



Matthew Henson: Arctic Explorer

Henson and Peary defy cold death in a race to the North Pole

The ground was flat and white and cold. In the distance a mist appeared. The vapors quickly resolved themselves into the exhalations of a team of dogs. Behind the team was pulled a sledge.

Behind the sledge was a man. The man called his team to a stop and waved down the other sledges that followed. Wiping his eyes he surveyed the desolate, white wasteland. It looked very much like the last 40 or so miles of flat, cold icepack, but something told the man that he was now very close to the objective. And one thing was certain. He was the first man in history to travel this far north. Perhaps a smile briefly crossed his lips as he remembered the first steps he had taken some thirty years ago that led to this amazing, dangerous journey...

Matthew Henson was only twelve when he walked from his home in Washington, D.C. to Baltimore, Maryland to get a job as a cabin boy on the three-masted merchant ship *Katie Hines*. At first Captain Childs, a square, tall 60-year-old man with flowing white hair, was reluctant to bring such a young lad on-board. When Henson told him that he was an orphan, Captain Childs relented and made the young man his cabin boy.

Henson had been born on August 8, 1866, in Maryland. His parents were freeborn black sharecroppers. When Henson was four, his family moved to Washington D.C. where more jobs were available. When his parents died, he and his siblings moved in with a nearby uncle. Henson was fascinated by stories about life at sea, so when he saw a chance to become a cabin boy, he took it.

Captain Childs was kind to Henson and under his tutelage Henson became an able-bodied seaman. Childs also instructed him in math, history, geography and the Bible as they traveled to such exotic locations as China, Japan, North Africa and the Black Sea. When Captain Childs died Henson gave up the sea, and eventually found a job as a clerk at a furrier back in Washington, D.C..

Fateful Meeting

It was here fate brought him into contact with Robert Peary. Peary, an officer in the U.S. Navy Corps of Civil Engineers, had already made one exploration trip to Greenland. Peary's next naval assignment, however, would take him in quite a different direction. He was being sent to the jungles of Nicaragua to study the feasibility of digging a shipping canal there that would connect the Atlantic and Pacific oceans.

Peary had brought back some Arctic furs to sell to the furrier and while there met Henson. Henson seemed to share Peary's interest in adventure and Peary decided to offer Henson a job as his personal assistant during the Nicaraguan trip. Henson, eager to resume traveling, accepted and spent two years in Central America with Peary. During this time Peary found Henson's skills as a mechanic, navigator and carpenter extremely valuable.

Peary, who was interested in becoming the first man to reach the North Pole, decided after the Nicaraguan trip to offer Henson a job as a messenger at the League Island Navy Yard in Philadelphia with an eye to having Henson come along on future ventures. Henson accepted. Two years later, in 1891, Peary, who had been granted a leave from the Navy to do more exploration in Greenland, asked Henson join him. This was the chance Henson had been waiting for and he accepted without hesitation, though it caused friction with his fiancée, Eva Flint, and her family.

Greenland Explorations

In April 1891 Henson married Eva and two months later left her to join Peary aboard the ship *Kite* bound for Greenland. The exploration party consisted of Peary, Henson and four others. One of these was a doctor by the name of Frederick A. Cook. In an unusual move Mrs. Peary also traveled with the group.

The *Kite* struggled through the icy waters near Greenland to Wolstenholm Sound where the party set up a base camp. Henson's carpentry skills were called into play to build a two-room house that would serve as the expedition's headquarters. The building, which came to be called "Red Cliff House," was completed at about the same time as Henson's twenty-fifth birthday. Peary's wife threw a party to commemorate both events.

In the spring Peary and his men left the camp with the goal of crossing Greenland from west to east in an attempt to find the northern-most point of the island. Peary would then use this information to help him plan his trip to the Pole. Henson was injured, though, and forced to return to Red Cliff House.

At Red Cliff House Henson ran into direct conflict with John Verhoeff, another expedition member. Verhoeff had been left behind because Peary had found him insubordinate and undependable. He also resented the respect Peary accorded the black Henson.

Verhoeff and other expedition members also seemed to have little respect for the native Eskimo population too. Henson, however, quickly learned the Eskimo language, Arctic survival skills and local culture. What Henson learned from the Eskimos and shared with Peary would be key to them later conquering the pole.

This first trip led Henson to spend the next eighteen years with Peary in Arctic exploration. In 1893 they returned and Henson was the only one that remained with Peary when other members abandoned the expedition.

In 1895 Henson, Peary and Hugh J. Lee charted the entire ice cap of Greenland and discovered the island's northern terminus. This trip nearly ended in tragedy as the three came close to starving to death. At first they couldn't locate food they'd cached along the way due to new snow. Then the hunting became poor. They pushed on despite the hunger. Fortunately they managed to find a musk ox or rabbit just as things seemed hopeless. Finally they reached the northernmost corner of Greenland. Peary had planned to do more but was forced to turn back. As they retreated, they had to use the dogs that pulled their sleds as food. At one point Lee lay down to die begging Henson and Peary to go on without him. Peary answered "we will all get home or none of us will." Lee rallied and they straggled into their base camp two weeks later with only one dog left alive.

