

# Matthew Henson at the Top of the World

Biography by JIM HASKINS

## Connect to Your Life

What images come to mind when you think of the word *explorer*?

**Build Background** In 1908, Matthew Henson joined Commander Robert E. Peary's expedition. Their goal was to be the first people in history to reach the North Pole. In their search, they were assisted by Eskimos known as Inuit.

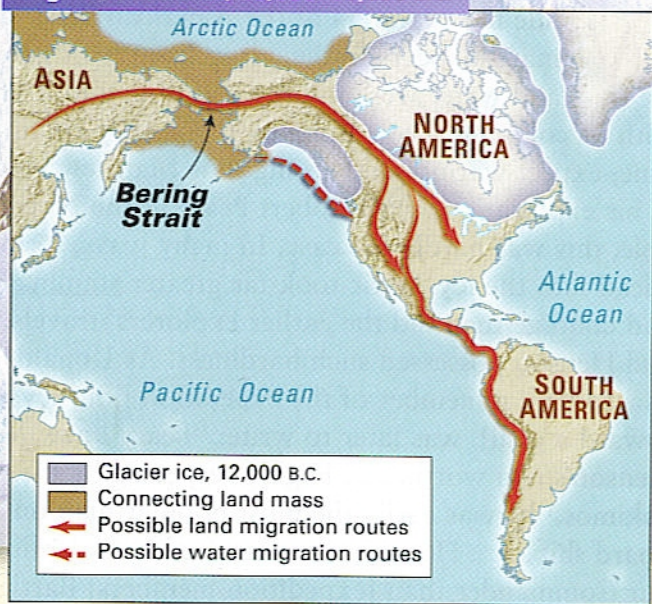


The Asian ancestors of the Inuit followed the mammals they hunted into new lands.



Inuit are descendants of people who migrated to the Americas between 20,000 and 40,000 years ago.

## Migration Routes, 40,000–10,000 B.C.



## Focus Your Reading

### LITERARY ANALYSIS BIOGRAPHY

A biography is the story of a person's life, written by another person. In creating a biography, a writer may use interviews, diaries, and letters. As you read, think about sources the author might have used.



**LaserLinks: Background for Reading**

Geographical Connection  
Historical Connection  
Visual Vocabulary

### WORDS TO KNOW Vocabulary Preview

apt	menial	stamina	tyranny
ardent	proposition	surveyor	validate
deprivation	resentful		

### ACTIVE READING IDENTIFYING MAIN IDEA AND DETAILS

In most writing, it is possible to figure out the writer's most important points by identifying the **main idea**, or topic, of each paragraph. The main idea may be stated at any point in the paragraph, or it may be suggested by **details**. As you read, choose a few important paragraphs. In your **READER'S NOTEBOOK** jot down the main ideas of each paragraph. Below each main idea, note supporting details—such as facts or examples.

# MATTHEW HENSON AT THE TOP OF THE WORLD

by Jim Haskins

While the explorers of the American West faced many dangers in their travels, at least game and water were usually plentiful; and if winter with its cold and snow overtook them, they could, in time, expect warmth and spring. For Matthew Henson, in his explorations with Robert Peary at the North Pole, this was hardly the case. In many ways, to forge ahead into the icy Arctic took far greater stamina and courage than did the earlier explorers' travels, and Henson possessed such hardiness. As Donald MacMillan, a member of the expedition [journey toward a goal], was later to write: "Peary knew Matt Henson's real worth. . . . Highly respected by the Eskimos,<sup>1</sup> he was easily the most popular man on board ship. . . . Henson . . . was of more real value to our Commander than [expedition members] Bartlett, Marvin, Borup, Goodsell and myself all put together. Matthew Henson went to the Pole with Peary because he was a better man than any one of us."

Matthew Henson was born on August 8, 1866, in Charles County, Maryland, some forty-four miles south of Washington, D.C. His parents were poor, free tenant

1. Eskimos: a term used throughout this account to refer to the native peoples of the Arctic; the Eskimos of Greenland, such as those who traveled on Peary's expeditions, call themselves Inuit, as do the Eskimos of Canada.

WORDS  
TO  
KNOW

**stamina** (stäm'ə-nə) *n.* the strength to withstand hardship

farmers<sup>2</sup> who barely eked a living from the sandy soil. The Civil War had ended the year before Matthew was born, bringing with it a great deal of bitterness on the part of former slave-owners. One manifestation of this hostility was the terrorist activity on the part of the Ku Klux Klan<sup>3</sup> in Maryland. Many free and newly freed blacks had suffered at the hands of this band of night riders.<sup>4</sup> Matthew's father, Lemuel Henson, felt it was only a matter of time before the Klan turned its vengeful eyes on his family. That, and the fact that by farming he was barely able to support them, caused him to decide to move north to Washington, D.C.

