

# ***ARCHAEOLOGY ON THE ALASKA PENINSULA: THE LEADER CREEK SITE AND ITS CONTEXT.***

By Don E. Dumond. *University of Oregon Anthropological Papers No. 60.* Eugene. 2003. 174 pages. \$14.00.

Reviewed by R. K. Harritt

Cultural Heritage Studies, Environment and Natural Resources Institute (ENRI), University of Alaska Anchorage.

This volume is the latest installment (at the time this review was prepared) in a series of reports generated by Dumond based on approximately 45 years of research on the northern Alaska Peninsula. The UOAP series was inaugurated 33 years ago with two volumes released in 1971; the second issue of that year, No. 2, is one of the first publications on the archaeology of the 'Katmai region.' Through the years, a hallmark of the UOAP series has been extensive presentations of research results, including considerable amounts of data accompanied by syntheses of new information with previous knowledge. Overall, a dozen of the reports in the series have been important, solid contributions to the prehistory of Alaska. The 2003 Leader Creek site report continues this tradition; it also contains an unusually large amount of history, that covers archaeological research in the area and late precontact through contact period history. The organization of the volume is unusual with regard to the series of plates that appear near the front, on pages 8-15, containing artifact sets with attributes that define the different cultural traditions of the Naknek drainage over the past 4,500 years. Students of the region's prehistory have seen these images before, most importantly in Dumond's 1971 monograph on his Naknek Region cultural sequence.

For those unfamiliar with northern Alaska Peninsula ethnohistory, it is important to note that the contact period history for the western side of the Aleutian Range is quite meager in contrast with that of areas such as Kodiak Island and the Aleutian archipelago. Among the reasons for this circumstance are the relative amount of attention given by early Russian colonists, whose interests were focused on acquisition of resources such as sea otter furs. In addition, the upper drainage was depopulated as a result of the 1912 eruption of the Mount Katmai volcano (but, compare Davis 1954:3 and Alaska Packers Association 1919:5-6). The very deep deposit of tephra that covered the area at that time also obscured remains of occupations that historic sources indicate were located on the Ukak River, and without a doubt other types of seasonal use locations have been deeply buried

as well. While this situation presents substantial challenges in reconstructing the behavioral characteristics of the contact period inhabitants of the upper drainage and nuances of their material culture, it is nevertheless excellent fodder for developing and refining archaeological methodology.

In 'Leader Creek,' the history of research is presented first by way of the volume introduction (pages vii-ix) then in earnest in the chapter 1 'Introduction and Background' (pages 2-30). This section is a history of the various projects that have been carried out over the past 50 years, and the issues of prehistory that have been addressed over the years are also described. Reviews of this type are rare in the literature on Alaska, but some parallels can be seen with Giddings' (1967) *Ancient Men of the Arctic*, which chronicles the main portion of his archaeological efforts in northwest Alaska. Dumond's review of Naknek research is considerably more limited in geographic scope, but it has a clear focus on the progress of the archaeology. The research history is therefore a generous gift to those who labor to learn the prehistory of the area, and to those who plan research for the future.

Among subjects addressed in chapter 1 is a brief comment concerning the limited physical anthropology conducted so far (page 19). Significantly, no mention is made of problems with the samples and Dumond's present review continues to gloss over those issues. It would be appropriate to acknowledge the deficiencies of the samples as they represent Naknek drainage inhabitants related to a specific phase of the prehistoric sequence; in prior treatments, the remains ascribed to the three prehistoric phases of the area (Camp, Bluffs, and Pavik) are lumped together as one population in some analyses (cf. Harritt 1997:51). This issue is especially germane to the discussions of ethnicity and social groupings in the area.

The contact period history (pages 20-25) is a welcome synthesis of what must be considered to be the

bulk of existing historic documentation for the area. Although this hunt has involved several researchers over the past five decades none have been in a better position than Dumond, who has reviewed all and sundry firsthand, to evaluate the import of the information. In this regard, the Leader Creek report contains what must be regarded as the definitive contact period history for the area. An obvious question related to progress in this area is ‘why has it taken several decades to develop a contact period history for the Naknek drainage?’ Undoubtedly an underlying reason is that the questions asked of archaeological data and history, which are posed with the initiation of the research and at succeeding points along the way, guide the development of knowledge. The lateness of the development of a definitive contact period history is an exquisite example of this process.

