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The North Pole Controversy of 1909 and the Treatment of the Greenland Inuit People: An Historical Perspective

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The North Pole Controversy of 1909 and the Treatment of the Greenland Inuit People: An Historical Perspective

Polar exploration was a large part of American culture and society during the mid to late nineteenth century and the early twentieth century. The North Pole controversy of 1909 in which two American Arctic explorers both claimed to have reached the North Pole was a culmination of the polar exploration era. However, one aspect of the polar expeditions that is relatively unknown is the treatment of the native Inuit peoples of the Arctic by the polar explorers. The case of a small group of Inuit peoples who were brought back from Greenland and sold to the American Museum of Natural History highlights the attitudes of the American public and museums of this period that allowed such poor treatment of native peoples. This thesis is a historical perspective of the North Pole controversy along with a discussion of the role of native peoples in advocating reform that could have prevented the tragic treatment of the Inuit peoples at the hands of explorers and early museums.
State University of New York
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The North Pole Controversy of 1909 and the Treatment of the
Greenland Inuit People: An Historical Perspective

A Thesis in
History and Museum Studies

By

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For my father, a fellow history buff who first sparked my interest in the subject of polar exploration. Thank you for your enthusiasm, the use of your arsenal of books, for talking me through my frustrations, and for celebrating in my success.
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Chapter 1
Introduction

At the turn of the 19th century, polar exploration was at its height and the world watched as men tried to do the seemingly impossible. Museums and those who operated them also stood by hoping to showcase the findings of these explorers. However, at that time, museums were not what they are now and museum laws and ethics were lacking compared to those in place today. There was not the unification of native advocates that there is today. The focus on ethnography and anthropology were important aspects of museums of this time period which sometimes led to the exploitation and mishandling of native humans and native remains, in this case the native Inuit remains in the American Museum of Natural History. In this paper, a study will be made of the North Pole controversy of 1909, the attitude of the American public towards non-Western peoples at the time, the misfortune of six Greenland Inuits brought to the United States by an Arctic explorer and museum laws in place today aided by native advocacy which prevent such a thing from happening again.

There has been much attention given to Arctic and Antarctic exploration over the years by historians and authors. The races to the North and the South Pole were once of utmost importance all over the world as countries followed the progress of their own championed explorers and sought to be the first to be able
to claim either Pole for their country. The men who took on the mantle of explorers were touted as national heroes and were treated much the same way as modern day movie stars and athletes. The world watched their every move and felt personally invested in the explorers' many journeys into the harsh climates of the Arctic and Antarctic, hoping that they would emerge victorious or, at least, alive.

It was the age of discovery, when there were still unnamed lands and dark corners of the world that had yet to be explored and claimed by a nation's flag. Countries waited with bated breath to see if their explorer would avail them the right to boast one of the Poles as their own. It was also the age of scientific innovation, when nations sought to become the first to present new ideas and breakthroughs to their people and to the world. The many journeys to find the Poles were not only a matter of national pride but also a matter of which nation would receive the most scientific information from these explorers regarding the environment, climate, regions, land forms, native peoples and animals.¹ To be able to contribute to the growing scientific and anthropological fields was an honor feverishly sought.

Frederick Cook and Robert Peary both sought to secure the North Pole for the United States. In 1908, Cook returned from his Arctic journey claiming that he had found the North Pole and claimed it for the United States while Peary

returned in early 1909 claiming he had done the same (Figure 1).² What followed was a vicious barrage of accusations, defenses and investigations into each explorer’s story of discovery and their evidence validating their claims. The media followed this frenzy the entire time, keeping the public up to date on the latest Cook-Peary mud-slinging. Eventually the controversy cooled and Peary was hailed as the victor and Cook ridiculed until his death for being a fraud. However, doubts remained and years after the deaths of both explorers, the debate ensued.

**Review of the Literature**

Although the matter of Arctic and Antarctic exploration is today largely overlooked, there are still those who recognize the importance of the era and who appreciate the romanticism wrapped up in this time period that has since been lost. The literature on the subject of Arctic exploration alone is immense, with authors focusing on separate regions, explorers and time periods. Although there were many brave men who spent their lives and some who ultimately sacrificed their lives to the pursuit of the attainment of the North Pole, for the purpose of this thesis the focus is on two American explorers, Robert Peary and Frederick Cook.

These men would start off as fellow Arctic explorers with an easy comradeship but would eventually become rivals in a race to the North Pole (see

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Figure 13 in the Appendix for their supposed routes to the North Pole). Peary was well known for his many attempts to reach the North Pole as well as for his relentless determination, pride and arrogance. Cook was also a well known explorer. His repertoire was not limited to just the North Pole, but also included the Antarctic and scaling Mount McKinley. He was also an accomplished physician.

On the subject of the North Pole controversy of 1909, many of the sources used in this thesis are primary documents, mainly newspaper articles from The New York Times and The Washington Post. Arctic exploration was the focus of intense media speculation and attention during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Updates on the progress both Peary and Cook were making in their own personal journeys seeking the Pole were frequently posted as front page news stories in the papers. As both men prepared for their journeys, the media was there to document any developments in order to keep the public feeling as if they were there with the explorers. Once Cook and Peary returned from the Arctic and presented their stories of reaching the North Pole, there were constant articles dedicated to giving defenses of both men once the accusations of fraud started to fly from both camps.
Examples of such newspaper articles are titled “Peary-Cook Polar Dispute Flares Up Anew”\(^3\), “The Two Discoverers”\(^4\), “Burden of Proof on Cook”\(^5\), and “No Doubt About Peary”\(^6\), to name a few. There were also men who wrote into the newspapers giving their own personal views on the controversy and which explorer’s story they believed. One such man, named Ted, wrote into *The New York Times* to chastise Peary and his supporters for relentlessly accusing Cook and begging them to hear both sides of the story before hurling anymore accusations.\(^7\) The newspaper articles bias towards Peary and apparent belief of his story over Cook’s was a reflection of what the majority of the American public felt at that time. As with any news story, the intense media scrutiny of the North Pole controversy added fuel to the debate, creating two camps pitted against each other and always ready to defend their chosen hero.

To supplement the newspaper articles printed during the time of the controversy, cartoons that were commonly printed alongside these articles were included. One such cartoon showed Peary approaching the North Pole, which already has an American flag and a sign posted that Cook had already been there. Arctic animals look on, bemused at seeing yet another explorer approach

the Pole. Another cartoon depicts a group of older, middle class men sitting around debating both sides of the controversy. Yet another shows Cook laboring under the weight of a Pole, meant to be the literal North Pole, while pushing skeptics out of the way with it. These cartoons served the same purpose as our political cartoons do today, to poke fun and express the popular opinions of the public.

The personal memoirs of both Frederick Cook and Robert Peary about their journeys to the North Pole were closely examined in order to investigate the justifications put forth by both explorers as well as to study their accusations against each other. Peary’s account details his preparations for his trip and his journey to the Pole. There is very little mention of Cook or his rival claim of discovery. This could have something to do with the fact that it was published almost immediately after Peary returned from his journey to the Pole, well before the debate between the two explorers had developed into a full blown controversy. While Cook’s memoir also discusses his journey to the Pole, it was mostly spent defending himself against all the accusations leveled against him by Peary and Peary’s followers as it was written three years after Peary’s own account of reaching the North Pole and four years after the debate ensued.

8 J. Martin Miller, Discovery of the North Pole: Dr. Frederick A. Cook’s Own Story of How He Reached the North Pole April 21st 1908 and the Story of Commander Robert E. Peary’s Discovery April 6th, 1909. J.T. Moss, 1909.
9 Ibid.
10 Ibid.
11 Dr. Frederick A Cook, My Attainment of the Pole (New York: First Cooper Square Press, 1913)
The record put forth by Matthew Henson, one of Peary’s explorer companions and closest to him during the 1909 journey, was also studied and used as a primary source.\textsuperscript{13} It gave a valuable insider’s observation from an eyewitness close to Peary on the journey when the North Pole was supposedly reached, something that is lacking when studying Cook’s story of his alleged attainment of the Pole. Henson’s observations of Peary’s behavior at the point when Peary claimed to have reached the North Pole would ultimately be used to show that Peary might have lied about reaching the North Pole, even though Henson never came to that conclusion himself.\textsuperscript{14} He always maintained that Peary had reached the Pole. Because Cook did not have any companions like Henson with him to adequately substantiate his claim to the North Pole, this would always work in Peary’s favor.

However, the most exciting primary source that I found was a website run by Douglas Davies, an Arctic and navigation researcher who devoted himself to interpreting Peary’s journal that he kept during his 1909 journey to the North Pole.\textsuperscript{15} I was able to see photos of the actual journal pages, including the one where Peary exults at having finally reached the North Pole. All are included in the Appendix of this thesis. His website is pro-Peary as indicated in his subtitle-

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{13} Matthew Alexander Henson, \textit{A Negro Explorer at the North Pole} (New York: Arno Press, 1969)
\item \textsuperscript{14} Ibid, 135.
\end{itemize}
“Providing proofs that the 100 year old "Dr. Cook Hoax" was exactly that".\textsuperscript{16}

However, I used his website not for the information provided on it but for the pictures of the pages of Peary’s journal and the information he transcribed from them. I thought it important to provide pages from Peary’s diary since it is the ultimate primary source, carried on Peary’s person during the arduous journey he took to reach the North Pole. Seeing the pages penned in Peary’s own hand is exciting. Peary’s journal lent an air of legitimacy to his claim to have reached the North Pole first but eventually, as will be discussed later, discrepancies were found within the journal entries.

In addition to the primary sources, I also reviewed the works of historians who focus on Arctic exploration and on the North Pole controversy of 1909. Arctic historians stand divided as to which explorer actually reached the Pole. The American public was also divided on the subject and still is today. The literature that delves into the North Pole controversy naturally expands on the life of Robert Peary and his many failed attempts at the Pole before he claimed to have finally reached it as well as the humble beginnings of Frederick Cook, who would be fated to become Peary’s adversary. Fergus Fleming\textsuperscript{17}, Pierre Berton\textsuperscript{18}, Dennis Rawlins\textsuperscript{19} and Bruce Henderson\textsuperscript{20} are among the authors that put forth

\textsuperscript{16} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{17} Fergus Fleming, \textit{Ninety Degrees North: The Quest for the North Pole} (New York: Grove Press, 2001),
\textsuperscript{19} Rawlins, \textit{Peary at the North Pole}
their expert opinions on the matter in the most comprehensible manner. Their works are the most readable, are meticulously researched and articulate the backgrounds of both explorers, and the events leading up to the controversy itself.

Most of these Arctic historians do mention in passing the fact that Peary brought back six Inuits from Greenland and that he eventually sold them to the American Museum of Natural History. However, that is the extent of their involvement with the issue. Although most historians are willing to take sides on the topic of the North Pole controversy, they are either not willing to express an opinion about the actions of Peary or the museum or are not aware of the topic since this portion of the controversy is perhaps the least known aspect of the explorers’ exploits.

One Arctic historian who did definitively express his thoughts on the matter of the six Inuits brought back from Greenland by Peary was Kenn Harper, a Canadian teacher and author of *Give Me My Father’s Body Back*.21 His work is the main source used in this thesis when discussing the history of Minik, the young Inuit brought back by Peary from Greenland in the company of five of his Inuit companions. Harper lived in the Arctic for many years in Inuit communities and is fluent in the language, Inuktitut. He first heard the story of Minik in

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Qaanaaq, in northern Greenland, from the Inughuit Inuits themselves (Minik’s native tribe) and decided to write a book dedicated to Minik’s life.\(^{22}\)

In 1906, Minik launched a crusade against the American Museum of Natural History to obtain his father’s bones for traditional Inuit burial. Before Harper’s extensive research into this subject, there had previously been little mention about Minik’s story anywhere in the literature devoted to the subject of Arctic exploration. Harper took it upon himself to spear-head the effort to make Minik’s story known by documenting the treatment that Minik received in New York at the hands of New Yorkers and museum employees. He maintains strict neutrality on the subject of the North Pole controversy but indicts Peary and the American Museum of Natural History for their roles in bringing six Inuits from Greenland and then neglecting them. However, his main focus is on telling the story of Minik.

Harper maintains the guilt of the American Museum of Natural History and presents arguments for how the museum knew of the situation, took steps to purposely cover it up and ignored Minik and his pleadings for the return of his father’s body. He got the story directly from the Inughuit Inuit people, being fluent in their native tongue, and also from correspondence housed within the museum’s own archives. In addition, the book is masterfully written and one can

\(^{22}\) Ibid, xv.
easily get entangled in the characters and plotline. Every word is factual and well documented by primary sources.

The key player in this story is the American Museum of Natural History. Unfortunately, they ignored and evaded the issue of Minik and his quest to get his father’s bones back.\textsuperscript{23} According to Harper, the museum was embarrassed by Harper’s book when it was published as they had made it their business to try to keep the story as quiet as possible.\textsuperscript{24} What’s more, being unable to visit the museum myself, I tried to contact the museum, the library, and the collections department about the matter by telephone, email and post but my inquiries to the museum remain unanswered. This could possibly be due to the great number of inquiries they receive from researchers on a daily basis.

In a comprehensive overview of 125 years of exploration and scientific discovery, the museum dedicates a sufficient portion of their anniversary publication, \textit{The American Museum of Natural History: 125 Years of Expedition and Discovery}, to the topic of polar exploration and pays homage to the important people who dedicated their lives to the pursuit of the Poles and to the pursuit of scientific discovery.\textsuperscript{25} However, there is no mention of Minik or the fact that the museum benefited at all from Robert Peary bringing six Inuits from

\textsuperscript{23} Ibid, 225.
\textsuperscript{24} Ibid.
Greenland to the museum for study and for exhibition. Instead, Peary and his exploits are glorified and the tragedy of the Inuits’ deaths is ignored.

In an early publication dedicated to the museum written by museum director Henry Fairfield Osborn, Osborn boasts of the museum’s “pre- eminent” Inuit collection and all of the artifacts that they have accumulated as a result of their ethnological research.\textsuperscript{26} A few lines are devoted to Morris Jesup, the museum’s president, and his agreement with Robert Peary to receive “anthropological material” from his Arctic expeditions.\textsuperscript{27} There is no mention of the fact that this reported anthropological material included six live Inuits from Greenland. Instead, the material is described as canoes, sleds, tents and costumes, among other things. Yet again, the museum seems to claim superiority in anthropological study of the Inuit people and the Arctic region but there is no admission that they were keeping live Inuits in their basement as an exhibit and for research purposes.

However, one member of the American Museum of Natural History does acknowledge the issue of the Inuits, Peary and the museum. David Hurst Thomas, the curator of the Department of Anthropology at the American Museum of Natural History set aside a chapter in his book (published seven years after the return of Minik’s father’s remains to Greenland) to a summary and background of how the Inuits first came to New York, Peary’s role and Minik’s

\textsuperscript{26} Henry Fairfield Osborn, \textit{The American Museum of Natural History: Its Origins, History and the Growth of its Departments to December 31, 1909} (Chicago: Irving Press, 1911), 94.
\textsuperscript{27} Ibid.
ultimate heartbreak as his fellow Inuits and his father die.\textsuperscript{28} Thomas relates the situation straightforwardly and also recognizes the circumstances and outcome as “a tragic affair”.\textsuperscript{29} He addresses Franz Boas’ role in keeping the Inuits at the museum for research and seems to withhold judgment on Boas’ actions though he does not flinch from recounting some of Boas’ more cringe worthy moments such as his unwillingness to return the remains of Minik’s father and an instance of deception in order to cover up his “grave robbing” in order to obtain skulls for study.\textsuperscript{30} He passes no judgment on the American Museum of Natural History for their part in the proceedings and outcome of the Inuits brought to the museum by Peary. Thomas also highlights the tension between Native Americans and anthropological communities over the years through other case studies and ponders ways to bridge the gap between these two groups.

