

# MEMORANDUM

State of Alaska  
Division of Geological and  
Geophysical Surveys

DATE: June 13, 1983

TO: Neil Johannsen  
Director of Parks

Thru: Ross Schaff *for WJB*  
State Geologist

FILE NO:

TELEPHONE NO: 276-2653

FROM: Douglas Reger *DR*  
Archaeologist

SUBJECT: Knik Grave Survey

In response to your memorandum of April 26, 1983, requesting the assistance of the archaeology staff of this Division in locating graves in the vicinity of Knik townsite, our findings are attached. Dr. Douglas Reger, archaeologist, and Dr. Craig Mishler, historian, of this Division made a field examination of the area in question on June 1, 1983. They were accompanied by Dr. James Fall, Alaska Department of Fish and Game, who had written his dissertation on Upper Inlet Tanaina culture and has specific knowledge of the Knik area. They were also accompanied by Walter Tellman, President of Knikatnu, Inc., who showed some of the Indian graves and introduced Reger and Mishler to the native elders of the community. Reger and Mishler interviewed Bailey Theodore and Alice Theodore who are the oldest native residents of Knik. Alice Theodore in particular was able to point out locations of presently unmarked graves.

Walter Tellman and Randy Theodore showed Reger and Mishler grave house remains scattered around the area of Knikatnu, Inc., ownership. As the question to be addressed is the impact of the Iditarod Trail right-of-way, Tellman and Joe Redington, Sr., were asked to indicate the routes used in past Iditarod races. The routes are indicated on the accompanying air photo overlay. The grave houses are marked by X's and house depressions by squares. The base photo is at a scale of approximately one inch equals two hundred feet.

The trail pointed out by Walter Tellman and Randy Theodore as the route followed by the 1983 Iditarod, crossed from the front of the Knik Hall (or Knik Museum) over the area described by Alice Theodore as containing 24 unmarked graves and followed the cleared powerline right-of-way southwest to the top of the hill from which point the route turned north away from the road. This route impacts the reported grave house remains at the bottom of the powerline hill, passes fifty to one hundred feet from a house depression at the top of the hill where the trail turns and then follows an old road bed within one hundred feet of two more grave houses at a distance of about one hundred yards from the Knik Road.

Joe Redington, Sr., showed us a route he indicated had been followed in Iditarod races prior to 1983. That route departs

from the Knik Hall, passes to the rear of the Hall across the reported grave site area crossed by the 1983 route and then goes around the west edge of the swampy area west of the Knik Hall. Three house depressions exist along the base of the hill on the west edge of the depression. The trail passes between the swamp and two of the house depressions but through a third. To the north of the swampy area, 40 graves exist. They are represented for the most part by grave houses ranging in age from the 1916 grave of Chief Stephan to those erected in the 1950's. The pre-1983 Iditarod Race route passes to the west of the grave houses. North and west of the grave house cluster are a number of house depressions, presumably those indicated on the reconstructed map drawn by Herning in 1977. The map was intended to depict the layout of ca.1917 Knik. The map also showed an Indian cemetery northwest of the present grave house cluster. Three grave houses were seen on top of the ridge which separates the swampy area and Knik Lake. Those were probably part of the Indian cemetery shown on the Herning map. The pre-1983 race route does not impact the graves on the ridge but passes through the middle of one house depression as it turns west up a gully leaving the confines of the swampy area. The pre-1983 race then directly crosses through two house depressions and the area reported to contain 24 graves.

Walter Tellman indicated to Reger and Mishler that there has been talk of both winter and summer use of the trail routes. Winter use of either route would probably not seriously impact any of the cultural features seen (assuming adequate snow cover exists to cushion passage). Summer use will allow possible impacts along both routes due to increased accessibility to house depressions and grave houses. Both routes will impact the area of 24 graves reported by Alice Theodore if used during times when no snow cover exists.

Historically, the earliest identifiable Indian grave on U.S. Survey No. 1726 belongs to Chief Stephan, who was killed in 1916, but undoubtedly there were many Tanaina Indians buried there before 1916. As early as 1886 the Alaska Commercial Company operated a trading post at Knik Station for the purpose of buying furs from the local Tanainas and from the Copper River Indians. A.C. Company record books show that construction of a Russian Orthodox Church was begun on February 9, 1887, and it can be reasonably inferred that Indian grave houses were used at Knik at least from that time continuously up to the present day, even though the church itself burned down sometime in the early part of the 20th century. The most recent Tanaina occupants of U.S. Survey 1726 were Rufe and Annie Stephan and their eleven children, whose house was abandoned in the early 1950's. The site of this house and its root cellar were discovered during the course of our survey with the assistance of Alice Theodore, one of Rufe's and Annie's children.

An added note is that Alice Theodore also reported as many as 40 graves in the area immediately behind the Knik Hall. That area apparently was filled in at the time the present Knik Road was built. Any graves which existed there are now covered by fill. Further, a number of graves are reported by various natives to exist in the area but are not marked by grave houses. Small depressions in the ground surface indicate the location of such graves. As no sub-surface testing was allowed during this investigation, this could not be documented.

