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§ 7 The Fake Peak Revisited

An examination of the new evidence for and against Frederick A. Cook's claim to have climbed Mount McKinley in 1906

by Robert M. Bryce

A Introduction

A1 Late on the night of October 2, 1906, a telegraph messenger knocked at the door of 604 Carlton Avenue in Brooklyn, New York. Herbert L. Bridgman, business manager of the Brooklyn Standard Union, paid the $12.50 collect charges and opened the telegram. It was dated September 27:

Tyonek, Alaska

H. L. Bridgman, Brooklyn, NY:
We have reached the summit of Mount McKinley by a new route in the north, and have mapped 3000 miles of country. Return to Seattle by next steamer. Fred. A. Cook.

A2 Frederick A. Cook was a medical doctor and friend of Bridgman’s. He was also a noted explorer. Cook had been Robert E. Peary’s surgeon on his North Greenland Expedition in 1891-1892 and was recognized publicly by Peary for his contributions to its success. He had also served with distinction in a similar role with the Belgian Antarctic Expedition of 1897-1899. In 1903 he had made his first attempt to climb the highest peak in North America, and now his telegram to Bridgman proclaimed his victory in that venture. But this claimed success came as a surprise to many, especially Herschel Parker, a physics professor at Columbia University, who had only recently returned from Alaska, where he had been part of Cook’s expedition. He was under the distinct impression that Cook had given up any attempt to climb the mountain. In fact, that is why Parker had returned to New York ahead of the rest of the party.

A3 When confronted with Cook’s telegram, Parker could scarcely allow that it could be true. “He will have to tell me how he did it before I can believe that it was done,” asserted Parker. “He may have ascended one of the peaks of the range, but I do not believe that he made the ascent of Mount McKinley.” When Cook reached New York in November, he went to see Parker, who apparently was convinced of the truthfulness of Cook’s claim, though he discounted its scientific importance. In Alaska, however, doubts remained that an Easterner had done what most Alaskan “Pioneers” considered impossible.

A4 Cook published the first account of his climb in Harper’s Monthly Magazine in 1907. The tale it told was very thrilling. Cook, with two companions, an Alaskan miner named John Dokkin and a horse packer from Montana named Ed Barrill, set off toward...
Mount McKinley by motor launch (the Bolshoy) in late August. Cook had told the rest of the expedition members who stayed behind that he would merely be looking for a workable route for another attempt the following year. According to Cook’s account, they established a base camp some 40 air miles from the mountain and started up Ruth Glacier, which Cook had discovered curling away from McKinley’s southeastern flank in 1903 and named for his adopted daughter. Dokkin soon turned back, but Cook and Barrill continued on with heavy packs, and in three days reached the base of a 12,000-foot ridge on the mountain’s eastern flank. Once atop this ridge, they were encouraged to go on by a break in the weather. They continued climbing for two more days and, after a number of harrowing escapes and a miserable, sleepless night spent in a hole dug into a nearly vertical slope at 14,000 feet, they realized they had a chance of reaching the very summit. The weather held, and despite the headaches, nosebleeds, snowblindness and other evil effects of the high altitude and intense cold, Cook related, they managed to struggle to within 2,000 feet of the top on the seventh day of the climb. On the morning of the eighth day they made a dash for the higher of the twin summits and reached it about 10 o’clock, September 16. They stayed only twenty freezing minutes at –16 degrees before beginning their descent, reaching their boat again on September 20.

A5 Accompanying his article, Cook published two drawings showing dramatic scenes from the narrative, several photographs with captions implying they had been taken during the actual ascent, and one unequivocally identified as the summit with Ed Barrill standing at its apex holding an ice ax with an American flag lashed to it. During December 1906 and the first months of 1907, Cook lectured on his climb and was elected the second president of the Explorers Club of New York, succeeding Adolphus W. Greenly. A6 In July 1907, Cook embarked on a new expedition to the Arctic. During his absence, in 1908, a full-fledged book detailing his two expeditions to Alaska appeared under the title To the Top of the Continent, in which the same pictures as had appeared in Harper’s were printed with somewhat different captions. In the case of the one of Ed Barrill on the summit, the picture was rendered differently from that which had accompanied Cook’s article. In Harper’s the sky had been airbrushed out and appeared blank, but in the book, the same picture had a dark sky, matching the description in Cook’s narrative, which remarked on its peculiar color at the summit. The book was reviewed favorably in America and Europe and there seemed to be no lingering doubts over Cook’s claim to have conquered the great Alaskan peak.

A7 All of that changed on September 1, 1909, when Cook sent a dispatch from Lerwick, Scotland, saying that he had reached the North Pole on April 21, 1908. He was being given a tumultuous welcome in Copenhagen, Denmark, when word arrived from Robert E. Peary that he had claimed he had reached the North Pole in April of 1909, followed shortly by Peary’s first allegation that Cook’s prior claim to the Pole was a fraud. In the charges and countercharges that were to rage for months in the nation’s newspapers, the initial doubts about Cook’s climb of Mount McKinley were raised early on, but it was not until October 14, 1909, that Cook’s climb of McKinley became a central issue in what has since been dubbed The Polar Controversy.

A8 On that day, the New York Globe & Commercial Advertiser published a detailed affidavit signed by Edward Barrill swearing that neither he nor Cook had ever been within 12 miles of the summit of Mount McKinley, that they had never climbed even a 12,000-foot ridge, much less stood on the 20,320-foot summit, and that all of the harrowing adventures in between had been nothing but fantasy on Cook’s part. Cook’s many supporters, including the powerful New York Herald, countered that Barrill’s affidavit could not be trusted, since it had been made admitting to have lied in the past when he told friends on numerous occasions that he and Cook had reached the summit. He had even shown them his diary bearing a record of the climb, substantially as Cook had described it in his writings. Indeed, the diary, when published in full the next day, did corroborate in all major aspects Cook’s narrative of his ascent. However, his affidavit said that the diary entries regarding the climb were also invention, having all been dictated by Cook.

A9 Before the affidavit was published, there had been numerous rumors of bribes offered to Cook’s former climbing partner and to others for the purpose of bringing down Peary’s rival. Barrill’s affidavit proved that either in the past or now, he was a liar; but, purchased or not, the affidavit was ultimately to have a powerful effect on the decline of public belief that Frederick Cook was a truthful man. Nonetheless, when Cook’s North Pole claim was rejected in December 1909 by a Konsistorium appointed by the University of Copenhagen to examine his proofs, many still adhered to the notion that Cook had been defeated by a moneyed conspiracy bankrolled by the powerful men of the Peary Arctic Club, which had financed Peary’s attempts to reach the Pole for ten years—a conspiracy, they said, in which the Barrill affidavit, which had been bought, had played a major role.

A10 In 1910, the Explorers Club, which had previously formed a committee to examine the merits of Cook’s claim to have climbed Mount McKinley and rejected it, fielded its own expedition to Alaska. Led by Herschel Parker along with another former member of Cook’s 1906 expedition, Belmore Browne, it was financed by the Peary Arctic Club. Its objective was to visit the small peak along a tributary of Ruth Glacier described in Barrill’s affidavit to obtain photographs that would show that it, and not the summit of the great mountain, was where Cook’s picture of Barrill standing with the flag had been taken.

A11 Browne and Parker located the spot, but were unable to exactly duplicate Cook’s photo due to deep snow, which obscured many of the important features visible four years before, and because a shift in a drifted snow cornice prevented them from standing in the position that would have allowed the same camera angle Cook had used. So even their photographs of what they called “Fake Peak” did not convince some that it was the same place as the one in Cook’s photograph, especially since they were sponsored and financed by Cook’s opponents. Browne and Parker were successful in exactly duplicating several of Cook’s other photographs, however, thus showing conclusively that they were not taken at the locations or the altitudes ascribed to them in Cook’s book or magazine article, being miles away and thousands of feet lower in altitude than those he had assigned them.

A12 In the 1950s, Bradford Washburn, the foremost expert on the topography of the Alaska Range, was able to duplicate all but two of the controversial pictures in To the Top of the Continent, none of which were at the altitudes or locations Cook had said they were. But he too was unable to duplicate Cook’s summit picture at Fake Peak, for two reasons. Fifty feet of snow had melted away7 at the site since 1906, placing the spot Cook might have stood when he took his picture far up in thin air. Also, part of the right side of the profile of rocks just below the position Barrill was shown standing in Cook’s photograph was missing, making an exact duplicate of this key photo no longer possible.

