

LAST WORD SOCIETY

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90° North?—Examination of Robert E. Peary's Polar Journal No. 1, 1909

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ABSTRACT: The controversy continues as to whether or not Robert Edwin Peary actually reached the North Pole, 90° N. In the recent past, a crucial journal/diary chronicling Peary's success at being the first man to reach the top of the world was made public. Separate leaves inserted into the notebook have raised questions of authenticity. Is this Journal a rewritten version of an undisclosed original, or a work prepared to counter skepticism by detractors, including members of Congress? This paper describes information gained from a controlled, restricted examination of Journal No. 1, 1909, at the National Archives in Washington, DC.

KEYWORDS: Last Word Society, Peary, Robert E., historical background, questioned documents

PEARY, ROBERT EDWIN, 1856–1920. Amer. naval officer and Arctic explorer; discovered North Pole.

The American Heritage Dictionary
Second College Edition
Houghton Mifflin, p. 1449.

Historians, scholars, modern-day Arctic explorers, and astronomers are still debating whether Robert Edwin Peary actually reached 90° North, the North Pole, on the 6th of April 1909. His navigational work papers have been characterized as fraudulent by at least one astronomer, who was later challenged and proven wrong by the Navigation Foundation [1]. Wally Herbert, a modern-day Arctic explorer, examined Admiral Peary's 1909 Journal/Diary and found it "lacking in essential data" and noted that there was a "surprising consistency of the handwriting" [2]. Author Pierre Berton in his book *The Arctic Grail* also questions the 1909 Journal for lack of soiling and because "there is a loose sheet of a different kind of paper" (Ref 3, p. 580). Berton also makes the following blunt statement of Peary (Ref 3, p. 580):

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He had designed an assault on the North Pole that would impress any modern military commander. Why, then, did he fail to take the final step to pin down the certainty of his victory? There can be only two explanations: either he didn't expect that another person would also claim the Pole and therefore believed his own feat would not be questioned (as had been the case in the past), or he simply faked the whole story.

Matthew Henson, Peary's black manservant who had accompanied Peary on all of his previous expeditions, is reported to have written later that when Peary produced a flag Henson asked what the camp would be called. Peary said that the spot would be known as Camp Morris K. Jesup (a prominent Peary backer), "the last and most northerly camp on the earth." But Peary did not say that they had finally reached the North Pole (Ref 3, p. 580). Peary left the camp without Henson to take observational readings and upon his return Henson asked, "We are now at the Pole, are we not?" Peary replied, "I do not suppose that we can swear we are exactly at the Pole" [2]. Henson then extended his hand to Peary, who "turned aside with both hands covering his eyes" [2].

Dr. Frederick Cook claimed to have reached the North Pole on 21 April 1908, a year ahead of Peary. On Peary's return from the "Pole" he was informed of Dr. Cook's claim. Therein may lie many of Peary's problems. Cook also claimed to be the first to climb Mount McKinley. It was later proven that he faked this claim as well as the photographs proffered as proof (Ref 3, p. 615).

It appears that Peary's misfortune was the appearance of Dr. Cook, who, interestingly, had accompanied Peary on an earlier expedition in search of the Pole. Since two individuals claimed to have accomplished the impossible, the press, public, and even Congress wanted proof.

When Dr. Cook produced his "original" notebook, his own lawyer admitted that the handwriting in the diary was "remarkably even" for having been prepared while Cook was "wearing two pairs of mittens when he held the pencil" (Ref 3, p. 613).

The University of Copenhagen subsequently rejected Dr. Cook's papers as not constituting sufficient proof of his claim. Popular opinion initially favored Dr. Cook, but in the end, Peary was to become the discoverer of the North Pole.

While it is certainly conjecture, it appears that Peary was wrestling with his conscience. He is quoted as saying shortly after his return from the "Pole" that the "Northern trip [was] entirely satisfactory" and "I have not been altogether unsuccessful" (Ref 3, p. 585). Nebulous statements such as those are surprising for a man who spent the majority of his adult life away from his family on expeditions in search of the North Pole. Had Dr. Cook not tried to usurp Peary's "North Pole," it is possible that the explorer might have admitted defeat. The last confirmed witnessed siting was taken by Captain Bob Bartlett on 31 March 1909 at latitude 87°47', approximately 150 miles (240 km) from 90° North (Ref 3, p. 577). Responding to critics, Peary said, "No one except the most ignorant will have any doubt but what, at some time, I had passed close to the precise point, and had, perhaps, actually passed over it" [2]. This is certainly not an unequivocal statement for the man who wrote, "The Pole at last!!!!"

