

Ricky Holt

SOL - 068

Cultural Resource Reconnaissance at the Okpiktulik site,
Seward Peninsula, Alaska

*AHRS site
SOL-068*

RECEIVED
JUL 16 1992
OHA

by

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1011 E. Tudor Road
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July 16, 1992

Location

The Okpiktulik (also spelled Uqpiktulik or Uqvigtalek) Site (AHRS # SOL-068) is a habitation and burial site about eight miles east of Solomon, on a beach ridge overlooking Norton Sound immediately to the south (Figures 1 & 2). Immediately to the northeast is Taylor Lagoon, where -- although it doesn't actually break through the beach ridge there -- Cache Creek (locally called Spruce Creek) could be said to have its mouth. The features appear to be located in the SE corner of Section 1 (a partial section), T 11 S, R 28 W; and the SW corner of Section 6, T 11 S, R 27 W, Kateel River Meridian.

Management History

In a letter of June 30, 1989, following up a telephone inquiry of September 16, 1988, Guy Martin informed the Alaska State Historic Preservation Officer, Judith Bittner, of exposed human remains near Topkok, east of Nome. Mr. Martin is the Land Manager for Bering Straits Native Corporation (BSNC). On December 7, 1989, he wrote a similar letter to the Regional Manager of the Alaska Department of Natural Resources' Parks and Outdoor Recreation Branch. State Archaeologist Robert D. Shaw contacted Charles Diters and Mike Blanden of USFWS to suggest that the area of concern was on U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) land, and mentioned in his response of January 2, 1990 to Mr. Martin that Diters had in turn conferred with Bureau of Land Management (BLM) archaeologist Julia Steele because of the possibility that use of the Iditarod Trail (managed by BLM) was affecting cultural remains.

In February of 1992 Bering Straits Native Corporation and USFWS conferred directly several times, resulting in a letter from Acting USFWS Regional Director R. David Purinton to BSNC, dated February 7, 1992, stating USFWS's intention to visit the site as soon as possible. Charles M. Mobley, for USFWS, arranged to inspect the site, accompanied by Mr. Martin and BSNC shareholders Robert Bahnke and his wife Marianne Bahnke. Using a helicopter from Evergreen, the four flew from Nome to the site area on July 6, spending about one and one-half hours on the ground before returning to Nome.

At the site, Mobley took field notes and videotaped surface features and surface artifacts. Time was not available to construct a formal site map. No artifacts or other items were removed. Mr. Bahnke constructed two signs, one saying "Graves," the other saying "Spruce Creek Graves," and placed them in the middle of the winter trail to demarcate the segment containing human remains on the surface. Mr. Bahnke also dragged several drift logs across the trail to further impede dogsled and snowmachine traffic. Together, the party pointed out surface

artifacts and features, and discussed the disturbance and ways to alleviate it.

This report was developed by Mobley upon returning to Anchorage. A routine check of the Alaska Heritage Resource Survey (AHRS) inventory maintained by the Alaska Office of History and Archaeology revealed that the site had been mentioned in several historic documents, and had been assigned AHRS site number SOL-068 in 1974; the AHRS record was updated in 1987. A few days later it was learned that the site had been investigated in 1984 by archaeologists with the Bureau of Indian Affairs, for the purpose of confirming Bering Straits Native Corporation's application (BLM Case #F-21889) for the parcel under Section 14(h)(1) -- concerning historical place and cemetery sites -- of the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act (Sheppard n.d.). The AHRS record does not mention the BIA research, 14(h)(1) case file number, or Sheppard reference, nor does the BIA report mention the site's AHRS number.

Because the USFWS field work reported here was conducted briefly and without the benefit of AHRS or BIA-ANCSA information, many of the observations were superficial and tentative; BIA-ANCSA's "Report of Investigation for Uqpiktulik, Bering Straits Native Corporation, BLM F-21889" is much more thorough and contains site plan maps and descriptions of over 120 cultural features. That document was helpful in confirming perceptions made in July of 1992, but the result was two mutually exclusive data sets independently collected in the field.

