

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

For NPS use only

National Register of Historic Places  
Inventory—Nomination Form

received JUL 9 1986

date entered 8-21-86

See instructions in *How to Complete National Register Forms*  
Type all entries—complete applicable sections

1. Name

historic Cooper Landing Historic District (SEW-338)

and/or common Riddiford

2. Location

street & number Milepost 48.7 Sterling Highway \_\_\_\_\_ not for publication

city, town Cooper Landing \_\_\_\_\_ vicinity of

state Alaska code 02 county Kenai Peninsula Borough code 122

3. Classification

Category	Ownership	Status	Present Use
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> district	<input type="checkbox"/> public	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> occupied	<input type="checkbox"/> agriculture
<input type="checkbox"/> building(s)	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> private	<input type="checkbox"/> unoccupied	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> commercial
<input type="checkbox"/> structure	<input type="checkbox"/> both	<input type="checkbox"/> work in progress	<input type="checkbox"/> educational
<input type="checkbox"/> site	<b>Public Acquisition</b>	<b>Accessible</b>	<input type="checkbox"/> entertainment
<input type="checkbox"/> object	<input type="checkbox"/> in process	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> yes: restricted	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> government
	<input type="checkbox"/> being considered	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> yes: unrestricted	<input type="checkbox"/> industrial
		<input type="checkbox"/> no	<input type="checkbox"/> military
			<input type="checkbox"/> museum
			<input type="checkbox"/> park
			<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> private residence
			<input type="checkbox"/> religious
			<input type="checkbox"/> scientific
			<input type="checkbox"/> transportation
			<input type="checkbox"/> other:

4. Owner of Property

name Multiple--see continuation sheet

street & number

city, town \_\_\_\_\_ vicinity of \_\_\_\_\_ state

5. Location of Legal Description

courthouse, registry of deeds, etc. State of Alaska, District Recorder's Office

Box 1929

street & number

city, town Seward state Alaska 99664

6. Representation in Existing Surveys

title Alaska Heritage Resource Survey has this property been determined eligible? \_\_\_\_\_ yes  no

date 1976 and 1979 \_\_\_\_\_ federal  state \_\_\_\_\_ county \_\_\_\_\_ local

depository for survey records Alaska Division of Geological & Geophysical Surveys

city, town P.O. Box 7028, Anchorage state Alaska 99510

# 7. Description

**Condition**

excellent

good

fair

deteriorated

ruins

unexposed

**Check one**

unaltered

altered

**Check one**

original site

moved date \_\_\_\_\_

**Describe the present and original (if known) physical appearance**

Description:

The Cooper Landing Historic District consists of five major buildings on two lots totalling 4.25 acres. Four of these (identified below as A, B, C, and E) are historically significant, while the fifth (building D) is stylistically compatible with the others.

The four historic buildings were all constructed during the period 1905-1927 and are focused on the Kenai River as a transportation corridor. In the words of one resident, "The river was the highway." An early photograph of the entire district, taken in 1925 or 1926 clearly shows this riverine orientation (see photo #1). Today the District is most accessible via the Sterling Highway at Milepost 48.7. Although there was an early road running from a mile below Kenai Lake to the boundary of the Chugach National Forest (terminating just across from the mouth of the Russian River), the Sterling Highway was not built as a through road connecting Seward with Kenai until the late 1940s.

Of the four most historically significant buildings, two still maintain much of their original appearance and integrity, while one, the post office, has been altered with a contemporary addition, and the fourth has suffered damage from being vacant and exposed to the weather. All five of the buildings appear to have been constructed from local timber, were built by local residents, and should be understood as vernacular Alaskan folk architecture.

Buildings Contributing to the Character of the District (see sketch map for locations):

A. The Charles and Beryl Lean House (Photos #2 & #3): c. 1910, two-story, gabled, built of recycled 4"x12" bridge timbers, laid horizontally like logs and covered on the exterior with vertical pieces of sawn spruce boards. This house has a front entrance facing the river (closed off before 1925) and a back entrance facing the highway. Both entrances are covered by lean-to roofs. The covered front porch was added about 1930, even though the front door remained sealed. There are three rooms downstairs--a kitchen, living room, and bedroom. An outside wooden stairwell near the back entrance leads to the upstairs, which contains a hallway leading to one bedroom and an unfinished storage area. Exterior dimensions (excluding the lean-tos) are 5.7 M x 7.6 M. A comparison of photos #2 and #3 shows that the back outside stairway and lean-to roof have been replaced but with almost identical materials. According to the owner, these features have been replaced two or more times, most recently in 1968. The appearance of the house has not been altered in the process of restoration. Excellent condition.