My interest regarding all of the above started after observing a photograph of a handwritten page, apparently from a notebook in the 100th Anniversary Issue of the *National Geographic* [2]. The page was from Robert E. Peary's Journal entitled, "No. 1, Roosevelt to _____ & Return, Feb. 22 to Apr. [28 (crossed out)] 27 1909, R. E. Peary, U.S.N." (Fig. 1). *The Roosevelt* was Peary's ship, designed by him specifically for Arctic travel and named for President Theodore Roosevelt. What struck me, after reading the page which begins "The Pole at last!!!!" (Fig. 2), is that it appeared to be too neat. Herbert states that in Peary's book *The North Pole* he prepared the entry "after awakening" the afternoon of 6 April 1909 [2]. The line quality seemed excellent for an entry prepared under what I assumed to be extreme conditions. The entry appeared to have been

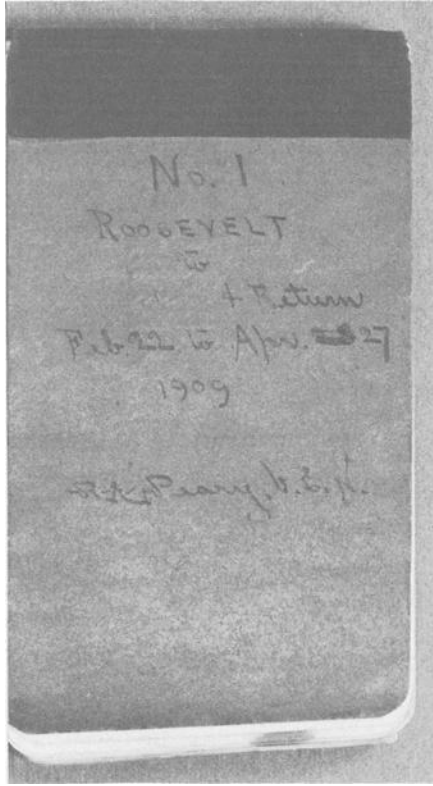


FIG. 1—Cover of Journal No. 1, 1909, showing the blank area where the notation "North Pole" should be.

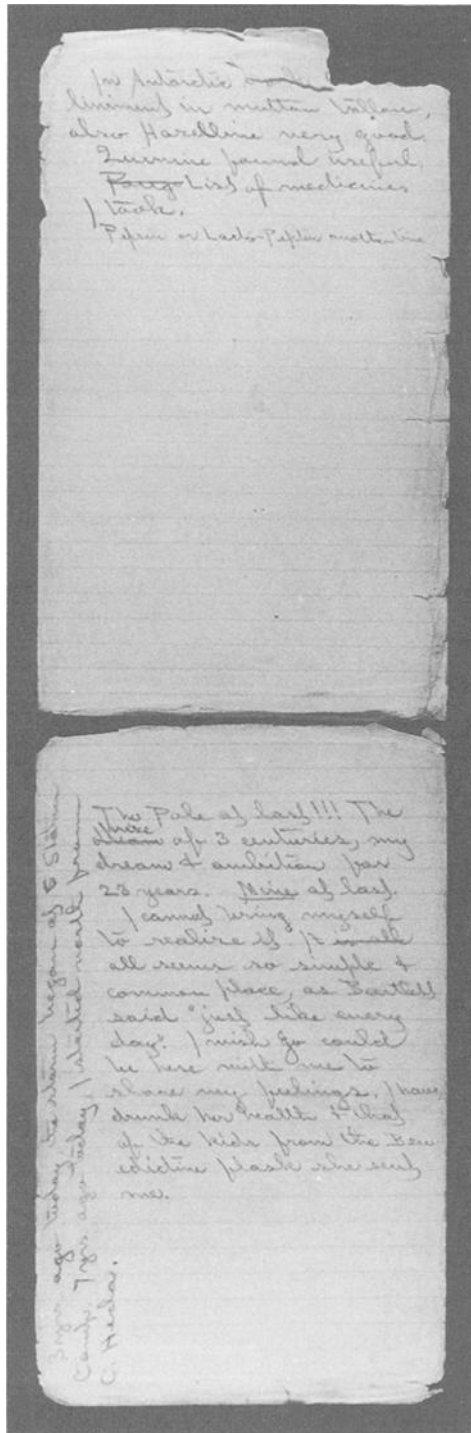
prepared by an ink pen. I wondered how Peary kept the ink from freezing. The entry, in addition to all the others, was actually prepared using a pencil.

