Historic Alutiiq Kayak Featured in New Exhibit

In 1869, a US Army officer left Alaska with a piece of Alutiiq culture, a skin covered kayak. Now, almost 150 years later, the boat has returned to Kodiak to share its story. The watercraft is a one-man, Alutiiq kayak with an intact, decorated skin cover. Culture bearers Ronnie Lind and Sven Haakanson Jr. recognized the very rare vessel in storage at Harvard’s Peabody Museum in 2003. Since then, the Peabody Museum and the Alutiiq Museum have been working to share the boat in Kodiak.

“The Alutiiq Museum helped the Peabody Museum develop a grant to preserve the boat,” said Executive Director April Counceller. “And two of our culture bearers, Alfred Naumoff and Susan Malutin, traveled to Massachusetts to study the kayak and assist in its conservation. The Peabody staff worked very hard to prepare the boat for travel, while we looked for funds to bring it to Alaska. It has taken many years to make the arrangements but it is finally happening. The boat is in Kodiak, Judy Jungels from the Peabody is here to help us install it, and we have a generous ten-year loan.”

The kayak arrived in Kodiak in early April, carefully packaged for its long journey across the continent. Art handlers in Boston created custom crates for the 14 foot, 39 pound watercraft, double boxing the fragile artifact to withstand the 5,000 mile trip. A moving truck carried the case to Tacoma, Washington, to a Matson shipyard. Containerized, the crate continued by ship to Kodiak. The final leg of the journey, by water, provided an appropriate entrance for this masterpiece of Alutiiq engineering.

“The crate was simply too big to come by air,” explained project director Marnie Leist, the Alutiiq Museum’s curator of collections. “We were thrilled when we learned that the kayak would need to travel home by water. Kayaks are one of the most iconic pieces of Alutiiq maritime technology. They represent incredible knowledge of Kodiak’s waters. Imagine making a boat from driftwood and animal skins without metal tools, a boat designed to weather some of the roughest water in the world. Coming home by water seemed fitting.”
On May 6\textsuperscript{th}, the Alutiiq Museum will share the vessel in a new exhibit—\textit{Qayat-Kayaks}, an exploration of Alutiiq maritime traditions. The historic kayak will be mounted opposite a kayak frame carved by Alfred Naumoff, one of just a handful of Alutiiq kayak builders whose knowledge has been informed by studies of the historic boats. The exhibit will also share artifacts related to kayaking and historic photographs.

“We placed the two kayaks together to show both the inside and the outside of a boat. Naumoff’s kayak is not covered, so you can really see the details of internal construction—frame design and lashing,” said Leist. “Then with the historic kayak, you get to see how the skin cover is made and attached. We placed the two together to help people to understand the links between old and new objects. This exhibit is also about living culture, about how collections can inspire and inform cultural practices.”

Generous support for the exhibit project came from Institute for Museum and Library Services, the Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology, Koniag, Inc., Matson, Marian Owen Photography, and the Alutiiq Heritage Foundation.

The Alutiiq Museum is a non-profit organization dedicated to preserving and sharing the history and culture of the Alutiiq, an Alaska Native tribal people. Representatives of Kodiak Alutiiq organizations govern the museum with funding from charitable contributions, memberships, grants, contracts, and sales.
About the Visiting Kayak
Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology Artifact No. 69-30-10/1619

Description: This historic watercraft is a single-hatched kayak with a bifurcated and upturned prow. Although the exact origin of this boat is unknown, the up-turned prow is distinctly Alutiiq. This style of prow is different from prows made by other Alaska Native cultures. The boat has a hand carved wooden frame, lashed together with animal and plant fibers and covered with dehaired seal skin. The kayak’s skin cover includes inset hairs, delicate decoration along the carefully stitched seams of the boat cover.

Weight: 39 pounds

Dimensions: 444.5 cm x 71.1 cm x 35.6 cm

Materials: Seal skin, humpback whale sinew, hair, wool yard, wood, plant fiber cordage, and spruce root.