# 8. Significance

Period	Areas of Significance—Check and justify below					
<input type="checkbox"/> prehistoric	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> archeology-prehistoric	<input type="checkbox"/> community planning	<input type="checkbox"/> landscape architecture	<input type="checkbox"/> religion		
<input type="checkbox"/> 1400-1499	<input type="checkbox"/> archeology-historic	<input type="checkbox"/> conservation	<input type="checkbox"/> law	<input type="checkbox"/> science		
<input type="checkbox"/> 1500-1599	<input type="checkbox"/> agriculture	<input type="checkbox"/> economics	<input type="checkbox"/> literature	<input type="checkbox"/> sculpture		
<input type="checkbox"/> 1600-1699	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> architecture	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> education	<input type="checkbox"/> military	<input type="checkbox"/> social/		
<input type="checkbox"/> 1700-1799	<input type="checkbox"/> art	<input type="checkbox"/> engineering	<input type="checkbox"/> music	<input type="checkbox"/> humanitarian		
<input type="checkbox"/> 1800-1899	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> commerce	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> exploration/settlement	<input type="checkbox"/> philosophy	<input type="checkbox"/> theater		
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> 1900-	<input type="checkbox"/> communications	<input type="checkbox"/> industry	<input type="checkbox"/> politics/government	<input type="checkbox"/> transportation		
		<input type="checkbox"/> invention		<input type="checkbox"/> other (specify)		

**Specific dates** 1905-1929 **Builder/Architect** unknown

**Statement of Significance (in one paragraph)**

Statement of Significance:

The Cooper Landing Historic District achieved significance during the period 1905-1929 as a frontier mountain community which developed a subsistence economy supplemented by a diversity of small-scale family businesses and a school. The district contains residential, commercial, and educational buildings which are aesthetically and architecturally compatible, retain most of their original integrity, and provide the feeling of old-time Alaska in a highly scenic setting. Mona Painter, Cooper Landing historian and President of the Kenai Peninsula Historical Association, feels that these buildings are the nucleus and heart of a community which now extends for nearly 10 miles along the Sterling Highway. The vernacular log architecture of this district is a strong reminder of the Leans and the Towles, the two pioneer families who built them. As such, they testify uniquely to the vanishing life style of subsistence hunting and fishing, guiding, trapping, fur farming, trading, and rural schooling adopted by white settlers in the interior of Alaska's Kenai Peninsula during the early 20th century.

History:

Although visited briefly as early as 1848 by the Russian mining engineer Peter Doroshin who was prospecting for gold, the first settler of note was Joseph Cooper, an American who prospected and established a trading post in the area in the early 1880s. The first real wave of white settlers at Cooper Landing, however, did not take place until the gold rush to Cooper Creek and the northern Kenai Peninsula during the period 1896-1912. Today virtually nothing is left of that first placer mining camp along Cooper Creek, which appears to have been mostly a tent city. Although there were approximately half a dozen frame buildings built about a quarter of a mile up the creek from the road, these were torn down and salvaged for lumber.

As early as 1898 hydraulic mining was briefly attempted on the north shore of the Kenai River near the lower end of Kenai Lake, and in 1910 mining engineer Charles Hubbard built a gold dredge on the Kenai River just downriver from the mouth of Cooper Creek. What endures to the present day, however, is a small second tier of more permanent log and timber structures situated along the

# 9. Major Bibliographical References

See continuation sheet

# 10. Geographical Data

Acreeage of nominated property 4.25

Quadrangle name Seward

Quadrangle scale 1:250,000

### UTM References

A 

0	6	3	4	4	3	7	5	6	7	0	1	9	0	1	5	1	0
Zone		Easting				Northing											

B 

Zone		Easting				Northing											

C 

Zone		Easting				Northing											

D 

Zone		Easting				Northing											

E 

Zone		Easting				Northing											

F 

Zone		Easting				Northing											

G 

Zone		Easting				Northing											

H 

Zone		Easting				Northing											

### Verbal boundary description and justification

See continuation sheet

### 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 Craig Mishler

organization \_\_\_\_\_ date January 28, 1986

street & number Star Rt B, Box 7648 telephone (907) 745-3046

city or town Palmer state Alaska 99645

# 12. State Historic Preservation Officer Certification

The evaluated significance of this property within the state is:

national  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 Judith E. Bittner

title State Historic Preservation Officer date June 26, 1986

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I hereby certify that this property is included in the National Register

*for* William B. Bushong date 8/21/86  
Keeper of the National Register

Attest: \_\_\_\_\_ date \_\_\_\_\_

Chief of Registration

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Owner of Property

There are four lots and two owners in this District:

U.S. Survey No. 2527, Homesite 26 (tax parcel nos. 8 and 9)  
Homesite 42 (tax parcel no. 13)

Clements N. Lean  
Box 301  
Douglas, Alaska 99824

U.S. Survey No. 2527, Homesite 27 (tax parcel no. 10)

Betty J. Fuller  
Postmaster  
Cooper Landing, Alaska 99572

Please Note: Since Homesite 27 is already on the National Register, no Property Owner Waiver is included for that lot.

