

James Taylor Cabins
Right bank of the Yukon River opposite
Fourth of July Creek
Yukon-Charley Rivers National Preserve
Eagle vicinity
~~Upper Yukon Division~~
Alaska

HABS No. AK-41

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Historic American Buildings Survey
National Park Service
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HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY

JAMES TAYLOR CABINS

HABS No. AK-41

Location: Right bank of Yukon River opposite mouth of Fourth of July Creek approximately 3 miles downriver from the Nation River, approximately 50 miles downriver from Eagle in the Yukon-Charley Rivers National Preserve, Alaska.

USGS Charley River Quadrangle, UTM Coordinates:
07.7232150.463200

Present Owner: U. S. Government.

Present Use: Main cabin destroyed by fire ca. 1968.

Significance: James Taylor, a miner who had been in the country since the early days of the twentieth century, settled on the right bank of the Yukon when he had ceased mining and turned to trapping in the mid 1920s. Although the main cabin no longer stands, the remaining cabins show the careful construction and ingenuity for which Taylor was known. The shed, clearly added to, was used for storage, and the shop served as his first residence on the site and later as his blacksmith shop. The dog barn, divided into different stalls by vertical poles, and the dog corrals, which gave the dogs access to water, were unusual.

PART I. HISTORICAL INFORMATION

A. Physical History:

1. Date of erection: The shop was built in 1924 when Taylor first moved to the site. It served as his residence until he built the main cabin ca. 1928-29. Charlie Biederman remembers that the main cabin was definitely present in 1930.
2. Builder: James Taylor probably built the cabins himself.
3. Original and subsequent owners: James Taylor, the original owner, left the place to Ed Biederman in his will. Taylor died in 1933. Biederman's widow sold it to Mr. and Mrs. Heiniger.
4. Original plan and construction: The original cabin on the site, the shop, is a one-story log cabin with the logs notched or nailed into corner posts. The logs are

carefully hewn on the interior and chinked with moss and mud. The roof was sod on split poles.

The shop was probably built in 1924, when Taylor moved across the river from Nation. A note on the inside of the door, which is constructed of beaded siding, reads "Nov. 1/31." There is a counter built in along the east wall and a small cast-iron stove.

Main cabin: The main cabin on this site was so unusual that it remained vividly in visitors' minds. Two accounts are quoted here.

Sam White, a game warden in the area in the 1920s and 1930s, wrote in his undated memoirs:

The cabin was built on a bank overlooking the Yukon and in a beautiful setting. The cabin itself was a two room affair with quite a bit of room in each room. In the far corner of the room sat a cook stove. Beside the cook stove was a trap door in the wall on hinges, and a wood box full of wood right under the trap door. On the outside of the wall was a wood shute full of wood and when one opened the door the wood rolled into the wood box automatically. By the partition separating the two rooms there was what looked like a trap door in the floor, except it was not a trap door, it was the top of a "dumb waiter" with two shelves in it. On the partition was a crank with some cable arrangements and to raise the waiter from the basement just turn the crank and the waiter raised out of the basement and everything on it was nice and cool. The floor of both rooms was covered with a good grade of linoleum. The eating table sat near the front wall by a window overlooking the Yukon River, a pleasant place to sit and eat. In the other room Jim had cot beds with plenty of blankets and comforters, pillows, pillow cases and sheets, all snow white and clean. When Jim put in a stick of wood in the stove he grabbed a brush and a dust pan and swept up all slivers and bark and put them in the stove also. When a meal had been eaten, the dishes were whisked off the table and put in the sink and washed immediately. The dumb waiter was cranked up again the the perishables were placed on it and let down into the basement.

Barney Hansen, who worked on Fourth of July Creek in the early 1930s, recalled the cabin in a talk he gave in 1974:

Gee that was a beautiful cabin; made out of logs he got near the mouth of July Creek where it runs into the slough -- nice big logs. He came up here and

got all the old nails he could get, all the old magazines, catalogues and papers and took them down there and made a mash out of the stuff. He drove nails into the logs and pasted this paste he had made over them. That stuff never did let loose, it was still pliable, you could stick your finger into it. He built it right over a little spring that ran into that draw. It was a two room cabin. In his kitchen he had a dumb waiter. On the end he had a crank handle, he could open the door and crank it up. He had drawers and shelves in it to put things in. It went down to the spring, so it was always cold and nothing spoiled. Dandy place and pretty handy. In the front room he had a great big window. He sent outside and had it specailly made -- plate glass double thickness with a space in between the glass so it never fogged up. It was beautiful, he could always look out on the river.

