Form No. 10-300 REV. (9/77) Senators: Ted Stevens/Mike Gravel Congressman: Don Young

UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR
NATIONAL PARK SERVICE

PH0676349

NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES INVENTORY -- NOMINATION FORM

FOR NPS USE ONLY
RECEIVED APR 3 1979
JUN 4 1979
DATE ENTERED

SEE INSTRUCTIONS IN *HOW TO COMPLETE NATIONAL REGISTER FORMS*
TYPE ALL ENTRIES -- COMPLETE APPLICABLE SECTIONS

1 NAME

HISTORIC
Cable House and Station (AHRS SITE NO. SIT-212)

AND/OR COMMON
Communications Center and Quarters

2 LOCATION

STREET & NUMBER
Lincoln Street _NOT FOR PUBLICATION

CITY, TOWN
Sitka X VICINITY OF

CONGRESSIONAL DISTRICT
Alaska, at large

STATE	CODE	COUNTY	CODE
Alaska	02	Sitka	220

3 CLASSIFICATION

CATEGORY	OWNERSHIP	STATUS	PRESENT USE	
_DISTRICT	_PUBLIC	X OCCUPIED	_AGRICULTURE	_MUSEUM
X BUILDING(S)	X PRIVATE	_UNOCCUPIED	X COMMERCIAL	_PARK
_STRUCTURE	_BOTH	_WORK IN PROGRESS	_EDUCATIONAL	_PRIVATE RESIDENCE
_SITE	**PUBLIC ACQUISITION**	**ACCESSIBLE**	_ENTERTAINMENT	_RELIGIOUS
_OBJECT	_IN PROCESS	X YES: RESTRICTED	_GOVERNMENT	_SCIENTIFIC
	_BEING CONSIDERED	_YES: UNRESTRICTED	_INDUSTRIAL	_TRANSPORTATION
		_NO	_MILITARY	_OTHER:

4 OWNER OF PROPERTY

NAME
RCA Alaska Communications, Inc. (907) 272-8411

STREET & NUMBER
629 E Street

CITY, TOWN
Anchorage X VICINITY OF

STATE
Alaska 99501

5 LOCATION OF LEGAL DESCRIPTION

COURTHOUSE, REGISTRY OF DEEDS, ETC.
District Recorder

STREET & NUMBER
P.O. Box 910 (907) 747-3292

CITY, TOWN
Sitka

STATE
Alaska 99835

6 REPRESENTATION IN EXISTING SURVEYS

TITLE
Alaska Heritage Resource Survey (AHRS)

DATE
October 12, 1977 _FEDERAL X STATE _COUNTY _LOCAL

DEPOSITORY FOR SURVEY RECORDS
Alaska Division of Parks, 619 Warehouse Dr., Suite 210

CITY, TOWN
Anchorage

STATE
Alaska 99501

7 DESCRIPTION

CONDITION		CHECK ONE	CHECK ONE
X EXCELLENT	__DETERIORATED	X UNALTERED	X ORIGINAL SITE
__GOOD	__RUINS	__ALTERED	__MOVED DATE_____
__FAIR	__UNEXPOSED		

DESCRIBE THE PRESENT AND ORIGINAL (IF KNOWN) PHYSICAL APPEARANCE

The Cable House is of relatively simple and uncomplicated design. It is a square-shaped building, 40 feet on each side, containing two stories and an attic, under a low hip roof, erected on a concrete block foundation.

The exterior of the Cable House is aluminum drop siding. The hip roof is sheathed by wood shingles. The present siding, recently installed by RCA ALASCOM, returned the exterior to its original appearance, but not its original wood siding. The Cable Office Building emulates the basic lines of late 19th Century neo-Russian buildings constructed in Sitka during the first decades of American suzerainty over Alaska. The silhouette of the building follows that of the Russian public and residence buildings which still dominated the Sitka scene at the beginning of the Twentieth Century.

The basement area has a concrete floor, an entrance door from the exterior, and an oil-fired hot water heating plant. The main floor, covering 1,500 square feet of area, has a wooden floor covered by asphalt tile, a lavatory, two offices, and an equipment room. The second floor can be attained by ascending either of two stairways, one inside and one outside. The second floor is divided into a 6-foot wide hall leading to a 19 x 19 living room. There are two large bedrooms, the larger of the two measuring an ample 21 x 20 feet, and a kitchen measuring 15 x 19 feet. The second floor residence has one complete bathroom.

The front entranceway is surmounted by a smaller scale emulation of the roof-lines, supported by two squared wooden pillars over an entryway porch raised four steps above grade. From the building the view is expansive, both of the islands and of the harbor.