A PBS television documentary provides a succinct summary of Minik’s life along with insight into Peary’s role by “examining an overlooked chapter in the history of American exploration…the sacrifices made and the lives irrevocably changed for the sake of discovery.”\textsuperscript{31} Ira Jacknis, an anthropologist, along with David Hurst Thomas, curator at the American Museum of Natural History, and Bruce Henderson, the aforementioned Arctic exploration historian, lend their expertise to the documentary making it a well rounded source for any

\textsuperscript{29} Ibid, 82.
\textsuperscript{30} Ibid, 59.
\textsuperscript{31} “Minik, the Lost Eskimo.” \textit{PBS: American Experience}. PBS, 2009.
researcher. Between the three of these experts in their fields supplemented by narration and reenactment, this documentary gives audiences a look at early anthropology, museums and the age of exploration in America during the late 19th century. Archival footage from, among others, the American Museum of Natural History, the National Archives in Washington, D.C., the New York Public Library and the National Geographic Society invigorates the story of Minik and the Greenland Inuits brought to America for study and exhibition. The transcript of the film can be found on PBS’s website along with a teacher’s guide, additional research resources, and other acknowledgements.

Newspaper articles were also found to supplement Harper’s findings on Minik’s tragedy and the museum’s role in The Washington Post and The New York Times. One such article was entitled “The Skeleton in the Museum’s Closet: An Eskimo Boy’s Tragedy in the Name of Science”. Another was titled “Why Am I an Experiment?” Yet another was written after Minik’s father’s skeleton was sent back to Greenland in 1993, entitled “The Eskimos Finally Go Home: Museum to Return Century Old Remains to Greenland.” All of the articles found were dated between 1992 and 2000 and articulate the story with a definite bias against the museum, as indicated by the titles of the articles.

The American Museum of Natural History accepted live Inuits as a gift from Robert Peary, exhibited them in their museum, collected their remains after they had died and subsequently refused to repatriate them when asked by a

32 Ibid.
33 Ibid.
34 Ibid.
living relative. This story is a tragic episode in the history of Arctic exploration and the role of American museums in exploiting indigenous peoples. Specific legislation, native advocacy for reform and a general societal change in attitude have all worked to address these serious practices.

Museums have evolved past their earliest manifestations and the competition to collect. Thoughtful and focused collection policies define the items they take in and the ethics surrounding their operations. As an emerging museum professional, one of the most interesting things about researching this thesis topic was learning about the earliest museums. Robert Bogdan’s book on early freak shows, *Freak Show: Presenting Human Oddities for Amusement and Profit* (1988), along with Rosemarie Garland Thomson’s on the same subject, *Freakery: Cultural Spectacles of the Extraordinary Body* (1996), and Andrea Stulman Dennett’s examination of early dime museums in America in her book *Weird and Wonderful: The Dime Museum in America* (1997) were indispensable to my research on the reasons for the treatment of the Inuits by the earliest museums. Robert Rydell’s book on the earliest fairs in America and their legitimization of race exploitation was essential in my studies on why it was

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35 Kenn Harper, *Give Me My Father’s Body: The Life of Minik, the New York Eskimo*
considered ordinary to exhibit Minik and his fellow Inuits. These books delved into the attitudes of the time towards non-Westerners and how these exhibits and freak shows at the world fairs and expositions shaped these attitudes for future generations. The authors also gave examples of the most infamous freak shows and specific non-Western people that became well-known. Stulman’s information on the earliest museums was integral to my study of why the American Museum of Natural History was so quick to accept the six Inuits from Peary and why the American public did not find this to be unethical or even unusual.

It can be argued that if legislation was in place back when Peary brought Inuits back from Greenland and deposited them at the American Museum of Natural History, the story might have ended very differently. The Greenland Inuits might never have been made into a living exhibit in the basement of the museum, nor would they have suffered and died in a land that was foreign to them and then be refused proper burial according to their customs. Minik might never have gone through the ordeal that he did. Perhaps if the standards to which museums were held accountable were set higher at that time, none of these things would have happened. Minik took on the role of asking for his father’s bones back by himself, with no support system but if he had been joined

by other indigenous people, strength in numbers might have resulted in a
different outcome.

In order to make a complete study of the role of indigenous advocacy and
museum legislation that resulted in increased restitution and repatriation, I relied
on research done by museum professionals on issues of repatriation, cultural
patrimony, and the rights of native peoples. There is a vast amount of
scholarship advising museums how to avoid portraying native people in a
culturally biased manner and assisting museums with abiding by federal and
state regulations on the handling of human remains. There is also an abundance
of sources on how native people advocated for reform, the beginnings of the
repatriation movement and the significance of native advocacy in obtaining
restitution for wrongs.

A comprehensive view of US laws in place protecting cultural property and
the repatriation of items held by museums can be found in H. Marcus Price III’s
book on the subject.\(^\text{40}\) The book details specific legislation that has been passed
in each state of the US regarding repatriation and protection of cultural and
sacred objects belonging to aboriginal people. Along with state legislation, it also
addresses federal legislation and how native advocacy aided in pushing these
laws through when they found that simply asking for their treasures back was not
working.

I looked at several sources on the general subject of repatriation and cultural property. Authors such as Jeannette Greenfield⁴¹, Andrew Gulliford⁴², Sjoerd R. Jaarsma⁴³, Elazar Barkan⁴⁴ and Phyllis Mauch Messenger⁴⁵ all delve into the topic, offering their expertise on how to properly preserve relationships with indigenous tribes, how to ethically deal with the problems that come along with repatriation claims and the complications that arise when the ownership of ethnographic and cultural materials are repatriated. Messenger’s book addresses legislation that has been passed beginning in the early 20th century regarding the protection of cultural heritage and antiquities. The book also provided valuable information on a certain piece of legislation that pertains directly to the Inuit people, the United States-Canada Bilateral Cultural Property Agreement to Protect Archaeological and Ethnological Material (1997).⁴⁶ Vicki Cassman⁴⁷ and James Cuno⁴⁸ also devote their books to the discussion of cultural property, human remains and the debate between museums and indigenous people over who owns these objects. They focus on the importance

⁴⁶ Ibid.
of treating human remains with respect and caution those handling them to keep in mind the emotional and spiritual connections that relatives may have with the remains. They also caution readers about the complexity of having human remains in museum collections and the problems that might arise.

Joy Hendry’s book looks at the subject from the view of native cultures, expressing the different ways that native people have attempted to reclaim their cultural identity, including opening up their own museums to further self-represent their traditions and way of life.49 Roger C. Echo-Hawk also writes from an indigenous point of view. His book documents the beginnings of the injustices faced by American Indians from the first time white men came ashore on their land. He also addresses the American Indian movement towards restitution and their eventual triumph when the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act was passed in 1990.50

The Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act, commonly known as NAGPRA, is an important aspect to note when discussing issues of restitution and repatriation of cultural patrimony of indigenous people. There are many sources available that focus specifically on the plight of the American Indian. Kathleen S. Fine-Dare’s book discusses the American Indian movement

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for repatriation from its beginnings in the 1880s up until NAGPRA was passed.\textsuperscript{51} She also points out the strengths and weaknesses of the legislation as it pertains to museums and aboriginal cultures. In the Appendix of Fine-Dare’s book, the full text of NAGPRA can be found.\textsuperscript{52} This was used as a primary source as well. The full text of the law can also be found online.\textsuperscript{53} A source written by Devon A. Mihesuah also focuses specifically on the American Indian’s efforts at repatriation of their cultural items.\textsuperscript{54}

As museum professionals, we can learn from the missteps of the American Museum of Natural History in order to prevent similar situations from happening in the future. As a culture, we can learn essential lessons about the value of human life and about the dangers of going too far in the name of science.

\begin{quote}
\textsuperscript{51} Kathleen S. Fine-Dare, \textit{Grave Injustice: The American Indian Repatriation Movement and NAGPRA}, (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2002).
\textsuperscript{52} Ibid, 197.
\end{quote}
Chapter 2

North Pole Exploration

Two years ago marked the one hundredth anniversary of one of the major scientific and historical debates of the early twentieth century. Dr. Frederick A. Cook and Admiral Robert E. Peary had both emerged from the Arctic in 1908 and 1909 respectively, each claiming to be the first American explorer to have reached the North Pole. The argument between the two opposing sides continued long after Cook and Peary’s deaths and still rages today, albeit not as fiercely. Nonetheless, as in 1909, Robert Peary is today generally accepted as the true discoverer of the North Pole because of his experience, influence in the exploration community, and propaganda that successfully discredited Cook. Expert mathematicians, navigators and Peary’s own fellow explorers were called upon to investigate his claim and the majority concluded that Peary was the true discoverer of the North Pole. However, now that the heated controversy has settled somewhat, a closer examination of the character, experience and justifications set forth by Cook and Peary suggests that the fraud might have been Peary.

America During the Age of Exploration

Although nowadays the North Pole evokes images of Christmas and children’s stories about elves and Santa’s workshop, a hundred years ago
this area symbolized a different kind of fantasy for many. Tensions among
nations ran high and in the early twentieth century, nations competed with one
another to discover unknown lands and claim these territories for one’s own
homeland. The race to the North Pole was an international phenomenon that
dominated the news and the minds of the people. Explorers risked their lives
and reputations in order to be the first to discover the Poles, the North Pole in the
Arctic and the South Pole in the Antarctic (see Figure 14 in the Appendix for a
map of the Arctic Circle and the North Pole). Wealthy individuals also took part,
supplying the money necessary to fund such expeditions in the hopes of sharing
in the glory if they ended up backing the explorer who achieved fame.\textsuperscript{55}

Today, such notions seem obsolete since virtually every corner of the
world and beyond has been explored and claimed by one country or another. In
the mid-nineteenth century, explorers were becoming increasingly interested in
traveling to the top of the earth. The region of the North Pole was a changeable
and harsh setting, the perfect challenge for any American explorer seeking glory
and achievement for himself and for his country. As \textit{The Washington Post}
declared in 1896, “It will never do to leave upon the brow of a mere Norwegian
the glory, of having gone nearer to the Pole than our own indomitable explorers.
Yankee pluck and Yankee genius will never, never put up with such a

\textsuperscript{55}Rawlins, \textit{Peary at the North Pole}, 8.
consummation...our national honor is at stake."\textsuperscript{56} However, the North Pole was also an area that seemed “virtually designed for hoaxery since there is no fixed land at the spot—only impermanent ice, ever drifting over a deep ocean.”\textsuperscript{57}

To find and claim the North Pole represented the conquest of humans over a hostile environment, a great accomplishment in the eyes of the exploration community and the public. In the opinion of Anthony Brandt, a leading historian on the race to the North Pole, “it was a matter of national pride for some, personal pride for others, a challenge in either case, and human beings are programmed to accept challenges.”\textsuperscript{58} The American people saw Frederick Cook and Robert Peary as heroes who willingly challenged themselves physically as well as mentally for the glory of their country. People became so invested in the expeditions and the outcomes that they even wrote to the explorers, offering advice and ideas about “inventions and schemes, the adoption of which would absolutely insure the discovery of the Pole.”\textsuperscript{59}

The accomplishments of Cook and Peary were important to the American public and were shared by all Americans, reinforcing the notion of patriotism—it was a nation’s achievement, not just one man’s. As one companion of Peary’s recalled when they supposedly “nailed stars and stripes to the Pole...a thrill of patriotism ran through me and I raised my voice to cheer the starry emblem of

\textsuperscript{57}Rawlins, \textit{Peary at the North Pole}, 11.
\textsuperscript{58}Brandt, ed., \textit{The North Pole}, 368.
\textsuperscript{59}Peary, \textit{The North Pole}, 17.
The 20th century parallel to this expeditionary spirit and patriotic fervor was experienced during the “Space Race” between the United States and the Soviet Union, when the United States triumphed in being the first nation to place a flag on the moon.

In an era when countries won respect for themselves through warfare and politics, explorers won it by hard work and personal sacrifice. It is no wonder that the discovery of the North Pole is not well known or recognized for its historical significance—the values that the explorers exhibited and ideals that they held to are currently not in as much abundance. The discovery of the North Pole was made before all of the technology available today turned the populace away from such activities as exploration and the challenging of one’s body and mind in order to investigate new lands and claim honors for one’s country. “With gigantic wars and breath-taking inventions to think about, mankind has grown accustomed to sensations.” It is essential that the men who dared such feats, without the help of the technology that is relied on today, are not forgotten nor their achievements disregarded.

The exploration and discovery of the North Pole was not just a subject of national pride or personal achievement. It was also the source of demographic, scientific, geographical and geological value in the world. There was much to be learned from the few native tribes that dwelt in the region—their hunting habits,

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60 Henson, A Negro Explorer at the North Pole, 133.
language, social customs, healthiness and their ability to thrive in such a harsh environment when so many men who ventured there from other nations suffered simply to stay alive. Explorers hoped to learn more about the shape and rotation of the earth, the flow of the water and ice at the Pole, along with more knowledge of navigation in general. Investigations on the formation of ice packs and glaciers could be beneficial along with the discovery of possible new land masses. This sort of information would be vital to the progress of science and geography. Each nation wanted these statistics for itself in order to further its own research and gain its own advantages from such examinations. Therefore, the race to the Pole was not just a race for national honor and personal gain, but a race for scientific data, cultural information and geographical territory.

The North Pole Controversy of 1909

When Cook and Peary returned from the Arctic both claiming to have captured this for America, there was understandable excitement throughout the world but especially among the American public. This excitement, along with the interest in the two men’s previous expeditions and early friendship, fueled the controversy between Cook and Peary that followed. In order to understand how this debate started, it is necessary to examine how each man got his start in exploration and first became interested in the North Pole.

The beginnings of both explorers would prove to be as different as the men themselves and would explain why their friendship and professional
relations soured. Robert Peary was born in 1856 in Cresson, Pennsylvania and obtained an education in civil engineering from Bowdoin College in 1877. He entered the United States Navy as a civil engineer in 1881. After his first reconnaissance journey to Greenland in 1886, Arctic exploration dominated his life. The challenge of the North Pole consumed him to no end. As he recalled in his 1910 memoir, “civilization began to lose its zest for me…I began to long for the great white desolation, the battles with the ice and the gales, the silence and the vastness of the great, white lonely North.”\textsuperscript{62}

Frederick Cook was born nearly ten years after Peary, in 1865, and spent most of his early years supporting his family by delivering milk in the early hours before rushing off to school. He attended medical school and became a doctor in 1890 before returning to his hometown of Hortonville, New York to establish his own practice. He first entered the polar exploration scene when, ironically enough, he answered an ad in the newspaper asking for a surgeon for Peary’s North Greenland expedition in 1891. Both men reportedly got along rather well during the trip—Cook admired Peary’s determination and Peary was grateful for Cook’s medical ability and cool demeanor as he helped Peary recover from a debilitating leg injury.\textsuperscript{63}

From then on their lives would be intertwined but the relationship between the two men would turn sour for a number of reasons even before the North Pole

\textsuperscript{62} Peary,  \
The North Pole, 10.