Provenance: The kayak was made in or before 1869. It was collected by Captain Edward G. Fast, a US Army officer surveying the Alaska Territory. Fast was stationed in Sitka, and traveled in the Gulf of Alaska. It is not known where he acquired the kayak. Although Sitka falls in the homeland of the Tlingit Indians, Alutiiq people were among the community’s residents—brought to Sitka by Russian Fur traders to work as laborer. It is possible the Fast obtained the kayak in Sitka. In 1869, the Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology, Harvard University, Cambridge, Massachusetts purchased Fast’s Alaska collection, which included the kayak.

Photographs: Requests for photographs of the kayak can be directed to Viva Fisher, registrar of the Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology at gfisher@fas.harvard.edu.

Importance: The boat is a rare example of a complete, single-man watercraft. Artifacts made of animal skins are fragile, especially kayak covers, which tend to spit and deteriorate. It is unusual for a boat of this age to retain an intact skin cover. Because the boat is complete (with its cover) and as it was made at a time when Alutiiq craftspeople were manufacturing traditional items in traditional ways, it contains rare cultural knowledge. The kayak embodies a chain of technological knowledge, craftsmanship, and spiritual beliefs passed down through generations. Today’s students and craftsmen can study the boat to reveal this traditional knowledge.
Attached Photographs

**Photograph 1.** Alutiiq Museum staff members Natalie Wadle and Marnie Leist stand beside the 18-foot shipping crate that carried the historic Alutiiq kayak back to Alaska. Grant funds from the Institute for Museum and Library Services paid for construction of the custom crate and its shipment to Seattle by truck. Matson, a Pacific shipping company, transported the crate to Alaska as a donation to the project. Photograph courtesy the Alutiiq Museum.

![Photograph 1](image1.png)

**Photograph 2.** Men kayaking in the mouth of the Karluk River, 1889. Courtesy the National Archives, Albatross Collection, 22-FA-1154. This image is among those used in the *Qayat* exhibit.

![Photograph 2](image2.png)
Qayat–An Exhibit of Alutiiq Maritime Traditions

**Private Reception – Friday, April 22, 5:00 – 8:00 pm, By Invitation**
A gathering for exhibit sponsors and museum supporters to have the first view of the historic kayak and our new exhibit. Opening ceremony begins at 5:30 followed by refreshments and the opportunity to enjoy the exhibit.

**Exhibit Grand Opening – Friday, May 6, 5:00 – 7:00 pm, Free and open to the public.**
The public is invited to view the Qayat exhibit as part of Kodiak’s monthly First Friday Artwalk. The Alutiiq Museum will celebrate with light refreshments, door prizes, and a chance for all community members to enjoy the new exhibit at no charge. Door prizes generously sponsored by Henry’s Great Alaska Restaurant, Kodiak Electrical Association, and Northern Exposure Gallery.

**Maritime Story Share – May 13th, 6:00-8:00 pm, Free to the public at the Kodiak Library**
Hear Kodiak story tellers share tales of life on the water and enjoy refreshments. In partnership with the Kodiak Public Library, and produced with support of New Pathways | Alaska, a program of EmcArts and The Foraker Group, supported by the Rasmuson Foundation.

**Craft Saturday | Hunting Visors – May 21st, Noon- 4pm, Suggested Donation $5**
Hunting visors were an essential piece of gear for Alutiiq hunters pursuing sea mammals in Kodiak’s stormy waters. Drop by the Museum this Craft Saturday to cut, color, and hot glue your own hunting visor. Then take a look at an example of an open-crown visor featured in the Qayat exhibit.

**Lecture Series – August & September 2016**
The Alutiiq Museum will host a maritime-themed lecture series on Thursday evenings in our gallery. Stay tuned for a list of speakers and topics.

*Members of the press are welcomed at all events. Please contact Gallery Manager Dana Haynes for additional information or to add you name to our press list, 904-486-7004, or dana@alutiiqmuseum.org*