

Matthew Henson was born on August 8, 1866 in Charles County, Maryland.

Matt was orphaned as a child and ran away to the sea after his parents died. At the age of 12 he signed on as cabin boy aboard the Katie Hines. He served on board the Katie Hines for the next six years including trips to the Far East.

Matt was 18 years old and working in a Washington D.C. hat store when he met **Robert E. Peary**. Robert hired Matt as a valet for his upcoming expedition to Nicaragua in 1888. Robert was impressed with Matt's skills and resourcefulness and employed him on seven Arctic Expeditions including the famous 1909 polar expedition in which they became the **First to Reach the North Pole**. (*Note 1*)

Matt married Eva Flint in 1891, however his continuous trips with Peary led to the breakup of the marriage and their eventual divorce in 1897.

Matt and Robert left on their first expedition to Greenland in 1891. They covered an impressive 1300 miles on this trip. Matt and Robert's first serious attempt at reaching the pole came in 1898. They reached latitude 84°17' north by 1899 but were forced to retreat in 1902. In 1908 after several other unsuccessful attempts, Matt and Robert embarked on their last attempt to reach the pole. There were twenty-six men in the expedition along with numerous well trained and equipped Inuit hunters and trackers. They used nineteen sledges and one hundred thirty-three dogs. The expedition reached the 88 parallel in late March of 1909. On April 6, 1909 Matthew Henson and Robert Peary reached their ultimate goal. Matt, who usually broke trail ahead of the main body may have been the first to actually reach the North Pole. (*Note 3*)

Matt was a ***Jack-of-All-Trades***, he spoke fluent **Inuit** (*Note 2*) and he was well versed in carpentry and blacksmithing. Matt built the sledges which were used on the expedition and was also the principal driver.

Matt wrote an account of the expedition in 1912 called, **A Negro Explorer at the North Pole** and in 1913 **President William Howard Taft** secured an appointment for Matt as a clerk in the U.S. Customs House in New York City. Matt held that post until his retirement in 1936.

Matt received a ***Congressional Medal*** in 1944 for his part in the 1909 expedition and in 1937 he was made an honorary member of the **Explorers Club**.

Matthew Henson died in New York City on March 9, 1955. He was commemorated on the stamp depicted above in 1986 and in 1988 was reburied at Arlington National Cemetery with full honors.

Note 1. There is quite a bit of controversy over whether Matthew and Peary actually reached the geographical North Pole. Many scholars today believe that they were actually a couple of miles off. In any event, their feat was prodigious and deserving of acclaim whether they reached the actual pole or not.

Note 2. The Inuit are the indigenous native people living in the far north who provided assistance and support for the expedition. Both Matthew and Perry were involved in personal relationships with Inuit women and Matthew Henson has family living in Greenland to this day.

Note 3. *The United States Army - District of Washington* (an official government Website) states, "*On that historic day, it was Henson, an African-American, who first reached the Pole and planted the American flag.*"

Matthew Henson's book *A Negro Explorer at the North Pole* can be purchased online at Amazon.com

Sources:

Encyclopedia Africana

Encyclopedia Britannica