

Old Harbor — Nuniaq

NUNIARMIUQ-QAA ELLPET? – ARE YOU AN OLD HARBOR PERSON?



Photo: The Alutiiq village of Old Harbor.

The community of Old Harbor (Nuniaq) has its origins in the era of Russian conquest. In 1784, Russian traders massacred several hundred Alutiiq men, women, and children at Refuge Rock, a tiny island off the eastern coast of Sitkalidak Island. In Alutiiq, this sacred place is known as Awa'uq: to become numb. To many, it represents a dramatic turning point in Native history, the loss of political sovereignty and traditional lands under Russian subjugation. After the battle, Russian traders established a settlement in nearby Three Saints Bay, where Alutiiq people were forced to hunt and prepare food for Russian use. In 1793, the Russian colonists moved their settlement to Pavlovskiaia Gavan—Paul's Harbor—the present location of Kodiak. The Native community they left behind became known as Starrie Gavan or Old Harbor. The community's Alutiiq residents moved several times, finally settling in the present location of Old Harbor. In the mid-nineteenth century, Old Harbor also had a Russian trading post that was located near Gull Light at the Sitkalidak Narrows.

Old Harbor has long been a refuge for people from other villages. Survivors of a devastating smallpox epidemic joined the community in 1838, and in the twentieth century, people from the villages of Aiaktalik and Eagle Harbor resettled here. Even the village's own residents have been forced to resettle. Old Harbor was badly damaged by the tsunamis that followed the 1964 Great Alaska Earthquake. Only the community's Orthodox church survived the flood. Families had to rebuild their homes.

Throughout its history, Old Harbor residents have made their living from the sea. In the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries, residents worked in area canneries processing fish for western markets, and they participated in whaling at Port Hobron. Commercial fishing became an economic mainstay in the late nineteenth century and is combined with tour guiding and sportfishing today. Old Harbor residents enjoy sharing Kodiak's environment with visitors and their hospitality is renowned.