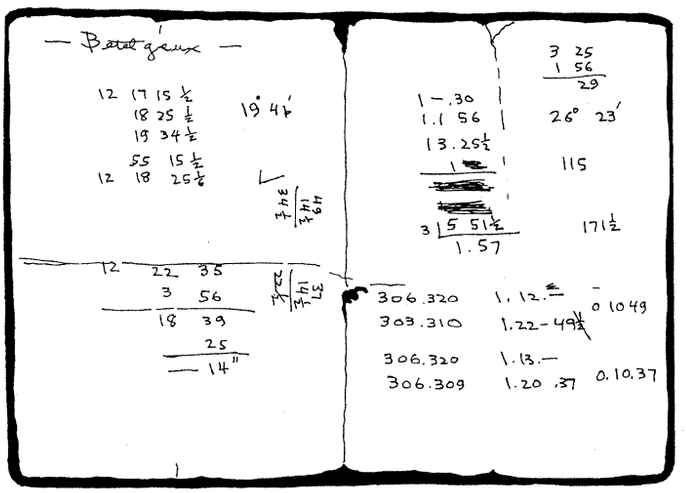
Peary's North Pole Claim Reexamined

The National Geographic Society has commissioned a study of Peary's credibility in the wake of charges that the explorer faked data on his 1909 trip to the North Pole

THE SEARCH FOR THE TRUTH about Admiral Robert E. Peary's trip to the North Pole in 1909 is emerging from a blizzard of controversy this winter, the most recent storm in an 80-year-old dispute over Peary's credibility. Peary, a U.S. Navy surveyor, claimed to have been the first person to reach the North Pole, dismissing as fraudulent the claim of a colleague, the surgeon-explorer Frederick Cook, who claimed priority.

Until recently, history has honored Peary's claim, not Cook's; but there are reasons to think Peary may have faked some data as well.



National Geographic Society

The Betelgeux paper. *Astronomer Dennis Rawlins found it among Peary's records and misread it as a "sun shot" at the North Pole.*

Like Peary on his trek across the ice, latter-day investigators are finding it hard to follow a straight line to the heart of this matter, broached again last fall in a series of articles in *The Washington Post*. The inquiry wandered off course before Christmas, going out on thin ice in pursuit of a "suppressed document" that seemed to condemn Peary as a fraud. Since then, the document has been set aside as a distraction. The astronomer who saw evidence of fraud, Dennis Rawlins of Baltimore, now agrees that he misread the document.

A team financed by the National Geographic Society, one of Peary's original sponsors, is plowing through hundreds of other documents in the Peary files at the National Archives, looking for new facts that will shed light on Peary's 1909 trip. The team is led by retired Admiral Thomas D. Davies, president of the Foundation for the Promotion of the Art of Navigation. Davies says he has been told by Gilbert Grosvenor, president of the National Geographic Society, to "leave no stone unturned." He expects to hand in a final report by July.

This quest through the archives, although backed by the National Geographic, was inspired by Rawlins and other skeptics who have hammered at the Peary legend. The Geographic, on the other hand, has supported Peary until recently. In 1906, after Peary's first failed attempt to reach the pole, it hosted a banquet in Washington at which President Theodore Roosevelt presented Peary with a medal for penetrating farther into the polar region than anyone before.

Rawlins, an independent astronomer, says there is not enough evidence to support Peary's claim to have reached the pole on his second try in 1909. Rawlins published an indictment of the explorer in a 1970 article in the Naval Institute *Proceedings* and in a 1973 book called, *Peary at the North Pole: Fact or Fiction?* Rawlins concludes that no one set foot on the North Pole until 1952, when Joseph Fletcher, leader of a U.S. Air Force team, reached it by air.

Last fall, Rawlins told *The Washington Post* he had found new evidence of the fraudulence of Peary's claim in some "long suppressed navigational documents." Rawlins also told the *Post* that he was upset that the *National Geographic Magazine* printed a 26-page article in September 1988 reviewing much of the evidence he raised against Peary without citing his work. Rawlins says the article may have been commissioned some time ago, but he thinks it came to light in 1988 because he began telling people in 1987 that he had found new, hard evidence against Peary.

