

Robert Peary



The famous American explorer Robert Peary was the first to claim to have reached the geographic North Pole. An only child, he was born in 1856 in Pennsylvania, where his parents had moved from Maine. When his father died when he was three, Peary and his mother moved back to Maine. There, he went to public schools, and graduated from Bowdoin College in 1877 with a degree in civil engineering.

From a young age, Peary knew he wanted to leave his mark on the world. He first worked as a surveyor, but there was little work in that field, so he practiced taxidermy to earn extra money. In 1879, he became a cartographic draftsman with the U.S. Coast and Geodetic Survey in Washington, DC. It was not a job where he felt he could earn much distinction, however, and in 1881 he applied and was selected to be one of six new civil engineers by the Navy.

It was during this time that he first heard of Greenland, and his three-week long exploration of it ignited a passion for exploration that would drive the rest of his life.

In all, Peary made eight attempts to reach the North Pole. On his first, he lost some toes to the cold. On his seventh try he had to turn back only 175 miles from his goal. His eighth try, aided by his support party, fellow explorer Matthew Henson, and four Eskimos, he succeeded in reaching the North Pole on April 6, 1909.

When he returned with his claim, however, he learned that another explorer, Frederick A. Cook, who had once been part of Peary's expedition, said he had reached the North Pole in 1908. Peary successfully challenged Cook's claim and for most of the twentieth century, Peary was credited with being the first explorer to reach the North Pole. In 2005, the explorer Tom Avery recreated Peary's expedition, making the trip in five fewer hours less than Peary did, proving Peary's claim.

1. What did Peary always know he wanted to do?
2. What is Peary credited with being the first person to do?

