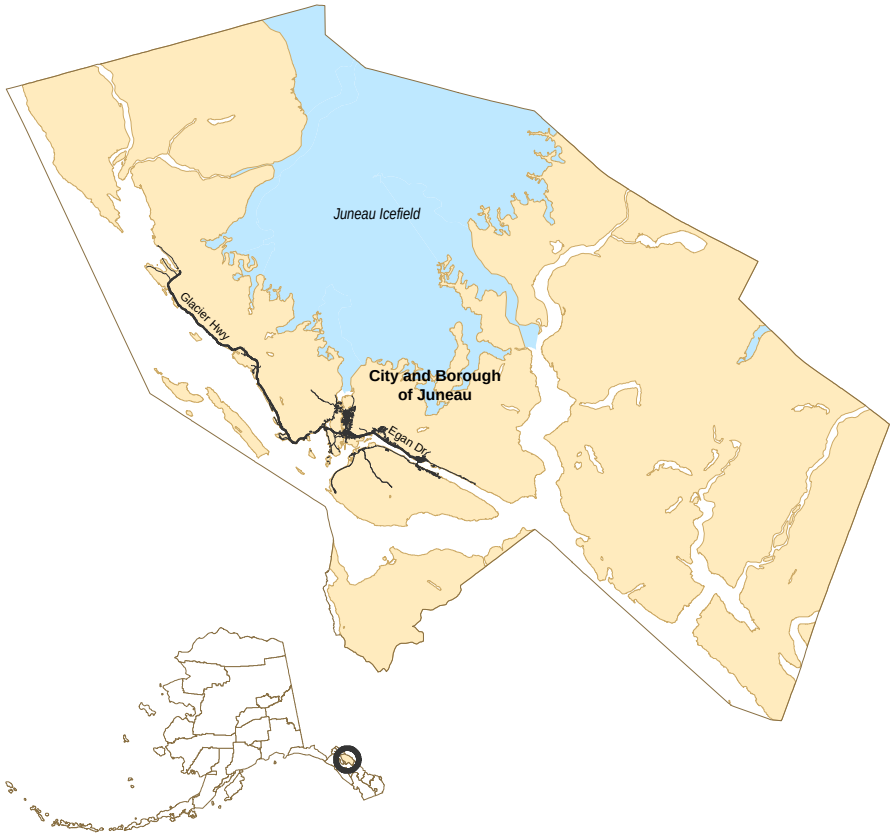
The capital city's transformation

Juneau's economic journey from its start as a mining camp

By JOSHUA WARREN

Originally fishing grounds for the Áak'w Kwáan and T'aakú Kwáan and now Alaska's capital, Juneau has changed dramatically over the last two centuries.



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

Striking gold

Like many places on the country's west coast, the Gold Rush first brought European settlers to Juneau, and with it a bustling mining industry.

In the late 1800s, George Pilz, a German mining engineer who had worked throughout the United States, moved his way north into the new territory of Alaska. He settled near Sitka and enlisted local Tlingit in the search for new potential claims.

One was Kawa.ée, also known as Chief Kowee, whose gold samples prompted Pilz to send prospectors Richard Harris and Joe Juneau to what is now Juneau to explore.

When their efforts paid off in what is now Gold Creek, the men marked the area as a town site, and it quickly expanded into a mining camp with more than 100 people.

What's in the name

The camp's name changed several times in those early days, from Rockwell to Harrisburg, after Richard Harris, and finally to Juneau, after Joe Juneau.

The community has been Juneau ever since, except on a single day in 2016.

As part of an April Fool's Day joke and game promotion that year, the game and toy company Mattel reached out to the city. In exchange for renaming Juneau as "Uno" for one day, Mattel provided promotional materials and a $15,000 donation for at-risk youth in honor of Juneau Mayor Greg Fisk, who had died just after taking office.

Robust early growth with mining

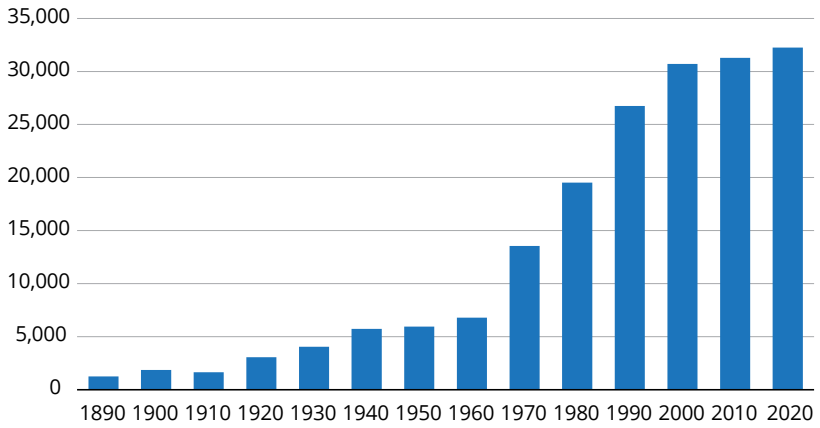
Several industries took root during Juneau's first few decades, turning it into the state's largest settlement.

