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National Register of Historic Places  
Multiple Property Documentation Form

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New Submission     Amended Submission     NHL Nomination

A. Name of Multiple Property Listing

The Settlement and Economic Development of Alaska's Matanuska-  
Susitna Valley

B. Associated Historic Context(s)

(Identify theme, geographical area, and chronological period for each.)  
The New Deal Colony Settlement of the Matanuska-Susitna Valley in  
Alaska, 1934-1940

C. Form Prepared by

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## WRITTEN NARRATIVE

Provide the following information on continuation sheets in the sequence listed below. Cite the letter and the title before each section of the narrative. Fill in the page numbers in the column on the right.

TABLE OF CONTENTS	Page
E. Statement of Historic Contexts(s) (If more than one historic context is developed, present them in sequential order before proceeding to the next section.)	4
F. Associated Property Type(s) (Provide description, significance, and registration requirements.)	10
G. Geographical Data (Explain and justify boundaries.)	16
H. Summary of Identification and Evaluation Methods (Discuss the methods used in developing the multiple property listing.)	18
I. Major Bibliographical References (List major written works and primary location of additional documentation: state historic preservation office, other state agency, Federal agency, local government, university, or other, specifying repository.)	18

## **E. Statement of Historic Context(s)**

One historic context, The New Deal Colony Settlement of the Matanuska-Susitna Valley in Alaska, 1934-1940, with three distinct, but related, property types, is developed below. The property types are Community Center Buildings and Structures, Colony Farmsteads, and Colony Farm Houses. The Matanuska Colony is significant for its association with the New Deal rural resettlement program and for its architecture. Areas of significance include social history, community planning and development, government and politics, and commerce. Planning for the colony began in 1934; actual construction of buildings began in 1935. The period of significance ends in 1940 when a farmer's cooperative association took over management of the colony from the Alaska Rural Rehabilitation Corporation. Because of the integrity of its remaining buildings, the Matanuska Colony is considered to be nationally significant. It is also of local significance for the impact of the project on development in the Matanuska Valley.

### Introduction

In the 1930s the United States was in the depths of the Great Depression. Especially hard hit were rural areas of the Great Lakes states where mining and logging had declined. In an attempt to help alleviate the suffering, the New Deal administration of President Franklin D. Roosevelt initiated ninety-nine resettlement projects involving the relocation of nearly 11,000 families.

Of these Federal Emergency Relief Administration (FERA) projects, none captured the public's attention quite like the colony that was established in Alaska's Matanuska Valley. The Alaska project was unique because it required creation of a complete community in a largely unsettled region. Planned in large part by David Williams, an architect employed by the FERA, the project was launched in 1934 on a tremendous wave of optimism. The colony, however, suffered from poor planning, political patronage, and personnel problems. It became an expensive political liability and required an investigation by the Roosevelt administration in 1935. However, the project succeeded in establishing commercial agriculture in the Matanuska-Susitna Valley and in creating the town of Palmer. Of all the resettlement projects, the Matanuska Colony has more integrity than the other ninety-eight. There are more original buildings standing and less contemporary intrusions in the community core. The original plan of an open quadrangle with large public buildings anchoring the perimeter and smaller public buildings surrounding them is clearly evident today. Although it hardly appeared so at the time, the Matanuska Colony eventually drew recognition as one of the principal achievements of the FERA community building program.

### Development of the Matanuska Colony 1934-1940

The idea for an Alaskan colony came, in large part, from David Williams, a New Deal architect in the Washington, D.C. office of the FERA. Williams' career began in 1916 when he went to work as a civil engineer for Gulf Oil in Tampico, Mexico. While in this position, he designed a simple,

prefabricated building that was adopted by the oil companies and used world-wide. Prefabrication was a constant theme of Williams' work, and gained him national and international recognition. In the case of the Matanuska Colony project, the term prefabrication meant that building materials were measured, pre-cut, and numbered for assembly prior to being transported to the building site. It involved using identical building components such as doors, windows, trim, and siding, in many of the structures. It also refers to the assembly of building components such as gables before being transported to the site.

Williams opened The Studio in Dallas, Texas in 1924 and worked there until 1933. During this time, Williams developed an indigenous architecture for the southwestern United States that gave birth to the "Ranch House" design. In 1934, FERA hired Williams to assist with planning rural rehabilitation settlements. His long career in public service included several projects for the United Nations Rural Relief Agency. He retired in 1952.

