

A Negro Explorer at the North Pole: Foreword and Chapter 15

by Matthew A. Henson



Matthew Henson

A Negro Explorer is a book written by African American explorer Matthew A. Henson. It was published in 1912. The foreword of this book was written by explorer Richard E. Peary. Henson accompanied Peary on an expedition to the Arctic.

Foreword

Friends of Arctic exploration and discovery, with whom I have come in contact, and many whom I know only by letter, have been greatly interested in the fact of a colored man being an effective member of a serious Arctic expedition, and going north, not once, but numerous times during a period of over twenty years, in a way that showed that he not only could and did endure all the stress of Arctic conditions and work, but that he evidently found pleasure in the work.

The example and experience of Matthew Henson, who has been a member of each and of all my Arctic expeditions, since '91 (my trip in 1886 was taken before I knew Henson) is only another one of the multiplying illustrations of the fact that race, or color, or bringing-up, or environment, count nothing against a determined heart, if it is backed and aided by intelligence.

Henson proved his fitness by long and thorough apprenticeship, and his participation in the final victory which planted the Stars and Stripes at the North Pole, and won for this country the international prize of nearly four centuries, is a distinct credit and feather in the cap of his race.

As I wired Charles W. Anderson, collector of internal revenue, and chairman of the dinner which was given to Henson in New York, in October, 1909, on the occasion of the presentation to him of a gold watch and chain by his admirers:

"I congratulate you and your race upon Matthew Henson. He has driven home to the world your great adaptability and the fiber of which you are made. He has added to the moral stature of every intelligent man among you. His is the hard-earned reward of tried loyalty, persistence, and endurance. He should be an everlasting example to your young men that these qualities will win whatever object they are directed at. He deserves every attention you can show him. I regret that it is impossible for me to be present at your dinner. My compliments to your assembled guests."

It would be superfluous to enlarge on Henson in this introduction. His work in the north has already spoken for itself and for him. His book will speak for itself and him.

Yet two of the interesting points which present themselves in connection with his work may be noted.

Henson, son of the tropics, has proven through years, his ability to stand tropical, temperate, and the fiercest stress of frigid, climate and exposure, while on the other hand, it is well known that the inhabitants of the highest north, tough and hardy as they are to the rigors of their own climate, succumb very quickly to the vagaries of even a temperate climate. The question presents itself at once: "Is it a difference in physical fiber, or in brain and will power, or is the difference in the climatic conditions themselves?"

Again it is an interesting fact that in the final conquest of the "prize of the centuries," not alone individuals, but *races* were represented. On that bitter brilliant day in April, 1909, when the Stars and Stripes floated at the North Pole, Caucasian, Ethiopian, and Mongolian stood side by side at the apex of the earth, in the harmonious companionship resulting from hard work, exposure, danger, and a common object.

R.E. Peary

Washington, Dec. 1911

Chapter 15: The Pole!

Captain Bartlett and his two boys had commenced their return journey, and the main column, depleted to its final strength, started northward. We were six: Peary, the commander, the Esquimos,

Ootah, Egingwah, Seegloo and Ooqueah, and myself.

Day and night were the same. My thoughts were on the going and getting forward, and on nothing else. The wind was from the southeast, and seemed to push us on, and the sun was at our backs, a ball of livid fire, rolling his way above the horizon in never-ending day.

The Captain had gone, Commander Peary and I were alone (save for the four Esquimos), the same as we had been so often in the past years, and as we looked at each other we realized our position and we knew without speaking that the time had come for us to demonstrate that we were the men who, it had been ordained, should unlock the door which held the mystery of the Arctic. Without an instant's hesitation, the order to push on was given, and we started off in the trail made by the Captain to cover the Farthest North he had made and to push on over one hundred and thirty miles to our final destination.

The Captain had had rough going, but, owing to the fact that his trail was our track for a short time, and that we came to good going shortly after leaving his turning point, we made excellent distance without any trouble, and only stopped when we came to a lead barely frozen over, a full twenty-five miles beyond. We camped and waited for the strong southeast wind to force the sides of the lead together. The Esquimos had eaten a meal of stewed dog, cooked over a fire of wood from a discarded sledge, and, owing to their wonderful powers of recuperation, were in good condition; Commander Peary and myself, rested and invigorated by our thirty hours in the last camp, waiting for the return and departure of Captain Bartlett, were also in fine fettle, and accordingly the accomplishment of twenty-five miles of northward progress was not exceptional. With my proven ability in gauging distances, Commander Peary was ready to take the reckoning as I made it and he did not resort to solar observations until we were within a hand's grasp of the Pole.

