

WHITTIER FIRE HALL
(Whittier Fire Station)
Chugach National Forest
Intersection of Eastern Avenue and Whittier Street
Whittier
Valdez-Cordova Census Area
Alaska

HABS AK-249
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PHOTOGRAPHS

WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

FIELD RECORDS

HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY
ALASKA REGIONAL OFFICE
National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior
240 West 5th Avenue, Room 114
Anchorage, AK 99501

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WHITTIER FIRE HALL (Whittier Fire Station)

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Location: Intersection of Eastern Avenue and Whittier Street, Whittier, Valdez-Cordova Census Area, Alaska

The building is located at 604629N/1484048W, Zone 6, USGS Quad Seward D-5, Series 1:63 360, 1990. There is no restriction on its release to the public.

Present Use: Vacant

Significance: The Whittier Fire Hall was the first fire station in Whittier, and the only building constructed by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers in Whittier after the end of World War II. The fire hall retains its original structure and is directly linked to the social history of Whittier.

I. Historical Information

A. Physical History:

1. Dates of erection: Construction began in 1951 and was completed in 1952.

2. Architect: Victor Jones and Associates (Architects and Engineers, Seattle, Washington)

3. Original and Subsequent Owners: United States Army (original); United States Forest Service

In 1967, the year that the Forest Service acquired the building, it allowed the City of Whittier to use the Fire Hall as long as the city began upkeep of the building.

4. Building Contractor, Suppliers: U.S. Army

5. Original Plans and Construction: On file at the Chugach National Forest Headquarters, Anchorage, Alaska

6. Alterations and Additions: A cement (cinder) block enclosure has been added to the west side entryway. The cement block is 3.5" wide. The southern wall measures 8' north to south, and the western wall measures 3'-1" east to west. The height of both walls is 4'-3", and the width of the hall is 3.5" (due to the width of the cement block). The easternmost window in the southern wall of the fire hall has been blocked with cement (cinder) blocks.

B. Historical Context:

The U.S. Army used the Passage Canal as a strategic post during World War II. Passage Canal was perfect for a cold-water port. This 700'-deep port was ice-free year round and perpetually veiled by fog, hiding it from Japanese planes.¹ If the port could be connected somehow to the railroad along Turnagain Arm, it would provide another place of entry for men and supplies to Fort Richardson and Fort Wainwright during the war. The government decided the most efficient way to transport supplies and men was by train through the middle of the mountain. In March 1941, engineers were sent to Passage Canal to survey a new town site. The new town was named after Whittier Glacier that hangs over the town site. Whittier Glacier was named and published by the U.S. Coast and Geodetic Survey in 1915 for the American poet John Greenleaf Whittier (1807-92).²

In April 1941, construction began on the tunnel that would connect the cold-water port to the Anchorage and Seward railroad system. With the Japanese already bombing areas of Alaska, there was pressure to speed work on the tunnel. The tunnel was finished on April 23, 1943, more than a year after the Japanese staged an attack on Unalaska.³

On a foggy day in August 1943, Canadian and American troops discovered Japanese soldiers had evacuated the island of Kiska under the cover of fog. This ended the only armed occupation on American soil during the war. With this, focus on the World War II Alaska campaign began to decrease. During this time, Whittier had a substantial role the repositioning of equipment from the South Central area. Equipment came from Anchorage by train and was then shipped on barges from Whittier. At the close of the war in May 1945, the Whittier Army Post was declared excess and closed.⁴

Post-war relations with the Soviet Union were not stable. With the close proximity of Alaska to the USSR, the Army reopened Whittier's port in 1948 to increase U.S. defensive power. The army set plans in motion to establish a more permanent presence in Whittier.

In 1949, the army began construction of a permanent complex. At its completion in 1954, the Buckner Building was a "city under one roof" housing a hospital, dental office, theater, two rifle ranges, post office, bank, hobby room, bowling alley, barbershop and café. This enormous building housed over a thousand men and their families. People did not have to walk outside in the harsh weather, nor was space wasted by building many separate shops in the small town of Whittier.⁵ By 1953, the town of Whittier swelled to a record population of 1,200 people. It also had eight buildings including the Fire Hall, the Buckner Building, various railroad buildings, and new fuel-oil terminal. As of 2000, Whittier averaged a steady population of 300 people.⁶

¹ Kim Murphy, "Alaskans Find New Road Paved with Uncertainty," *Los Angeles Times*, June 7, 2000.

