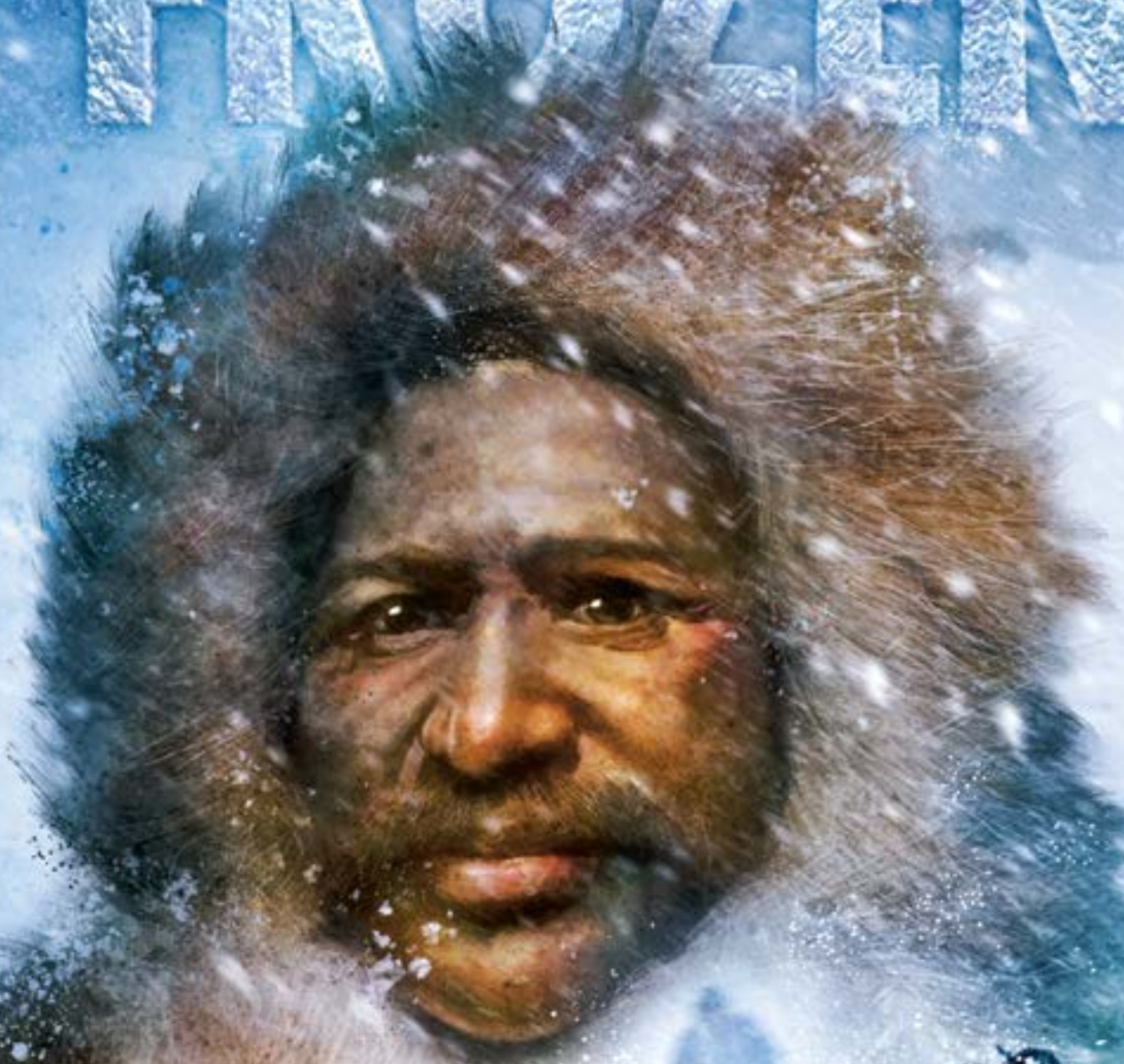


Nonfiction

FROZEN



MARCEL JANOVIC/SHUTTERSTOCK.COM (DOGS)

DREAMS

SEE OUR
BEHIND-
THE-SCENES
VIDEO AT
STORYWORKS
DIGITAL

**Matthew Henson helped discover the North Pole.
It would take many years for the world to discover him.**

BY LAUREN TARSHIS | ART BY RANDY POLLAK

UP
CLOSE

Author's Purpose As you read, think about why the author wrote this article and what she wants you to know about Matthew Henson.

