

Grave — Qunguq

AATAMA QUNGUA NUNIAM ET'UQ. – MY FATHER'S GRAVE IS IN OLD HARBOR.



Photo: Graves in the Old Harbor community cemetery.

Death in classical Alutiiq society was a forty-day process of passing into the spirit world. When a person died, their body was washed by relatives and wrapped in skins. These were often old boat covers, or for wealthy individuals, sea otter pelts. The corpse was not considered evil or frightening, because the person's spirit helpers were believed to leave their body at death. However, the deceased could reappear and communicate with others during the mourning period.

The body of the deceased was laid at home for several days while mourners sang, wept, and cut or singed their hair. Residents of the house didn't work during this period. Burial was usually in or around the person's community. Graves were simple pits dug into the ground and lined with wooden planks or slate slabs. Personal belongings might be included in the grave or placed on top. For the next forty days, water and food were brought to the grave, and then a memorial feast was held to honor the deceased.

Although there is limited historical information on other burial customs, archaeological data show that Alutiiq people practiced both mummification and cremation. The bodies of powerful whalers were often eviscerated, stuffed with grass, wrapped in skins, and placed in remote caves. Here other whalers would visit to harvest parts of the corpse to enhance their own hunting magic.

Today, burial practices closely follow the tenants of western religions. People are interred in formal cemeteries in graves marked with headstones or the white wooden crosses, picket fences, and spirit houses of Russian Orthodoxy.