Natural Environment

The Okpiktulik Site is located on a beach ridge that has a maximum elevation of 30 feet above mean sea level, according to a spot elevation plotted on the Solomon C-5 1:63,360 scale USGS topographic map. Besides dwarf willow and alder bushes near the edge of Cache Creek and Taylor Lagoon, the area vegetation is predominantly grasses, crowberry, mosses, lichens, and other tundra vegetation. The site vegetation can be divided into two areas. In the western portion where housepits are evident, grasses are tall and other vegetation is dense, probably reflecting the high organic content of the site vicinity. In the east portion of the site, where the winter trail runs through a burial area, vegetation is thin and seems prone to wind erosion; bare soil shows through the mosses and lichen in numerous places.

Little effort was made to inventory fauna in the vicinity, but moose were seen as the helicopter landed, as were ground squirrels and fox. Schools of salmon were seen offshore and in the lagoon.

Site Description

The Okpiktulik Site has been mentioned in historic literature, using at least nine different spellings. The site is described by Orth (1971:727) as a:

"former Eskimo village or camp reported in 1842-44 as "Oukviktoulia" and "Ukvikhtulig-mut" by Lt. L.A. Zagoskin, IRN. In the 1880 Census Petroff (1884, p. 11) listed "Okpiktolik," population 12, but showed "Opiktalik" on his maps. The 1890 Census (p. 162) listed "Upiktalik" and included the population in the Norton Sound Settlements."

However, Ray (1964:71) was told by local informants that the site had as many as 10 houses, which -- if all occupied simultaneously -- would suggest far more than 12 individuals. Referring to this discrepancy, the Alaska Heritage Resources Survey (AHRS) form for the site (SOL-068) states that "apparently Zagoskin and Hrdlicka mistakenly located the village at Topkok Head." Accordingly, the AHRS form gives its location as "on the north shore of Norton Sound, at the mouth of Cache (Spruce) Creek, midway between Solomon and Topkok Head." The site was formally called to the attention of the Bering Straits Native Corporation by Koutsky (1981(IV):28). Other published references to the site mentioned by Sheppard (n.d.:5-7) include Jacobson (1984:564), Masterson and Brower (1948:92a), Zagoskin (1967:126), Black (1984:494), Nelson (1899:plate II), Jarvis (1899:49), and the U.S. Census Office (1900).

Although no feature map was constructed in the field, and house pits were not counted, aerial videotape of the site plainly shows the site complex to have many depressions; Sheppard (n.d.:14) mapped over 60. Some are more distinct than others, and superpositioning has confused the pattern. The total feature inventory was mapped and described by Sheppard (n.d.:8-30) as "very recent features related to short-term use, a late mining era structure, the remains of earlier historic cabins, depressions left from traditional-style semisubterranean houses and associated features, and the remains of aboveground graves."

East of the house pit area a winter trail crosses a thinly-vegetated area and human remains are exposed. The trail is reportedly used by participants in the Iditarod race. Evident is a linear swathe about two meters wide where the surface vegetation mat is either compressed, or eroded by mechanical action and wind to reveal underlying soil. Snowmachine tread tracks show plainly in the soil patches.

Human bones were observed in five contexts: 1) in place, imbedded in the soils exposed in the trail; 2) in place, outside of the trail, within the remnants of rectangular wooden crib features; 3) disturbed, in piles beside the trail where people had recently

put them; 4) disturbed, as isolated bones scattered outside of the trail, on top of the tundra vegetation, where people or animals may have moved them (a fox den was noted in the vicinity during the field inspection); and 5) as isolated bones scattered within the trail, where people, animals, or vehicles may have moved them. The length of the trail that appeared to have human remains in it was paced at about 120 meters -- the distance between the two signs put up by Mr. Bahnke.