In 1896 and 1897 Peary and Henson returned to collect three meteorites they'd found on earlier expeditions. These were sold to the American Museum of Natural History and the cash used to finance future assaults on the Pole. The Peary Arctic Club was also formed to raise more money.

By this time Henson's continuous trips north had worn down his wife's patience. She requested and received a divorce at the end of 1897.

Trying for the Pole

Henson and Peary tried for the Pole several times over the next few years. Each attempt was frustrated and in 1902 the trip was disastrous. Six Eskimo helpers died and the food ran out. They were blocked from progress north across the icepack by melting ice.

In 1906 they returned with a new ship named the *Roosevelt* after the newly-elected President who was a supporter of the drive to the Pole. The vessel was specifically designed for cutting through ice. The hull was shaped so that if the ship was caught in a frozen sea the pressure would not crush the vessel, but push it upward. With this ship carrying them the first part of the way, the expedition was able to get closer to the Pole than any other human beings - within 174 miles. Melted ice blocked the final distance and they were forced to leave and try again in 1908.

It was during the 1906 trip that Peary spotted what looked like land to him some 120 miles off the coast of North America. The place, which he dubbed "Crocker Land" was discovered to be an Arctic [mirage by a later expedition.](#)

[While Peary went off to raise support for this next trip, Henson stayed with the ship to oversee repairs and prepare equipment. It was at this time that Henson proposed to, and married, Lucy Jane Ross, who he had been courting for two years.](#)

[On July 6th, 1908, the USS *Roosevelt* departed from New York for what would be the final attempt on the Pole, success or not. Henson was forty and Peary fifty. Both knew they were getting too old for exploring the Arctic. It was then, or never.](#)

The Final Attempt

Peary had carefully hand-picked his team. It included Henson, of course, Dr. John W. Goodsell, Donald B. MacMillon, Ross G. Marvin, George Borup and Robert Bartlett, who was the ship's captain. The plan was to sail to Cape Sheridan on the northern-most part of Ellesmere Island, Canada, then make the assault on the Pole using a relay strategy.

On September 5, 1908, the *Roosevelt* reached Cape Sheridan. They spent the long dark winter night there (remember above the Arctic circle the nights are six months long) preparing to strike out toward the Pole in the daylight of spring. The time was spent hunting musk-ox, deer and rabbits for food. Henson made ready the equipment. Donald MacMillon recalled, "with years of experience equal to that of Peary himself, [Henson] was indispensable." Henson used his carpentry skills to build all the sledges and trained the less-experienced members of the group on handling the dogs.

In February, Henson and some of the Eskimos traveled by sledge to Cape Columbia which would serve as a base camp for the attempt. They built several igloos and cached supplies there. Soon the rest of the group joined them.

On March 1, 1909, Henson pointed his sledge north and, under Peary's orders, started breaking the trail across the icepack toward the pole. Bartlett and Borup had left the day before.

There are few activities more dangerous than Arctic exploration on land. One of those, though, is Arctic exploration on the icepack. While traveling across the icepack there are all the hazards of the far northern climate: Sub-freezing temperatures, sudden storms, slow starvation, plus those particular to the great ice sheets that cover the Arctic Ocean.

One might picture that with the low temperatures near the North Pole the ice there must be thick, hard and smooth. Nothing could be farther from the truth. The movement of currents under the icepack cause constant changes on its surface. Small, steep mountains of ice, called "pressure ridges" well up blocking the path. Sections of the pack are often rent apart creating open lanes of water called "leads." Anyone slipping into a lead can drown, or freeze to death in minutes.

Henson, and the rest of Peary's party, constantly ran into these dangerous obstacles. Peary fell into leads twice during the trip. Henson also slipped into one and was rescued just in time by his Eskimo assistant Ootah. Bartlett and his team nearly floated out to sea on an ice island formed by leads opening around their igloo in the middle of the night. Fortunately they were able to dash to safety.

Each of the Americans knew that not all of them would be able to go all the way with Peary to the Pole. The plan called for each team to go so far along the path, then cache the supplies it was carrying to be used by the other teams going closer to the Pole. However Peary had stated from the beginning that "Henson must go all the way. I can't make it there without him." Perhaps this was to fulfill a promise to Henson Peary had made when Henson had saved his life in Greenland years ago, but more likely it was because Henson was simply the best and most skillful of Peary's assistants. His loyalty and dependability had been proven over twenty years of exploration. Still, Henson knew he would only go to the Pole if conditions were right. Injury or sickness could

easily force a change in plans.

As supplies ran out teams started to turn back. The first were those led by MacMillan and Goodsell. Then Borup. Then Marvin.

