

REPORT

AHTNA CHIEF ANDRES' MATANUSKA VILLAGE SITE VISITED BY LT. CASTNER IN 1898: CHICKALOON COMMUNITY ARCHAEOLOGY AT OLD MAN LAKE, ALASKA

Angela Wade

Chickaloon Native Village, Cultural Historic Preservation Department, Chickaloon, Alaska 99674; alwade@chickaloon-nsn.gov

John Jangala

Bureau of Land Management, Glennallen Field Office, Glennallen, Alaska 99588; jjangala@blm.gov

Caroline Ketron

Bureau of Land Management, Glennallen Field Office, Glennallen, Alaska 99588; cketron@blm.gov

Marco Sugamiele

University of Alaska Anchorage, Department of Anthropology, Anchorage, Alaska 99508; msugamiele@alaska.edu

Kathryn E. Krasinski

Adelphi University, Department of Anthropology, Garden City, New York 11530; kkrasinski@adelphi.edu

Brian T. Wygal

Adelphi University, Department of Anthropology, Garden City, New York 11530; bwygala@adelphi.edu

ABSTRACT

A cultural resources survey of a 120-acre parcel of Bureau of Land Management (BLM) administered land along the east shore of Old Man Lake (OML) was conducted under a land selection article in the Dingell Act following the Department of Interior Alaska Native Vietnam-Era Veterans Allotments Rule in June 2023. The parcel selection was initiated by a Chickaloon Native Village (CNV) tribal citizen and military veteran with direct ancestral ties to the east shore of OML. It was under these circumstances that, while in transit to study the parcel, our team located what we believe to be the Matanuska Village site (GUL-036) first reported in 1898 by Lieutenant Castner as the home of Chief Andre and his band of Ahtna. The site is highly significant to members of CNV who trace their ancestry to the area and for its potential to preserve evidence of direct contact with Lt. Castner during this early phase of settler colonialism. In this report we detail the identification of the site and correct its reported location. Additionally, we integrate ethnographic and archival literature with an updated site description. The subsequent report serves as a case study in community-engaged archaeology and multi-institutional collaboration.

INTRODUCTION

A cultural resources survey of a 120-acre parcel of Bureau of Land Management (BLM) administered land along the east shore of Old Man Lake (OML) in southcentral Alaska (Fig. 1) was initiated under Section 1119 of the John D. Dingell, Jr. Conservation, Management, and Recreation Act of March 12, 2019 (Dingell Act), following

the Department of Interior, BLM Alaska Native Vietnam-Era Veterans Allotments Rule (43 CFR Part 2560). It was initiated by a Chickaloon Native Village (CNV) tribal citizen, military veteran (active service 1967–1970), and Alaska Native with direct ancestral ties to the specified parcel. CNV is a federally recognized Ahtna Dene tribe in Southcentral Alaska, governed by Chickaloon Village Traditional Council (CVTC). The Native allotment

