

Alaska — Alas'kaa

GUANGKUTA ALAS'KAARMIU'AT. – WE ARE ALL ALASKANS.



Map: Native peoples and languages of Alaska,
courtesy of the Alaska Native Language Center, UAF.

Unangam Tunuu, the Native language of the Aleutian Island chain, is the source of the name Alaska. In Unangam Tunuu, *Alaxsxi* essentially means “great land” or “mainland.” Before western conquest, Aleutian Islanders used this word to refer to the western end of the Alaska Peninsula. From their island perspective, the peninsula was an enormous land.

Early western explorers followed Unangan tradition, using the term Alaska for the Alaska Peninsula. Early cartographers recorded many versions of the word, including Alakshak, Alaksu, Alaxsa, and Aliaska. Alaska was not adopted as the name for what is now the forty-ninth state until 1867. Secretary of the Interior William H. Seward and his colleagues Charles Sumner and H. W. Hallek proposed the name when the region passed from Russian to American rule and became a territory of the United States.

The term Alaska is also distinctively Native in other ways. Alaska Native place names often refer to local features of the landscape. Alutiiq people, for example, might name a cove for a particular plant found along its shores, or a headland for its dominant wind. In contrast, European peoples tend to name large geographic features or to use place names to commemorate others: Chirikof Island, Mt. Glotov, and Shelikof Strait are some local examples