorka island, Shoal's Point, Mahknati
- Evolution of national security
- Alaska Natives—What they gave up so Fort could be built
- History of military in Alaska (timeline)

- Sitka's relationship with Japan
- Sitka Sound overall defense

### **Do you have any concerns regarding visitation and interpretation on the causeway?**

- Vegetation management; vegetation is destructive to concrete structures
- Leave areas for exploration
- Current land issues
- Cultural history
- Make sure development is for community members and not simply tourism; the causeway should first and foremost be a community asset
- There is no foot access; however, this has helped preserve the causeway and its historical features
- How will it be protected once it becomes more accessible?
- Residual chemicals
- Airport security
- Cumulative impacts to WWII sites
- WWII sites in Sitka are fragmented; how could we connect them?
- How do we let people (visitors) know the site is there?
- Safety of buildings—there are open shafts and man holes. However, don't make everything so safe that the exploration and "fun factor" is lost

## **MEETING TRANSCRIPT**

(The tape begins during Matt Hunter's overview of the site – approximately five minutes after the meeting started)

[Matt Hunter discusses that he has studied WWII history in Sitka]

### **Matt Hunter – Local historian/teacher:**

As I learned more, I said "why were they here?" Well up until the 1930s there was only one garrison of troops in Haines, Alaska, and that was left over from the gold rush. As Japan canceled the treaty with the U.S. – saying that the two countries could not fortify in the north Pacific—American planners said, "we don't have anything up there. They are fortifying their islands. Let's go up there and fortify Alaska and protect our west coast."

So, to protect the west coast, they came up with a plan, called "Plan Orange." This was a naval plan because the navy was in charge of war in the Pacific and the army was in charge of war in Europe. They decided to make a triangle from the Panama Canal zone down south, over to Hawaii, and then up to Alaska. The navy came and built three naval air stations starting in 1937. They had sea planes based in Sitka. These were planes that didn't have any wheels and were bi-planes originally. Then in 1939 they built the naval air station, which is the Mt. Edgecumbe High gym, the UAS campus building, and all the barracks which are now dormitories for Mt. Edgecumbe students. And the back wing of the Search Hospital was the old navy hospital. That was completed in 1939 and they had between 2,000 and 3,000 sailors based in Sitka, along with a few thousand civilian contractors from the Sims Drake and Puget Sound Company.

It's great to have this navy base, but what you really need is something to protect the navy base in case it gets attacked. So the Army came to Sitka. When they first arrived they lived in tents on Japonski Island then on Alice and Charcoal islands on the other side of Sealing Cove Harbor. And that was basically all

they had. They had some mobile guns that arrived in mid-1941 and some other guns—this type here, an old WWI French artillery piece that the Americans modified and figured out that if you mounted it on a level concrete emplacement you could double the range and make it quite accurate. So that was up until about 1942. And then the military planners had enough time to get some engineers up to Sitka and start looking at the big guns and how they were going to fortify Sitka Sound. So they placed guns on Biorka Island, about 20 miles to the south, Mahknati Island, which is the last island of the Causeway, and at Shoals Point under Mt. Edgecumbe. Those guns created a triangle for Sitka Sound. They needed about 3,000 soldiers in Sitka to man these facilities. On the causeway itself, there was at least a thousand and up to two thousand men living in first tents, and then they had rows of barracks...and most of them are single-story barracks but there were a couple that were larger buildings that had rooms for the men when they weren't on duty—they could play pool or read books and we recently discovered a volleyball court that is in a spot where there is fireweed growing and no trees. It's all sand so we're assuming it's a volleyball court.

Life in Sitka during WWII was a lot different than it is now. There were only 2,000 people in the town and then you had roughly up to 10,000 men move to town. They had to deal with everything from a shortage of water—they had a whole separate salt water fire fighting system—there were pipes next to each other: one was for the drinking water one was for the salt water. They built Halibut Point Road so they could house troops out the road in a separate encampment. They totally changed the face of the causeway islands, which were originally rounded and rocky to be flat, including Japonski Island and Alice and Charcoal islands.

So the buildup in Sitka stopped in about mid-1944 and that was well after the Battle of Midway in mid-1942, and that was when the Japanese occupied Attu and Kiska on the Aleutian Islands, so far west that it's actually in the eastern hemisphere. At that time Sitka became more of a stopping point from troops and ships moving out west to fight the battles in the Aleutians.

There were other air stations and similar installations on Kodiak and Dutch Harbor.

Any questions about WWII in Sitka or Alaska?

**Participant (voice unidentified):**

So it was about 10,000 troops? I have seen numbers from 20,000 down to...