A13 This same rock profile was visible in Browne’s Fake Peak photo of 1910, but Washburn contended that this ledge had collapsed since Browne’s photograph was taken; Cook’s supporters maintained that this ledge had never existed (7 §G1), but had been painted into Browne’s photo to convict Cook of fraud. Even Washburn associate Adams Carter’s 1957 attempt to erect a climbable 30-foot mast so as to place him at the right camera angle failed to settle the matter when he found it left him several feet short of the conjectural spot where Cook had stood in 1906.

A14 In 1995, Brian Okonek, an Alaskan climbing guide, duplicated the last of Cook’s supposedly high-altitude pictures from the surface of Ruth Glacier (Top opp. p.238). But without a duplicate of the summit picture, many Cook supporters remained adamant that his photo actually showed the top of the continent as it looked in 1906, and suggested several innocent-sounding excuses to explain the misattribution of the locations of the rest. Thus, Cook’s photograph of Ed Barrill holding the flag has been called “the most controversial picture in the history of exploration.” Is it a fake or not?

B New photographic evidence comes to light

B1 In 1989 most of Frederick Cook’s papers were donated to the Library of Congress. They had been in the possession of his family since his death in 1940 and had never been available as a whole for scholarly examination. Among them was the original diary of his 1906 expedition to Alaska, the existence of which was previously known only to Cook’s family and a few of their intimate friends. However, a portion of the papers remained in the possession of the Frederick A. Cook Society, a non-profit educational organization composed of a small group of ardent supporters and Cook family members headquartered in the Sullivan County Historical and Cultural Museum in Hurleyville, New York.

B2 In the course of research for a biography of Frederick A. Cook, I was given unlimited access to both repositories of the papers once held by the Cook family. In a search through the photographic materials at Hurleyville in 1991, a number of negatives taken by Cook in 1906 turned up, some of them never published.

B3 It had always been lamented that no one had ever had access to the original negative of Cook’s summit photograph, because the picture as published in his book was dark, obscuring many of the details needed to definitely identify where it had been taken, and the publication of the same photo in Harper’s had been so badly retouched that it had the same effect. If additional prints could be made from the original negative, students of the subject speculated, that might clear up the whole matter. Unfortunately, the negative of Cook’s most controversial picture was not among those at Hurleyville. There were a number of prints made from Cook’s original negatives, however, and among them was a sharp, clear copy of his summit picture. That should have settled the matter, but the history of this picture continued to be bizarre.

B4 As part of my request for documentation from the Frederick A. Cook Society, a copy of this picture was asked for on several occasions. Nearly all of my many other requests were eventually filled — but time after time a copy of the crucial summit picture did not come. In 1994, a direct appeal to Warren B. Cook, Sr., president of the society, produced a series of xerox copies of a print from the original negative of Cook’s summit photograph, but not from the one I had seen in 1991. This second print was distinguishable by a different inscription on its back and, judging from the copies, was evidently not as sharp as the one I had seen in 1991. However, when copied at various settings on the xerox machine, its details were enhanced so that they were clearly discernible. Later, in 1994, I was asked by the society to evaluate the collection at Hurleyville for content and preservation.

During my examination of the collection, I revisited the original negatives and prints that I had seen in 1991. The society’s former archivist had processed the photographic materials since my last visit and placed each of these items in a separate acid-free envelope. At each of the pictures I had seen in 1991 was no longer among them. There was, however, one empty acid-free envelope in the box containing the other 1906 prints. Fortunately, the second print (from which the xerox copies that I had received were made) was still among the papers; but as suspected, instead of being crisp and clear, it had yellowed and faded badly.

C The three versions of Cook’s “summit” photograph

C1 Cook’s “summit” photograph was first published in the May 1907 issue of Harper’s Monthly Magazine as part of his article entitled “The Conquest of Mount McKinley.” In this guise, it was cropped at the left and right and the sky was painted out. Many Cook critics have assumed that this was an intentional attempt to alter the picture enough to make it difficult to recognize the place where it had been taken. However, according to the later recollection of a member of the Harper’s staff, Cook was not responsible for these changes; the retouching had been an editorial decision taken without consulting Cook, and

9 Letters, Robert M. Bryce to Mary Allison Farley [then-archivist of the Frederick A. Cook Society], dated October 21, 1991: “Definitely must . . . ; Photocopy of Dr. Cook’s ‘summit’ picture that we saw among his Mt. McKinley photos on my first trip this summer”; December 11, 1991: “On the summit picture: Please send me a 1:1 size copy of this and one as large as you can get on a page by enlargement. Take an enlarged exposure lighter and darker also. This picture was part of the McKinley prints we came across on my first visit.” January 21, 1992: “What I wanted was the print of the famous ‘Top of the Continent’ picture — the one that Dr. Cook always claimed was the top of Mt. McKinley with Ed Barrill holding the flag. We found a print of it in those boxes of Alaskan pictures we looked through on the first visit.” Letters, Robert M. Bryce to Warren B. Cook, Sr., dated February 6, 1993; March 3, 1993; February 17, 1994; April 15, 1994: “I do wish, though, when he found it, that [Sheldon Cook-Dorough, the Cook Society historian at the time] had sent me copies of the Mt. McKinley summit picture as I outlined in detail in several of my letters to Ms. Farley”; May 11, 1994: “While [Mrs. Burns, caretaker of the collection at Hurleyville at the time] is at it, I hope she will send me the copy of the ‘summit picture’ that I have requested on a number of occasions in the past, or that you will do it yourself when you make your upcoming visit to the Museum mentioned in your letter. . . . When I was last in Hurleyville, the picture was contained in a green cardboard folding storage box on the top of the grey bookcase behind the desk as you entered the door to the room in which the papers were held. Sheldon confirmed to me that it was still so located when he was at the Museum doing his evaluation of the papers in 1993. Obtaining a copy of this is also important, since, while my memory is excellent, I would rather not rely on it here. Of course, it would be best if I could be sent an actual photographic copy of the photo. It would have to be 1:1 in size (not an enlargement), then the xerox copies would be unnecessary, but they also would be completely satisfactory, and preferable, if this is going to cause a big delay or cause you any inconvenience. I am sending a copy of the ‘summit photo’ from Harper’s. I believe Burns might easily recognize the one I am looking for.” May 18, 1994. Copies, possession of author.

10 Letters, Mary Allison Farley to Robert M. Bryce, dated January 17, 1992: “I’ve enclosed several copies of summit shots since I do not remember precisely which one you were thinking of. If these are not what you had in mind, perhaps you can check again if you make a return trip this spring.” June 30, 1992: “You will find the photocopy of the print of Marie Cook climbing in 1903 as well as another peak shot. The only print that I can find of Barrill on the summit is a reproduction of the photograph from the book.” Letters, Warren B. Cook, Sr. to Robert M. Bryce, dated February 16, 1993; March 22, 1993: “I appreciated your long letter of 3/3/93 and will try to help or seek help wherever possible to address the open issues”; March 8, 1994: “As regards your requested items via your 5/18/93 letter, you can imagine my frustration in not being able to oversee distribution of any items that might be of value to your research if indeed we have same in Hurleyville.” Attached to this letter was a copy of a letter to Warren B. Cook, Sr. from Sheldon Cook-Dorough, dated February 26, 1994, which contained the following: “The other item which Robert wanted which I was able to find was a print of Dr. Cook’s photograph of the peak which he captioned the top of Mt. McKinley. Now, of course, I could not mail this photograph. But I told Bill [Smith, executive director of the Cook Society at the time] that Robert was very interested in it and I told Bill, as I recall, where the photograph was filed. I then wrote Robert, I believe. I wanted to let you know that he has wanted it in the Collection, in the box where he had seen it the previous year.” April 29, 1994.


