

The Extraordinary Life of Matthew Henson: Co-Discoverer of the North Pole



Keep On!: The Story of Matthew Henson, Co-Discoverer of the North Pole by Deborah Hopkinson

★★★★☆ 4.8 out of 5

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In the annals of polar exploration, the names of renowned explorers like Roald Amundsen and Ernest Shackleton are often etched in gold. However, the extraordinary contributions of Matthew Henson, an African American explorer who played a pivotal role in reaching the North Pole alongside Robert Peary, have often been overlooked.

This article aims to shed light on the fascinating journey of Matthew Henson, a man whose unwavering determination, resilience, and invaluable skills proved indispensable in the perilous quest to conquer the Arctic.

Early Life and Background

Matthew Alexander Henson was born on August 8, 1866, in Charles County, Maryland. Growing up in a racially segregated society, Henson faced numerous obstacles and discrimination from a young age. Despite these challenges, he harbored an unquenchable thirst for adventure and exploration.

As a teenager, Henson left home and embarked on a life at sea, working as a cabin boy on merchant ships. During his travels, he developed exceptional survival skills, learned navigation, and gained a profound understanding of the Arctic environment.

Meeting Robert Peary

In 1887, Henson's life took a pivotal turn when he met Robert Peary, a renowned Arctic explorer who was planning an expedition to the North

Pole. Impressed by Henson's skills and experience, Peary hired him as his assistant and interpreter.

Over the next 23 years, Henson would accompany Peary on numerous expeditions to the Arctic, proving to be an indispensable asset to the team. He played a vital role in setting up supply depots, training dog teams, and navigating treacherous ice floes.

Henson's intimate knowledge of the Inuit people and their survival techniques proved invaluable. He established strong relationships with the Inuit communities, gaining their trust and assistance.

The Race to the North Pole

In 1909, Peary and Henson embarked on their most ambitious expedition yet: a final attempt to reach the North Pole. The journey was fraught with hardships, including extreme cold, treacherous ice conditions, and dwindling supplies.

On April 6, 1909, after months of grueling travel, Peary and Henson, along with four Inuit companions, became the first humans to reach the North Pole. Henson planted the American flag and claimed the discovery for the United States.

Controversies and Recognition

Despite their undeniable achievement, Peary and Henson's claims to have reached the North Pole were met with skepticism and controversy. Some explorers questioned the accuracy of their navigation and accused them of falsifying their records.

Nonetheless, Henson's contributions to the expedition were undeniable. He was recognized by the National Geographic Society with the Hubbard Medal for exploration and scientific research. However, it wasn't until 1988 that the United States Congress officially recognized him as a co-discoverer of the North Pole.

Legacy and Impact

Matthew Henson's legacy extends far beyond his Arctic explorations. He became a symbol of perseverance and resilience in the face of adversity, inspiring generations of African Americans and others who faced discrimination.

Henson's story teaches us the importance of recognizing and valuing the contributions of all individuals, regardless of their race or background. It also highlights the crucial role that collaboration and diversity play in achieving great feats.

The life of Matthew Henson is a testament to the power of determination, the indomitable spirit of exploration, and the importance of acknowledging the contributions of all those who strive for greatness. As we continue to explore the world around us, let us remember the extraordinary journey of Matthew Henson, an unsung hero who helped conquer the Arctic and left an enduring mark on history.



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