² Donald J. Orth, *Dictionary of Alaska Place Names*, Geological Survey Professional Paper 567 (Washington, DC: United States Government Printing Office, 1971).

³ Alan Taylor, *The Strangest Town in Alaska: The History of Whittier, Alaska and the Portage Valley* (Kokogiak Media, 2000).

⁴ Taylor, *Strangest Town*.

⁵ Colt D. Denfield, "The Cold War in Alaska: A Management Plan for Cultural Resources, 1994-1999" (Alaska District, U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, 1994).

⁶ Taylor, *Strangest Town*.

The Whittier Fire Hall was also built during the post-World War II era. The Army Corps of Engineers constructed the building 1951 to serve as a fire station. The fire hall was the only building constructed by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers in Whittier after the end of World War II.

By 1960, the army had declared the Whittier Military Post unnecessary, and many of the buildings were deactivated.⁷ Although the 1964 earthquake caused an estimated \$5 million in damage to various properties in Whittier, the fire hall remained intact.⁸ The Fire Hall was continuously used as a fire station from 1951 up until 1999.

The Forest Service obtained the property in 1967. From 1967-1999, the Whittier Fire Hall was jointly used by the Forest Service and the City of Whittier. Agreeing to maintain the building, the City of Whittier was allowed to share space with the Forest Service. The fire hall was used by the Forest Service to store boats and trailers and house crews traveling to the area.⁹ The City of Whittier used the building as the town fire hall as well as for city offices, the library, the city road crew, the police station and jail, the medic, and the Chamber of Commerce, often holding town meetings and dances.

Lael Morgan's article from *Alaska Magazine* in 1977 on "Whittier Tunnelland" describes the function of the fire department in Whittier.

The biggest ongoing social event is the Whittier Volunteer Fire Department and the stories of its derring-do fill many long winter evenings. During the famed Fourth of July parade the fire truck had to be pushed because no one could get it started. On one call it ran out of gas and when it did arrive—belatedly—at the fire no one could figure out how to pump the water out. Some ingenious soul tried to extinguish the blaze with a snow blower, but too late. Only the lot was saved. On its next call the fire truck was gassed and ready, hitting the road immediately without most of the fire-fighting crew, who followed, barefoot in its wake, yelling for the driver to wait up.

Lael Morgan also references the fire chief, Jerry Lewis, who says it used to cost \$12 to join, but that there is no fee now and only a \$2 fine for being late. The membership at that time was capped at twelve members. A photograph of Whittier's legendary fire department in front of the fire station from 1977 accompanies the article. The bay doors with their red and white paint can be seen in this photograph.¹⁰

Over the years, the City of Whittier has shown interest in purchasing and renovating the fire hall. This is evidenced in multiple letters between City of Whittier officials and the Forest Service. In

⁷ Denfield, "Cold War in Alaska."

⁸ Taylor, *Strangest Town*.

⁹ John Hicks, "Engineering Report," 1972, on file: Chugach National Forest, Engineering, Anchorage, Alaska.

¹⁰ Lael Morgan, "Whittier: A Visit to the Tunnelland, One of Alaska's More Unusual Hideaways," *Alaska Magazine*, August 1977.

1993, the city was still interested in owning the fire hall.¹¹ Currently, the City of Whittier supports the proposal to remove the building and the associated hazardous wastes and is no longer interested in assuming ownership, occupying, or restoring the building.

In 1999, due to the city's lack of maintenance, Whittier vacated the fire hall, which was then in failing condition.¹² The city offices moved next door to new offices. According to City of Whittier officials, the fire hall was still being used as a Fire Station for Whittier until 1999. While the building is now vacant, it is owned and located within the Glacier Ranger District, Chugach National Forest. The Forest Service maintains the property as an administrative site.

II. Architectural Information

A. General Statement:

1. Architectural Character: The one-story rectangular building with basement encompasses 6,129 square feet. It is of column and beam design and constructed of reinforced concrete. The building consists of two wings flanking a center area that serves as the engine bay. It has a flat roof. The interior layout consists of three engine bays, crew housing, a kitchen, and offices.