**LOOK FOR WORD NERD'S
7 WORDS IN BOLD**



It was April 3, 1909. An American explorer named Matthew Henson was trudging across the Arctic Ocean. This was an ice-covered land of brutal cold and blinding blizzards. No person could survive here for long. Even polar bears stayed away.

But Henson was excited. In a few days, he hoped to achieve his dream of being one of the first people to set foot on the North Pole.

Henson put his head down and pushed against the fierce wind. Suddenly, he lost his balance. The ice beneath him wobbled, and he tumbled into the ocean. The **frigid** water hit his skin like millions of needles.

The water seemed to grab him and pull him down. Henson had spent nearly 20 years trying to get to the North Pole. And now it seemed it would all end here, in the icy blackness of the Arctic Ocean.

KINGDOM OF ICE

Matthew Henson was born in 1866. In those times, people rarely traveled more than a few miles from where they were born. There were no airplanes zooming across oceans. There were no cars or Google Maps. Parts of the world were still unknown.

One place in particular remained unreachable: the North Pole. It sits in the middle of the Arctic Ocean, which is mostly covered in floating ice. The closest land is Greenland, an island more than 500 miles away.

The native people of Greenland, called the Inuit, did not dare go near the North Pole. They believed the area was cursed by a demon that lived under the ice. And the Arctic is indeed cursed—by weather that is colder and stormier than almost anywhere on Earth.

In the 1500s, European explorers began sailing into the “kingdom of ice.” They



IF YOU'D BEEN AN



You would've eaten meals of hard biscuits and **pemmican**, a survival food invented by Native people. It's made of dried and mashed meat, berries, and slow-cooked fat.

You would've slept in **igloos**, round shelters made from blocks of packed snow that the Inuit taught explorers how to build. They're not very warm, but they protect you from the harsh weather.



You would've been very thirsty. Although the Arctic is covered in snow and ice, melting it in your mouth would've made you dangerously cold. For the whole trip, you would've drunk **warm tea**.

searched for ocean routes from Europe to Asia—the Northwest and Northeast Passages.

More than 100 men died trying to find them. Their ships were crushed by thick slabs of ice that drift across the Arctic. Sailors who escaped soon died in temperatures that dropped to 60 degrees below zero. Even with these dangers, adventurers still wanted to explore the Arctic.

A CHANCE MEETING

Matthew Henson probably didn't hear much about the Arctic when he was growing up in Washington, D.C. By the age of 13, Henson was an orphan. As an African American, he faced cruel racism that was common throughout America at the time.

At 13, he walked 40 miles to Baltimore, hoping to get a job as a sailor. There, he convinced a ship captain to hire him as a cabin boy—the lowliest job on a ship. Henson sailed around the world. He learned to read

and became a skilled sailor and carpenter.

At age 18, Henson returned to Washington, D.C., and looked for a good job. But most white business owners wouldn't hire African Americans. The best job Henson could find was stocking shelves in a hat store.

One day, a tall man came into the store. His name was Robert Peary, and he was an engineer in the U.S. Navy. Peary was going on a Navy **expedition** to a jungle in Central America. He was looking for a cabin boy.



Robert Peary

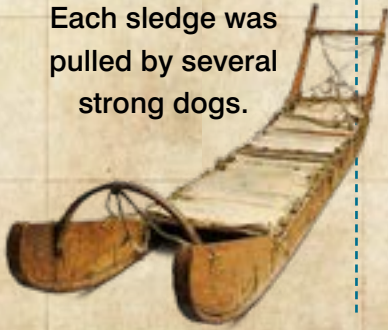
FIERCE AMBITIONS

Peary was impressed by Henson's experience at sea. He offered Henson the job. Of course, Henson was **capable** of far more. But he accepted Peary's offer. Little did he know how this decision would change his life—and history.



ARCTIC EXPLORER . . .

You would've traveled using **sledges** (extra-sturdy sled) loaded with hundreds of pounds of supplies. Each sledge was pulled by several strong dogs.



You would've worn clothes hand sewn by Inuit women. A **fur jacket** with a thick hood, **polar bearskin pants**, and **sealskin boots** stuffed with grass kept you warm.



You might've gotten **frostbite**, which is when your skin and the tissue underneath freeze. Severe frostbite can make the affected area go numb, harden, turn black, and die.