This building was built after the original laying of the cable, but prior to 1910. The original cable house appears to have been a temporary site in a nearby store-front building, utilized temporarily until this permanent cable office was constructed. The location of the temporary cable office has not been established, and it is doubtful in the extreme that that building survives. It location was probably within a few yards of this present building. The 1904 configuration of the Sitka waterfront point to the site of the present building as the most desirable site for the cable office and technical communications station. It was then on a point of land most accessible to the harbor and the sea. The point of land has been partially screened from the water by the land fill for construction of the access road to the Sitka-Mount Edgecombe Bridge, but remains a primary site for its originally intended function. Both the building and the site maintain integrity of design, site and function.

6 SIGNIFICANCE

PERIOD	AREAS OF SIGNIFICANCE -- CHECK AND JUSTIFY BELOW				
__PREHISTORIC	__ARCHEOLOGY-PREHISTORIC	__COMMUNITY PLANNING	__LANDSCAPE ARCHITECTURE	__RELIGION
__1400-1499	__ARCHEOLOGY-HISTORIC	__CONSERVATION	__LAW	__SCIENCE
__1500-1599	__AGRICULTURE	__ECONOMICS	__LITERATURE	__SCULPTURE
__1600-1699	__ARCHITECTURE	__EDUCATION	__MILITARY	__SOCIAL/HUMANITARIAN
__1700-1799	__ART	__ENGINEERING	__MUSIC	__THEATER
__1800-1899	__COMMERCE	__EXPLORATION/SETTLEMENT	__PHILOSOPHY	__TRANSPORTATION
X 1900-	X COMMUNICATIONS	__INDUSTRY	__POLITICS/GOVERNMENT	__OTHER (SPECIFY)
		__INVENTION		

SPECIFIC DATES C. 1904-1910 BUILDER/ARCHITECT

STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

This building represents completion of the Washington-Alaska Military Cable and Telegraph System (WAMCATS), the overland and submarine cable telegraph designed to provide wire communications between the main military posts and communities of Alaska and the lower United States. The submarine cable first utilized here was both a major breakthrough in the technology of submarine cable manufacture and the first submarine cable of this design manufactured in the United States.

HISTORICAL NARRATIVE:

This building was constructed as the permanent cable office in Sitka for WAMCATS, upon, or soon after, completion of the original system. Authorized by Act of Congress on May 26, 1900, WAMCATS' primary purpose was to connect the U.S. Army Headquarters of St. Michael, Alaska, by military telegraph and cable lines, with other military stations in Alaska, and then to link this network to the lower states' wire communications network via submarine cable laid through Sitka. The equipment installed here was designed as the key link between the Alaskan communications network and the submarine cable between Sitka and Seattle. At that point in the development of communications technology, neither the Marconi wireless, nor the telephone, was technically capable of serving this purpose as effectively as the wire and cable telegraph, though both received consideration. (Colby, 1939, page 101).

Congress enacted legislation authorizing WAMCATS in response to deep seated friction between the United States and the British Government over the location of the Alaska-Canada boundary. Since the only telegraphic communications between the nation's capital and military commanders in Alaska was via Canadian telegraph, WAMCATS was designed to relieve a situation militarily untenable. Four decades earlier much field work had been accomplished towards construction of a telegraph line virtually girdling the globe, between Washington, D.C., and Paris, France, via Canada, Alaska, and Siberia. It was the vestiges of this line that were still in use in 1900 to transmit wire messages from Seattle to Alaska, via British Columbia. The earlier project had been well under way when it was summarily cancelled by successful progress toward laying of the first Atlantic Cable between Europe and North America. Submarine cable for the Atlantic Cable was fabricated in England, where virtually all submarine cable was manufacted until 1900. By 1900 American technology developed improvements upon the English cable. (Alaskan, October 19, 1901).

9 MAJOR BIBLIOGRAPHICAL REFERENCES

(See Continuation Sheet)

10 GEOGRAPHICAL DATA

ACREAGE OF NOMINATED PROPERTY 1.76 acres

QUADRANGLE NAME Sitka (A-5) QUADRANGLE SCALE 1:63 360

UTM REFERENCES

	ZONE	EASTING	NORTHING		ZONE	EASTING	NORTHING
A	0 8	4 7 9 5 2 0	6 3 2 2 7 8 5	B			
C				D			
E				F			
G				H			

VERBAL BOUNDARY DESCRIPTION

U.S. Reserve Signal Corps Portion of U.S. Survey No. 1473, Sitka Townsite.