12 Letter, Patricia Burns to Robert M. Bryce, dated July 1, 1994: “I have enclosed copies of McKinley worship we could not locate the original.” Possession of author. That there was a different, sharper copy was confirmed by then-archivist of the Frederick A. Cook Society, Sheldon Cook-Dorough, in a letter to the author dated June 25, 1994: “I found the photograph of the summit of Mt. McKinley to which you referred: Cook’s summit. It is indeed in the collection and is a print from the original negative. Dr. Cook wrote Dr. Smith on the back of the photograph. I told Bill Smith who is executive director of the Collection that I had found it and its exact location and that you might want to copy it for your book. Write Bill a note and let him know your desires.” Only six days after this letter, as noted above, Patricia Burns sent me the xerox copies of the faded picture, but “could not locate the original” even though the historian of the society had told the executive director the “exact location” of it. Both, possession of author. [In a phone conversation in February 1998, Mary Allison Farley told the author that she was never instructed to hold the photograph back by anyone in the Cook Society, and that she had no knowledge of what became of it.]

Cook had objected to the alterations, since they had removed the dark sky prominently mentioned in his text and replaced it with a featureless white blank; the magazine was already on sale by the time of his objection, however, and nothing could be done.14

C2 The next version of the “summit” photograph was the one that appeared in Cook’s To the Top of the Continent (Doubleday, Page, 1908, Fig.3). In this version, the picture was cropped more on the left than in Harper’s, but less on the right, revealing an important detail that the magazine’s editor had mostly cropped and partially airbrushed out. This is in the form of a peak visible in the distance, which Cook’s critics asserted gave the true location of the picture away. They said this “distant peak” was identical to one of the mountains that could be seen across Ruth Glacier in one of Cook’s other photographs that appeared in his book (Mt. Grosvenor, Fig.4). If this was true, they reasoned, then Figs.3 & 4 must have been taken at very similar locations. Fig.4 was later shown by Bradford Washburn to have been taken from the top of Fake Peak itself, proving that Cook visited the spot in 1906.15 Therefore, if any feature of Cook’s “summit” photograph could be tied to Fig.4, it would conclusively demonstrate that Cook’s summit is identical to Browne’s Fake Peak. That connection can now be clearly established with the recovery of the original prints of Cook’s photographs.

C3 The collection formerly held in Hurleyville by the Frederick A. Cook Society is now housed at Ohio State University as a result of an agreement concluded between the two in 1996. An inquiry to the university’s archives disclosed that the sharp, original print viewed in 1991, which was missing from the Hurleyville collection in 1994, was not transferred to Columbus along with the rest of the documents. But the yellowed version used to make the 1994 xerox copies was. It is this copy that has been used here for the first publication of Cook’s full original photograph that he claimed represented McKinley’s summit in 1906 (Fig.18, pp.68-69).16 When Cook’s original photograph is compared with Fig.4 and the photograph taken by Adams Carter in 1957 (Fig.5), it can be indisputably shown that Cook’s is indeed Fake Peak and not part of Mount McKinley, much less its summit.

D The three key points of comparison

D1 Each of the key points has been numbered for comparison on Figs.2, 3, 4, 5, 7, and 18. The “distant peak” seen on the extreme right (Mt. Grosvenor) is labelled [1]. This was mostly cropped and airbrushed out of the Harper’s version, but a part of it is visible in the one from To the Top of the Continent. Fig.6(a), an enlarged detail from Fig.4, is provided for comparison with Fig.6(b), and enlargement of the same detail from Fig.18. Notice how the snow lies identically on this peak in both photographs, which were exposed within minutes of each other. Adams Carter was unable to get quite high enough for a perfect alignment of the distant peak with the rock face of Fake Peak that would match Cook’s photo (see

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16 Fig.18 is reproduced from the yellowed print enhanced by OSU by means of a die-sublimation printer, which corrects for the original’s faded appearance. The original print seen in 1991 was even sharper than this. Notice the blemish in the sky in the upper right quadrant of both this print and the one printed in To the Top of the Continent, which proves that the same negative was used to print both of them. Correspondence with Laura J. Kissel, Polar Curator at the Byrd Polar Research Center at OSU, disclosed that although she said “OSU received the entire photographic collection that was in Hurleyville, to the best of our knowledge” and that she “confirmed this with Dr. Goerler, the University Archivist,” a number of items seen by the author during his research were not transferred from Hurleyville to Columbus. These included: the clear original print of Cook’s summit picture; all of the original 5 x 7 negatives taken on Ruth Glacier in 1906; the full original print of the picture reproduced on p.822 of Cook & Peary showing Ed Barrill standing to the right of the tent; the clear version of the photo reproduced at the bottom of p.832 in Cook & Peary. [E-mail messages from Laura J. Kissel to Keith Pickering, dated November 13 & 17, 1997; January 26, 1998 (quoted above).] Copies, possession of author.

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Figure 2: Cook’s “summit” photograph as it appeared in Harper’s Monthly Magazine, May, 1907. Original caption: “THE FLAG ON THE SUMMIT OF MT. MCKINLEY, 20,300 FEET ABOVE SEA-LEVEL”. The left and right edges have been cropped and the sky has been painted out.
Figure 3: Cook’s “summit” photograph as it appeared opposite p.227 in *To the Top of the Continent* (1908). Original caption: "THE TOP OF OUR CONTINENT. The summit of Mt. McKinley, the highest mountain of North America. Altitude, 20,390 feet". The left edge has been cropped more severely than Fig.2, but the sky is original. Note feature [1], the “distant peak” (Mt. Grosvenor), at the center of the extreme right-hand margin.

Figure 4: The full, original print of the photograph that appeared opposite p.239 in *To the Top of the Continent*, published here for the first time. Cook’s 1908 caption: "SCENE OF GLACIERS, PEAKS AND CLIFFS. Shoulder of Mt. McKinley, a cliff of 8,000 feet. Ruth Glacier, a freight carrier of the cloud world. The Great White Way, where the polar frosts meet the Pacific drift of the tropical dews." (His Harper’s 1907 article p.833 put this scene at 16,000 feet.) View looks a little south of west-southwest, from atop Fake Peak. The tall background peaks Cook named (l. to r.) Mt. Church (8233 ft), Mt. Grosvenor (8450 ft), & Mt. Johnson (8460 ft), names evidently not now recognized by the USGS. (See Fig.1 & fn 33.) Details of this photograph are enlarged as Figs.6(a) & 8(a). Photo courtesy of the Ohio State University Photo Archives.
but had he been able to, it would align correctly. But of course, the missing rock profile made a duplicate of Cook’s photo by Carter impossible. Due to the change in the position of the snow cornice leading up to the top, Parker and Browne were unable to align the peak with the foreground in their 1910 photographs, either (Fig.7).

D2 What appears to be a dark cave-like recess, but may be only a shadowed rock face, is the second key point [2]. This feature is visible in all versions of Cook’s picture and is especially striking when Carter’s and Cook’s original photographs are compared. Notice the dark streaks radiating down the slab above the recess. Only the top slab of this feature protrudes from the snow in the Parker-Browne photograph.

D3 The top of the cliff adjacent to Fake Peak on the extreme left is the third key point [3]. This is the cliff prominent on the left-hand margin of Fig.4. This tell-tale feature is cropped out of the version printed in To the Top of the Continent, but is just visible in the Harper’s version, though badly retouched. Here, for the first time, a direct comparison can be made between Cook’s two original photographs. Two details are included. Fig.8(a) is an enlargement of the top of the cliff as it appears in Fig.4. Fig.8(b) is taken from the center of the left-hand margin of Fig.18. Notice the rock outcrops and that the snow is lying identically in all of the crevices in both of the pictures, proving it is the same cliff and that the pictures were taken at nearly the same location. Notice, too, the orientation of this same cliff to Fake Peak in the Parker-Browne photograph (Fig.7).

D4 Comparing Cook’s original summit picture with Carter’s photograph discloses several other interesting points. The rock face below Barrill must have actually collapsed, since all other features are readily identifiable from one picture to the other, except for one large rock, which can be seen below and slightly to the left of Barrill in Cook’s original (Fig.18), that also has slipped away. In 1912, a strong earthquake centered in the Katmai Peninsula violently shook the area immediately surrounding Mount McKinley. This may have been responsible for these changes, which are known to have occurred sometime between 1910, when Parker and Browne made their photographs, and 1938 when Ted Leitzell, a journalist and supporter of Cook, visited Fake Peak and first noted that this rock face was absent. There is no known published record of any other visit to this spot in the intervening 28 years.

