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Press Release

COMMISSIONER'S OFFICE

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
Dec. 6, 2012

Alaska's Moon Rocks Return to the State

JUNEAU -- Following legal proceedings, Alaska has reclaimed Apollo XI moon rocks missing since a fire at the Alaska Transportation Museum in Anchorage in 1973. The moon rocks will be displayed through December at the Alaska State Museum in Juneau starting on Dec. 7.

The moon rocks, presented to Gov. Keith Miller by President Nixon in 1969, turned up in the possession of former Alaska resident Arthur Anderson, who asked an Alaska Superior Court judge in December 2010 to declare him the moon rocks' owner. Anderson asserted that the state had abandoned the moon rocks after the fire.

State Superior Court Judge Eric Aarseth of Anchorage, responding to a state motion, said the documentary evidence of continued state ownership was strong. The Alaska Department of Law persuaded Anderson to voluntarily dismiss the case, which Judge Aarseth did on Sept. 27, 2012.

Judge Aarseth had previously required Anderson to submit the moon rocks to NASA at the Johnson Space Center in Houston, Texas, for authentication. The FBI, using highly sophisticated photographic analysis, confirmed that the moon rocks and the plaque that contained them were the same rocks and plaque depicted in earlier photographs. The plaque also contained a small Alaska flag that had traveled to the moon and a brass plaque noting the gift from President Nixon to the people of Alaska.

"I am pleased that my agency was able to facilitate the return of this artifact to the people of Alaska," said Alaska Attorney General Michael Geraghty. "I want to thank the many federal agencies that helped us with this case, including the U.S. Attorney's Office, NASA, and the FBI."

Apollo XI carried the first geologic samples from the moon to the Earth. Astronauts Neil Armstrong and Buzz Aldrin collected about 48.5 pounds of lunar material. Moon rocks are among the rarest materials on Earth, said Steve Henrikson, curator of collections at the Alaska State Museum in Juneau.

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Over the years, curators at the Alaska State Museum maintained an open file and gathered evidence in the hope the moon rocks would come to light. These museum files became the basis of the state’s case proving ownership.

“The Alaska State Museum has always maintained that the value of the moon rocks lay in their rarity and their historical significance to America’s early space exploration, which made their removal from public ownership a great loss to Alaska and the country,” said Bob Banghart, chief curator at the Alaska State Museums, which operates museums in Juneau and Sitka.

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