The town grew quickly in its early years as a district, and in the 1920 Census, its population of 3,000-plus surpassed that of Fairbanks. Juneau remained Alaska's largest community until the 1950 Census, when Anchorage surpassed it.

As Juneau's economy grew with a robust mining industry, other industries sprung up to support it.

These included a vibrant dairy industry with multiple large herds raised in the part of downtown Juneau that now includes the Evergreen Cemetery.

Juneau's population growth since the gold rush



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

Later, as the town expanded, the dairy industry moved into the more plentiful land of the Mendenhall Valley. It continued to thrive until air transportation arrived in the 1940s, making it difficult to compete with imported dairy. (See the August 2025 issue for more on Alaska's dairy history.)

Employment and the population continued to grow as mining operations expanded early in the 20th century. The first complex at Treadwell, on neighboring Douglas Island, operated until 1922 even after a 1917 collapse flooded the tunnels. After that, the AJ Mine in what is now downtown Juneau became the dominant mine, and it operated until 1944.

World War II led to labor shortages, and gold was considered nonessential during the war, so AJ was closed by federal order in 1944. AJ's closure brought the era of mining dominance in Juneau to an end.

After mining declined, a range of industries continued to support the town — fisheries, timber, and the beginnings of tourism. But becoming the capital brought the strongest growth.

The journey to the capital

Becoming the capital of Alaska was the real turning point for Juneau.

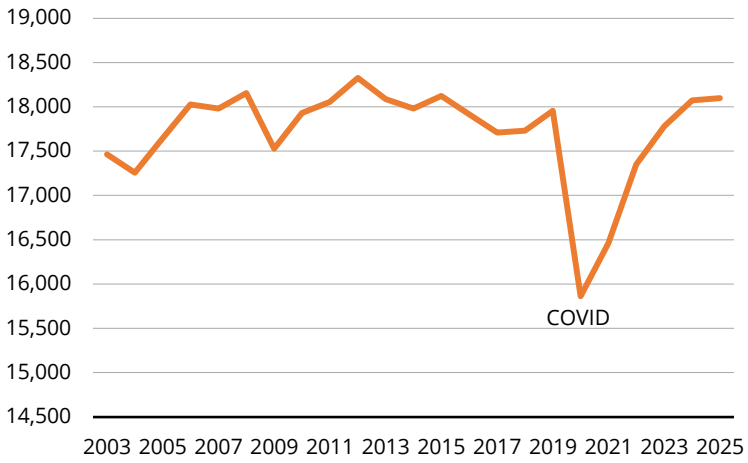
After the United States acquired Alaska in 1867, the territory was briefly governed by branches of the military before the U.S. declared it a civil and judicial district in 1884. At that time, Sitka was its temporary seat.

Congress named Juneau the capital of the district in 1900, then the territory in 1912, and finally the state in 1959 when Alaska was granted statehood.

The population growth pattern shown above reflects several changes as Juneau expanded from a mining town to the state's capital.

The growth between the 1960 and 1970 censuses included incorporating Douglas Island into Juneau's borders on July 1, 1970, creating the consolidated City and Borough of Juneau.

Juneau has fewer jobs than it had in 2012



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



Downtown Juneau, photo by Flickr user Susan Smith

After that, population growth came mostly from government expansion. This was especially true when 1970s oil money spawned substantially more government employment in the city, jobs that paid a premium wage.

Government and fishing receded over the decades

With the tighter budgets that followed oil prices dropping in the late 1990s, government growth grounded to a near-halt, and so did Juneau's population growth.

In the early 2000s, Juneau had more than 4,500 state government jobs. By 2025, that had dropped to just over 3,300. Most of the losses came in the last 10 years as the state faced budget deficits. The State of Alaska cut positions and has faced difficulty filling the remaining jobs, occasionally offering signing bonuses to attract more applicants.

Commercial fishing has also slowed over the last few decades. While the industry is vital to Southeast, its job count has never made it one of Juneau's main economic pillars. However, it still provides hundreds of jobs in the capital.

While seafood harvesters are considered self-employed and aren't included in our regular employment data sets, according to the Commercial Fisheries Entry Commission, Juneau had 295 commercial harvesters in 2000 and 175 in 2025. Gross earnings have not kept pace with inflation. However, the remaining harvesters are earning more on average.

Seafood processing jobs took the opposite trajectory, nearly doubling over those decades. While seafood processing around the state has struggled in recent years, Juneau has largely escaped most of that downturn. Most processing jobs in Juneau are with local independent processors instead of the large national chains that have taken a hit in recent years.