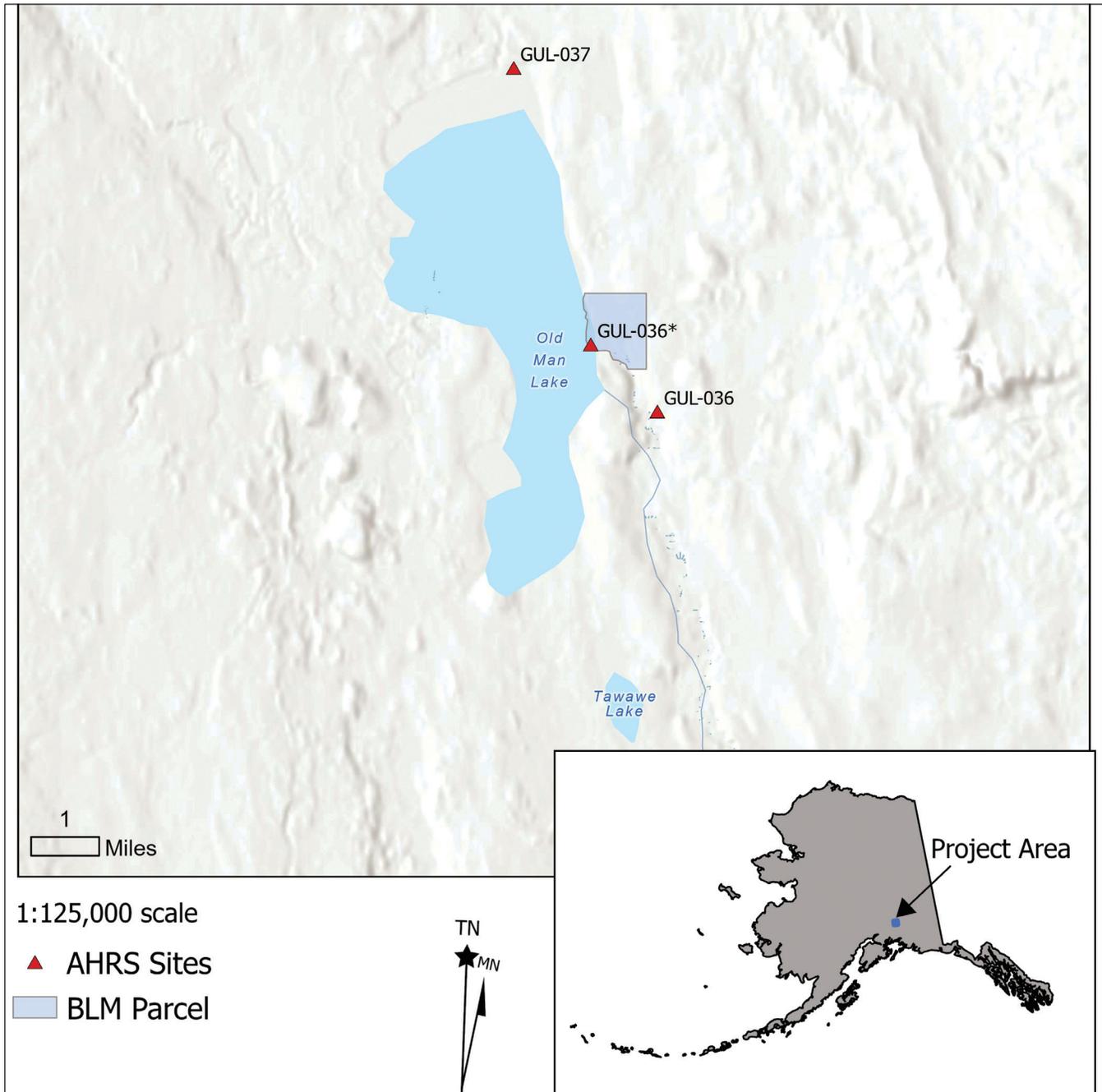


Figure 1. BLM Native allotment selection and Old Man Lake survey parcel on aerial basemap Gulkana A-6 quad with reported location of GUL-036* according to 2023 AHRS database. The updated location is indicated by GUL-036 label without an asterisk (1:125,000 scale).

transfer request initiated a National Historic Preservation Act (NHPA) Section 106 cultural resources survey, resulting in this joint CVTC, BLM Glennallen field office, and Adelphi University cultural survey. Literature review before fieldwork indicated there was an Alaska Heritage Resources Survey (AHRS) site designated GUL-036 within the BLM-selected parcel. However, the only cultural materials observed in the BLM parcel were two tin cans. On an adjacent State of Alaska parcel, we inadvertently identified a substantial multicomponent village site that we believe to be GUL-036 (AHRS 2023) and infer to be the likely location of Chief Andre's village as originally encountered by Lt. Casner in 1898. The site is well preserved archaeologically and serves a significant role in CNV oral history where several tribal citizens trace their direct ancestry (Reckord 1983:158).

COMMUNITY APPROACH

This report serves as a case study on the results of an engaged community approach to archaeology by CVTC and Adelphi University's Department of Anthropology, which have been collaborating on various projects since 2016 (Krasinski et al. this volume). This project applied the science of archaeology on behalf of and in collaboration with CVTC. In this report we highlight how the joint investigation into the culture history of OML resulted in the identification and literature assessment of Chief Andre's village. CNV Elders and CVTC developed research questions that aligned with other communities and agencies, including those interested in the historical U.S. Army expedition led by Lt. Castner in 1898 as well as the Ahtna's homelands in the western Copper River Basin and Matanuska Valley.

