

# TEACHING GUIDE

## *Matthew Alexander Henson (1866 – 1955)* *Trailblazer*

By: Sterling T. Ashby  
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Suggested for grades 2 - 7  
Ages 7 - 12

### SUMMARY

Risking his life in the coldest part of the world, Matthew Henson was the first American to discover the North Pole, as part of Robert Peary's expedition. He spent his life as a young boy traveling the world on the high seas and craved the life of an explorer. Henson's survival skills in the Arctic were the difference between death and the greatest discovery of this life. For 18 years, he searched for what was his to discover.

### BIOGRAPHY

<http://www.hiatoys.com/henson.html>

### THEMES

- Believe in and follow your dreams, no matter how long it takes to achieve.
- Do not be afraid to be the first to accomplish a goal.
- Life holds infinite possibilities for those willing to imagine and pursue them.
- Ordinary people can live super ordinary lives if they challenge themselves and strive to achieve their goals.
- Overcoming adversity, in particular, poverty, racism and discrimination, can be done.

### KEY DATES

It is appropriate to teach students about Matthew Henson year round. However, a few key times to highlight his life and achievements may include:

- Black History Month: February (USA, Canada); October (UK)
- Diversity Awareness Month: October (USA)
- Matthew Henson's birthday: August 8, 1866
- Day Matthew Henson reached the North Pole: April 9, 1909

## PREPARING TO INTRODUCE THE TOY

The following may help place Matthew Henson's story in the context of a student's life today:

- What career would you like to pursue when you are older? Why do you want to pursue this career? How long would you work to achieve a career goal? How would you feel if no one recognized you for achieving your goals?
- Locate Maryland, Nicaragua, China, Japan, Greenland, the North Pole and the Black Sea on the world map.
- Find a picture of a merchant ship.
- Have you every traveled on a ship? A merchant ship? What do you have to learn in order to sail a merchant ship?
- What obstacles make traveling to the North Pole challenging? What would you need to bring with you to reach the North Pole? How long would it take to get there?
- Find a picture of a sextant. How is it used?
- What do you think life would be like in the late 1800s and early 1900s for people generally? For Children? For African-American men?
- Name three ways your life is different from Matthew Henson's life in the late 1800s and early 1900's. How is it different due to changes in the law? How is it different due to changes in technology?
- Name three challenges that you must overcome in order to accomplish your career goals.

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

The following questions can be explored while learning about Matthew Henson:

- How would you describe Matthew Henson's life as a child?
- How old was Matthew Henson when he first went to sea? What type of work did he do?
- What types of jobs did other African-American boys in the early 1900s have?
- What types of jobs did other boys in the early 1900s have?
- How was Matthew Henson educated? By whom? What did he learn?
- Why was Matthew Henson selected to be Robert Peary's assistant?
- What type of work would Matthew Henson have done on his trip to Nicaragua? Why was this trip significant?
- What skills did Matthew Henson have to learn to survive in the Arctic? What challenges did he face? What would his life have been like?
- How do you think Matthew Henson felt when he reached the North Pole?
- How do you think Matthew Henson felt when he returned from the North Pole? What did he do?
- Why do you think it took so long for Matthew Henson's accomplishments to be recognized?
- Describe Matthew Henson's personality.
- Why would Matthew Henson be described as "America's Resourceful Explorer?"