2. Condition of Fabric: The original steel reinforced concrete on the exterior of the building is beginning to crumble. The exterior layer of the concrete in several areas has sloughed off to a depth of approximately 2" (the width of the wall being 11.5"). The roof extending out from the northeast corner, which creates a stoop for the northeast entrance, "droops" at its northeast corner and has been barricaded for fear of collapse. Two of the bay doors, which have replaced the originals, have been damaged by car collisions. All of the windows are broken. The flat tar and gravel roof has leaks, and many interior rooms are perpetually wet.

The deteriorating lead paint found on both the interior and exterior walls and the asbestos contamination potentially found in the piping, lighting, insulation, ceiling tiles, floor tiles (and the glue used to secure them), any early wall board and gaskets on the doors are the primary concerns of the Forest Service and the City of Whittier (who use the building).

B. Description of Exterior:

1. Overall dimensions: 93' east to west x 65.8' north to south x 10' height
These dimensions exclude the fire bay which slopes and has a total northern (front) height of 15' and a total southern (rear) height of 12'-8".

2. Foundations: Concrete

3. Walls: Reinforced concrete

¹¹ Terry Reid, "Engineering Report," 1993, on file: Chugach National Forest, Engineering, Anchorage, Alaska.

¹² Elaine S. Gross, "Engineering Report," on file: Chugach National Forest, Engineering, Anchorage, Alaska.

4. Structural system framing: Steel (rebar) reinforced concrete

5. Porches, stoops, balconies: A roof extending over the northeast entrance measures 5' north to south x 13'-6.5" east to west. Another roof extending over the western (Garbage Can Storage Room) entrance measures 11'-4.5" north to south x 4'-9.75" east to west. The thickness of this roof is approximately 8", as the thickness of the tar roofing material varies.

6. Chimneys: None

7. Openings:

a. Doorways and doors: The north side (front) contains three 12' x 12' bay garage doors with retracting overhead mechanisms to pull the doors open and into the interior of the fire hall. The northeast corner contains a 40.5" x 86" tall doorway with a simple flat wooden door. The west side "Garbage Room" contains a 38" x 86" tall doorway with a flat, hollow wooden door.

b. Windows and shutters: The north side (front) contains six (4'-9.75" x 2'-11" wide) single-hung sash windows to the west of the three truck bays.

The northeast corner contains one (4'-9.75" x 9'-4" wide) triple-sash window in which the two outermost sashes slide horizontally inward to open.

The south side (rear) contains seven (4'-9.75" x 2'-11.75" wide) single-hung sash windows with storm windows and one (4'-9.74" x 5'-9.5" wide) double-sash window that slides horizontally to open. The easternmost window on the south (rear) side has been closed with concrete (cinder) blocks.

The east side of the building contains four windows. The two southern windows (on the east side) (4'-6.75" x 8'-7" wide) contain three sashes each. The two outward sashes slide horizontally toward one another to open. The middle window (on the east side) (4' x 8'-7" wide) contains two sashes, one of which slides horizontally parallel to the other to open. The northernmost window (on the east side) (4'-9.75" x 3'-8" wide) is single-hung sash.

The west side of the building contains two (3'-10.25" x 9' wide) windows with three sashes. The two outermost sashes open horizontally toward one another. The west side's "Garbage Room" has a (2'-10.25" x 4'-5" wide) single-hung sash window that is adjacent to the door.

In windows with two or more sashes, the sashes are equal in size. The building has never had shutters.

8. Roof:

a. Shape, covering: The roof is flat except for a sloping section which rises 5' above the rest of the roof in the front (northern) side and 2'-4" in the rear (southern) side. This section accommodates the truck bay area of the fire hall. The roofing material consists of the same steel reinforced concrete as in the exterior walls. Tar and gravel protect the outer surface.

b. Cornice, eaves: None

c. Dormers, cupolas, towers: None

C. Description of Interior

1. Floor Plans: The original floor plans are on file at the Chugach National Forest Headquarters in Anchorage, Alaska. A wall has been added to the latrine to separate it into two separate bathrooms. This change occurred after the period of significance. The wall runs generally from east to west. The wall is situated at a 90-degree angle to the eastern wall of the latrine 2'-9" north of the northern wall of the shower. From this point, the wall runs west 5'-2" until turning slightly to the south. Then the wall runs 2'-2" until turning back west and running for another 4'-10". At this point, the wall intersects with the west wall of the latrine at a 90-degree angle. The point at which this new wall intersects with the west wall of the latrine is 9'-4.5" north of the northern latrine wall.