In 1933, Williams conceived of his first large-scale community building project in the United States. The Woodlake Cooperative Agricultural Community in East Texas was intended to take depression-displaced farm families out of "Hoovervilles" in Dallas and Houston and put them back on the land. Administered by Lawrence Westbrook, who in 1935 became director of FERA's Division of Rural Rehabilitation, the project impressed members of the Roosevelt administration. FERA hired Williams in 1934 to plan agricultural communities for displaced farm families. One of the projects was the Matanuska Valley Colony.

As early as 1934, the Division of Rural Rehabilitation had received requests from individuals for aid in colonizing Alaska. Williams researched the practicality of an Alaskan venture. He discovered that Alaska had almost no commercial agriculture and the cost of importing foodstuffs contributed heavily to the territory's \$7 million annual deficit. Williams believed that locally produced agricultural products would find a ready market in the railbelt area between Anchorage and Fairbanks.

Williams saw Alaska as a vastly underpopulated territory that might provide a safety valve for overpopulated, depressed rural areas of the U.S. In 1934, he issued a report on the possibilities of Alaska colonization. FERA received favorable responses to the report, and sent Assistant Administrator Jacob Baker to Alaska to inspect the recommended site in the Matanuska Valley. Baker publicly guessed that in time the valley could support 2,500 families and that if a project for government-sponsored settlement were approved a start could be made with 500 families. Between August and December 1934, Williams collected information on northern agriculture, set guidelines for the colony project, and interviewed Alaskan construction experts. He sent a memo to Harry Hopkins, FERA Administrator, outlining the colony proposal. Hopkins related the information to President Franklin D. Roosevelt who requested a conference with Williams. Roosevelt and Williams met in February 1935. The president was fascinated with the resettlement idea and ordered the FERA to initiate the project. Following endorsement of the project, Roosevelt, by Executive Order 6957,

closed to homestead entry eleven townships in the Matanuska Valley to reserve them for the colony. Williams was directed to finalize plans for the settlement.

Williams worked with other federal agencies, particularly with the Interior Department which had been encouraging immigration to the territory. Final plans for cooperation were formulated by March 1, 1935. FERA would finance and direct the project, and the Interior Department would provide support functions. Specifically, the Interior Department was to procure all supplies and equipment, provide information on Alaskan conditions, and furnish a ship for transportation of temporary workers and supplies. The Rural Rehabilitation Division of FERA would be the administrator of the colony, responsible for formulating all construction plans, and select and transport the colonists.

Construction plans were prepared according to Williams' directions. Buildings were to use indigenous materials, that is, they would be log and wood frame. Site plans called for low profile houses that would conform to the topography of the Matanuska Valley. The logs would be pre-cut and ready to put together for houses, barns, and outbuildings to speed construction. The original colony plan called for 208 tracts of land. Of these, 134 would be forty plus acres, 66 would be eighty plus acres, 8 would be sixty plus acres, and 12 additional sites of varying acreage were reserved for future community use. An effort was made to purchase already cleared land from valley homesteaders. The vast majority of the tracts, however, were uncleared wilderness. The master plan called for clearing 22 acres per farm in the first five years of occupancy.

The plan concentrated the farmsteads around the community center which would provide the essential administrative, economic, and social services. The agricultural colony would need storage, processing, and marketing facilities, stores, school, community hall, staff offices and housing, cannery, and creamery. Williams envisioned a "well-rounded community, self-sufficient agriculturally, with small allied industries and processing plants." The entire project would be governed by a "Settlement Agreement" that specified the responsibilities of the settlers and the government.

Each colony family was allowed to charge pre-departure expenses for furniture, tools, and household equipment. At FERA's direction, the Alaska Rural Rehabilitation Corporation (ARRC) incorporated on April 12, 1935, as a non-profit entity to administer the project in Alaska. ARRC would pay the transportation costs of the colonists and up to 2,000 pounds of freight per family. Colonists would be housed in tents until their homes were completed. Each family would be able to buy a homestead of at least forty acres, ranging in price from \$5.00 per acre for unimproved land to an unspecified amount for cleared or developed acreage. Payment to the corporation would be over a thirty year mortgage at three percent interest, with interest to begin accumulating in 1938 and payments to start in 1940.

The ARRC would provide machinery, livestock, and equipment via sale, lease, rent, or per use charge. Until they were self-sufficient, colonists could charge subsistence items at cost to their accounts. It was estimated that

expenses would be about \$3,500 per family by the time they achieved self-reliance (a figure that proved to be much too low). The ARRC would provide educational, recreational, and health services, supervision of the colony, and consultation to the colonists. Colonists were required to agree to abide by all corporation rules in conjunction with crop production, processing and marketing, distribution, and other measures for the welfare of the community. This emphasis on communal cooperation prompted some critics to accuse the administration of socialism and of designing a communistic community on the order of the Soviet Union's state farms.