The memory of those last five marches, from the Farthest North of Captain Bartlett to the arrival of our party at the Pole, is a memory of toil, fatigue, and exhaustion, but we were urged on and encouraged by our relentless commander, who was himself being scourged by the final lashings of the dominating influence that had controlled his life. From the land to 87° 48' north, Commander Peary had had the best of the going, for he had brought up the rear and had utilized the trail made by the preceding parties, and thus he had kept himself in the best of condition for the time when he made the spurt that brought him to the end of the race. From 87° 48' north, he kept in the lead and did his work in such a way as to convince me that he was still as good a man as he had ever been. We marched and marched, falling down in our tracks repeatedly, until it was impossible to go on. We were forced to camp, in spite of the impatience of the Commander, who found himself unable to rest, and who only waited long enough for us to relax into sound sleep, when he would wake us up and start us off again. I do not believe that he slept for one hour from April 2 until after he had loaded us up and ordered us to go back over our old trail, and I often think that from the instant when the order to return was given until the land was again sighted, he was in a continual daze.

Onward we forced our weary way. Commander Peary took his sights from the time our chronometer-watches gave, and I, knowing that we had kept on going in practically a straight line, was sure that we had more than covered the necessary distance to insure our arrival at the top of the earth.

It was during the march of the 3rd of April that I endured an instant of hideous horror. We were crossing a lane of moving ice. Commander Peary was in the lead setting the pace, and a half hour later the four boys and myself followed in single file. They had all gone before, and I was standing and pushing at the upstanders of my sledge, when the block of ice I was using as a support slipped from

underneath my feet, and before I knew it the sledge was out of my grasp, and I was floundering in the water of the lead. I did the best I could. I tore my hood from off my head and struggled frantically. My hands were gloved and I could not take hold of the ice, but before I could give the "Grand Hailing Sigh of Distress," faithful old Ootah had grabbed me by the nape of the neck, the same as he would have grabbed a dog, and with one hand he pulled me out of the water, and with the other hurried the team across.

He had saved my life, but I did not tell him so, for such occurrences are taken as part of the day's work, and the sledge he safeguarded was of much more importance, for it held, as part of its load, the Commander's sextant, the mercury, and the coils of piano-wire that were the essential portion of the scientific part of the expedition. My kamiks (boots of sealskin) were stripped off, and the congealed water was beaten out of my bearskin trousers, and with a dry pair of kamiks, we hurried on to overtake the column. When we caught up, we found the boys gathered around the Commander, doing their best to relieve him of his discomfort, for he had fallen into the water also, and while he was not complaining, I was sure that his bath had not been any more voluntary than mine had been.

When we halted on April 6, 1909, and started to build the igloos, the dogs and sledges having been secured, I noticed Commander Peary at work unloading his sledge and unpacking several bundles of equipment. He pulled out from under his *kooletah* (thick, fur outer-garment) a small folded package and unfolded it. I recognized his old silk flag, and realized that this was to be a camp of importance. Our different camps had been known as Camp Number One, Number Two, etc., but after the turning back of Captain Bartlett, the camps had been given names such as Camp Nansen, Camp Cagni, etc., and I asked what the name of this camp was to be—"Camp Peary"? "This, my boy, is to be Camp Morris K. Jesup, the last and most northerly camp on the earth." He fastened the flag to a staff and planted it firmly on the top of his igloo. For a few minutes it hung limp and lifeless in the dead calm of the haze, and then a slight breeze, increasing in strength, caused the folds to straighten out, and soon it was rippling out in sparkling color. The stars and stripes were "nailed to the Pole."

A thrill of patriotism ran through me and I raised my voice to cheer the starry emblem of my native land. The Esquimos gathered around and, taking the time from Commander Peary, three hearty cheers rang out on the still, frosty air, our dumb dogs looking on in puzzled surprise. As prospects for getting a sight of the sun were not good, we turned in and slept, leaving the flag proudly floating above us.

