

SPOTLIGHT

A Long Dream Comes True

By *Neil H. Swanson*

DAY AFTER TOMORROW, the State of Maryland will honor two men who dreamed impossible dreams—and made them come true.

Both men are Negroes.

Both were born poor. There was no reason at all to suppose that either of them would find a place in Maryland history, or a plaque in the hall of the old colonial State House in Annapolis.

But each made himself unique. Each achieved distinction by an almost incredible, unyielding patience—by an almost incredible faith in a goal—by an almost incredible, selfless devotion to somebody else.

One of the men so honored is Matthew A. Henson, because he was the first man to reach the North Pole. His name will be on the bronze tablet. The "somebody else" to whom he gave utter devotion was Robert E. Peary, officially known as the discoverer of the Pole.

There is no doubt that he was made of the stuff of heroes.

The second man's name will not appear on the tablet. But those who know what he has done will see it between the lines cast in bronze—Herbert M. Frisby. The "somebody else" to whom he gave a lifetime of utter devotion was Matthew Henson.

It was Henson, the powerful, walrus-mustached Maryland Negro, who made it possible for Peary to find the Pole.

It was Frisby, the small, skinny Negro boy selling peanuts in Baltimore alleys at five cents a pack to help support the family, who made it possible for Matthew Henson to become the first man of his race to receive such a tribute from Maryland.

The intermingled stories of these two men had unpropitious beginnings.

First at Pole by 45 Minutes

Matt Henson was born, the year after Appomattox, in a log cabin two miles from the bank of Nanjemoy Creek in Charles county. Twenty-five years later he was doing chores in a Washington hat store when a young Navy lieutenant, Robert Peary, saw him, liked him, and offered to take him along on an exploring expedition to Nicaragua.

From then on, until the North Pole was conquered after six heart-breaking failures, Matt Henson was Peary's assistant—the man "I can't get along without." By the explorer's own testimony, he became "probably a better dog-driver than any other man living," an expert in building igloos, mighty walrus hunter, master of the Eskimo language, and amateur surgeon who chopped off Peary's frozen toes with a hatchet to save him from death by gangrene.

The crippled Peary, unable to march, condemned to ride a dog sled, sent his faithful assistant ahead to be the first man at the top of the world. He was, by 45 minutes.

Herbert Frisby's part of the story began 52 years ago in the old Hill Street school, when his sixth grade teachers announced that "a man of your race has just reached the North Pole."

Dream That Lasted Half a Century

A shabby arm waved. A voice shrilled from the back of the room: "I'm going to be the second Negro at the North Pole!"

Forty-five years later, in an Air Force plane, he flew over the Pole and dropped the Maryland flag and a Maryland seal engraved with Matt Henson's name. But that wasn't the end of the dreaming. There was an invitation to Matthew Henson and his wife to visit the White House. There was a memorial museum of the Negro explorer's Arctic equipment and pictures.

And Saturday morning, the long dream comes to a shining climax. Matt Henson was first at the Pole. And Herb Frisby is first to win for him the high honor of the bronze tablet in the historic State House, which knew the makers of the young nation a long time ago.

Herb Frisby will be sitting on top of the world.



SWANSON