2. Stairways: One steel staircase leads from the area east of the latrine to the eastern part of the one-room basement.

3. Flooring: The cement foundation provided the original flooring material for the dormitory and truck bay. The rest of the original flooring is unknown. Today the truck bay is still cement. The other floors have been covered in modern carpet or tiling.

4. Wall and Ceiling Finish: Most of the interior walls are covered in wooden paneling. The exceptions to these paneled walls are the walls creating the jail's holding cells; the southern, eastern and western truck bay walls, and the restroom walls which are all concrete (cinder) block. Additionally, the walls within the present women's restroom (which contains the shower) are original yellow tile. All paneled walls are not original. All concrete block walls are likely original excluding those creating the walls of the jail cells.

5. Openings:

a. Doorways and doors: All interior doors, including the jail cell doors, are hollow wooden panel doors. The jail cell doors are steel bar sliding doors with two panels. One panel is fixed and the other slides in front of it.

b. Windows: There are no interior windows.

6. Decorative Features and Trim: No decorative features. Only the rooms that have been added or remodeled after the building's period of significance have decorative trim. This trim consists of simple crown molding, window trim, and baseboards in all rooms. Chair rails have also been added to the Police Office, T.V. Room, Conference Room, Magistrate's Chambers, and Courtroom.

7. Hardware: No original door hardware. Sinks, toilets, and urinals within the original lavatory (which has been separated into two lavatories) appear to be original. The shower's faucet and handles have been replaced. Steel cabinets have been added within the new kitchen area (inside the old dormitory). Most other hardware has been replaced or removed.

8. Mechanical Equipment:

a. Heating, ventilation: A Well-McLain boiler (date of manufacture unknown) housed in the basement was used to heat the entire building. Additionally heating units were placed overhead along the southern wall of the Fire Truck Bay.

b. Lighting: All lighting was electrical. Most original electrical hardware has been removed.

c. Plumbing: As stated previously, the plumbing within the original lavatory is original. This consists of three toilets, one urinal (one original urinal has been removed), and two sinks. In addition to the original lavatories, two toilets have been added within each jail cell, and a bathroom with toilet and sink has been added to the Magistrate's Chambers. The basement's western wall contains a faucet with plumbing and also a sump pump. The kitchen that has been added to the Dormitory had a plumbed sink that has been removed. Within the Fire Truck Bay, there is a drinking fountain on the eastern side of the southern wall.

D. Site

1. General Setting and Orientation: Building faces north towards the Passage Canal.

2. Historic Landscape Design: None. Historic plans include only the building.

3. Outbuildings: A metal lookout tower to the west of the building was built near the time of the Fire Hall by the Whittier Volunteer Fire Crew. It measures 8' square at the base and housed the city siren. A Transformer building also stands to the south. It measures 11'-3" x 15'-6" and contains four switch boxes and two transformers. This building was built during the Fire Hall's period of significance.

III. Sources of Information

A. Original Architectural Drawings: On file at the Chugach National Forest Headquarters, Anchorage, Alaska

B. Early Views: On file at the Chugach National Forest Headquarters, Anchorage, Alaska

C. Interviews: One interview with William “Billy” Miller is on file at the Chugach National Forest Headquarters, Anchorage, Alaska.

D. Bibliography:

1. Primary and Unpublished Sources:

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2. Secondary and Published Sources:

Denfield, Colt D. “The Cold War in Alaska: A Management Plan for Cultural Resources, 1994-1999.” Alaska District, U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, 1994.

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Taylor, Alan. *The Strangest Town in Alaska: The History of Whittier, Alaska and the Portage Valley*. Kokogiak Media, 2000.

E. Likely Sources Not Yet Investigated: Unknown.

G. Prepared By: Heather C. Hall, Helen Lindemuth, Melissa Workmon, and Lesli Schick researched and wrote the historical context and compiled the bibliography. Suika M. Rivett prepared the report.

Part IV. Project Information

The Chugach National Forest (CNF) owns the Whittier Fire Hall. This project has been completed by the Heritage Department of the CNF with review from the Alaska State Historic Preservation Office (SHPO). CNF's research into Whittier Fire Hall is due to its planned demolition. This research began October 1, 2003, and has continued with the completion of a HABS Level II survey of the building and immediate site. Demolition is planned for September 2005.