



Matthew Alexander Henson (1866 – 1955)

Arctic explorer

Major Achievement: First member of the Peary expedition to reach the North Pole

Background: Henson was born in Nanjemoy, MD. His parents were freeborn sharecroppers. He lost his parents when he was quite young. At the age of eleven he went to Washington, DC, where he had various jobs. One of which was a cabin boy on a ship that allowed him to travel to Asia, Africa and Europe. He subsequently met Robert Peary who, in 1887, initially hired him as a valet. Henson became a skilled explorer, making at least 7 Arctic voyages with Peary over the next 23 years.

In 1909, Peary and Henson made their most celebrated attempt to reach the North Pole. The trip was incredibly grueling (starting out with 24 men, 14 sledges or sleds and 133 dogs and ending with 6 men and 40 dogs). Henson was reported to be the first member of the expedition to reach the North Pole.

While Peary's claim that his expedition was the first to reach the North Pole has been disputed, Henson was most certainly the first African-American to reach that area of the Arctic. Peary recognized Henson as an especially skilled explorer who had in-depth knowledge of Inuit language and culture, as well as survival techniques. When referring to that trip, Peary said that he could not get to the destination without Henson. Unfortunately, Henson's contributions to the success of the expedition were largely ignored because he was African-American.

In 1912, Henson published his book, "A Negro Explorer at the North Pole," a memoir of the famous voyage. It would be three decades later before he would get the proper recognition for his role as an explorer, receiving the Peary Polar Expedition Medal in 1944.

"Fun Fact" – Henson's first job on a ship was responsible for shaping his future as an explorer. At the age of 12, he took a job on a merchant ship. The ship's captain became his mentor, teaching Henson seafaring skills such navigation and nautical mechanics as well as reading, writing and geography. Henson traveled the world on this ship for nearly seven years. It was the knowledge of seamanship he gained as a boy that caused Peary to hire Henson and begin a collaboration of explorers that lasted over twenty years.

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