This was a thin silk flag that Commander Peary had carried on all of his Arctic journeys, and he had always flown it at his last camps. It was as glorious and as inspiring a banner as any battle-scarred, blood-stained standard of the world—and this badge of honor and courage was also blood-stained and battle-scarred, for at several places there were blank squares marking the spots where pieces had been cut out at each of the "Farthest" of its brave bearer, and left with the records in the cairns, as mute but eloquent witnesses of his achievements. At the North Pole a diagonal strip running from the upper left to the lower right corner was cut and this precious strip, together with a brief record, was placed in an empty tin, sealed up and buried in the ice, as a record for all time.

Commander Peary also had another American flag, sewn on a white ground, and it was the emblem of the "Daughters of the Revolution Peace Society"; he also had and flew the emblem of the Navy League, and the emblems of a couple of college fraternities of which he was a member.

It was about ten or ten-thirty a. m., on the 7th of April, 1909, that the Commander gave the order to build a snow-shield to protect him from the flying drift of the surface-snow. I knew that he was about

to take an observation, and while we worked I was nervously apprehensive, for I felt that the end of our journey had come. When we handed him the pan of mercury the hour was within a very few minutes of noon. Laying flat on his stomach, he took the elevation and made the notes on a piece of tissue-paper at his head. With sun-blinded eyes, he snapped shut the *vernier* (a graduated scale that subdivides the smallest divisions on the sector of the circular scale of the sextant) and with the resolute squaring of his jaws, I was sure that he was satisfied, and I was confident that the journey had ended. Feeling that the time had come, I ungloved my right hand and went forward to congratulate him on the success of our eighteen years of effort, but a gust of wind blew something into his eye, or else the burning pain caused by his prolonged look at the reflection of the limb of the sun forced him to turn aside; and with both hands covering his eyes, he gave us orders to not let him sleep for more than four hours, for six hours later he purposed to take another sight about four miles beyond, and that he wanted at least two hours to make the trip and get everything in readiness.

I unloaded a sledge, and reloaded it with a couple of skins, the instruments, and a cooker with enough alcohol and food for one meal for three, and then I turned in to the igloo where my boys were already sound asleep. The thermometer registered 29° below zero. I fell into a dreamless sleep and slept for about a minute, so I thought, when I was awakened by the clatter and noise made by the return of Peary and his boys.

The Commander gave the word, "We will plant the stars and stripes- *at the North Pole!*" and it was done; on the peak of a huge paleocrystic floeberg the glorious banner was unfurled to the breeze, and as it snapped and crackled with the wind, I felt a savage joy and exultation. Another world's accomplishment was done and finished, and as in the past, from the beginning of history, wherever the world's work was done by a white man, he had been accompanied by a colored man. From the building of the pyramids and the journey to the Cross, to the discovery of the new world and the discovery of the North Pole, the Negro had been the faithful and constant companion of the Caucasian, and I felt all that it was possible for me to feel, that it was I, a lowly member of my race, who had been chosen by fate to represent it, at this, almost the last of the world's great *work*.

The four Esquimos who stood with Commander Peary at the North Pole, were the brothers, Ootah and Egingwah, the old campaigner, Seegloo, and the sturdy, boyish Ooqueah. Four devoted companions, blindly confident in the leader, they worked only that he might succeed and for the promise of reward that had been made before they had left the ship, which promise they were sure would be kept. Together with the faithful dogs, these men had insured the success of the master. They had all of the characteristics of the dogs, including the dogs' fidelity. Within their breasts lingered the same infatuations that Commander Peary seemed to inspire in all who were with him, and though frequently complaining and constantly requiring to be urged to do their utmost, they worked faithfully and willingly. Ootah, of my party, was the oldest, a married man, of about thirty-four years, and regarded as the best all around member of the tribe, a great hunter, a kind father, and a good provider. Owing to his strong character and the fact that he was more easily managed by me than by any of the others, he had been a member of my party from the time we left the ship. Without exaggeration, I can say that we had both saved each other's lives more than once, but it had all gone in as part of the day's work, and neither of us dwelt on our obligations to the other.

My other boy, Ooqueah, was a young man of about nineteen or twenty, very sturdy and stocky of build, and with an open, honest countenance, a smile that was "child-like and bland," and a character that was child-like and bland. It was alleged that the efforts of young Ooqueah were spurred on by the shafts of love, and that it was in the hopes of winning the hand of the demure Miss Anadore, the

charming daughter of Ikwah, the first Esquimo of Commander Peary's acquaintance, that he worked so valiantly. His efforts were of an ardent character, but it was not due to the ardor of love, as far as I could see, but to his desire to please and his anxiety to win the promised rewards that would raise him to the grade of a millionaire, according to Esquimo standards.