Early Naknek drainage research was concentrated on establishing the cultural sequence and the nature of the prehistoric human use of the area, a process which eventually subsumed Davis’ (1954) initial work and resulted in Dumond’s (1971, 1981) syntheses; subsequently, during the past two decades substantial new data were developed through investigations of prehistoric human social behavior organization and relationships. The new data also corroborated the established cultural sequence. The use of historic analogues was an integral component of my dissertation (cf. Harritt 1988, 2000), based on historic analogues that I used as a method of interpreting archaeological data. It has been stated as a set of postulates focused on whether a late prehistoric society inhabited the upper Naknek drainage during the Bluffs phase, AD 1450-1800, immediately prior to the persistent Russian presence to the east (Harritt 1988:99-106). This approach to late prehistoric archaeology on the northern Alaska Peninsula and elsewhere has been re-evaluated more than once (e.g., Harritt 1997, 2000, 2003), and in ‘Leader Creek’ (pages 89-90) Dumond again assesses the evidence for social boundaries in the Naknek drainage. It remains a useful tool.

It is important to point out that although the use of analogues has been directed toward proving the existence of such a societal entity in the area, it is not the sole objective of the exercise. In this regard, it is reasonable to assume that humans distributed across a landscape will organize themselves socially into definable groups. I believe that few anthropologists would reject an assertion that this is a propensity in human behavior. Substantial gains in understanding prehistoric human social behaviors can be made by developing ways to identify the archaeological signatures of prehistoric societies. Through this approach, the suites of artifact forms and attributes

that define the Bluffs and Pavik phases of the Naknek drainage can be analyzed and compared with those which can be used as examples of the ethnic essence of the late precontact and contact period Koniag of Kodiak Island. Did the late precontact Alutiiq-speaking inhabitants of both areas, who undoubtedly were organized as separate societies, share the same ethnohistory over the course of several centuries (ca. AD 1500-1800)? The answers to this line of inquiry are at the core of Dumond’s 1998-1999 investigation of the form and attributes of prehistoric houses at Leader Creek specifically, and in the area in general (page 36). ‘Leader Creek’ builds on prior arguments by Dumond and others that Bluffs phase houses of the Naknek drainage were consistent with multi-room houses reported on Kodiak Island (e.g., Dumond 1994). Because the matter of house forms as a reflection of ethnic identity has figured prominently in recent literature of the area, the remainder of this review will concentrate on that subject, and leave consideration of other Bluffs phase attributes and data for another time.

The preamble to the latest Leader Creek investigation flows without break or pause in Chapter 2 (pages 31-42) from discussions, first of ‘House Forms in the Brooks River Bluffs Phase,’ then ‘Distribution of Ethnic Groups,’ then ‘The Leader Creek Site,’ to ‘Strategy’ to ‘Fieldwork Summary, 1998-1999.’ Chapter 3, ‘Excavations,’ presents results in the concise and clear fashion one expects from the author. House A and House B excavations are both illustrated in plan views and profiles and described. One quickly realizes that the approach used in the house excavations are strategically placed small excavation blocks, trenches and units, rather than complete block excavations of each. One cannot fault the investigator for not excavating the entire areas of each house, insofar as the sizes of the areas are daunting. By my rough estimate, the combined excavations carried out in House B, are distributed over an area of slightly under 53 square meters, of which more than 40% was excavated over a relatively brief period.

In the end, the investigation was successful in most cases in establishing clear relations between the side rooms and main rooms of both House A and House B. A possible exception is the treatment of excavation unit ‘C-1,’ illustrated in the report in Figures 3.2, 3.4, and 5.1, and in the discussions on pages 43-56. In Dumond’s final evaluation of the clay-lined pit features uncovered in ‘C-1,’ he proposes (page 77) that it and the similar feature in ‘C-2’ represent small separated structures covering sets of clay-lined pits that were not connected to either of the houses. The C-1 clay-lined pits lay above what is presumed to be the interior end of the entry tunnel to House A (pages 48-