Colonists chosen for the project came from Michigan, Minnesota, and Wisconsin (and one from Oklahoma). FERA officials thought these people would do well because the climate of the Great Lakes states was comparable to the Matanuska Valley. Large areas of these states had acute rural relief problems due to the exhaustion of mining and timber resources and the loss of associated jobs. The colonists were persons of European stock; among them Scandinavians, Germans, English, Scots, and Irish. The qualities most sought were farming experience, useful occupation skills, relative youth, good health, a family with four to six children, evidence of the pioneer spirit, and a desire to live on the land. Problems in the selection process were responsible for a number of later troubles. Social workers found it difficult to separate those equipped for pioneering from the dreamers. Charges were made that some social workers used the opportunity to be relieved of some of their more troubling families. Some of the people selected had very little farming experience.

Seizing on the romance of pioneering, the media provided extensive coverage of the colonists. Newspaper editorials commented that "the eyes of the world" were upon the colonists. Overseas press coverage included an article in the Spanish language edition of Time, Tiempo. Will Rogers visited the colony in 1935, the day before his fatal plane crash. A Broadway play titled "200 Were Chose" had a five-week run. Paramount Pictures would later make a movie, The New Horizon, based on the colony. Entertained by mayors and interviewed by journalists while traveling from the Midwest to California for their departure, the colonists became celebrities.

Part of the colonists' appeal to Americans was a result of the agrarian or frontier myth. Many Americans believed that a simple agrarian existence was more virtuous than other types of labor. And the Great Depression presented a powerful case against free market industrialization. Perhaps Alaska, in spite of historian Frederick Jackson Turner's pronouncement that the frontier was closed, could provide a safety valve for the population.

In contrast to the hoopla surrounding the colonists was the near obscurity with which the four hundred California Works Progress Administration (WPA) workers left San Francisco on April 23, 1935, for the voyage to Alaska. The colony was a WPA work relief project as well as a resettlement project for the 204 families. WPA workers were to set up the tent camps for the colonists and to prepare logs and construct houses, barns, roads, and community buildings. The WPA workers reached Seward on May 5th, only one day before the colonists were scheduled to arrive. Compounding the problem

was the fact that the Alaska Railroad lacked the capacity to move both workers and freight at the same time. When the colonists arrived at Seward, the WPA workers did not have tents set up in Palmer, land cleared, or roads built. The colonists lived on board ship at Seward for a few days.

On May 10, 1935, the first colonists arrived at the recently finished Alaska Railroad Depot (listed in the National Register) at Palmer. The lottery to select homestead tracts was held on May 23rd. A total of 204 tracts were selected, and after a little trading of parcels among the colonists, most people were pleased with their draw. In June and July the colonists moved to camps closer to their tracts.

Due to problems of coordination and supply, WPA workers were unable to process enough logs for house construction. Shipping problems in Seattle, including a longshoremen's strike, delayed work. Further complications occurred with the actions of on-site political appointees who began making changes in Williams' house plans. Some of the colonists vented their anger at the delays on June 16, 1935, by sending telegrams to President Roosevelt, Alaska Governor John W. Troy, and the senators from the three Midwest states. The telegrams stated that house and barn construction was at a stand still, wells were not being dug, roads were not being built, commissary prices were too high, medical care was insufficient, and political appointees were creating problems.

Back in Washington, D.C. presidential friend and advisor Louis Howe worried that the controversy would hurt Roosevelt's image. He urged that a team be dispatched to investigate. In the interim, FERA troubleshooter Eugene Carr was sent to the colony to straighten out personnel problems and expedite construction. On July 12, 1935, the investigation team arrived in Palmer and spent twelve days. The ARRC Board of Directors was reorganized with a Palmer headquarters and local members. It began active direction of the colony, replacing the long distance administration of FERA officials. A survey by David Williams revealed that there were enough logs to construct 59 of the 134 houses remaining to be built. Because of the shortage of logs, 75 houses would be of frame construction. To expedite building, Williams ordered 225 additional WPA workers and authorized hiring 85 local carpenters and foremen. In addition, a colonial police force was created and the medical staff was expanded. The colony was a better functioning operation after these changes.

