

**United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service**

For NPS use only

**National Register of Historic Places  
Inventory—Nomination Form**

received **SEP 23 1985**

date entered

See instructions in *How to Complete National Register Forms*

Type all entries—complete applicable sections

**DEC 6 1985**

**1. Name**

historic The Potter Section House AHRs SITE NO. ANC-075

and/or common

**2. Location**

street & number Mile 115.3, Seward Hwy./Mile 100.6 of the Alaska RR not for publication

city, town Anchorage vicinity of

state Alaska code 02 county Anchorage Division code 020

**3. Classification**

Category	Ownership	Status	Present Use
<input type="checkbox"/> district	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> public	<input type="checkbox"/> occupied	<input type="checkbox"/> agriculture
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> building(s)	<input type="checkbox"/> private	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> unoccupied	<input type="checkbox"/> commercial
<input type="checkbox"/> structure	<input type="checkbox"/> both	<input type="checkbox"/> work in progress	<input type="checkbox"/> educational
<input type="checkbox"/> site	<b>Public Acquisition</b>	<b>Accessible</b>	<input type="checkbox"/> entertainment
<input type="checkbox"/> object	<input type="checkbox"/> in process	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> yes: restricted	<input type="checkbox"/> government
	<input type="checkbox"/> being considered	<input type="checkbox"/> yes: unrestricted	<input type="checkbox"/> industrial
		<input type="checkbox"/> no	<input type="checkbox"/> military
			<input type="checkbox"/> museum
			<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> park
			<input type="checkbox"/> private residence
			<input type="checkbox"/> religious
			<input type="checkbox"/> scientific
			<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> transportation
			<input type="checkbox"/> other:

**4. Owner of Property**

name Alaska Division of Parks & Outdoor Recreation (907) 276-2653

street & number Pouch 7001

city, town Anchorage vicinity of state Alaska 99510

**5. Location of Legal Description**

courthouse, registry of deeds, etc. The Alaska Railroad

street & number Pouch 7-2111

city, town Anchorage state Alaska 99510

**6. Representation in Existing Surveys**

title Alaska Heritage Resources Survey (AHRs) has this property been determined eligible? yes no

date 1976 federal X state county local

depository for survey records Alaska Division of Geological and Geophysical Survey

city, town Anchorage state Alaska 99501

## 7. Description

<b>Condition</b>		<b>Check one</b>	<b>Check one</b>
<input type="checkbox"/> excellent	<input type="checkbox"/> deteriorated	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> unaltered	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> original site
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> good	<input type="checkbox"/> ruins	<input type="checkbox"/> altered	<input type="checkbox"/> moved date _____
<input type="checkbox"/> fair	<input type="checkbox"/> unexposed		

### Describe the present and original (if known) physical appearance

This section house is reportedly the only one of its type that is left along the 470-mile railway. Built in 1929, it has been in continuous use as a section house. Three other section houses (believed to be of the same design) were also built that year. They were located at Divide, Indian, and Sherman and are no longer part of the Alaska Railroad system. The Potter section house is the only older (pre-1930) section house which still exists in Anchorage.

This one and one-half story frame house is 28 x 36 feet. Similar entrances are provided at the ends of the building. Two, four-pane sash windows are located to either side of the main entrance. The back entrance has only one window adjacent to the door. Two identical windows are set above each door. The building is covered with shiplap.

Close examination of the stock plan (dating from 1929) reveals slight differences in relation to the building as it currently exists. The dimensions of the windows are not the same as shown in the stock plan. Additionally, the number of lights (panes) varies. The existing windows may have been part of the original building; the variation might well be due to the unavailability of identical window framing at the time of construction. The original window which provided daylight to the stairway appears to have been enlarged.

