

The Black Explorer Who May Have Reached the North Pole First

In 1909 African American Matthew Henson trekked with explorer Robert Peary, reaching what they claimed was the North Pole. Who got there first?



Bettmann / Contributor/Getty Images

When Commander Robert Peary ordered his team to make camp on April 6, 1909, he was not entirely certain that he had reached his objective. On his final expedition to the North Pole, the challenges of Arctic exploration were exacerbated by the complexities of terrestrial navigation.

Though history (initially) gave credit to Peary for being the first person to reach Earth's northernmost point, one invaluable member of Peary's party was long overlooked in the record books: a Black explorer from Baltimore named Matthew Alexander Henson.

Exhausted from weeks of travel across the stark expanse of the polar ice cap, Peary had struggled to recover after the shock of plunging into the frigid open water of a sudden fissure the day before. Undaunted, the team that included four Inuit hunters named Ooqueah, Ootah, Egingwah, and Seegloo pressed forward. Henson had also fallen in.

"Faithful old Ootah grabbed me by the nape of the neck, the same as he would have grabbed a dog," Henson wrote in his memoir [*A Negro Explorer at the North Pole*](#). "And with one hand he pulled me out of the water, and with the other hurried the team across."

Henson and Peary's Accounts of Reaching the North Pole

Perhaps in the confusion of enthusiasm for being so close to their goal, the team traveled north at a frantic pace for several more miles. As Peary struggled in the rear, they finally stopped for the night. “The Commander, who was about fifty yards behind, called out to me and said we would go into camp,” Henson wrote.

With just a few hours of sleep to regain his strength, on the morning of April 7, Peary made careful measurements to determine their exact location.

“We were now at the end of the last long march of the upward journey,” he wrote in his book *The North Pole Its Discovery in 1909 Under the Auspices of the Peary Arctic Club*. “I was actually too exhausted to realize at the moment that my life’s purpose had been achieved.”

By his calculations, the team had reached the North Pole. Henson confirmed Peary’s account.

“The results of the first observation showed that we had figured out the distance very accurately, for when the flag was hoisted over the geographical center of the Earth it was located just behind our igloos,” Henson wrote.



[CORBIS/Corbis via Getty Images](#)

In April 1909, American explorer Robert Peary claimed he and his team reached what they believed to be the North Pole. Peary is shown here in January 1900.

Peary’s claim of reaching the pole eventually fell under scrutiny. In fact, by the 1980s, even one of Peary’s financial backers, the National Geographic Society, determined Peary’s team may have [fallen short](#) in their goal.

Still, if Peary and his party did plant their flag at the North Pole, as they believe, which member of the team arrived there first? Some records suggest it would have been Henson.

“When the compass started to go crazy,” Henson recalled in [a 1936 interview](#), “I sat down to wait for Mr. Peary. He arrived about forty-five minutes later, and we prepared to wait for the dawn to check our exact positions... The next morning when [the] positions had been verified, Peary said: 'Matt, we’ve reached the North Pole at last.'”

Henson Overlooked

During the modern era of exploration at the turn of the last century, adventurers seeking fame and glory tried to lay claim to the last remaining untouched corners of the globe. The traditions of colonial conquest continued through the rise of American dominance to give credit exclusively to the exploits of white men placed in charge expeditions. Contributions of the indigenous population and people of color, like Henson, were often overlooked or disregarded out of hand.

But Henson had long been an essential partner in Peary's expeditions. Born on August 8, 1866, to a family of freeborn [sharecroppers](#) in Nanjemoy, Maryland, Henson was orphaned at a very young age. At the age of 12 he went to sea as a cabin boy on a sailing ship and acquired technical skills and languages as he traveled the world.

While working as a salesclerk in a furrier shop in Washington, D.C. when he was 18, Henson met Navy Corps of Civil Engineers Commander Robert Peary. Peary hired Henson as an assistant and the two began a long partnership in exploration. Henson and Peary spent the next several years traveling through Nicaragua, the rainforests of Central America—and then the Arctic.

Controversy Over North Pole Claims

Not long after Peary and Henson's return from the North Pole expedition, an arch rival of Peary, a disgraced former colleague named Dr. Frederick A. Cook, took credit for reaching the Pole on April 21, 1908, a year earlier. His claim was debunked.

Due to the harsh physical environment and the inaccuracy of navigational instruments at the time, it is [difficult to know](#) with any certainty whose claim was truly valid.

Still, anecdotal accounts of Inuit witnesses and original photographic evidence suggest that in the 1909 expedition, Matthew Henson was the first arrive at what they believed was the North Pole. The dispute over who arrived first would fracture Peary and Henson's bond.

After an association together as explorers for more than 20 years Henson and Peary became estranged. Though he duly acknowledged the contributions of each member of the team, including the Inuit hunters, Peary claimed sole title as the man who "discovered" the North Pole. His assertions denied Henson credit as a full partner in the enterprise.

"From the time we knew we were at the Pole, Commander Peary scarcely spoke to me," Henson later [recalled](#). "It nearly broke my heart ... that he would rise in the morning and slip away on the homeward trail without rapping on the ice for me, as was the established custom."

The two men had mapped the coastal perimeter of Greenland. They had retrieved and transported the Cape York Meteorite, the second largest of its kind, from the Arctic to the American Museum of Natural History in New York City. As a team, their expeditions from 1898–1902 set a new "Farthest North" record by reaching Greenland's northernmost point, Cape Morris Jesup. And they made two more expeditions to the Arctic, in 1905 through 1906.

Throughout their expeditions, Peary took credit for their accomplishments, while Henson built and maintained all the sledges. He trained the other western members of their team. Henson was fluent in the Inuit language and established a rapport with the native people of the region.

He was known in the community as Maripaluk, or "Matthew the Kind One." Henson learned the methods the Inuit used to survive and travel safely through the Arctic.

"[Henson] was indispensable," team member Donald B. MacMillan recalled in an article published in the [April 1920 issue of National Geographic Magazine](#). "With years of experience equal to Peary himself." Whether or not the team actually reached the North Pole in 1909, all members of the expedition—including Henson—were critical to the endeavor. As Peary, himself, said while they were planning the journey, "Henson must go all the way," he said. "I can't make it there without him."

By: [James Edward Mills](#)
Published: January 31, 2024

Little Know Black History