5. Alterations and additions: The cellar of the main cabin was filled in and the floor replaced by the Heinigers. The cabin was destroyed by fire ca. 1968. The shop's roof, replaced in 1984, is tarpaper over wood planks.
6. Outbuildings:
 - a. Shed: The shed, located east of the shop, was built in two sections. They are both of round logs nailed or notched into corner posts. The gable that originally marked the end of the original building is still in place, although the wall below it has been removed. The chinking between the logs consists of a paste-like material (of which newspapers are one of the ingredients) which may be that described by Barney Hansen in reference to the main cabin. The roof was tarpaper and corrugated tin over wood planks, although that may have been a replacement of the original, which might have been sod, like the shop. A large cabinet in the northwest corner is constructed of drop siding.

Notes on the interior of the door, which is constructed of beaded siding, recorded break-ups: "May 14, 1914. ice moved 4:20 P.M." and "May 9, 1915. ice moved 1:10 P.M." It is unlikely that this building was at this site at that time. The door may have been moved from somewhere, perhaps Nation. The beaded siding used to make the door probably came from Fort Egbert.

The similarity between the shop and the shed indicates that they were both built by Taylor. Like the shop, the interior walls in the shed are hewn flat. Both cabins are marked by the uniformity of

their logs and the unusual treatment of the corner posts. The notes on the doors are in the same place, near the top in the center. The roof, replaced in 1984, is now corrugated tin over wood planks.

- b. Dog barn: The dog barn, located east of the cabins, is a low, log cabin, saddlenotched, with a sod roof over split poles. The door is just 2'-4" high. On the interior, six stalls are built from vertical poles, spaced a few inches apart. Each stall has its own door. It is said that Taylor could operate the doors simultaneously by pulling a lever outside, but this mechanism no longer remains (McPhee, 259). There is evidence in the roof of a hole for a chimney.
- c. Dog houses and corrals: Taylor built extensive dog houses and corrals for his dogs. One dog house, which remains, is of logs with lap-jointed corners and a shed roof. The corrals, which extended from the dog houses down to a nearby stream, were constructed of vertical poles.

B. Historical Context:

Before he settled on this site on the right bank of the Yukon, James M. Taylor prospected and mined for nearly twenty years on the left bank. Taylor was born in Wisconsin in 1875 (1910 Census) and staked his first claim on the Seventymile River in 1905. In 1906 he staked a claim on a tributary of Washington Creek (Eagle District Mining Locations 3:482, 588).

By 1908, Taylor was prospecting on Fourth of July Creek, and he mined and worked there for the next fifteen years or so (Eagle District Mining Locations 4:173, 242, 342, 518, 519). The 1910 census taker found him on Ruby Creek, a tributary of Fourth of July Creek, and he also apparently had several cabins, there and at Nation. Art Reynolds' diary for 1911 contains the following cryptic entries:

- May 15. I moved from Taylor's little cabin into the one he lives in.
- June 24. I moved from Taylor's house to his cabin.
- Oct. 14. We moved from Taylor's cabin to our new one on 13. Taylor helped us move.

Along with Woodchopper and Coal creeks, Fourth of July Creek was one of the richest creeks for gold mining between Eagle and Circle. The U.S. Geological Survey noted:

A trail 10 to 12 miles long leads from Nation, on the Yukon at the mouth of Fourth of July Creek, to these

placers....It is reported that half a dozen men were at work here in 1906 (Brooks, 200).

By 1909-10, the creek produced about \$6,000 and was being worked by about a dozen men, with one automatic dam in operation (Ellsworth and Parker, 172). A contemporary described Taylor's mining operation:

Jim Taylor had about the best ground on July Creek just a bit below the mouth of Union and all the way up through there....Jim went outside and bought a great big double barrel logging hoist and a Bagley Scraper. He had to have his boxes elevated pretty high and that made an awful lot of spew work. He didn't have any ditch dug so he had to run water out of the creek around on a ditch in the bench. From that ditch he had to build a trestle and a flume to get it into the boxes. He'd fill the Bagley Scraper and hoist it and swing it around with a stiff leg or gin poles and it made too much dead work all the time. He had to change things, cables all the time every dead man, the back haul. It was a losing game because the ground wasn't rich enough to stand that kind of stuff. It did stand hydraulicking, to anyone who understood hydraulicking (Barney Hansen).