Commander Peary's boy, Egingwah, was the brother of my boy Ootah, also married and of good report in his community, and it was he who drove the Morris K. Jesup sledge.

If there was any sentiment among the Esquimos in regard to the success of the venture, Ootah and Seegloo by their unswerving loyalty and fidelity expressed it. They had been members of the "Farthest North party" in 1906, the party that was almost lost beyond and in the "Big Lead," and only reached the land again in a state of almost complete collapse. They were the ones who, on bidding Commander Peary farewell in 1906, when he was returning, a saddened and discouraged man, told him to be of good cheer and that when he came back again Ootah and Seegloo would go along, and stay until Commander Peary had succeeded, and they did. The cowardice of their fellow Esquimos at the "Big Lead" on this journey did not in the least demoralize them, and when they were absolutely alone on the trail, with every chance to turn back and return to comfort, wife, and family, they remained steadfast and true, and ever northward guided their sledges.

Name: _____ Date: _____

1. According to R.E. Peary, Matthew Henson is only another one of the multiplying illustrations of what?

- A. a colored man being an effective member of a serious Arctic expedition
- B. the fact that he knows only some of his friends of Arctic exploration and discovery by letter
- C. unlocking the door, which held the mystery of the Arctic, and planting the American flag there
- D. the fact that race, or color, or bringing-up, or environment counts nothing against a determined heart, if it is backed and aided by intelligence

2. In chapter 15, what does Matthew Henson describe the sequence of?

- A. He describes the sequence of events that lead to him and his team reaching the North Pole.
- B. He describes the sequence of events before Captain Bartlett and his two boys started on his return journey.
- C. He describes the sequence of events that took place after he returned to America from the North Pole.
- D. He describes the sequence of Peary's expeditions, which he has been a part of.

3. What evidence from the text supports the conclusion that Matthew Henson was extremely determined to reach the North Pole?

- A. "He had saved my life, but I did not tell him so, for such occurrences are taken as part of the day's work, and the sledge he safeguarded was of much more importance, for it held, as part of its load, the Commander's sextant, the mercury, and the coils of piano-wire that were the essential portion of the scientific part of the expedition."
- B. "From the land to 87° 48' north, Commander Peary had had the best of the going, for he had brought up the rear and had utilized the trail made by the preceding parties, and thus he had kept himself in the best of condition for the time when he made the spurt that brought him to the end of the race."
- C. "Day and night were the same. My thoughts were on the going and getting forward, and on nothing else."
- D. "The cowardice of their fellow Esquimos at the 'Big Lead' on this journey did not in the least demoralize them, and when they were absolutely alone on the trail, with every chance to turn back and return to comfort, wife, and family, they remained steadfast and true, and ever northward guided their sledges."

4. Based on the evidence in the text, how can the relationship between Commander Peary and Henson best be described?

- A. disloyal and unfaithful
- B. fearful and distrusting
- C. distant and cold
- D. respectful and supportive

5. What is the main idea of this text?

- A. Commander Peary reached the North Pole with his team in April 1909 and planted the American flag.
- B. An Esquimo named Ootah saved Henson's life after he slipped and fell into the water.
- C. Henson, an African American man, was a key member of a serious Arctic expedition.
- D. Henson has great affection for the Esquimo members of his team.

6. Read these sentences from the text:

"Esquimos at the 'Big Lead' on this journey did not in the least demoralize them, and when they were absolutely alone on the trail, with every chance to turn back and return to comfort, wife, and family, they remained steadfast and true, and ever northward guided their sledges."

Based on this evidence, what is the meaning of the word "steadfast" in this excerpt?

- A. dishonest and disloyal
- B. reliable and loyal
- C. weak and unreliable
- D. creative and flexible

7. Choose the answer that best completes the sentence.

_____ the memory of the last expeditions is a memory of toil, fatigue, and exhaustion, Henson states they were urged on this expedition and encouraged by their relentless commander.

- A. Although
- B. However
- C. Therefore
- D. Instead

8. How did Henson feel when the American flag was planted at the North Pole?

9. Describe at least one contribution Matthew Henson made during his team's expedition to the North Pole.

Support your answer with evidence from the text.

10. In the foreword, Peary states that "race, or color, or bringing up, or environment, count nothing against a determined heart." Using evidence from Chapter 15, explain how Henson embodies this statement.