A door was also added and later enclosed. The long vertical window space of the bath was converted into a doorway. This doorway was used by section workers to reach the stairway to their quarters. Consequently, they would not have to go through the living quarters of the section foreman and his wife. It also was reportedly used by passengers who would wait for trains upstairs. The exact date of this alteration is not presently known. The doorway was there in the 1940s or early 1950s. It has since been sealed and covered with siding. The shape of the door and its sloped cover are still apparent.

(SEE CONTINUATION SHEET)

# 8. Significance

Period	Areas of Significance—Check and justify below			
<input type="checkbox"/> prehistoric	<input type="checkbox"/> archeology-prehistoric	<input type="checkbox"/> community planning	<input type="checkbox"/> landscape architecture	<input type="checkbox"/> religion
<input type="checkbox"/> 1400-1499	<input type="checkbox"/> archeology-historic	<input type="checkbox"/> conservation	<input type="checkbox"/> law	<input type="checkbox"/> science
<input type="checkbox"/> 1500-1599	<input type="checkbox"/> agriculture	<input type="checkbox"/> economics	<input type="checkbox"/> literature	<input type="checkbox"/> sculpture
<input type="checkbox"/> 1600-1699	<input type="checkbox"/> architecture	<input type="checkbox"/> education	<input type="checkbox"/> military	<input type="checkbox"/> social/
<input type="checkbox"/> 1700-1799	<input type="checkbox"/> art	<input type="checkbox"/> engineering	<input type="checkbox"/> music	<input type="checkbox"/> humanitarian
<input type="checkbox"/> 1800-1899	<input type="checkbox"/> commerce	<input type="checkbox"/> exploration/settlement	<input type="checkbox"/> philosophy	<input type="checkbox"/> theater
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> 1900-1935	<input type="checkbox"/> communications	<input type="checkbox"/> industry	<input type="checkbox"/> politics/government	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> transportation
		<input type="checkbox"/> invention		<input type="checkbox"/> other (specify)

**Specific dates** 1929-1935 **Builder/Architect** Alaska Railroad

## Statement of Significance (in one paragraph)

### Introduction

Anchorage history is interwoven with Alaska Railroad history. In the Municipality there are over seventy miles of rail line. Along that line, and in the terminal yards, are a few vestiges of the Alaska Railroad's past. One of them is the Potter section house.

### Background: An Overview of Alaska Railroad History

The construction of the railroad was overseen by the Alaska Engineering Commission (hereafter A.E.C.). That three-member commission was designated by President Woodrow Wilson in 1914; its mission was to connect the Pacific with interior Alaska. Wilson's sentiments on the potential of the railroad became evident in his first year of office: "Alaska, as a storehouse, should be unlocked. One key to it is a system of railways," he said. "These the Government should itself build and administer, and the ports and terminals it should itself control in the interest of all who wish to use them for the service and development of the country and its people."

Wilson himself chose the so-called Susitna Route, a line that would join Seward at Resurrection Bay with Fairbanks. The last spike was driven in 1923 by President Warren G. Harding. That year it officially became known as the Alaska Railroad. The railroad was constructed and has always been operated by the federal government. It is scheduled to be purchased by the State of Alaska.

### Potter as a Construction Camp in the Anchorage Division

Potter was originally a construction camp. Like so many construction camps, it later became a section house location.

(SEE CONTINUATION SHEET)

## 9. Major Bibliographical References

The Alaska Railroad, Engineering Department Files, Anchorage. (maps and drawings)

The Alaska Railroad Record. Anchorage: Alaska Engineering Commission, 1916-1920.

(SEE CONTINUATION SHEET)

## 10. Geographical Data

Acreage of nominated property less than one(1) acre

Quadrangle name Anchorage (A-8) Alaska

Quadrangle scale 1:63 360

UTM References

A 

0	6	3	4	8	8	7	5	6	7	7	1	2	5	0
Zone		Easting				Northing								

B 

Zone		Easting				Northing								

C 

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D 

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E 

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H 

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Verbal boundary description and justification

The house and outbuildings are located between the right-of-way of Seward Highway and the shore line of Turnagain Arm. They are located at Alaska Railroad Mile 100.6 and Seward Highway Mile 115.3.

