



# Metlakatla

Canadian tribe founded Alaska's only reservation

By **SARA WHITNEY**

The Annette Island Reserve, which lies across the Inside Passage from Ketchikan, is Alaska's only federally recognized Indian reservation. The island is home to Metlakatla, a village of about 1,460 people that was established in the late 19th century by a migrating Canadian tribe, the Tsimshian.

The 86,000 acres that make up the reservation today were originally a Tlingit hunting ground called *Taquan*, known for its calm Port Chester Bay, plentiful fish, and accessible beaches. It's also one of the warmest places in Alaska.

## The migration west

The 826 original Tsimshians migrated to Annette Island from Prince Rupert, British Columbia, via canoe in 1887 and were granted permission to settle there by a local Tlingit chief. They called their adopted home New Metlakatla, which means "saltwater passage," after the original Metlakatla: a community of about 100 people near Metlakatla Pass in British Columbia. In time, as New Metlakatla grew, they dropped the "new."

In addition to the desirable land, the Tsimshian had sought religious freedom in the United States. A Scottish Anglican priest, the Rev. William Duncan, traveled to Washington, D.C., on the tribe's behalf to speak to President Grover Cleveland, who granted Duncan permission to choose a group of islands in Alaska for the tribe to resettle. Congress declared Annette Island a federal Indian reservation in 1891.



Lt. Gen. Douglas Fraser leads a procession of military officials and Metlakatla Indian Community council members to the ferry to meet Alaska Sen. Ted Stevens in August 2007 to mark the completion of Operation Road Project. The 14.5-mile road connects Metlakatla to the other side of Annette Island to allow for easier ferry transport to and from Ketchikan. Photo by Petty Officer 1st Class Kim McLendon, U.S. Navy

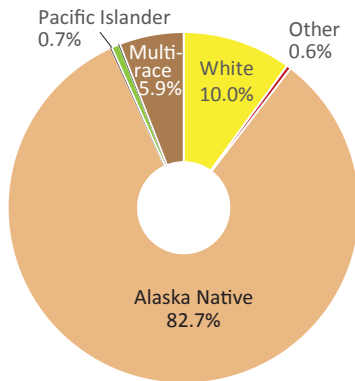
Duncan helped build the new community and remained an authority figure until his death in 1918. After that, the community took over management of all its affairs, formed a 12-member tribal council, and elected local government officials. The incorporated entity is officially called the Metlakatla Indian Community.

## Not subject to state oversight

Metlakatla's federal reservation status puts it in a dif-

# 1 Majority Native Population

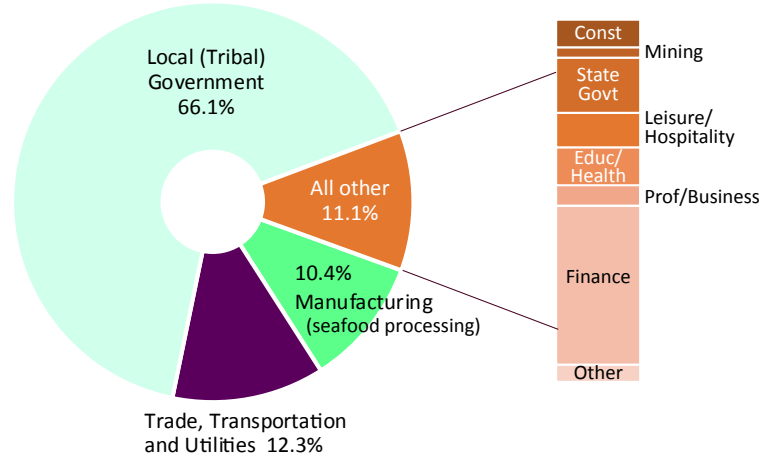
METLAKATLA, 2015



Source: U.S. Census Bureau, American Community Survey 2011 to 2015; and Alaska Department of Labor and Workforce Development, Research and Analysis Section

# 2 Most Work in Tribal-Run Firms, Services

METLAKATLA RESIDENTS, 2015



Note: Does not include self-employed workers, such as most commercial fishermen. Source: Alaska Department of Labor and Workforce Development, Research and Analysis Section

ferent category from all other land in Alaska. (That could change, though, as a federal court recently ruled that Alaska land can be transferred back into federal trust. See the sidebar on page 13.)