Where human remains appeared to be in place, either in the trail or outside of the trail, in all cases articulated bones suggested a prone position in an east/west orientation (parallel to the trail). Traces of decayed wood in the trail occurrences suggested that graves were delineated with a rectangular log crib, possibly covered with more logs; in at least one occurrence off the trail the rectangular log outline was quite distinct. The shallow nature of the features indicates that the bodies may not have been buried, but were instead simply interred in a wooden surface crypt. Supporting this is the visual appearance of the features -- articulated bones poking through the sod and moss mat.

Skeletal elements noted include long bones, cranial fragments, ribs, and vertabrae. Small eroded fragments of what appeared to be the skeleton of a child were observed. Bones of marine mammals were also noted in the immediate interment area.

Grave goods were noted with two skeletons. One had four baby seal teeth perforated in the middle for suspension, and a rusty, exfoliating metal bracelet -- probably of iron. They were on the surface with the disturbed bones of an adult, located essentially in the trail. The second grave with associated artifacts was also immediately beside the trail, and contained long multi-perforated bone implements -- probably sled runners and other sled parts.

The above field observations were made without reference to the descriptions or maps of individual graves accomplished by Sheppard (n.d.:28-29; Figures 7,8). He (n.d.:16-17) summarizes the skeletal data as follows:

All but one of the graves located at Uqpiktuliq are in Areas I and II East (Figures 7 and 8). The disintegrated remains of 9 to 11 graves were identified (Photograph 6), and an additional 4 isolated human bones were found nearby. The advanced state of deterioration of the graves makes it nearly impossible to determine their original structural details, but they were probably similar to the crib-style burials found on sites east of Uqpiktuliq. An interesting thing about the graves at this site is that two, or possibly three, of the graves include the remains of two or more individuals. One grave, located in Area III West (Figure 5), is clearly the remains of a crib-style grave...

The individual descriptions of human remain occurrences (Sheppard n.d.:28-29) mention some isolated bones scattered in the area. No mention is made of the trail or its relationship to the grave sites, nor were grave goods described. This would suggest that trail traffic has further disturbed the graves since 1984. A field inspection comparing the present distribution of human remains with that mapped and described in 1984 could confirm this suggestion.

Eligibility to the National Register

The site complex -- the house pit area and the grave area -- is likely eligible to the National Register of Historic Places as it "may be likely to yield information important in prehistory or history." According to 36 CFR 60.4, "ordinarily cemeteries... shall not be considered eligible for the National Register," but the proximity of the graves to the habitation site makes their association very likely, and the graves could be included in a nomination of the entire cultural complex.

Land Ownership and Management Responsibility

The brief inspection of the site vicinity turned up no survey markers, although Sheppard (n.d.:iv) states that "Bureau of Indian Affairs archeologists marked the corners of the site in accordance with 43 CFR 2650." Property lines and their relationship to the cultural features observed in 1992 are approximate. That portion of the site in Section 6, T 11 S, R 28 W is part of Native allotment #F14761, belonging to Minnie Fagerstrom of Nome, Alaska (Figure 3). The letter of conveyance from the BLM, dated June 20, 1991, states the land to be in Section 1, T 11 S, R 28 W. The house pit features are very likely all in the Native allotment. The grave area may not be in the allotment, and may instead be in Section 6, T 11 S, R 27 W. The section line appears to more or less separate the two areas. All of the site, in both sections, is within the boundary defined in the 14(h)(1) application (#F-21889) by Bering Straits Native Corporation (Figure 4). According to the Public Information office of BLM, the parcel has not been conveyed to BSNC. The AHRS form for SOL-068 states the land owner to be BLM. The map of land ownership issued by Bering Strait Native Corporation (Figure 2) indicates the west portion (Section 1) to be BLM land, and the east portion (Section 6) to be state land.

