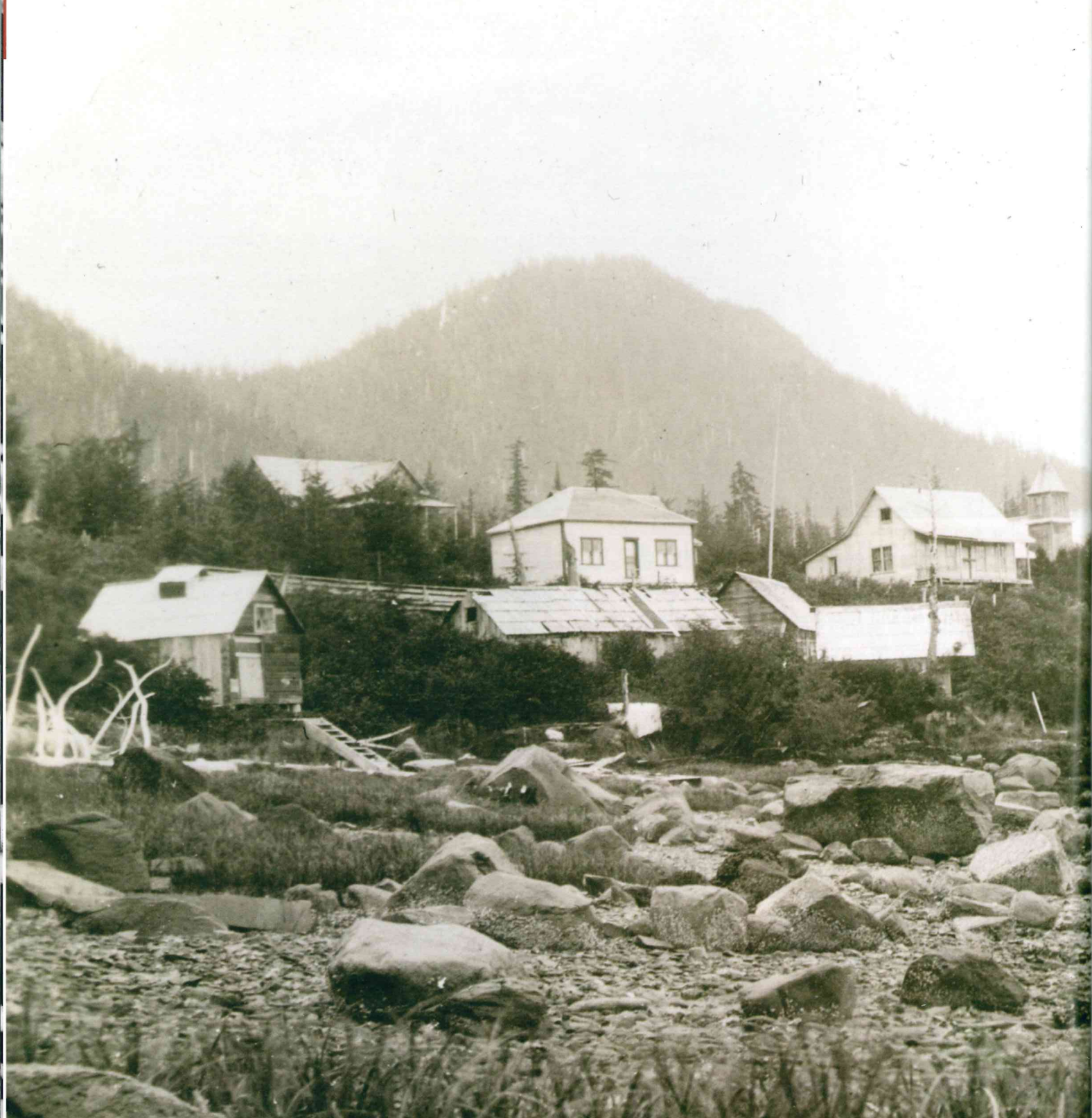




The Legacy of **Saxman**
Looking to the Future Through Our Past





Foundling

The Founding of
Saxman
and the Saxman Government School



Saxman, Alaska.



Above: View of Saxman School - City Hall Building today (M+AA photo 2011).

The founding of Saxman and the opening of the Saxman School are closely intertwined. Prior to the establishment of the village of Saxman in 1894, the Tlingit villages of both Cape Fox and Tongass had petitioned Dr. Sheldon Jackson, the General Agent for Education in Alaska and Presbyterian missionary, to establish a government school. The U.S. Organic Act of 1884 had ordered the establishment of schools in Alaska without reference to race, making a new school possible with funding from the U.S. government. Sheldon Jackson responded that he would support only one school at a site agreed upon by the two communities. In 1886, Jackson had decided to establish a school at Loring, but due to the low attendance at this location the school was abandoned, and the missionary teacher there, Samuel Saxman, and his wife were relocated to a school for the Tongass Tlingits in a former U.S. Army barracks. Soon after arriving, Saxman and two villagers were

Top: View of the Saxman School House (far right) and the Presbyterian Church surrounded by clan houses a. 1890-1910 (Tongass Historical Museum 81-9-5-260).

lost in a storm while looking for a site for the new school. Efforts to establish the new school were temporarily stalled.