\textsuperscript{63} Cook,  \
My Attainment of the Pole, vi.
controversy. After returning from Greenland and having his first taste of the
Arctic, Cook would also become preoccupied with Arctic exploration but never to
the same degree as Peary. Nevertheless, he ventured forth into the Arctic to find
and claim the North Pole a year before Peary did the same.

After returning from the Arctic and asserting his claim that he had reached
the North Pole on April 21, 1908, Cook was the clear favorite in the eyes of the
American public for quite some time. A cartoon (Figure 1) portrays Peary
reaching the North Pole only to find that Cook had been there first and attached
an American flag and a plaque with his name on it.  

In a poll conducted in a
local newspaper, 73,238 readers believed Cook while only 2,814 of the readers
believed Peary. Most of this was based on the very different personalities of
the two explorers—Cook was very easygoing, charming and personable whereas
Peary was known as “one of the least lovable of those who sought the Arctic
Grail.” Cook was seen by the media and the public as an “absolutely sincere,
simple man or else deserves a pedestal in history as one of the greatest actors”
as one newspaper article observed.

While Cook was able to accept a more subordinate position in various
expeditions and learn from such experiences, Peary accepted only the position

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64 Miller. Discovery of the North Pole
65 Henderson, True North, 266.
(accessed February 3, 2010).
of commander. He was considered ruthless, arrogant and paranoid about his fellow explorers and of any man whose ambitions threatened his own.\textsuperscript{68} In his mind, the North Pole was his and no one else’s. In his own words, Peary believed that “the reason and intent of my existence was the solution of the mystery of the frozen vastnesses of the Arctic.”\textsuperscript{69} His single-mindedness in reaching the North Pole caused him to treat those below him shoddily and led to his unfortunate unwillingness to be a team player—no one was allowed to get the credit except for him.\textsuperscript{70} Henson, his faithful servant and companion on all of his Arctic expeditions (Figure 12), reportedly confirmed this to reporters by saying “Commander Peary, for all the years I have known him, has been a selfish man, after his own glory and that of nobody else…I see that more plainly than ever before, and so have some others.”\textsuperscript{71}

The discovery of the North Pole was Peary’s obsession, so much so that in one instance after a long day of sledging, Peary lightly told Henson that he could no longer feel his feet. When Henson moved to take his boots off, a number of Peary’s toes snapped off at the joint.\textsuperscript{72} He would end up having eight of his toes amputated due to extreme frostbite. He saw such sacrifices as a small price to pay in order to achieve his life-long ambition.

\textsuperscript{68} Berton, \textit{The Arctic Grail}, 512.
\textsuperscript{69} Peary, \textit{The North Pole}, 11.
\textsuperscript{70} Berton, \textit{The Arctic Grail}, 512-13.
\textsuperscript{72} Fleming, \textit{Ninety Degrees North}, 307.
Peary did not undertake his trek to the North Pole as a scientific discovery or as a journey to learn about the region. Instead, he sought to be simply the first to reach the Pole. According to Pierre Berton, “the polar expedition was a sporting event, not a scientific exercise” to Peary. He wanted fame and fortune and he knew that the best way to achieve that was to discover the North Pole before anyone else did, a feat that would endear him to the American public and to those who could put his name in the record books and thus cement his immortality. This is especially apparent when examining the pages of Peary’s Arctic diary. Many of the pages stress plans for marketing his instruments and equipment in order to make money, portraits of himself, and special souvenirs (Figures 2-6). To attain this goal, Peary was willing to act like an insensitive and overbearing leader. He was willing to alienate some people in order to get his name in the record books.

This unfortunate character trait would be the first source of the rift between Peary and Cook after returning from their Greenland expedition. Cook had acquired a substantial load of scientific and ethnological information from the expedition that he wished to publish for the benefit of the scientific community. Upon asking Peary’s permission, Cook was given a resolute “no.” Peary was known for making his fellow companions on his expeditions sign contracts

74 Ibid.
75 Ibid, 512.
77 Ibid.
promising that they would not publish any account of the expedition until he himself had published his own book about it. This stipulation was probably an attempt by Peary to avoid competition even in the literary field. The contracts were in place to “prevent talking or writing after the expedition’s return—contracts by which Mr. Peary derived the sole credit, the entire profit and all the honor of the results of the men who volunteered their services and risked their lives.”

Cook found Peary to be acting unfairly, since his book would in no way have anything to do with Peary but instead about scientific information in which Peary had no interest. Cook did not like to be “muzzled” with such a contract but Peary would not budge on the matter. And so, Cook resigned from participating in any other expedition Peary might take in the future as a matter of principle. From that point on, the two men followed their own paths that would lead them to make their simultaneous journeys to the North Pole and initiated the controversy that would shadow them for years to come.

After Peary’s claim to have been the first to the North Pole on April 6, 1909 (Figure 7) and his rejection of Cook’s declaration, it was not enough for just the American public to be on the side of one explorer—an official investigation was necessary in order to try to reach a verdict on who was the true first explorer to set foot at the North Pole. It did not seem acceptable to Peary and others in

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78 Cook, *My Attainment of the Pole*, 516.
the exploration community that there should be two winners, although Cook did express pleasure when Peary made his claim public and tried to make it clear that “there is glory enough for all.” According to Cook, all that mattered was that the glory and recognition went to the United States, not which explorer reached the North Pole first. “My feeling at the news, as I analyze it, was not of envy or chagrin. I thought of Peary’s hard, long years of effort and I was glad; I felt no rivalry about the Pole.” In an article printed only a few days after Peary’s announcement, The Washington Post agreed with him, saying “Americans especially will hope that both have been successful, and that they will be as liberal in dividing honors as they have been intrepid in seeking them.”

However, this was not the approach taken by Peary. He considered Cook to have stolen the object of his desire and to be fraudulently seeking to reap the benefits. He pushed an investigation into Cook’s claims and also into Cook’s past career achievements, determined to undermine Cook’s credibility. However, this was a misjudgment on his part. Exhibiting his characteristic arrogance, Peary impudently thought only Cook’s claims and prior achievements would be investigated. Instead, his own records and past accomplishments were also examined.

81 Cook, My Attainment of the Pole, 474.
82 Ibid.
Peary and his supporters soon embarked on a bitter campaign to discredit Cook and his past exploits, but Peary had to defend his own credibility issues. Problems emerged during the ensuing investigations in Washington made by some of the most distinguished men in the field of geography—Henry Gannett, a member of the US Geological Survey; O.H. Tittmann, the Superintendent of the US Coast and Geodetic Survey; and Rear Admiral C.M. Chester of the US Navy.\(^84\) Peary proved himself time and time again to be obsessed with discovery and setting records. He repeatedly made claims that turned out to be untrue.\(^85\)

For example, on his previous Arctic expeditions, he claimed to have discovered that Greenland was an island, to have reached the farthest north and to have discovered several land masses, all of which turned out to be false. Peary had thought he had reached the end of Greenland and looked across a channel to another land mass. He had actually only been looking at another piece of Greenland. The land masses that he supposedly discovered and named turned out to not exist where he said they were. Peary had made many Arctic expeditions in his life and was feeling the pressure of the public and his financial backers to have something to show for his trips. To just travel into the Arctic and return was not very heroic and would not justify the spending of hundreds of thousands of his funders’ dollars, so Peary fabricated new


\(^{85}\) Brandt, ed., The North Pole, 390.
discoveries or brought back trophies in order to show that he was making progress. After the failure of one of his Arctic expeditions to reach the North Pole, he brought back great meteorites from a native Inuit village and sold them to the American Museum of Natural History. It did not matter to him that these meteorites were the only source of iron for the tribe and thus, one of their only ways to obtain tools necessary for survival.

He even brought back to the United States a number of Inuits to accompany him on his lectures and for the American people to gape at in museums. It also did not matter to him that they did not receive any of the stipulations that he had promised them before their move or that they died soon after from being so long in a foreign climate.\textsuperscript{86} Peary had to provide some tangible proof or trophy for his backers and the public that was spurring him on and "if it couldn't be the Pole, it must be something that could bear his stamp—a body of water, a mysterious meteorite, a new island."\textsuperscript{87}

In addition to examining Peary's past exploits, the investigating commission required him to submit his expedition diaries and navigational instruments. The commission also questioned Peary during several inquiries. \textit{The New York Times} commented on this, saying "The public has been driven into an attitude of desiring to see Peary force Cook to prove his claim. This is not the proper scientific attitude. It is for both to prove that they have been at the

\textsuperscript{86} Cook, \textit{My Attainment of the Pole}, 514.  
\textsuperscript{87} Berton, \textit{The Arctic Grail}, 552.
Pole.” 88 Peary submitted all required material but it did not clear his name nor did it prove his claim of being the first man to the North Pole. It only raised new questions and concerns.

There were unusual discrepancies in his diary that concerned investigators. 89 Peary had kept a detailed expedition diary but there seemed to be no record of the thirty hours he had allegedly spent at the North Pole. Most investigators seemed to be under the impression that if Peary had truly reached his lifelong goal, he would have made many observations and made at least some note of what he did in those thirty hours at the Pole. It also seemed unusual that the page in which Peary triumphantly recorded that he had at last reached the Pole was a loose page, the only unattached page in the whole diary (Figure 8). 90 Some wondered if he had not simply written the page and inserted it later after he had returned. The diary also seemed to be in an unusually clean condition—there were no “finger marks or rough usage.” 91

There also seemed to be some navigational inconsistencies recorded in Peary’s diary. He had sent Robert Bartlett, one of his chief exploration companions, back with a small party to make a trail for Peary and Henson to follow on their return journey and so had released the one man who could have

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91 Henderson, True North, 275.
checked his recordings and corroborated his story. Bartlett was understandably disappointed and had thought he had a sure ticket to the North Pole partly because he was the only other one besides Peary who could read a sextant, the main navigational instrument.\(^2\) Peary could have easily faked his data since neither Henson nor his Inuits could read the navigational instruments. He must have had his reasons for leaving Bartlett behind—one of the reasons could have been that he did not want anyone present who could challenge his records. In his 1910 memoir, Peary does not shed any light on his reasons but said that he felt “keen regret” for sending Bartlett back.\(^3\)

In addition, Peary’s rate of progress seemed to double and even triple after he sent Bartlett back, making his recorded rate of progress seem unbelievable. He went from averaging around twelve miles per day to a staggering thirty miles per day.\(^4\) Investigators and some of the American public seemed to think that this was suspicious behavior for such a seasoned Arctic explorer.

One of the most damning pieces of evidence that led to doubts about Peary’s truthfulness came from one of his most dedicated servants, Matthew Henson. Henson had joined Peary in 1886 and had accompanied him on every

\(^2\) Ibid, 221.
\(^3\) Peary, \textit{The North Pole}, 269.
\(^4\) Ibid, 267.
one of his Arctic journeys. In Henson’s account of the journey to the Pole, he noted Peary’s apparent lack of excitement and even moroseness at the time when he alleged that they were standing right on the North Pole. Henson wrote that “feeling the time had come, I ungloved my right hand and went forward to congratulate him on the success of our eighteen years of effort, but a gust of wind blew something into his eye, or else the burning pain caused by his prolonged look at the reflection of the limb of the sun forced him to turn aside; and with both hands covering his eyes, he gave us orders…” Henson obviously was not sure as to why exactly Peary turned away from him—it could have been that Peary knew at that moment, after taking his observations, that they were not really at the North Pole but did not want Henson to see such an awful truth in his face.

In addition to this strange reaction, Henson noticed that Peary seemed to avoid him on the return trip and once they were back on land. “I would catch fleeting glimpses of Commander Peary, but not once in all that time did he speak a word to me…Not a word about the North Pole or anything connected with it.” Since Peary had spent the greater portion of his adult life preparing, searching and anticipating the discovery of the North Pole, it seemed out of character for him not to share his feelings of triumph with Henson, his most dedicated and

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95 Rawlins, Peary at the North Pole, 33.
96 Henson, A Negro Explorer at the North Pole, 135.
97 Ibid, 153.
trustworthy companion. A modern historian on the matter defends Peary, saying “after the painful trauma of losing his toes in 1899, after giving more than twenty years of his life, after fighting and wearing himself down and risking his neck far out on the pack, Peary probably figured he at least deserved the Pole” even if he had not actually reached it.98

Henson also comments on Peary’s health during the trip—“I do not believe he slept for one hour from April 2 until after he had loaded us up and ordered us to go back over our old trail” which could have contributed to him being “practically a dead weight.”99 With their commander a dead weight, it seems very unlikely that they would have been able to make such a speedy return journey when Peary was riding most of the way back in the sledge as an added weight. Even without the extra weight and if the ice had been flat and unmoving, it seems improbable that Peary and his companions would be able to make the speeds as were recorded.

Even with these problems brought up by Henson, he still believed that Peary had “taken the North Pole by conquest, in the face of almost insuperable natural difficulties, by the tremendous fighting-power of himself.”100 When confronted with Cook’s counter-claim, Henson dismissed it as “ridiculous and absurd.”101 He also disparaged Cook himself saying, “aside from his medical

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99 Henson, *A Negro Explorer at the North Pole*, 140.
100 Ibid, 141.
101 Ibid.
ability, we had no faith in him whatever...the idea of his making such an
astounding claim as having reached the Pole was so ludicrous that, after our
laugh, we dropped the matter altogether.”102 Many others in the exploration
community agreed with Henson’s views and an investigation by leading agencies
such as the Royal Geographic Society, the National Geographic Society and the
Naval Affairs Committee of the House of Representatives helped to reinforce this
position. A committee of “distinguished men” ranging from geographers to naval
officers was appointed by the National Geographic Society to question Peary and
examine his records, instruments and navigational data.103

The committee found Peary to be truthful and his data to be correct and
he was awarded a gold medal for his discovery of the North Pole.104 Peary’s
records and instruments were examined and found to be sound by Hugh Mitchell
and Charles Duvall, expert mathematicians of the Coast and Geodetic Survey in
1911 before the House Committee of Naval Affairs.105 The Naval Affairs
Committee of the House of Representatives was more insistent in its questioning
of Peary but Mitchell, who was present at the hearing, noted that Peary “dodged
no questions” and Mitchell was “fascinated by the unfailing courtesy and
frankness of Peary’s answers under all conditions of questioning.”106 However,

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102 Ibid, 176.
104 Ibid.
105 Ibid.
106 Ibid.
Duvall, were asked to mathematically analyze Peary's data in order to prove one way or another if Peary's numbers were accurate.

According to Mitchell, Peary cooperated at every turn of their investigation, providing every record that they required and making himself available whenever they needed him.\textsuperscript{107} Mitchell professed himself impressed with Peary's character and described him as "a man not only incapable of falsehood himself, but intolerant of falsehood in others."\textsuperscript{108} Some years later, after a renewal of interest in the North Pole controversy, Heber Curtis corroborated the findings of Mitchell and Duvall. As an experienced astronomer, he recomputed their findings in order to find mistakes, but also concluded that Peary's numbers were accurate and his observations made by the sun did indeed put him at the North Pole.