**A**t first things went well for the Henson family, but then Matthew's mother died and his father found himself unable to care for Matthew. The seven-year-old boy was sent to live with his uncle, a kindly man who welcomed him and enrolled him in the N Street School. Six years later, however, another blow fell; his uncle himself fell upon hard times and could no longer support Matthew. The boy couldn't return to his father, because Lemuel had recently died. Alone, homeless, and penniless, Matthew was forced to fend for himself.

Matthew Henson was a bright boy and a hard worker, although he had only a sixth-grade education. Calling upon his own resourcefulness, he found a job as a dishwasher in a small restaurant owned by a woman named Janey Moore. When Janey discovered that Matthew had no place to stay, she fixed a cot for him in the kitchen; Matthew had found a home again.

Matthew Henson didn't want to spend his life waiting on people and washing dishes, however, no matter how kind Janey was. He had seen enough of the world through his schoolbooks to want more, to want adventure. This desire was reinforced by the men who frequented the restaurant—sailors from many ports, who spun tales of life on the ocean and of strange and wonderful places. As Henson listened, wide-eyed, to their stories, he decided, as had so many boys before him, that the life of a sailor with its adventures and dangers was for him. Having made up his mind, the fourteen-year-old packed up what little he owned, bade good-bye to Janey, and was off to Baltimore to find a ship.

#### ACTIVE READING

**QUESTION** What is the main idea of the paragraph you have just read?

Although Matthew Henson's early life seems harsh, in many ways he was very lucky. When he arrived in Baltimore, he signed on as a cabin boy on the *Katie Hines*, the master of which was a Captain Childs. For many sailors at that time, life at sea was brutal and filled with hard work, deprivation, and a "taste of the cat": whipping. The captains of many vessels were petty despots, ruling with an iron hand and having little regard for a seaman's health or safety. Matthew was fortunate to find just the opposite in Childs.

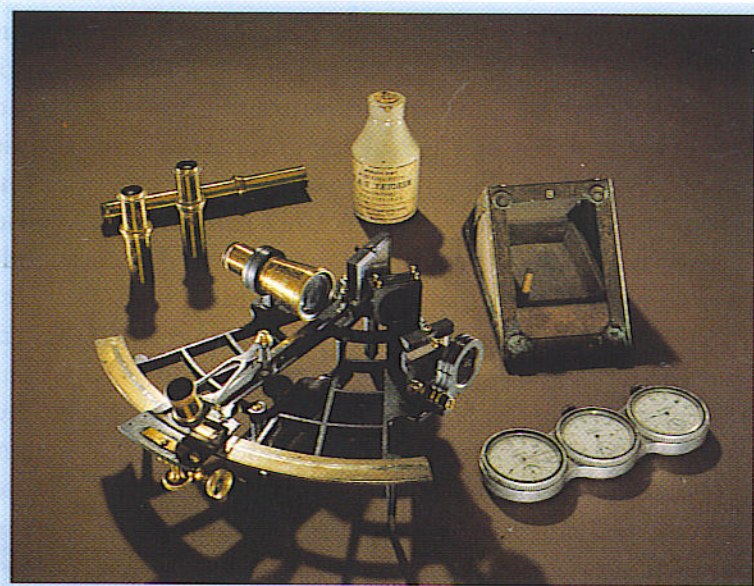
2. **tenant farmers:** people who farm land rented from others.
3. **Ku Klux Klan** (koo' kluks klän'): a secret society, organized in the South after the Civil War, that used terrorism to reassert the power of whites.
4. **night riders:** mounted and usually masked white men who committed acts of terror against African Americans during the period following the Civil War.

Captain Childs took the boy under his wing. Although Matthew of course had to do the work he was assigned, Captain Childs took a fatherly interest in him. Having an excellent private library on the ship, the captain saw to Matthew's education, insisting that he read widely in geography, history, mathematics, and literature while they were at sea.

The years on the *Katie Hines* were good ones for Matthew Henson. During that time he saw China, Japan, the Philippines, France, Africa, and southern Russia; he sailed through the Arctic to Murmansk. But in 1885 it all ended; Captain Childs fell ill and died at sea. Unable to face staying on the *Katie Hines* under a new skipper, Matthew left the ship at Baltimore and found a place on a fishing schooner bound for Newfoundland.