According to current plats, Section 6, T 11 S, R 27 W, is state land. U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service involvement seems to stem from confusion early on in the correspondence between concerned parties, when the site's location was stated to be Section 1, T 11 S, R 27 W. That section, located five miles further to the east, is administered by U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service as part of the Alaska Maritime Wildlife Refuge. As was mentioned earlier, confusion about the site's placement appears to

have begun as early as a century ago. The confusion was compounded -- resulting in less efficiency in the 1992 field documentation -- by the absence of information-sharing between the BIA-ANCSA archaeologists and the Alaska Office of History and Archaeology.

Because use of the winter trail, which is also a designated part of the official Iditarod Trail, appears to be at least in part responsible for some of the disturbance to human remains, the BLM - which is responsible for the Iditarod Trail -- continues to have an interest in management of the site regardless of land ownership

Summary

The reconnaissance at the Okpiktulik Site was successful in briefly documenting the cultural features and disturbance to human remains. In the field, Bering Straits Native Corporation Land Manager Guy Martin suggested re-aligning the winter trail to the south, to avoid the grave area. This would seem reasonable, given the observations made in the field in 1992. To the west the trail would necessarily rejoin the original route at a point within the house pit complex, but the heavy vegetation cover there would likely preclude the possibility of significant damage to the depression features. The disposition of the graves and grave goods in the trail is an archaeological matter, and would be best resolved through a joint agreement among the responsible parties.

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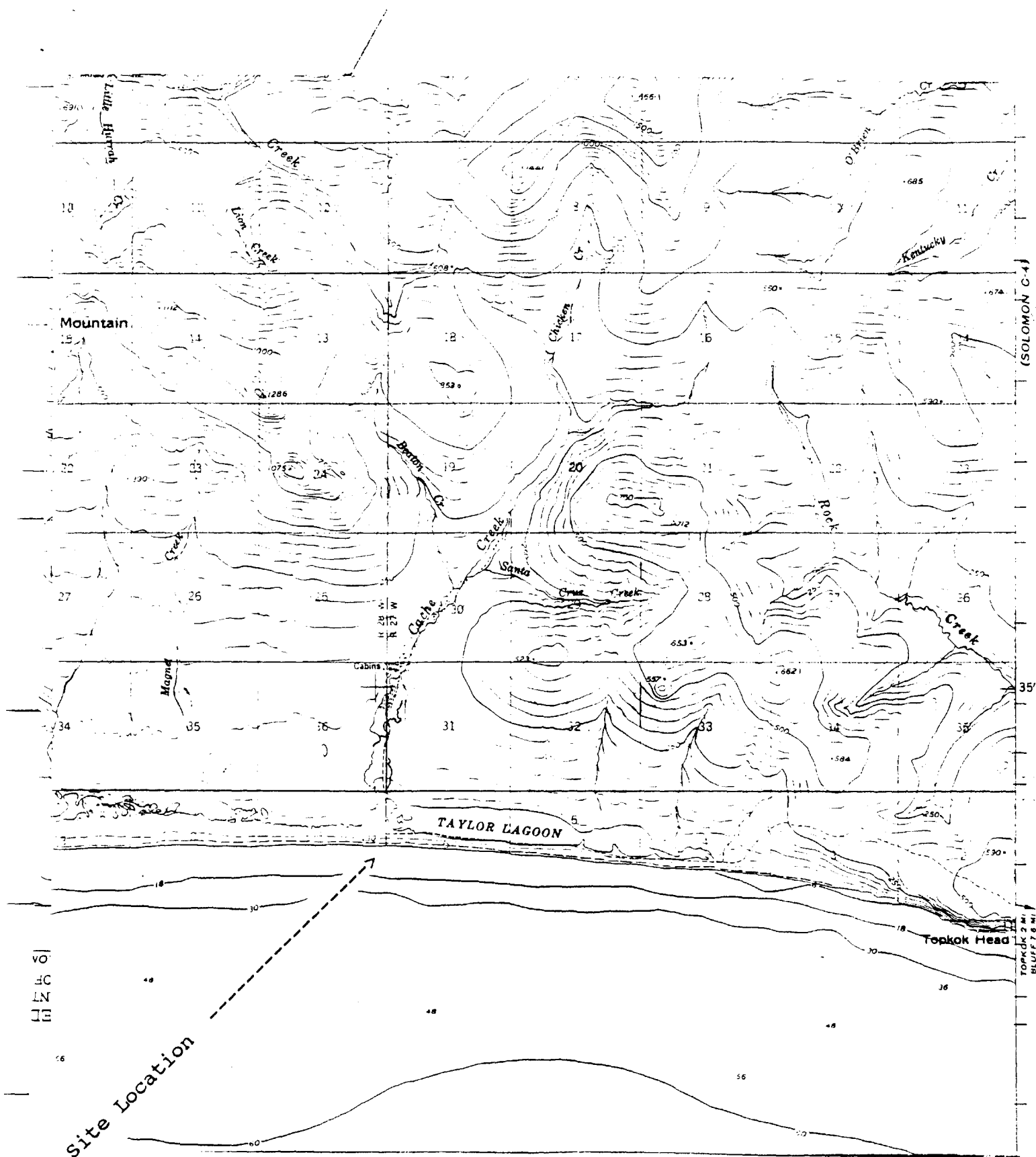