49), even though the excavation did not accomplish complete excavation of the remaining segment of the tunnel. The unexcavated strips between the main room of House A and the C-1 excavation present the reader with a modicum of uncertainty about whether unquestionable direct evidence of their physical relationships has been obtained. The same is true for C-1 and the main room of House B (Figure 5.1). And, while we know that the C-1 pits are younger than House A, we apparently don't have its documented stratigraphic relationship to House B. The relative chronological positions of House A and House B are indicated by way of a suite of radiocarbon dates, however (pages 63-67). Therein, Dumond nevertheless suggests that House B was occupied only approximately 100 years later than House A. One cannot help but wonder if this assessment of relative ages is overly precise, given the number of variables associated with any radiocarbon date. In this respect, the spatial organizations of the side rooms of the two houses illustrated in Figure 6.1 are laid out in a manner that indicates mutual accommodation of the side room locations for each house, thereby suggesting contemporaneity of the two dwellings. It is noted that my speculation here assumes that the projected configurations are related to some unknown degree to the buried physical remains.

Along slightly different lines, I encountered an incongruence concerning the relationships between the unexcavated House A surface depression illustrated by Dumond in his Figure 3.1, and the projected forms and dimensions of House A elements illustrated in Dumond's Figure 3.2. It is not clear what the 'projected' outlines of the features are based upon, and no explanation is provided concerning how the projected dimensions and forms presented were developed. As an exercise to determine which elements of House A, visible on the surface, were actually exposed in the excavations, I modified Dumond's Figure 3.2 by eliminating the 'Projected' dashed lines from the plan map. There appears to be good reason for uncertainty about what the projected outlines and dimensions represent in some cases, both with respect to the surface depression and to the portions of some of the house elements that were excavated, specifically, side rooms A 4, A 5, and as noted, the entry tunnel below C 1. I am therefore less than completely satisfied that the configurations and dimensions of multi-room houses at Leader Creek have been established. But it is nevertheless now convincing that multi-room houses are one important aspect of the Bluffs phase in the Naknek drainage. But other configurations also occurred, as Dumond qualifies his argument for the pervasiveness of the multi-room house in the Bluffs phase with a suggestion that single room houses occurred during this time as well (page 88).

It therefore appears that as a result of the recent discourse and investigations of Bluffs phase house remains on the northern Alaska Peninsula, both multi-room and single-room Bluffs phase configurations are now established. This circumstance ironically supports both sides of the prior argument.

However, Bluffs phase house forms still have not been adequately characterized at the present stage of research and many questions remain that beg further investigation, in a fashion in which the attributes and configurations are evaluated in systematic ways. In this respect, Dumond's comments (pages 83, 88-89) that the modal Bluffs phase house plan was multi-room of a Leader Creek type therefore seem premature, considering the range of variations illustrated in 'Leader Creek' in Figures 2.2, 2.3, 6.3, 6.4 from the Alaska Peninsula, and a house plan from Kodiak Island, in Figure 6.5 (see also, Harritt 1997: Figure 3).

As suggested previously in this review, the questions asked of the archaeological data and history shape new knowledge to a substantial degree. In this respect it is clear that existing knowledge could be considerably advanced from new investigations of the Old Savonoski site or perhaps at other settlement sites located along the outlets of the Colville Lake and Grosvenor Lake in the upper Naknek drainage (Harritt 1997:Figure 4; Figure 1 in this review). Old Savonoski contains both multi-room and single-room houses, a circumstance that Davis (1954:64-65) suggests, *de facto*, reflects changes that occurred in house configurations over time. In fact, Davis' (loc cit.) comments seem remarkably germane to the present discussion:

*Two dwelling types are represented at [Old] Savonoski, a modern, e.g. post-contact, single room, semi-subterranean house and an older, multi-roomed semi-subterranean structure. Depressions left by the latter occur throughout the length of the site. These depressions are oval in appearance, but enough of their outlines remain to indicate that the rooms were roughly rectangular. The floor plan shows a square central room (roughly three by four meters or a little larger) with one or more entrances from the river side, and having two or more rectangular rooms opening off of it at random intervals...The single-room modern house was in use at the time of the Katmai eruption. Fifteen of these houses are situated in a row along the river bank at the modern village site...*