Now, for the first time, Henson encountered the kind of unthinking cruelty and tyranny so often found on ships at that time. The ship was filthy, the crew surly and resentful of their black shipmate, and the captain a dictator. As soon as he was able, Matthew left the ship in Canada and made his way back to the United States, finally arriving in Washington, D.C., only to find that things there had changed during the years he had been at sea.

Opportunities for blacks had been limited when Henson had left Washington in 1871, but by the time he returned they were almost nonexistent. Post-Civil War reconstruction had failed, bringing with its failure a great deal of bitter resentment toward blacks. Jobs were scarce, and the few available were menial ones. Matthew finally found a job as a stock clerk in



A sextant (center) and other navigational instruments of Robert Peary. Victor R. Boswell, Jr.

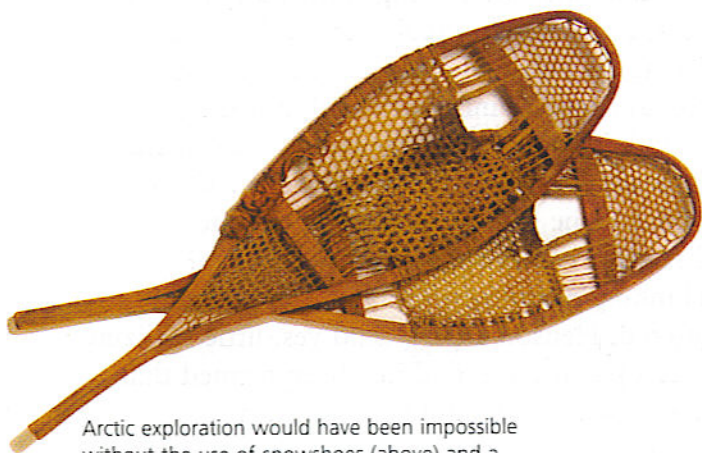
a clothing and hat store, B. H. Steinmetz and Sons, bitterly wondering if this was how he was to spend the rest of his life. But his luck was still holding.

Steinmetz recognized that Matthew Henson was bright and hard working. One day Lieutenant Robert E. Peary, a young navy officer, walked into the store, looking for tropical hats. After being shown a number of hats, Peary unexpectedly offered Henson a job as his personal servant. Steinmetz had recommended him, Peary said, but the job wouldn't be easy. He was bound for Nicaragua to head an engineering survey team. Would Matthew be willing to put up with the discomforts and hazards of such a trip? Thinking of the adventure and opportunities offered, Henson eagerly said yes, little realizing that a partnership had just been formed that would span years and be filled with exploration, danger, and fame.

WORDS **tyranny** (tĭr'ə-nē) *n.* an extremely harsh or unjust government or authority  
TO **resentful** (rĭ-zĕnt'fəl) *adj.* angry due to a feeling of being treated unfairly  
KNOW **menial** (mĕ'nē-əl) *adj.* fit for a servant

Robert E. Peary was born in Cresson, Pennsylvania, in 1856 but was raised in Maine, where his mother had returned after his father's death in 1859. After graduating from Bowdoin College, Peary worked as a surveyor for four years and in 1881 joined the navy's corps of civil engineers. One result of his travels for the navy and of his reading was an ardent desire for adventure. "I shall not be satisfied," Peary wrote to his mother, "until my name is known from one end of the earth to the other." This was a goal Matthew Henson could understand. As he later said, "I recognized in [Peary] the qualities that made me willing to engage myself in his service." In November 1887, Henson and Peary set sail for Nicaragua, along with forty-five other engineers and a hundred black Jamaicans.

Peary's job was to study the feasibility<sup>5</sup> of digging a canal across Nicaragua (that canal that would later be dug across the Isthmus of Panama).<sup>6</sup> The survey took until June of 1888, when the surveying party headed back to the United States. Henson knew he had done a good job for Peary, but even as they started north, Peary said nothing to him about



Arctic exploration would have been impossible without the use of snowshoes (above) and a compass (facing page).

continuing on as his servant. It was a great surprise, then, when one day Peary approached Henson with a proposition. He wanted to try to raise money for an expedition to the Arctic, and he wanted Henson to accompany him. Henson quickly accepted, saying he would go whether Peary could pay him or not.

"It was in June, 1891, that I started on my first trip to the Arctic regions, as a member of what was known as the 'North Greenland Expedition,'" Matthew Henson later wrote. So began the first of five expeditions on which Henson would accompany Peary.