LIST ALL STATES AND COUNTIES FOR PROPERTIES OVERLAPPING STATE OR COUNTY BOUNDARIES

STATE	CODE	COUNTY	CODE
STATE	CODE	COUNTY	CODE

11 FORM PREPARED BY

NAME / TITLE

Alfred Mongin, Architectural Historian

ORGANIZATION — DATE

Alaska Division of Parks — January 19, 1979

STREET & NUMBER — TELEPHONE

619 Warehouse Dr., Suite 210 — (907) 274-4676

CITY OR TOWN — STATE

Anchorage — Alaska 99501

12 STATE HISTORIC PRESERVATION OFFICER CERTIFICATION

THE EVALUATED SIGNIFICANCE OF THIS PROPERTY WITHIN THE STATE IS:

NATIONAL X STATE ____ LOCAL ____

As the designated State Historic Preservation Officer for the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966 (Public Law 89-665), I hereby nominate this property for inclusion in the National Register and certify that it has been evaluated according to the criteria and procedures set forth by the National Park Service.

STATE HISTORIC PRESERVATION OFFICER SIGNATURE William Brandel

TITLE State Historic Preservation Officer DATE 3/29/79

FOR NPS USE ONLY

I HEREBY CERTIFY THAT THIS PROPERTY IS INCLUDED IN THE NATIONAL REGISTER

for Keeper of the National Register Bill Worth DATE 6/4/79

ATTEST: for Chief of Registration W. Ray Luce DATE June 4, 1979

GPO 921-803

Form No. 10-300a
(Rev. 10-74)

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Following Congressional authorization for WAMCATS in 1900, U.S. Army Signal Corps personnel began construction of the land lines system between Valdez and St. Michael in 1901. Up until the present time WAMCATS land lines construction has received more published notice than the cable segment, due to the later fame of one of the junior Signal Corps officers, Lieutenant (later General) William Mitchell. There was, as well, another devisive controversy over Congressional funding of the first submarine cable from the west coast, on the issue of whether the first cable westward into the Pacific should be laid from San Francisco to Hawaii and the Orient, or from Seattle northwestward to Alaska. The advantage pointed out for the route to Alaska, or via Alaska to the Orient, was the immense value it would be to the Alaskan Territory. At the same time it would be shorter, less expensive to build, and would have more numerous relay stations or landings than the southern, or central Pacific, route from California. Ultimately, both lines were constructed, but the cable to Alaska was laid first. (Alaskan, December 14, 1901, December 13, 1902; August 17, 1907; Mitchell, 1904, passim).

During the summer of 1902 the cable ship BURNSIDE repaired vestigal sections of the 1860's cable remaining in service on the southeastern Alaskan Panhandle coast, and laid new short sections of submarine cable between nearby coastal control and communications points. In the spring of 1903 the BURNSIDE replaced cable sections between Juneau and Skagway, and laid cable between Sitka and Juneau. The first message was conveyed by submarine cable from Sitka to Juneau at 3:00 p.m. on October 2, 1903. Since Juneau already was in rudimentary fashion in telegraphic contact with Seattle, via the vestigal Canadian coastal cable, when the line between Sitka and Juneau opened, the next Alaskan headline read, "SITKA COMMUNICATES WITH THE WORLD." (Alaskan, July 11, October 3, 1903).

The major work was, however, the laying of the cable for the long route between Seattle and Sitka. During the summer of 1903, 1100 statute miles of submarine cable for the project were transported from New York City, around Cape Horn, to Seattle, by the steamships TEXAN and AMERICAN, of the Hawaiian-American Line. The shipments included five distinct weights and finishes of the newly developed cable, designed for specific measured segments of the surveyed route. Under contract to the U.S. Army Signal Corps, the cable was fabricated by the Safety Insulated Wire and Cable Company, New York City, employing a newly developed vulcanized rubber insulation. It was superior to the English cable then in standard use, and the first long line submarine telegraph cable manufactured in the United States. (Alaskan, July 11, 1903, March 14, July 11, Oct. 24, Nov. 14, 24, 28, 1903).

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While the cable laying project moved forward, an extensive array of telegraph terminal and switching equipment was installed in the first cable station in Sitka. This equipment was designed to send, receive, and scribe telegraph signals between Sitka and other Alaskan coastal communities and with interior points on the WAMCATS system, all the way to St. Michael; between Sitka and Seattle; and to link messages through the Sitka terminal between the Alaskan telegraph system and the Sitka-Seattle cable. The full extent of the equipment was described in a contemporary interview with Mathew H. Faust, Chief Operator of the Sitka Cable Office, published in the Alaskan. (Alaskan, October 17, 1903).

