Frozen Dreams
Matthew Henson helped discover the North Pole. It would take decades for the world to discover him.

It was April 3, 1909, and an American explorer named Matthew Henson was trudging across the ice-covered Arctic Ocean. All around him stretched the frozen wilderness of the Arctic, a forbidding region of brutal cold and blinding blizzards. Enormous slabs of sea ice floated on the deathly cold ocean water. No human being could survive here for long. Even polar bears stayed away.

But as Henson made his way across the ice, fiery excitement warmed his heart. He felt sure that he was just days away from achieving his dream of being one of the first humans to set foot on the North Pole. Henson put his head down and pushed against the fierce wind.

Suddenly, he lost his balance. The ice beneath his feet wobbled. And before Henson knew what was happening, he had slipped off the ice and tumbled into the ocean. The frigid water hit his skin like millions of piercing needles.

Gasping for breath, he clawed at the jagged edges of the ice, trying to pull himself up. But it was no use. The water seemed to drag him down.

Henson had dedicated nearly 20 years of his life trying to get to the North Pole. Now it seemed it would all end here, in the icy depths of the Arctic Ocean.

Kingdom of Ice – Heading 1

Matthew Henson was born in 1866, a time when few people traveled more than a few miles from where they were born. There were no cars zipping down highways, no airplanes zooming over continents and oceans. There was no GPS or Google maps. Parts of the world were still mostly unknown.

One place in particular remained unreachable: the North Pole, the very top of the world. The North Pole is the northernmost point on Earth. It sits in the middle of the Arctic Ocean, which is covered in ice that is constantly moving and shifting.

The closest land is Greenland, an island more than 500 miles away. The indigenous people of Greenland, called the Inuit, did not venture near the North Pole. The Inuit believed the area was cursed by a demon called Kokoyah, a knife-toothed beast that lurked under the ice. And the Arctic does seem cursed—by weather that is colder and stormier than nearly anywhere else on the planet.

Beginning in the 1500s, European explorers began sailing into the Arctic—the “kingdom of ice,” as they called it. They were seeking ocean routes from Europe to Asia. These routes were never found, though more than 100 men died trying. Ships were crushed by the 10-foot-thick slabs of ice that drift across the Arctic. Sailors who managed to escape their broken ships quickly perished in temperatures that plunged to 60 degrees below zero. But despite many shipwrecks and grisly deaths, the mystery of the Arctic continued to lure explorers and adventurers.

Growing Dreams – Heading 2
It’s doubtful Henson heard much about the Arctic when he was growing up, in southern Maryland. His parents were poor farmers, and Henson didn’t have much education.

Around age 11, Henson became an orphan. He went to live with his uncle in Washington, D.C. It was during this time that Henson heard Frederick Douglass give a speech. Douglass was a respected leader and writer who had escaped enslavement before the Civil War and had become a powerful voice against slavery. In his speech, Douglass urged black Americans to pursue education and to fight racism and discrimination.

Douglass’s words resonated deeply with young Henson, who harbored growing dreams of seeing the world.

When he was 13, Henson walked 40 miles to Baltimore and persuaded a ship captain to hire him as a cabin boy—the lowest job on a ship. For the next few years, he sailed around the world. He learned to read and became a skilled sailor and carpenter.

At age 19, Henson left his life on the sea and moved back to Washington, D.C., hoping his experiences would help him land a good job. But most white business owners refused to hire African Americans. In fact, most of the southern United States had so-called “Jim Crow” laws. These laws mandated racial segregation, keeping African Americans separate from white people in schools, in restaurants, on trains, and many other places. The laws were designed to make it difficult for African Americans to participate in society—to own property, make money, vote, get a good education—to exercise the rights that were supposed to be everyone’s under the Constitution.

And so Henson could not get the kind of highly skilled work he was qualified for. Eventually, he took a job stocking shelves in a hat store.

One day, a tall, mustached man came into the hat store. His name was Robert Peary, and he was an engineer in the U.S. Navy. Peary was preparing for a Navy expedition to map a jungle in Central America. Impressed by Henson’s experience at sea, Peary offered the young man the job of cabin boy. The position was far beneath Henson’s qualifications. But, eager to escape the hat shop, Henson accepted Peary’s offer. Little did Henson know how this decision would change his life—and history.

As Henson would discover, Peary was a man of fierce ambitions. As a white man, Peary, unlike Henson, had many opportunities to make his dreams come true. And Peary’s dreams were big. More and more explorers were venturing into the Arctic, racing to be the first to reach the North Pole. Whoever won this race would become famous. Peary decided that man should be him.

So when he and Henson returned from Central America, Peary began planning for a yearlong trip to northern Greenland. He wanted Henson to come along, as his “manservant.” It was clear to Peary that Henson was capable of far more; on the Central American trip, Henson had taken on complex jobs, working alongside Navy engineers. But Peary would never treat Henson as an equal.

**Blubber and Blood – Heading 3**

In June 1891, Henson and Peary set sail for Greenland with four other men and Peary’s wife, Josephine. One month later, the group came ashore and set up a camp. As planned, the ship headed back to New York. It would return to pick them up in one year.

Henson and Peary had made it to the “kingdom of ice.” But they were still some 700 miles from the North Pole. Getting there meant traveling on foot and by dogsled for weeks through punishing cold and ferocious blizzards.