D5 With the publication here — at last — of Cook’s full “summit” photo, there can be no further argument over its authenticity. It joins all the others in To the Top of the Continent that purport to represent Cook’s climb (beyond the Ruth Glacier) in being a misrepresentation of both its location and altitude. The point at which Barrill is standing in Cook’s photograph is merely a few hundred feet above the glacier floor and 19.42 miles from the actual summit of Mount McKinley. Its altitude is only 5338 feet, as opposed to McKinley’s altitude of more than 20,000 feet.

E Other photographic evidence

E1 As Cook’s allegedly-high-altitude pictures were revealed, one by one, as misrepresentations, his advocates advanced various explanations that would avoid them being branded as outright fakes. They were mix-ups at the publisher’s for which Cook was not responsible, they said, or they were substitutions for photographs that had been spoiled by the harsh conditions encountered at high altitudes on the mountain. One Cook biographer who accepted that the summit picture was probably a fake, allowed that in presenting Fake Peak as the summit, Cook was merely “cutting a corner,” and still maintained that Cook had actually climbed the mountain. If Cook did, then his narrative should support him.

E2 Another important picture that turned up in the searches of the Cook Society’s collection bears directly on the veracity of Cook’s account. That photograph was first reproduced on p.822 of my book, Cook & Peary: the Polar Controversy, Resolved. The

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Figure 5: Photograph of Fake Peak made from a 50-foot mast by Adams Carter, July 21, 1957. Photo courtesy of Bradford Washburn.
Figure 6: [a] A 4.5x enlargement of the middle peak from the right of the “Peaks and Cliffs” photo, Fig.4 (p.49). [b] A 4.5x enlargement of the distant peak in the background at the extreme right edge of the original “summit” photo, Fig.18 (pp.68-69). Slight differences in shadows indicate that Fig.4 was taken a little after Fig.18. Note the matching patterns of bare rock and snow below the summit, and the chevron-like rock patterns near the bottom. (Photos courtesy of the Ohio State University Photo Archives.) Both images in possession (for 91 years) of the Cook family, then the Cook Society — but never published by them.

Figure 7: Parker-Browne photograph of Fake Peak. Photo by Merl La Voy, July 1910, published in Winchester, J.W., “Dr. Cook, Faker,” Pacific Monthly, March 1911, p.253. The white frame line corresponds to the field of view shown in Cook’s “summit” photograph as published in To the Top of the Continent. The other white line running across the whole image is a defect caused by a fold in the original page’s middle. Notice that the photographer was unable to align Mt. Grosvenor with Fake Peak’s rocky outcrops because the snow cornice had shifted to the left from where it was in 1906. Note also the orientation (with respect to Fake Peak) of the cliff top seen on the left margin of Fig.4.
Figure 8: (a) A 2.5x enlargement from the left of the “Peaks and Cliffs” photo, Fig.4 (p.49). (b) A 2.5x enlargement of the cliff top from the left of the original “summit” photo, Fig.18 (pp.68-69). Note the matching patterns of rock and snow, especially the angular shadow just below the top of the snowbank. The slight differences in size and orientation show that the vantage point of (b) is farther from the cliff and lower & to the left. Photos courtesy of the Ohio State University Photo Archives.

image printed there was made from a copy of a cropped test print, which I took as a study record for my 1994 report on the Hurleyville papers. Fig.9 reproduces the image of this same print from the (also-cropped) copy now at Ohio State University. Cook took this photograph from the east side of Ruth Glacier looking northwest toward Mount Barrille, which is prominently seen in the distance. A very similar, but not identical, view (Fig.10) appeared in To the Top of the Continent, but again, the one Cook published did not show the scene’s most significant element: the presence of Cook’s distinctive tent in the foreground, which was cropped out of the published print. (In both 1991 and 1994, I also saw the original of this image which includes the figure of Ed Barrill standing to the right of the tent. An inquiry to the university’s archives disclosed that this, like the original sharp summit print, was not transferred to Columbus by the Frederick A. Cook Society.)

E3 In his narrative in To the Top of the Continent, Cook said he reached a place he called Glacier Point in two days travel from his boat. After he left the camp at Glacier Point, he next camped at “8000 feet within a few miles of the northern ridge.”18 The entry on p.65 of Cook’s diary for the day after he camped at “Cerac (sic) point” (as he called Glacier Point in his dairy) is headed “Cerac to 8300 camp at base of N. Ridge.” He notes that he started from Glacier Point at 8 A.M., and claims that he camped at the base of the N. Ridge at 6 P.M. There is no text in his diary to indicate any stops or camps between these two points. But this alleged 8,300 foot camp does not fit the location shown in Fig.9 at all, being far beyond it and much higher. Fig.9 was taken at an elevation of 4767 feet, near the Gateway (the north end of the Great Gorge: see Fig.32), at the western foot of the granite cliffs of the Moose’s Tooth.19 Mount McKinley is still 12.68 miles distant. This location exactly fits the

19 Washburn, Bradford, American Alpine Journal, vol.11 no.1 (1958), p.15. Some might argue that the camp at “Cerac pt.” could be the one pictured here, and therefore a different camp from the one described by Cook at Glacier Point in To the Top of the Continent. But this is disproved by Cook’s own texts. Cook describes the camp at “Cerac Pt.” in his diary as pitched “on a bed of picturesque moss” — exactly what is shown in the picture of his camp at Glacier Point in his book, which he describes there as on “a beautiful moss-covered point.” There is no moss shown in the picture of the tent pitched on the glacial ice across from Mount Barrille, and there is no moss anywhere near this campsite, which was located at the foot of the near vertical cliffs of the Moose’s Tooth. Glacier Point can’t be the “2000 foot camp,” mentioned in Cook’s diary, either, because he labels his picture of it in To the Top of the Continent (opp. p.192) “Camp at 5,000 feet”. Actually, the camp shown in his picture at Glacier Point is 3753 feet above sea-level. The correct altitude of the Mount Barrille camp is only 4767 feet.

Figure 9: Looking WNW toward Mt. Barrille, a view similar to the one that appeared opposite p.193 in To the Top of the Continent (Fig.10). Notice Cook’s distinctive tent pitched in the lower right hand corner, with gloves drying on the tent line. That this is not the full image can be shown by taking a simple ratio. A 5 x 7 photograph has a ratio of 0.714 between its width and height. But this photograph has a ratio of about 0.8 between its two dimensions. [DIO note. The above reproduction misses a bit on the left edge, and the image reproduced at Cook & Peary p.822 missed a sliver on the right.] A slide made at Hurleyville by the author, of a print of the photo shows a ratio exceeding 0.75. Therefore, a substantial part of the original image has been cropped off. The original of this photograph showed Ed Barrill standing to the right of Cook’s tent. This original version was evidently not forwarded by the Cook Society to OSU. Photograph courtesy of the Ohio State University Photo Archives. [DIO note. Umbral and parallactic analyses show that Fig.10 was taken a few minutes later and near the tent, which is why the tent is not visible in Fig.10.]
position of camp 8 on the map Barrill drew to accompany his affidavit (Fig.11). This was the last camp Barrill said he and Cook made during their journey up Ruth Glacier before turning back.

In his book, Cook says they made such “splendid progress” that he set up his tent for two hours at lunch time on September 10. So this photograph, it might be argued, was made at this lunch stop, though there is no mention of setting up the tent or stopping for lunch in either Cook’s or Barrill’s diary text to support this conjecture. Moreover, Fig.9 was taken only about five miles farther up the glacier from their last camp at Glacier Point. So this “splendid progress” would be less than Cook’s reported average for the first two days of the trip. But it is the picture itself that proves that this is an overnight camp, not a lunch stop. The tent is pitched on the glacier at the foot of the great cliffs below the Moose’s Tooth. In the picture, the shadows of these cliffs extend across the glacier toward not the 5500 feet he mentions in his diary (p.59) for “Cerac pt.”. All of Cook’s altitudes are in some error, due either to the inaccuracy of his aneroid barometers (which he relied upon for his readings) or because they are either guesses or fantasies. But the difference in the given altitudes for Glacier Point and Cerac Point of only 500 feet assures that they are the same place, since the actual difference in altitude between the two camps is 1000 feet. The difference of 500 feet merely follows Cook’s pattern of lowering the altitudes in To the Top of the Continent from the figures he recorded in his diary. For instance, the camp beyond Glacier Point is put at 8,300 feet in the diary, but only 8,000 in the book. Furthermore, in his diary he says he camped at Cerac Point first, before going into the Fake Peak amphitheater. If Cerac Point was the camp opposite Mount Barrille, he would have had to double all the way back to the amphitheater and return to the same camp before going on to the 8,000/8,300 foot camp, something that would be difficult to do in one day, and something he does not claim to have done, either in his diary or his book. Besides, this course of action would make no sense whatever for a person whose intent was (as Cook claimed) to climb Mount McKinley rapidly, before the season got any later.

