

FROZEN DREAMS

Matthew Henson helped discover the North Pole. It would take decades for the world to discover him. **By Lauren Tarshis**

As You Read Think about why the author wrote this article.

It was April 3, 1909. An explorer named Matthew Henson trudged across the ice-covered Arctic Ocean. All around him was the frozen wilderness of the Arctic, a **forbidding** region of brutal cold and blizzards. Huge slabs of sea ice floated on the cold ocean water. No human could survive here for long. Even polar bears stayed away.

But as Henson moved across the ice, excitement warmed his heart. He felt sure that he was about to achieve his dream of being one of the first humans to set foot on the North Pole. Henson put his head down and pushed against the fierce wind.

All of a sudden, he lost his balance. The ice beneath his feet wobbled. Before Henson knew what was happening, he slipped off the ice and fell into the ocean. The icy water hit his skin like millions of needles.

He clawed at the sharp edges of the ice, trying to pull himself up.

But it was no use. The water seemed to drag him down.

Henson had spent nearly 20 years trying to get to the North Pole. Now it seemed it would all end here, in the depths of the Arctic Ocean.

KINGDOM OF ICE

Matthew Henson was born in 1866. At that time, few people traveled more than a few miles from where they were born. There were no cars zipping down highways, no planes zooming over continents and oceans. There was no GPS or Google Maps. Parts of the world were still mostly unknown.

One place in particular remained unreachable: the North Pole, the very top of the world.

The North Pole is the northernmost point on Earth. It sits in the middle of the Arctic Ocean, which is covered in ice that is always moving and shifting.

The closest land is Greenland, an island more than 500 miles away. The indigenous people of Greenland, called the Inuit, did not **venture** near the North Pole. They believed the area was cursed by a demon called Kokoyah, a knife-toothed beast that lurked under the ice. And the Arctic does seem cursed—by weather that is colder and stormier than nearly anywhere else on Earth.

In the 1500s, European explorers began sailing into the Arctic—the “kingdom of ice,” as they called it. They were seeking ocean routes from Europe to Asia.

These routes were never found, though more than 100 men died trying. Ships were



crushed by the huge slabs of ice that drift across the Arctic. Sailors who managed to escape their broken ships quickly died in temperatures as low as 60 degrees below zero. But despite many shipwrecks and deaths, the mystery of the Arctic continued to lure explorers and adventurers.

GROWING DREAMS

As a kid in Maryland, Henson probably didn't hear much about the Arctic. His parents were poor farmers, and Henson didn't have much education.

Around age 11, Henson became an orphan. He went to live with his uncle in Washington, D.C. During this time, Henson heard Frederick Douglass give a speech. Douglass had escaped enslavement before the Civil War. He had become a powerful voice against slavery. In his speech, Douglass urged black Americans to pursue education and to fight racism and discrimination.

Douglass's words **resonated** deeply with young Henson, who dreamed of seeing the world.

When he was 13, Henson walked 40 miles to Baltimore. There, he persuaded a ship captain to hire him as a cabin boy—the lowest job on a ship. For the next few years, he sailed around the world. He learned to read and became a skilled sailor and carpenter.

At age 19, Henson left his life on the sea and moved back to Washington, D.C. He hoped his experiences would help him get a good job. But most white business owners would not hire African Americans. In fact, most of the southern United States had

so-called "Jim Crow" laws. These laws **mandated** racial segregation. They kept African Americans separate from white people in schools, in restaurants, on trains, and in many other places. The laws made it hard for black people to own property, make money, vote, get a good education—to exercise the rights that were supposed to be everyone's under the Constitution. Henson could not get the kind of highly skilled work he was qualified for. And so he took a job stocking shelves in a hat store.



Henson wore boots called *kamiks*, which were made from seal and caribou skin. They kept him warm and dry.



The Team
Henson (far right) with members of the crew on a mission to the North Pole, 1910



An Icy Wilderness

The amount of ice in the Arctic is shrinking, because of climate change. There is less ice today than in Henson's time and it's becoming easier for ships to sail through the region.

FIERCE AMBITIONS

One day, a man came into the hat store. His name was Robert Peary, and he was an engineer in the U.S. Navy. He was preparing for a Navy expedition to map a jungle in Central America. Peary offered Henson the job of cabin boy. Henson was qualified for a better job. Still, he accepted the offer. This decision would change his life—and history.

Peary was a man of fierce **ambitions**. As a white man, he had many opportunities to make his dreams come true. And Peary's dreams were big. More and more explorers were venturing into the Arctic, racing to be the first to reach the North Pole. Whoever won this race would become famous. Peary decided that man should be him.

So when he and Henson returned from Central America, Peary began planning for a yearlong trip to Greenland. He



Robert Peary

wanted Henson to come along, as his "manservant." Peary knew that Henson was capable of far more. On the Central America trip, Henson had taken on complex jobs, working alongside Navy engineers. But Peary would never treat Henson as an equal.