In July of 1894, a conference was held in Ketchikan of the leading men of both the Tongass and Cape Fox tribes with Dr. Sheldon Jackson to decide upon a piece of land where the two tribes could come together and found a new town for a school. The village of Cape Fox had been struck with a small pox epidemic earlier, and as the villagers watched large numbers of their relatives die, knew that they should leave their village. Together with their desire to see their children go to school, the Cape Fox people took the opportunity to relocate their village. After much discussion, a site toward the lower end of Tongass Narrows that had been a

summer camp for some of the clans, a little more than two miles south of Ketchikan, was selected. At this conference, the villagers were promised a day school and services of a minister if they would move together to this new site. The town was to be named Saxman after the teacher, Samuel Saxman, who lost his life helping search for a new town site seven years before. Moving meant a great loss of wealth to many of the villagers who had to leave their valued possessions and property behind. But by the fall of 1894, the school building was constructed and villagers had erected a few buildings along the shore. The Saxman School would be

Below: Interior of Saxman Clan House ca. 1938 (Anchorage Museum at Rasmuson Center AMRC-b75-175-611).



one of about twenty-five government schools operating in Alaska at this time.

J.W. Young was appointed the first teacher and missionary, and arrived in Saxman at the end of October, 1895. The Saxman School opened with 31 students. In his annual report for this year, Young notes, *“When I arrived there was no building here except the schoolhouse. The natives have since built seven houses. During three months we had about 50 inhabitants, many of them living in tents. That they are anxious to have their children educated was shown by their coming here and camping in tents during the bitter cold weather of January and February, so that they could send their children to school. The children have made good progress. Many of them had never been to school before.”*

In 1897, there were 75 students at the day school, and the town had grown. J.W. Young was assisted in teaching by Miss M.J. Young. He notes in his report for this year, *“The year has made a great change in the size of the community, and if that is to be a test, we have succeeded very well....Now we have a village of 24 houses, with a population of 120. As you know, the Thlingets do not remain in one place during the entire year, but go to their hunting and fishing grounds at the proper season. During the months of December, January, and February we had a quite a good school, and the pupils made good progress in their studies, especially the younger ones.”* He also noted, *“I found that there was a great need for a store in our new settlement, so I put up a suitable building and send for my son, who laid in a stock of goods and is conducting a successful business. It is a great help to the community.”*

Below: Saxman City Hall today (M+AA photo 2011).



Young helped organize a council of twelve men who governed the village, with the residents abiding by their decisions. By 1898, there were 63 students. J.W. Young writes in his report for this year, *"In presenting my annual report I have nothing unusual or sensational to report. We have had a quiet year of work and have made fair progress. I was afraid that after the novelty of the school had worn off that the interest of the natives would diminish, be it seems to be as strong as it was at first... Our people have been remarkably healthy during the past winter. While other towns had epidemics of measles and the grip, we have been entirely free from them. On the whole, the year has*



been one of progress in education and civilization and the future looks bright."

The emphasis of the day school was on basic skills in reading, writing and arithmetic, with students in grades up through the 8th. Only English was allowed to be spoken. The best students were encouraged to attend secondary school, but they would have to leave Saxman, and sometimes Alaska, to do so. Attendance at the



Above: Saxman City Hall cupola (M+AA photo 2011).

Left: Frank Howard, an early Saxman resident, at 9 years of age ca. 1938 (Anchorage Museum at Rasmuson Center AMRC-b75-175-614).

school varied in the coming years, affected by policies and funding. In 1905, the Nelson Act established two separate school systems in Alaska, with the federal government responsible for the education of Alaskan Natives, and the territorial government responsible for non-Native students. The American Presbyterian Home Mission Society was an important influence on the Native communities of Southeast Alaska during this time, and in 1898 the Presbyterians sent Rev. Edward Marsden, a Tsimshian, to minister to the people of Saxman where he married Lucy Kinninook, the daughter of the Tongass tribal chief. The church building was constructed in 1905 on the hill behind the school. Although stationed at Saxman, Rev. Marsden's work quickly expanded to include many of the Native communities in the area, and in 1915 he moved permanently to the Tsimshian community of Metlakatla, on Annette Island, across Tongass Narrows from Saxman, leaving the community without a minister.

The environment of Southeast Alaska was challenging to the residents of Saxman. In his annual report on education for 1908, Rev. Marsden wrote, "*During the first week in December, a terrific storm waged... The government school was blown off its foundations at night. No one was hurt.*" The school was quickly repaired, and a new foundation was placed under the building at its new location about ten feet down the hill.

In 1920, the census counted 103 people in Saxman, down from a population of 154 counted in 1910. Many of the Tongass Tlingits had moved from Saxman to Ketchikan. A road connecting Ketchikan and Saxman was completed in 1923; prior to this time access to Saxman was primarily by boat. This created an opportunity for students to attend schools in Ketchikan, but attempts to integrate the schools in Alaska were often denied. In 1928, William L. Paul, a Tlingit lawyer and the son of one of the villagers who was lost with Samuel Saxman when looking for a new village

site, was successful in an integration suit in Ketchikan. But it wasn't until 1949 that schools were integrated when the Office of Indian Affairs adopted a policy to assimilate Indians into the larger society. Attendance decreased at the Saxman School as students had opportunities to attend other schools, and there were only 5 students at the school when it was closed in 1945. In 1950, the population of Saxman was

Below: Saxman School House ca. 1938-1950 (Tongass Historical Museum 95-2-15-28).



167, and children attended schools in nearby Ketchikan as they do today. Since the time of its closure as a school, the building has housed many uses, including serving as a rest home. The school building still stands at its original location, and currently is used as the Saxman City Hall.

