Henson, Matthew Alexander

(b. Aug. 8, 1866, Charles county, Md., U.S.-d. March 9, 1955, New York, N.Y.), American black explorer who accompanied Robert E. Peary on most of his expeditions, including that to the North Pole in 1909.

Orphaned as a youth, Henson went to sea at the age of 12 as a cabin boy on the sailing ship Katie Hines. Later, while working in a store in Washington, D.C., he met Peary, who hired him as a valet for his next expedition to Nicaragua (1888). Peary, impressed with Henson’s ability and resourcefulness, employed him as an attendant on his seven subsequent expeditions to the Arctic (1891-92; 1893-95; 1896; 1897; 1898-1902; 1905-06; 1908-09). In 1909 Peary and Henson, accompanied by four Eskimos, became the first men to reach the North Pole, the rest of the crew having turned back earlier. Henson’s account of the journey, A Negro Explorer at the North Pole, appeared in 1912. The following year, by order of President William Howard Taft, Henson was appointed a clerk in the U.S. Customs House in New York City, a post he held until his retirement in 1936. Henson received the Congressional medal awarded all members of the Peary expedition (1944).