Henson went to Marvin's igloo to say goodbye, expecting to see him back on the ship. He never did. Marvin died on the return trip. His Eskimo companions said that he fell into an open lead and they were unable to rescue him. Later, one of them admitted he had killed Marvin in a dispute. The murder was probably brought on by the tension of the dangerous return trip and the inability of the American and Eskimos to communicate clearly.

The final team to turn back was Bartlett's. Bartlett had wanted to go on to the Pole, but admitted "Henson was a better dog driver than I." It was Henson's observation that "Captain Bartlett was glad to turn back when he did. He frankly told me several times that he had little expectation of ever returning alive."

Bartlett did make it back to the ship, but his fear of death was well-founded. As the Arctic spring continued, the icepack grew softer and more leads opened. The only way to get past a long, wide lead was to wait for it to freeze over again. If a big one opened behind the explorers, they might well starve to death as they waited for the lead to close.

Henson and Peary were only 174 miles from the Pole. They drove forward at an almost reckless pace. Peary used his sextant and chronometer-watch to constantly check their progress. Henson, using his astounding ability to reach a destination through "dead reckoning" broke the trail. He had once won a bet with Peary by estimating their position in his head to within twenty miles after a thousand mile trip. Now he let his sense of direction guide him north.

Five days after they had separated from Bartlett, they arrived at the top of the world. Peary made numerous measurements to check his position. Then they found a thin section of ice and broke through to do a sounding. The rope ran out at 9,000 feet. This surprised them as they hadn't thought the ocean would be so deep at the Pole.

Then they started the return. They were exhausted, but the planning they had put into the expedition paid off. With igloos and supplies already in position, they made the return to the base camp at Cape Columbia in record time. Four hundred and thirteen miles in sixteen days. When they finally arrived, Henson and Peary went to their igloos and collapsed in exhaustion.

Cook's Hoax

It took until July for the *Roosevelt* to free itself from the ice and start working its way south. On August 17th the ship put in at Etah, Greenland. Here the party heard some startling news. Dr. Frederick A. Cook, the same man who had been with Henson and Peary on an earlier Greenland trip, was claiming that he had reached the Pole on April 21, 1908, a full year before Peary's party.

The group was at first stunned, then skeptical. Henson interviewed the two Eskimos that supposedly had gone with Cook. They laughed, admitting they had never gone more than 20 miles out on the icepack. An examination of Cook's sledge, which was still at Etah, showed it

had hardly been used. It seemed obvious the Cook was telling a bold-faced lie.

A simple honor system had governed Arctic exploration, and Cook (left) took full advantage of it. By the time Peary had returned to the U.S., Cook had already received several honors in Europe and his success had been accepted by the public. Upon hearing Peary's charges against Cook, the National Geographic Society investigated and determined that Cook's claim was a hoax. A sea captain came forward and testified that he'd been paid by Cook to produce sextant readings that would be consistent with being taken at the North Pole.

Exposed, Cook disappeared. Eventually, in a separate matter, he was convicted and sent to jail for 14 years for selling bogus oil well stocks.

Decades after both Peary and Henson died, claims were made that they had gotten lost on their way to the Pole and missed it by a hundred miles. These claims, though, had little evidence to back them up. Peary took numerous sightings with his sextant to check his position and was as close to the Pole as his instrument would allow: about five miles. The position can be confirmed by looking at the sounding they did. The North Pole lays over a deep marine trench. Peary's sounding showed the depth was over 9,000 feet. If the Peary party had been carried west by drifting ice, as some believe, they would have been over shallower water. Further evidence can be found through a technique known as *photogrammetric rectification*. Photogrammetric rectification can be used to examine a picture and determine from the angle of shadows at what latitude the photo was taken. The photos taken by Peary have been analyzed and prove the expedition was truly at the Pole.

Unfortunately Cook's hoax stole much of the enthusiasm that the public might have had for the expedition's success. Eventually Peary was properly honored, but Henson, as a black man, got little recognition.

Belated Honors

It wasn't until 1937, at age seventy, that Henson got some of the attention he deserved. In that year he was made an honorary member of the famed Explorers Club in New York. In 1946 he was honored by the U.S. Navy with a medal. His most-prized award, though, was a gold medal from the Chicago Geographic Society.

Henson died on March 9th, 1955, and was buried in a small plot at the Woodlawn Cemetery in the Bronx. In 1987, Dr. S. Allen Counter, a Henson biographer, led a movement to have the remains of both Henson and his wife moved to lay adjacent to Robert Peary in Arlington National Cemetery, a more fitting location for an American hero. President Ronald Reagan granted permission and on the seventy-ninth anniversary of the discovery of the North Pole, Henson was laid to rest near his old friend. On Henson's tomb is written a quote from his autobiography:

The lure of the Arctic is tugging at my heart. To me the trail is calling. The old trail. The trail that is always new.