#### ACTIVE READING

**CLARIFY** Does the main idea appear at the beginning, the middle, or the end of this paragraph?

During this first trip to Greenland, on a ship named *Kite*, Peary discovered how valuable Henson was to any expedition. He reported

that Henson was able to establish "a friendly relationship with the Eskimos, who believed him to be somehow related to them because of his brown skin. . . ." Peary's expedition was also greatly aided by Henson's expert handling of the Eskimos, dogs, and equipment. Henson also hunted with the Eskimos for meat for the expedition and cooked under the supervision of Josephine Peary, Robert's wife. On the expedition's return to New York, September 24, 1892, Peary wrote, "Henson, my faithful colored boy, a hard worker and apt at anything, . . . showed himself . . . the equal of others in the party."

This first expedition to the Arctic led to several others, but it was with the 1905

5. **feasibility** (fē'zə-bīl'ī-tē): possibility of being completed successfully.
6. **Isthmus** (is'məs) **of Panama**: a narrow strip of land connecting the North and South American continents.

WORDS  
TO  
KNOW

**surveyor** (ser-vā'er) *n.* a person who determines land boundaries by measuring angles and distances  
**ardent** (ār'dnt) *adj.* full of enthusiasm or devotion  
**proposition** (prōp'ə-zish'en) *n.* a plan offered for acceptance  
**apt** (äpt) *adj.* quick to learn or understand

expedition that Peary first tried to find that mystical point, the North Pole, the sole goal of the 1908 expedition.

On July 6, 1908, the *Roosevelt* sailed from New York City. Aboard it were the supplies and men for an expedition to reach the North Pole. Accompanying Peary were Captain Robert Bartlett and Ross Marvin, who had been with Peary on earlier expeditions; George Borup, a young graduate from Yale and the youngest member of the group; Donald MacMillan, a teacher; and a doctor, J. W. Goodsell. And, of course, Matthew Henson. In Greenland the group was joined by forty-one Eskimos and 246 dogs, plus the supplies. "The ship," Henson wrote, "is now in a most perfect state of dirtiness." On September 5, the *Roosevelt* arrived at Cape Sheridan, and the group began preparing for their journey, moving supplies north to Cape Columbia by dog sled to establish a base camp. Peary named the camp Crane City in honor of Zenas Crane, who had contributed \$10,000 to the expedition.

The plan was to have two men, Bartlett and Borup, go ahead of the rest of the group to cut a trail stretching from the base camp to the North Pole. On February 28, the two men set out, and on March 1, the remainder of the expedition started north, following the trail Bartlett and Borup had cut the day before. At first, trouble seemed to plague them. On the first day, three of the sledges<sup>7</sup> broke, Henson's among them. Fortunately, Henson was able to repair them, despite the fact that it was nearly 50 degrees below zero.

As the days passed, further trouble came the way of the expedition. Several times they encountered leads—open channels of water—and were forced to wait until the ice closed over before proceeding. On March 14, Peary decided to send Donald MacMillan and Dr. Goodsell back to the base camp.



"IT WAS IN JUNE,  
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MacMillan could hardly walk, because he had frozen a heel when his foot had slipped into one of the leads. Dr. Goodsell was exhausted. As the expedition went on, more men were sent back due to exhaustion and frostbite. George Borup was sent back on March 20, and, on the 26th, so was Ross Marvin.


Although the expedition had encountered problems with subzero temperatures, with open water, and in handling the dogs, they had had no real injuries. On Ross Marvin's return trip to the base camp, however, he met with tragedy. On his journey, Marvin was accompanied by two Eskimos. He told them that he would go ahead to scout the trail. About an hour later, the Eskimos came upon a hole in the ice; floating in it was Marvin's coat. Marvin had gone through thin ice and, unable to save himself, had drowned or frozen. The Peary expedition had suffered its first—and fortunately its last—fatality.

7. sledges: sleds pulled by dogs.

By April 1, Peary had sent back all of the original expedition except for four Eskimos and Matthew Henson. When Bartlett, the last man to be sent back, asked Peary why he didn't also send Henson, Peary replied, "I can't get along without him." The remnant of the original group pushed on.

*We had been travelling eighteen to twenty hours out of every twenty-four. Man, that was killing work! Forced marches all the time. From all our other expeditions we had found out that we couldn't carry food for more than fifty days, fifty-five at a pinch. . . .*

*We used to travel by night and sleep in the warmest part of the day. I was ahead most of the time with two of the Eskimos.*

 So Matthew Henson described the grueling journey. Finally, on the morning of April 6, Peary called a halt. Henson wrote: "I was driving ahead and was swinging around to the right. . . . The Commander, who was about 50 feet behind me, called to me and said we would go into camp. . . ." In fact, both Henson and Peary felt they might have reached the Pole already. That day, Peary took readings with a sextant<sup>8</sup> and determined that they were within three miles of the Pole. Later he sledged ten miles north and found he was traveling south; to return to camp, Peary would have to return north and then head south in another direction—something that could only happen at the North Pole. To be absolutely sure, the next day Peary again took readings from solar observations. It was the North Pole, he was sure.

