



Matthew Henson,
dressed for the cold!

MARIPALUK

by Ellen Donohue Warwick

In a hat store in Washington, D.C., history was made in the spring of 1887. The U.S. government wanted to find a way to link the Atlantic and Pacific oceans, and U.S. Navy civil engineer Robert E. Peary was headed to Nicaragua to see whether a canal should be built there. Before he left, Peary went into the Steinmetz and Sons store on G Street to buy a sun helmet. He mentioned to Mr. Steinmetz that he needed not only a hat but also a personal servant to accompany him to the tropics. The store owner sug-

gested one of his African American stockmen, Matthew Henson.

Henson was 21 years old at the time. His childhood in Charles County, Maryland, had not been easy. Matthew's mother had died when he was an infant, and by the time he was eight years old, he was an orphan. Matthew supported himself by washing dishes in a restaurant. When he turned 12, he hired on as a cabin boy on a ship. The ship's skipper, Captain Childs, took a special interest in Matthew. He lent him books and helped him

learn to read and write. Henson became an able seaman.

When Childs died, Henson got a job on another ship, but he left because of poor working conditions and racial prejudice. Henson then tried various jobs that were open to African Americans in those days: **stevedore**, chauffeur, messenger, night watchman, and, finally, stock clerk in Steinmetz's hat store.

Henson joined Peary on the Nicaragua expedition and he soon became far more than a servant. He was a jack-of-all-trades, helping to construct Peary's headquarters in the jungle and working on the surveying team. His adaptability, strength, and endurance so impressed Peary that he asked Henson to accompany him to a far different part of the world: the Arctic.

Between 1891 and 1909, Peary led several expeditions north. Henson accompanied him on all these trips. Many people of that time were racially prejudiced, and Peary was criticized for taking along a black man and giving him some authority. But Peary's reply was, "I cannot get along without him."

In describing his Arctic expeditions, Peary wrote that the distinctive feature of his plan was "the adoption of Eskimo methods and costume." The native people knew how to survive in the harsh climate of the north. Peary needed their expertise. Part of his work was to persuade the Inughuit to help him.

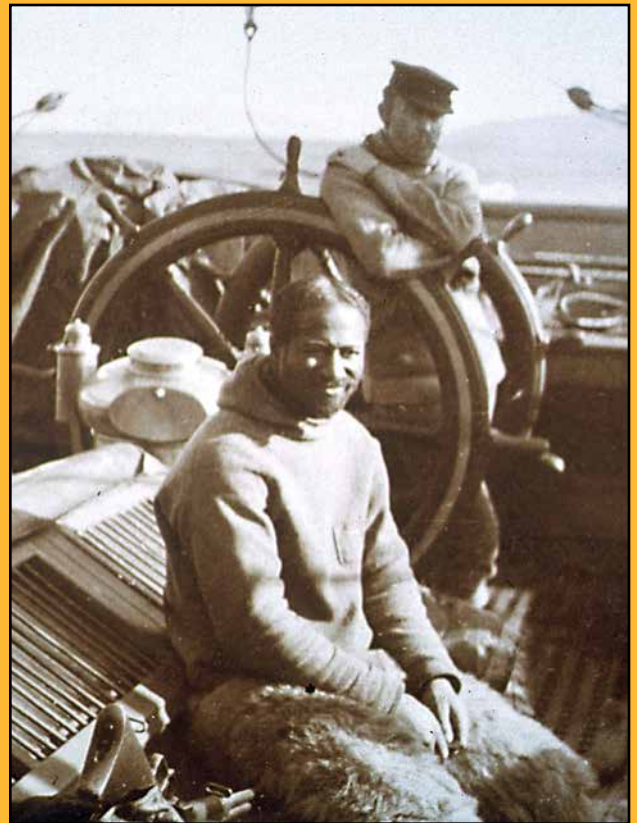
In this task, Henson proved invaluable. He quickly learned the

native language and before long spoke it better than anyone else in the expedition. He learned to drive a dog team, hunt and skin a seal, and kill a walrus. Most of all, he won the confidence and friendship of the Inughuit. They called him "Maripaluk," which means "Dear Little Matthew" or "Matthew the Kind One."