In 1919 Taylor sold his claims to a group from Sedro-Woolley, Washington, headed by B. D. Vanderveer. Taylor worked for the group, called the July Creek Placer Co., in 1919 and 1920 but probably not long after that. With outside capital, the company could afford the equipment to surmount the chronic water shortage on the creek. In 1922, they intended to "put in a 6 or 7 mile ditch this summer" (Ott & Scheele to W. Hunt, May 13, 1922). In 1924, a report stated: "The July Creek Placers, a mining company, is worked from 25 to 30 men, building ditch lines, putting in flumes, etc., preparatory to installing a big hydraulic plant" ("Mining on Interior..."). By 1925, "two ditches have been built, a lower one 2½ miles long, which taps the upper part of Fourth of July Creek, and an upper one 9½ miles long, which takes its water from the head of Washington Creek" (Mertie, 164). In 1932 it was "among the largest producing mines in the district" (Smith, 38).

The connection of the mining community on Fourth of July Creek to the outside was Nation, near the mouth of the creek. Nation was probably established in the 1898 gold rush, its very name reflecting the patriotism with which Americans leaving the Canadian Klondike returned to U.S. territory. As early as 1901 there was a roadhouse at Nation (Wickersham, 77). The roadhouse catered to travelers from Circle to Eagle along the Yukon, and also to those who lived along the river. As early as 1906 there was a trail connecting Nation to the diggings, 10 miles up the creek, which made Nation a supply point for the miners.

William E. Noyes ran the roadhouse here and served as postmaster from 1908 to 1912, when it was discontinued (Ricks, 45). In 1911 Nation was described as containing a steamboat landing and a few buildings (Prindle and Mertie, 201). From 1917 to 1924, Frank M. Young was listed as postmaster, but James Taylor seems to have served in effect. In December, 1923, Taylor reported Young's death, and in March, 1924, Taylor received orders to close the post office (J. Taylor to C. Ott, December 7, 1923, and March 10, 1924). The box to which mail and parcels were delivered is in the collection of the Eagle Historical Society. By 1930, "only two men live permanently at Nation, but eight or ten others are engaged in mining on the nearby Fourth of July Creek" (Mertie, 10). Nation soon became an abandoned town.

In 1924, probably soon after closing the post office, Taylor moved across the river from Nation and built the cabin that later served as his shop. About five years later, he built the main cabin for which he is remembered. After Taylor sold out to the July Creek Placer Co., he never mined again, but instead turned to trapping. In 1923, when he was still living at Nation, he recorded the sale of several furs:

1 black wolf \$50
3 grey wolf \$25 each
2 No. 1 small lynx \$25 each
1 medium beaver \$27.50
1 kit beaver \$18 (J. Taylor to C. Ott, February 25, 1923)

Charlie Biederman and Al Stout both recalled that he was successful at trapping, cutting trails and building cabins on Twelve-Mile, Hardluck, and 35-Mile creeks. He had four dogs and what Biederman termed "goofy ideas" about them, in reference to their extensive corrals.

Taylor was remembered for his neatness and his ingenuity, as evidenced by the descriptions of the main cabin, quoted above. Al Stout recalled that "when you visited him, you slept between sheets." In his blacksmith shop, he made all his camp stoves, and hauled iron in from all over for that purpose (Biederman). He also developed a contrivance to strip wolf skins (Stout), and his still is in the collection of the Eagle Historical Society. Although the 1910 census called him "single," Barney Hansen recalled that he was married. "His wife came up here and she didn't like the country. They couldn't agree on it. He liked it and she didn't, so he stayed and she left. They agreed to disagree." Taylor's letters display a sense of humor, such as in this description of a flood in his house:

This machine [the typewriter] was upside down on the floor and full of mud and you can see by the alignment of the damn thing that it resembles the tracks of a drunken

sailor going home from an Irish wake (J. Taylor to C. Ott, May 30, 1922).

In 1933, Taylor, ill with cancer, went to Seattle and died shortly afterward. He left all of his possessions to Ed Biederman.

PART II. SOURCES OF INFORMATION

A. Interviews:

Biederman, Charlie. Interviewed by Steve Ulvi and author, July 16, 1985. Tape in collection of Yukon-Charley Rivers National Preserve.

Hansen, Barney. Transcription of a talk given to the Eagle Historical Society, May, 1974. Collection of Eagle Historical Society.

Stout, Al and Roberta. Interviewed by Steve Ulvi and author, July 18, 1985.

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