Figure 1. Map of site location, from USGS topographic map Solomon C-5.

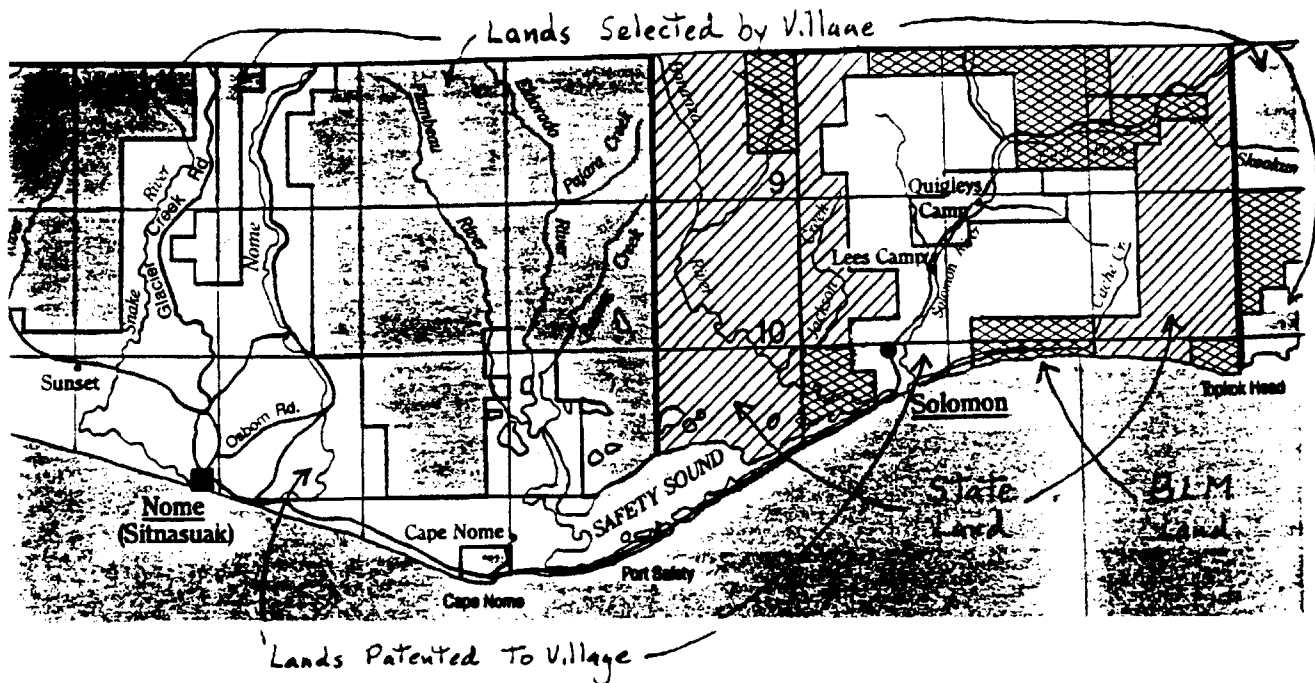


Figure 2. Map of land ownership, as indicated on Bering Straits Native Corporation regional land status map.

