

Hoonah carves a niche in the region

Southeast town’s strong visitor draw stands out, keeps growing

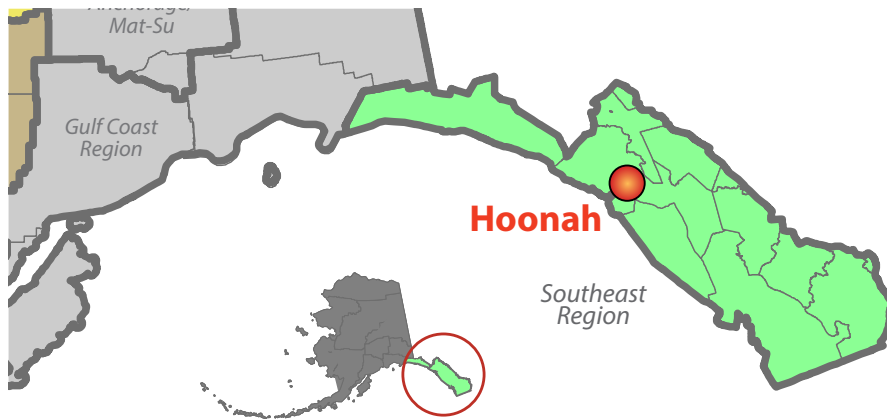
By SARA WHITNEY

It took the early census takers decades to figure it out. The Southeast Alaska community first appeared in the 1880 Census as Koudekan, then as Huna in 1890 and Hooniah in 1900. By 1910, the name established when the post office opened just after the turn of the century managed to stick.

Hoonah, the phonetic spelling of the Tlingit *Xunaa*, was recorded in 1910 with 462 residents. By 2020, the town had 931, a 22 percent increase from just 10 years earlier.

Hoonah made big changes in the new millennium, capitalizing on its natural beauty and cementing its place among the region’s other ports to host a burgeoning cruise ship industry. The local Native corporation, Huna Totem, established a major adventure park and visitor center less than two miles outside of town.

Icy Strait Point broke ground in 2001 and continued to grow. Two new cruise ship docks came amid multiple expansions: the first in 2016 and the second a few years later, although the pandemic delayed completion.



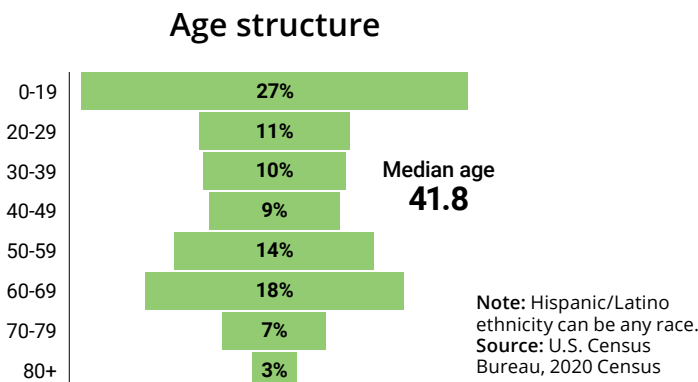
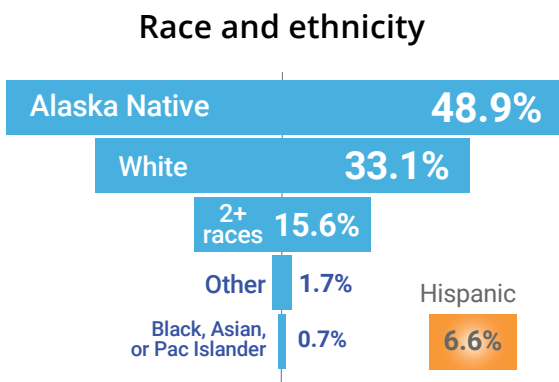
Source: Alaska Department of Labor and Workforce Development, Research and Analysis Section

Today, the site features everything from a museum, shopping center, restaurants, and myriad tours to one of the world’s most extreme zip lines.

