

The United States Marshals Service in Alaska

A Brief History

The US Marshals Service was created by the First Congress in the Judiciary Act of 1789, signed into law by President George Washington on September 24, 1789.

After the United States purchased Alaska from Russia on October 18, 1867, Alaska was designated a military district of the United States and placed under the control of the War Department. The US Army was charged with maintaining law and order until troops were withdrawn in 1877. Alaska was then briefly governed in succession by the Treasury Department and the Naval Department.

Law and order was finally addressed by the Organic Act of May 17, 1884, making Alaska a civil and judicial district subject to the laws of Oregon. Law in the rugged Alaska Territory was now upheld by the US Marshals under a District Judge. At the start of the gold rush there was only one Marshal and ten Deputy Marshals, the sole law enforcement authority throughout Alaska.



In 1897, Deputy Marshals William C. Watt and James Mark Rowan were the first to be killed in the line of duty. The Alaska Peace Officer Memorial chronicles the many brave Deputy US Marshals who paid the ultimate sacrifice in early Alaska.

It was the tumult of the gold rush period which first brought to focus the need for additional law enforcement support to the US Marshal's Office which would continue to bear the responsibility for law enforcement in Alaska for the next forty years.

In 1941 the 15th Territorial Legislature established the Territory of Alaska Highway Patrol for the purpose of enforcing the traffic code, but did not provide the new organization with general police powers. In 1945, as lawlessness continued to thrive outside the jurisdiction of local police departments, the members of the Alaska Highway Patrol were deputized as Special Deputy US Marshals to fill this void.

In 1953, the Alaska Highway Patrol was reformed as the Alaska Territorial Police and granted full police powers by the Territorial Legislature. Additional personnel were hired from the ranks of the US Marshals.

With the advent of statehood in 1959, the Alaska Territorial Police was renamed the Alaska State Police and the organization became a division of the Department of Public Safety. The new State Police added 13 former US Deputy Marshals and 10 new recruits to their ranks, increasing their number to 78 commissioned officers. In 1967, the Alaska State Police were renamed the Alaska State Troopers.

The US Marshals commitment to Alaska continues to be strong. Today the Marshals are headquartered in Anchorage and maintain a two-man office in Fairbanks. The Juneau, Ketchikan and Nome sub-offices are manned during scheduled court arraignments.

In March 1999, the Alaska Fugitive Task Force was established to pull together resources of several agencies and concentrate apprehension efforts on state and federal fugitives, especially those wanted for crimes of violence and drug trafficking. With the assistance of the Alaska State Troopers, the Anchorage Police Department, the Alaska National Guard Counter-Drug Support Team, the Alaska State Probation/Parole Office and other municipal law enforcement agencies, the Task Force has arrested over 5,000 subjects in Alaska and extradited over 250 subjects to other States for adjudication of crimes.

Due to the vast geography of Alaska and the unique challenges of providing law enforcement services, Alaska Deputy US Marshals participate in a variety of special missions like the Alaska Fugitive Task Force and the sharing of US Marshal marine and aviation assets to assist Alaska State Troopers and local law enforcement agencies in the fight against sexual assault and bootlegging in Southwest Alaska. Current US Marshal and Alaska State Trooper partnerships include the Village Crime Reduction Program, Registered Sex Offender Compliance & Enforcement Project and the Badges and Books Program.

Many non-fictional books about Alaska's history make reference to the US Marshals. Stories of the frontier Alaskan Marshal still live today in the minds of many village Elders who remember having Marshals in their villages when they were children.

In honor of this legacy, and the rich history between the great state of Alaska and the US Marshals Service, the Alaska State Legislature is proud to proclaim September 24, 2012 as US Marshals Day.

