Tanalian Point, Alaska: An Early 20th Century Lake Clark Village

Lake Clark
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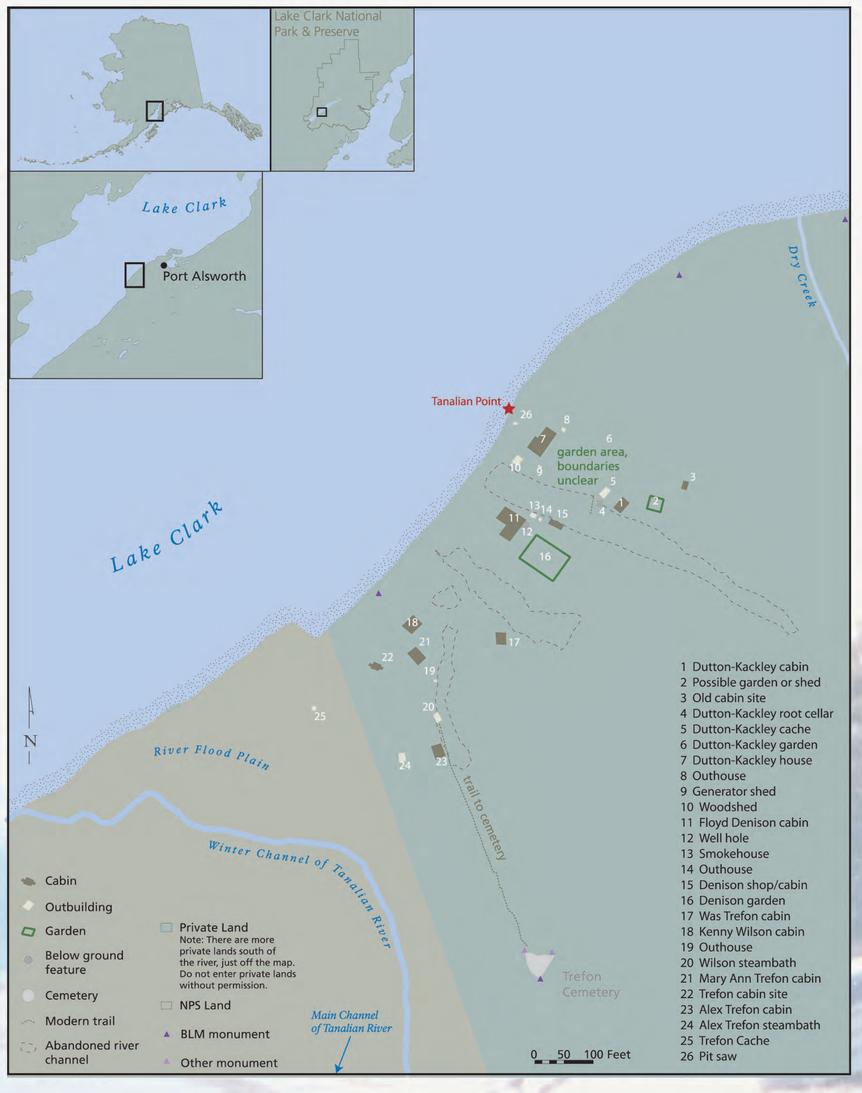
Tanalian Point, on the south side of Lake Clark, was settled by a few Euroamerican prospectors and Dena'ina Athabascans during the first 50 years of the 20th century. The Dena'ina word, *Tanilen Vetnu*, means "flows into water stream" and describes the Tanalian River flowing into Lake Clark at Tanalian Point. The idyllic site provided abundant fish, game, and fur, rich soils for gardening, and spruce and birch trees for cabins, boats, sleds, snowshoes, furniture, and abundant firewood.

The first known Euroamericans around Tanalian Point were prospectors C.T. Brooks, H. Von Hardenburg, and Harry Hicks, who prospected Kasna Creek copper deposits between 1901 and 1906. Tanalian Point was first documented as a 2-cabin settlement, also known as Walker's Camp, in 1909 by U.S.G.S. explorers G.C. Martin and F.J. Katz. During the summer of 1910, J.W. Walker, O.M. "Doc" Dutton, and Jonah E. Kackley moved from Old Iliamna to Tanalian Point to build their camp. The Trefon Balluta family moved from Kijik village across the lake and built cabins at Tanalian by 1911. Some of the log structures at Tanalian Point are the oldest standing buildings in the Lake Clark region.



This is the earliest known photograph of Tanalian Point, circa 1911. Otis M. "Doc" Dutton, Mary Ann Trefon, A.S. Tulloch, and Joe Kackley (left to right) stand in front of what is now the oldest standing structure on Lake Clark (labeled 1 on map). Photo H-71 courtesy of the Alaska Historical Society.

A New Beginning in a New Century

Early in the teens Tanalian Point saw a steady stream of Dena'ina visitors coming and going between Old Nondalton and even the Stony River country, as well as Euroamerican prospectors travelling through the area.

During the 1920s Tanalian established itself as a small hub on Lake Clark for trappers and prospectors and a home for the Trefons and Dutton and Kackley. Tanalian was even counted in the 1920 Federal Census with 10 permanent residents.

In 1921 Tanalian Point served as the jumping off place for the first known sport hunters who came to Lake Clark for big game, including Colonel A.J. Macnab and F.K. Vreeland from New York City.