The ZipRider, which opened in 2007, begins at the old Hoonah Air Force Station, a Cold War-era White Alice Communications System. With its launch point higher than the Empire State Building in New York City, six cables extend nearly 5,500 feet. Riders reach 60 miles per hour as they fly downward on a 60 percent grade.

Today, Icy Strait Point is now among the busiest Alaska cruise ship ports. It received nearly half a million visitors in 2023. (See the table on page 10.)

Racial makeup and age structure of Hoonah’s population in 2020 Census





Above, the visitor facilities at Icy Strait Point outside of Hoonah, owned and operated by the Huna Totem Corporation, include a museum at the old cannery, restaurants, shopping, multiple excursions, and a zip line with six cables that travels more than 5,500 feet. Zip line riders are visible over the mountainside in the background. Photo by Flickr user [Jay Galvin](#). At left, riders on the zip line, photo by Flickr user [Kent Quirk](#).

The Hoonah of centuries ago

The community, also called *Xunniyaa* and *Gaaw Yat'ak Aan*, goes back much further than the 1880 tally and has been home to hundreds of Tlingit since the Little Ice Age that peaked in the mid-1700s.

The Huna Tlingit came from Glacier Bay, where the advancing glaciers eventually pushed them out. They relocated to the new spot about 30 miles west of Juneau on Chichagof Island, the fifth-largest island in the United States.

Named for its mild climate, *Xunaa* means “protected from the north wind.”

Change came quickly around the turn of the 20th century. A large cannery called the Hoonah Packing Company opened in the early 1900s at the site that is now Icy Strait Point, joining a rapidly expanding list of salmon canneries in Southeast Alaska.

The cannery continued to operate through 1953 after changing hands several times, then served as a storage and maintenance facility for seiners until 1999. Today, the old cannery holds shops and a museum.

Hoonah area jobs by industry

Industry	Jobs in 2023
Total, All Industries	520
Total, Private-Sector	382
Construction	8
Manufacturing (incl Seafood Processing)	47
Trade, Transportation, and Utilities	55
Retail Trade	36
Transportation and Warehousing	13
Education and Health Services	32
Health Care	29
Leisure and Hospitality	236
Accommodation	69
State Government	6
Local Government (includes public school)	113

Notes: Includes Elfin Cove, Gull Cove, Idaho Inlet, Lisianski, Pelican, Port Althorp, Port Frederick, and Yakobi Island. Excludes industries with three or fewer jobs, so industry job counts will not sum to the employment totals. The self-employed, such as commercial fish harvesters, are also not part of this data set.

Source: Alaska Department of Labor and Workforce Development, Research and Analysis Section, Quarterly Census of Employment and Wages



Above, Cannery Road connects Hoonah and Icy Strait Point, photo by Flickr user [Clark Harris](#). At right, Hoonah, photo by the Alaska Department of Commerce, Community, and Economic Development.



The people and economy now

While the area's population rises in the summer, the town is home year-round to a majority Alaska Native population. In the recent census, just under half of its 931 residents reported they were Alaska Native alone and another 15.6 percent were mixed race. The exhibits on pages 8 and 11 give a range of details about Hoonah's population, from demographics to education and income.

Icy Strait Point provides hundreds of jobs to its residents. The Huna Totem Corporation reports that 85 percent of its employees at the site are Hoonah Tlingits. Icy Strait Point is just one of the corporation's ventures, and its profits serve nearly 1,600 shareholders with roots in Hoonah.

Cruise passengers by port, 2023

Port	Passengers
Juneau	1,669,500
Ketchikan	1,497,200
Skagway	1,195,100
Glacier Bay	677,100
Sitka	588,400
Icy Strait Point (Hoonah)	484,200
Whittier	223,500
Seward	191,500
Haines	73,200
Valdez	44,900
Wrangell	23,000
Kodiak	12,600

Source: McKinley Research Group: Alaska Visitor Volume, Summer 2023 and Winter 2023-24

A fire destroyed most of the town in 1944, damage compounded by the loss of many tribal artifacts.