The text on pp.201-202 of To the Top of the Continent reads: “We tried to set up our alcohol lamp in a big grotto, but delected currents of air so blew the blue flame that the heat was lost. The tent was set up and in it we brewed a pot of tea, ate pemmican and biscuits, and rested for two hours. . .” Was the lunch tent set up in the grotto? At the next camp Cook specifically states that the tent was set up “on the glacier.”
Mount Barrill. Since the cliffs are in the east, this shadow pattern indicates early morning, not lunch time. At noon the sun would be in the South, and would cast no shadows from eastern cliffs across Ruth Glacier, which runs nearly north-south. Also, Cook mentions in his text that he found the best way to dry clothing was not to take it into the tent, but rather to leave it on the tent line overnight. A pair of gloves can be seen hanging from the line. In short, all of this indicates that there seems no more reason to believe in the authenticity of his narrative when Cook says that he stopped for lunch than there is to believe any of its far more fantastic claims.

E5 Cook's narrative in To the Top of the Continent skips a day here: September 10 corresponding to his diary's September 11. In the diary, September 10 was devoted to exploring the amphitheater containing Fake Peak, where his fake summit photograph and some of his other misleading pictures were taken. His published account remains out of kilter with his diary from here virtually all the way to the summit (see §8). This skipped day may explain the peculiar split entry in Cook’s diary that was first noted in Cook & Peary, where there is every indication that he arrives at the summit on September 15. Since he did not want to mention anything in his narrative about the Fake Peak side trip, that put the diary one day ahead, date wise, which would have necessitated his arrival at the summit on September 15, which the entry indicates. But it appears he added one more day, via the split entry, stretching the time he allowed himself to reach the summit in his narrative while allowing him to leave out the day he spent in the Fake Peak amphitheater. Curiously, he fails to make up for this day in his narrative. If a careful accounting of his recorded activities is made, the reader will find him arriving at the summit on the 15th anyway, even though he says it is the 16th! (A full discussion of the date-discrepancies between the primary documents of Cook’s climb is appended to this article as §8.)

E6 In December 1906, Cook published a picture in Collier’s magazine that, from its caption, implied it had been taken from the summit itself.21 This picture was never again reproduced by Cook, but an original print of it was still among his photographs at Hurleyville in 1994. Its true geographical location was identified by Brian Okonek. It was taken, as were so many of the others, on the tributary of Ruth Glacier containing Fake Peak.

E7 Other unpublished photographs seen at Hurleyville also showed that the drawing done by Russell Porter for To the Top of the Continent to illustrate Cook’s camp on the ridge at 12,000 feet was based on a scene photographed just below Fake Peak. The other drawing by Porter showing Cook and Barrill dug into a hole for the night on a near-vertical slope at 14,000 feet has background elements drawn directly from Fig.4, taken from Fake Peak itself.22 Thus every one of the published illustrations, whether photographs or drawings, directly related to Cook’s climb have now been shown to be misrepresentations, fabrications or frauds. One of them were taken outside of the area that Barrill said he and Cook visited during their sojourn on Ruth Glacier, and there are no unpublished photographs that support any other conclusion but that Barrill’s account of events is generally accurate. A further study of Cook’s narrative only diminishes the trust that can be placed in Cook’s version of events.

21 “The Highest Mountain in America,” Collier’s, December 29, 1906. Caption reads: “The summit of Mt. McKinley, the top of the continent piercing arctic skies at an altitude of 20,464 feet, on which the American flag was planted by Dr. Frederick A. Cook on September 16th last.” The implication seems clear because the summit of Mount McKinley is nowhere visible in the picture.

22 See Cook & Peary, pp.830-835. Since the publication of the book, the mountain in the distance in the clear picture (p.832, Fig.5 of Cook & Peary) has been identified as the Moose’s Tooth, positively confirming that the location ascribed to it in Cook & Peary is correct.

F New evidence from Cook’s 1906 diary

F1 Until recently, the diaries of the two men had been hidden from scholarly eyes, Cook’s in the (generally23 unacknowledged) possession of his descendants, Barrill’s effectively lost24 in the immense accumulation of papers kept by Robert E. Peary. The opening of those diaries only further undermines the claim of Frederick Cook to have ascended Mount McKinley in 1906. Barrill’s diary is the less important find of the two, since the entire diary appeared in a reasonably accurate transcription in the Globe on the day following the publication of his affidavit against Cook. The Globe article also reproduced in facsimile the pages of the diary covering the days of the climb.

F2 Of special interest are two pages from Cook’s diary, here reproduced for the first time (Figs.12 & 13). These show sketch-maps of Ruth Glacier, one more detailed than the other, with several important and telling features when compared with Barrill’s published map (Fig.11) and affidavit. One is the position of two lakes on the map on diary p.46. These lakes were mentioned by subsequent travelers on Ruth Glacier, and they are key to understanding the rate of Cook’s progress up the glacier.25 Note the word “Lake” just below-left of center on the map on p.44 (Fig.12) between rules [13] and [14]. In his diary, Cook says he camped at the second lake the second day out from his base camp (September 9), but Barrill’s affidavit of the fourth day on out put the day of his camp at the summit on the same position on this map (between rules [11]-[12]) as Barrill indicates they camped (fourth day out) on his sketch-map (Fig.11), which accompanied his affidavit. Cook does not indicate that he camped in this area at all in any of his writings. In fact, his published narrative says they camped at Glacier Point on September 9. Barrill said in his affidavit that Cook instructed him to rewrite and backdate his diary to shorten the time to the beginning of the actual climb in order to make his time schedule look more plausible. If true, Cook must have done the same himself. These features of Cook’s map and internal evidence in both diaries support Barrill’s version of events, especially the confusion of dates throughout Cook’s. Also, the two men’s diaries coincide in other respects that support Barrill’s version of events and refute Cook’s.26

F3 A number of small circles with lines radiating from them can be seen on Fig.12, suggesting that these might be reminders of the positions from which Cook’s photographs were made. (Some of these circles seem to have a line pointing away, possibly indicating the camera’s direction.) When compared with the actual locations of the photographs he published, all of the marks correspond exactly with this interpretation. (The top page numbers opposite these photos are listed to the right of Fig.12.) However, no such symbols can be found on the tributary glacier coming in from the east. This is where most of the photographs Cook misrepresented as having been taken on the actual climb were taken and where Fake Peak, which he tried to pass off as Mount McKinley’s summit, is located. Perhaps the absence of these symbols from this part of the map indicates that he had already decided which photographs he would display as taken on the climb, and that he didn’t want it known where they had been exposed.

23 In a 1973/7/25 letter to D.Rawlins, Helene Cook Vetter stated that she possessed Cook’s “diaries and notes”. But not even contemporary believer Hugh Eames was allowed to plumb them.

24 [Until found by author Bryce. – ed.]

25 In 1996, the Frederick A. Cook Society published a transcription of Cook’s diary as part of a new edition of To the Top of the Continent. The transcription contains errors that seriously compromises its value. For instance, on p.55, the word “lake” is twice transcribed as “fork,” which completely destroys the significance of the passage. (A typed transcript of the diary by Helene Cook Vetter, who was intimately familiar with her father’s handwriting, also transcribes these words as “lake.”) The published transcription fails to reproduce the two maps on pp.44 & 46 (Figures 12 & 13), which show the two lakes being referred to and which contain other crucial elements necessary for a correct interpretation of the diary’s text. These may all be innocent errors, but in light of the society’s failure to forward any of Cook’s original 1906 negatives or the original prints of key photographs to OSU, these mistakes and omissions in the society’s transcription of the diary may be viewed by some in a more sceptical light.