CVTC developed *Ts'utsaetne Ugheldze'Dahwts'edeldiixl* We are Learning from Our Ancestors Good, a Culture and Historic Preservation Department that included tribal citizens and expert archaeologists focused on priority projects lead by CVTC's tribal historic preservation officer (THPO), a sovereign appointment and job title. Interviews with tribal Elders have guided the research priorities at all stages. In cooperation with BLM, this research group investigated the potential for historic properties or sites on the selected parcel in compliance with the NHPA. This collaboration facilitated regulatory compliance related to the land transfer and expedited the undertaking while successfully saving tax dollars and increasing public knowledge.

ETHNOHISTORICAL CONNECTIONS TO OLD MAN LAKE

Dene place names support a long history in Southcentral Alaska, based on ethnolinguistic and geolinguistic analyses of the highly complex and standardized Dene protocol for bestowing place names (Kari 1989, 2008, 2019; Simeone et al. 2019). OML sits in the *Atna*' Copper River Watershed (Kari 2008) where the Ahtna name for OML is *Bendaes Bene*, translated as 'shallows-lake lake' (Reckord 1983:158). Place names also record environmental change, temporal context, and directionality of travel. For example, *Tandzaey Dghilaaye* 'island mountain,' on the south side of the Tyone River 10 miles downstream from Tyone Lake, may indicate environmental change, and more specifically that *Tandzaey Dghilaaye* was named before the draining of late Pleistocene Glacial Lake Atna (Kari 2019). This name also suggests environmental change as these glaciers have since retreated, a deep antiquity for the name, and cultural continuity from at least the late Pleistocene to the present. The likelihood of an ancient cultural group being Dene is high since there is no evidence for other Indigenous groups living in the area before Euro-American colonization (Boraas 2007). However, to date, ancient archaeological sites reported in the area are limited.

Several old and ancient villages are known around OML and even more downstream the Mendeltna River near its mouth at Tazlina Lake. The OML sites are about halfway along an ancient trail between Tazlina Lake and the Tyone village north of Lake Susitna (BIA 1989; Kari and Fall 2016; Simeone 2018). Balasculya Nickolai moved to the outlet of Mendeltna Creek from Chitina. Balasculya was the maternal grandmother of Katherine "Katie" Wickersham Wade (1922–2009), matriarch and clan grandmother of CNV (BIA 1989; White 2009). Balasculya and her husband Frank had 11 children, of which three are known to have survived into adulthood: Annie, Olga, and Mary who were born circa 1902–1907 at OML (Wade 2004). The reported location of the Frank and Balasculya Nickolai cabin at OML matches the area surveyed and is the reason for its selection. In 1911 or 1912, Frank and Balasculya moved their family to Chickaloon. Their daughter Annie partnered with Jessie Wickersham who was a bootlegger and prospector. At approximately 14 years old, Annie had a daughter, Helen, at Gravel Creek near Chickaloon River (Wade 2004:329). A year or two after Helen was born, Annie and Jessie had

Katie Wade at the Chickaloon River cabin. Billy and Jesse came later (Wade 2004). Katie Wade had many children and became Chickaloon clan grandmother and matriarch of Chickaloon village (White 2009).

ENVIRONMENT OF OLD MAN LAKE

OML, at 2300 feet above sea level, is located within the Copper River Basin 38 miles west of Glennallen, six miles north of the Glenn Highway. It drains via Mendeltna Creek from its eastern shore into Tazlina Lake seven and half miles to the south. OML is fed from springs, swamps, and lakes to the north emanating from uplands reaching approximately 2500 feet above sea level. The natural environment of OML is dominated by black spruce taiga with an understory that includes lichens, mosses, low shrub cranberries, grasses, tussocks in particularly wet areas, and dwarf birch in better drained areas. Fauna includes caribou, moose, wolf, bear, and various smaller fur-bearing fauna. A rich avian population thrives at OML, including ravens, hawks, eagles, ospreys, and a variety of waterfowl including swans, ducks, and loons. Abundant fish including lake grayling and trout thrive in the lake.

During the Late Glacial period (-17,000–14,000 cal BP), the Copper River Basin was inundated by Glacial Lake Atna a proglacial lake formed from the receding piedmont glacier following the Last Glacial Maximum (-22,000–17,000 cal BP). OML, Lake Louise, Lake Susitna, and Tyone Lake are remnant features of the expansive Glacial Lake Atna (Smith 2019).

