

Matthew A. Henson (1866-1955)



America's only famous Negro polar explorer was the co-author to the major geographical quest of the century — the search for the North Pole.

For Matthew Alexander Henson, descended from former slaves, the road from Charles County, Maryland to the Arctic was long and arduous. He was born into dismal, hopeless poverty on 8 August 1866. At the age of 12 he escaped a loveless home — he never knew his mother, who died when he was two — and found his way to Baltimore and the benign Captain Childs, master of the ship *Katie Hines*. Befriending the frail, hungry, frightened boy, Capt. Childs bent the rules in signing Matt on as cabin boy: he recorded Henson's age as 15 rather than the illegal age of 12. In the five years that Matt sailed on the *Katie Hines*, Childs taught the young Negro reading, writing, mathematics, navigation, and general proficiency at the sailor's varied trade. These skills would ultimately prove indispensable in Henson's travels with Robert Peary.

The two men who were to find fame in the Arctic 22 years later first met in 1887 in a haberdashery in Washington, D.C., where Matt was a stockboy. Robert E. Peary, then a lieutenant in the Navy Corps of Civil Engineers, had just returned from his first of many attempts to gain the summit of Greenland's ice cap in search of a way to the North Pole. He had just been assigned to the survey team on the Nicaragua Ship Canal project, and though reluctant to postpone another assault on Greenland, Peary accepted the assignment provided he could

hire his own orderly. The day of the chance meeting, Henson was hired.

After proving his value to Peary during a year in the Nicaraguan jungle, Henson worked alongside him in a Philadelphia shipyard until Peary took another leave of absence to return to Greenland in 1891. Henson joined the party. His ocher-coloured skin, far from an asset in the racist U.S., helped him in the Arctic. To the Eskimo, Henson was not a white man but a prodigal brother who had forgotten his native tongue and the ways of survival in the harsh northern environment. In successive expeditions, his rapidly growing skills in speaking the Eskimo language, driving dogsleds, hunting, and trading for dogs and furs proved invaluable. In a short time "Miy Paluk", as the Eskimos called him, was to become hero and legend. He was the most important member of the seven expeditions spread over a period of 18 years. One expedition alone lasted four years, during which Matt's courage, sacrifice and physical strength saved Peary's life and the lives of others more than once.

Still convinced that Greenland was a continent leading to the Pole, Peary and Henson made several futile and dangerous attempts before abandoning the route. On the last Greenland effort both men nearly perished. Caught by blizzards and having exhausted their food supplies, they ate their dogs. Suffering from frostbite, scurvy, and exhaustion, the two men stepped into the dog traces and dragged the sledge, on which lay a sick

companion, over the ice cap and down the steep, treacherous glacier back to camp. Many times, Matt was to witness the sight of strong men beaten by the elements. He was to see robust, athletic men turn into weak, whimpering, helpless children. He was himself to feel the crippling exhaustion, the fierce slashing cold, the madness of near-starvation, and to come out the stronger for it. While Henson suffered no permanent damage from his long years in the Arctic, Peary was not so fortunate — he was crippled for life.

Between expeditions, Matt worked in varied jobs. He assisted taxidermists and artists of the Museum of Natural History in New York in mounting displays of the skins he and Peary brought back from the North. On one occasion he accompanied Peary on a fund-raising tour; sweltering in furs, he demonstrated the handling of a dog team and sledge while Peary introduced him as "my assistant, Matthew Henson".

In 1898 the Navy granted Peary a four-year leave of absence to search for the Pole once more. Peary planned to approach his goal this time via the frozen arctic sea. Threatened by rumours that a competing explorer, the Norwegian Sverdrup, was also planning a polar expedition, Peary and Henson immediately sailed north.

A completely new strategy was worked out for this expedition. They would sail as far north as the ice would allow in the frozen strait between Greenland and Ellesmere Island, and then travel by sledge to Fort Conger. Unused for 15 years, Fort Conger had been the headquarters for the Greely Geological Expedition, and would make an ideal winter outpost.

