

Matt Henson — Trek To The Pole

Baltimore Afro-American

Feature Page

NOVEMBER 18, 1961

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By Garey Reynolds

Matthew Alexander Henson was born in Charles County, Md., in 1866, one of 11 children. His mother died when Matt was seven and he was sent to Washington to live with an aunt.

At 11 years of age, Matt ran away from his aunt's home, and walked back to Baltimore. He was befriended by a woman who ran a restaurant. She took him as her helper, and cared for him.

During his stay there, Matt met an old sea duffer named Baltimore Jack, who whetted the youngster's appetite for the sea with his tales of high adventure.

Consequently, he was led to ask Captain Childs of the "Maria Hines," docked in the Baltimore harbor at that time, to take him on as cabin boy.

The Maria Hines with a cargo of wheat aboard sailed for China with Matt as cabin boy.

He stayed with the ship for four years, seeing much of the world, and becoming an expert sailor.

Put ashore in 1887, now 21 years old, Matt returned to Washington and took a job as stockboy with the B. H. Steinmetz Hat Store, then located on Pennsylvania Ave.

A young naval officer, Robert E. Peary, came into the store in the summer of 1887, to buy a tropical hat to wear on an expedition to Nicaragua.

He asked Matt if he would like to accompany him on the expedition as a valet.

Sam Steinmetz told Matt he could go and his job would be waiting for him when he returned.

Henson went on the expedition and returned to Steinmetz until Peary called him to New York as a clerk in a government office, and to prepare for the Arctic expeditions.

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IN DUE TIME Henson's versatility impressed Peary so much that he made him, as Peary put it, "an ambitious explorer's assistant."

Peary's dream since 1884 was to reach the North Pole.

For him, the man who stood with the "360 degree" Longitude beneath his feet would rank with Columbus and the other great explorers of the past.

In his specially built ship for Arctic exploration, "The Roosevelt," Peary and his staff made six unsuccessful attempts to reach the pole.

Each time Henson became more valuable to him because of his ability to make friends with the Eskimos, his fluency with their language, his skill as a sledge driver, and his genius at confronting Arctic dangers.

The trips took place from 1889-1909, when they discovered the North Pole.

On those trips, Henson had three times saved Peary's life.

Once by shooting an enraged musk ox which had charged Peary. Another time he cared for Peary's frozen feet until medical help could be had.

A third time, when one of his party was so badly frozen that to try to bring him back could have meant death for Matt, Peary and the frozen man.

However, triumphant against the odds, Henson brought all three back to safety, saving them all from starvation.

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ON THE seventh and final trip which began March 1, 1909 Peary decided that the days were becoming long enough for the most dangerous leg of the trip.

His plan for the 413 mile sledge run from Cape Columbia to the Pole was as follows: to send a pioneer division and supply division ahead of the main party to break trail, and to build igloos and leave supplies along the route.

As the entire party progressed Northward, the supplies began to dwindle. Some men would be sent back to Cape Columbia and the rest would push on. The returning men would keep the trail open and repair igloos.

The expedition began with 24 men and 133 dogs. A month later Peary was 133 nautical miles from the Pole, and the last supporting division turned back.

Peary kept Matt because as he said, "Henson is not to return. I can't get along without him."

Only Henson, the four strongest Eskimos and 40 dogs were left.

Now farther north than any man had ever been, Peary and his men, leg weary, with their food supply



Matt Henson as he appeared in 1927, posed with a pair of snowshoes.



AT THE NORTH POLE five of Admiral Peary's fellow discoverers held up flags for this photo. At center, Matt Henson held the American flag which Admiral Peary had carried hopefully for 15 years.

The other flags, from left, are those of the Navy League, Delta Kappa Epsilon Fraternity, Daughters of the American Revolution and that of the Red Cross.

running low, were alone with the horrors of the Arctic—

It took the party five days to reach the region of the Pole. In those last five days, there is some doubt that Peary could have walked because he was crippled by the loss of eight toes. Henson, remembering what happened, in later years.

"Well he walked and he didn't walk. Every morning an hour before we left camp, Peary would get up and start walking slowly toward the pole. Then we would overtake him and he would sit in the sledge, and

rest.

"At the end of the day he'd get off again and walk ahead till we camped."

At the end of the fifth day's march they knew they were near the Pole. But it was the next afternoon before Peary was satisfied he had found the spot.

Henson recalled Peary told him, "Plant the Stars and Stripes over there, Matt."

Peary then said "at the North Pole" and shook hands with Henson.

"Let's go home, Matt. Let's go home," he recalled Peary saying.

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IT TOOK 37 days to reach the Pole and 16 days to return because of the trail kept open by the returning party.

Five days before the world learned of Peary's reaching the Pole, a similar claim had been made by Dr. Frederick Cook, once a member of Peary's expedition.

But in 1910 the National Geographical Society stated belief in Peary's claim, and a year later Congress gave him a vote of thanks.

Peary came home to fame and fortune. Henson came home to obscurity.

In 21 years of service he was paid nothing until the last exploration, for which he received \$25 a month. Henson also received a \$150 bonus given to all members of the crew for a successful voyage.

For years, Matt Henson was not heard from. In 1913, an outraged friend found Henson working in a Brooklyn garage.

By pulling some political strings, the friend was able to get Henson a civil service appointment as messenger boy in the New York Customs office.

Following his retirement after 23 years of service, Matt had this to

say about his appointment:

"Now that is just fine. We get along alright, my wife and I, because she worked too and we had no children.

"Of course, retiring at 70, I didn't like. I was fit as ever and the retirement pay of \$1,020 annually meant that Lucy could not retire with me.

"But we get along."

In 1945, Henson was brought to a downtown navy office in New York and presented a Congressional medal by a Naval captain.

Then in 1947 with the publication of "Dark Companion" by Bradley Robinson, Matt began to get some long deserved recognition.

Said Matt of the book: "It comes a little late. I am 81 years old."

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ON A RADIO broadcast that same year, Matt said twice during the program, "Nobody has ever given me \$1 that I didn't earn."

Two years later in Baltimore, Her-

bert M. Frisby, head of the Douglass High School Science Department, began a 13 - year quest to get Henson recognized in "an honorable and creditable manner."

In 1954, Mr. Frisby succeeded in getting Henson an invitation to the White House to see then President Eisenhower. A year later, when Henson died, the Maryland Legislature passed a resolution, commending Henson.

As far North correspondent for the AFRO, Mr. Frisby flew over the North Pole and dropped a memorial plaque to Henson.

Mr. Frisby presented a resolution to the state legislature in 1959 asking that a memorial to Matt Henson be placed at the Pomonkey High School in Charles County. The legislature passed the resolution.

When Governor Tawes' Matt Henson committee met to make final plans for the memorial, Mr. Frisby who was chairman asked that the memorial be placed instead in the State's capital.

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THE MEMORIAL bronze plaque, 28 by 36 inches, will be unveiled by Mrs. Henson in formal ceremonies Saturday, 11 a.m. in the old Senate chambers.

Some 1,000 persons are expected to attend the dedication which is presided over by Mr. Frisby.

Included in the list are Andrew Hatcher, presidential associate press secretary; James C. Evans, Department of Defense counselor; Commander Edward Peary Stafford, Admiral Peary's grandson; Clifford Mackay, AFRO editor;

Dr. Russell Frazier, Explorers Club of New York; Governor J. Millard Tawes and Dr. Martin D. Jenkins, president of Morgan State College.



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