Telegraph communications between Seattle and Sitka were initiated on Sunday, August 28, 1904. During that day, and until 7:00 p.m. on Monday, August 29, all messages were sent free, with consequent pressure on operators at both ends of the line. A message dated August 29, from the Seattle Post Intelligencer to the Sitka Alaskan, read:

> "The City of the Sound to Sitka, Greeting. You are now connected with the whole world."

This was not, literally, true. The cable had yet to be laid from Sitka to Valdez, a straight line distance of approximately 410 miles, before the WAMCATS would be complete, connecting St. Michael to Seattle. (Alaskan, Oct. 3, 17, 1903).

While the cable for the Seattle-Sitka leg of the network had been transported from New York by ship, 600 miles more of cable for the Sitka-Valdez leg was shipped via rail from New York to Seattle, and laying of that last major stretch was completed in October 1904. A congregation of approximately 60 Sitkans were on board the BURNSIDE in Sitka harbor on October 6 to celebrate the splicing of the last cable ends and the relaying of the first messages the full length of the cable. Surveyor General William L. Distin, as Acting Governor, cut a rope which held the cable fast to the BURNSIDE, symbolizing the initation of the all-American WAMCATS, and providing direct wire communications between the lower states and Alaska. The event was signaled by the BURNSIDE firing a twenty-one gun salute, replied to by guns manned by U.S. Marine personnel on shore. Acting Governor Distin wired a message to the mayor of each of the 46 Alaskan communities on the overland telegraph line:

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> . . . The successful completion today of the government cable from Sitka to Valdez, connecting all stations in Alaska and putting us in close touch with the rest of the world by an all-American line, is the most important achievement in its history, and is the beginning of a new era for Alaska. Wagon roads and railroads will open up the greatest mining center in the world. Other industries will quickly follow and insure this vast country's future prosperity.

(Alaskan, October 17, 1903, April 30, October 8, 1904).

In 1905 cable was laid from Sitka to Fort Liscum, near Valdez, and across the Prince William Sound to Seward. With the extension of the cable network to Wrangell, Hadley, and Ketchikan, in March 1907, construction of WAMCATS, begun in 1900, was fully completed. "Fidelity and courage," commented the Sitka Alaskan, "have conquered the almost impenetrable wilds of Alaska. . ." (Alaskan, February 6, 1901; December 12, 1903; May 6, 20, 1905; September 8, 1906; March 9, August 17, 1907).

Upon completion, WAMCATS included 2,079 miles of submarine cable, 7,439 miles of land lines, and 107 miles of wireless route. When designing and planning construction, General Greely had decided to install materials of American manufacture, to be laid by American ships, with the exception of some cable instruments not yet available from American manufacturers; and to be operated by American soldiers. A force of men was trained during construction so that the U.S. Army Signal Corps became competent to lay and operate submarine cable of any length in war emergencies or in peacetime. General Greely himself considered the network to be ". . . unique in the annals of telegraphic engineering." (Alaskan, October 12, 1904).

During or immediately following completion of the network the present cable house was built, telegraph terminal and switching equipment moved here, and it has served continuously as a keystone of the telegraph and subsequent communications networks between Alaska and the lower states. The cable was operated until 1913, when it was supplanted by a network of radio stations for communication to and from the Territory of Alaska. During the same period of time the overland segments of WAMCATS gradually were abandoned, as they were supplanted by radio telephone and radio telegraph. By 1940 this network of radio stations represented the principal communications facility of the Territory. Since World War II, several waves of major overhaul and change in the system and in its components have reflected repeated upgrading and application of new communications technology, changing needs of government and private communications, and transfer of the system management from government to private ownership and operation. It all began with WAMCATS. (Colby, 1939, pages 101-102).

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Alaskan, The, February 6, December 14, 1901; December 13, 1902; January 17, March 14, July 11, October 3, 17, 24, November 14, 21, 28, December 12, 1903; January 23, April 30, July 2, September 3, October 8, 12, 19, 1904; May 6, 20, 1905; September 8, 1906; March 9, 1907.

Colby, Merle, A Guide to Alaska. N.Y., MacMillan, 1939.

Mitchell, Capt. William, "Building the Alaskan Telegraph System," National Geographic Magazine, Vol. 14, September 1904, pages 357-361.

Pathfinder, The, March 1920, page 29; September 1920, page 46; June 1921, page 11; October 1924, page 20; November 1924, page 18; March 1925, pages 5-7, 18; April 1925, pages 3-6, 21; May 1925, pages 5-7, 11.

Sitka-Juneau Cable Open," New York Times, October 4, 1903.

Presidential Executive Order 78, April 4, 1908.

U. S. Army in Alaska. DA Pamphlet 3605, May 1976.