

## Pit, hole in the ground — Laaqaq

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### LAAKAMEK LAGTUQ—HE IS DIGGING A HOLE.

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Photo: Pits in the floor of a 500-year old house, Settlement Point site, Afognak Island, AM33

Evidence of digging is as old as the human settlement on Kodiak. Alutiiq people have long dug into the ground to put up tents and drying racks, build houses, sheds, and hearths, create storage pits, and bury the dead. The Alutiiq word *laaqaq* refers to a ditch, a pit, or an excavation. Alutiiq speakers use this noun to talk about holes that people dig. In some areas of the Alutiiq world, *laaqaq* can also mean a hole cut into the ice for water.

How did Alutiiq people dig holes before the availability of metal spades, shovels, and pickaxes?

For small jobs, like harvesting roots and clams, they used digging sticks. These were sturdy lengths of wood or sea mammal bone with a pointed end useful for prying. Larger jobs, like digging a house foundation, required larger tools. Shovel blades made from the scapulas of sea mammals have been found in ancestral settlements, but they probably weren't helpful for breaking through Kodiak's thick sod. Stone pickaxes or even barbed sod saws may have helped builders break ground.

Like plants, animals, and water, dirt and sod were once important resources, and there is archaeological evidence of sod quarrying. At the back of ancestral villages, researchers often find depressions where people removed quantities of sod for use in house construction. These depressions lack the layers of grass and dirt found elsewhere. They are just pits where people harvested sod.

Pits were also used to cure salmon. In 1890, a Karluk visitor observed villagers brining salmon in shallow holes. When the tide was out, residents dug pits along the shore of Karluk Lagoon and layered them with grass, leaves, and freshly caught fish. Then, they covered the pits with dirt. After about six days of being inundated by the tides, people dug the fish out of the pits and hung the naturally salted filets to dry.