Agafia Trefon, right, and one of the children of Pete and Agafia Anderson in a garden at Tanalian Point circa 1913. Photo H-10 courtesy of Agnes Cusma.

Doc Dutton holds a pan of new potatoes in the draw between the Dutton-Kackley house and the Denison house at Tanalian Point in 1921. Photo H-762 courtesy of Mr. and Mrs. Bob Orrie.

Back Row: Mary Ann Trefon, Agafia Trefon, Trefon Balluta, Gabriel Trefon. Middle Row: Alexan Trefon, Was Trefon. Front: Alexie Balluta. The Trefon-Balluta family were among the founders of Tanalian Point. Photo circa 1907. Photo H-24 Courtesy Agnes Cusma.

The Trefon-Balluta family at Tanalian Point in 1921. Left to right: Katie, Mary Ann, Pete, Agafia, and Gabriel Trefon, Gabriel's wife Katherine, their daughter Agnes, Alec Trefon. Photo H-859 courtesy of Mr. and Mrs. Bob Orrie.

Mary Ann Trefon, left, and her son Alec stand at the grave of Agafia Trefon at Tanalian Point in 1928. Photo H-1595 courtesy of Tamar Bailey.

Three unidentified Lake Clark Dena'ina in a three-hatch bidarki off Tanalian Point around 1925. Photo H-1736 courtesy of Tamar Bailey.

Taking off Into the Modern Age

In 1930 the first float plane landed at Tanalian. In 1932 Charlie Denison and his son Floyd and daughter-in-law Lena moved to Tanalian Point and within a few years they had radio communication with Star Air Lines in Anchorage (which later became Alaska Airlines). The Denisons also set up a steam powered saw mill and built the first of three wooden bridges across the Tanalian River.

During the 1930s the younger Trefon children married and moved away but Mary Ann Trefon stayed on until she moved to Old Nondalton about 1940. Until the late 1940s Mary Ann Trefon returned each fall to Tanalian Point to put up red salmon with her grandchildren and friends.

Joe Kackley died in 1944 after fighting a house fire at Denison's. Doc Dutton died in 1949 at the age of 90, but not before marveling at Babe Alsworth's new 1,500 foot runway in 1945. With the departure of the founders from the stage and the arrival of bush pilot Babe Alsworth and his wife Mary in 1944, Tanalian Point was eclipsed. In 1950 a new settlement, Port Alsworth, developed around air transport one mile east on Hardenburg Bay.

Lake Clark artist Tish Bowman's painting of the first flight into Tanalian Point in the summer of 1930. The Dutton-Kackley cabin and Tanalian Mountain are in the background. The Waco 10 was piloted by Matt Nieminen. Pictured left to right are Joe Kackley, Nieminen, Doc Dutton, and Alec, Pete, and Katie Trefon. Courtesy of John Branson.

LaVerne Denison, left, and Andrew Balluta with a pile of large rutabagas in the Denison's garden at Tanalian Point circa 1937. Photo H-1728 courtesy of LaVerne Larson

Brothers Pete Trefon, left, and Alec Trefon with two black bears they shot at Tanalian Point circa 1932. Photo H-437B courtesy of Mr. and Mrs. Frank Hill.

Wasili Trefon in 1939 at Tanalian Point, preparing to travel north across Lake Clark to Miller Creek at the head of the Telaquana trail. Photo H-15 courtesy of Agnes Cusma.

Floyd Denison with a pike at Tanalian Point circa 1937. Photo H-1734 courtesy of LaVerne Larson.

Doc Dutton greets New York City big-game hunters Colonel A.J. McNab and Fred Vreeland in 1921 at the Dutton-Kackley camp. Photo H-736 courtesy of Sandra Orrie.

Mary Ann Trefon in front of her home at Tanalian Point about 1935. Photo H-262 courtesy of Helena Moses.

Sled dogs pause on a channel of the Tanalian River as they haul a saw log to the Charlie Denison sawmill near Tanalian Point in 1944. Photo H-51 courtesy of the Floyd Denison Collection.

Doc Dutton, Joe Kackley, Glenda Kennedy, Lena Denison, and LaVerne Denison (left to right) on the beach in front of Doc and Joe's house around 1936. Photo H-1719 courtesy of LaVerne Larson.

Olaf Borgason, Lena Denison, and Brown Carlson (left to right) at the Denison house at Tanalian Point in 1938 with a catch of furs. Photo courtesy of the Floyd Denison Collection.

The Dutton-Kackley house engulfed in flames the winter of 1938-1939. Photo H-1736 courtesy of LaVerne Larson.

Doc Dutton sits near his root cellar, where he stored the bounty of his garden at Tanalian Point, circa 1935. Photo H-1290 courtesy of the Ellen Pike Collection.

An unknown angler fishes for arctic grayling at the mouth of the Tanalian River around 1940. Photo H-1045 courtesy of Johanna Bouker.

Poster by John Branson, Barbara Bundy, and Buck Mangipane.

Background Photo: A view of the Dutton-Kackley house circa 1955-1960 with the northeast side of Lake Clark on the left. A wind charger stands where the old pit saw formerly stood in front of the house. Photo H-221I courtesy of Glen Alsworth, Jr.