The cover entry, I was later to discover was prepared with an ink pen. After reading Wally Herbert's article, I discovered that he, too, had reservations concerning the 1909 Journal. I wondered whether the National Archives, which houses the crucial Journal as well as other Peary journals and papers from previous expeditions (Peary made five in all), would allow a forensic examination to be made of the 1909 notebook and possibly several of the prior notebooks prepared by Peary from earlier polar trips. Could an examination of Journal No. 1 answer such questions as: Is the handwriting in notebooks from previous expeditions consistent in line quality with the 1909 Journal? Were the notebooks stained from water, food (including pemmican), soot, oil from lanterns, or unclean hands, as might be expected? Were fragments remaining in the binding where the detached page supposedly originated?

After several conversations and communications with individuals at the National Archives, I was directed to Norvell Jones, chief of the Document Conservation Branch. The Conservation Laboratory was at that time the custodian of the 1909 Journal and of one other notebook written by Peary, which bears no cover notations and which is an incomplete collection of his thoughts.

The 1909 Journal was scheduled to undergo revitalization because of its present condition, which is presumably unacceptable according to archive standards.² Therefore, it

²Jones, N., chief, Document Conservation Branch, National Archives, personal communications, April/May 1989.



for Antarctic work
 included in matter before,
 also Hareline very good,
 2 more found useful,
 Page List of medicines
 taken.
 Paper on Lark-Paper matter

3 days ago today we returned beyond of E. Station
 Camp 7800 ago today, I started next morning
 C. Peary.

The Pole at last!!! The
 dream of 3 centuries, my
 dream & ambition for
 23 years. Mine at last,
 I cannot bring myself
 to realize it. It would
 all seem so simple &
 common place, as Bartlett
 said "just like every
 day". I wish you could
 be here with me to
 share my feelings, I have
 drunk too much & that
 of the kids from the box
 edition please excuse
 me.

FIG. 2—The two loose leaves from the critical area of the journal. The bottom leaf begins "The Pole at last!!!"

is housed in the Conservation Laboratory of the Archives. My inquiry halted the plans to rebind the crucial Journal at least for the immediate present.³ Ms. Jones seemed to understand that rebinding the Journal might seriously hamper any forensic effort at gleaned information from the separate leaves.

After negotiating ways of examining the 1909 Journal, as well as earlier journals, I was granted permission to visit the Archives. It should be noted that I was not permitted to touch any of the notebooks. Examination and photography would be accomplished using an inclined board. Flash photography was not permitted, and no object, including a camera, could be held directly above the notebooks. From my readings, it appears that these restrictions were unique to my examination: both Wally Herbert and Pierre Berton were afforded free reign. In reference to the 1909 Journal/Diary, Wally Herbert states in his opening statement, "I took it out, removed its protective wallet, and held the diary" [2]. I can conclude that no standardized procedure for examination of antiquities is applied equitably.

Upon my arrival at the Conversation Laboratory in May 1989, I learned that my time was limited to three hours. A schedule taped to the conference room noted "Peary Photo 9-12." The promised earlier journals were not available for examination. I was, however, bound by any restrictions and the time allotted as conditions of my visit. However, I had been led to believe by Ms. Jones that I would be allowed to spend an entire day examining the journals. The overcrowded conference room was small and was also used as a library, computer terminal workstation, and document photography copy area. I was assisted by Constance McCabe, photographic conservator, who brought the two notebooks to the conference room. The notebooks were in a storage box and were both wrapped in white butcher-type paper. The canvas protective bag, or sleeve, visible in the *National Geographic* photography was not covering the crucial 1909 Journal.

My initial observation was that the 1909 Journal's cover was in surprisingly good condition, virtually pristine, for having been to the Pole and back and considering that it is at present more than 80 years old. I was to learn from Ms. McCabe that there was more than the one loose sheet in the Diary/Journal mentioned by Berton. The initial blank cover page and quite a few that follow are not secured in the notebook. After I had reviewed several entries in the notebook, it immediately became apparent to me that the handwriting was too consistent for having been prepared on such an arduous journey. That consistency is exhibited throughout the Journal. The entries are fluent and, in my opinion, too much so. There are four sheets of paper which are definitely from a source other than the 1909 notebook. Three of those are graph paper which were torn from another small notebook or other notebooks, on one of which is a note signed "Peary." The fourth is a piece of paper which contains a note written to Peary, possibly from Bob Bartlett, Peary's ship captain. It was, at one time, folded and the name "Peary" was written on the outside. But author Berton's claim of a sheet "of a different kind of paper," in reference to the page exclaiming, "The Pole at last!!!" is not true. There are actually two loose sheets in the area of the Journal which have raised many questions. Both leaves are similar in size to each other and also to leaves still attached in the notebook [10 by 18 cm (approximately 4 by 7 in.)]. Although there are no fragments at the point where the leaves are placed, a most important piece of information was observed: both leaves contain a watermark, which is identical to watermarks on other leaves attached in the notebook. The watermark is a crest and depicts an eagle or falcon. More interesting is that the partial watermark from both sheets, when joined, form a physical match (Fig. 3).