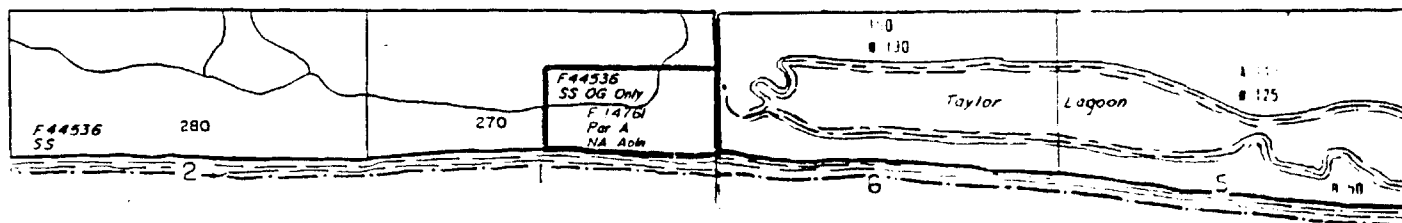


Figure 3. Map of Native allotment location, from Status of Public Land and Mineral Titles map.

BLM F-21889

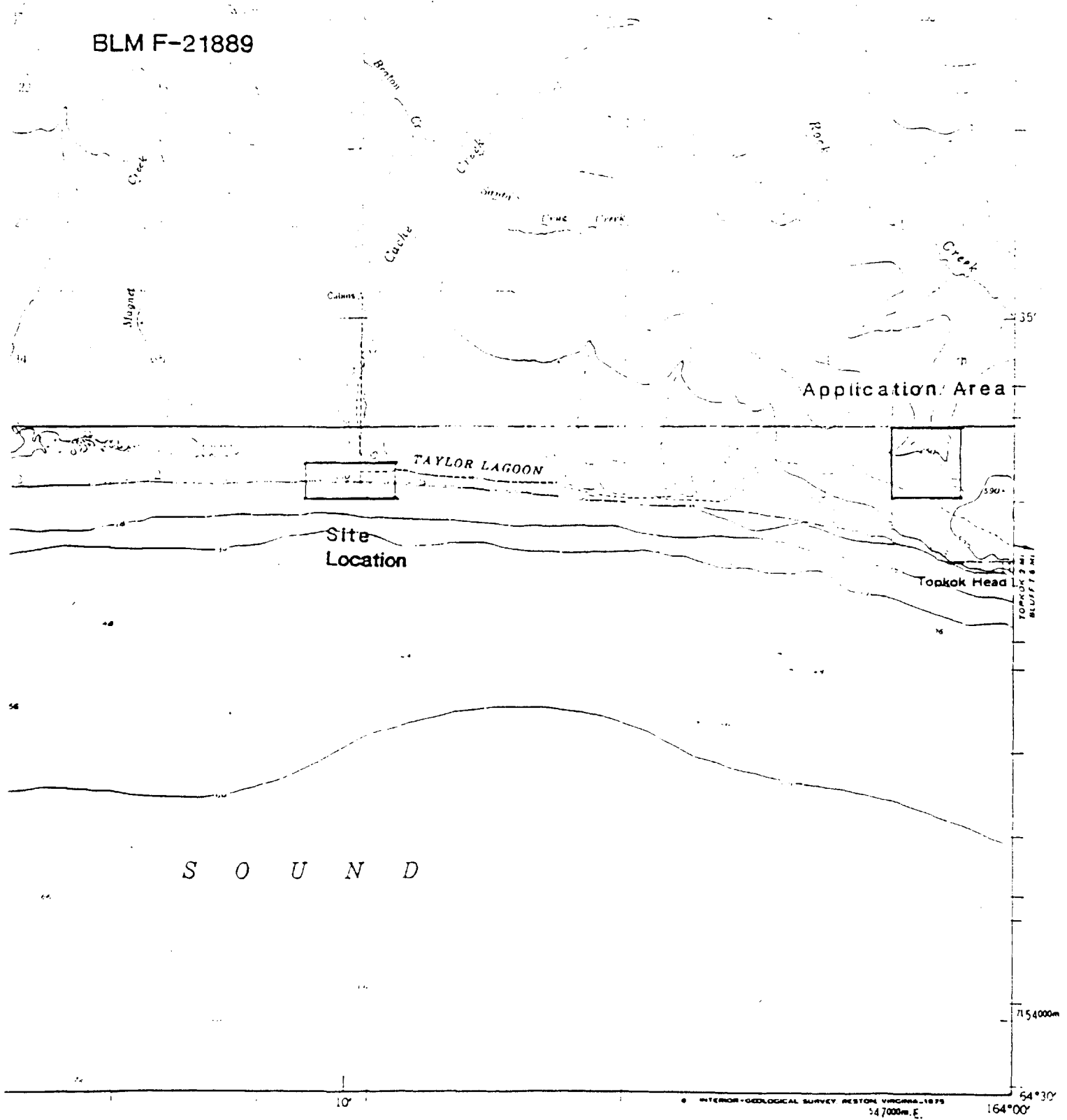


Figure 4. Map of 14(h)(1) parcel location, from Sheppard (n.d.).



BERING STRAITS NATIVE CORPORATION

MEMORANDUM

TO: JACK CARPENTER, PRESIDENT
FR: GUY MARTIN, LAND MANAGER *GM*
DT: JULY, 8, 1992
RE: FIELD ACTIVITY FOR JULY 6TH AND 7TH, 1992

Jack, please find a report and recommendation on the exposed grave matter which has been sent to U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. The site investigation was duly conducted on 07-06-92.

07-07-92

In an effort to cooperate with U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and the State Historic Office, BSNC assisted through a field trip recording of the Solomon Roadhouse, Cape Nome Roadhouse and the Pilgrim Springs area.

Transportation was provided by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Stampede). BSNC will receive proper records when completed by the Service.

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BERING STRAITS NATIVE CORPORATION

TO: THE RECORD
FR: GUY MARTIN, LAND MANAGER Gm
DT: JULY 7, 1992
SB: FIELD TRIP EXPOSED HUMAN REMAINS GRAVE SITE

On 07-06-92 Mr. Chuck Mobley, Mr. and Mrs. Robert Bahnke and Guy Martin conducted a site investigation near Taylor Lagoon.

Dr. Mobley recorded exposed human remains and disturbed grave sites, artifacts and house pits.

Bering Straits Native Corporation highly suggests that the Iditarod Trail be moved to the south of the markers which are located within the burial site. The size of the burial site with a small buffer zone may be 250 feet long (east-west) and 200 feet wide (north-south).

The people of our region have strong feelings about relocating existing graves. BSNC suggests that site integrity is very important and re-burial should be conducted at the present location.

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BERING STRAITS NATIVE CORPORATION

July 6, 1992

Charles E. Ditters
Regional Archaeologist
U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service
1011 East Tudor Road
Anchorage, AK 99503

Dear Mr. Ditters:

Please use this letter when you make your final determination in regard to the exposed graves near Taylor Lagoon.

RECOMMENDATION:

Although the grave site(s) is on Federal lands, BSNC suggests that the site maintains its integrity by re-burial at the present location.

Iditarod Trail:

BSNC suggests that the Historic Iditarod Trail be moved and re-staked to go around the grave sites. The people of our region have strong feelings about relocating existing graves. Thank you for your consideration.

Respectfully,

Guy Martin
Land Manager

cc: Solomon Native Corporation
Main file

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