The discrepancies in Peary's diary were also examined and any doubts about them were refuted.\textsuperscript{109} His method of navigation was sound and was the same used by other Arctic explorers. He would find true north from the sun at noon and then set course straight for the Pole, taking celestial observations from the sun at intervals in the journey. As for the doubts over his fantastic rate of speed and progress after Bartlett left the party, the agencies above found that his speed and distances recorded were not impossible. After all, they followed their

\textsuperscript{107} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{108} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{109} Ibid.
own trail back so it was not necessary to spend time forging a new path and the party was motivated to such speeds by the need to take advantage of the fair weather. This was the defense Peary gave along with the fact that their party had “encountered no delays” and had benefited from “experience and perfected clothing and equipment” which had made it an “amazingly comfortable return as compared with previous ones.”

In response to the loose page in Peary’s diary and his omission of his alleged thirty hours at the Pole, fellow explorers and experts argued that there would, of course, be strange lapses in his diary due to the extreme circumstances of the journey—a neat, scholarly diary would hardly have been possible due to the weather, exhaustion and fatigue. The loose page in which Peary had written his victorious entry was identified as a page from a notebook that Peary used on the journey to write messages to his party leaders who would turn back at intervals to make a return trail. It was possible that Peary had written the entry on a page from the notebook because it was more readily available. He supposedly carried it on his person while keeping the diary wrapped up safely in his sledge. Peary was struggling against the elements, starvation, and possible death in a forbidding region and so most were willing to give him the benefit of the doubt. In his investigation, Mitchell found that Peary

100 Peary, The North Pole, 316.
112 Ibid.
made no mention of his thirty hours at the Pole because he was busy continuing his journey ten miles in either direction in order to make sure that he did not miss the Pole. According to Peary, these thirty hours were “pretty well crowded what with my marchings and countermarchings, together with the observations and records.”

The majority of the American public was also willing to accept Peary as the true discoverer of the North Pole if these experts and organizations had found him to be truthful. After all, he was the more experienced explorer with over twenty years of Arctic exploration under his belt. Peary had traveled over and beyond Greenland in 1886 and in 1891. He had also conducted two previous expeditions to the North Pole in 1898 and 1905, both of which fell short of the Pole but achieved a farthest north point. As Peary put it, “always, it is true, I had been beaten, but with every defeat came fresh knowledge of the game, its intricacies, its difficulties, its subtleties, and with every fresh attempt success came a trifle nearer.” He was more accomplished, having mapped hundreds of miles of unchartered territory, made discoveries about the nature of Greenland, and even before his claim of having obtained the North Pole, he had made it the farthest north of any explorers. He was an expert navigator and had plenty of experience with navigational instruments on his past Arctic expeditions.

114 Peary, The North Pole, 300.
115 Ibid, 1.
But what ultimately convinced a majority of the American public that Peary was the true discoverer of the North Pole was the vigorous propaganda campaign mounted by Peary and his supporters. This campaign continuously attacked Cook and after a mental breakdown, Cook fled the country and refused to respond to such harassment.\textsuperscript{116} Thus, the American public was only hearing Peary’s version of events and popular opinion turned against Cook due to the attacks on his character and career.

Although the majority of the American people supported Peary and his claim to have reached the North Pole first, there were still some of the public who doubted Peary for the reasons listed earlier (Figure 9). This \textit{Washington Star} cartoon depicts members of the working class discussing their differing views on the North Pole controversy.\textsuperscript{117} Some of the men voice their support—"But he got there first!" and "By heck, he must be tellin’ the truth" while others take the opposite approach and express doubts such as, "How’d he git his lattytude?" and "Make him show his proofs!"

Indeed, some adamantly defended Cook despite all the information that had been brought forth against him. A man of the populace wrote in to \textit{The New York Times} to express his displeasure at how the controversy was progressing. He accused Peary and his supporters of making accusations that were

\textsuperscript{116} Cook, \textit{My Attainment of the Pole}, 481.
\textsuperscript{117} Miller, \textit{Discovery of the North Pole}, 134.
“premature and certainly undignified” and begged them to “put away their hammers until we hear all that each man has to say as to his claims.”

Another writer declared Peary’s accusations unfounded; whatever “was possible for Cook was possible for Peary” and so whatever Cook was accused of, Peary could be accused of, too. At least some of the populace could see through Peary’s attack campaign on Cook which dredged up Cook’s prior exploration mistakes and continually attacked any missteps that Cook had made during his trip to the North Pole and back to civilization. Instead, some of the public chose to look instead on just the facts about Cook that might prove the veracity of his statements.

Cook also had experience in Arctic exploration, albeit not as many years as Peary, but he had participated in many other Arctic journeys. He had been a doctor on several other Arctic expeditions as well as on the first discovery expedition to winter in the Antarctic in 1897. Cook was chosen to lead a mission to rescue Peary himself after one of Peary’s failed journeys to the Pole. He also had led a previous expedition to try to find the North Pole in 1902 but had returned home empty handed. He learned from the mistakes he had seen Peary make when he had accompanied him on his Greenland expedition and had turned them into advantages—he adopted many methods of Inuit travel and redesigned his sledges and equipment in order to be lighter to carry. He came

up with a different route and planned to take a smaller party with him to the Pole in order to cut down on the number of mouths to feed.\textsuperscript{120}

Perhaps most importantly, Cook was about ten years younger than Peary and in much better condition to make such a journey. Peary himself had told reporters that because of his advancing age, he should give up on Arctic exploration. “In my judgment, such work requires a far younger man than I. He should be under thirty rather than over forty. For that work [snowshoeing and carrying heavy loads] one should be a trained man, a thorough athlete, and that I am not.”\textsuperscript{121} On the occasion when Cook led a rescue mission to find Peary, he examined him and came to the same conclusion that Peary had years earlier. In Cook’s professional opinion, Peary was not fit to undertake anymore Arctic travels. This was the second cause of the personal rift between Cook and Peary—Peary resented this intrusion, was offended by Cook’s blunt appraisal of his health and fully disagreed with him. But Cook’s opinion was sound—by this point, Peary had lost eight toes to frostbite, was suffering from lack of proper nutrition for which Cook had prescribed raw meat and other dietary staples (Peary refused), and medical problems that came with advancing age.

Additionally, Cook’s narratives were consistent and his descriptions of many of the ice islands and other Pole regions were more accurate than those

\textsuperscript{120} Henderson, \textit{True North}, 183.

made by other explorers, including Peary. When the Inuits who travelled with
Cook were questioned by Peary after the party’s return from the Arctic, they
maintained that they had never been out of sight of land which would have
proved that Cook had never made it to the North Pole. Many were prepared to
take this admission on faith since eyewitness accounts were considered very
important in exploratory investigations. However, Inuits were very wary of being
away from land, knowing the harsh region surrounding them, the rarity of food
and game, and the changeability of the ice flow. Mirages were common from the
sun reflecting off the ice and several of the Inuits did believe that they saw land
on numerous occasions. Cook encouraged such beliefs in order to put his
companions at ease, keep morale high, and prevent uprisings.\textsuperscript{122} It was also
revealed that Peary had questioned the Inuits without an interpreter who had a
firm grasp on the language. Those who did speak the Inuit language fluently
were not allowed in the room while the questioning occurred. Therefore, it was
possible that Peary could have fabricated what he wanted the Inuits to have said
during the questioning.

Even with all of this evidence in support of Cook, Peary and his supporters
spurred on the skeptics who chose to focus on the gaps in Cook’s story and the
mistakes in his past (Figure 10). This cartoon portrays Cook attempting to

\textsuperscript{122} Cook, \textit{My Attainment of the Pole}, 510.
silence his critics. The atmosphere of the cartoon is one of dubious disbelief that Cook will ever be able to prove his veracity unless he somehow was able to bring the North Pole back with him. Since that was physically impossible, the cartoon suggests that Cook would never be able to “silence the skeptics”.

One of the major points against Cook that had been raised by Peary was that he had lied previously about being the first man to scale Mt. McKinley. Ed Barrill, a companion of Cook’s on the expedition, had came forward and claimed that Cook had never reached the top of the mountain. However, it was later revealed that Barrill had been paid off by Peary’s supporters and so was probably not to be believed. Months earlier, after returning from the Mt. McKinley trip, Barrill had proudly told the media and anyone who would listen about their accomplishment but after a meeting with a man later revealed to be part of the Peary Arctic Club, he suddenly changed his mind and signed an affidavit alleging that Cook had lied about reaching the summit. Such evidence from a man who was willing to first bask in the glory and then swear that he had lied and had been involved in such a falsehood can hardly be credible. However, the damage had been done. This proved particularly damaging to Cook and his reputation because it led many to wonder if he was dishonest about that journey, what was to prevent him from lying about reaching the North Pole?

123 Miller, *Discovery of the North Pole*, 76.
125 Ibid.
Another major point against Cook’s claim to have reached the North Pole was that he could not provide his records, diary, or instruments for examination by the organizations that investigated Peary. He claimed to have left them with a trusted friend, Harry Whitney, when he had returned. One of his Inuits fell ill and he was forced to leave one sledge behind. Without that extra room, Cook decided to leave a chest of “meteorological data, ethnological collections, geological specimens, instruments and some furs and other clothing” along with a portion of his records including his manuscript, diary and notes to be returned to the United States at a later date.\textsuperscript{126} In Cook’s own words, he “should have foreseen the trouble that resulted” but because he believed his accomplishment “largely personal, for which a world excitement was not warranted and in which I had such a sure confidence that I never thought of absolutely accurate proof.”\textsuperscript{127} In other words, Cook did not know what a huge tumult would greet him when he returned home to the United States and figured that leaving his instruments and records would not turn out to be as unfortunate a mistake as it was.

Whitney knew a ship that would be coming and had planned to take Cook’s chest on board with him but after time had passed and the ship had not shown up, Whitney had no choice but to take passage on the next available ship, which happened to be Peary’s. Peary had stopped the \textit{Roosevelt} on his return journey from the North Pole in Whitney’s native village and after questioning

\textsuperscript{126} Ibid, 230.  
\textsuperscript{127} Cook, \textit{My Attainment of the Pole}, 499.
Cook’s Inuits who were still recovering there, he planned to continue on to the United States. Whitney tried to barter passage for himself and for Cook’s chest of data and instruments but Peary refused to allow the chest on board his ship.\textsuperscript{128} Cook seems to bear him no ill will for this—“I have no complaint to make against Mr. Peary about this…he was at liberty to pick the freight of his own ship.”\textsuperscript{129} This was seen by Cook’s supporters as prompted by Peary’s jealousy and spite. Whitney resigned himself to this and hid the chest in the rocks on the coastline of his village, intending to return and retrieve it. And so they remained out of the hands of the experts who could possibly clear his name. They would never be recovered and Cook’s claim became that much harder for experts to verify (Figure 11).\textsuperscript{130}

Due to these problems with Cook’s story, Peary was generally accepted by the public and exploration community as the first American to have reached the North Pole. He had managed to turn the controversy around to his favor by a campaign of propaganda directed against Cook who saw it as an attempt to start a “personal fight” in which Peary and his supporters “tried to injure my veracity, my reputation for truth-telling, my personal honor.”\textsuperscript{131} However, Peary’s propaganda only succeeded because there was no one to refute him, for a number of reasons. Firstly, Cook mistakenly believed that no one would believe

\textsuperscript{128} Henderson, \textit{True North}, 247.
\textsuperscript{129} Cook, \textit{My Attainment of the Pole}, 500.
\textsuperscript{130} Miller, \textit{Discovery of the North Pole}, 92
\textsuperscript{131} Cook, \textit{My Attainment of the Pole}, 519.
Peary’s accusations because they seemed so “ridiculous”—afterwards, Cook would acknowledge that such thinking was “another of my many mistakes.”

Secondly, Cook eventually refused to fight back, believing that “nothing was to be gained by retaliation…No, I argued, this warfare of the many against one, under the dictates of envy, must ultimately bring to light its own injustice.”

Thirdly, after the controversy became too much for him to handle, Cook left the country and escaped the watchful eye of the media, describing himself as “unfit to bear the physical and mental demands and unable to cope with the many charges.” The American public was only hearing from Peary and with no answers from Cook, they soon forgot any of Cook’s defenses. When he finally returned and wrote his book to answer to all the charges that Peary had lain at his feet, he returned to an American public that had turned its back on him and was unwilling to hear his defense which it saw as too little, too late.

Peary also succeeded due to the investigating committees’ rulings in his favor. However, a closer examination of said committees reveals that most of the members in the organizations were decidedly pro-Peary and might not have done a thorough investigation before proclaiming him the victor. The American Geographic Society was a contributor to Peary’s own exploration group, the

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132 Ibid., 501
133 Ibid, 508.
134 Ibid, 481.
Peary Arctic Club.\textsuperscript{135} For a time, Peary had even been the president of the American Geographic Society from 1903-1907.\textsuperscript{136} The National Geographic Society also had close ties with Peary. He had been one of their star lecturers and had raised a considerable amount of revenue for them.\textsuperscript{137} A three man committee that had been formed by the National Geographic Society had found Peary’s claim to be true but the men on this committee were all personal friends of Peary.\textsuperscript{138} It also comes as no surprise that the House Committee on Naval Affairs ruled in Peary’s favor either—after all, Peary was a respected member of the Navy and his achievement in reaching the North Pole would also bring acclaim to the Navy. \textit{The New York Times} confirmed this, stating that “it is appropriate that the glory of confirming the last great discovery on the globe possible to man should come to a representative of the United States Navy, to which the country owes so many of the most brilliant pages in its history.”\textsuperscript{139}

In later years, the investigations of Peary and his records would be described as “perfunctory and hasty”, with most members of the investigation committees already hostile towards Cook because of their connections with Peary. So they came to a decision without really delving deep into the evidence as they perhaps should have. Cook was aware of this and commiserated with

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\textsuperscript{135} Rawlins, \textit{Peary at the North Pole}, 187. \\
\textsuperscript{136} Ibid. \\
\textsuperscript{137} Ibid, 189. \\
\textsuperscript{138} Henderson, \textit{True North}, 273. \\
\end{flushright}
the American public. He thought they were being hoodwinked in this controversy and unfairly turned against him—“To the public this society declared they were ‘neutral, unbiased and scientific’—no more deliberate lie than which was ever forced upon the public.”

Peary had friends in very high places, which ultimately contributed to his being accepted as the true discoverer. The president himself, Theodore Roosevelt, wrote an introduction to Peary’s book about the North Pole and persuaded the Navy to grant Peary leave for several of his expeditions.

This evidence came too late, however, since Peary was already credited as the discoverer of the North Pole. After the North Pole debate faded from the headlines, Peary hardly spoke of it and instead turned his attentions to his family, flying lessons, and organizing a patrol commission during World War One. He died in 1920 from the very disease that Cook had diagnosed him with when he had examined Peary on that rescue mission after one of Peary’s failed attempts at the Pole. Peary had evidently continued to disregard Cook’s professional advice and it cost him his life. Meanwhile, Cook had emerged from the North Pole controversy “branded as an imposter” and left the country, preferring to “remain in obscurity.”