Because of time constraints, it could not be established whether the leaves were torn from the 1909 Journal or from another notebook and placed in their present position.

³See Footnote 2.



FIG. 3—Watermark contained in the two loose leaves shown in Fig. 2.

However, it could be established that (1) the disputed "The Pole" loose sheet is not of a different kind of paper, as claimed by author Berton, and (2) both loose leaves did not originate from their present positions. It could be determined that the loose sheets in question were at one time joined; they were, therefore, "mates" in the same signature.⁴ However, they presently are positioned in two different signatures. The evidence strongly indicates that the disputed sheets were placed in the Journal at some later time and were not part of the "original" entries.

The first loose leaf refers to the great progress being made and ends on the reverse side mentioning medicines used in the "Antarctic" and "List of medicines I took" (Fig. 2). This sheet is undated and inserted between the entry for April 4th and April 5th. The second loose sheet, also undated, begins "The Pole at Last!!!" (Fig. 2) and is placed after the April 6th entry and precedes the blank entry for "Apr. 7." Were the loose sheets placed in the diary to bolster the credibility of the document? We can only speculate. Peary's detractors claim that his reported distance per day (during his final attempt at reaching the Pole) was not possible. The first loose sheet starts, "I have no doubt we covered 30 miles but will be conservative & call it 25 . . . in any event we are now beyond the 88th parallel." The "Apr. 5" entry begins "Over the 89th" and continues "The march a duplicate of previous . . ." Peary also noted, "Temp at starting -35 [°F]" (Fig. 4). Note the smooth flowing handwriting on the entries for both entries in Fig. 4. This same rhythmic line quality appears throughout the diary. I find it hard to believe, with temperatures of -35°F and the cumbersome clothing necessary for survival in such adverse conditions, that the writing is so precise.

It was certainly my hope to examine earlier diaries from the Peary Collection in order to compare the quality of the handwriting in those notebooks. There are seven Peary expedition journals presently in the custody of the National Archives, two of which were in the Conservation Laboratory. However, they were not produced for inspection, nor did Ms. McCabe, who assisted me at the Archives, have any knowledge that they were to be made available. In any event, my allotted three hours would not have permitted examination of any further documents. The surprisingly good condition and clean appearance of the pages of the disputed Journal raise additional doubts as to whether the notebook actually accompanied Peary in 1909. One would certainly expect that staining from food, lamp oil, water, and ice would be present on some of the pages and cover, but this is not the case. With the exception of a small rust-colored stain at the bottom of many pages, the notebook is virtually free of soiling.

Peary, pursuing the rank and pension of a rear admiral, was requested to appear before a House Naval Affairs Committee hearing, which was looking into the matter, and to provide proof of his claim. The Committee suspended the hearing so Peary could produce his original records. Peary was reluctant to allow anyone to see his records except members of the National Geographic Society committee, which had been formed for the purpose of verifying the results of this expedition and which was, for the most part, composed of his friends and supporters (Ref 3, p. 617).

It is interesting that the National Geographic Society committee urged Peary to produce his documentation for review. Peary's lawyer provided the Society's committee with a written account of the 1909 expedition, which was not complete and which did not mention actually reaching the Pole. According to Berton, the committee requested more proof, which Peary himself produced two weeks later. One member is quoted in Berton's book as saying, "We simply sat down with him and read his journal from his original records; he had an original record made in a little book, a notebook you know . . . it had all the earmarks of being the original. . . . Everyone who knows Peary's reputation, knows he would not lie." (Ref 3, p. 618).

⁴In bookbinding, signatures are sections of a book formed from sheets of paper folded into four or multiples of four pages prior to binding.

