National Science Foundation Supports Additional Alutiiq Language Research

With a $56,462 grant from the National Science Foundation (award #1360839), the Alutiiq Museum will extend its Naken–Natmen (Where From–Where To) language project for an additional year. First funded in 2014, the multi-year project improved access to Alutiiq language resources by developing an online archive of Alutiiq recordings, creating an Alutiiq speaker registry, and planning future language documentation projects. Now, a supplemental grant will allow the museum to study rare examples of written Alutiiq preserved in historic texts.

According to Dehrich Chya, a museum staff member and Alutiiq language learner, “During the original project, we learned of 19th century records with Alutiiq vocabulary. These are words and phrases written down by explorers and scholars. They contain information on places, tools, customs, beliefs, and more. Grant funds will allow us to travel to archives to review and copy documents, and then work with Elder speakers and translators to interpret them.”

The documents include the hand-written notes of French linguist Alphonse Pinart, archived at the Bancroft Library at the University of California at Berkeley; the papers of Walter J. Hoffman stored at the Smithsonian Institution’s National Anthropological Archives; and an Alaska Native Dictionary compiled in 1805 by Nikolai Rezanov. Work on the project will continue through July of 2020 and copies of the resources will be added to a documents page on the Naken–Natmen project website for sharing with the public.

“This is important, time sensitive work,” said Alutiiq Museum Executive Director April Counceller. “To understand the Alutiiq terms, we must work with first language Alutiiq speakers, the Elders who learned our language as children. This is old vocabulary, written phonetically, and our best chance to decode it is with their expertise. We are very grateful to NSF for making this possible.”

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.