140 Cook, *My Attainment of the Pole*, 543.
143 Ibid.
company.\textsuperscript{145} There were some problems encountered in which Cook was accused of illegal activities and arrested for mail fraud.\textsuperscript{146} He was sentenced to fourteen years in jail. He was paroled in 1930 and for the following years before his death, Cook tried adamantly to have his North Pole claim reconsidered and to clear his name.\textsuperscript{147} His requests were repeatedly denied due to a simple lack of interest and in 1940 Cook suffered a debilitating stroke which eventually caused his death in the following months.\textsuperscript{148}

Although both Cook and Peary maintained until the end of their days that they did reach the North Pole, there was never any way to substantiate their respective claims. Peary was generally accepted as the true discoverer but there were always uncertainties which haunted him. He could never fully enjoy the verdict in his favor because of the controversy that surrounded it. Instead of being remembered for reaching the North Pole, he would be most remembered for the controversy of polar exploration. Even in an obituary put forth by the Royal Geographic Society, the controversy occupied a substantial paragraph at the end of a summary of Peary’s life and accomplishments.\textsuperscript{149}

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\textsuperscript{145} Henderson, \textit{True North}, 285.
\textsuperscript{146} Ibid, 286.
\textsuperscript{147} Ibid, 289.
\textsuperscript{148} Ibid, 291.
\end{flushleft}
death was reported in *The New York Times* in 1940, most of his obituary was devoted to his role in the North Pole controversy.\textsuperscript{150}

Thus, both men lived out their lives under the bitter cloud of controversy instead of the glory and respect that each so desired. “Because the world mostly accepted Peary’s claim that he had reached the North Pole, interest in it languished after 1910.”\textsuperscript{151} Cook and Peary would prove to be among the last of the older race of explorers, those who raised money for their expeditions, excited the general public about discovery, and relied on their survival skills to carry them through the challenges and difficulties of the Arctic. However with the age of technology and flight, the North Pole was reached many times by airplane and submarine.\textsuperscript{152} The romantic era of men hauling their own equipment, struggling on foot over the ice of the Arctic was over. In 1968, an American insurance salesman named Ralph Plaisted headed an expedition on snowmobiles to the Pole, becoming the first person, “known for certain, beyond a doubt” to have reached the North Pole.\textsuperscript{153} And so, America could finally boast the honor of being the first country to undisputedly put an explorer at the North Pole, an honor that Cook and Peary had fought so hard for and ultimately ruined each other over decades earlier.

\textsuperscript{150} “Dr. F. A. Cook, 75, Explorer, Is Dead,” *The New York Times*, August 6, 1940.
\textsuperscript{151} Brandt, ed., *The North Pole*, 409.
\textsuperscript{152} Ibid, 410.
\textsuperscript{153} Ibid.
After so many years have passed since the alleged discovery of the North Pole, it is easier to examine both Cook and Peary’s claims directly instead of through a curtain of propaganda and deceit. After inspecting both men’s stories and the facts surrounding them, it is possible that Cook may not have been the fraud that Peary and most of the American public had branded him. Furthermore, it is possible that he was just as legitimate in his claims to have reached the North Pole as Peary. Unfortunately, it will never be known for certain whether it was Cook or Peary who reached the Pole first since neither explorer brought another man with them to substantiate their claims. Neither Cook nor Peary brought anyone who could read the navigational instruments in order to give a second opinion or prove them wrong—their only companions were Inuits and in Peary’s case, Henson, a man of limited navigational abilities. The only evidence to support their claims came from their own diaries and calculations—they asked the public and the exploration community to take them at their word and nothing else. Cook and Peary should have followed the examples of some of their contemporary explorers—Roald Amundsen and Robert Scott, both men who eventually would reach the South Pole, always brought on their expeditions “competent, first-hand witnesses who not only could navigate but who could share in the gathering and evaluating of raw data, thus verifying their reality.”154 But Cook and Peary chose not to and now the only

154 Rawlins, *Peary at the North Pole*, 126.
things that remain are their own individual accounts of their journeys, the records
of those who investigated them and the indignation and resentment of the
advocates of each explorer. The era of polar exploration has long been at an
end, but the legacies of these two men will remain not only for the controversy
surrounding them but also for their courage, endurance and contributions to
science and America's honor.
Chapter 3

Treatment of Native Inuit Peoples

In view of the fact that polar exploration was such an important aspect of American culture during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, attention is given mostly to the actual tale of the controversy between Robert Peary and Frederick Cook, to their perseverance as explorers, to the glory that they brought to the United States and to the competitive tension between them as they both claimed to have been the first man at the North Pole. However, an aspect of the story that is generally overlooked because of the controversy itself is the treatment of the native peoples that inhabited the polar regions. The media attention and the nation’s attention was fixed on who would reach the Pole first, not on how the explorers treated the natives they encountered on their many journeys and failed attempts.

During the era of polar exploration, explorers regularly came into contact with native peoples in both the North Pole and South Pole regions, indigenous peoples that had been living there for centuries and who had adapted to the extreme climate and harsh way of life. Because of their expertise in survival and knowledge of the region, these natives were an important resource for the polar explorers. They would not seek out the North Pole themselves because they knew all too well the dangers that came with such a journey and they preferred to
stay close to land and to their hunting grounds that would help them survive in such a harsh climate. However, the native Inuits were an integral part of the plan explorers used to map out their journey. The explorers depended on the assistance of local Inuits.

Explorers persuaded the Inuits to assist in their journeys to the North Pole by telling them of the new lands where there would be an excess of game for them to hunt and by trading tools, weapons and other implements for their services.155 They were used as guides, hunters, laborers, and general companions. Any necessary equipment, such as sledges, was mostly built by the indigenous tribes because they knew how to travel safely and quickly across the ice. They also knew how to remain healthy during the long journeys in the climate of the Arctic as they subsisted mainly on raw meat which lowered their chances of scurvy, a common ailment that claimed the lives of many polar explorers. The Inuits also provided another necessary part of a polar journey—trained sled dogs to pull the sledges.156 Indeed, explorers came to rely so heavily on the Inuits that some historians have even come to the conclusion that without their help, many, if not all, of the expeditions to the North Pole would have failed, some saying “Peary’s name might have been less famous than it is now” without their help.157

156 Ibid, 52.
Some experiences with the natives became even more intimate than just worker/employer relations. Roald Amundsen, a Norwegian explorer who spent his life exploring the Antarctic and who ultimately reached the South Pole, even “rescued” two young native children from their communities, brought them back with him and paraded them as his “foster children.” However, Amundsen eventually tired of their presence and sent them to Seattle for return passage to their native land, Chukchi, never to bother himself with them again. Peary himself even took an Inuit wife while on one of his many journeys in the Arctic and they had a son together.

As illustrated by Amundsen, the attitudes of polar explorers towards their native companions could be patronizing or even indifferent. For the most part, however, explorers had a peculiar paternal attitude towards their native companions and those they met along the way. Robert Peary, for example, enjoyed the Inuit community and reportedly was “less offended” by their customs and traditions than other polar explorers who thought they should be converted to Christianity. However, he still believed that “they valued life only as did a fox or a bear, purely instinctively” and did not have any interest in learning their customs or language as did his rival, Frederick Cook.

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159 Ibid.
161 Ibid, 57.
162 Ibid.
Regardless of how the polar explorers felt about the natives they encountered, they knew that they were coming across untouched territory and that just as people at home would be curious about the North Pole journey itself and the actual polar region, they would also be interested about the inhabitants of such a foreign land and how they differed from them. Peary understood this and viewed the Inuits as people to be studied and examined as specimens. During one of his attempts to reach the North Pole in 1891, Peary passed his time by photographing the native community in which he was staying. He brought men, women and children in one at a time, had them “disrobe and positioned [them] in front of a wall next to the stove” after which he snapped photos of them from every angle, explaining to them that “their bodies would be compared with those of people from other regions of the world.”

Both Peary and his fellow polar explorers knew that the American public would be curious about these Inuit people and therefore, tried to satiate the public’s taste for the unknown by bringing back native trinkets, clothing and stories. This was not only for the benefit of the American public but for the explorer’s benefactors as well. The men who journeyed into the Arctic were well funded by private as well as public backers and if they came back from a journey with nothing to show for it, they risked losing their funding for future explorations. As discussed earlier, Peary even brought back a huge meteorite from a native

163 Ibid, 59.
Inuit tribe, in part to show how these people obtained the materials necessary to make their own tools. It was sold to the American Museum of Natural History for $40,000 by Peary’s wife, Josephine, reportedly to pay for her children’s education. The museum did not seem to think this was anything out of the ordinary and says nothing in its account about the effect this might have had on the tribe which relied on it for weapons. According to Peary’s rival, Frederick Cook, this “theft” was committed by Peary for “so-called scientific honors among his friends.”

**Six Inuits Brought from Greenland**

Perhaps the most disturbing means of demonstrating the culture of the native inhabitants of the polar regions and to satisfy the public was brought about in the late nineteenth century as Robert Peary was forced to turn back on one of his many failed trips to the North Pole before his reported success in 1909. After having been asked in 1895 by the assistant curator of the museum, Dr. Franz Boas, to bring him back one live Inuit “to study for a year”, Peary instead brought back six Inuits, promising them, according to one of the Inuits, “nice warm houses in the sunshine land, and guns and knives and needles and many other things”, none of which they ultimately received. The six Inuits that Peary brought back with him were his two best hunters and sledge drivers (Qisuk and

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165 Ibid.
166 Cook, *My Attainment of the Pole*, 514.
Nuktaq), the wife of Nuktaq (Antangana) and three young Inuits (Minik, Qisuk’s son along with Aviaq, Nuktaq’s daughter, and Uisaakassak, the betrothed of Aviaq).

The Inuits reportedly thought Peary was very convincing when he wanted to be and were eager to please him seeing as how he controlled the supply of trade goods to that district. They were taken by his promises of a land where people did not have to wear furs to stay warm, his tales of the great buildings and lights. Peary also promised that those who came with him would return within the year with guns and ammunition for the hunters and presents for the women and children. Peary’s promises convinced the Inuits that “for so much good and comfort for their people, they should…make the trip.”

Peary and the Inuits reached the United States in 1897 where 20,000 people had gathered to view the Inuits on their first dock at harbor. Everyone had to have a ticket to be admitted onto the ship to view the Inuits. Thus, they were not even in the museum yet and they were already on exhibit. Wherever the ship docked, thousands of people gathered to catch a glimpse of the foreign passengers. Reportedly, the crowds found the young Inuits to be the most interesting and fed them peanuts and sweets as if they were zoo animals. Indeed, as per one of the ship’s officers, “the children were sick from the quantity

170 Ibid.
171 Ibid, 22.
of sweet things given to them” because of the change in diet from their native raw meat.\textsuperscript{172}

Peary’s reasons for bringing the Inuits to New York were simple, at least on his end. He had first been asked in 1891 by Professor F. W. Putnam of the Peabody Museum of American Archaeology and Ethnology at Harvard University to collect any anthropological specimens that he could find from his travels in the Arctic to bring back so that Putnam could bring to life his grand scheme of “assembling the largest anthropological collection ever exhibited at a world’s fair for the World’s Columbian Exposition being planned in Chicago.”\textsuperscript{173}

Many letters were exchanged between Peary and Putnam regarding the types of materials Putnam desired and Peary’s eagerness to help in the whole affair. Peary did not bring back any Inuit remains at that time based on a passage in one of the letters he sent Putnam in which he lamented, “I regret very much that the list does not include a stone house or any skeletons.”\textsuperscript{174} However, he quickly remedied that a few months later as noted in another letter sent to Putnam in which Peary lists “1 Eskimaux skull from grave at Nettik” as part of a group of artifacts he was sending to aid in the exhibit.\textsuperscript{175} Thus, Peary had already begun digging up Inuit graves in order to send samples back to America for exhibit and for a share in the profits.

\textsuperscript{172} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{174} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{175} Ibid.
Putnam would later be named part time curator of Anthropology at the American Museum of Natural History with Dr. Franz Boas as his assistant curator. They would continue corresponding with Peary about contributing Arctic anthropological material which is how Boas, a man who harbored a deep interest in Inuits as a civilization and in the Arctic in general, would come to ask Peary to bring back a live Inuit specimen with him this time.\(^{176}\) A letter from Boas to Peary on May 24, 1895, in the American Museum of Natural History Department of Anthropology’s file (1896-38), puts forth Boas’ exact request.\(^{177}\) Based on Peary’s prior deals made with Putnam and Boas regarding bringing back anthropological materials in return for money and credit in the exhibit, Peary was already well versed in these types of dealings with museum authorities and did not find it out of the ordinary that Boas would have asked such a favor from him.

By bringing back not one, but six Inuits, Peary no doubt felt that he was doubling the amount of prestige and boosting his reputation in the eyes of the museum and the museum’s scientists. He also felt obligated to do so because his repeated attempts at reaching the North Pole were in part funded by Morris Jesup, then president of the American Museum of Natural History. Jesup was also the one who organized the Peary Arctic Club, an organization that would finance Peary’s trips to the North Pole in the coming years up until his reported

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\(^{177}\) Ibid, 239.
success in 1909. Thus, it is easy to see where his loyalties were in regards to choosing between the wellbeing of the Inuits brought to the museum and the fame that Peary was amassing for both himself and the museum. Jesup was president of the museum until his death and his presidency “largely shaped the museum as an instrument of popular education and research.”

Jespup himself did not find anything surprising about Peary bringing back a group of Inuits to the museum, as per a handwritten note in the museum’s archives in File 517 that Jesup wrote on the bottom of a memo in 1898 saying “I understand Peary brought this party here at the suggestion of the Department of Anthropology.”

However, two years had passed since Boas had first requested Peary to bring back a live specimen when Peary actually showed up at the museum with the Inuits in tow. With his other responsibilities at the museum, Boas had forgotten about the possibility that Peary would possibly be bringing Inuits for study and was “stunned when he found out Peary had brought Inuits back.”

With the appearance of Peary and the six Greenland Inuits, Boas remembered why he had asked for a live specimen to begin with. Boas intended to “collect data from the Inuits that would challenge conventional notions of a racial hierarchy amongst the world’s peoples.” It was his belief that people were not ranked from primitive to advanced but instead were essentially the same, a radical notion at the time since the impression of most American anthropologists

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180 David Hurst Thomas, *Skull Wars*, 78.
182 Ibid.
during the 19th century was that "white people are at the top of a ladder and that dark skinned people are at the bottom of the ladder".\textsuperscript{183} By studying a live Inuit, Boas hoped to discredit this and give a different perspective to the rest of the anthropological community. Ultimately, this type of research that Boas conducted "transformed theories of cultural difference and discredited 19th century concepts of a racial hierarchy" and led to Boas being regarded as the founder of modern American anthropology.\textsuperscript{184}

The six Inuits were put in the basement of the American Museum of Natural History where they became very sick due to the change in climate from their native region. Even during their time in the basement, visitors were given permission to come down and look at the Inuits although Boas had "stressed that the Eskimos were visiting New York strictly for scientific purposes—not to be exhibited".\textsuperscript{185} Knowing they were ill, the Inuits attempted to perform their native spiritual practices to ward off illness and local newspapers documented these acts and saw them as a form of entertainment.\textsuperscript{186} Boas knew that the Inuits were having an adverse reaction to being in a different climate and had attempted to find them a way back home but all he could arrange was passage to Labrador.\textsuperscript{187} Knowing that this was still a long way from their native Greenland, he decided it would do more harm than good to send them away. They were eventually taken

\begin{thebibliography}{99}
\bibitem{183} Ibid.
\bibitem{184} Ibid.
\bibitem{185} David Hurst Thomas, \textit{Skull Wars}, 79.
\bibitem{186} Kenn Harper, \textit{Give Me My Father's Body}, 30.
\end{thebibliography}
to an upstate New York farm to recuperate but died shortly thereafter. Only two boys survived, Uisaakassak and Minik.