SURVEY METHODOLOGY

Pedestrian survey of the selected BLM parcel took place in June 2023 by a crew of five. The crew used two Argo-brand all-terrain vehicles (ATVs) to follow a section line trail to the survey parcel. A handheld Garmin GPSMap 62sc was used to record pedestrian transects and mark observation waypoints. While in transit to the survey location, a Euro-American/Dene multicomponent site with cabin remains was located on State of Alaska-administered land. Preliminary documentation of the site was conducted to update the AHRS as a courtesy to the State of Alaska Office of History and Archaeology. However, given time constraints, only a cursory inspection was conducted through nonsystematic transects. Structures and surface artifacts were described and select photographs were taken, but a comprehensive assessment was not completed and no

artifacts were collected. No subsurface or formal pedestrian survey was undertaken outside of the BLM parcel and no artifacts were collected. To determine the history of OML and the GUL-036 site, additional archival research was conducted comparing Castner's (1984) report to those of ethnographic and archaeological literature.

ASSESSING LOCATION OF GUL-036

FIELD VERIFICATION

Original reports suggested the GUL-036 site is the location of the Ahtna camp encountered by Castner (de Laguna 1970:37). The originally reported location was 520 m north (350°) of the Mendeltna Creek outlet (Fig. 2) directly on the east shore of OML (AHRS 2023). However, a thorough pedestrian and aerial survey of this 120-acre parcel did not result in the identification of former settlements, particularly cabins or features at or near this location. The only evidence of prior cultural activity in the BLM survey parcel was two isolated cans visible on the ground surface. One was a circular tin can with crimped seam (Fig. 3). No lids or maker's marks were identified, and the cans were partially crushed. However, a cursory field inspection suggests these may be #10 cans, which are seven inches high and 6³/₁₆ inches in diameter and often used for fruit or baking powder (BLM n.d.). Modern activity by fishers and hunters was observed in the form of a fire hearth, clay pigeons, shotgun shells, and fish remains.

HISTORICAL ACCOUNTS

Much of the literature reviewed stems from original reports (Abercrombie 1900; Abercrombie and Glenn 1899; Castner 1984) and secondary sources (AHRS 2023; BIA 1989; de Laguna 1970; Reckord 1983; West 1974). Ethnographic information was also consulted (Kari 1989; Kari and Fall 2016; Simeone 2018; Simeone et al. 2019). Based on these sources, the site we located on State of Alaska land while in transit likely represents the GUL-036 site and the village of Chief Andre originally reported by Lt. Castner.

In 1898, Castner entered the Copper River watershed after traveling through the Boulder Creek area: "On August 1st we left Matanuska waters and crossed a small divide onto a stream [probably a tributary to Little Nelchina River] flowing easterly to the Copper River" (Castner 1984:27, brackets in original). Castner (1984:28)



Figure 2. BLM Native Allotment Selection (right) and existing Alaska Native Allotment (left) of the Mendeltna Creek source, flowing out from Old Man Lake. Note, no observable trace of cabin sites in the selected parcel to the north. Photo taken toward the northwest. Photo by Marco Sugamiele.



Figure 3. Historic #10 cans observed on the surface in the BLM Native allotment selection. Photos by B. Wygal.

then described the physical location of the village on the far bank of the outlet stream. The site we identified sits on an elevated terrace overlooking the east bank of Mendeltna Creek below its confluence with OML and was the only site visible on the ground surface near the outlet. This location is a better fit for the village site as described by Castner. West (1974:31) and de Laguna (1970) also

confirm “a village located at the outlet of Old Man Lake” and not along the lake shore.

Castner (1984) identified at least one additional Ahtna camp near the head of OML (BIA 1989:147) which was labeled GUL-037 in the AHRS (AHRS 1974; BIA 1989:148–156; de Laguna 1970). Based on location alone, the site identified in this project could not represent the

one at the head of OML. GUL-037 is also clearly not the site we identified because the structures and surface artifacts are distinct, such as the presence of a plywood shack and 55-gallon drums, for example, which were not observed at GUL-036.