On that day Robert Peary had Matthew Henson plant the American flag at the North Pole. Peary then cut a piece from the flag and placed it and two letters in a glass jar that he left at the Pole. The letters read:

90 N. Lat., North Pole  
April 6, 1909

*Arrived here today, 27 marches from C. Columbia.*

*I have with me 5 men, Matthew Henson, colored, Ootah, Egingwah, Seegloo, and Ooqueah, Eskimos; 5 sledges and 38 dogs. My ship, the S.S. Roosevelt, is in winter quarters at Cape Sheridan, 90 miles east of Columbia.*

*The expedition under my command which has succeeded in reaching the Pole is under the auspices of the Peary Arctic Club of New York City, and has been fitted out and sent north by members and friends of the Club for the purpose of securing this geographical prize, if possible, for the honor and prestige of the United States of America.*

*The officers of the Club are Thomas H. Hubbard of New York, President; Zenas Crane, of Mass., Vice-president; Herbert L. Bridgman, of New York, Secretary and Treasurer.*

*I start back for Cape Columbia tomorrow.*  
Robert E. Peary  
United States Navy

90 N. Lat., North Pole  
April 6, 1909

*I have today hoisted the national ensign of the United States of America at this place, which my observations indicate to be the North Polar axis of the earth, and have formally taken possession of the entire region, and adjacent, for and in the name of the President of the United States of America.*

8. sextant: an instrument used to measure the positions of heavenly bodies.



Robert Peary (second from right) and Henson (far right) on board ship with other members of an expedition, 1909.

*I leave this record and United States flag in possession.*

*Robert E. Peary  
United States Navy*

Having accomplished their goal, the small group set out on the return journey. It was, Matthew Henson wrote, “17 days of haste, toil, and misery. . . . We crossed lead after lead, sometimes like a bareback rider in the circus, balancing on cake after cake of ice.” Finally they reached the *Roosevelt*, where they could rest and eat well at last. The Pole had been conquered!

During the return trip to New York City, Henson became increasingly puzzled by Peary’s behavior. “Not once in [three weeks],” Henson wrote, “did he speak a word to me. Then he . . .

ordered me to get to work. Not a word about the North Pole or anything connected with it.” Even when the *Roosevelt* docked in New York in September of 1909, Peary remained withdrawn and silent, saying little to the press and quickly withdrawing to his home in Maine.

The ostensible<sup>9</sup> reason for his silence was that when the group returned to New York, they learned that Dr. Frederick A. Cook was claiming that *he* had gone to the North Pole—and done so before Peary reached it. Peary told his friends that he wished to wait for his own proofs to be validated by the scientific societies before he spoke. He felt sure that Cook would not be able to present the kinds of evidence that he could present, and so it proved.

9. ostensible (ŏ-stĕn’sə-bəl): claimed, but not necessarily true.



On December 15, Peary was declared the first to reach the North Pole; Cook could not present adequate evidence that he had made the discovery. Peary and Bartlett were awarded gold medals by the National Geographic Society; Henson was not. Because Henson was black, his contributions to the expedition were not recognized for many years.

After 1909, Henson worked in a variety of jobs. For a while, he was a parking-garage attendant in Brooklyn, and at the age of forty-six, he became a clerk in the U.S. customhouse in Lower Manhattan. In the meantime, friends tried again and again to have his contributions to the expedition recognized. At last, in 1937, nearly thirty years after the expedition, he was invited to join the Explorers Club in New York, and in 1944, Congress authorized a medal for all of the men on the expedition, including Matthew Henson.

After his death in New York City on March 9, 1955, another lasting tribute was made to Henson's endeavors. In 1961, his home state of Maryland placed a bronze tablet in memory of him in the state house. It reads, in part:

#### MATTHEW ALEXANDER HENSON

Co-discoverer of the North Pole  
with Admiral Robert Edwin Peary  
April 6, 1909

*Son of Maryland, exemplification of courage, fortitude, and patriotism, whose valiant deeds of noble devotion under the command of Admiral Robert Edwin Peary, in pioneer Arctic exploration and discovery, established everlasting prestige and glory for his state and country ❖*

#### LITERARY LINK

## Into Lucid Air

by Walt Whitman

I inhale great draughts of space,  
The east and the west are mine, and the north  
and the south are mine.

**lucid** (loo-sīd): clear and easy to see through.

**draughts** (drāfts): big gulps or breaths; also gusty air currents.