List all states and counties for properties overlapping state or county boundaries

state code county code

state code county code

## 11. Form Prepared By

name/title Micheal E. Carberry, Historic Preservation Specialist

organization Municipality of Anchorage

date August 2, 1978

street & number Pouch 6-650

telephone 264-4888

city or town Anchorage

state Alaska 99501

## 12. State Historic Preservation Officer Certification

The evaluated significance of this property within the state is:

national  state  local

As the designated State Historic Preservation Officer for the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966 (Public Law 89-665), I hereby nominate this property for inclusion in the National Register and certify that it has been evaluated according to the criteria and procedures set forth by the National Park Service.

State Historic Preservation Officer signature

*Judith E. Biltner*

title State Historic Preservation Officer

date August 30, 1985

For NPS use only

I hereby certify that this property is included in the National Register

*William B. Bushong*

date 12/6/85

for Keeper of the National Register

Attest:

date

Chief of Registration

United States Department of the Interior  
Heritage Conservation and Recreation Service

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Continuation sheet Potter Section House (ANC-075) Item number 6

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TITLE: Patterns of the Past: An Inventory of Anchorage's Heritage Resources

DATE: 1978  X  LOCAL

DEPOSITORY: Municipality of Anchorage

CITY: Anchorage STATE: Alaska

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Heritage Conservation and Recreation Service

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The original plans called for a spacious kitchen and dining room (14 x 27 feet), washroom and three other rooms (each about 10 x 12 feet) on the ground floor. The upstairs contains a large hall (16 x 35 feet). For some years this space reportedly served as a waiting room for passengers. It may also have been used as a bunk room. Small closet-like rooms are located under the eaves.

Nearby are two outbuildings -- a car shed and tool shed.

Originally, the Potter section met with the Rainbow and Campbell section. With the discontinuation of those and other sections, the Potter crew came to oversee the maintenance of an area whose intermediary points were between Anchorage and Girdwood. In late July 1978 the Potter section was closed. Future maintenance of the rail line is handled by personnel from Anchorage and Girdwood.

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Continuation sheet Potter Section House (ANC-075) Item number 8

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Anchorage was started on the banks of Ship Creek by the A.E.C. The site had been selected as a major construction camp for the construction of the Alaska Railroad. The centrality of Ship Creek permitted construction north to form the link to the Matanuska coal fields and south to join the rehabilitated rail line which had formerly been the Alaska Northern Railway. (The Alaska Northern was started in 1903 by John E. Ballaine as the Alaska Central Railway. That railroad outlined the right-of-way of the line to Potter and beyond. However, because of financial chaos, rail construction ceased at Kern, only 71 miles out of Seward.)

Rumors of a Ship Creek construction camp blossomed into reality in the late spring of 1915. Soon the town of Anchorage was born. The A.E.C. designated the rail mileage between Kern and Broad Pass as the Anchorage Division. Captain Frederick Mears, one of the A.E.C. commissioners, was placed in charge of construction.

Within the Anchorage Division, the A.E.C. created the Turnagain District to coordinate construction along the Arm. The work was the most difficult of any in the entire Division. Turnagain Arm presented sheer rocky slopes, tremendous snowslide hazards, not to mention the widely ranging tides and vagaries of the northern climate. The construction along Turnagain Arm took about two years to complete.

A base camp was set up at Potter Creek in 1916 as the headquarters of the district engineer and his clerical and construction assistants. Barges were able to supply the camp with needed construction material. The "Johnson Trail" (the railroad construction trail) linked Potter with the camps down the line. Warehouses, residences, a messhall and a handful of log buildings formed the camp. The camp was used during 1916 and 1917. By late December 1917 rail had been laid to Falls Creek, nine miles away. The Potter camp was then abandoned and re-established at Falls Creek.