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Description

B. The Riddiford School (photo #4): c. 1925-1927, one-story gabled log structure with saddle-notched corners and two rooms, 5.2 M x 10.8 M. The first room was built in 1925 and the second, on the east end, was added a year or two later. This knowledge helps date the photo of the entire District (photo #1) which shows the school with only one room instead of its current two. This building is listed on the Alaska Heritage Resource Survey as SEW-179 and was active as a school from 1929 to 1938. It is now used as a private residence and has been altered and refurnished on the inside only. Logs are in fair condition but exterior walls are sagging.

C. The Dunc Little Cabin (photo #5): c. 1905, one-story one-room gabled log structure with saddle-notched corners, 4.4 M x 5.2 M. Long abandoned, this one-room cabin has lost its windows and part of its roof and is facing severe deterioration from the weather. Like the Lean house, this cabin faces the river. A survivor of the gold rush era, the Dunc Little cabin is the oldest building in the district and the one in greatest need of preservation. The walls, gable ends, and purlins of this cabin are still intact enough to convey the original architectural form and feeling of the frontier.

D. The Leo Douglas Cabin (photo #6): c. 1946, one-story gabled log structure with large 2 M roof overhang on the front gable-end. Exterior dimensions (excluding the overhang) are 7.7 M x 5.3 M. Names engraved in the cement chinking between the logs say "Bonnie 1949" and "Donna 1949". Logs are darkened but in excellent condition.

E. The Cooper Landing Post Office (photo #7, formerly Jack Lean's Store): c. 1910-1920. The main part of this log building is the gable-roofed store with its entrance on the river side. A west addition which houses the post office is also of log construction. The mail room, a brown modern frame addition on the south side was erected in 1977 and is not contributing. This building is already entered on the National Register and is listed on the Alaska Heritage Resource Survey as SEW-146, but it is not the original Cooper Landing post office. Good condition.

F. Storage shed, gable roof, log construction. Good condition.

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Description

Non-Contributing Structures and Objects:

- G. Carport (new)
- H & I. Modern frame cabins, gable roofs
- J. Meat house
- K., L., M., N., & O. Storage sheds
- P. & Q. Boat docks
- R. Float plane dock
- S. Wooden boat, badly deteriorated
- T. Wooden boat, elevated on rack
- U. Modern frame building with gable roof (SEW-180).  
This was Jack Lean's rental cabin.
- V., W., and X. Frame privies
- Y. Underground root cellar
- Z. Frank Towle cabin

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Statement of Significance

south bank of the upper Kenai River about a mile upriver from the mouth of Cooper Creek. These structures were all built between 1908 and 1925 at a time when "trappers and big game guides took the place of gold miners" (Pittenger and Thomas 1979:136).

In the spring of 1896 Joe Cooper led another prospecting party to Cooper Creek and organized the Lake Mining District, which included Skilak Lake, Kenai Lake, the Kenai River and related tributaries. That same spring or possibly not until in 1898, George Towle along with his two sons Ben and Tom came to Cooper Landing by way of Sunrise on Turnagain Arm, seeking their fortune as gold miners. Having found good prospects on Cooper Creek and Stetson Creek, they staked numerous claims before leaving for California that fall.

When they returned again, they brought along Frank Towle, another of George Towle's sons. George Towle, however, became ill, and died, but with the help of his two brothers, Tom Towle built a cabin on the Kenai River just below Schooner Bend about 1910. Ben Towle and Frank Towle returned to California, but Frank came back and began building what is now the Charles and Beryl Lean house out of bridge timbers.

While building the Lean House, the Towle brothers lived in Dunc Little's log cabin. Duncan McGregor Little was an ex-stampeder from Nova Scotia who had participated in gold rushes to Dawson, Chandalar, Iditarod, and Salchaket. After moving to Cooper Landing he trapped and prospected and occasionally found employment as a camp cook. Frank Towle married a woman named Grace Brooks, who apparently sold the house to Charles Lean while her husband was away on a hunting trip. This occurred about 1919, the same year Beryl Lean arrived to visit her mother and met Charles. Frank Towle established a successful guide service for hunters and fishermen and was issued a patent for a 109 acre homestead in June, 1932. This homestead, now subdivided, adjoins the historic district on the east.

