

# THE NEGRO HISTORY BULLETIN

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MATTHEW ALEXANDER HENSON  
CO-DISCOVERER OF THE NORTH POLE  
WITH  
ADMIRAL ROBERT EDWIN PEARY  
APRIL 6, 1909

BORN: AUGUST 8, 1866

DIED: MARCH 9, 1955

SON OF MARYLAND  
EXEMPLIFICATION OF COURAGE, FORTITUDE AND PATRIOTISM,  
WHOSE VALIANT DEEDS OF NOBLE DEVOTION  
UNDER THE COMMAND OF ADMIRAL ROBERT EDWIN PEARY,  
IN PIONEER ARCTIC EXPLORATION AND DISCOVERY,  
ESTABLISHED EVERLASTING PRESTIGE AND GLORY  
FOR HIS STATE AND COUNTRY

BY THE STATE OF MARYLAND  
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**COVER: MATTHEW HENSON MEMORIAL**

This memorial tablet, unveiled and dedicated November 18, 1961, is located in the State House, Annapolis, Maryland, in the section which formerly (November 26, 1783, to August 13, 1784) was the Capitol of the United States of America.

MATTHEW (MATT) ALEXANDER HENSON was born August 8, 1866, on a farm, Nantuxom, Charles County, Maryland.

Henson, the man destined to become the first person to locate and stand on the Top of the World, was born in virtual obscurity. Little is known of his early boyhood. Around the age of eleven, he ran away from Nantuxom one night and walked to Washington, D. C. There, he divided his time between working in a restaurant operated by his aunt, Mrs. Janey Moore, and attending irregularly, the N Street Elementary School.

Henson left Washington at the age of thirteen, walked to Baltimore, Maryland, and located around the waterfront. Soon thereafter, as one without a home, he shipped as a cabin boy on a schooner under the command of a Captain Childs. This skipper taught him the rudiments of simple mathematics and navigation. The voyage carried him to China and return.

Returning to Washington, he found employment as a porter in a hat shop on Pennsylvania Avenue. One day, the then Lt. Robert E. Peary visited this store. He observed Matt Henson at work and became impressed with

Gentlemen:  
Enclosed find photograph of the Memorial Tablet in the State House, Annapolis, Maryland, the first of its kind in any southern state, on a State Level, to a Negro.  
I have already furnished you with a file of materials related thereto and have explained the struggle to get this accomplished.  
I hope you will be able to use the picture as a cover for one of your publications. April 6, is the anniversary date of the discovery of the North Pole.  
Sincerely yours,  
HERBERT M. FRISBY

him. Matt was invited by Lt. Peary to join him on a canal surveying expedition to Nicaragua. Henson accepted.

When this mission was completed, Peary became interested in heading an expedition in search of the North Pole, which at that time, was the intensive objective of many nations. Henson accompanied Peary on each of his seven expeditions into the Arctic and Polar regions.

Matt saved Peary's life when he was attacked by an infuriated musk ox, and also on one occasion rescued him from starvation. He was chosen by Peary to be a member of the party of six to make the final dash to the Pole. Peary paid him this compliment — "He is my most valuable companion. I could not get along without him."

Overcome with exhaustion and crippled by the loss of most of his toes by frostbite, Peary sent Henson forward to make final observations and calculations, and await his arrival. Forty-five minutes later, Peary, driven up on his sled by four Eskimos, joined Henson. Peary's check confirmed the discovery of the North Pole.

90 N. Lat., North Pole  
April 6, 1909  
Arrived here today, 27 marches from Cape Columbia.  
I have with me 5 men: Matthew Henson, colored; Ootah, Eskimowah, Seegloo and Ookeah, Eskimos; 5 sledges and 38 dogs.  
The expedition under my command has succeeded in reaching the Pole . . . for the honor and prestige of the United States of America.

Robert E. Peary  
United States Navy  
(From Log Book of Admiral Peary)  
"This scene my eyes will never see again. Plant the Stars and Stripes over there, Matt, . . . At the North Pole." — Peary.

Aside from Peary, the leader of the expedition, Henson has been given most of the credit for the success of the discovery of the North Pole. This is because of his courage and daring; ability to withstand the most rigorous climate and exposure,

mastery of the Eskimo language and their admiration of him, his skill in sled building, driving and igloo construction. These credits were accorded him by all the surviving members of the polar expeditions.  
In recognition of his contributions, Mr. Henson was awarded the Master of Science degree by Morgan State College, and Howard University, a Congressional Medal, Life Membership in the Explorers Club, a medal from the Chicago Geographical Society, a citation by the U. S. Department of Defense, a commendation from President Dwight D. Eisenhower, at the White House, numerous medals and plaques from civic organizations.

On August 12, 1956, a memorial tribute to him was dropped on the North Pole from a U. S. Air Force plane by Afro-American Arctic Corps respondent, Herbert M. Frisby, the author of this biographical sketch.  
There is Henson Bay, in northwest Arctic Canada, named as a tribute to him.

Mr. Henson died March 9, 1955, in New York City. He is survived by Mrs. Lucy J. Henson, his widow.  
Since his passing, he has been memorialized by His Excellency, J. Mildard Tawes, Governor of Maryland, proclaiming April 6, 1959, the 50th Anniversary of the Discovery of the North Pole, as MATTHEW ALEXANDER HENSON DAY in the State of Maryland.

By action of the Maryland General Assemblies in 1959 and 1961, provisions were made for the establishment of permanent memorials to Mr. Henson, one to be placed in the State House at Annapolis, and a small replica of the same on the campus of the Pomomkey High School, Charles County, both in Maryland.  
(H.M.F.)

For further details see —  
Henson, Matthew A.: *A Negro Explorer at the North Pole* (1912)  
Life Magazine: *Discovery of the North Pole* (May 12, 1951)  
MacMillan, Admiral Donald B.: *Matthew Henson: Explorers Magazine*, Fall, 1955  
Peary, Admiral Robert E.: *The North Pole* (1910) (Contains 13 references)