Mining resurgence, tourism reinvigorate the capital

Other parts of Juneau's economy have grown in the last couple of decades. Mining's return has contributed the most growth through its modern mines, Greens Creek and Kensington.

Kensington is 45 miles north of Juneau and produces mostly gold — more than 100,000 ounces last

year. Greens Creek is mainly a silver mine. Located 18 miles southwest of the city, it produces around 9 million ounces annually.

Twenty-five years ago, local mines employed around 300. Today, these two mines provide more than 1,000 jobs. Strong commodity prices suggest Juneau's mining employment will hold steady or grow in the near future.

Tourism is a major industry in Juneau today, with more than a million cruise passengers visiting each year. The city, which has about 32,000 residents, hosts up to 16,000 cruise ship tourists daily in the summer, with a new voluntary cap of 1.6 million for the 2026 season. For comparison, 950,000 visited during the summer of 2006.

While visitors spend money in the capital, cruise ships haven't prompted much job growth in recent years. Over the last 20 years, the leisure and hospitality industry has added just 200 jobs (the industry serves locals as well as visitors). While leisure and hospitality has not grown much, it represents almost 10 percent of Juneau's employment, at around 1,700 jobs in 2025.

Tourism also creates jobs in retail, transportation, and a handful of other industries. Sales tax revenue helps fund local government.



The Goldbelt Tram carries people up Mount Roberts from downtown Juneau. Photo by Flickr user Mark Hogan

Medical care and schools are changing shape

Local government has fared better in the capital than its state and federal counterparts. Parts of local government have taken a hit this decade; for example, the school district has lost jobs through the loss of state funding and lower enrollment. However, tribal organizations and the city-owned Bartlett Regional Hospital have added jobs in recent years.

Health care employment has grown in Juneau as it has nationwide. Outside of government-run medical care in Juneau, the large nonprofit regional provider SEARHC —SouthEast Alaska Regional Health Consortium — has expanded considerably throughout the region this decade.

SEARHC began as a health group in 1975 under provisions of the Indian Self-Determination Act. The group's services have expanded not just geographically from serving mainly Alaska Natives to serving the public. SEARHC has also acquired many independent medical providers in the capital and built large new facilities in the Mendenhall Valley.

Tribal organizations have also expanded into new spaces and industries throughout the city. The largest is Tlingit and Haida, which purchased a downtown hotel, Driftwood Lodge, in 2023 and recently opened the Two Coppers casino on the road to Eaglecrest ski area on Douglas Island.

Goldbelt and Sealaska, two other large Alaska Native corporations, have also expanded, creating a major heritage center downtown and planning to build additional cruise ship docks on the far side of Douglas Island within the next couple of years (see the next section for more details).

School employment has declined, with school consolidations over the last few years and closures contributing. As student counts decreased and funding failed to keep up with costs, in 2024 the district consolidated its two high schools into one at Juneau-Douglas Yadaa.at Kalé High School and transformed what was Thunder Mountain High School into a middle school that hosts the city's two consolidated middle schools.

The city shuttered Floyd Dryden Middle School, and the Dzantik'I Heeni Middle School now houses alternative education programs. Local elementary schools also expanded to include the sixth grade, which was previously in middle school.

More closures are likely, as the population ages 0 to 4 continues to shrink. Juneau has about 20 percent fewer infants than 5-year-olds, making upcoming kindergarten classes smaller.

Population, jobs have settled, but major projects are on the horizon

Overall, Juneau's job and population numbers have settled. While the population grew rapidly over the first couple of decades of the 20th century, it hasn't changed much in the first two decades of the 21st. Total employment is now slightly lower than it was a decade ago.

Going forward, construction and leisure and hospitality are likely to add jobs with new docks and other tourist-centered projects, but most industries have seemingly moved into a steady state.

Still, some projects on the horizon could spur growth. The proposed dock on the far side of Douglas Island and a downtown dock expansion would expand Juneau's cruise ship capacity within the next couple of years. Right now, the city has docking space for four of the five allowed daily ships, and a fifth ship must bring passengers in by tender.

The downtown dock project, called Aak'w Landing, would expand capacity to a fifth ship. While the project has gotten smaller with rising costs from inflation and tariffs, construction is scheduled to start in 2027 with the dock opening in 2028.

The Douglas Island plans are still in the early permitting stages, but opening for the 2028 cruise season is possible. The project includes building out the area near those docks with stores and other amenities. That construction and those businesses will generate additional jobs if the project comes to fruition.

The U.S. Coast Guard will also port at least one Icebreaker in Juneau in the next few years. The Storis is currently home-ported in Seattle; it is expected to be home-ported in Juneau in 2029 when the facility is estimated to be completed.

The Coast Guard originally estimated the vessel would bring in 200 crew, but it reduced the estimate to 120, with 238 accompanying family members.

Joshua Warren is an economist in Juneau. Reach him at (907) 465-6032 or joshua.warren@alaska.gov.