National Geographic Magazine Editor Wilbur Garrett told the *Post* that the magazine commissioned the article in 1984 to set the record straight following the broadcast of a CBS television show that favored Cook.

As the furor grew, Grosvenor wrote to the Navigation Foundation last October seeking help. "The sensational nature of Rawlins' conclusions" in the *Post*, Grosvenor wrote, made it necessary to launch a new "impartial study." He promised Davies full support and a free hand in the inquiry, concluding: "Since 1909, this Society has been criticized for too hasty a verification of the Peary polar data. We do not intend to suffer that charge again."

The "suppressed document" Rawlins publicized is a single sheet of unlined paper bearing the word "Betelgeux" and a series of numbers. He uncovered it through detective work. In 1987 he learned that the library at Johns Hopkins University had unsealed the papers of Isaiah Bowman, former president of the university, chief of the American Geographical Society, and a player in the Peary controversy in the 1930s. Rawlins went to the Bowman file, where he found correspondence with Peary's daughter, Marie, and references to a secret document that Peary had asked his wife to keep as her "most precious possession" after his death.

At Marie's request, Bowman went to the Peary home to examine the document, then kept in a safe. A copy was given to other scientists for a confidential study. On the envelope that held it, Peary's wife had written: "Original Observations made by R. E. Peary U.S.N. at 90° N. Lat. April 5 & 6, 1909"—apparently the notes taken at the North Pole. But the measurements were wrong; or, at any rate, they did not fit the claimed location. Bowman soon dropped the matter, also quietly putting aside Marie's request that Peary be given a posthumous award.

Rawlins did not find the measurements in the Johns Hopkins library, but when he visited the National Archives in Washington in 1987, he found the original among Peary's papers.

Rawlins then made his own study, assuming the numbers on the sheet were compass

readings and "sun shots" (measurements of solar elevation) taken by sextant at the North Pole. He fit most of them into an odd scheme of observation that seemed to show that Peary had missed the pole by 120 miles. The word "Betelgeux"—the name of a bright star used in navigation—he took to be a sham. Betelgeux would not have been visible from the North Pole when Peary was there in 1909, and Rawlins concluded that Peary had put its name on the paper as a ruse.

Three months after being asked to look into the subject, Davies issued an "interim report" in February that demolishes Rawlins's thesis. It shows that what Rawlins took for compass readings were the serial numbers of Peary's chronometers. What Rawlins took to be solar elevations were clock times. The observational scheme that Rawlins concocted is "nonsensical," Davies says. Far from being a sham, the label "Betelgeux" was the key to the puzzle.

As Davies notes, it was standard practice in those days to take "time sightings" of celestial bodies before setting out on a trip across unknown territory, and Betelgeux was often used for this purpose. A time sighting is used to check the error in one's clock by comparing clock time with celestial time as given by navigation tables at known locations. If this explanation is accepted, all the numbers on the document make sense. The standard practice would have been to take sightings of Betelgeux and another star on the opposite horizon. The numbers suggest that this is just what Peary did, and that the opposing star, not labeled on the paper, was Rasalhague.

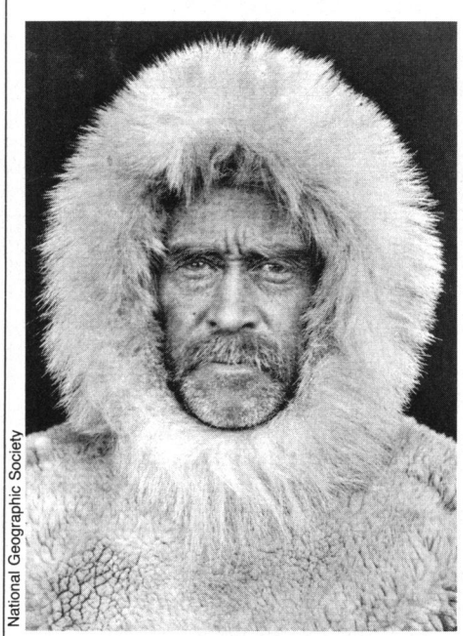
Today, Rawlins accepts this solution but differs with Davies on where and when the measurements may have been taken. "The most logical place," Davies says, "was at Cape Hecla in February of 1906," a point on Greenland's northern rim, as Peary was getting ready to set out from his boat on his first, unsuccessful attempt to cross the ice to the pole. Rawlins thinks this is wrong. He claims that Rasalhague would have been invisible at Cape Hecla when Peary was there. More likely, he says, Peary took the sightings at Etah, Greenland, further to the southeast, on 1 or 3 March in 1900. Etah was the jumping-off point for Peary's 1899–1900 arctic exploration and the starting point for his rival Frederick Cook, who claimed to have made a trip to the pole in 1908.