## **FOLLOW-UP QUESTIONS & ACTIVITIES**

- Discuss examples of other well-known African-Americans who were the first to accomplish a noteworthy goal. What are common challenges they faced? What are common themes their lives highlight?
- Create a "week in the life of Matthew Henson" journal.
- Discuss examples of other explorers who have done extraordinary things. What were some of their challenges?
- The Matthew Henson action figure comes with snow shoes, grappling hook, ice pick and sexton. What is missing? What else might Matthew Henson need to have a successful trip?
- Create a passport and travel to Nicaragua and Greenland. Plan your trip. What might you see when you arrive? What might you learn? How would your experience be different if you were Matthew Henson?
- Learn about the Inuit people in Greenland. What was unique about their culture?
- Create an art project highlighting ships sailed in the late 1800s and early 1900s.
- Learn more about the lives of African-Americans in the late 1800s and early 1900s in America.
- Learn to use a sextant.
- Debate the resolution: Matthew Henson's path to get to the North Pole required more courage than Yuri Gagarin's path to orbit the earth once on his historic flight into space.
- Write a 5 page story describing a fictional dinner party you host for Matthew Henson, Richard Byrd, Yuri Gagarin and Christopher Columbus.

## **LEARN MORE ABOUT MATTHEW HENSON**

- African-American North Pole Explorer Matthew Henson in National Geographic:  
[http://news.nationalgeographic.com/news/2003/01/0110\\_030113\\_henson.html](http://news.nationalgeographic.com/news/2003/01/0110_030113_henson.html)
- Arlington Cemetery biography:  
[http://www.arlingtoncemetery.org/historical\\_information/matthew\\_hensen.html](http://www.arlingtoncemetery.org/historical_information/matthew_hensen.html)[ML1]

## **LEARN MORE ABOUT FIRST AFRICAN-AMERICANS**

- William Henry Hastie, the first African-American federal judge:  
<http://www.tnstate.edu/library/digital/hastie.htm>
- Colin Powell, the first African-American Secretary of State:  
<http://www.achievement.org/autodoc/page/pow0bio-1>
- Hiram Revels, the first African-American to serve in the US Senate:  
<http://bioguide.congress.gov/scripts/biodisplay.pl?index=R000166>
- Jackie Robinson, the first African-American to play major league baseball:  
<http://www.time.com/time/time100/heroes/profile/robinson01.html>
- Phillis Wheatley, the first African-American to publish a book:  
<http://www.lkwdpl.org/wihohio/whea-phi.htm>
- Carter G. Woodson, African-American historian to organize first Black History Month:  
<http://www.chipublib.org/002branches/woodson/woodsonbib.html>

## **LEARN MORE ABOUT AFRICAN-AMERICAN EXPLORERS**

- James P. Beckwourth: <http://www.beckwourth.org/Biography/index.html>
- Guion Bluford: <http://www.jsc.nasa.gov/Bios/htmlbios/bluford-gs.html>
- Jean Baptiste Pointe DuSable<sup>[ML2]</sup>: <http://www.toptags.com/aama/bio/men/dusable.htm>
- Esteban:  
[http://epcc.edu/ftp/Homes/monicaw/borderlands/17\\_esteban\\_furthered\\_legend.htm](http://epcc.edu/ftp/Homes/monicaw/borderlands/17_esteban_furthered_legend.htm)
- Mae Jemison:  
<http://www.cnn.com/SPECIALS/2002/black.history/stories/01.jemison/index.html>

## **ABOUT THE TOY MAKER**

Starting at age seven, the Founder of History In Action Toys was an avid collector of comic books. In fact, he loved collecting comic books so much, he braved a 20 minute bus ride with his five year old sister in tow to downtown Philadelphia just to get the latest issue in his favorite series. His fondness for collecting and a Christmas shopping experience inspired him to create his own collectible. In 2003, the Founder was shopping for a Christmas present for a friend's son and wanted to buy an unusual toy. He finally purchased a doll of a famous scientist and was struck by the toy's educational quality.

When the child opened the toy, he looked at his father, asking him who this person was. His father explained that he was a famous scientist and the boy stared at the doll in amazement. Later, he put the toy in a special place in his room. Seeing the excitement and wonder on the boy's face gave the Founder an idea. Using real heroes from history, he created a series of action figures that were fun, positive role models, whose real-life stories would awaken both a child's imagination and appeal to the kid within us all. History in Action Toys was born!

## **ORDER THE TOY**

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