**Matt Hunter – Local historian/teacher:**

I saw 30,000 somewhere.

**Participant (voice unidentified):**

Yes, I did to.

**Matt Hunter – Local historian/teacher:**

What I did was I counted all the units, and if they were all here at the same time, that could be between 4,000-5,000 soldiers. And then the housing at the air station was only for about 2,400 sailors. They also had a marine contingent. But if you throw in some tents and the civilian contractors who lived on the old steam ship, I think you approach 10,000. I don't know that they were all here at the same time though.

**Participant (voice unidentified):**

Where were the barracks out at HPR out towards Cascade Creek Rd?

**Matt Hunter – Local historian/teacher:**

You know where the landslides have been and they have the terrible problem with slope stability? Where the old city shops were? That's right where the encampment was—they had about 30 Quonset huts and cut down all the trees. I think that might have caused some of the problems there. They also had a small gun battery. They had a gun battery about where the Seamar parking lot to the 7<sup>th</sup> day Adventist church is as well, they had facilities for that. If you go up Cascade Creek Road there's the "elephant shelters"- steel reinforced ammunition magazines.

**Participant (voice unidentified):**

There was a concrete pill box in the ground right where those houses are that overlook the Seamar parking lot.

**Matt Hunter – Local historian/teacher:**

That was the arrangement placement for those guns. I didn't get a chance to see it before they put the houses on it.

And there was no underground hospital. It was really a gun battery where the headquarters were bunkered.

**END OF MATT HUNTER'S PRESENTATION.**

**BEGIN AUDIENCE PARTICIPATION SECTION.**

**Kathlene Rowell – Alaska State Parks/Project Planner:**

If they [visitors to the causeway] could learn one thing about the site—one take-home message—what would it be?

**Participant (voice unidentified):**

That Sitka played an important role in the defense of the nation during WWII. I feel that the highest priority for funds and time should be expended in preserving and interpreting the objectives for what the park was initially set-aside. And so, while we might have other things out there I don't think that we should try to be all things to all people. For example I don't see us having tennis courts and all that sort of stuff. WWII is really why that's a park, and we need to have a lot of emphasis on that and interpret it.

**Kathlene Rowell – Alaska State Parks/Project Planner:**

If I could step back for a moment, one of the things that we discussed at the meeting this morning and on our site visit, were some of the ideas that Sitka Trail Works had for sites out there. They'd like to have a landing site for folks to come on. They also have some ideas for day-use areas on Sasedni Island, possibly using the concrete footprints that are there. Some of the sites have been cleared so that you can get in and see them more. One of the ideas would be to clear a site so that people can really see some of the different components and then leave the other sites in their natural state so they're open for exploration. Matt brought that up, the idea being that you can go out there no matter what you want [to do] and discover something on your own. We don't anticipate doing any major recreation sites at this point. Since it is a cultural site it does have special considerations for on-site management.

**William DeArmond – Sitka Historic Preservation Commission:**

The concern I have is the vegetation that's growing out there, the alder and seedling saplings will most certainly destroy all the concrete. If we don't cut some of the vegetation off the structures then they won't be there in another 20 years. The root pressure is very slow but it's there and it will crack and chip all of the concrete away. Many of the structures have already been taken over by vegetation.

**Matt Hunter – Local historian/teacher:**

For example where we have four gun mounts, clear two of them and let the other two naturally decay. So kids can have the opportunity to run off and discover something and say, “Wow, what is this?”

**Deborah Lyons – Sitka Trail Works, Inc.:**

When we got the grant money for Sitka Trail Works to do some work out there we went to the tribes and gave a presentation about improving the pathways and making the causeway safe and accessible again to the community at large. The pushback on a couple of the points were very interesting. There are a lot of untold stories from the Tribe’s point of view about impacts on people when the causeway was built, Indian River, and old land/current land issues. That’s a voice that I think is going to come into this process. We heard a lot of different concerns from tribal citizens and tribal council members—everything from supporting the causeway and wanting to reclaim it for the community to use, plus use it as a place to honor the role Natives played in the war.

All of that, those issues will come from that point of the community during this process. The other pushback point was that we’re only developing it for the tourists—what about for the people who live here? People were really sensitive about turning it into Disneyland and having a bunch of tour ship passengers out there, and it’s not for the people here to use anymore because it is an important recreation area to the town. We’ve kind of incorporated both of those to get the community to really love it.