After about a year in the United States, Uisaakassak returned to Greenland and would go on to tell tales of New York to his fellow Inuits, who nicknamed him “the Big Liar” due to their disbelief over his supposed tall tales. There is no mention of why Minik did not join Uisaakassak back to Greenland when he had the chance. Qisuk, Minik’s father, was the first to succumb to sickness and his remains were returned to the museum for study and exhibition. The museum staged a mock funeral for Minik in order to alleviate his grief—a log was put inside the coffin.

Robert Peary was relatively silent during the plight of the Inuits. When Qisuk died, he sent a short telegram to the museum expressing his condolences and taking responsibility but made no public statement about the incident as he knew it would probably put him in an unfavorable light. This telegram is kept in the archives of the Department of Anthropology in the museum, File 1900-6. Indeed, it could be said that he used his “selective memory” to “wash his hands of the whole sordid affair.”

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190 Ibid, 114.
191 Ibid, 39.
192 Ibid, 240.
193 Ibid, 42.
While the Inuits’ health was deteriorating in the basement of the American Museum of Natural History, William Wallace, a building superintendent at the museum, was developing a relationship with Minik, who was proving to be an intelligent boy who was becoming quite taken with the city and its people. He was reportedly picking up English words very quickly and was counted upon as the “brightest in the group.” It was to Wallace’s cottage in upstate New York that the Inuits were brought to recuperate when they were first ill and when all but Minik and Uisaakassak had succumbed to death, Wallace was there to comfort Minik and to act as a father figure for him. Minik moved in with the Wallace family. Morris K. Jesup, the president of the American Museum of Natural History, backed Wallace in this decision to take in Minik and even promised to compensate the Wallace family for the added expense of taking in the child. Minik took the new name of Minik Peary Wallace.

Minik began his life in New York and acted as any normal young boy. He seemed to adapt well and made friends easily. He also visited the museum frequently since Wallace was still employed there and was greeted with pleasure by the museum employees. However, the museum did not pass up any

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194 Ibid, 30.
195 Ibid.
196 Ibid, 44.
opportunity to utilize him and he was sometimes made to participate in the living exhibit in the basement of the museum.\textsuperscript{197}

Minik's new life came to a halt when it was found out that Wallace had been embezzling money from the museum to pay for his own expenses and left the museum's employment in disgrace. This put a strain on the finances of the family and Wallace was embroiled in years of fighting with the museum to get the compensation promised to him by Jesup. Jesup refused to have anything more to do with Wallace or Minik after the financial scandal and after Jesup's death in 1908, Wallace gave up on trying to get any support for Minik.\textsuperscript{198} Soon after the scandal, Wallace's wife died. These events had a major effect on Minik, who saw Wallace and his wife as his own surrogate parents in this new world. He was deeply depressed with the death of Wallace's wife.

It was only a matter of time before Minik found out that the funeral he had attended for his beloved father had been staged for his benefit as the museum used Qisuk's body as a scientific study. After a trip to the museum, Minik's eye was drawn to a display case that housed a number of Inuit artifacts and skeletons. He noticed that the label for one of them claimed it to be "The Skeleton of Qisuk, a Polar Eskimo."\textsuperscript{199} He was heartbroken and could hardly believe what he was seeing. Hadn't he seen the funeral for himself? Franz Boas later confirmed that the museum had faked the burial in order to keep Minik from

\textsuperscript{197} Ibid, 48.
\textsuperscript{198} Ibid, 111.
\textsuperscript{199} Ibid, 183.
knowing how the museum was actually using his father’s skeleton but also to comfort the child. Boas also reasoned that Minik had not asked for his father’s body at the time of death so the museum had a legitimate claim to it.

Qisuk’s body was not the only one taken for scientific study. The study of skulls and brains was a typical practice associated with scientists of the time. One of the Inuit women who was also brought to New York with Minik and the others, was taken to a college where her brain was removed and an autopsy performed. In a separate incident, a young Alaskan girl was brought to New York by a fur trader and then died of consumption. Her body was sent to Columbia University where it was preserved and then turned over to the American Museum of Natural History since she had no relatives to claim her. After the death of a Native American named Ishi in 1916, who was considered to be the last surviving member of the Yahi tribe in California and was exhibited in A.L. Kroeber’s Museum of Anthropology in San Francisco, an autopsy was performed and his brain was removed for study, even against the wishes of Kroeber himself who wanted Ishi to have the full burial rites of his native tribe.

Once he knew the truth about where his father’s body was and that the funeral had been staged, Minik began to call for the return of the remains from the museum. The only contact Minik had within the museum was the director,

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200 Ibid, 88.
201 Ibid, 89.
202 Ibid, 90.
203 Ibid, 95.
204 David Hurst Thomas, Skull Wars, 88.
Hermon Carey Bumpus. However, Bumpus seemed intent on evading Minik and his efforts. According to Harper, “he bore no bad feelings toward Minik personally but resented the interest in Minik that drew reporters to his door and caused his name to be bandied about in the newspapers.”²⁰⁵ So Minik continued to fight in vain for his father’s remains.

At this time, he had moved out of the Wallace household and was trying to further his education but he was frequently ill and had to interrupt his studies. In 1908, he heard that Peary was planning a trip to Greenland and would be leaving that summer.²⁰⁶ He was unable to get in touch with Peary himself and approached Bumpus, hoping the director could arrange passage for Minik on Peary’s ship. Apparently, according to a note on a memo by Bumpus in the museums archives, File 517, Bumpus tried but failed to arrange such passage.²⁰⁷ Wallace then tried and Peary replied that the ship was too full and that perhaps another trip could be arranged at a different time.²⁰⁸

Minik returned to his studies at Manhattan College but his time there was less than pleasant. He still suffered from recurring bouts of illness and in addition, he was an object of constant curiosity and began to feel “more or less a freak” to those around him.²⁰⁹ Minik continued to ask for the return of his father’s

²⁰⁶ Ibid, 117.
²⁰⁷ Ibid.
²⁰⁸ Ibid.
²⁰⁹ Ibid, 127.
remains during this time and also began to talk to the press about his situation. Based on some disparaging comments he made about Peary and Peary’s refusal to take him north with him, articles surfaced which cast Peary in a less than favorable light. Peary and his wife were embarrassed by the negative press and worried that it was tarnishing Peary’s reputation and would stand in the way of him receiving future funding for his efforts to reach the North Pole.²¹⁰

They needn’t have worried. Minik soon got another chance to head north back to Greenland. He departed in July 1909 to finally go back home just as Robert Peary was leaving for his final journey to the North Pole, the journey after which he would claim he had finally reached the elusive spot. His homecoming to Uummannaq was a bit awkward as he was now more American than Inuit. He no longer knew the language or the customs. His people quickly accepted him back into their lives and Minik adapted back into this new atmosphere. He became an agile hunter and loved to tell his companions stories about New York. He married a local Inuit woman but their marriage ended quickly because of her apparent slovenly ways.²¹¹ But he was homesick for America and after a few years, in 1916, he returned to America.

Eventually, as the years wore on with no change in attitude from the museum in regards to his father’s body, interest in Minik’s story and the plight of

²¹⁰ Ibid, 139.
²¹¹ Ibid, 171.
his fellow Inuits waned. Minik still tried to obtain his father’s body but with even less response from those he contacted about the matter. By 1916, the United States was embroiled in the war in Europe and no longer had attention to spare for Minik.\(^{212}\) The newspapers no longer cared about the story and most people believed that he had grown into an adult and now must be over the trauma of discovering his father’s body as an exhibit in the museum. Minik drifted from city to city, picking up work where he could and even applied to become a citizen in 1917.\(^{213}\) While working in a lumberyard in New Hampshire, Minik caught the flu and on October 29\(^{th}\), he died of bronchial pneumonia.\(^{214}\) He was buried near the Indian Stream.

The American Museum of Natural History continued to bear a sense of “shame and guilt” over its role in Minik’s life in New York.\(^{215}\) If anyone approached the museum asking for information about their involvement with the Inuits that Peary brought back with him to Greenland, they were given the run around and never really given any information.\(^{216}\) With the coming of Kenn Harper’s privately published book recording the story of Minik and his Inuit companions and the role of the American Museum of Natural History, more attention was given to the incident and pressure was put on the museum to

\(^{212}\) Ibid, 208.
\(^{213}\) Ibid, 211.
\(^{214}\) Ibid, 218.
\(^{215}\) Ibid, 222.
\(^{216}\) Ibid.
finally release the skeletons of the Inuits back to Greenland in 1993, including the bones of Minik’s father.

One newspaper article in particular helped to bring about more attention, aptly titled “The Skeleton in the Museum’s Closet” in which the reporter tells the story of Minik and his Inuit companions as well as the museum’s role in hiding Qisuk’s remains. It also calls attention to the “insensitivity of the scientific community” and of the American Museum of Natural History for trying to cover the story up. The director of public affairs of the museum was interviewed for the piece in the *Washington Post* and is quoted as saying that he could not comment on the Minik’s experience or the museum’s role in it because “it was a long time ago and I wasn’t around.” Articles such as this brought much needed attention to the subject of past injustices that native peoples had suffered at the hands of whites seeking fame and museums seeking scientific study.

In 1993, the museum finally returned the remains to Greenland where they were given a proper native burial in early August of that year by the Thule Museum in Qaanaaq. A plaque on the grave read simply, “They have come home.” Originally, William Wallace’s great-granddaughter had sought to have Qisuk’s remains buried next to Minik’s in New Hampshire but expressed her general satisfaction that no matter where he was buried, “the main thing is that

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218 Ibid.
220 Ibid.
they are getting Qisuk out of the museum.” The homecoming was recorded in a Washington Post article which also skewered Peary and the museum for their actions in the whole affair.

Frederick Cook summed up this entire incident in his memoir, saying:

Seven or eight Eskimos were put aboard a ship against their will and brought to New York for museum purposes. They were locked up in a cellar in New York, awaiting a market place. Before the profit-time arrived, because of unhygienic surroundings and improper food, all but one died. When in the grip of death, through a Mrs. Smith, who ministered to their last wants, they appealed with tears in their eyes for some word from Mr. Peary. They begged that he extend them the attention of visiting them before their eyes closed to a world of misery and trouble. There came no word and no responsive call from the man who was responsible for their suffering. Of seven or eight innocent wild people, but one little child survived.

Although there are elements of exaggeration in Cook’s version of the story, such as the number of Inuits brought to New York and the fact that they were “awaiting a market place”, the details where Peary ignored their pleas and later the pleas of Minik, seem to be true.

Ironically, In his 1910 memoir about his trek to the North Pole, Peary states that “the suggestions of some well meaning persons that they [the Inuits] be transported to a more hospitable region would, if carried out, cause their extermination in two or three generations…our variable climate they could not endure, as they are keenly susceptible to pulmonary and bronchial affections.”

One can only conclude that he talks so confidently about how the Inuits would be affected by such a drastic change in environment because of his own knowledge

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221 Ibid.
222 Ibid.
223 Cook, My Attainment of the Pole, 514.
224 Peary, The North Pole, 47.
about the deaths of the Inuits that he himself brought to New York from Greenland. Not once in his memoir does he mention this but he stated that they should not be moved to the United States because of dangers to their health when he did exactly that years before!

Today, after hearing the plight of these Inuits and of Minik in particular, the general reaction to the story is horror as to the end that they met, pity for the families and shame that we, as a nation, stood by and let this happen. Lives were lost…and for what? So these peoples and cultures that were foreign to us, as Americans, could be gaped at and displayed as dehumanized exhibits, for our entertainment and for profit. The six Inuits brought back by Robert Peary were not the first native people or human curiosities that were put up as living exhibits throughout American culture. Nor would they be the last because during this era, exhibits like this were springing up all over the world in world fairs, freak shows and dime museums.

**Museums of the Time**

In the period coined “the Gay Nineties”, people found themselves with more free time and thus entertained themselves with activities such as picnics and social gatherings. The most up and coming forms of leisure activities were state fairs, expositions and carnivals. These fairs graduated from celebrating agricultural achievements to becoming a place to highlight American innovations.

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and technological wonders. They proved to be a good source of money making and were extremely popular. Along with showcasing innovations, fairs also displayed bands, circuses and amusement rides.

There were also expositions in which states and cities would hold grander scale fairs with activities such as those listed above but they also served to “feature a specific region of the country.” Buffalo’s Pan-American Exposition in 1901 and the Louisiana Purchase Exposition in 1904 were two of the largest of these expositions along with expositions held in New Orleans in 1884, Chicago in 1893, Omaha in 1898, Saint Louis in 1904, Portland in 1905, and Seattle in 1909, among others. International expositions, or world’s fairs, were similar to these but on a much grander scale. In many cases, the locations of these fairs were chosen in order to give an economic boost to the city or region in which the fairs were held. Fairs were used to promote manufacturing and commercial interests along with showing off the “economic strength and artistic resources” of a nation. The United States had its own world’s fair in 1876 with the Centennial Exhibition in Philadelphia which boasted agricultural, industrial and cultural exhibits.

The darker side of these fairs and expositions was their expression on the idea of race, nationality and ethnology. Rydell, a leading historian on world’s

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226 Ibid, 140.
227 Ibid.
228 Rydell, All the World’s A Fair, 2.
229 Ibid.
230 Bogdan, Freak Show, 48.
fairs, claims that “at the fairs, the idea of technological and national progress became laced with scientific racism.”\(^{231}\) He also maintains that these fairs ultimately “legitimized racial exploitation.”\(^{232}\) This idea led to the creation of “human zoos” in which real life tribes and native peoples from across the globe were put on exhibit for the purpose of entertainment and viewing enjoyment. This was ostensibly to show them “how other people lived in their native habitats” but also to “prove American superiority and technological achievement.”\(^{233}\) For example, Africans were exhibited at fairs in Chicago (1893) and Buffalo (1901) in villages to show them in their “natural habitat.” Nearly twelve hundred Filipinos were displayed much the same way in the 1904 Louisiana Purchase Exposition in St. Louis, an example of one of the largest scale exhibits.\(^{234}\) In the Pan-American Exposition in Buffalo in 1901, Mexicans were exhibited in villages in which boasted the most realistic reproductions of the architecture of different cities and villages in Mexico as well as the “racial customs and characteristic street scenes of the Mexican people” such as sports and routine daily life activities.\(^{235}\) Labrador Inuits were also displayed at the 1893 World Columbian Exposition in Chicago.\(^{236}\)

\(^{231}\) Rydell, *All the World’s A Fair*, 5.