26 See Cook & Peary, Chapter 28 for a full discussion of Cook’s Mount McKinley claim.

Cook's diary sketches

G1 The feature of Cook's diary that has generated the most controversy since it was made known to scholars are two sketches Cook made on diary p.52. The first to theorize on this page was a retired California gardener named Hans Waale, who had limited formal education but was, in fact, a self-educated genius, holding several important patents related to astronomy. Waale had access to parts of Cook's diary through an intimate correspondence with Cook's daughter, Helene Cook Vetter. He became absolutely obsessed with trying to prove Cook's climb authentic and carried on an interesting correspondence with Bradford Washburn about it for many years. After prolonged study and great personal expense, he worked out an ingenious, if circuitous, route for Cook by which most of the directions mentioned in his diary and narrative and the physical descriptions Cook gave of the mountain in his 1908 book could be explained. His route had Cook going over the East Buttress of the mountain and down into the Treadeika Amphitheater on his eventual way to Pioneer Ridge, by which Waale theorized Cook gained access to Harper Glacier as a route to the summit by traversing the north face of the mountain. A number of Waale's suppositions have, upon close examination, proved to be no more than wishful thinking on his part, but his argument that Cook's sketches on diary p.52 were drawn from the crest of the East Buttress has taken root in the hearts of another group of Cook backers who contend, unlike Washburn, that it holds the key to proving that Cook climbed to the summit from the East Buttress itself.

G2 This has become the mantra of Ted Heckathorn, a real estate agent from Woodinville, Washington, and longtime friend of the Frederick A. Cook Society. In 1993 he proposed that the society finance an expedition to test this theory, and, with several Cook Society members, hired and accompanied several professional Alaskan guides as they made an attempt in 1994 to follow Cook's hypothesized route to the summit by way of the East Buttress. This attempt got no farther than a point on its ridge at about 11,000 feet. The professional climbers, who were the only ones to reach even this point, obtained a photograph there that (they told Heckathorn) seemed to match Cook's drawing. Even if this were so, it would not come close to proving that Cook reached the mountain's summit, but the Cook Society's point was that such a match would prove Barrill's version of events corrupt, since if Cook did reach this point, it would be in direct contradiction of his partner's affidavit. That, in turn, would lend credence to the contention that the rest of Barrill's story was a lie, and that the description of the climb contained in Barrill's diary, which largely corroborates Cook's, is more likely the truth. Although this approach to truth may seem more than unbiased logic would allow, and from a source paid by an interested party — just what the Cook Society objects to about the Barrill affidavit — an examination of any merits it may have must be based on existing documentary evidence, not baseless speculation.

G3 There has been no comment from the members of the Frederick A. Cook Society about the conclusive revelations that Cook's summit photo is a fake, except perhaps for Heckathorn, who says he now considers all of the photographic evidence against Cook, including, it may be surmised, his faked summit photograph, "irrelevant" in light of the "new evidence" in his favor. This evidence is entirely embodied in the photograph of Pegasus Peak (Fig.14) obtained by the 1994 climbers on the East Buttress, which the Cook Society says matches one of Cook's sketches on p.52 of his diary (Fig.15). But neither in Cook's book nor in his diary is there any substantial support for the notion that he climbed McKinley via the East Buttress. In fact, Cook made two very definite statements that indicate that he claimed to have climbed Karstens Ridge, and most, if not all, of his descriptions given in his narrative of the climb tend to support Karstens Ridge as his route.29 So, we must look in detail at p.52 to verify or reject the purported match of Fig.14 to Fig.15.

27 See Cook & Peary, pp.830-835.
28 Stranger yet: see 19 [B3].
29 Cook, Frederick A., "Mount McKinley," Overland Monthly, February 1912, p.106; My Attainment of the Pole (Mitchell Kennerley, 1913) p.534. See also Fig.31 & caption.

Figure 14: Pegasus Peak, as published by the Frederick A. Cook Society in its 1996 reprint of To the Top of the Continent.

G4 Cook's handwriting is extremely problematic, and no one can guarantee absolutely what some of his written words actually are; but my long familiarity with it makes most words decipherable. Page 52's inscriptions are interpreted below Fig.15. What could they mean? And can they tell us anything about where these drawings were done, and what they represent?

G5 The Cook Society maintains that the top sketch represents Pegasus Peak as viewed from the East Buttress and that the lower one is a different mountain (Friendly Peak), which they identify as the "Gun Sight peak."30 Of diary p.52. However, the Society's view is not...

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30 For a full presentation of the Frederick A. Cook Society's arguments, see: Heckathorn, Ted, "Re-opening the Book on Mount McKinley," in Cook, Frederick A., To the Top of the Continent, Ninetieth Anniversary Edition. Seattle: Alpen Books, 1996. See also: Polar Priorities vol.14, pp.1-12; vol.15, pp.33-37; vol.16, pp.3-14; vol.17, pp.20-25. An experienced mountaineer and map maker who attended the Frederick A. Cook Society's symposium in Seattle in 1994 that presented its "new evidence," had this to say: "My observations of the writings and speeches of the Cook Society's Ted Heckathorn have given me no respect for his self-proclaimed status as 'Polar Historian.' In the appended material in the 1996 reprint of Dr. Cook's To the Top of the Continent, Heckathorn's text, photos and maps provide very sloppy interpretations of Cook's claimed route. His crudely drawn map [his Plate 2/12] has Cook's route to the East Ridge taking a straight line from above 'Sept 9' across the complex system of ridges and glaciers that form the massif of the Moose's Tooth. And his delineation of Cook's supposed descent route from the 'summit' follows a different line than the 'ascent' route, straight down the peak's upper east face. From there he has Cook and Barrill descending all the way to their base camp below the Ruth Gorge in a mere two days!" (Letter, Dee Molenaar to Robert M. Bryce, dated November 13, 1997.) [High praise for Heckathorn's solid and courageous research (in a non-Cook context) — contributing crucially to accurate polar history — can be found in, e.g., DIO 2.2 [F; DIO 2.3] & B, and Science 1993 June 11. Although Heckathorn is a personal friend of DIO's publisher, our policy is to give discoverer-authors wide interpretive and critical latitude, no matter how close to home shafts may strike. DIO readers, desiring direct access to Heckathorn's side of these matters, are urged to contact him, by telephone or fax, at 425-844-9302. — ed.] It might be added to this that Heckathorn's map, although his legend says it is derived, in part, from Cook's diary, is actually contradicted by Cook's diary at every turn. The September 8 camp is in the wrong place. Cook never said he camped anywhere near where the September 9 camp is located by Heckathorn. The map shows no camp on Glacier Point at all, even though Cook published a picture of it. Heckathorn has him going over the...
Figure 15: Page 52 from Cook's Mount McKinley diary, 1906. Transcriptions of this sketch’s legends: [A] 8; [B] about 750 feet higher than west peak (the figure appears written over, and might be interpreted as 150); [C] N gl.; [D] gl. [Cook’s consistent abbreviation for glacier]; [E] gl; [F] East ridge cornice; [G] Bar. 24; [H] Gun Sight peak; [I] seen from gl. opp. Peak 7.; [J] McK. from [or form.] Top. view from N (with a squiggle at the end).

Figure 16: Page 52 of Cook’s diary with the labels supplied by Bradford Washburn superimposed. Note the upper drawing’s similarity to Fig.17 or Fig.25 (as against Fig.14), and the lower drawing’s similarity to Fig.17 or Fig.27 (as against Fig.26).

accepted by experts on the mountain’s topography. Brian Okonek, who has been over the area many times, guesses that the diary p.52 sketches are Cook’s views from the Ruth Glacier region (though he warns that the “terrible” imprecision of the drawings hinders pinning down exact locations from them): the lower sketch is a detail of the South Peak, while the upper sketch is a panoramic representation of McKinley’s two summits. Bradford Washburn agreed with Okonek’s essential finding (that the upper drawing’s subject is McKinley) and went further by helpfully supplying the author with a labelled copy. Fig.16 is Cook’s diary p.52, with Washburn’s labels (identifying the upper sketch’s prominent features) superimposed on it. A comparison of several photos with Cook’s drawings should show which theory has more in its favor.