BLUBBER AND BLOOD

In June 1891, Henson and Peary set sail for Greenland with four other men and Peary's wife, Josephine. A month later, the group came ashore and set up a camp. The ship headed back to New York. It would return to pick them up in one year.

Henson and Peary had made it to the "kingdom of ice." But they were still some 700 miles from the North Pole. To get there would take weeks. They would have to travel on foot and by dogsled through punishing cold and blizzards.

They would need help from

experts in Arctic survival: the local Inuit people. The Inuit were skilled ice fishermen and hunters of arctic animals like seals and polar bears. They ate the meat and blubber of the animals they caught, and often drank the blood. They made clothes from the skins and furs. They made tools from the bones.

Peary hired Inuit women to sew fur clothing and sealskin moccasins. These didn't freeze and split open in the cold as leather boots did. With help from the Inuit, Peary's expedition spent their first months in Greenland building sleds and preparing food and other supplies they'd need to explore Greenland and find the best route to the North Pole.

Henson made friends with the Inuit people he met. Unlike Peary, Henson learned the language of the Inuit and joined their celebrations. His new friends taught him



to hunt and icefish. They also taught him to drive a dogsled pulled by a team of eight dogs. No other American or European Arctic explorer had these kinds of skills.

FROZEN TOES

By the end of the expedition, Henson and Peary had explored much of Greenland, searching for a route to the North Pole. In the coming years, they made five more trips. Each time, they got closer to finding a way through the floating ice. They faced many near-disasters. They got lost in blizzards. At times, they nearly starved. On one trip, Peary's feet became so frostbitten that eight toes snapped off. Peary would have lost his feet completely had Henson not pushed him back

to camp on a sled, an **arduous** 11-day journey.

Despite these setbacks, Peary became famous. Back in America between trips, he was surrounded by admirers. He dined with President Theodore Roosevelt. Newspapers ran stories about his daring

You would sleep in **igloos**, dome-shaped shelters made from blocks of packed snow that the Inuit taught explorers how to build. They aren't warm, but they offer protection from harsh weather.



You would eat hard biscuits and **pemmican**, a survival food invented by the Inuit people, made of mashed and dried meat, berries, and slow-cooked fat.



IF YOU WENT WITH MATTHEW HENSON TO THE NORTH POLE . . .

You would drink a lot of **tea**. The Arctic is covered in snow and ice, but melting it in your mouth would make you dangerously cold. To stay hydrated, you'd sip warm tea.



You would travel in **sledges** (extra-sturdy sleds) loaded up with hundreds of pounds of supplies. Each sledge was pulled by several strong dogs.



You would wear warm clothes sewn by Inuit women: a **fur jacket** with a thick hood, **polar bear skin pants**, and **sealskin boots** stuffed with grass.



You might get **frostbite**, when skin and tissue freeze. In severe cases, the affected area turns numb, hard, and black—and dies.



adventures. Henson was rarely mentioned, except as Peary's "manservant."

Still, Henson had become as determined as Peary to reach the North Pole.

Finally, in 1909, it seemed their dream would come true. On April 3, they were pushing

their way across the ice. Henson was leading the way with four Inuit men: Seegloo, Egingwah, Ooqueah, and Ootah. Peary believed they were about 150 miles from the North Pole.

But then came the moment when Henson slipped and fell into the ocean. In water that cold, death comes in minutes. Muscles knot. Blood flow slows. Vision blurs as the brain powers down.

Henson had spent years trying to get to the North Pole. Now, just miles from his goal, he was sure he was about to die.

Then he seemed to fly up out of the water. Ootah had grabbed him and hauled him up, saving his life.

Three days later, Henson, Peary, and the other men

reached the North Pole. It was Henson who planted the American flag in the snow.

OUT OF THE SHADOWS

Only Peary got credit for "discovering" the North Pole. He became known as one of history's most **illustrious** explorers.

In the coming decades, Henson won some minor awards. Within African American communities, he was deeply admired. But history books mostly ignored his achievements.

After his triumph in the Arctic, Henson lived in New York City with his wife, Lucy. He worked as a messenger. His niece once told classmates that her uncle Matthew was a famous

explorer. Her teacher punished her for lying.

But by the time Henson died, in 1955, America was changing. African Americans were fighting for equal rights. In the 1960s, new laws outlawed discrimination based on race and ethnicity. The accomplishments of African Americans began to be recognized. They were no longer in the shadows.

In 1988, Henson's body was moved to Arlington National Cemetery, the burial ground of many of America's most admired heroes. The headstone that marks his grave has a picture of his face, Arctic scenes, and these words:

*Matthew Alexander Henson
Co-Discoverer of the North Pole.* ●



Writing Contest

Imagine that a museum exhibit has been created to honor Matthew Henson. Create a brochure for the exhibit. It should include an introduction explaining who Henson was and a guide to the exhibit. Send your brochure to **Henson Contest**. Five winners will each get *First Man* by Simon Schwartz. See page 2 for details.

Get this activity online.