Peary had great **ambitions**. As a white man, he had many chances to make his dreams come true. And Peary had big dreams. More explorers were racing to be the first to reach the North Pole. The winner of this race would become famous. Peary decided that man should be him.

When he and Henson returned from Central America, Peary began planning for a yearlong trip to northern Greenland, the land closest to the North Pole. He wanted Henson to come along as his “manservant.”

Peary knew how much more Henson could do. On the Central American trip, Henson had taken on difficult jobs, working alongside Navy engineers. But Peary would never see past the color of Henson’s skin. No matter what Henson did, he was never treated as an equal.

Henson must have been **embittered** by this unfairness. But he couldn’t say no to a chance to see more of the world.



BLUBBER AND BLOOD

Henson and Peary set sail for Greenland in June 1891 with four other men and Peary’s wife, Josephine. One month later, they came ashore and set up camp near a bay. As planned, the ship sailed away. It would return in one year to pick them up.

They had made it to the Arctic. But they were still 700 miles from the North Pole. Getting there would mean weeks of trekking through killing cold and harsh blizzards.

To survive, they would need help from Arctic experts: Inuit people. The Inuit were skilled ice fishermen and hunters of arctic animals like seals, walrus, and polar bears. They did not waste a single scrap of an animal. They ate the meat and **blubber** and often drank the blood. They made clothes from skins and furs and carved bones into tools.

The team spent the first months in Greenland, where they prepared food and

Henson and Peary's Final Polar Expedition (1908-1909)



other supplies. Peary hired Inuit women to sew them fur clothing and sealskin moccasins, which didn't freeze and split open in the cold like leather boots did.

During this time, Henson began to make friends with the Inuit people they met. Unlike Peary, Henson learned their language and joined their celebrations. Henson's Inuit friends taught him how to hunt and ice fish. They taught Henson to drive a dogsled pulled by a team of eight dogs. No other American or European explorers had these kinds of skills.

BLIZZARDS AND FROSTBITE

In the coming years, Peary and Henson would make five more trips to the Arctic. They faced many near

disasters. They got lost in blizzards and nearly starved.

On one trip, Peary's feet became so frostbitten that eight of his toes snapped off. Peary would have lost both his feet, but Henson pushed him back to camp on a sled—a journey that took 11 days.

Even with all these troubles, Peary became famous. Newspapers ran stories about his daring adventures. Henson was rarely mentioned, except as Peary's "manservant."

Yet Henson was determined to get to the Pole. And in 1909, on their sixth trip to the Arctic, it seemed their dream was about to come true.

On April 3, they were



pushing across the ice. Henson was leading the way along with four Inuit men. They were about 150 miles from the North Pole.

MINUTES FROM DEATH

But then came the moment when Henson slipped and tumbled into the frigid Arctic waters. Death comes within minutes in water that cold. Muscles turn to knots.

Blood slows. Vision blurs as the brain powers down. Henson was just hours from achieving his dream. But he was sure he was about to die.

And then with a sudden *whoosh!* he flew up out of the water. One of the Inuit men had grabbed Henson, saving his life.

Three days later, Peary, Henson, and the other men all reached the North Pole. Henson planted the American flag in the snow.

When they returned to America, it was Peary who got **sole** credit for “discovering” the North Pole. Peary took his place alongside Ferdinand Magellan and Marco Polo as one of history’s famed explorers.

FROM THE SHADOWS

In the following years, Henson was admired by many African Americans. But history books mostly ignored Henson’s achievements and those of most nonwhite people. Henson lived a quiet life in New York City with his wife, Lucy. His niece, Olive Henson Fulton, once told classmates that her uncle Matthew was a famous Arctic explorer. Her teacher punished her for lying.

By the time Henson died in 1955, America was changing. African Americans were fighting for equal rights. In the 1960s, new laws made it illegal to treat someone differently based on race. The achievements of African Americans began to rise out of history’s shadows.

In 1988, Matthew Henson’s body was moved to Arlington National Cemetery, the burial ground of many of America’s heroes. The gravestone says:

Matthew
Alexander Henson
Co-Discoverer of the
North Pole. ■



Henson's gravestone at
Arlington National Cemetery

WRITE TO WIN

Imagine a statue honoring Henson is being built in your town. Write a brochure for visitors, telling what he achieved and why he didn't get the credit he deserved. Send it to “Henson Contest” by April 1, 2020. Ten winners will each receive *Onward* by Dolores Johnson. See page 2 for details.

FIND A
SKILL
BUILDER
ONLINE!