To further corroborate our identification of GUL-036, Castner (1984), provides one additional piece of geographic information: “As we made our way past the head of Upper Lake Plaveznie, Andre came out of some stunted spruce in which his people were camped” (Castner 1984:31). Abercrombie (1900:211–213) indicated that Castner referred to OML specifically as Upper Lake Plaveznie.

PRELIMINARY SITE DESCRIPTION

At the GUL-036 site, vegetation consisted of black spruce, moss, lichen, tussock grass, and some areas of dwarf birch in several well-drained areas. Undergrowth was less than one meter tall, making ground surface visibility high. At least two cabin ruins and various outhouses were observed (Figs. 4–6). Artifacts observed on the surface included a variety of metal objects including portions of wood stoves,

sheet iron fragments, metal cans, and porcelain kitchenware (white ware) fragments. A blue glass bead (Figs. 7–8), and “1 lb BAKING POWDER” can lid with an outside rim also were observed on the surface along with lithic flakes, including heat-treated chert and a *bendaasi* or split cobble knife/hide scraper like that described by Wade (2004). There were at least two cabins and several subterranean surface features. The condition of the cabins as well as presence of semisubterranean cultural features indicates the cultural remains likely represent multiple generations of Ahtna living at this village around the turn of the twentieth century and before. Further, the presence of ground caches or depressions with elevated berms and lithic artifacts likely represent older components.

The log cabin consisted of two rooms where each room was approximately 10 square feet. It was 14 tiers high in some places (3½ ft high), constructed with sawn and axe-cut logs, notched corner joints, and metal nails. The roof was collapsed with spruce trees growing out of it. Associated metal tools included a crowbar, sheet metal, and remnants of a stove. A second structure north of the two-roomed cabin was completely collapsed and revegetated. It was represented by a rectangular berm roughly



Figure 4. Historic double-room cabin feature and associated debris scatter observed at actual location of GUL-036 on State of Alaska land near the survey parcel. Photo taken approximately 50 feet above the ground surface. Photo by Marco Sugamiele.



Figure 5. Older cabin berm feature observed at GUL-036. Six-meter pocket rod in center of photo for scale. Photo taken approximately 50 feet above the ground surface. Photo by Marco Sugamiele.

12 inches high and estimated to be 14 by 10 feet in dimension. The level of vegetation regrowth of moss and berries indicates this cabin is older than the two-roomed log cabin. Castner (1984:30) appears to have learned about sweat baths and may have observed them directly at this location where several individuals “gave us an illustration of the uses of the sweat bath. Adopted from the Russians, this is taken in a room especially prepared for it in each house, or in a dome-shaped structure made of bent willows about four feet high and twelve feet in circumference.” Perhaps one of these features represents a sweat bath?

The ceramic pieces included one with a maker’s mark reading “K.T. & K Granite” as well as others with floral patterns which can be temporally diagnostic. Further research of these prints may provide more constraining dates for one or multiple generations living at the village. The blue bead observed on the surface compares well with Cook type or Padre trail beads described by Grover (2016). Trade beads, especially pale blue, turquoise, and white glass beads, have been identified in late precontact and protohistoric contexts in Alaska, demonstrating vast trading networks (Grover 2016). Based on the available evidence, it is possible that these artifacts indicate a period

consistent with Castner’s 1898 visit to the site, along with older and younger elements as well.

CONCLUSION

No significant cultural resources were observed within the BLM-selected parcel, including no evidence for reported GUL-036 site (AHRS 2023) within the survey parcel. However, a substantial multicomponent site with ancient, precontact, and contact-era artifacts and features was located on the adjacent State of Alaska land and is presumed to be GUL-036 or Chief Andre’s Ahtna village site. It is most likely the site described by Lt. Castner in 1898 as the location of an “Indian” village based on comparisons of the physical location and its differentiation from other sites around the area including at the head of OML. Because this site was identified during transit to the study parcel, it was not recorded in detail, but an initial report is provided here. Additional research is encouraged to confirm the hypothesis that this site is significant as a Dene village connected to CNV as well as to Lt. Castner and earlier Russian settler colonial activities.



Figure 6. GUL-036 (actual location) photos of historic double-room cabin with axe- and saw-cut logs. (A) Stacked cabin logs at the northeast corner of the structure; (B) Stacked logs at the southeast corner of the structure; (C) stacked corner logs at the northeast corner of the structure with alternate angle facing west; (D) overview photo facing west of the eastern wall of the cabin structure. Photos by B. Wygal.