By the end of 1935, workers had completed the warehouse, trading post, and generating plant. Construction had begun on a school, a gymnasium, and the creamery/cannery. The last of the colonist's houses was completed October 30, 1935, and 149 wells and 106 barns on individual farmsteads were finished. The next year, the remainder of the community center buildings were finished. A large dormitory for the colony's unmarried school teachers and nurses, a hospital, and twelve staff houses were completed. The ARRC also erected a water tower and installed sewer, water, and steam heating lines for the community center buildings.

Farm development in 1936 proceeded with mixed results. Land clearing took much longer than anticipated. By the end of the year, only 275 additional acres were ready for cultivation.

In addition to the colony construction, there was private commercial construction underway in Palmer. Koslosky's dry goods and clothing store opened in 1935 as did the Hyland Hotel. Sally's Cafe provided food and coffee.

Some of the colonists began planning to leave almost immediately upon their arrival in the valley. By the end of July 1935, only two months after establishment of the colony, 26 families had left. Between 1935 and 1940, a total of 124 families left the colony. At least 24 families left because of ill health, 24 because they were not suited to farming or were asked by the ARRC managers to leave, and 47 because they were dissatisfied with the general performance and management of the colony. During the same period, 80 new families joined the colony. Consequently, the colony population averaged 160 families, totaling approximately 800 people. In an effort to ameliorate some of the colonist's complaints, the Matanuska Valley Civic Association, created in 1935, was revived in 1937. It provided colonists with a forum to air their ideas about the colony. One of the issues was the increasing individual indebtedness of the colonists.

While a few of the colonists had moved to a pay-as-you-go routine, the majority were still running up large debts with the ARRC. By 1937, the average colonist's indebtedness was \$9,694.50. The ARRC authorized an initial adjustment of these debts to an \$8,000 maximum, and in 1937 set a \$5,000 maximum.

From 1937 to 1940, the colonists concentrated on developing their farms and assuming more control of the colony's management. The ARRC started a variety of programs. The Work Credit Program, begun in early 1937, was one of the most popular ideas; more than 95 percent of the colonists participated. It allowed colonists to be paid in cash for clearing land, completing fences, and constructing well houses and outbuildings. That year colonists cleared nearly 1,500 acres. In November 1937, the Security and Development Program was implemented. This program placed a greater emphasis on land clearing and paid colonists higher wages than under the Work Credit Program. By the time this program ended in December 1938, another 1,100 acres of land had been cleared, bringing to almost 3,000 the total acreage ready for cropping. The third and final land clearing program, the "Thirty Acre Program," started in 1939. By the end of 1940, over 4,300 acres were ready for cultivation.

The farmers formed the Matanuska Valley Farmer's Cooperative Association (MVFCA) in 1936 to become more active in managing the colony. By 1938, the ARRC had turned over most of the colony management functions to the association. The transition was completed in January 1940, when the MVFCA purchased the community center properties effectively ending ARRC's role as administrator of the colony. After the change in administration, there was still land clearing to be done, community service improvements to be made, and issues between the colonists and the management to resolve.

The Matanuska Colony was a success. In 1930 the population of the valley was 876 and there was no town of Palmer. Ten years later the valley's population was 2,400, and Palmer had 244 residents. By 1960, the valley had almost 5,200 people, and Palmer had 1,181 people. By Alaskan standards, Palmer had become a town of considerable importance. The Matanuska Colony project exceeded its budget, as did the other ninety-eight New Deal resettlement projects. Originally projected to cost around one million dollars, the final ARRC audit put the cost at \$4.7 million, approximately \$30,000 per family. Comparable projects averaged between \$14,000 and \$16,000 per family. All of the Matanuska colonists who stayed after 1940 paid back their loans from the federal government. Three-fifths of the colony's cost was for roads, community facilities, public improvements, and non-residential buildings. More expensive than anticipated was the cost of carving farms out of the forested valley.

## **F. Associated Property Type(s)**

### **1. COMMUNITY CENTER BUILDINGS AND STRUCTURES**

#### **Description:**

Community Center properties include buildings and structures associated with government, commerce, industry, and institutions. Together they reflect social and economic aspects of a community.

The most desirable community sites were adjacent to transportation corridors. Commercial and industrial properties in the communities included warehouses, docks and garages, lodging and eating establishments, banks, stores, and offices for lawyers, surveyors, engineers, and doctors. Public buildings included government offices, railroad depots, schools, libraries, and community halls. Groups built churches and social halls. To service these buildings, utility buildings and power houses were built. The people developed residential areas in close proximity to the town centers. More roads and trails were built to move people and freight to the community centers from farms and mines.