Charles Lean and his brother Jack came to Alaska in 1910 and worked on the Copper River & Northwestern Railroad before moving to Cooper Landing. Jack became a dog musher and carried the mail on the Iditarod Trail and had part-ownership in a couple of roadhouses in Rainy Pass. He returned to Cooper Landing and built a cabin in 1925, running a trapline and doing some guiding. Later on he started a mink ranch, did some guiding, and carried the winter mail to Kenai. In the late 1930s he opened a store at Cooper Landing.



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Statement of Significance

Charles Lean worked with hunting guides as a packer, cook, and cape skinner, and also did some trapping, and woodcutting. Later on he was employed seasonally by the Bureau of Public Roads to maintain the small section of road between Kenai Lake and the mouth of the Russian River. In 1925 he built the first room of the log schoolhouse. At that time the school and the post office were known as Riddiford, after a man who donated his land for a post office. Beryl Lean is credited with getting the Territorial school board to send the first teacher to Cooper Landing in 1929. During the summer months, while school was not in session, the Leans ran a roadhouse and resort. Guests slept in the school and boarded in the Leans' own house. The cost was \$1/meal and \$1/night.

About 1937 three arrowheads were discovered in the Leans' vegetable garden. These artifacts, which have since been donated to the University of Alaska Museum in Fairbanks, should be understood within the context of recent cultural resource surveys and excavations within and adjoining the nearby Sqilantnu Archaeological District (Pittenger and Thomas 1979; Pittenger, 1981; Holmes 1985). These surveys have yielded a multitude of features and artifacts representing both Eskimo and Tanaina Indian occupations in the Cooper Landing area dating from late prehistoric and early historic times. It would thus appear that the Cooper Landing Historic District retains some potential for additional archaeological data recovery.

In 1946 a friend of the Leans named Leo Douglas built another log cabin behind the Lean house and across the driveway from the Riddiford School. He did so with the understanding that after ten years ownership of the cabin would revert back to the Leans. The Cooper Landing Community Hall (SEW-145), also built in the late 1940s, was located just west and downriver from the Dunc Little Cabin, but in 1977 was moved across the river onto a new foundation. In April, 1949, Homesite 26 of U.S. Survey 2527 (1.48 acres) was patented to Charles Cleave Lean, and the adjoining Homesite 27 (2.77 acres) was patented to John Potts Lean. In 1950, ten years after these two lots were surveyed, the alignment of the Sterling Highway was changed to run due east, and the bridge across the Kenai River in front of Jack Lean's store was removed (compare plat and sketch map). For a time, Jack also owned a substantial log cabin situated on the river bank between his store and his brother's house (see photo #1), but this later burned.

Over the years Charles and Beryl Lean raised one son, Clements (Nick) Lean, and three nieces in the house they bought from Frank Towle's wife. As is evident

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Statement of Significance

from a historic photo (see photo #8), the Leans lived a subsistence lifestyle, fishing from the river and cultivating an vegetable garden with a large productive potato patch. The Leans lived at Cooper Landing continuously from sometime in the late 1910s until the mid-1960s, and their son Nick still retains ownership of all the historic buildings on Homesite 26. Charles Lean died in 1958, and his brother Jack passed away in 1976. Beryl Lean lived on until 1984.

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Major Bibliographical References

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Lean, Beryl

- 1984 Taped interview with Craig Mishler at Cooper Landing, July 24. Oral History Project Archives, Rasmuson Library, University of Alaska, Fairbanks.