Henson selected the field teams, choosing the best and strongest Eskimo hunters, skilled sledge builders and dog handlers. The Eskimos were loyal to Matt, who now spoke their language fluently. They would follow him anywhere, for "Miy" was already a legend; several of the men he picked were mere boys when he had first arrived in their land.

The plan to use Fort Conger had tragic results. While still aboard ship, Peary's party was visited by Sverdrup, who admitted he too was aiming for Fort Conger. It was the dead of winter, the worst possible time to travel the 250 miles to the fort. Matt argued that Sverdrup could not possibly reach his objective before spring. Peary stubbornly refused to listen; reluctantly, Matt organized four teams and they set out for Fort Conger.

The march nearly cost the lives of the entire party. Arriving at the fort, Henson discovered that Peary had badly frozen his feet. Removing his companion's sealskin boots, he found both legs a bloodless white to the knees. When Matt gently removed the rabbit-skin inner boots, two or three toes from each foot clung to the hide and snapped off at the first joint. He nursed Peary through the next two months, fighting a desperate battle against gangrene, knowing that amputation was urgently required. By February the weather improved, and with Peary lashed to the sledge, Henson led the party south on the 11-day trek to the ship. The surgeon aboard the *Windward* immediately amputated all of Peary's toes. Tragic as it was, this blow did not diminish Peary's burning ambition to discover the Pole.

Matthew Henson now became more indispensable than

ever. His strength, courage and field experience suited him to the role of leader, and there was no other man Peary could trust as he could Matt. But a new method of travel for Peary had to be worked out. No longer able to walk behind a sledge, he would have to ride, which had never been allowed. To preserve his pride and dignity, Peary would be the first man out of camp, shuffling slowly, and when the others had passed he would climb aboard the last sledge.

On the next-to-last march of the successful expedition, Henson knew at the outset how far the last day's journey would be, and his experience told him how many hours it would take to travel that distance. The sun was his clock. Sighting the position of the sun as he started that final advance on 6 April 1909, Matt knew where it would be when he had reached the Pole. Thus it was that he arrived 45 minutes before Peary, who, after taking an instrument sighting, said "This is it, the Pole at last."

Upon their return to America, in the public controversy brought on by Dr. Frederick A. Cook's claim to have beaten Peary to the Pole, the question was raised of why Henson, a Negro, had accompanied Peary on his final march. Donald MacMillan, a member of the successful expedition and of several others, understood Peary's total dependence on Matt. "He never would have reached the Pole without Henson," he later wrote. "Matt was of more real value than the combined services of all of us. With years of experience, an expert dog driver, a master mechanic, physically strong, most popular with the Eskimos, talking the language like a native, clean, full of grit, he went to the Pole because Peary couldn't get along without him."

Back in the States, Matt drifted into semi-obscurity. In 1913, President Taft appointed him to a Civil Service job as a messenger boy at the New York Customs House. Over the ensuing years, as many as six bills were introduced in Congress to retire Matt with honour and a pension, but all failed.

On 9 March 1955, Matthew Henson died at 88. He died proud of his humble collection of awards, many given to him over the years by Negro societies — two gold watches, a lacquered steel medal, a silver-plated loving cup from the Bronx Chamber of Commerce, a Navy medal given belatedly in 1946, and a medal bestowed by President Eisenhower in 1953. Two Negro universities presented him with M.Sc. degrees. In Charles County, Maryland, a new public school was named after him. Capt. Childs would have been ecstatic to know that his 12-year-old urchin pupil had raised himself, literally, to the top of the world.

FURTHER READINGS

- HENSON, MATTHEW A. 1912. *A Negro Explorer at the North Pole*. New York: Frederick A. Stokes.
 ROBINSON, BRADLEY. 1947. *Dark Companion*. New York: R.M. McBride and London: Hodder and Stoughton (1948).

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