High costs to transport construction materials to the Matanuska-Susitna Valley encouraged moving buildings, in whole or in part, from one community to another. This was a common practice.

The early buildings in Matanuska-Susitna Valley communities tended to be small, one-, one-and-a-half, and two-story structures of log or frame construction. Double-hung windows and gable roofs covered with rolled asphalt were common. Frame buildings usually had shiplap or drop siding. In general, the buildings were simple in plan and unadorned. The Alaska Railroad depots and section houses were rectangular, one-story, frame construction with drop siding, and built on cement foundations. These railroad buildings frequently had hip roofs.

The Alaska Railroad depots at Palmer and Wasilla are listed in the National Register. Several buildings in Wasilla, the community hall and schoolhouse, are listed in the National Register for their association with the community's exploration and settlement.

#### Significance:

The earliest communities in the Matanuska-Susitna Valley were located along rivers and trails; later communities were adjacent to the Alaska Railroad, highways, and airstrips. The communities were founded to facilitate natural resource development including coal and gold mining, as well as renewable resource development of farming and dairying. The Federal Government, builder of the Alaska Railroad, also encouraged economic development and was responsible for the establishment of several settlements in the Matanuska-Susitna Valley: Chickaloon in 1915, Wasilla in 1917, Talkeetna in 1918, and Palmer in 1935. The government surveyed townsites and held auctions to sell lots. During the late 1920s the government-run railroad conducted a national advertising campaign and offered incentives such as discounted transportation costs to people willing to homestead in the Matanuska-Susitna Valley.

Under criterion A, properties associated with the establishment of communities (exploration/settlement) or associated with industry, commerce, politics and government, and social history in the community can be eligible. Buildings connected with the railroad or road construction, commercial buildings such as stores, banks, and hotels, public buildings such as schools and government offices, and private community buildings such as churches and social halls should be considered. Public and commercial buildings connected with the Federal Government's Matanuska Colony resettlement project are important to the nation's governmental and social history. Along with broadening the economic base, community center buildings often gave a feeling of permanence to a community.

Under criterion B, buildings and structures in communities associated with prominent individuals could be eligible for the National Register.

Under criterion C, properties that reflect the style, size, and method of construction in an area, or are good examples of a type or period of construction, or possess high artistic value can be eligible for the National Register. Communities characterized by log buildings, such as Talkeetna, exhibit use of local building materials. The Matanuska Colony community center at Palmer is an example of a planned community core. As a district, the colony buildings retain more integrity than the other ninety-eight New Deal resettlement projects constructed around the United States.

#### Registration requirements:

For all properties in community centers, it must be shown that there is a strong association between the resource and the development of the community. Nominations of districts, defined as five or more properties related by time, place, and theme, are preferred to nominations of

individual buildings. If necessary to protect a single building when the integrity of other properties related by time, place, and theme has been destroyed, then individual nominations can be prepared. Preferably, the centers should have a combination of public, commercial, and industrial properties to explain the multiple purposes of community centers. A few buildings that have been moved can be included as long as the district retains its essential integrity. Properties in a district might not be individually eligible for listing in the National Register, but can be contributing properties because they are types of buildings constructed when the community was established or because they reflect their original association to one another.

For those properties that are good examples of a building type, alterations should be minor. The essential integrity of design, materials, and workmanship should remain. It is important to be able to reestablish the original fenestration of a building. The property should have integrity of location, association, setting, feeling, and at least one of the following: materials, workmanship, and design.

## 2. COLONY FARMSTEADS

### Description:

A total of 204 farmsteads on 40, 60, or 80 acre tracts were created as part of the Matanuska Colony project. Several of the original farmsteads are intact. Approximately ten of the farmsteads are still owned by original colonists. Under subsequent owners, several colony farms were combined. The farmsteads were designed to have a farmhouse, barn, outhouse, well house, and one or more of the following: chicken house, brooder coop, and shed. To be eligible for the National Register, a farmstead should include at a minimum the original house and barn. One farmstead, the Raymond Rebarchek Colony Farm (AHR Site No. ANC-134), was listed in the National Register in 1977.

Houses: Most colony farm houses were one-and-one-half stories, although a few were one or two stories. The houses were log, frame, or a combination of the two. They had either rectangular or L-shaped floor plans and ranged in size from 900 to 1,500 square feet. Typically, they had gable roofs. Frame houses had drop siding and cornerboards. The same plank doors and double-hung multi-pane windows as those used on community center buildings were used in the houses. This repetition of building elements created buildings with a similar architectural vocabulary. It also promoted speedy construction and lowered building costs. Pre-cut house logs, marked for assembly prior to being moved to the construction site, also shortened construction time.