The town includes more businesses, such as restaurants, totem carvers, artists, accommodations, and a brewery, making leisure and hospitality Hoonah's largest sector. The second-largest is a combination of transportation and retail, also tied to visitors and the town's ferry and airport services that connect to Juneau.

Like other small towns in Alaska, Hoonah has some jobs in basic resident services such as government and health care. It also has manufacturing, which is mostly employment at a handful of seafood processing and cold storage facilities.

Fishing has long been a mainstay of the town, both commercially and as subsistence. Most Hoonah residents rely to some degree on subsistence foods, as they have for centuries.

Fishermen aren't included in the employment table on page 9 because they're considered self-employed, but state permit and harvest data show that in 2023, the most recent year available, 40 Hoonah harvesters grossed nearly \$1.6 million. The biggest harvest by far was salmon, followed by halibut and crab.

Hoonah also has a notable amount of self-employment beyond commercial fishing. While no reliable,

detailed data on self-employment are available for a population this small, the number of business licenses gives some sense of sole proprietors' role in the economy. As of January, Hoonah residents held 108 active business licenses.

Hoonah borough petition approved but faces obstacles before vote

After multiple failed attempts, the City of Hoonah's most recent petition to form a borough was narrowly approved last November by the Local Boundary Commission and is scheduled for a resident vote this summer. The most recent new borough in Alaska, Petersburg, was formed in 2013.

If Hoonah prevails this time, it will become Alaska's 20th borough, called Xunaa. The petition faces headwinds, however.

The city says a borough designation would give it more control in developing Hoonah's cruise ship industry, but it faces opposition from some surrounding communities over boundary and taxation questions as well as a dissenting report from several commission members.

According to KTOO, the City of Gustavus may file for a reconsideration of the petition with the commission. Gustavus, Pelican, and Tenakee Springs excluded themselves from the potential new borough.

Significant hydropower boost on the horizon with recent grant

Improving hydropower is also on the agenda this

The new hydropower addition will double Hoonah's average capacity, cutting its reliance on diesel.



The Gartina Falls Hydroelectric run-of-river system near Hoonah currently provides 25-30 percent of the city's power, on average. Photo by the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration.

year. In January, a rural clean power grant from the U.S. Department of Agriculture awarded \$7.4 million to the Inside Passage Electric Cooperative to develop a second run-of-river hydropower system, technology that doesn't require dams.

The co-op's goal is to generate enough additional hydroelectricity to power 543 Hoonah homes. The city's current hydropower averages 25-30 percent, and the addition will bump it up to 50-60 percent.

According to IPEC CEO and general manager Brandon Shaw, construction on the two-year project could begin as early as this fall, if permitting can be completed quickly.

"It will significantly reduce our diesel dependence, allowing us at times to be on 100 percent hydropower," Shaw said. "That would be a first for Hoonah."

The addition will be within a mile of the existing Gartina Falls creek infrastructure, so it will be easy and cost-effective to connect the new "salmon-friendly" project, he said, which will be built well above spawning grounds.

Sara Whitney is the editor of *Alaska Economic Trends*. Reach her in Juneau at (907) 465-6561 or sara.whitney@alaska.gov.

More Hoonah characteristics, 2023

Employed (age 16+)	57.8%	Education (age 25+)	
Private-sector	54.8%	Less than 9th grade	1.1%
Government	39.2%	9th to 12th grade	3.5%
Unemployed	12.6%	Diploma/GED	40.7%
		Some college	26.4%
Per capita income	\$42,061	Associate degree	9.3%
Household income*	\$81,406	Bachelor's degree	13.6%
		Grad/prof degree	5.4%

*Median

Note: Margins of error can be significant for places this small.

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates, 2023