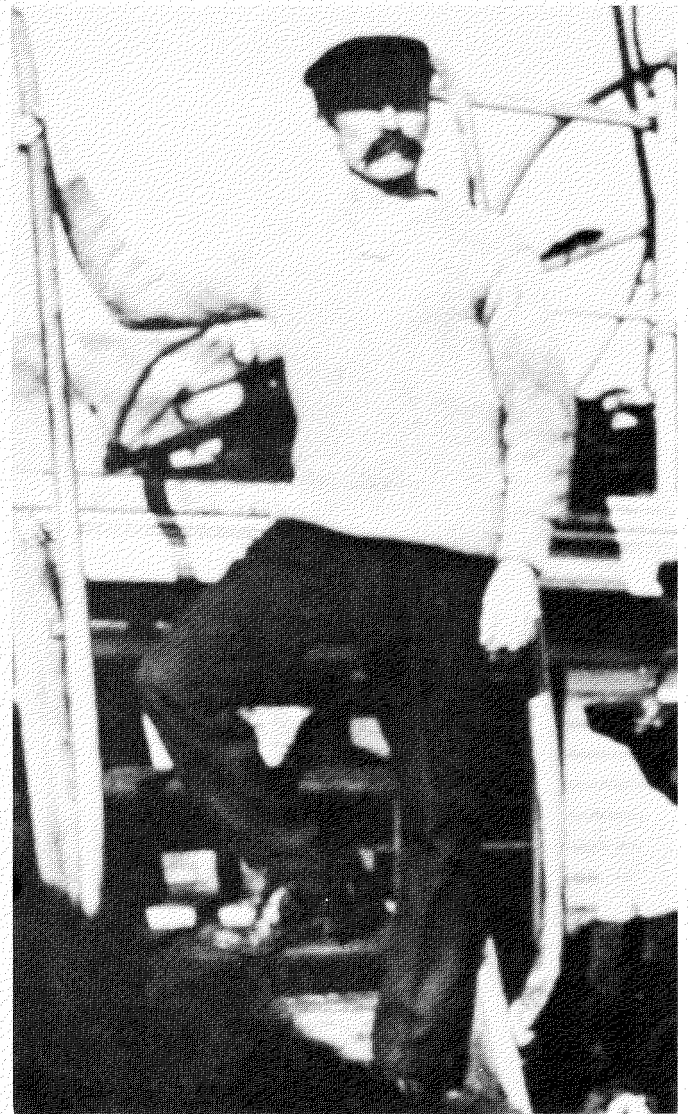


Robert Edwin Peary (1856-1920)

"I *must* have fame," young Robert Edwin Peary told his mother more than once. In the dwindling nineteenth century, large areas of the planet still had not been visited by man. After much deliberation, Peary made his choice: he would become an arctic explorer, would be the first man to reach the North Pole.

Peary could be called a self-made man in the truest sense. Within three years of his birth on 6 May 1856, at Cresson, Pennsylvania, his father died. His mother packed family possessions and took her "Bertie" and Charles Peary's body back to her native Maine. There she buried her husband, established residence, and devoted herself to bringing up "Bertie" — almost as a girl. Mary Wiley Peary taught him the handiwork practiced by genteel young ladies of that period and sent him out to play wearing a bonnet to protect his fair skin. Nearly as dismaying to this sensitive boy was the fact that he and his mother (who never remarried) were considered poor relations by the family. All this propelled him at an early age to prove himself. Significantly, his youthful companions soon used "Bert" as his nickname.



Peary graduated from Portland High School, earned a degree from Bowdoin College, then took a naval commission in the Civil Engineer Corps with the thought that work on a proposed Nicaraguan canal might win him fame such as had come to the Frenchman De Lesseps for the Suez Canal. Nicaraguan plans collapsed, but Peary stayed in the Navy.

About 1885 Peary's interest in the North was rekindled. He began poring over voluminous reports of arctic explorers during his free hours. On 13 October of that year, he wrote himself a memorandum (which I found in 1962 in his own voluminous papers) that the time had come "for an entire change in the expeditionary organization of Arctic research." Instead of utilizing large parties and several ships, he wrote, he would have a small group relying on Eskimo assistance. He had not been to the Arctic then, but the method he outlined would eventually bring him success.

From 1886 to 1909 Peary devoted himself to planning and leading eight arctic expeditions — one of them of four years' duration. With increasing difficulty, he obtained leaves of absence from the Navy, raised his own money, recruited his own men, made his own rules — and expected strict compliance.

During one expedition he froze his feet and lost most of his toes to amputation, then suffered hellish agony when frequent bumps against jagged ice left the stumps bloody and aching. Nevertheless, arctic exploration continued to come before all else: health, the Navy, finances, family (he married Josephine Diebitsch in 1888; they had two children).

The early desire for fame became an obsession to reach a goal. During years of exploration Peary mapped unknown lands and showed Greenland to be an island, but he did not get to the North Pole. To him this meant failure.

Finally, he succeeded, at the age of 52 — a wiry, auburn-haired, mustached man who could still hold his six-foot frame erect, but whose drawn, ruddy face and squinting eyes indicated hard experience. On 1 April 1909, he said good-bye to the last of four compact supporting parties that had accompanied him across the treacherous, ever-shifting ice of the Arctic Ocean. Then, with a black assistant, Matthew Henson, four Eskimos, five sledges, and 40 dogs, he struggled across more floating ice and reached the Pole five days later, according to his navigation, only to return to civilization and learn that Dr. Frederick A. Cook, a former Peary expedition member, was claiming to have arrived first. Virtually all scientific and geographical organizations eventually credited Peary with the achievement and discredited Cook, but controversy still flares occasionally.

After 1911 Peary retired as a rear admiral, voted the "Thanks of Congress". For nearly a decade he and his family enjoyed normal life, although the Cook dispute cast a pall. On 20 February 1920, Peary died from pernicious anemia.

Letters of condolence and tribute came from presidents, kings, geographers, and explorers. It was Peary himself, however, who had expressed the most appropriate tribute — years earlier. After the polar attainment a college classmate recalled that Peary had an affinity for quoting some poignant lines written by another Bowdoin man, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow:

"A boy's will is the wind's will,
"And the thoughts of youth are long, long thoughts."



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