**Participant (voice unidentified):**

In any tourism-related project, you hear “how come they’re spending all this money on the visitors and not on us [locals]?” Very critical to tell the story of WWII but I don’t want to make the community feel pushed out. There’s just such an incredible amount of information out there, but I’d like to see the interpretation focus on the significance.

**Participant (voice unidentified):**

The causeway goes back to well before the airport was built and you could just walk out there. We kids regularly did, it was a great place for kids. In the 1970s, when you asked the airport manager, then you could scurry across out to it. One of the reasons that it is so well preserved is that since it became impossible to cross the runway it has become fairly hard to get there. You can reach it with small boats or kayaks but it can be tricky. I think that has helped preserve it—you have to really want to go there to get there.

One of the things that comes to my mind is what provisions will be made to protect it once it becomes easier to get there? So once there’s a permanent landing or dock, and there’s nobody there except during the daytimes, I feel it’s going to be another party central. It’ll be more open to vandalism. Has thought been given as to what types of steps will be taken to make it hard to land there if you don’t have proper business there or to protect it from vandals?

**Kathlene Rowell – Alaska State Parks/Project Planner:**

One idea is to have State Park volunteers. We have a lot of park units that have volunteers that come in the summer and stay onsite to help with maintenance and keep an eye on things. Another idea that’s more long term, would be to have a small visitor facility out there that would have an interpretive area on the bottom floor and maybe living quarters on the top where someone could actually stay there and have more of a permanent presence. Another component is that the dock would most likely be removed in the off-season.

**Deborah Lyons – Sitka Trail Works, Inc.:**

May through September the float would be attached to the pilings, but in the off-season the Ranger would tow the float to the harbor and put the gangway up. People who have summer homes out here have that sort of arrangement. We were thinking something like that where you'd have good shore access just during that part of the year. We were also talking about with the interpretation, if we redo the fuse house and do a replica wooden fuse house with interpretive content in there, then that building could be closed during the winter months to protect whatever you had out there. That was the idea that we had, that you'd have a phase where it's open for business and then there's a dormant phase during the winter months.

**Kathlene Rowell – Alaska State Parks/Project Planner:**

The removable dock will also protect the subsistence resources in the area. I'm learning more about those components—the fisheries and other things that have been brought up. There can't be anything there when the herring are spawning.

**Participant (voice unidentified):**

You mentioned that there are still chemicals that reside out there and should be cleaned up. The more people that we put out there, the more concerned we are. What about airport security itself? With more people over there, they could cross and get to the runway.

**Kathlene Rowell – Alaska State Parks/Project Planner:**

Is that much of an issue now?

**Matt Hunter – Local historian/teacher:**

The runway can be walked on from multiple places.

**Deborah Lyons – Sitka Trail Works, Inc.:**

When we had the map up there earlier and showed the areas that are going to be more user-friendly. It's like the central area of the island, so we're deliberately not improving the pathways or walking area back towards the airport. If you're really determined you can land a boat on the causeway and hike back to the airport, but if you wanted to do that then you might as well land a boat on the beach by the airport and walk up onto the runway since it isn't fenced. So, compared to current accessibility, if someone's determined to get to the airport there are much closer ways than the causeway. We're deliberately not improving the walking area back from Virublenoi, the improvements will end there. It's a more passive way of discouraging people from heading back to the airport out of curiosity or accessibility.

**Participant (voice unidentified):**

That's true but that doesn't negate the concern. TSA and FAA will get interested more as we get more people on the shore. We'll probably have to build a fence.

**Kathlene Rowell – Alaska State Parks/Project Planner:**

A couple of ideas now, when we visited we landed here (pointed on map). But the idea for the removable dock would be over here.

There's a possible day use area on this side. There are some concrete foundations that could be used for the foundation of the picnic shelters. We haven't really discussed overnight camping yet, but my initial thoughts are to require a special permit.

**Jim Bunting – Alaska State Parks, Sitka:**

There are about four sites [camping sites] that have been there longer than I've been on planet earth. We're not planning on taking them away, those have a history. As far as picnic pavilions, there has been some talk to get a feel for what the public wants. Whether it's like Halibut Point Recreation or something as simple as a place to sit down.

**Peter Gorman – State Historic Preservation Commission:**

I'm on the Historic Preservation committee and we just received a letter from the Office of History and Archaeology [State office] that they received a Preserve America grant, to spend for national historic landmarks. And one is Fort Rousseau.

