



## AMERICAN COMMEMORATIVES

# Polar Explorers

The stark, frozen wilderness of the north polar regions has always fascinated scientists and explorers. For centuries, adventurers have journeyed to these icy lands and seas, drawn by scientific interest and the thrill of new discoveries.

The first great American polar expedition was led by Elisha Kent Kane, who sailed the waters off Greenland in 1850 and 1853, searching for an earlier British expedition that had disappeared in 1845. Though no trace of their predecessors was ever found, Kane and his crew gathered a wealth of geological and geographical data. Eventually forced to abandon their icebound ship, Kane's party trekked overland to Greenland, finally returning to New York over two years after they had first set sail.

The coast of Greenland and the cold interior of Ellesmere Island, Canada, were later charted by Adolphus Greely and his expedition of 1881. Greely carefully observed the weather and tide, and collected samples of arctic flora and fauna. Tragedy struck the explorers when a relief ship failed to arrive in the fall of 1883. They journeyed south and wintered on Pym Island, Canada, but chilling temperatures and hunger took the lives of all but Greely and six of his men.

Methods of survival in the cold environment were studied by Vilhjalmur Stefansson, who learned from the people who made the Arctic their home. In 1906-1907, Stefansson lived with the Eskimos of Alaska and northern Canada, and later led expeditions through the Northwest Territories.

The skills of the Eskimos were also noted by the man who was first to reach the north pole. Robert E. Peary had been fascinated with Kane's polar expedition since he was a boy, and was determined to find fame for himself in the frozen polar regions. He led several expeditions to northern Greenland in the late 1800s, and learned to travel as the Eskimos did, with sleds pulled by strong dogs.

In 1909, after two unsuccessful attempts, Peary set off across the ice toward the pole. With his trusted companion, Matthew Henson, himself an expert at arctic survival, and four Eskimos, Peary reached the pole on April 6, 1909.

The stamp commemorating these explorers was designed by Dennis Lyall of Norwalk, Connecticut. It was issued on May 28, 1986, at North Pole, Alaska.





*Polar Explorers  
Robert E. Peary / Matthew Henson*



FIRST DAY OF ISSUE

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# Polar Explorers

## Robert E. Peary/Matthew Henson

**First Day of Issue:** *May 28, 1986*

**First Day City:** *North Pole, Alaska,*

*named for the goal of many expeditions*

**Stamp Designer:** *Dennis Lyall*

*Norwalk, Connecticut*

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The team of Robert Edwin Peary and Matthew Alexander Henson, shown on this U.S. stamp, were a resourceful and complementary team that made numerous Arctic voyages together. Their efforts were finally rewarded in 1909, when they became the first men in history to reach the North Pole.

A professional engineer in the U.S. Navy, Peary (1856-1920) became intrigued by Arctic exploration in 1885, after reading an article describing Greenland's inland ice. The following year, he made his first trip to the island, "to gain a practical knowledge of the ice conditions of the interior; to put to the test of actual use certain methods and details of equipment; to make such scientific observations as might be

practicable." After several additional explorations, he set his sights beyond Greenland, to reaching the North Pole.

Peary's path had crossed with Matthew Henson (1866-1955) in 1887, during a surveying expedition in Nicaragua. Thereafter, Henson, the son of a black tenant farmer, accompanied Peary on all his Arctic expeditions. His ability to fraternize with the Eskimos and interpret their language was invaluable to the success of these missions. He also showed great skill in building boats and repairing sledges.

The expedition of 1908-09 marked Peary and Henson's third attempt to reach the North Pole. Setting out from Ellesmere Island with a party of four Eskimos, the two men journeyed via the Kennedy Channel and Cape Columbia. On April 6, 1909, they reached latitude 89° 57', within sight of the Pole. Exhausted, they stopped for a few hours of rest, but then pushed on to reach their goal the same day.