The intent of this memorandum is to present findings and make some preliminary assessment of route impacts on the features observed. Any decisions based on these observations is a management decision and not the prerogative of the Division of Geological and Geophysical Surveys. We hope the above information aids you. Photos, maps and notes of this investigation are in the office files of Douglas Reger at DGGS. They can be consulted as needed.

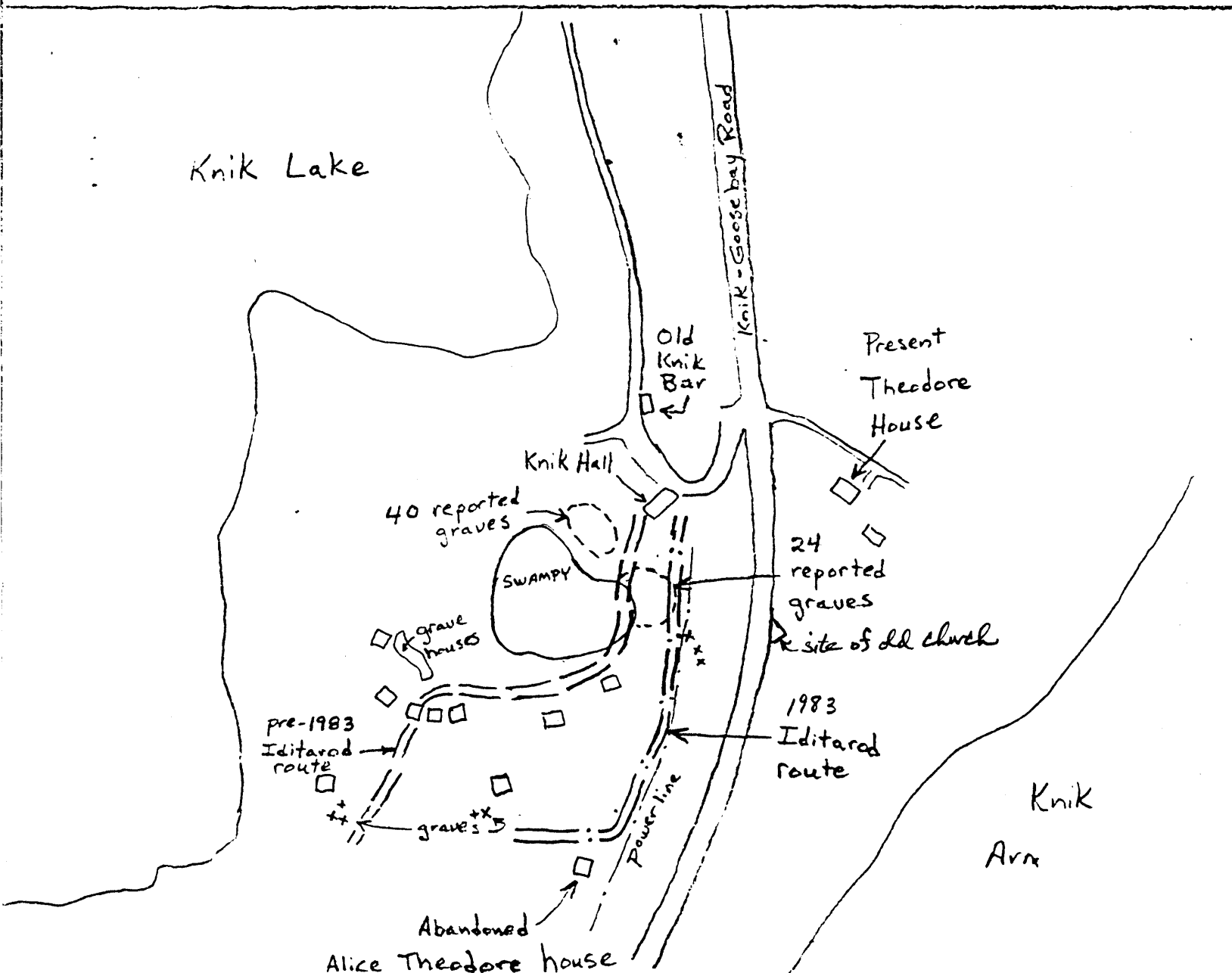
DR/nld

CC: Lawrence H. Kimball, Jr. (attn: Rick Elliot)  
Municipal Land Trust Officer  
Dept. of Community and Regional Affairs

Walter Tellman,  
President  
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Gary Thurlow,  
Borough Manager  
Matanuska-Susitna Borough

Dorothy Pye,  
President  
Wasilla-Knik-Willow Creek  
Historical Society



□ = house depression

x = grave house

0 200 ft  
approximate scale

KNIK TOWNSITE

AMT 1500

24°

KNIK

7-1-74

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