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Painter, Mona

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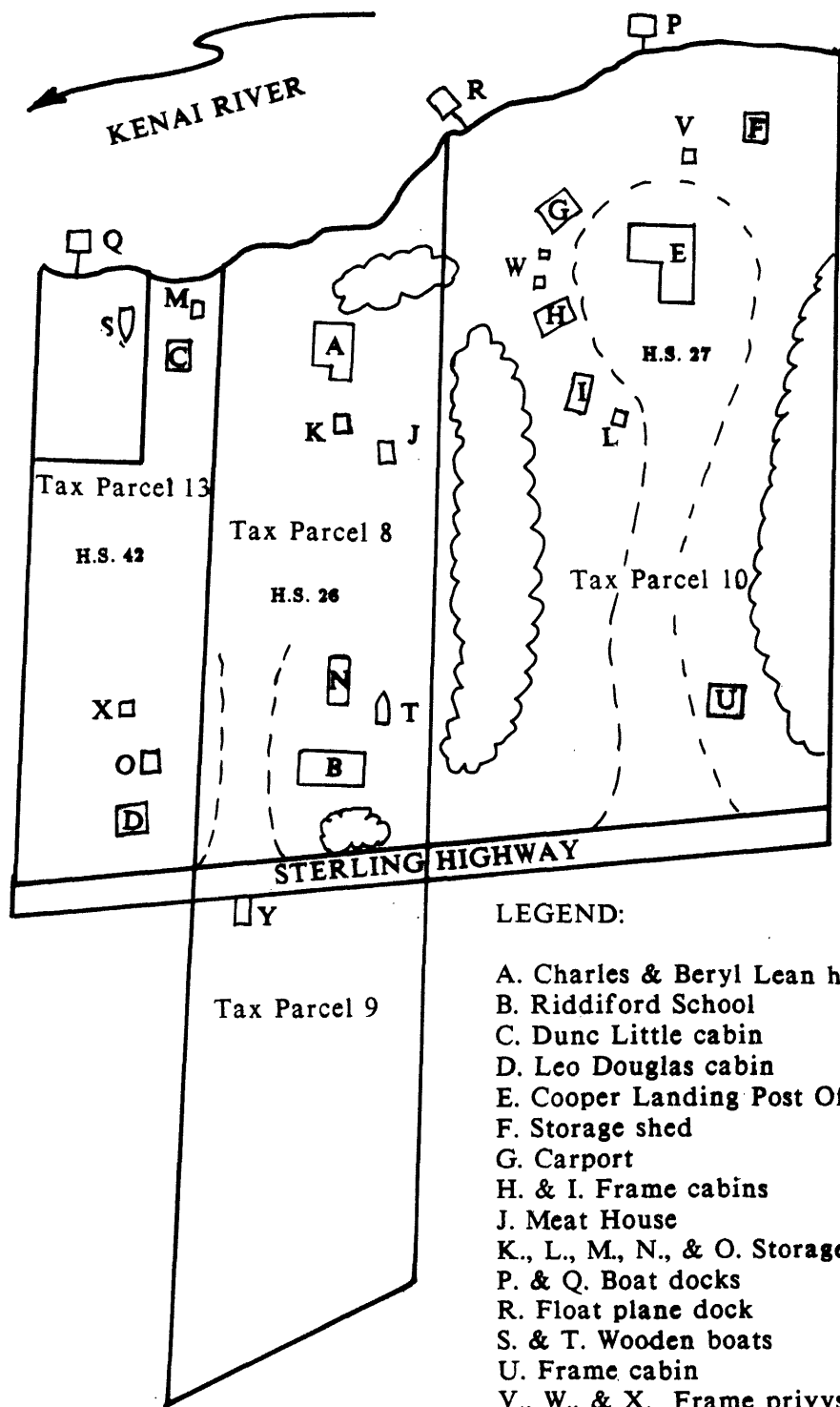
Date entered

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Verbal boundary description and justification

The Cooper Landing Historic District lies on a river plain and is bounded naturally on the north by the Kenai River. It has a somewhat irregular southern boundary, owing to land status changes made since the original 1940 survey plat. The district is now defined as Kenai Peninsula Borough tax parcels 8, 9, 10, and 13 (see tax parcel map). These parcels all lie within U.S. Survey No. 2527, Homesites No. 26, 27, and 42 (see original survey plat). At some point, Homesites No. 27 and 42 were subdivided. All of the historic buildings, however, lie on the north side of the Sterling Highway, and the district includes all known buildings of historic importance except the Frank Towle house (SEW-181). This building was excluded because its integrity has been compromised by severe alterations to its exterior and because the owner was unwilling to sign an ownership waiver.



**LEGEND:**

- A. Charles & Beryl Lean house
- B. Riddiford School
- C. Dunc Little cabin
- D. Leo Douglas cabin
- E. Cooper Landing Post Office
- F. Storage shed
- G. Carport
- H. & I. Frame cabins
- J. Meat House
- K., L., M., N., & O. Storage sheds
- P. & Q. Boat docks
- R. Float plane dock
- S. & T. Wooden boats
- U. Frame cabin
- V., W., & X. Frame privys
- Y. Underground root cellar
- Z. Frank Towle cabin

**COOPER LANDING SKETCH MAP**

**SCALE: 1 inch = 90 ft.**