In addition to being occupied by an originally Canadian tribe, Metlakatla is not part of the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act, or ANCSA, which was enacted in 1971 and was then the largest land claims settlement in U.S. history.

ANCSA transferred ownership of millions of acres of federally owned land to 12 newly created Alaska regional corporations<sup>1</sup> and more than 200 local village corporations, in which Alaska Natives became shareholders. In exchange, the shareholders agreed to drop aboriginal land claims.

Alaska had other reservations before that time, but they were extinguished by ANCSA. The Metlakatla Indian Community, however, voted to opt out because it would have required them to give up their land and water rights.

Because of the tribe's direct relationship with the United States, Metlakatla is not subject to state control. The community's tribal government regulates its own commercial fishing and operates a tribal court system that includes juvenile and tribal appellate courts.

Another difference emerged in the last few years. Al-

<sup>1</sup>A 13th corporation was created later for Natives who no longer lived in Alaska, and they received compensation but not land.

though Alaska has legalized marijuana cultivation and sale, Metlakatla's direct federal oversight means it's still prohibited there.

## Access to Ketchikan by ferry

During World War II, the U.S. built a military airbase on Annette Island and signed a treaty in exchange that promised to build a 14.5-mile road from one end of the island to the other to allow easier ferry access to Ketchikan. That project took decades to come to fruition, however. The military started the project in 1997 and it took 10 years to complete.

Annette Island is only accessible by boat or seaplane, but the Alaska Marine Highway system has extended its Ketchikan ferry service to five days a week, and

### About the data

Data for a place as small as Metlakatla are collected less often and tend to have high margins of error, so these numbers are more useful for the overall picture they paint than for their precision.

Except for the more recent sources noted, most of this article's data come from the U.S. Census Bureau's American Community Survey five-year estimates released in 2015, which generally match up with the more detailed data from the most recent U.S. Census, in 2010.

in 2013 the island got a newer, closer dock that cut travel time to 45 minutes.

The airbase was decommissioned in the 1970s when the new Ketchikan Airport was built across the channel from Ketchikan on Gravina Island, and the site is now the tribally owned Annette Island Airport.

## Majority Native community

From only about 465 people at the beginning of the 20th century, Metlakatla grew to an estimated 1,467 people by 2016 with almost all of the population growth in the second half of the century. The majority of homes in Metlakatla were built between 1970 and 1999.

About 83 percent of the population are Alaska Native alone and another 6 percent are multi-race. (See Exhibit 1.) While Metlakatla's Native population is primarily Tsimshian, other Alaska Native tribes can join the Metlakatla Indian Community as bona fide tribal members if granted permission by the Metlakatla Tribal Council and Executives. The Metlakatla Indian Community has about 2,300 members, many of whom live elsewhere.

The original tribal language is also Tsimshian, known as *Sm'álgyax*, but few residents speak it. Ninety-five percent of Metlakatla's population speak only English, and 5 percent speak at least some of an Alaska Native language.

Like most of Southeast Alaska, Metlakatla's population is slightly older than Alaska's population as a whole, with a median age of 34.6 as of 2015 compared to 33.4 for the state. It's a slightly younger community than most of Southeast, though. It's common throughout Alaska for majority Native areas to have a lower median age, largely due to higher birth rates.

In other ways, Metlakatla's population doesn't differ much from the statewide average. For example, among the population age 25 and older, 91 percent in Metlakatla have a high school diploma, about the same as Alaska's 92 percent. Attainment of college degrees, including associate degrees, is lower at 14 percent in Metlakatla and 36 percent statewide.



