

# Matthew Henson

August 8, 1866 - March 9, 1955

## Perseverance



“The path is not easy, the climbing is rugged and hard, but the glory at the end is worthwhile.” Matthew Henson

**E**ach moment of Henson’s life was filled with delayed gratification, calling for perseverance at each turn. From his early years of great loss, multiple attempts to reach the North Pole, and recognition not received in his lifetime, **the soft skill of perseverance** became a theme in his life. He finally received the recognition he deserved for a tremendous achievement with fellow climber, Robert Edwin Peary.

Matthew Henson was born in 1866 in Maryland of two freeborn African-American sharecroppers. After the death of his mother, his father moved the family to Washington, D. C. His father later died, leaving him orphaned at the age of 11 during the yellow fever epidemic. Henson became a cabin boy on a sailing ship, *The Katie Hines*, where he traveled to Asia, North Africa and investigated the Black Sea. During that time, he received an education, gained technical skills and excelled in competency as a sailor. The man who hired him died and Henson later found work in Washington, D.C. as a clerk in a millinery (hat) shop. He met Robert Edwin Peary, an explorer and officer in the US Navy Corps of Civil Engineers. Henson impressed Peary with his sea experience, and Peary offered Henson a job as a valet for an upcoming expedition.

Becoming fast friends and trusted colleagues, they made several journeys together before trying to reach the North Pole. Their successful attempt included 24 men, 19 sledges, and 133 dogs. The journey took its toll on many in the party, who turned back. However, on April 6, 1909, Peary, Henson, along with four Eskimos and 40 dogs finally reached the North Pole. Unfortunately, the success was clouded in doubt for many years by the climbing establishment.

Henson spent the next 30 years as a clerk in the New York Federal Customs Office. He published his memoirs in 1912, accounting for the journey to the North Pole. In 1937, at the age of 70, he finally received acknowledgement in the Explorers Club of New York as an honorary member. In 1944, all members of the expedition, including Henson, were awarded a Congressional Medal. He worked with Bradley Robinson to write a biography of his journeys, *Dark Companion*, published when he was 80 years old.

In 1987, his remains along with his wife’s were moved to Arlington Cemetery in the same manner Peary and his wife were buried, giving him equal status.

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