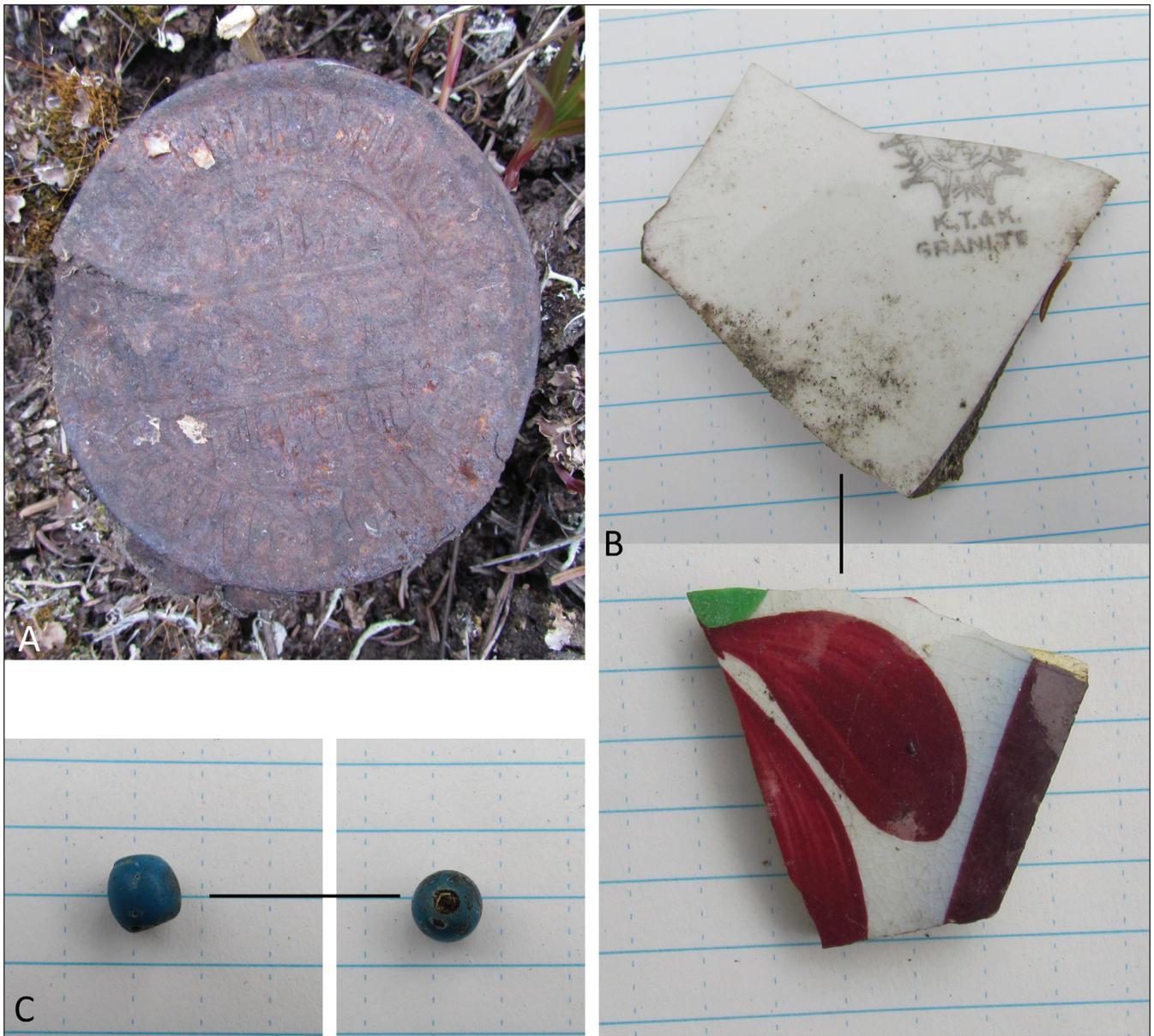


Figure 7. GUL-036 Assorted artifacts from the surface. (A) Baking powder one pound can; (B) front, ceramic fragment with K.T.&K Granite maker's mark; back, ceramic fragment with floral pattern; (C) blue glass bead; graph paper scale is one square = ¼ inch, four squares = 1 inch. Photos by B. Wygal.