(SEE CONTINUATION SHEET)

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The work south of Potter was extremely rugged. Between Kern and Potter over 4,000,000 cubic yards of the rocky cliff were removed. The cost of putting in the rail line along Turnagain Arm averaged \$110,000 per mile. The last spike in the Turnagain Arm District was driven by A.E.C. Chairman William Edes on September 10, 1918.

The Role the Section House Played

With the completion of the railroad line, sections were established to ensure that the track would be maintained. Potter, as were many of the former railroad construction camps, became a location for a section house. A string of section houses, "as thick as fleas on a dog's back in the early days," were built along the length of the railway. A section foreman, his wife (or cook) and his crew members resided in the house. Various outbuildings such as additional bunkspace, car sheds, tool sheds and water tanks might be located nearby. The houses were built according to a variety of standard plans. Certain styles can usually be attributed to a certain date.

The section foreman and his crew (gandy dancers as they were sometimes called) were responsible for a designated length of track -- the so-called section. The length between sections varied depending upon snowslide hazards, the terrain, grades and similar factors. The section foreman typically had a crew of six to eight members working for him. During the summer the crew might be larger. At that time the grading, alignment and similar maintenance functions were carried out. In winter the crew was generally smaller. A "track walker" was necessary to make sure that the railway was clear of boulders, snowslides and related obstructions.

Besides their role as maintenance quarters, the section houses usually served as flag stops along the line. Thus limited passenger and mail service was available through the section houses.

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The Potter section house was built during an improvement program of the late 1920s which occurred not long after Colonel Otto Ohlson, long-time manager of the railroad, took control. It is not known what happened to many of the buildings which had been built during the construction era, 1916-17. None of them exist at Potter today. Only the section house and its associated outbuildings remain as evidence of the role Potter played in railroad history.

Potter--the Last of the Early Section Houses in Anchorage

Of the many early section houses which were built, comparatively few still exist along the rail line. The buildings have been lost to fire, demolition and removal. Various plans were drafted by the A.E.C. and the Alaska Railroad in order to construct the houses. The Standard Plans (1929) resulted in four, similarly-built structures: of those, only the Potter section house exists.

Within the geographic limits of the Municipality there were as many as fourteen sections during the earlier years of the railroad's operation. Starting at the southern end of the railway, section houses were located at Moraine, Portage, Kern, Girdwood, Bird Point, Indian, Rainbow, Potter, Campbell, Anchorage, Whitney, Eagle River, Birchwood and Eklutna. Recently (1975-77) two of the oldest were taken from the railway. The Campbell section house was torn down. The Whitney section house was moved out of the Municipality to the State Transportation Museum at Palmer following a law suit, McCutcheon v. The Alaska Railroad, in an effort to keep it from being demolished.

Beyond its historic association to railroad development, beyond its importance as the only remaining section house of its type, the building has one of those intangible, yet important factors of significance -- its location. The Potter section house is like a gateway to Turnagain Arm. Its presence at Potter is a landmark delineating the end of the flatlands of the Anchorage bowl and the beginning of the sheer cliffs which adjoin Turnagain Arm. This was the major reason why the site was chosen as a district engineering headquarters and as a section house location. Although the advancement of railroad maintenance from the manual to the machine age has finally resulted in closure of the section, the house remains as the only evidence of that role. Importantly, its location is an aesthetically pleasing one and, because it is adjacent to the railroad, is in keeping with its historical context.

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Prince, Bernadine L. The Alaska Railroad in Pictures. Anchorage: Ken Wrays  
Print Shop, 1964.

Wilson, William H. Railroad in the Clouds: The Alaska Railroad in the Age of  
Steam, 1914-1945. Boulder, Colorado: Truett Publishing Company, 1977.

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Continuation sheet

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Page 1

The legal description for Potter Section House is:

Lot 35, Sec. 10, T 11 N, R 3 W, Seward Meridian

located in the SW 1/4 SW 1/4 of Sec. 10.