To succeed, they would need help from experts in Arctic survival: the local Inuit people. The Inuit were skilled ice fishermen and hunters of arctic animals like seals, walruses, and polar bears. They ate the meat and blubber of the animals they caught, and often drank the blood. They made clothes from the skins and furs, and tools from the bones.

Peary hired Inuit women who lived near the camp to sew fur clothing and sealskin moccasins, which didn’t freeze and split open in the cold as leather boots did. With the help of the Inuit, Peary’s expedition spent their first months in Greenland building sleds and preparing food and other supplies they’d need to explore Greenland and find the best route to the North Pole.
During this time, Henson forged close friendships with the Inuit people he met.

Unlike Peary, Henson learned the language of the Inuit and joined their celebrations. His new friends taught him to hunt and icefish. The Inuit also taught Henson to drive a dogsled pulled by a team of eight arctic dogs. No other American or European Arctic explorer had these kinds of skills.

Frozen Toes – Heading 4

By the end of the expedition, Henson and Peary had explored much of Greenland, searching for a route to the North Pole. In the coming years, they made five more trips, each one bringing them closer to finding a way through the floating ice. They faced many near-disasters. They got lost in blizzards and at times nearly starved. On one trip, Peary’s feet became so frostbitten that eight toes snapped off. Peary would have lost his feet completely had Henson not pushed him back to camp on a sled, an arduous 11-day journey.

Despite these setbacks, Peary became famous. Back in America between trips, Peary was surrounded by admirers. He dined with President Theodore Roosevelt. Newspapers ran glowing stories about his daring adventures.

Henson was rarely mentioned, except as Peary’s “manservant.” And yet Henson had become as determined as Peary to reach the North Pole.

Finally, in 1909, it seemed their dream would come true. On April 3, they were pushing their way across the ice. Henson was leading the way with four Inuit men: Seegloo, Egingwah, Ooqueah, and Ootah. Peary believed they were about 150 miles from the North Pole.

But then came the moment when Henson slipped and tumbled into the ocean. In water that cold, death comes in minutes. Muscles knot. Blood flow slows. Vision blurs as the brain powers down.

Henson had spent nearly two decades trying to get to the North Pole. Now, just miles from achieving his dream, he was sure he was about to die.

Then with a sudden whoosh! he seemed to fly up out of the water. Ootah had grabbed Henson and hauled him up, saving his life. Three days later, Henson, Peary, and the other men reached the North Pole.

It was Henson who planted the American flag in the snow.

Out of the Shadows – Heading 5

Only Peary got credit for “discovering” the North Pole. He took his glorious place alongside Ferdinand Magellan and Marco Polo as one of history’s most illustrious explorers.

In the coming decades, Henson would win some minor awards, and within African American communities, he was deeply admired. But history books mostly ignored his achievements—along with the achievements of most African Americans and indigenous people.

After his triumph in the Arctic, Henson lived a quiet life in New York City with his wife, Lucy, working as a messenger. His niece, Olive Henson Fulton, once proudly told classmates that her uncle Matthew was a famous explorer. Her teacher punished her for lying.

But by the time Henson died, in 1955, America was changing. African Americans were fighting for equal rights. In the 1960s, new laws outlawed discrimination based on race and ethnicity. The accomplishments of African Americans began to rise up and out of history’s shadows.

In 1988, Henson’s body was moved to Arlington National Cemetery, the burial ground of many of America’s most admired heroes. The granite headstone that marks his grave features a picture of his face, Arctic scenes, and these words:

Matthew Alexander Henson Co-Discoverer of the North Pole.
After Reading “Frozen Dreams”

Answer the following Close-Reading Questions – on your own paper!

1. In the first section, what details about the Arctic does author Lauren Tarshis include? Why is this information important to the story? (author’s craft)

2. Reread the section “Fierce Ambitions.” In what ways were Henson and Peary different and similar? (compare and contrast)

3. How did Henson’s friendships with the Inuit help him and Peary in their Arctic expeditions? (key ideas)

4. On page 9, Tarshis writes that in the 1960s, “the accomplishments of African Americans began to rise up and out of history’s shadows.” What does she mean by “history’s shadows”? (figurative language)

Complete the 5 sections to show central idea/most important ideas from each section. From BEFORE reading section above.

Step 1: Before you can create the brochure, you need to have a clear idea of what the exhibit will include. Here are some ideas for the types of objects that might be part of the exhibit:

- photos
- historical artifacts (objects from the time of Peary and Henson’s expedition)
- documents (letters, newspaper articles, records, other papers)
- models
- maps
- sound recordings
- video

Use the boxes below to brainstorm objects that could be in the exhibit. In the last box, list any ideas you have that don’t fit into any of the categories we gave you.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>the history of Arctic exploration</th>
<th>Henson’s early life</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Henson and Peary’s expedition(s)</td>
<td>Henson’s legacy</td>
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Step 2: Now it’s time to plan the introduction for your brochure, which should explain who Henson was. Start by brainstorming a list of questions that you think the introduction should answer. List the questions here:

Step 3: Think about how the exhibit will be set up. First, go back to the objects you brainstormed in Step 1. Do you want to use all of them in your display? If not, circle the ones you want to include. Then in the space below, make notes and sketches about how the objects should be displayed.

Step 4: Imagine that a museum exhibit has been created to honor Matthew Henson. Create a brochure for the exhibit. It should include an introduction explaining who Henson was and a guide to the exhibit.