

Alaska Highway

1942, 1943



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The attack on Pearl Harbor in Hawaii on December 7, 1941, raised a concern that the U.S. Territory of Alaska was vulnerable to Japanese attack. The Aleutian Islands off southwest Alaska were closer to Japan than any point in North America. Construction of a land route to Alaska, long supported by Alaskan officials, now became militarily crucial. The Alaska Highway would stretch northwest from Dawson Creek through Fort Nelson and Whitehorse in Canada and via Tok Junction to Big Delta southeast of Fairbanks, Alaska.

The construction of the highway was a truly cooperative effort between the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, Army engineering units, the Public Roads Administration (PRA), and PRA contractors. The Corps of Engineers was to build the pioneer road, with Army engineering units and contractors furnished and directed by the PRA. The over 1,500-mile pioneer road was constructed in rough terrain that included sub-arctic tundra, rugged mountains, and virgin forests and was completed by October 1942. Many of the troops constructing the pioneer road were black soldiers who had been drafted into the Army since approval of the Selective Service Act of 1940. The permanent location of the Alaska Highway was constructed in 1943. The military road was turned over to Canada on April 1, 1946, and was opened to the general public in 1948.

1942 photo of a tractor with grader widening the roadway of the Alaska Highway shows the difficult construction terrain.



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1942 photo (top) of bridge for the Alcan Highway construction built over a tributary of the Peace River.

1942 photo (far left) of a stretch of the Alcan Highway.

1942 photo (left) showing tractor pushing grader over a section of the Alcan Highway.

Quick Facts

- Initially, the project was referred to as the Alcan Highway, but on July 19, 1943, Canada and the United States exchanged diplomatic notes formally naming it the Alaska Highway.
- President Franklin D. Roosevelt approved the project on February 11, 1942, and an agreement for U.S. construction of a road in Canada was reached on March 18. Canada supplied the right-of-way and waived customs duties, and the United States built and agreed to maintain the road during the war.
- The Alaska Highway was built to defend the Territory of Alaska from threats in the Pacific and stands today as one of the boldest homeland security initiatives ever undertaken. The over 1,500 miles of roadway was built in less than 9 months for a cost of \$130.6 million.
- The Alaska Highway was truly a marvel of engineering, considering the pace of construction and the difficult terrain and conditions. The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers assigned more than 10,000 men to build the pioneer road, about a third of whom were black soldiers, members of three newly formed “Negro regiments.”
- Operating alongside the Corps of Engineers, the PRA worked from the pioneer road, relocating the route to more permanent ground and building a highway to proper civilian standards using the services of several large American and Canadian construction firms. The PRA’s project was more expensive, more carefully managed, and designed to last.
- After World War II, the U.S. Army transferred control of the Canadian portion of the highway to the Canadian Army. In order to reduce future American claims to the highway, the Canadian government repaid the United States the cost of constructing the road’s Canadian portions. In 1948, the Alaska Highway was opened to civilian traffic on a limited basis.

Reference and Additional Information

<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/features/introduction/alaska/>
<http://web.mst.edu/~rogersda/umrcourses/ge342/Alcan%20Highway-revised.pdf>

<https://archive.org/details/gov.dod.dimoc.23086>