Barns: Several barns were designed, but the standard one was 32' x 32' with a gambrel roof. The roof ridge projected over the hay mow track and the roof had flared, open eaves. An open cupola provided venting through the center of the ridge. One-and-one-half stories in height, the lower floor of the barn was log and the upper floor was frame. The mid-section, or "pony wall," was made of board and batten or of vertical planks. Drop

siding sheathed the hay loft. A large square door, either hinged or on sliding track, provided entry to the hay loft, while double doors provided ground floor entrance. Fixed glass, multi-pane windows were typical on the first level.

Three other designs were used for colony barns. A one-and-one-half story "stock barn" with a barrel roof line appeared to be a smaller version of the gambrel-roofed one. The first floor was log, the upper story frame, and the barn measured 28' x 32'. The first floor had several single doors and windows identical to those used in the other barns. A much smaller barn, of frame construction, measured 16' x 20'. This barn had a shed roof with open eaves and drop siding with cornerboards. Several wall vents and a single roof vent provided circulation for the small buildings.

The third type of barn was called a "stallion barn." One-and-one-half stories with a rectangular floor plan, these barns measured 30' x 25'. The lower level was log with lapped corners, the upper level was frame. It had a low gambrel roof with frame gables. The standard fixed multi-pane windows, double and single doors and square hay loft door were used. This type of barn was built specifically to stable one of three thoroughbred draft stallions owned by the ARRC.

Outbuildings (chicken houses, brooder coops, outhouses, well houses, sheds): These buildings were usually made of log, sometimes log and frame. Sheds were typically 16' x 20', with either a shed or gable roof. If they contained windows, they were the standard multi-pane used throughout the colony. Outhouses were prefabricated log buildings that measured 4' x 4' and had a shed roof. Chicken coops measured 16' x 20' and were often two story buildings. The bottom level was log, usually with square notched corners. A bank of four six-panel fixed windows were used in the front facade and 12/12 fixed windows on the sides. The upper level was frame, with corner boards and a shed roof. This floor was typically used for storing feed. Well houses measured 6' x 8' x 8', were constructed of logs, and had gable roofs.

#### Significance:

The farmsteads were the foundation of the entire resettlement program. They were intended to turn the Matanuska Valley into a self-sufficient agricultural area served by small industries and processing plants. Much of the valley's tillable land was cleared as a result of the project. It was envisioned that the farmsteads would provide the raw materials and allied industries and processing plants would produce marketable products. The cooperative, in turn, would seek marketing arrangements.

The Matanuska Colony farmsteads are significant under criterion A in the areas of agriculture and social history.

The farmsteads are also significant under criterion C in the areas of architecture and community planning and development. Those sites where logs were used for building the principal structures represent early examples of prefabrication. Logs for the buildings were pre-cut, marked,

and ready for assembly when they arrived at the farmstead site. David Williams, the chief architect of the project, was a pioneer in the development of this building technique. Williams located the farmsteads evenly around the community center, none more than twelve miles away so that the center would be accessible to all of the colonists. Williams also emphasized the use of indigenous building materials and homesite design that was compatible with the surrounding terrain. Consequently, the farmsteads were composed of buildings relatively small in mass, made from native log and wood frame that fit well in the mixed flat land and rolling hills of the Matanuska-Susitna Valley.

#### Registration requirements:

To be eligible for listing in the National Register, a farmstead must retain the farmhouse and barn. Ideally, outbuildings and fields should also be part of the farmstead. If historic fields are altered, or cannot be distinguished from non-historic fields, farmstead boundaries should circumscribe only the structural complex.

A farmstead should retain the original spatial relationships between the various built components, and the individual structures should retain sufficient integrity of massing, roof shape, design, decorative features and fenestration to convey their historic character. Many character-defining elements, such as cupolas, vents, and window rows are integral to the function of farmstead structures, and eligible properties should retain these features. Alterations must be carefully evaluated to determine the impact to the significant historic character of a structure. Modifications to structures completed during the period of significance may reflect the evolution of farming technology and should be evaluated within that context. Extensively altered or gutted barns and outbuildings, or other lesser structures should not be considered for listing in the National Register if they stand alone. Generally, isolated structures have lost their integrity of association and setting due to absence of other original farmstead elements.