By all accounts the site was a residence for elements of the society inhabiting the area during late precontact and contact period times up to the time of the Katmai eruption in 1912 (e.g., Harritt 1997, 2003, with references). Under these circumstances, rather obvious questions could be posed concerning the cultural remains and history of Old Savonoski, such as:

1. What is the age range for the multi-room houses at the site, and concomitantly, what is the age range for the single-room houses at the site?
2. Do the multi-room houses reflect a detectable design template for their configurations and other attributes?
3. Assuming that a succession from multi-room to single-room house forms is indicated by the archaeological data, does the transition coincide with the arrival of Russian Orthodoxy in the Naknek drainage?

Clearly, many other questions could be posed as well that would illuminate the ethnohistorical significance and evolution of house forms across the northern Alaska Peninsula.

In returning to 'Leader Creek' I will note a few small quibbles with the volume. In Figure 5.1, feature C 2 is mislabeled as C 3, and in Figure 6.1, feature C 1 is presented as a part of House A instead of the free-standing, covered grouping of clay-lined pits described on page 77. The footnote at the bottom of page 104 states that "Harritt (1997) maps dialects somewhat differently, showing distinct dialects in northern and southern Kodiak...." Although I am not certain about the reference in this case, I will assume that the remarks in question are:

*"The late prehistoric Pacific Eskimo can be divided into regional groups on the basis of historically documented dialectal differences in some cases and socioterritorial designations in others ... For example, at least two regional Sugpiak-speaking groups occupied the northeastern and southwestern ends of Kodiak Island...."* (Harritt 1997:56).

It is important to note that my comments concerning Kodiak Island are not new, but follow closely statements made previously by Clark (1964:118). The caption for the map that accompanies the text (Harritt 1997:Figure 2) states, "Documented and postulated Late Prehistoric re-