\(^{232}\) Ibid, 236.

\(^{233}\) Ibid, *Freak Show*, 48.


\(^{235}\) Rydell, *All the World’s A Fair*, 148.

Many enjoyed these human zoo exhibits at the fairs but there were a slim minority of the populace who did object to seeing such treatment. A staff member of one of the anthropologists responsible for setting up a Native American Indian exhibit at the Columbian Exposition in Chicago in 1893 objected publicly to the *New York Times* and was subsequently dismissed from her position.237 She accused the exhibit of misleading people into thinking that Indians were “either savage or could be educated only by government agencies” and also claimed that “every means was used to keep self-civilized Indians out of the Fair.”238 She went on to further accuse the exhibit and those involved with it of purposely displaying the Indians in such a way as to validate any stereotypical opinions held by Americans.

In addition to state fairs and expositions, dime museums had emerged in the middle of the nineteenth century as a source of cheap, popular entertainment. Most began as “cabinets of curiosities” owned by private collectors and were meant to be centers of scientific study.239 However, soon these collectors began to publicly display their “cabinets” to earn extra income. The only way to make money was to not only show their “high-quality” items but also to display “sensational novelties to attract crowds.”240 These early museums charged admission ranging from ten to fifty cents and were open seven days a week, sometimes for as many as twelve hours a day.

237 Rydell, *All the World’s A Fair*, 63.
238 Ibid.
240 Ibid.
accommodate the “working man’s” time schedule.241 This made them very accessible and contributed to their explosive growth in popularity.

In the mid 19th century including, the United States experienced an influx of European immigrants, most of whom were settling into America’s cities. The dime museum sprang up in virtually every city. Many of them were geared towards these new immigrants and others who were poor, uneducated and non-English speaking.242 The dime museum acted as a sort of safe haven in the midst of a country on the brink of “formidable challenges of modernization” by essentially distracting its visitors from the chaos of the outside world through its exhibits of the wonders of the natural world.243 At its peak between 1880 and 1900, the dime museum offered “dioramas, panoramas, georamas, cosmoramas, paintings, relics, freaks, stuffed animals, waxworks, and theatrical performances”, all for a low admission fee.244

The first and most well known dime museum was P.T. Barnum’s American Museum, which he claimed to be “an encyclopedic synopsis of everything worth seeing in this curious world.”245 Barnum’s American Museum operated from 1841 to 1865 in New York City. It featured sensational exhibits as well as human freak shows. Some of his more memorable exhibits were the Feejee Mermaid

241 Ibid, 8.
242 Bogdan, Freak Show, 35.
243 Bennett, Weird and Wonderful, 7
244 Ibid, 5.
245 Ibid, 27.
exhibit and a Swiss bearded lady. His goal was strictly to make money by sensationalizing his museum and the museum’s sole purpose was to be shocking, get publicity and earn money. Barnum’s American Museum burned to the ground in 1865, at which time P.T. Barnum retired from the museum world. He would not be the last to embrace the turning tide of museums transitioning “from science and education to entertainment and amusement while still maintaining the trappings of the museum’s respectability.”

However, not everyone viewed the museum as respectable. Barnum and his museum were looked down upon by the more upright members of the emerging museum field. Edwin Lawrence Godkin, the associate editor of the *New York Evening Post*, wrote a scathing review of Barnum’s American Museum in which he celebrated its destruction. He categorized the “so-called museum” as a place that “respectable people never went” to and where only the “worst and most corrupt classes of our people resort” because it “pandered to the most foolish curiosity and to the most morbid appetite for the marvelous.”

Furthermore, Godkin saw in the destruction of Barnum’s American Museum the opportunity to create “a real museum” to rival some of Europe’s best institutions, such as the British Museum. However, Godkin’s point of view was only

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246 Bogdan, *Freak Show*, 32.
248 Ibid, 35.
shared by a minority of the population at the time and museums such as Barnum’s American Museum remained popular.

George H. Huber also opened a museum in New York around this time, called Huber’s Museum, a dime museum known for having a spectacular array of freak shows and was the most popular New York City attraction until it closed in 1910.249 P.T. Barnum’s American Museum was not the only popular dime museum in the country—other museums emerged in St. Louis, Boston, Baltimore and Providence.250 Dime museums flourished up until World War I when they gradually lost favor and closed down.251

While freak shows were a part of the amusements offered in dime museums like P.T. Barnum’s and George Huber’s, as well as in state fairs, world fairs and expositions alike, they were also separate forms of entertainment in and of themselves. Their inclusion in these fairs and expositions helped legitimize them as their own form of entertainment. P.T. Barnum’s American Museum brought the freak show to prominence as a part of the “popular amusement industry.”252 Although these displays are no longer tolerated and considered to be the highest form of exploitation, for a century starting in 1840 freak shows were the epitome of amusement and were extremely profitable in American culture. It is estimated that hundreds of human beings were toured around the

249 Bennett, *Weird and Wonderful*, 58.
250 Ibid, 41.
251 Ibid, xi.
252 Bogdan, *Freak Show*, 10.
country in the last quarter of the nineteenth and first quarter of the twentieth centuries.\textsuperscript{253}

Freak shows stemmed from early museums or the aforementioned “cabinets of curiosities”—it was the human curiosities that brought in the people and more importantly, the profit for those running the museums. It is also important to note that during this time period, indigenous peoples were not the only ones objectified in this manner and subjected to poor treatment. Those with mental handicaps and those with physical differences were treated similarly. In general, anyone who was considered different in any way could be subjected to poor treatment just like non-Westerners in early museums and freak shows. However, for the purpose of this study, more of a focus is on the treatment of native peoples and non-Westerners. To those who ran these shows as part of the museums, the native people exhibited were “of scientific interest because they represented specimens, data to be examined in quest of answers to the pressing scientific question of the day.”\textsuperscript{254} The study of these foreigners helped further the classification of human races and “the place of various humans in the great chain of being.”\textsuperscript{255}

Freak shows typically showcased different “types” of freaks, either unknown races or “nature’s jokes or mistakes.”\textsuperscript{256} Around this time, Americans were exploring the world and different regions, not only the Arctic region as

\textsuperscript{253} Ibid, 2.  
\textsuperscript{254} Ibid, 29.  
\textsuperscript{255} Ibid.  
\textsuperscript{256} Ibid, 6.
Peary and Cook were. Those at home thirsted for stories of these non-Westerners and information on how and where they lived. Those who were brought back were exhibited in these freak shows as examples of non-Westerners and unknown races. The Inuits brought back by Peary would have fit under this category of “freaks.” There were also other instances where these exhibited peoples suffered just as the Inuits did in the American Museum of Natural History. The Jones twins, a set of 15 month old Siamese twins, died while on tour with a freak show most likely due to insufficient natal care.²⁵⁷

Non-Western people were put on exhibit as freaks. Their display was thought out carefully. It was presented in such a way as to best appeal to the public’s interests and curiosities. The freaks were displayed in their “natural” habitat, highly exaggerated or inaccurate, to amplify the “culturally strange, the primitive, the bestial, the exotic.”²⁵⁸ There were lectures that went along with the exhibits. The lecturer would give a “true life story” of the person on display including “purposefully erroneous and distorted information” about their life and customs.²⁵⁹ The person on display was dressed in a style that coincided with the story the lecturer was telling and in most cases, they were also expected to act out the story or “behave consistently with the front.”²⁶⁰

²⁵⁷ Ibid, 16.
²⁵⁸ Ibid, 105.
²⁵⁹ Ibid.
²⁶⁰ Ibid.
The Arctic and Antarctic regions were not the only continents that the American people were curious about. Africa was also the subject of scrutiny. The exhibition of Africans during this time period was another example of America’s obsession with “ethnological show business, displaying foreign peoples for commercial and/or educational purposes.” For example, an African woman named Saartjie Baartman, known as the Hottentot Venus, was put on display in London to showcase the difference in African physique compared with “the European notion of classic beauty.” She had a feature typical of the women in her tribe, “a greatly enlarged rump, which appears to have been the single feature of her anatomy sensational enough to bring out crowds to see her.” Those who came to see her were even encouraged to touch her “rump” and make certain there was no padding added to enhance her figure. Another group of Africans was put on exhibit throughout Europe for five years and drew crowds because of their “diminutive size and odd features” as well as their choice of lifestyle which included very little clothing, few possessions, no permanent homes and only rudimentary tools.

Along with displays highlighting the African continent, some world’s fairs and dime museums also put a spotlight on areas of the world such as the Philippines. The Bontoc Igorots were brought to the United States and became

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262 Ibid, 208.
263 Ibid.
264 Ibid.
265 Ibid, 211.
one of the most popular exhibits at the World’s Fair in St. Louis in 1904. Audiences were most interested in their strange religious rituals and fierce hunting reputations.\textsuperscript{266} Joining the Igorots were other “anthropological exhibits staged by the Department of Anthropology” such as Patagonian giants, American Indians, Japanese aboriginal Ainu and Central African Pygmies.\textsuperscript{267} Just as the Inuit people were treated when they were brought to the United States, the Igorots were treated as “anthropological freaks…and were dehumanized.”\textsuperscript{268} Therefore, the Inuit people were not the only ones brought to the Western world because of the American public’s interest in their countries and their culture. The context of American society and culture of the 19\textsuperscript{th} century allowed and encouraged this.

The American public enjoyed these exhibitions of human beings as a form of entertainment and there was little opposition to the morality of the practice. However, there is evidence that not all who saw the exhibits of human beings enjoyed the show. In an article published in \textit{The New York Times}, African American clergymen expressed horror and offense at the exhibit of Ota Benga, nicknamed “the Bushman”, in the New York Zoological Park.\textsuperscript{269} Benga was displayed in a cage with monkeys and Reverend Dr. R. S. MacArthur of Calvary

\textsuperscript{266} Thomson, ed. \textit{Freakery}, 219.
\textsuperscript{267} Ibid, 226.
\textsuperscript{268} Ibid, 219.
Baptist Church voiced his dismay over the exhibit, stating “the person responsible for this exhibition degrades himself as much as he does the African. Instead of making a beast of this little fellow, he should be put in school for the development of such powers as God gave to him.”

MacArthur also stated his plans to join together with other African American pastors and congregations to actively oppose the exhibit and work towards releasing Ota Benga from the cage.

As a result, because of their exposure to dime museums and freak shows that were popular at the time, no one thought it unusual that Peary brought back Inuits or that he exhibited them first on his own boat and then sold them to the American Museum of Natural History for them to exhibit at their own discretion. The regular display of foreign people at freak shows and dime museums had desensitized the American public to the actuality of what they were paying money to look at and enjoy for amusement.

In the late nineteenth century, dime museums and freak shows accustomed the American public to the idea of exhibiting outsiders, not just non-Westerners, but anyone who was considered unusual. People were desensitized to humans on exhibit. The museum was also using skeletons for study and refusing to send them back to their native homes for burial. This was typical of anthropologists in the 19th century when the field of anthropology was

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270 Ibid.
271 Ibid.
still in its formative period. In a quest for knowledge, skulls and skeletons from all over the world were studied, measured and compared in the hopes of understanding more about humans. If, in the pursuit of these potential discoveries, the early anthropologists acted unethically or requested some quite unbelievable things, like Franz Boas did when asking Peary to bring back Inuits as if they were mere objects, it was not considered unusual. It is easy for us now to judge their actions as immoral or unscrupulous because of what they did to obtain, preserve and study these remains. However, at that time, this was common practice.

These early anthropologists were “products of their times” and their approach to the Inuits and other foreign people could be construed as racist from today’s standpoint but in the time they lived, that was the common attitude. Men were superior to women. Whites were superior to blacks. Americans and Europeans were superior to foreigners. As per Kenn Harper, “the bones and brains that gather dust on the shelves of the back rooms of the world’s greatest museums were acquired in the spirit and hope of human enlightenment and betterment.”

He also makes the point that most of these people were already dead when brought to the museum and so had no awareness that their bodies were being dissected in the name of science.

273 Ibid.
However, things went too far with the six Inuits that were brought to the museum and then held in the basement. As stated by Kenn Harper, “it was one thing to collect human parts in the far off corners of the world but quite another to bring living specimens from the far-off corners of the world to entertain the public and allow the scientists of America to do their work in comfort.”274 Everyone had profited from the Inuits being brought to the museum—Peary got the fame, the American public got to gape at them for entertainment, and Boas got his scientific study (three, in fact—“The Eskimo of Smith Sound”, “Animal Tales of the Eskimo”, and “Tales of the Smith Sound Eskimo”).275 Everyone profited except for the four Inuits who paid with their lives “for this meager addition to scientific knowledge.”276

As a society, we can try to understand the attitudes of the time that would have contributed to making the situation what it was. On the other hand, there must be a point where we acknowledge that something went horribly wrong and no amount of attempted understanding can take away from the fact that people suffered and died in the name of science and knowledge. Based on tragic situations such as Minik’s, laws are now in place and ethical codes are required of museums in order to make restitution for situations such as this that occurred in the late nineteenth century.

274 Ibid.
276 Ibid.
Chapter 4

Native Advocacy to Promote Reform

In the decades after Minik’s death, there was a gradual change in society’s outlook both in regards to the treatment of native peoples and in regards to museum’s use of native people’s bones for scientific study. Instances of racial discrimination are considered wrong in today’s society. To single out a people because of their cultural or racial differences is no longer correct, especially not in the way it was during Peary’s lifetime when exhibiting Inuits and people from other regions of the world was considered entertainment.

This shift in attitude contributed to the American Museum of Natural History’s decision to return Qisuk’s body to his native country in 1993. It was no longer considered decent behavior for museums to use these remains—or in some cases, artifacts—in such a manner and to refuse to cooperate with relatives of the deceased who were calling for the return of the remains. Conflicts were arising between science driven behavior and culturally driven beliefs. However, the shift in attitude discussed earlier was not the only aspect that drove reform. Indigenous people played a large part in advocating for the return of their cultural property. Native people began to come together demanding action be taken to address the wrongs that had occurred regarding their cultural patrimony being housed in museums.
By himself, Minik was unable to convince the American Museum of Natural History to return his father’s body to him. Although there were people around him who cared for him and also felt the museum should have returned Qisuk’s body to Minik, they were not willing to give him the backing necessary that would have given weight to his demands and caused the museum to really take Minik’s claim seriously. There were no fellow Inuits to stand behind Minik and give him support in numbers. There was no legislation in place for him to call upon when asking the museum for his father’s body.

In contrast to the early 20th century when Minik was calling for the return on Qisuk’s remains, today there is more unity of the indigenous people of the world against the mishandling of their cultural items. There is strength in numbers now that was never there during Minik’s era. Native people have banded together to advocate for reform in regards to restitution of past wrongs and repatriation of their cultural patrimony. As with other reform movements such as the civil rights movement and the suffrage movement, strength in numbers is important in making the world listen and recognize the demands made by those advocating for reform. When it was just Minik calling for the return of his father’s remains, his demands were not recognized because he was just one individual.