G6 The weakest part of the Cook Society’s contention is the claim about what it calls Gunsight Peak. The picture of it that the society published (Fig.26) has no similarity to Cook’s sketch at all, being far too sharp a peak to match it. However, Cook’s sketch fits well with Okonek’s and Washburn’s theory. Fig.17 is a detail of the summit taken from the direction of Ruth Glacier. Notice the similarity of the width of the peak and the position of the ridges to the lower sketch on p.52, especially the curve of the central ridge line.

cliffs, as Molenaar says, when Cook clearly describes traveling on the glacier at all times, and then he has him in a camp across from Mount Barrille, of which there is no trace in any of Cook’s writings. Also, Cook’s diary makes it very clear that they descended along the exact same route as they ascended, sleeping in the uppermost igloo on their return from the summit, and the text expresses emotion as they passed the hole where they had spent the night dug into the side of the mountain on September 13.


Figure 17: Summit of Mount McKinley, viewed from a little east of southeast. Mt. Barrille is at bottom center. (Solid line is Cook Society’s hypothesized East Buttress route.) Compare this view to Figs. 15 & 16, and 32. Detail of aerial photo by Bradford Washburn.

G7 The reference to “Gun Sight peak” [H] on Cook’s sketch is not to a specific mountain peak, but rather a general descriptive term then commonly applied to any peak coming to a sharp point. In 1909, Belmore Browne described the cliff adjacent to Fake Peak as a “gunsight peak” in his testimony before the Explorers Club committee that had been appointed to look into Cook’s claim. In Barrill’s diary he refers to the summit of McKinley as a “gunsight” peak. In his entry for September 16, he says “we reach the top at last at about 11 A.M. to the gunsight.” Moreover, in his affidavit, Barrill quotes Cook, himself, as saying of Fake Peak: “That point would make a good top of Mt. McKinley. It looks just about like the gunsight peak would look on Mt. McKinley,” which they had been looking at from the saddle of Fake Peak. Supporting the veracity of Barrill’s quotation is the fact that it was published in 1909, more than 84 years before the picture on p. 52 of Cook’s diary with its notation about a “Gun Sight peak” became an issue or was even generally known to exist. Right under the lower sketch, Cook has written “seen from gl. opp. Peak 7.” Peak 7 was what Cook called Mt. Dickey (9545 ft) — or perhaps33 adjacent Mt. Barrille (7650 ft) — near the north end of a row of peaks along the western margin of the Great Gorge of Ruth Glacier (see Fig. 12, rules [5]–[7], or Fig. 13, rule [8]; also Figs. 1 & 32), close to the place Ed Barrill says they turned for home.

G8 Claude Rusk, a climber from Oregon, said of his view of the summit from the Gateway in 1910: “The summit, seen from the upper glacier, is a very sharp snow point, although seen from the other sides of the mountain it has more of a rounded and dome-like appearance.”34 The lower drawing, therefore, is certainly what the inscription says it is, the sharp-pointed “Gun Sight peak” of McKinley as viewed from Ruth Glacier near the Gateway at the north end of the Great Gorge, where its conformation appears (Fig. 27) to form a sharp point rather than looking rounded, and which Cook reproduces on p. 52 with reasonable accuracy. What was “seen from gl. opp. Peak 7” if not “McK” itself (so cited on this very page)? Certainly not Friendly Peak, which when “seen from gl. opp. Peak 7” is largely blocked by intervening mountains.35

G9 The upper sketch is more problematic, but if we assume for it no more than rough accuracy, then even this standard will eliminate the drawing as a representation of Pegasus Peak. Notice the following points of comparison:

Although some might initially see a rough conformity between the photograph circulated by the Cook Society (Fig. 14) and Cook’s sketch, when the actual Pegasus Peak scene is enlarged (Fig. 19), even this rough conformity dissolves. The sharp drop of the slope at the left does not match, and neither does the contour of the one at the right. The sketch’s line labelled “East ridge cornice” [F] running across the peak at the left is not present on Pegasus Peak. Notice also that the glacier noted at [E] and the nearly horizontal area between the two peaks are both absent. This label (which should actually be the South Buttress, as Bradford Washburn points out) is significant for another reason.

G10 This significance lies in the sketch on p. 50 of Cook’s diary (Fig. 20), which shows several peaks south of the location that would be the vantage point of the upper drawing on diary p. 52, if we accept that it represents McKinley’s twin summits. The large arrow on Fig. 12 between rules [13]–[15] may indicate the direction of the sketch on p. 50. This is supported by the label on the sketch itself, which says “From 1st bend Bearings.” The bend of the glacier referred to can be clearly seen on Fig. 13. If Cook made his sketches in sequence, p. 50 would be the first page previous to p. 52 available to him, since he kept his narrative diary on the odd numbered pages. If so, then p. 52 would represent a natural

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33 Cook seems to have initially counted the peaks (the first six of which he estimated on his diary p. 56 as “about 10000 feet high”: Fig. 30), from Mt. Church north to Mt. Barrille, as seven in number, but later settled on eight as the correct figure. (See Fig. 13, where “8” is written over original “7”.) [Barrill’s diary drawing of Mts. Wake through Barrille numbers them exactly as in our Fig. 1.] For Cook, the high peaks’ names, in S-to-N order, were Church, Grosvenor, Johnson, Wake (double-peak), Bradley, etc. (All identified in Fig. 1.) He also saw four more peaks beyond, in a line with these eight: see fn 30.


35 See 19 D10.

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Figure 18:

The full, original uncropped version of Cook’s “summit” photo, published here for the first time. Size of the original print is 5 x 7 inches. Details of this photograph are enlarged as Figures 6(b) and 8(b). Photo courtesy of the Ohio State University Photo Archives.
progression as he moved up Ruth Glacier, and the arrow between rules [6] and [7] on Fig.12 may indicate the position from which at least one of the sketches on p.52 was drawn, which is “opp. Peak 7.” But it is the label “East ridge cornice” that definitely ties the two pages together. Each has a similarly shaped ridge with this label, and on p.50 the massif behind this ridge is unambiguously labelled “McK” — McKinley; p.52 says at the top: “McK. from Top. view from N.” [J] Since Cook often wrote a summary of what was on his diary pages at the top of each page, and this is the only non-horizontal text on p.52, it would seem that the entire page is meant to represent the top of Mount McKinley itself viewed from the northern end of Ruth Glacier. Thus this label and the fact that the drawings on pp.50 & 52 seem to overlap, supports p.52 as a representation of the summit of McKinley, just as Okonek and Washburn believe. But the key to p.52 may have been given us, as has been so much else in solving the mysteries of Dr. Cook’s disputed geographical claims, from his own hand.

G11 In the upper-right corner of diary p.50 is the number “52.” This seems to be a reference to the drawing on diary page 52. This falls in line with Cook’s tendency to cross reference within his diaries. There are many such references throughout his polar notebooks of 1907-1909 as well as some others in his 1906 McKinley diary.

G12 When Ed Barrill’s diary was transcribed in the Globe, only one of the sketches it contained was reproduced. However, the book has a number of other interesting drawings including one (Fig.21) which further supports the theory of §G11. The sketch was unquestionably made at nearly the same spot as Cook’s sketch on p.50. Both show “Little McKinley” (a name popularly applied to this peak by Alaskan prospectors at the time but no longer used) to the left and similar ridges on the right. But Barrill’s sketch shows the entire massif beyond and unambiguously labels it “Mount McKinley from the southeast.” (Compare it to Fig.17, keeping in mind that the photograph was taken from a higher

36 Possible reading: McK [seen] from top [of a vantage point, e.g., Fake Peak (see Fig.25)]. view from N [point of Great Gorge]. The latter interpretation is attractively consistent with the very specific note elsewhere on the page: “seen from gl. opp. Peak 7.”