In recent decades, metal roofing and wood siding have been added to many barns and outbuildings. These structures are unheated and susceptible to weathering and decay, especially if the roof is deteriorated. It is recommended that metal roofing and wood siding over log be considered alterations having minimal effect on integrity. If the alterations can be reversed, the properties can be eligible for the National Register.

Most colony barns and many houses were built directly on grade that resulted in deterioration of the bottom course of logs. Concrete block and poured concrete foundations have been placed under the majority of these buildings. The foundations may also indicate an evolution of farming practice. To be a grade "A" dairy, a barn had to have a concrete floor to meet sanitation requirements and thus many of the original dirt floors have been covered. Such alterations are considered to have minimal impact on integrity.

Because location and setting are central to the character of historic farmsteads, moved properties normally are not eligible for the National Register. If a building has been moved a short distance on a farmstead, has a similar setting and orientation to the other buildings that it had originally, it can be a contributing farmstead building.

Modern additions to farmsteads, such as metal silos, pole barns, fertilizer tanks, additional colony farm buildings, and feed storage bins reflect the evolution of farming technology and should be considered as having minimal adverse effect upon integrity unless their number, size, and prominence overwhelm the farmstead's historic character. A modern house replacing the original one, however, significantly diminishes the integrity of a colony farmstead. The application of stucco to the colony houses was common in 1950s Palmer. It sealed the exterior walls and provided an additional layer of insulation to the houses. The stucco, by itself, should not be considered a disqualifying modification unless a house is being nominated individually.

Collapsed structures should not be considered as adversely affecting a farmstead's integrity, unless the structure was a pivotal, character-defining element such as the main barn or house.

### 3. COLONY FARM HOUSES:

#### Description:

Nine house plans were originally designed for the Matanuska Colony. Five of these plans were presented for the colonists to choose from, with the majority selecting a one-and-one-half story model. Some colonists were permitted to alter their house plans as long as the cost did not exceed the projected budget. Originally, all houses were to be log construction. A shortage of suitable logs resulted in only 125 houses constructed of at least partial log. Approximately 75 houses were of frame construction. No plan included a full basement or suitable foundation; the houses were built directly on grade or, in a few cases, colonists dug their own basements. Consequently, several original houses have suffered deterioration of the bottom course of logs from years of water and soil saturation. Many of the houses now sit on poured concrete and concrete block foundations.

The one-and-one-half-story houses had either rectangular or L-shaped floor plans, with the same general division of interior space. The ground floors had the kitchen, living room, storage space, one bedroom or bunkroom, and space for a bathroom. None of the original houses was built with an indoor toilet, or even indoor plumbing, but space was provided. The second floor contained two bedrooms and storage space. The one-story houses had three bedrooms centered around a living room/kitchen area with a closet. Gable roofs were typical. The frame houses were covered with drop siding and cornerboards. All the houses had double-hung 6/6 windows. A typical door, four sections of drop siding used vertically with a 4-pane window, was used throughout. This duplication of building materials gave all the houses a similar appearance, reduced cost, and speeded construction.

## Significance:

A key component of the New Deal resettlement program was the provision of each family with a home.

The farm houses are significant under criterion A in the areas of agriculture and social history. The farm houses were all originally part of the Matanuska Colony resettlement project and connected with the development of commercial agriculture in the valley.

The farm houses are also significant under criterion C in the areas of architecture and community planning. David Williams, the colony architect, was a pioneer in the design and use of prefabricated building components. Logs and lumber for the colony houses were pre-cut and then moved to the building site for assembly. This allowed for speedier, less costly construction. Williams also emphasized the use of indigenous building materials and house designs that were compatible with the surrounding terrain. Consequently, the houses were small in mass, made from native log and wood frame that fit into the mixed flat land and rolling hills of the Matanuska-Susitna Valley.

## Registration requirements:

Initially, all colonists' houses were part of a farmstead. As circumstances changed and people subdivided their land or sold their buildings, some of the best examples of colony farm house design and construction were no longer part of a farmstead.

A colony farm house should maintain its integrity as constructed in 1935-1936. Exterior walls should not be sheathed in any type of covering material and fenestration should not be significantly altered. Some of the houses have been placed on concrete foundations to ensure their survival. The addition of a foundation or basement does not significantly compromise the physical integrity of a house.