For example, once American Indians began to form organizations and band together against the mishandling of their funerary remains and grave goods
at the hands of museums, things began to change in their favor, as will be discussed later. Examples of such organizations included the Indian Rights Association (1882), the American Indian Association (1922), the National Congress of American Indians (1944), and the American Indian Movement (1968), among others.\textsuperscript{277} They also organized protests in order to increase public awareness. Several hundred American Indians led a peaceful protest march, the Longest Walk, the outcome of which was the American Indians Against Desecration organization that would feature prominently in the call for repatriation laws.\textsuperscript{278} This instance of an indigenous people uniting for a common cause was indicative of what other native people would ultimately do to further their cause of restitution and repatriation.

\textbf{Legislation}

With indigenous people coming together to advocate for restitution and repatriation, there was a realization that no change can come without specific legislation in place to provide the proper backing to add weight to their demands. The issue of repatriation amongst American museums has become a complex and delicate one. Although museum officials have a responsibility to the artifacts and collections they exhibit, they also have to reconcile themselves with the fact that those who previously owned the artifact(s) or consider them to be an important part of their heritage, could potentially ask for them to be returned, just

\textsuperscript{277} Fine-Dare, \textit{Grave Injustice}, 75.
\textsuperscript{278} Ibid, 78.
as Minik asked the American Museum of Natural History. Museum professionals have to do their duty with respect to exhibiting and researching artifacts, including human remains, while at the same time maintaining relationships with the native people of whom the artifacts are a representation. This tension between museums wishing to preserve artifacts for the public to see and research them and indigenous people wanting their ancestors back for the sake of their religious and spiritual beliefs has resulted in legislation regarding repatriation of human remains.

Awareness of this tension was heightened by the media and by intensive lobbying. For example, attention to the subject of repatriation was helped along by the media in terms of the newspaper articles discussed in Chapter 1 regarding the American Museum of Natural History and Minik’s story. Kenn Harper’s book, also discussed in Chapter 1, contributed to this as well by bringing attention to the plight of a certain group of indigenous people. Efforts were made to “sensitize the larger population to the specific values underlying the changes sought.” This led to more indigenous people joining the cause. When representing a minority group, effecting change requires “recruiting the support of the majority population or at least convincing a majority of the legislators that such support has been obtained.”

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280 Ibid, 117.
recognized this and their strength in numbers and appeals to legislators helped push legislation through that would protect their people and cultural artifacts.

NAGPRA, the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act gained national recognition as a “new milestone in Indian and white relations”.\textsuperscript{282} The legislative history of NAGPRA began in 1987. Many Native Americans and tribal leaders from across the country testified at length regarding repatriation and the importance of grave protection for the Native American communities.\textsuperscript{283} The bill was passed in 1990 by President George Bush.\textsuperscript{284} The two main objectives of NAGPRA are to repatriate American Indian remains and other cultural items that are being stored in museums or on display and to ban the illegal trafficking of Native American remains and artifacts as well as prohibiting the selling, buying, or transporting for sale of any human remains of a Native American taken from any location unless there is specific permission given from the burial ground tribe.\textsuperscript{285} Trafficking of aboriginal human remains and cultural items is made punishable by a fine and imprisonment. The law protects human remains, funerary objects and cultural patrimony.

Five years was given to each museum receiving federal support in which to complete an inventory of their collections and document any Native American human remains and grave goods in the museum’s possession. According to the

\textsuperscript{282} Ibid, 38.
\textsuperscript{283} Greg Johnson, \textit{Sacred Claims: Repatriation and the Living Tradition}, (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2007), 47.
\textsuperscript{284} See Appendix in Kathleen S. Fine-Dare, \textit{Grave Injustice}, 197.
\textsuperscript{285} Cassman, Odegaard, and Powell, \textit{Human Remain}, 238.
law, within six months of the inventory, museums must notify Native Americans or other appropriate aboriginal groups regarding their current collections and any future collections to determine possible repatriation after the museum has completed its research and study.\textsuperscript{286} The notice must include a detailed description of all items as well as the circumstances of the acquisition of the materials.

    NAGPRA also required that before any Native American remains or artifacts can be removed from tribal or federal lands, the tribe must be consulted.\textsuperscript{287} On the other hand, tribes cannot simply take back their remains or artifacts without proving that they are indeed descendants and the property was indeed taken from their lands. NAGPRA allows for this and also settles disputes that may arise when more than one tribe makes competing claims.

    Although the Inuit people are not specifically covered under NAGPRA, the very passage of such a law and others like it puts pressure on museums to search their collections and answer to higher authorities as to the nature and reason why they had certain remains or artifacts in their collections. No doubt after the passage of NAGPRA in 1990, the American Museum of Natural History was feeling a bit of this pressure from the public and from within the museum field to answer for the part they played in the incident with Minik and his father’s

\textsuperscript{286} Price III, \textit{Disputing the Dead}, 33.  
\textsuperscript{287} Ibid, 237.
remains and also to finally do the right thing, ethically and legally, by repatriating Qisuk’s remains. They returned his remains in 1993.

Along with NAGPRA, other laws have been passed in order to protect cultural heritage. The Antiques Act of 1906 was first proposed in 1900 but was held up from being passed by battles between politicians and archaeological associations. The Archaeological Resources Protection Act of 1979 replaced the Antiquities Act of 1906 and provided guidelines for the preservation of scientific, historical and archaeological data taken from archaeological sites. Indigenous people must be given notice if excavations are to be held on their land and they have control over the terms and conditions of the permits. The National Museum of the American Indian Act of 1989 established a museum within the Smithsonian Institution, the National Museum of the American Indian. This museum must have at least twelve Indians on the Board of Trustees, preference is given to the requests of Indian groups and Indian remains and graven goods held in Smithsonian collections are given high priority.

The United States-Canada Bilateral Cultural Property Agreement to Protect Archaeological and Ethnological Material was passed on April 10, 1997 and protects materials “that represent the Aboriginal cultural groups of Canada,

289 Ibid, 30.
290 Ibid.
292 Ibid.
including Inuit (Eskimo), Subarctic Indian, Northwest Coast Indian, Plateau Indian, Plains Indian, and Woodlands Indians.  

This agreement states that no materials belonging to these native groups can be exported from Canada to the United States without proper permits and documentation. Conversely, Canada agreed to abide by US laws that protect archaeological resources and Native American cultural items. Canada also agreed to cooperate with the US government in recovering any objects that have entered Canada illegally. So although the Inuits are not protected under NAGPRA, they are protected under this legislation. Currently, there is no repatriation law of the equivalent to NAGPRA specifically regarding Inuit remains and funerary objects.

**Related Advocacy**

Museums today are dedicated to telling the stories of all peoples in such a way as to correctly portray a culture in a non-discriminatory and factual manner. An exhibit in the basement of a museum of people from a remote corner of the world is no longer accepted and museums invite input from the community whose story is being presented. Museums today must be very careful about what they display to their visitors and in what manner they exhibit their collections so as not to show favoritism or prejudice against one or another group of people. The patronizing attitude that was present towards native people by some

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294 Ibid.
museums during the era of the dime museum and freak show has been replaced with cultural empathy and inclusion.

The goal of most museums now is to educate their visitors and the public through their collections and artifacts, including their Native American and Inuit collections. They have a responsibility to the public but their responsibility must also be to respect the values of all indigenous peoples. Museums have already tried to bridge this gap by including native peoples on their boards and obtaining their advice when it comes to how to exhibit certain items. Advisory boards are made up of both natives and non-natives working together to decide on exhibits and their contents “that would effectively tell their stories.” At the Glenbow Museum in Canada, the curator there has apparently “so impressed the Native people with whom he works that they have made him an honorary chief.” He partners with the people whose objects are displayed in the exhibits and goes to great lengths to announce this at the entrances of the galleries so that museum visitors are fully aware of the collaboration. He also makes an effort to use the proper language and names so as to fully represent the culture being exhibited. This needs to continue along with even better communication and cooperation. The goals of both indigenous peoples and museums have

295 Ibid, 37.
296 Hendry, Reclaiming Culture, 33.
297 Ibid, 35.
298 Ibid.
been brought into closer alignment—to preserve traditions and history for future generations.

As well as partnering with existing museums to influence how they and their cultural items are exhibited, indigenous people have also initiated the creation of their own museums.\textsuperscript{299} This has proved to be an important step in the self-representation of aboriginal people and cultures. Despite efforts made by museums and native people to partner with each other to correctly represent the native people and artifacts on display, the museums “still often exemplify Western methods of display.”\textsuperscript{300} Indigenous museums have opened up all over the world, including the Museum of Wounded Knee in South Dakota and the Woodland Cultural Centre in Ontario.\textsuperscript{301}

Therefore, native people are finding new ways to make certain that they are represented appropriately. Their partnership with museums and their initiative to start their own museums illustrates the positive effects that native advocacy has had on the museum community and on society in general. The clash between scientifically driven behavior and culturally driven beliefs will probably always exist. However, great strides have been made by indigenous advocates and museum professionals to help these two convictions coincide.

\textsuperscript{299} Ibid, 38.
\textsuperscript{300} Ibid, 39.
\textsuperscript{301} Ibid.
This provides hope that issues of repatriation, such as Minik and Qisuk’s story, will be resolved in a more mutually empathetic manner.

**Conclusion**

North Pole exploration was at its peak during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and those men who journeyed to the Arctic found themselves to be celebrities due to their attempted feats. Today, polar exploration is no longer of such importance to society or to the scientific community. We have explored these areas and into the deepest corners of the world through advances in technology and innovation. However, there will always be aspects of the world in general that remain a mystery. Therefore, the world is still dedicated to furthering their knowledge of things unknown, just as the North Pole was one of the biggest unknowns during Peary and Cook’s lifetimes. As a civilization, we strive to understand and learn about new things, places and peoples.

Museums are essential to this endeavor as they serve as the middle ground between researchers, anthropologists, others dedicated to learning and the public they serve. Museums function as places where visitors can learn about new people and places without traveling halfway across the world. They are also necessary for their commitment to furthering knowledge and educating their public. Because of this, museums must always be prepared to evolve and adapt to the needs and desires of their visitors. There are episodes in the museum of America’s earliest museums that are less than stellar. Nonetheless,
they are a part of our history and cannot be ignored. Museums today have evolved from their earliest forms like the dime museums and freaks shows discussed earlier. Native advocacy has provided a basis for this change and reform within the museum community. Museums will have to keep progressing into the future in partnership with aboriginal cultures in order to stay relevant to society.

**Opportunities for Further Research**

As with any research project, there are always opportunities for further investigation and study. For example, personal access to the American Museum of Natural History archives and library as Kenn Harper had when researching his novel about Minik would have been exciting. It is one thing to read about the research he did, the correspondence he uncovered and other evidence he came across in the process of writing his book but it would have been more thrilling to see such things myself and therefore offer a deeper perspective into the issue.

For those who are inspired by the research I was able to do, a visit to the American Museum of Natural History, specifically the Department of Anthropology, to see the evidence in the museum’s archives would be a natural next step.

Along with the American Museum of Natural History, a visit could also be made to the Peary-MacMillan Arctic Museum and Arctic Studies Center at Bowdoin College in Brunswick, Maine. Their collection includes materials
donated by Donald MacMillan, another prominent Arctic explorer who also accompanied Peary on one of his many North Pole expeditions, as well as archival material relating to Robert Peary. There have been current and past exhibitions regarding Peary’s North Pole journeys as well as exhibits on the Arctic environment and the effect of climate change in the Arctic. A visit to this museum would most likely also be enlightening. Museums focused on Arctic exploration exist all over the world (England, Russia, Norway, Iceland) due to the fact that so many countries championed their own explorers. All I can hope for is that my attention to this subject can open doors for further research just as Kenn Harper’s research inspired mine.
Bibliography

Primary Sources


Cook, Dr. Frederick A. *My Attainment of the Pole*. New York: First Cooper Square Press, 1913.


**Books and Articles**


**Websites**


Appendix

Figure 1
Figure 2

Have set of ivory mounted sledge implements made.

Whipstock, ivory handle & tip Snow beater " " , tip & edges Saw knife, hunting knife, marble clasp & sheath knives, large Collins knife, & hatchet with ivory handles.

Ivory trace toggles & bridle line fid.

Ivory mounted snow shoes?

Think up some ivory articles to be made for the home folks.
Figure 3

Sounding reel to have automatic registering device on shaft.

Peary sextant & horizon to Navy Museum (Annapolis?)

Have my N.P. eye glasses gold mounted for constant use.

Have extra pair ditto as a present to some one?

Ha
Penstock to Mrs. McLean from sledge & flagstaff of D.A.R. flag for official pen of D.A.R. President
Suggest sending piece of fringe to each local or state division D.A.R.
Will furnish requisite number plates. Retain piece of fringe.
Suggest fringe arrangement Trenchard (?)
Piece of N.P. bearskin fringe for souvenirs to women
The N.P. flag with white bar

-sketch of a flag design-

This as a stamp on all N.P. articles?
Figure 5

Have special pair "Peary North Pole snowshoes made. Raised toe & heel, curved body, lancewood bows, ebony crossbar, w silver (keel?) & name plate, white gut lacing.

Have Henson make pattern "Peary North Pole" sledges 12' x 2', 10' x 2' 8' x 2' 6' x 18" 54' x 15" For miners, prospectors, lumbermen, explorers, children.* Have special sledge made, ebony sides, hickory runners & crossbars, rosewood (?) nose & stern, plated shoes, white gut lashing, for exhibition. Have such sledge, & snowshoes also "Peary

[Vertically in margin:] *Children’s sledges have detachable upstanders, each have M.O., bear, deer, walrus, or dog stencilled on it. Peary N.P. snowshoes metal sockets for crossbar, socket at heel & chisel blade for tent pegs & hole in ice.
Figure 6

Jewel for Order of the N.P.

-sketchof medal & ribbon design- meteorite star w. diamond Pendant N.P. flag gold & enamel proper color

Have Borup take a 5" x 7" 3 1/2 to 4 ft. focus portrait of me in deer or sheep coat with bear roll (face unshaven) & keep on till satisfactory one obtained.

Have Foster color a special print of this to bring out the gray eyes, the red sun burned skin, the bleached eyebrows & beard. frosted eyebrows, eyelashes, beard
My life work is ended accomplished. The thing which it was intended from the beginning that I should do, the thing which I believed could be done, & that I could do, I have done. I have got the North Pole out of my system. After 23 yrs of effort, hard work, disappointments, hardships, privations, more or less suffering & some risks, I have won the last, great geographical prize, the North Pole, for the credit of the U.S., the Service to which I belong, myself, & my family. My work is the finish, the cap & climax, of 300 years of effort, loss of life, & expenditure of millions, by some of the best men of the civilized nations of...
The Pole at last!!!
The dream prize of 3 centuries, my dream & ambition for 23 years. Mine at last.
I cannot bring myself to realize it. It is all seems so simple & common place, as Bartlett said "just like every day." I wish Jo could be here with me to share my feelings. I have drunk her health & that of the kids from the Benedictine flask she sent me.
From the Washington Star.

THE POLAR DISPUTE GETS VERY EXCITING.

Figure 9
Figure 10
Figure 11

DISCOVERY OF THE NORTH POLE HARD TO PROVE.
Figure 12

Map of Peary’s North Pole expeditions
Figure 13

Map of Cook and Peary’s routes to the North Pole in 1909
Figure 14

Map of the Arctic Circle