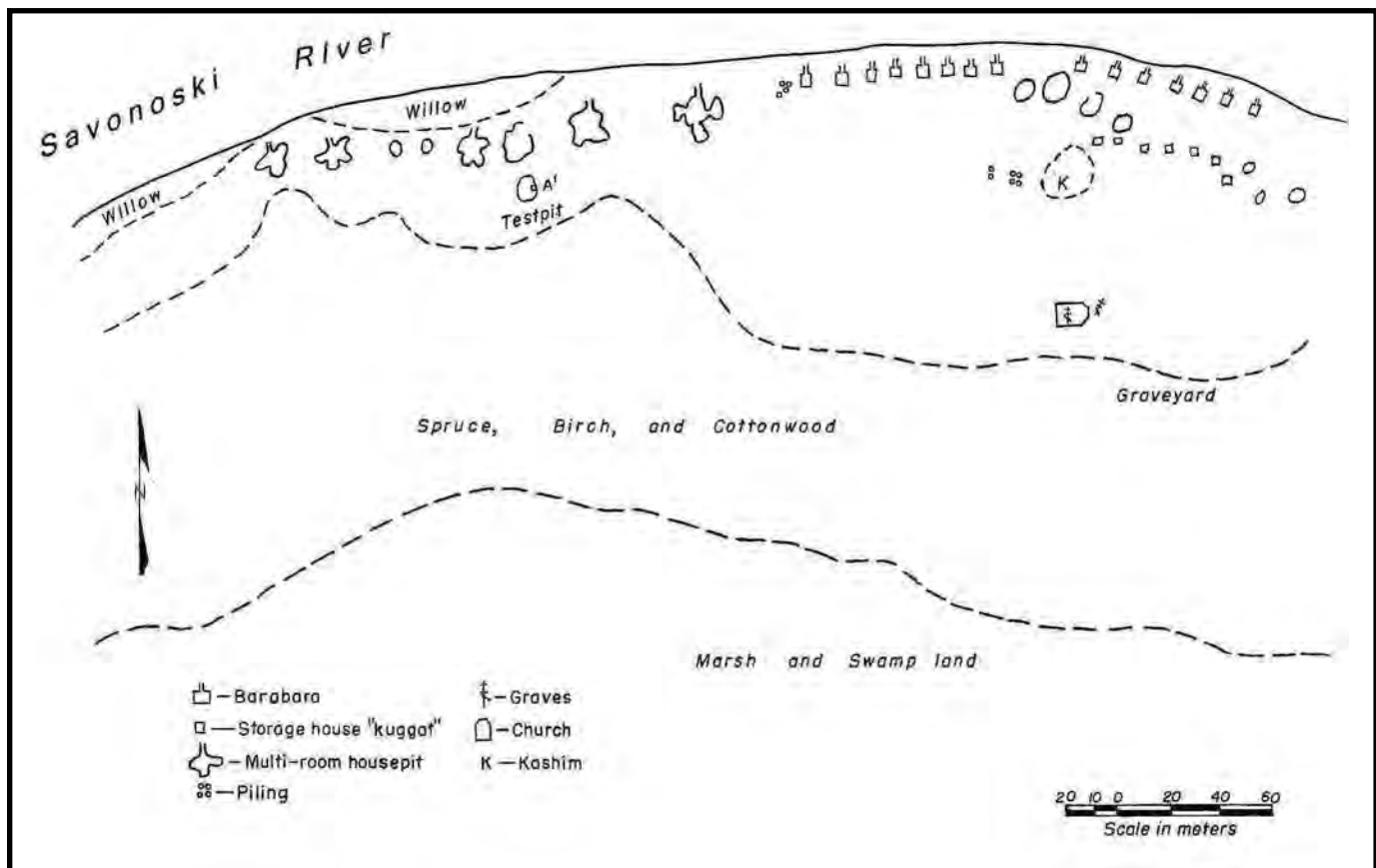


Figure 1. Plan Map of the Old Savonoski Site (XMK-002) Showing Both Multi-Room and Single-Room House Depressions (after Davis 1954:Map 5).

gional Eskimo groups in Southern Alaska....” In my opinion, although the reference to dialects in the footnote is incorrect, the gist of it is in agreement with the suggested divisions described in the 1997 passage.

The final chapter of the volume (pages 103-110) consists of discourse on the (pre) historic relations between the Alaska Peninsula and Kodiak Island, prehistoric demography, geography and cultural diversity, a recapitulation of the significance of multi-room houses, and a final conclusion. Much of the content of this section has appeared previously in the literature (e.g., Clark 1984, 1988; Dumond 1987; Jordan and Knecht 1988), but is updated in the present volume to reflect a shift in the direction of cultural influences across the Alaska Peninsula that appears to coincide with a major volcanic eruption, ca. 500 years ago. During the Bluffs phase period that ensued, the conclusion suggests in essence that the inhabitants of the Naknek drainage were under the sway of a culture centered on Kodiak Island.

In addition to the main body of the report, a total of three appendices are included:

Appendix A, pages 113-134, summarizes the artifact collections from the 1998-1999 effort in tabular form and includes descriptions of artifacts recovered from the Leader Creek site. Table A.1 provides a cross reference of Bluffs phase artifact classes from Dumond’s 1981 monograph, my initial report (Harritt 1988), and from the most recent effort by Dumond. Appendix A, therefore will be of considerable aid for future analyses.

In Appendix B (pages 135-140), the analysis of the faunal collections from 1998-1999 by Robert Losey, is presented in a direct, straightforward fashion. An evaluation of the seasons represented by the various species, normally perfunctory in this type of analysis is not presented by the faunal analyst. A secondary evaluation of the analysis is presented by Dumond in the main body of the report (pages 59-61) as a part of the review of the 1998-1999 collections.

Appendix C (pages 141-164), an analysis of Leader Creek site geomorphology by Jared Erickson, is abstracted from his University of Oregon Master’s thesis. No citation is given by Erickson or Dumond in the main volume bibliography for the Master’s thesis — should one wish to see the original report, alternative sources must be used. A footnote on page 141 states that Erickson’s original analysis was altered to correspond with important points Dumond makes elsewhere in the volume, and on page 164 a footnote indicates that a section from the origi-

nal thesis that treats changes in climate regimes is excluded. Nevertheless, the presentation in the present UOAP volume clearly reflects extensive background research (pages 143-145), including an abbreviated vegetation history, before getting down to cases of archaeological relevance. The analysis itself is thorough and professional and should be useful as a reference for the major processes that affected the landforms of the area.

