

## *Alaska Highway*

### *Teacher's Guide*

*Building the Alaska Highway* offers insights into topics in American history including the American frontier, life in Alaska, World War II, the Pacific theater, homeland defense, African Americans and the military, the impact of a wartime economy, natural resource management, infrastructure planning and development, and more. Use part or all of the film, or delve into the rich resources available on this website to learn more, either in a classroom or on your own. The following activities are grouped into four categories: history, economics, geography, and culture. You can also read a few **helpful hints** for completing the activities.

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#### History

##### 1. Turning the tide against the Axis

The Alaska Highway officially opened on November 20, 1942, less than a year after the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor brought the United States into World War II. By that time, early signs were starting to point to an Allied victory over the Axis Powers of Germany, Italy, and Japan.

Divide the class into groups of two to three students each and assign each group one or more of the months from December 1941 through December 1942. For each of the months they have been assigned, the groups should select the two to four most important developments on any front in the war (Asia/Pacific, Europe, or Africa). Assemble the groups' selections into a timeline of the period. Then add to the timeline the [major events](#) ([www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/features/timeline/alaska/](http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/features/timeline/alaska/)) in the creation of the Alaska Highway. If workers on the highway had received regular updates on the war's progress, which events would have raised their morale? Which would have hurt their morale?

##### 2. A soldier's daily life

Read about the [life of a highway builder](#).

([www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/features/general-article/alaska-builder/](http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/features/general-article/alaska-builder/)) As a class, compare the daily lives of U.S. Army soldiers in World War II with those on duty in Iraq today. Divide the class into two groups -- one for World War II and one for the present day -- and have each group find the answers to such questions as: What food did the soldiers eat? Where did they sleep? What were their sources of world news? How did they communicate with family at home? What did they do for recreation? Summarize your findings in the form of a chart, or use them to write fictionalized letters or diary entries from soldiers in the two time periods.

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### Economics

#### 1. Alaska's economy today

Visit the map on this site, [The Last Frontier](#), (www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/features/flash-interactive/alaska-frontier/) and tour the Alaskan locations shown, paying special attention to locations in the "Economy" category. Working in small groups, choose a major industry in Alaska, such as fishing, tourism, or oil, and find out more about it: Is the industry dominated by a few companies? How many people does it employ? Who buys the goods or services it provides? Present your findings to the class.

#### 2. Oil drilling in A.N.W.R.?

Recently, Congress has debated whether to allow drilling for oil and natural gas in Alaska's Arctic National Wildlife Refuge (also known by its acronym, A.N.W.R.). To examine the arguments on both sides of this controversial issue, divide the class into four groups. The first group should review reasons for supporting the proposal. The second group should review statements made by members of Congress during past congressional debates on the issue. The third group should examine materials issued by non-profit organizations on both sides of the debate. The fourth group should review news media accounts of the issue.

When all groups have completed their research, combine their findings to prepare three posters: one giving an overview of the issue (What and where is A.N.W.R.? What is the proposal in question? etc.), one listing arguments in favor of the proposal, and one listing arguments against it.

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#### Civics

##### 1. African American soldiers

Read about the [U.S. Army and matters of race](#)

([www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/features/general-article/alaska-WWII/](http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/features/general-article/alaska-WWII/)) during World War II. Choose a topic related to African Americans in the armed forces to research. You may choose a topic connected with World War II (such as the Tuskegee Airmen) or with another era, such as the 54th Massachusetts Infantry in the Civil War, the "Buffalo Soldiers" of the American West, individual stories of African Americans who have won the Congressional Medal of Honor, or the career of Colin Powell (the first African American chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff).

Now imagine you are writing a book on this topic. What would make the most effective introduction to your book -- in other words, what kind of opening to your story would likely prove most interesting to readers? Write your introduction, and then read it to the class. Do your classmates agree that it grabs their attention?

##### 2. Homeland security, then and now

Read the [film description](#)

([www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/features/introduction/alaska/](http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/features/introduction/alaska/)) and about Japan's [invasion of the Aleutian Islands](#). ([www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/features/general-article/alaska-japan/](http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/features/general-article/alaska-japan/)) Just as the Roosevelt administration ordered the construction of the Alaska Highway to respond to the threat to American security posed by the Pearl Harbor attack, the Bush administration took a number of steps -- from tightening airport security to launching military action overseas to creating the Department of Homeland Security -- to

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respond to the September 11 terrorist attacks. Which of these steps have made you feel safer from terrorist attack? Which have not? Are there other steps you think should be taken to reduce the risk of terrorism? Write a 750-word essay expressing your viewpoint on this issue.