**Kathlene Rowell – Alaska State Parks/Project Planner:**

We're right down the hall from the History and Archaeology office and they're doing a series of historic preservation plans for historic parks that are also designated national historic landmarks. Fort Rousseau is one and they're also doing one for Old Sitka and Castle Hill. And Doug Gasek is the gentlemen from History and Archaeology, and Nicole Acevedo who works with us will also be working with them on the interpretive component. The preservation plan will contain an interpretive plan for each site. Castle Hill and Old Sitka already have an interpretive footprint, while Fort Rousseau is new. Their plan will most likely have a longer timeline than this interpretive plan does, so I would imagine that their preservation plan would include our interpretive plan. In addition they'll be looking more strongly at the structures and the buildings. Deborah is hoping that they might come up with some ideas to help with some of the deterioration and maybe they'll recommend vegetation removal. We talked about things to aerate some of the buildings since some are quite wet inside. They'll focus more on the physical structures. All three of us are kind of working on different components so we'll have it covered.

**Participant (voice unidentified):**

What do you mean by aerate the structures?

**Kathlene Rowell – Alaska State Parks/Project Planner:**

Ventilate.

**Deborah Lyons – Sitka Trail Works, Inc.:**

The buildings have a lot of condensation in them, with the difference between temperatures of the concrete under the earth. Cold and warm air comes in, and there's water dripping. I was thinking that there might be some way to put in some passive systems with the shafts and fans and anytime the wind blows you could at least move air in. There must be some ways to help the buildings stay naturally drier, without resorting to heat. I think some design things might help.

**Participant (voice unidentified):**

In the Fort Abercrombie plan, they talk about things that they did to help preserve those structures. One was paint a tar mixture on some of the exterior concrete to keep the water from leeching the lime out of the concrete.

**Matt Hunter – Local historian/teacher:**

They scraped all of the dirt off, painted it and then reburied it.



**Kathlene Rowell – Alaska State Parks/Project Planner:**

Fort Abercrombie is another one of the sites where we're doing the preservation plan, so I imagine they'll learn some things there. They're actually going to Kodiak in the next couple of weeks. I would really look to Doug Gasek since he's their building guy and he'll have ideas for preservation.

**Deborah Lyons – Sitka Trail Works, Inc.:**

There's one building on Kirushkin that kind of creeps me out because it has these wires and stuff still hanging down in there. We really need someone from Archaeology, a building person, to really come up with a plan for the interior so that they're safe to go in or close them off because it's kind of a safety aspect. All of the hazards in terms of the open shafts and the manholes on Sasedni, so maybe the building people can help us come up with an approved plan for making the buildings safer.

**Gina Javurek – Alaska State Parks/Project Planner:**

On our floor we have H&A [Office of History and Archaeology]; we also have engineers that are part of Design and Construction [Section]. We won't be coming up with those plans, we'll use people that have more experience and they'll know how to handle that or who the correct people are to talk with.

**Participant (voice unidentified):**

The counterpart to that is there is a fun factor in being around WWII structures. You can safety it to death, but people are going to have to recognize that they're in a hazardous area. It was a war and the defense structure; I think it would be counterproductive if whole parts of it were locked off. In Fort Thompson you could go for like 12 miles through structures there, but Washington State Parks came in there and reduced it to a very small area. Of course it wasn't too long before their barriers were broken down.

**Kathlene Rowell – Alaska State Parks/Project Planner:**

I think that goes back to what Matt brought up earlier—that feeling of exploration and experiencing/discovering areas. Maybe it will feel like someone hasn't been there in a while. So concentrating on a couple of buildings that will be cleaned up, where most visitors go. And then I think we'll have to talk with H&A and Design and Construction to see what the actual regulations are for visitor facilities since I am unsure of this.

**Matt Hunter – Local historian/teacher:**

It's reinforced concrete and with the exception of some of the alders and less well-built structures, I think it's going to be pretty safe if you get a grate over some of the holes and snip some of the wires hanging down.

**Kathlene Rowell – Alaska State Parks/Project Planner:**

And maybe do something in a manner where it might look like a historic part of it, covering some of the holes with rusty metal plates so it's not such an eyesore and won't stand out as much.

**Michelle Mahoney – Sitka Tribe of Alaska**

Visitors to the site might not necessarily know what materials were used and while the materials were perfectly safe in the 1940s, they could be toxic to visitors now. High schoolers at Edgumbe don't know what they're breaking into, they just do it. The information should contain at least some of the info, saying that might contain asbestos or lead.



**Kathlene Rowell – Alaska State Parks/Project Planner:**

Sitka Trail Works and the Corps of Engineers have both done environmental assessments. And I believe within the next month or two that they are coming out with a report where they've identified the sites that they feel are areas of the most concern.

**TAPE EXPIRED**  
**END OF RECORDING**