On the whole, and the critical comments of this review aside, Dumond’s latest analysis of the late prehistory of the northern Alaska Peninsula should be required reading for students of southwest Alaska prehistory. It is a rare thing indeed for an archaeologist to sustain interest and active research in the same geographic area over a period of 45 years, during which fundamental changes in the discipline have occurred. Dumond’s contributions to Northern prehistory over the course of his long career are legendary, and the 2003 Leader Creek report is once again an achievement in further illuminating prehistory. I encourage Northern specialists to read it, and buy the complete set.

## REFERENCES

- Alaska Packers Association, Bristol Bay, Alaska  
1919 Report on the 1919 Influenza Epidemic: Naknek Station, Nushagak Station, Kvichak Station.
- Clark, D.  
1974 Contributions to the Later Prehistory of Kodiak Island, Alaska. *Canadian National Museum of Man, Mercury Series, Archaeological Survey of Canada*, No. 20. Ottawa.
- 1984 Prehistory of the Pacific Eskimo Region. In *Handbook of North American Indians, Volume 5, Arctic*, edited by David Damas, pp. 136-148. Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.
- 1988 Pacific Eskimo Encoded Precontact History. In *The Late Prehistoric Development of Alaska's Native People*, edited by R.D. Shaw, R.K. Harritt and D.E. Dumond, pp. 211-224. Aurora: Alaska Anthropology Association Monograph Series, No. 4. Anchorage.
- Davis, W.A.  
1954 Archaeological Investigations on Inland and Coastal Sites of the Katmai National Monument, Alaska. Reports to the U.S. National Park Service. Department of Anthropology University of Oregon, Eugene. [Also as *Archives of Archaeology* No. 4. University of Wisconsin Press].
- Dumond, D.E.  
1971 Archaeology in the Katmai Region, Southwestern Alaska. *University of Oregon Anthropological Papers*, No. 2. Eugene.
- 1981 Archaeology on the Alaska Peninsula: The Naknek Region, 1960-1975. *University of Oregon Anthropological Papers*, No. 21. Eugene.
- 1987 Prehistoric Human Occupation in Southwest Alaska: A Study of Resource Distribution and Site Location. *University of Oregon Anthropological Papers*, No. 36. Eugene.
- 1994 A Reevaluation of Late Prehistoric Houses of the Naknek River Region, Southwest Alaska. *Arctic Anthropology* 31(2):108-118.
- 1998 The Archaeology of Migrations: Following the Fainter Footprints. *Arctic Anthropology* 35(2):59-76.
- 2003 Archaeology on the Alaska Peninsula: The Leader Creek Site and Its Context. *University of Oregon Anthropological Papers*, No. 60. Eugene.
- Giddings, J.L.  
1967 *Ancient Men of the Arctic*. Alfred A. Knopf, New York.
- Harritt, R.K.  
1988 The Late Prehistory of Brooks River, Alaska: A Model for Analysis of Occupations on the Alaska Peninsula. *University of Oregon Anthropological Papers*, No. 38. Eugene.
- 1997 Problems in Protohistoric Ethnogenesis in Alaska: The Naknek Drainage and the Pacific Eskimo Area. *Arctic Anthropology* 34(2):45-73.
- 2000 The Metes and Bounds of Prehistoric Eskimo Distributions: Ethnographic Analogues and Archaeological Techniques. In: *Culture Contact and Change in Northern North America: Collected Papers from the Symposium held at the 16th Annual Meeting of the Alaska Anthropological Association*. Anchorage, March 1989. *Anthropological Papers of the University of Alaska* 25(1):103-109.

2003 Problems in Protohistoric Ethnogenesis in the Naknek Drainage: An Update. *Alaska Journal of Anthropology* 1(2):6-9.

Jordan, R.H. and R.A. Knecht

1988 Archaeological Research on Western Kodiak Island, Alaska: the Development of Koniag Culture. In *The Late Prehistoric Development of Alaska's Native People*, edited by R.D. Shaw, R.K. Harritt and D.E. Dumond, pp. 225-306. Aurora: Alaska Anthropology Association Monograph Series No. 4. Anchorage.