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#### Geography

##### 1. An alternate route for the highway?

In class, take a poll on whether the Alaska Highway should have been built along a Seattle-Vancouver-Prince George route instead of the Edmonton-Fairbanks route that was selected. Compare the class results to the [online results](http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/features/poll-results/alaska-poll/), ([www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/features/poll-results/alaska-poll/](http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/features/poll-results/alaska-poll/)) and read historian Ken Coates' comments, [Planning the Highway Route](http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/features/general-article/alaska-interviews/), ([www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/features/general-article/alaska-interviews/](http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/features/general-article/alaska-interviews/)) on how the route was chosen.

On a blank map of the region, trace the route of the Alaska Highway and the alternate route suggested in the reading. Label the major towns or cities through which each route passes, along with the population of each. Now compare the two routes: does this map change your answer to the Poll? Why or why not?

##### 2. Jack London's tales of the North

Read about [travelers to Alaska](http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/features/general-article/alaska-travel/). ([www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/features/general-article/alaska-travel/](http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/features/general-article/alaska-travel/)) Another notable visitor to Alaska was the writer Jack London, who traveled to the Yukon during the gold rush of 1897. London's classic novels and stories, such as *The Call of the Wild* and "To Build a Fire," are some of the best-known accounts of life in the far North.

Read one of London's stories set in the Yukon. Then select a passage -- from one paragraph to one page long -- that you think gives the most vivid picture of the challenges of life in the region. Read your selection to the class.

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#### Helpful Hints

#### History

1. Students should note that two key events in the Allies' war against Nazi Germany -- the Second Battle of El Alamein in North Africa and the Battle of Stalingrad in the Soviet Union -- occurred around the time the Alaska Highway was being completed.

A good starting point for this activity would be to read President [Franklin Roosevelt's December 8, 1941 speech](#)

([www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/presidents/32\\_f\\_roosevelt/psources/ps\\_pearlharbspeech.html](http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/presidents/32_f_roosevelt/psources/ps_pearlharbspeech.html)) regarding the Pearl Harbor attack.

2. Information on one of these topics -- what soldiers ate -- can be found at the Web sites of the [U.S. Army Quartermaster](http://www.qmfound.com/army_subsistence_history.htm) ([http://www.qmfound.com/army\\_subsistence\\_history.htm](http://www.qmfound.com/army_subsistence_history.htm)) and the [Defense Logistics Agency](http://www.dscpl.dla.mil/subs/rations/programs/index.asp). (<http://www.dscpl.dla.mil/subs/rations/programs/index.asp>)

#### Economics

1. A useful source of relevant information is Alaska's website, including the [Department of Labor and Workforce Development](http://almis.labor.state.ak.us/). (<http://almis.labor.state.ak.us/>)

2. For the question regarding the A.N.W.R., students can perform a keyword search at the [White House website](http://www.whitehouse.gov) ([www.whitehouse.gov](http://www.whitehouse.gov)). For congressional debate on A.N.W.R., students can search the [Congressional Record](http://thomas.loc.gov/home/LegislativeData.php?&n=Record&c=108) (<http://thomas.loc.gov/home/LegislativeData.php?&n=Record&c=108>). Two non-profit groups working on the issue are [Arctic Power](http://www.anwr.org/power.htm) ([www.anwr.org/power.htm](http://www.anwr.org/power.htm)) and the [Sierra Club](http://www.sierraclub.org). ([www.sierraclub.org](http://www.sierraclub.org))

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### Civics

1. For example, a student writing about the Tuskegee Airmen might describe a scene of aerial combat between one of the airmen and an enemy plane; a student writing about black Medal of Honor winners might give an overview of the number of medal winners and the wars they fought in; and a student writing about Colin Powell might imagine Powell looking back on his life thus far as he announces his resignation as secretary of state. Students should understand that the introduction does not need to summarize the topic but instead can focus on one specific (but important) piece of that topic.
2. You might introduce this activity by holding a class discussion on the similarities and differences between the threats faced by the United States following Pearl Harbor and the 9/11 attacks.

### Geography

1. To get a better sense of the highway today, students might want to [view photos](http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/features/general-article/alaska-scouting-route) (www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/features/general-article/alaska-scouting-route) taken by the filmmakers and read about [driving the Highway today](http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/features/general-article/alaska-today). (www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/features/general-article/alaska-today)
2. Many of London's works, such as "[To Build a Fire](http://london.sonoma.edu/Writings/LostFace/fire.html)," are available online. (http://london.sonoma.edu/Writings/LostFace/fire.html)

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