Figure 8. Lithic tool (bendaasi) observed on the surface of the GUL-036 site. Dorsal (top), ventral (bottom). Photos by B. Wygal.

REFERENCES

- Abercrombie, W. R.
1900 A Military Reconnaissance of the Copper River Valley. In *Compilation of Narratives of Explorations in Alaska*. U.S. Senate Committee on Military Affairs, Washington, DC.
- Abercrombie, W. R., and E. F. Glenn
1899 *Reports of Explorations in the Territory of Alaska (Cooks Inlet, Sushitna, Copper, and Tanana Rivers) 1898*. Report no. 25. U.S. Government Printing Office, Washington, DC.
- Alaska Heritage Resources Survey (AHRS)
2023 Alaska Heritage Resources Survey. Alaska Office of History and Archaeology, Anchorage.
- Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA)
1989 *Report of Investigation for Lake Sites in the Southwest Ahtna Region, Ahtna, Inc.* BLM AA-58702 to AA-58727 and AA-60736. Bureau of Indian Affairs, ANCSA Program, Anchorage.
- Bureau of Land Management (BLM)
n.d. National Training Center, Historic Artifact Identification Guide. <https://www.ntc.blm.gov/krc/system/files?file=legacy/uploads/22015/HistoricArtifactIDGuide.pdf>
- Boraas, Alan
2007 Dena'ina Origins and Prehistory. In *Nanutset Ch'u Q'udi Gu, Before Our Time and Now*, edited by Karen Gaul, pp. 31–41. National Park Service Anchorage.
- Castner, J., Lt.
1984 *Lieutenant Castner's Alaska Exploration, 1898: A Journey of Hardship and Suffering*. Alaska Historic Commission Studies in History no. 125. Cook Inlet Historical Society, Anchorage.
- de Laguna, Frederica
1970 *Sites and Place Names in Atna Territory Copper River Basin*. ANCSA Office, Bureau of Indian Affairs, Anchorage.
- Grover, Margan A.
2016 Late Precontact and Protohistoric Glass Beads of Alaska. *Arctic Anthropology* 53(2):69–80.
- Kari, James
1989 Some Principles of Alaskan Athabaskan Toponymic Knowledge. In *General and Amerindian Ethnolinguistics*, edited by M. R. Key and H. M. Hoenigswald, pp. 129–149. New York: Mouton de Gruter.
2008 *Ahtna Place Names Lists*, 2nd ed. Alaska Native Language Center, University of Alaska Fairbanks.
2019 The Resilience of Dene Generative Geography, Considering “*The Nen' Yese' Ensemble*.” *Alaska Journal of Anthropology* 17:44–76.
- Kari, James, and James A. Fall
2016 *Shem Pete's Alaska: The Territory of the Upper Cook Inlet Dena'ina*. University of Alaska Press, Fairbanks.
- Reckord, Holly
1983 *Where Raven Stood: Cultural Resources of the Ahtna Region*. Anthropology and Historic Preservation, Cooperative Park Studies Unit, University of Alaska Fairbanks.
- Simeone, William E.
2018 *Ahtna: The People and Their History*. Ahtna, Inc., Glennallen, AK.
- Simeone, William E., Wilson Justin, Michelle Anderson, and Kathryn Martin
2019 The Ahtna Homeland. *Alaska Journal of Anthropology* 17(1–2):102–119.
- Smith, Gerad
2019 Geoarchaeology of Glacial Lakes Susitna and Atna. *Alaska Journal of Anthropology* 17(1–2):6–27.
- Wade, Katherine
2004 *Chickaloon Spirit: The Life and Times of Katherine Wickersham Wade*. Chickaloon Village Traditional Council, Chickaloon, AK.
- West, Constance
1974 *An Inventory of Trails with Habitation Sites in the Ahtna Region*. Report 16071086. Alaska Office of History and Archaeology, Anchorage.
- White, Rindi
2009 Katherine Wade, Matriarch of Chickaloon Tribe Dies. *Anchorage Daily News*, March 24. <https://www.adn.com/alaska-news/article/katherine-wade-matriarch-chickaloon-tribe-dies/2009/03/25/>