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Writing and the Humanities

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November 26, 2023

### Anton Anderson Memorial Tunnel: A Passage Through Time



Nestled against the rugged Alaskan landscape, where towering peaks cast shadows over pristine fjords, lies a testament to history, resilience, and the intricate dance between colonial pasts and indigenous narratives is the Anton Anderson Memorial Tunnel, more commonly known as the Whittier Tunnel. This 2.5-mile-long engineering masterpiece, developed in the midst of World War II military strategy, has become a famous Alaskan landmark recognized for its unique route between Prince William Sound and Turnagain Arm.

Originally constructed during World War II by the U.S. Army, the Whittier Tunnel served strategic military purposes. Its construction aimed to create a link between the port town of Whittier and

military facilities in the region. This 2.5-mile tunnel is the longest highway tunnel in North America. The tunnel is a one-lane highway that must be shared by both cars and trains. The unique design allows vehicles to travel over the rail system. It also has a jet turbine ventilation system to remove hazardous carbon monoxide from the tunnel.

Although the Whittier Tunnel's genesis lies in the strategic needs of the military in 1941, it has transcended its initial purpose to become a critical passage linking the community of Whittier to the broader highway system. In 1960, the U.S. Army abandoned the town of Whittier, leaving it with new opportunities. The town evolved into a popular destination for freight ships, cruise lines, fishermen, and recreational boaters. The tunnel also facilitates access for numerous tourists each year, offering them the chance to immerse themselves in the breathtaking beauty of the Prince William Sound.

The construction of the Whittier Tunnel during World War II marked a significant chapter in its history. However, it is important to note that the need for travel between Prince William Sound and Turnagain Arm has an extensive history in Alaskan culture as well. Long before the tunnel, Alaskans traveled to the Whittier area via different modes and routes. The interconnected waterways and fjords of this region served as key conduits for transportation, trade, and cultural exchange among Alaskan communities. For generations before the tunnel was built Alaskans have navigated these intricate waterways, relying on boats, canoes, and other watercraft to traverse the difficult terrain. The natural water routes were critical for commerce and connecting communities scattered throughout the vast Alaskan region. For hundreds of years, Chugach Eskimos have hunted and gathered in this area. They ventured over Portage Pass and Portage Glacier to trade and fight with the Cook Inlet Athabaskan Indians.

In the 1800s, Alaska gold prospectors used Whittier to access gold fields and trekked through the Portage Pass. Portage Pass was a challenging and risky hike that often resulted in disaster due to the high incidence of avalanches, and movement via the pass was restricted to the warmer months. The Whittier tunnel, which connected this little village to the rest of Alaska, became a modern convenience, alleviating the hardships of historical routes.

Fast forward to today, where Whittier hosts 200 residents and welcomes over 700,000 visitors during warmer months. The Whittier Tunnel has become a lifeline, connecting the community to modern necessities such as work, medical care, shopping, and recreation. However, meticulous planning is requisite due to the tunnel's alternating schedule, opening for one-directional traffic every 30 minutes between 7:00 a.m. and 10:45 p.m.

The Whittier Tunnel, which has evolved from a military conduit to a key civilian link, may therefore be viewed as a solution to the longstanding and inherent need for reliable transportation between Prince William Sound and Turnagain Arm. While its military roots emphasize regional strategic importance during wartime, its adaptation to civilian use echoes a lasting significance that resonates through the lives of Alaskans, seamlessly bridging the past, present, and the promising future of this remarkable Alaskan landscape.

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