The significance of the paper remains a mystery, although Rawlins suggests it may have something to do with Peary's pride in his excellent 1900 arctic survey. One thing does seem clear, however: Rawlins and Davies agree that Peary's wife must have mislabeled the envelope that contained it.

While the expedition into the archives may show Peary to have been a better navigator than some thought, it has done nothing to strengthen his claim on the North Pole.

Peary failed to produce convincing evidence when he returned from the 1909 trip, and the credibility gap that appeared then has grown. Rawlins ticks off the problems in his book. They include the absence of any recorded compass readings or "steering" data on the final 135-mile dash to the pole, a hard-to-believe acceleration of walking pace in the last marches, a lack of credible witnesses to the event, and a muddled record—both in Peary's diary and in later verbal recollections—of what happened on the critical days of 6 and 7 April 1909, when Peary supposedly reached the pole.

The lack of steering data is the hardest to explain, as a U.S. congressional investigation learned in 1910. It is virtually impossible to maintain a beeline route across arctic ice because the scenery is both monotonous and constantly changing. The 413-nautical-mile path from Peary's base camp to the pole went across ice fields on the Arctic Ocean, which in spring continuously shift, melt, and recombine. There are no marks to steer by, except the sun and the trail one leaves behind. In April when Peary was there, the sun did not set, so even the guide stars were unusable. Compass readings would have been helpful, but less and less so as one approached the pole, for magnetic north differs from true north. (No one at the time knew by how much because no one had been there.) One of the great scientific disappointments of the trip was Peary's failure to record magnetic data along the way and at the pole. He never explained it, skirting the issue when questioned by Congress.



National Geographic Society

Admiral Robert E. Peary

Rawlins suggests a sinister explanation: Peary failed to reach the pole and did not dare record a fake compass reading in case a later explorer should prove it wrong.

Peary claimed to have followed a 413-mile beeline from his point of departure on land, Cape Columbia, directly along the 70th west meridian to within 4 or 5 miles of the pole. The only accurate way to steer in these circumstances was to take sextant shots of the sun along the route and at transverse angles to it, fixing both lateral and longitudinal progress. The last recorded sun shot for steering took place on 1 April at "Camp Bartlett," 6 days' march and 135 miles out from the pole. At this point, Peary sent the other credible witnesses in the party back to the base camp and continued with his loyal assistant, Matthew Henson, on the final trek with no navigator other than himself.

Peary claimed he aimed straight at the pole over the final 5 days by "dead reckoning" or intuitive steering. However, Peary's 1906 expedition and the experience of arctic travelers since then show that it is impossible to travel in a straight line across rough arctic ice fields, with crosswinds and moving ice continuously driving one sideways. Rawlins argues persuasively that one should add 50 to 75% to the direct distance between two points in the Arctic to get an estimate of the actual number of miles that must be covered in walking. But Peary claimed he was able to make the final 135-mile trip to the pole with none of these problems, without any deviation, at a faster pace than in any of his polar travels, and with no compass or recorded sun shots.

The final sun shots that Peary claimed to have taken on arrival at the pole (an event from which even Henson was absent) are considered questionable because they were not set down in Peary's diary on 6 and 7 April. The pages for those days are blank. Instead, the observational data are recorded on separate pages, which were torn out of a notebook and inserted loosely.

For these and other reasons, Rawlins says, Peary's story of hitting a "pole-in-one" is not believable. He thinks Peary never got closer than about 100 nautical miles.

The way to deal with claims that cannot be verified is to ignore them, and this is what Rawlins would do with Peary's claim.

As for his own failure to prove a fraud with the Betelgeux document, Rawlins says: "I made a mistake and I retract it totally." He hopes his example will encourage humility among Peary's backers in the future.

■ ELIOT MARSHALL