

Arlington burial sought for explorer

Annapolis Bureau of The Sun

Annapolis—Matthew A. Henson, a Maryland-born black explorer, traveled from the log cabin of his slave parents to the North Pole with Adm. Robert E. Peary.

Now, more than 18 years after his death, he may complete the final leg of his journey—to a grave near the admiral's in the Arlington National Cemetery.

Senator J. Glenn Beall, Jr. (R., Md.) has asked the Senate to grant Mr. Henson's dying wish and authorized the burial at Arlington.

Previous measures, introduced by Senator Beall, his father (also a senator) and former Senator Joseph D. Tydings, all failed because of the Army's opposition to the bills.

The black explorer is now recognized as the first man who reached the North Pole.

He was sent ahead of the main expedition by Admiral Peary in 1909, and arrived "90 degrees north latitude" about 45 minutes before the celebrated naval officer.

But unlike the admiral, Mr. Henson lived out his life in obscurity and relative poverty.

Since Mr. Henson was not a veteran, special legislation by Congress is required to allow burial at Arlington.

A similar bill was allowed to languish in the Senate Committee on Veterans' Affairs last year after the Department of the Army gave it a negative recommendation.

Kenneth E. Belieu, the undersecretary of the Army, told the committee the bill allowing Mr. Henson's burial "would discriminate against his fellow citizens who have served their country in various civilian capacities, in both war and peace."

Spokesmen for Senator Beall said this year's bill has a better chance of passage because it was introduced earlier in the session than were previous measures.

"By getting it in a little bit earlier, we may give the committee a chance to do more than just read a proforma response from the Army people," said Randolph Arndt, the senator's press aide.

Mr. Arndt said the senator's staff was searching Arlington's records for evidence of similar special burial plans for non-veterans.

The Army concedes that Mr. Henson did have something of a case, in that he worked as a laborer at the Philadelphia Navy Yard from 1889 to 1891. In the Army's view, it is simply not enough.

Mr. Henson was working as a porter in a Washington hat

store when Admiral Peary, then a lieutenant, visited the store.

Admiral Peary asked Mr. Henson to accompany him "as a man-of-all-work" on an expedition to Nicaragua. According to the admiral's logs, Mr. Henson soon became so valuable, he was promoted to "assistant."

The two undertook six discouraging trips to the Arctic, each time falling just short of their icy goal.

On one trip, Henson saved Admiral Peary's life when he brought down an enraged and wounded musk ox that was charging the frost-rattled officer.

On another trip, he brought the exhausted Peary back to base just in time to save him from starvation.

On the last leg of the seventh attempt to reach the pole, only Admiral Peary, Mr. Henson, and four Eskimos were present.

Once again exhausted and crippled with frostbite, Admiral Peary sent Mr. Henson forward to make final observations and await the arrival of the main party.

When the admiral arrived in his dogsled, he found Mr. Henson standing on the pole. Together they planted the flags.

Back in the United States, and parted from one another, Commander Peary was promoted to rear admiral, but Mr. Henson fared less well.

He was found in New York, four years later, working in a parking garage. He later got a job as a messenger in the New York customs house. In 1936, he retired, at 70, on a pension of \$1,020 a year.

Recognition of his achievements came very late in life. One year before he died, he spent 20 minutes with President Eisenhower, who presented him with an award.

About four years after his death in 1955, on the 50th anniversary of the discovery of the pole, Gov. J. Millard Tawes proclaimed April 6, 1959 "Matthew Alexander Henson Day" in Maryland.



MATTHEW A. HENSON

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