Today in History - May 6

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Today's Stories: **Northward Over the Great Ice** | **General James Longstreet**

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Northward Over the Great Ice

On **May 6**, 1856, Robert E. Peary, who claimed discovery of the North Pole, was born in Cresson, Pennsylvania.

During the early years of the twentieth century, the conquest of the North and South poles became the object of fervent international competition. Teams from Russia, Norway, Italy, and the United States vied to be the first to fly their nation's flag at the summit of the world. Many expeditions, such as the failed Ziegler Expedition pictured below, sought to explore the Arctic from the northernmost points of Russia, Franz Joseph Land. Robert Peary set his sights on Greenland as the launching ground of a northward dash to the pole.

Ad. N. Lar... Photographed off the coast of Franz Joseph Land, Arctic Ocean, during failed Ziegler expedition to the North Pole, Anthony Fiala, photographer. March 1905. Panoramic Photographs. Prints & Photographs Division

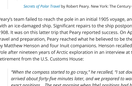
Peary received his degree in civil engineering from Bowdoin College in 1877 and went to work for the U.S. Coast and Geodetic Survey before obtaining a commission in the U.S. Navy Civil Engineers Corps. His first assignments took him to tropical, rather than arctic climates. In 1884 and again in 1887, Peary was responsible for surveying a route for a proposed ship canal across the Isthmus of Nicaragua. On his second trip to Nicaragua, Peary was accompanied by his assistant, Matthew Henson, who also was his trusted companion throughout his Arctic explorations.

In 1886, Peary obtained leave from the Corps and set out to explore the Greenland ice cap. This was the first of a series of trips to Greenland during 1886-97 in which Peary mapped Greenland's northern coastline and gathered data regarding meteorological and tidal patterns of the Arctic Ocean. Perhaps most important, Peary encountered the Inuit people of northern Greenland. He learned their language and customs as well as techniques of survival in the Arctic—igloo and sled-building, hunting, and the use of sled dogs and fur suits.

Peary adopted a number of other practices that facilitated his exploration of the region, including the establishment of support bases and shelters, a backup supply line using relay teams, and the construction of a ship, the *Roosevelt*, built to withstand the Arctic ice.

Departure of Peary (and the) "Roosevelt" from New York

Departure of Peary (and) Roosevelt From New York / Departure of Peary for the North Pole



Departure of Peary and the Roosevelt from New York, Cliff Bicker, camera; United States. American Mutoscope and Biograph Company, Jul 16, 1905. Life of a City: Early Films of New York, 1898 to 1906. Motion Picture, Broadcasting & Recorded Sound Division

Peary had powerful support for his project with the enthusiasm of President Theodore Roosevelt and the financial backing of prominent individuals and institutions, including the National Geographic Society. With their support, Peary was able to finance the building of the Roosevelt to his specifications:

> *The Roosevelt embodies all that is most careful study of previous polar ships and my own years of personal experience in the arctic regions. With the sturdiness of a battleship and the sharply lines of a Maine-built schooner, I regard her the finest icefighter afloat. As I write these lines, I see her slowly but surely forcing a way through the crowding ice. I see the block hull have out bodily onto the surface of the ice by a cataclysm of the great floes. I see her squeezed as by a giant's hand amongst a rocky shore till every rib and timber is vocal with the strain. And I see her out in the North Atlantic lying to for days through a wild autumn northeaster, indifferent, with her damaged propeller, and shuttered stern post, …a scrap of double reefed foresail keeping her up to the wind, riding the huge waves like a seagull till they are tired out.*
>
> Secrets of Polar Travel by Robert Peary, New York: The Century Co., 1917 p.28-31

Peary's team failed to reach the pole in an initial 1905 voyage, and he returned to New York with an injured foot. Significantly, Peary had lost eight toes to frostbite during an attempt until 1906. It was on this latter trip that Peary reported success. On April 6, 1909, after months of travel and preparation, Peary reached what he believed to be the North Pole, accompanied by Matthew Henson and four Inuit companions. Henson recalled the discovery of the North Pole after nineteen years of Arctic exploration in an interview at the time of his 1936 retirement from the U.S. Customs House:

> *"When the compass started to go crazy," he recalled, "I sat down to wait for Mr. Peary. He arrived about forty-five minutes later, and we prepared to wait for the dawn to check our exact positions… The next morning when first positions had been verified, Peary said, "Matt, we've reached the North Pole at last."*
>
> "Matt Henson," Theodore Pearson, interviewer, New York City, 1936; American Life Histories: Manuscripts from the Federal Writers' Project, 1936 to 1940. Manuscript Division

After time spent taking notes regarding their location, the team began the arduous return trip. When Peary notified the world that the North Pole had been attained, he was immediately embroiled in a controversy that continues to this day.

Shortly before Peary made his announcement, Dr Frederick A. Cook (a companion on one of his earlier journeys in 1891) claimed that he himself had reached the pole on April 21, 1908. At the time, the National Geographic Society examined the records of both men and concluded that Peary and Henson had reached the pole first. Dr. Cook was subsequently involved in other controversies and his claim was further discredited.

Dinner to Commander Robert E. Peary, U.S.N., Hotel Astor, March 5, 1910 (New York), NYC, Geo. R. Lawrence Co., c1910. Panoramic Photographs. Prints & Photographs Division

Peary's achievement was hailed worldwide; he was given medals and a pension by the U.S. Congress and feted at dinners. Proper recognition for Henson was long delayed. President Taft appointed him as a customs clerk in 1913, but it was not until 1944 that he received the Congressional medal that was awarded to all other members of Peary's expedition.

This was not the end of the story, however. In 1989, after years of increasing public skepticism, the National Geographic Society reviewed the records made by Peary and Henson and concluded that their calculations were incorrect—leaving them short of the pole. Nevertheless, Peary's achievement remains substantial in the annals of American Arctic exploration methods and in his knowledge of the region.

Learn More

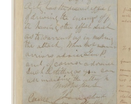
- See Race to the North Pole: Topics in Chronicling America, to find historic newspaper articles about the competing polar expeditions and the resulting controversy. Search across all of Chronicling America to read additional articles about adventure and discovery.
- Read Matthew Henson's account of his Arctic explorations to the North Pole with Commander Robert E. Peary in A *Negro Explorer at the North Pole* included in the Library's Selected Digitized Books collection. A commentary and synopsis of this book is provided in the January 1913 issue of *The A.M.E. Church Review* beginning on p. 297.
- Search Today in History for features on discovery and adventure such as the Vitfarod Trail Sled Dog Race.
- Maps play an integral role in the process of expanding knowledge about our physical world. Explorers develop and use them as they prepare and then set out on their journeys. Just as Peary made preliminary excursions to map the Greenland coastlines and learn about the meteorological and tidal patterns of the Arctic Ocean in preparation for his trip, so did Europeans in the late 15th to 17th century *European Age of Discoveries* rely on their map-making skills in determining the outlines of the continents, the shape of coastlines and waterways. The Discovery and Exploration map collection documents significant discoveries.

General James Longstreet

On **May 6**, 1864, Confederate General James E. Longstreet was seriously wounded, caught in the fire of his own troops during the second day of fighting at the Battle of the Wilderness, eighteen miles west of Fredericksburg, Virginia.

Portrait of Lieut. Gen. James Longstreet, Officer of the Confederate Army. Brady's National Photographic Portrait Galleries,[between 1860 and 1865]. Civil War Glass Negatives and Related Prints. Prints & Photographs Division

> *I never on any occasion during the four years of the war saw a group of officers and gentlemen more deeply grieved. They were literally bowed down with grief…It was not alone the general they admired who had been shot down—it was, rather, the man they loved.*
>
> Robert Stiles, an artillery officer, on the wounding of General James Longstreet, Four Years Under Marse Robert by Robert Stiles. New York & Washington: The Neale Publishing Company, 1903 p.241



Campaign of "The Wilderness," position of brigades of 2nd Corps, K. H. Ste. May 6th, 1864. Hotchkiss Map. Map, 2nd Corps. Hotchkiss Map Collection. Geography & Map Division

The injury to their beloved commanding officer was devastating to Longstreet's fellow officers, to the infantry, and to the Confederate Army as a whole. Longstreet described his own response to the panic experienced by those around him as he was carried off the field:

> *As my litter was borne to the rear my hat was placed over my face, and soliders by the road side said, "He is dead, and they are telling us he is only wounded." Hearing this repeated from time to time, I raised my hat with my left hand, when the burst of cheers and the flying of hats in the air eased my pains somewhat.*
>
> From Manassas to Appomattox… by James Longstreet. Philadelphia: J.B. Lippincott Co., 1896. p56.