Henson helped in many ways during these expeditions. He once saved Peary's life by shooting an angry musk ox. When Peary's toes

A **stevedore** is someone who loads and unloads ships.

Henson found greater equality as a member of Peary's expeditions than was shown to African Americans in the United States at the time.





Henson (right) and some of the crew relax on a sledge aboard a ship.

were frostbitten in 1901, Henson helped save his feet from **gangrene**. And frequently he went on ahead to break a trail, risking a fall into one of the treacherous leads that opened in the frozen Arctic Ocean.

After their last polar trip in 1909 (see page 16), Peary and Henson parted ways. Unlike Peary, Henson did not immediately enjoy fame. He wrote a book about his adventure, *A Negro Explorer at the North Pole*, but he found work as a garage attendant. In 1912, Henson became a messenger for the U.S. Customs Department. After 40 years of service, he retired with a small pension.

Gradually, Henson began to receive some of the credit he was due for his role in polar exploration. Congress awarded him a U.S. Navy medal, the New York Explorers Club made him an honorary member, and the Chicago Geographic Society also

presented him with a medal. In 1954, President Dwight D. Eisenhower received Henson and his wife at the White House. A bronze plaque with his picture was installed in the Maryland State House, and a school in Baltimore was named after him.

When he died in 1955, Henson was buried in New York City. Then, on April 6, 1988, 79 years after he had stood at the top of the world, Matthew Henson was **reinterred** with full military honors next to Peary in Arlington National Cemetery. Both Peary and Henson had children with Inughuit women. Henson's descendants were present at the reinterment ceremony and still live in Greenland today.

In 2000, the National Geographic Society posthumously awarded its highest honor, the Hubbard Medal, to Henson for his role in the Arctic expeditions.

Gangrene is the death of soft tissue from disease or infection.

Reinterred means reburied.

FIELD DAY ON THE ICE

by Mary Morton Cowan

There it was in front of them: the "Big Lead." About 50 miles out on the Arctic Ocean, Robert E. Peary and his men were halted by a wide lane of open water. Peary had encountered this type of lead on two earlier expeditions. Now Peary's 1909 attempt to reach the North Pole was in jeopardy, too.

Sledges could cross narrow leads, and sometimes the men could cut huge floating ice cakes to ferry sledges and dogs across open water for short distances. But this lead was so wide they could do nothing but wait for the water to freeze.

Waiting meant wasting precious time and using up valuable food — and Peary and his crew had to wait nearly seven days. Worse, the rumbling, shifting ice made everyone nervous.

The Inughuit became frightened and talked about quitting. They didn't like being far out on the sea ice, but had come with Peary because he had promised them hunting weapons, ammunition, and tools.

Matthew Henson and Donald MacMillan, an assistant on the expedition, could tell trouble was brewing. Peary couldn't get to the pole without the Inughuit. Expert dog handlers, they drove something quickly to keep them from deserting. MacMillan, who was a physical education teacher, began to do stunts and crack jokes. "His jokes are cheering and make us all feel more light-hearted," Henson noted.

Most important, MacMillan organized athletic games and contests. At -59° Fahrenheit, he staged a field day on the ice. The Inughuit got so excited elbow wrestling, thumb pulling, and playing tug-of-war, they forgot their fears. For two days, MacMillan distracted them with contests and games. Peary sent two dissatisfied Inughuit back, but the rest stayed. Finally, the Big Lead iced over, and the men sledged on toward the pole.

Peary said, "MacMillan was invaluable to me during this period." MacMillan never returned to teaching. His explorations of the Arctic spanned more than 45 years — from 1908 to 1954 — and he made significant contributions to the region's science and cultural understanding.



After his first trip with Peary in 1908–1909, Donald MacMillan made more than 30 other trips to the Arctic.