A Metlakatla cannery, which closed in the 1990s, now operates as a cold storage facility for local fish products about to be shipped out. The facility is run by the Metlakatla Indian Community. Photo by U.S. Department of Defense

## 3 Laborer, Seafood Processor Most Common Private Jobs

### METLAKATLA RESIDENTS, 2015

Occupation	Workers
Laborers/Material Movers, Hand	79
Meat/Fish Cutters and Trimmers	45
Retail Salespeople	44
Secretaries/Admin Assistants	25
Preschool Teachers, Except Special Ed	25
Teacher Assistants	21
Janitors and Cleaners, Except Housekeepers	19
Carpenters	18
Medical Records and Health Info Technicians	13
Billing and Posting Clerks	11

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

## Housing costs, income are low

Metlakatla's housing costs stand out, but in the opposite way from most of Alaska. As of 2015, the most recent year available, median rent was just under \$700, and the median home value was only about \$116,000.

Income in Metlakatla also tends to be lower than in Alaska overall, though. Per capita income, which is

wages from a job plus all other income sources,<sup>2</sup> was \$22,944 in Metlakatla and \$33,413 for Alaska, as of 2015. Household median incomes were \$49,924 and \$72,515, respectively.

## Most jobs are in tribal government

Almost all Metlakatla workers are employed locally, with only about 1 percent commuting outside the Prince of Wales/Hyder Census Area.

Metlakatla's industry mix looks a lot like other small communities, with the biggest share working in local government — in this case, tribal government. (See Exhibit 2.)

This is common in rural areas where local governments provide the lion's share of basic services, but even more so in Metlakatla, where the tribe manages some services the state might typically handle as well as a number of community enterprises. For example, the Metlakatla Indian Community owns and operates its own hydroelectric plant, a cold storage facility, and a casino.

About 61 percent of residents over age 16 were employed in 2015, about the same as Alaskans overall, but that percentage doesn't reflect subsistence work or self-employment, such as commercial fishing, which are both significant. About 20 percent of households reported self-employment income, in contrast to 14 percent of all Alaska households.

## Fishing is a cornerstone

In 2016, Metlakatla residents held 60 commercial fishing permits. Most were for herring and salmon, but other species included shellfish, halibut, and groundfish.

According to the Alaska Commercial Fisheries Entry Commission, harvests totaled more than 2.3 million pounds in 2016 with estimated gross earnings of about \$758,000, mostly from salmon.

The town also has one seafood processing facility, run by Silver Bay Seafoods, and seafood processing occupations are among the most common private-sector oc-

<sup>2</sup>Other sources of income include Alaska Permanent Fund and shareholder dividends, rents and investments, pensions, and government transfer payments such as Medicare and Medicaid, welfare, and food stamps.

## The only reservation — for now

While Metlakatla is currently the only federal Indian reservation in the state, a recent federal land trust ruling based on a 2007 suit filed by several villages could alter future ownership, funding, and governance elsewhere in Alaska.

Based on a lower court's interpretation, the U.S. Department of the Interior asserts that the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act, which deeded lands to Native corporations, does not prohibit transferring ownership back into federal trust. The State of Alaska appealed that decision to the U.S. Court of Appeals for the District of Columbia in 2015, which upheld the lower court's ruling in August 2016.

cupations in the area. (See Exhibit 3.)

Common subsistence harvests are halibut and salmon, although these have declined since the early 2000s. In 2003, residents held 360 subsistence halibut permits and 40 for salmon, but by 2010 just 193 halibut permits were issued and the last number available for salmon was two permits in 2008. Residents also harvest cod, seaweed, clams, and waterfowl.

Although Metlakatla residents rely on a range of species for subsistence, there hasn't been a comprehensive study on other types of harvests since 1987. However, the Alaska Department of Fish and Game survey conducted that year gives a sense of how important a variety of subsistence foods are to Metlakatla households.

The survey showed the following percentages of households harvested these other species in 1987: clams (37 percent of households), Dungeness crab (26 percent), abalone (22 percent), chitons (19 percent), rockfish (18 percent), Dolly Varden (11 percent), octopus (11 percent), sea cucumber (9 percent), and cod (7 percent). Also mentioned were herring and roe, flounder, hooligan candlefish, scallops, sea urchins, shrimp, king crab, Tanner crab, and harbor seals.

*The Annette Island School District has three schools: the blue-ribbon Richard Johnson Elementary School (187 students), Charles R. Leask Sr. Middle School (60), and Metlakatla High School (90).*

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