



The Clerk's Black History Series

Debra DeBerry Clerk of Superior Court DeKalb County Matthew Henson



(August 8, 1866 – March 9, 1955)

“First African–American Artic Explorer” “First African–American to Reach North Pole”

Matthew Henson was born August 8, 1866, in Nanjemoy, Maryland, to freeborn black sharecropper parents. In 1867, his parents and three sisters moved to Georgetown to escape racial violence where his mother died when Matthew was seven years old. When Matthew's father died, he went to live with his uncle in Washington, D.C. When Matthew was ten years old, he attended a ceremony honoring Abraham Lincoln where he heard social reformer and abolitionist, Frederick Douglas speak. Shortly thereafter, he left home, determined to find his own way. After working briefly in a restaurant, he walked all the way to Baltimore, Maryland. At the age of 12, Matthew went to sea as a cabin boy on the merchant ship *Katie Hines*, traveling to Asia, Africa and Europe under the watchful eye of the ship's skipper, Captain Childs. After Captain Childs died, Matthew moved back to Washington, D.C.



When Matthew was 21 years old, he met Commander Robert E. Peary, an explorer and officer in the U.S. Navy Corps of Civil Engineers. Impressed with Matthew's seafaring experience, Commander Peary recruited him for an upcoming voyage to Nicaragua. After returning from Nicaragua, Matthew found work in Philadelphia, and in April 1891 he met and married Eva Flint. But shortly thereafter, the two explorers were off again for an expedition to Greenland and the marriage to Eva ended. Matthew and the Commander would cover thousands of miles across the sea and the world, exploring and making multiple attempts to reach the North Pole. Some expeditions proved beneficial while others ended in tragedy. A 1902 attempt to reach the North Pole ended with six Eskimo team members perishing due to lack of food. An earlier journey also left the team on the brink of starvation when members of the expedition managed to survive by eating all but one of their sled dogs. During their extended expeditions to Greenland, Matthew and Commander Peary both fathered children with Inuit women. In 1906, Akatingwah, an Inuit woman, bore his only known child, a son named Anauakaq. But when he returned home the same year, he married Lucy Ross.



In the team's 8th and final attempt to reach the North Pole, a very large expedition boarded the ship and left Greenland on August 18, 1909. In February 1909, Matthew Henson and Commander Peary anchored their ship at Ellesmere Island's Cape Sheridan, and set out with Inuit men and 130 dogs laying a trail of supplies along the route to the Pole. Cape Sheridan is on the northeastern coast of Ellesmere Island, Canada situated on the Lincoln Sea in the Arctic Ocean. It is one of the closest points of land to the geographic North Pole.



Commander Peary, Matthew Henson along with three Inuit men set out on foot with sled dogs for the final, most difficult leg of the trip to the North Pole. When Commander Peary became ill and unable to continue by foot, Matthew Henson set out alone as a scout. He returned to the group and when Commander Peary regained his strength, Matthew lead the group back in the direction of his scouting trip. When the men reached the North Pole, they saw Matthew Henson's footprints from his previous scouting trip. Following this momentous expedition, the men returned to New York where Matthew was honored at many dinners within the black community, but his role was downplayed to Commander Peary's more public celebrations.



In 1912, Matthew published his memoirs titled "A Negro Explorer at the North Pole" and was admitted as a member of the prestigious "Explorers Club" in New York City in 1937. In 1947, Matthew collaborated with author Bradley Robinson on his biography, "Dark Companion." In 1948, he was promoted to Honorary Member of the exclusive "Explorers Club" when only 20 a year were named, and was honored by both President Truman and Eisenhower.

Matthew Henson died in New York City on March 9, 1955, and was buried in Woodlawn Cemetery. The body of his wife, Lucy, was buried beside him in 1968. In a move to honor Henson, in 1987, President Ronald Reagan approved the transportation of Henson and Lucy's remains for reinternment at Arlington National Cemetery, per the request of Dr. S. Allen Counter of Harvard University. The national cemetery is also the burial site of Commander Peary and his wife, Josephine.