## G. Geographical Data

### Boundaries and climate of the Matanuska-Susitna river valleys

The geographic and political boundaries of the Matanuska and Susitna river valleys are defined by the geological relief of southcentral Alaska. What is referred to as "the valley" encompasses approximately 20,100 square miles within the Matanuska-Susitna Borough. Dominant rivers draining the region are the Matanuska, Knik, Susitna, Yentna, Chulitna, and Talkeetna. The Susitna River drainage to the west stretches northward and inland approximately 293 miles to the crest of the Alaska Range in central Alaska. Flowing into the valley from the east, the Matanuska River separates the Talkeetna Mountains that create the north boundary and the Chugach Mountains that form a rim around the eastern and southeastern edge. From Knik Glacier, in the Chugach Mountains to the southeast, the Knik River flows. It meets the Matanuska River at Knik Arm where both discharge into

Cook Inlet. At the southern coastal limit of the valley, Cook Inlet determines much of the area's weather.

The Matanuska-Susitna climate, influenced by the Japanese Current, is mild and moist. Average summer temperatures are 50-55 degrees Fahrenheit. Records show a growing season of over 100 days stretching from May into September. The valley, with its midnight sun, has weeks with 14 to 20 hours of sunlight important for agriculture.

#### Agricultural potential and colony settlement

Soils within the Matanuska-Susitna Valley are made up of glacial till, which includes sand, gravel, and silt with sandy loams predominating. The depth and grade of the soils vary according to geographic location. At the eastern end of the valley, between the Matanuska and Susitna rivers, is an alluvial plain consisting largely of silty and fine sandy sediments underlaid by thick deposits of gravel and stones. Large amounts of windblown material are constantly being deposited along the Matanuska and Knik rivers, in some places it is as much as ten feet thick. West of the two rivers, the mantle decreases rapidly, thinning out to ten inches at Wasilla. West of Wasilla, in the Susitna floodplain, the loess mantle is thicker and consists mostly of poorly drained glacial outwash plains with muskegs, kettles, lakes, and small streams. This area also has well-drained but shallow loess over gravely kames, eskers, and has rolling to steep moraines.

Most of the valley's best farmland lies adjacent to and west of the Matanuska River. Much of the remaining area is too poor for farming. Experiments conducted by the U.S. Department of Agriculture at their Matanuska Experimental Farm had proven that some produce, especially root crops and plants in the cabbage family, could be grown without too much effort in the valley. Considering the climate and soils to be comparable to that of the upper Great Lakes states, colonists for the Federal Government's resettlement program in the 1930s were selected from the land adjacent to the Matanuska River.

The colony was in the eastern half of the Matanuska-Susitna Valley. The colony center, Palmer, was built a little west of the Matanuska River, in the heart of the valley's better farmlands. It was 37 miles northeast of the city of Anchorage. The surrounding area was divided into forty and eighty acre tracts. The forty acre tracts were located on comparatively good soils, close to the Matanuska River. The eighty acre tracts were located a couple of miles west of the Matanuska River on the upper terraces where top soils begin to thin out, and in lower swampy regions adjacent to and encompassing several of the lakes which are numerous throughout the valley. Although considered the Alaska's best agricultural region, many colony tracts have been subdivided for residential development.

## H. Summary of Identification and Evaluation Methods

In 1986, the Cultural Resources Division, Matanuska-Susitna Borough, prepared an inventory of historic sites in the valley. It was discovered that structures built between 1935 and 1940 as part of the Matanuska Valley resettlement program were being impacted by residential subdivision activity. A group of local residents were concerned about the potential loss of some of the colony's community buildings. A group of Palmer residents worked for Certified Local Government status for the Matanuska-Susitna Borough which was achieved in 1986.

In 1987, the Borough received a federal Historic Preservation Fund grant to evaluate the properties associated with the Matanuska Valley resettlement program. As part of this project, the Borough's cultural resources staff identified historic contexts for the local preservation plan, among them agriculture and the Matanuska Colony. The staff researched and visited colony properties and drafted a historic context. Evaluation of the information resulted in identification of the community center district, several farmsteads, and several farm houses as eligible for listing in the National Register of Historic Places. A subsequent grant from the Historic Preservation Fund was used to prepare National Register of Historic Places documentation for colony properties. As part of a multiple property nomination, "The Settlement and Economic Development of Alaska's Matanuska-Susitna Valley," one context, "The New Deal Colony Settlement of the Matanuska-Susitna Valley in Alaska, 1934-1940," a district and an individual nomination for community center buildings, and six individual nominations for farmsteads and houses were prepared in 1989-1990.

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Additional data is in the files of the Cultural Resources Division, Matanuska-Susitna Borough, 350 East Dahlia Avenue, Palmer, Alaska 99645.