Born January 8, 1821 in South Carolina, Longstreet graduated from the U.S. Military Academy at West Point in 1842. When South Carolina seceded from the United States, he resigned his commission with the U.S. Army and was made a brigadier general in the Confederate Army. He fought in the first and second battles of Bull Run near Manassas, Virginia. He commanded troops through the Peninsular Campaign, and at the battles of Antietam, Sharpsburg, Fredericksburg, and Chickamauga, displaying tenacity as well as tactical brilliance.

At the Battle of Gettysburg, Longstreet was second in command to General Robert E. Lee, who called him affectionately, "my old war horse." Longstreet's reputation suffered a blow at Gettysburg, where his delay in the attack known as "Pickett's charge" was blamed by many for the Confederate defeat. Longstreet was later to say that the day of that battle was the saddest day of his life. He had warned Lee that an attack would be doomed to failure, and he grieved over the unnecessary loss of life.

Letter. Gen. James Longstreet to Col. Edward P. Alexander, July 3, 1863. (Edward P. Alexander Papers). Manuscript Division

Although his right arm was paralyzed by his injury at the bloody Battle of the Wilderness, Longstreet resumed his command in November 1864, but, by that time, Lee's army was embroiled in the siege of Petersburg. Longstreet remained by Lee's side to the end, surrendering with the Army of Northern Virginia.

General Longstreet, who remained the friend and admirer of both his West Point classmates General Ulysses Grant and General Robert E. Lee, became an active member of the Republican Party after the end of the war.

As a supporter of the Reconstruction Acts and of Grant's administration, Longstreet was appointed surveyor of customs for the Port of New Orleans, and later served as U.S. marshal in Georgia and, for a brief time, as the U.S. minister to Turkey. His reconciliation to the Union, along with his representation of General Lee's handling of the Battle of Gettysburg, offended many Southerners and made him a controversiary figure for the rest of his life.

In retelling the story of his war wounds in his memoirs *From Manassas to Appomattox*, published in 1896, Longstreet indicated that the post-war controversies had been more personally painful to him than the flesh wound he had suffered:

> *Bad as was being shot by some of our own troops in the Battle of the Wilderness,—that was an honest mistake, one of the accidents of war,—being shot, since the war, by many officers, was worse.*
>
> From Manassas to Appomattox… by James Longstreet. Philadelphia: J.B. Lippincott Co., 1896. p568.

Learn More

- View Primary Documents in American History: Civil War and Reconstruction, 1860-1877 for further information on this era.
- Search Today in History on Civil War battles to find more features on the conflict.
- Browse the Time Line of the Civil War in the collection Civil War Glass Negatives and Related Prints to find dates of battles and other significant events of the conflict.
- View the drawing by Civil War sketch artist, Alfred Waud of *Wounded Escaping from the Burning Woods in the Wilderness*, published in Harper's Weekly, June 4, 1864.
- Search the collection Drawings Documentary using the terms Battle and Wilderness to find additional Civil War sketches of battles and battle. Search on Waud in that collection for more of his drawings.
- For a first-hand description of a Civil War Hospital, view the hospital Notebook of poet Walt Whitman, who served as a nurse to the Union wounded. The notebook is part of the Thomas Biggs Harned Collection of Walt Whitman Papers.
- For a lighter reference to Longstreet, visit the online collection of post-Civil War era sheet music, Music for the Nation, ca. 1870 to 1885 which includes Julia A. Wood's "Virginia Cotillions," among them the "Jas. Longstreet Cotillion" named for the general.

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