

World War II Maritime Military Heritage

Sitka, Alaska is on the outer coast of Baranof Island in the southeastern Alaskan Alexander Archipelago. Remote and hard to get to, but with a protected harbor from the Pacific Ocean, Sitka's geography has determined its significance to American maritime history.

The Japonski Island Boathouse was built in late 1941, part of the Sitka Naval Air Station, which was for Navy seaplanes, the PBY "Flying Boats." These long-range reconnaissance aircraft played a critical role in the Aleutians Campaign, when the United States fought to retake the islands of Kiska and Attu from Japanese occupation. Few Americans know that the Japanese occupied American territory, an attempted diversion from their planned attack on Midway.

The National Historic Landmark designation is because the Sitka Naval Air Station was the only defense installation on the North Pacific when WWII began. Bases at Kodiak and Dutch Harbor came on line soon afterward.

The installation was a critical piece of the United States' War Plan Orange, with defenses strategically (but sparsely) located in a triangle around the Pacific Ocean. Sitka was key in refueling and servicing aircraft bound for the Aleutians.

Also significant to United States maritime history, Sitka was one of the last Coast Artillery installations in North America, built even as air power was making such defenses obsolete. Because the Sitka Naval Air Station was on the largest and flattest island, the Army decided to blast, flatten, and connect a dozen or more smaller islands for its base, in a massive earthworks project culminating in a 1 1/2-mile-long causeway (now part of the National Historic Landmark).

Three massive concrete gun batteries and their base end stations, with spotlights, communications cable, and bunkers, lookouts, camps, and a secret radar site, located on islands over hundreds of square miles of Sitka Sound, manned by thousands of Army troops, are dramatic evidence of the seriousness of the threat of foreign attack.

As its name suggests, the Japonski Island Boathouse was not intended to be used as a boat repair facility, but for off-season storage and light maintenance. Very soon after construction, however, improvised wings were added for a workshop and parts storage. It was the primary repair facility, along with a tidal grid and a floating dry dock, for repairs to the more than 50 vessels, Army and Navy, needed for construction and patrolling the waters of this section of southeastern Alaska. At one point 26 shipwrights shared space here; a letter, now in the National Archives, from the lead shipwright complained of the situation, and a larger facility was planned, but never built.

The Boathouse is thus additionally significant for its unique role in the defense of North America in this island-based Air Station and Harbor Defenses.

"Mt. Edgecumbe"

After the war, the Army and Navy bases were turned over to the Public Health Service for a tuberculosis sanitarium, to address the tragic epidemic among Alaska Natives, and the Bureau of Indian Affairs, for a boarding high school for Alaska Natives.

“The Island” was a federal community called Mt. Edgecumbe, connected with the adjacent town of Sitka only by Shore Boat, ferries still called by the Navy name for the tenders that took troops from ship to shore. The shore boats were an important part of life for Mt. Edgecumbe residents to get to stores and churches, and for Sitkans to get to the airport, basketball games at the BIA school, and other events.

The Shore Boats were maintained in the Boathouse, by one shipwright, Robert Modrell, from the early 1950s until the O'Connell Bridge was built in 1972.

The government community of Mt. Edgecumbe no longer exists and is of national historic significance for its impact on Alaska Native people, the education of Native leaders at the Bureau of Indian Affairs school, and social change in Sitka.

Wood Boats and Fishing

Open on one end to a beach for receiving boats for repair, the building is also significant for its traditional appearance and function. This wooden structure, once characteristic of west coast communities, is rapidly being replaced by generic steel and concrete buildings and rock fill. It is a reminder of the boom times of the west coast fishing and boatbuilding industry, significant to the maritime heritage of this region and the United States.

During the federal days, when only federal employees could use the facility, fishing boats temporarily changed ownership – to a PHS nurse, or Forest Service employee – in order to get hauled out. For a time in the 1970s this was the only boat haul-out in Sitka.

Commercial fishing was the main factor in the development and population of southeastern Alaska, as well as many towns on the West Coast. Sitka has been a major fishing port since the early 1900s, and still ranks among the top commercial fishing ports in the United States by value. Thousands of wooden boats were built on Puget Sound during the golden years of commercial fishing. At least 100 fishing boats were built in Sitka, most of them by Alaska Native craftsmen.

Sitka is a remarkable floating museum of west coast fishing, due to the vitality of Alaska's fisheries even as other west coast fisheries declined. In particular, the longline boom of the 1980s, when the demand for boats outstripped supply, led to the repair and rebuilding of the old wooden fishing boats.

As elsewhere in the United States, consolidation in the fisheries and industrial uses of waterfront leave this building as a rare, significant connection to the West Coast boatbuilding and commercial fishing heyday, when fishing was king, boats were wood, and boat shops essential.