37 Just as the note “Tokoshit 54” on page 50 may refer to the Tokoshita glacier — and thus to the “glacial notes” found on diary page 54. [A speculative alternate reading: “Center Tokosh 154”: a 154° compass bearing for the central Tokosha Mts. peak. — ed.]
The summit as drawn by Barrill from this position bears more than a passing resemblance to the contours of the mountain in the upper sketch on p.52 of Cook’s diary. In the end, however, because his difficult writing leaves it open to interpretation, and because Cook was not much of an artist, showing little talent with even the simplest of subjects (and because McKinley was far off, often surrounded by clouds), we may never know the exact spot where the upper sketch on p.52 was drawn. It is just not accurate enough that one can match each feature to reality, to everyone’s satisfaction. Even Bradford Washburn’s labels of the elements in Cook’s drawing are open to quibbles for the same reasons. But if we allow the same standard of only rough accuracy used by the Cook Society to compare it to their photograph of Pegasus Peak, Washburn’s labels fit far better, making it highly probable that Fig.15 was meant as a representation of McKinley’s summit. Compare the aerial photograph (Fig.17) of the view of the summit area (from the same direction as Mt. Barrille) with the features Washburn has labelled (Fig.16). Also, compare Cook’s drawing with the sketch of the twin summits of McKinley as viewed from the top of Fake Peak from Belmore Browne’s diary (Fig.22), as well as the sketch drawn by Ed Barrill from nearly the same point (Fig.23) — a view Cook certainly had. They are far more similar to Cook’s drawing than to Pegasus Peak. It may even be that Cook’s upper sketch was made from the very same area as was Browne’s and Barrill’s — the Fake-Peak summit which Cook called “the top of our Continent.” Here is what Cook said of that view in his p.59 diary entry (38 §B) for September 10: “The top from here two peaks middle gl. a way around the break,” exactly as shown in the upper drawing on p.52. Also, Cook’s top note, “about 750 ft. higher than the west peak” [B], is approximately accurate as a description of the difference between the heights of McKinley’s twin summits and such a notation written just above his sketch of them would be logical if the drawing was meant to represent the summits. But Cook considered this view so important he did not trust it to his sketches or description alone. He made a photograph of it from the top of Fake Peak. This photograph (Fig.24) was never published, but it is now among the photographs at Ohio State University. An enlarged detail of this photograph (Fig.25) corresponds well to the upper sketch of diary p.52 (Fig.16). If the Cook Society’s argument has any merit, then it is only reasonable to ask why Cook would lavish so much attention on Pegasus and Friendly Peaks (landmarks having no relation to his alleged objective), would draw them on the same page (when they are on opposite sides of the East Buttress), and label the page that bears them as “McK” — though his diary has not a single other sketch that indicates any portion of his actual route beyond where Barrill says he turned back. Common sense alone would seem to rule all of this out. (See [9 fn 41].)

Although the sketches on p.52 can objectively prove nothing about Cook’s route, much less the reality of his claim to have reached the summit, there are massifs of evidence showing Cook’s dishonest tendencies, as already detailed, in both his and his only witness’ writings and drawings and Cook’s own duplicitous photographs of lower mountains that he passed off as scenes from his actual climb, crowned by his fake “summit” photograph.

A far more fruitful approach to getting Cook’s narrative in line with a possible route might have been based on the work of Hans Waale (§G1). Even Bradford Washburn had to admit that Waale’s route fit Cook’s sketchy narrative in all details and made sense of the many directional inconsistencies it had seemed to contain. However, upon study of Waale’s proposed route, any reasonable person must agree with Washburn’s objection that Cook and Barrill had neither the time nor the equipment to make such a circuitous journey and return to their base camp on the time schedule Cook claimed for his attempt.

39 [Skeptics cannot be held hostage to Cook’s artistic and other limitations. We cannot even be sure that he did not, e.g., deliberately exaggerate the height of the North Peak, in order to pretend that his vantage point was higher than reality. — ed.]

40 The North Peak is actually 850 feet lower than, and almost due north of, the South Peak (§ 9 fn 1). But, by Cook’s perspective (looking more west than north) the former may have appeared relatively much farther away than reality, because it is lower and Karstens Ridge partly blocks it. (Alternatively, Cook might possibly have been referring to 20120 ft-high Kahiltna Horn, just below-left of the South Peak’s summit in Fig.15; if so, then his notation was “150 feet” instead of “750 feet”. Kahiltna Horn is c.1000 ft west-southwest of the true summit and 200 ft below it: § 9 fn 7.)

41 Neither name appears to be recognized by the USGS. 42 [Washburn notes that no one has ever even tried to climb McKinley by Waale’s route. — ed.]
Summary of evidence, and a conclusion

H1 The pattern of belief in Frederick Cook’s claim to have climbed Mount McKinley in 1906 has been one of almost continuous retreat. At first it seemed only just to defend him. He appeared to be in an unequal fight that had brought to bear upon his North Pole claim, and subsequently his McKinley climb, the vast monetary resources and influence of the powerful men who had backed Robert E. Peary. Furthermore, there seemed nothing in Cook’s previously genuine record of achievement as an explorer that indicated that he was a man of less than ordinary veracity. A close study of Cook’s prior career, however, has revealed a pattern of financial indiscretions and a life-long tendency to embellish his real experiences that were not known at the time of the initial controversy over his McKinley and Polar claims. In comparison to false claims of such great feats of exploration, however, even these would have seemed minor offenses had they been known. The testimony of the witnesses against him seemed either bribed or faked. (Though, few Cook-supporters, even today, have considered the possibility that Ed Barrill was paid to recant his former lies rather than to invent new ones.) But over the years, as it was incontestably shown that each of Cook’s purportedly high-altitude photographs were located at different places than he attributed them, Cook partisans made excuses to relieve him of the responsibility for their erroneous captions or to explain them away in the most innocent way. All but a few of these adamantly defended Cook’s “summit” photo to the end as the true summit of the great mountain. Now that it, too, proves to be a fake, and as new evidence has proved that even the drawings that appeared as illustrations of the spine-tingling incidents of his climb in To the Top of the Continent are fabrications based on photographs of completely different places than they are said to represent, his ardent supporters dismiss this pattern of deceit, including his faked summit photograph, as “irrelevant” to the issue of whether he did climb the mountain or not.

H2 The evidence against Cook is neither irrelevant nor incidental, however, because it is objective, not subjective, like the “new evidence” the Cook Society offers in his favor. Even subjectively, the Cook Society’s theories suffer when compared with other, more logical interpretations. The evidence against Cook is central and specific to the question of whether Cook was an honest man, incapable of such grand deceits as those of which he was accused, and it is based directly upon the primary documents left by Cook’s own hand in the form of the photographs he made and the contents of the actual diary he kept, which are immutable.

H3 This, after all, is the central question — Cook’s character. And all of this primary documentation points consistently to the conclusion that Cook was not an honest man in either his claim to have climbed McKinley or to have attained the North Pole, but that both claims were knowing frauds. Despite this, the interested partisans of the Frederick A. Cook Society ask the world to believe that a man who has been proven untruthful by all the physical evidence that should support any honest report, is truthful when he presents
nothing better than his bare word in support of his two most spectacular claims. There is simply little more than that to support the proposition that Frederick Cook stood at the top of the greatest mountain in North America seven years before anyone else, or ever attained the North Pole unresupplied and returned to tell about it, an accomplishment that was surely a physical impossibility using nineteenth century technological means. Furthermore, the only witnesses to both of these claimed achievements contradict Cook’s bare word, and each of their statements stands the test of credibility that Cook’s consistently fails.

In the wake of Cook’s fall from hero to humbug in 1909, one editor nevertheless declared, “There will be a ‘Cook party’ to the end of time, no matter how strong the evidence brought against him in the future, no matter if he made public confession to fraud. . . . This sentiment of personal devotion and championship once aroused is one of the most powerful and indestructible of human motives.” The continuing story of the efforts to defend Frederick A. Cook, despite all the evidence that has accumulated against him since then, proves that point, at least, beyond all cavil.


[A recent article has several good examples of the leaps of faith Cook’s partisans are prepared to indulge in to keep this sentiment intact and their own self-interests alive. Ted Heckathorn, while tacitly acknowledging the summit photo is a fake, still excuses Cook’s lack of any photographic evidence from any part of his alleged climb: “I’m convinced now that Dr. Cook was carrying bad film packs;” he is quoted as saying. “He’d bought his film early in the year and now it was September and they’d been going through streams and fog and heavy snow for months. His real summit film was probably water-damaged, so he used other photos to express what the summit looked like.” (Donahue, Bill, “Dissent on Denali,” Climbing, May 1, 1998, p.116.) Heckathorn fails to explain why these “bad film packs,” which he is convinced (fn 28) were damaged by age and exposure to the elements, produced the splendid sequence of pictures of every place Cook actually visited on Ruth Glacier right up to the very point Ed Barrill says they turned back for their boat, but without exception failed to record any scene beyond that point right up to the very summit itself. He also fails to explain why an honest man would take a flag-raising fake summit photo before he ever made an attempt to reach the actual summit.]