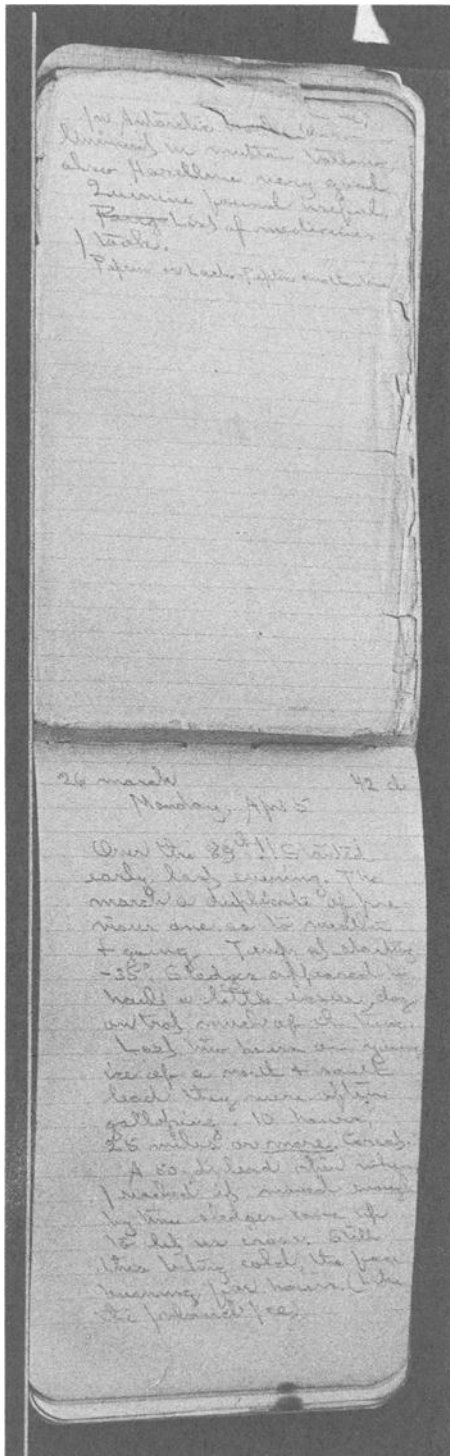


FIG. 4—Entry for "Monday, Apr. 5."

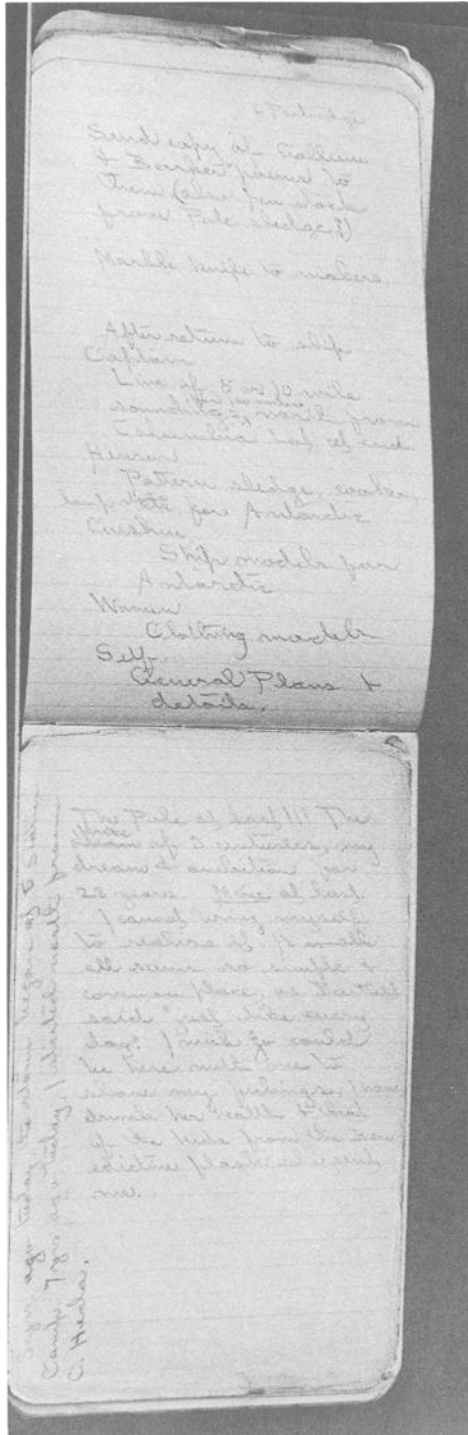


FIG. 5—Present position of "The Pole at last!!!" entry in the 1909 journal.

Which notebook is now in the possession of the National Archives? Is it the first notebook rejected by the National Geographic Society committee or the second one produced at their urging? Is it possible that they are one in the same, the second an expanded version of the first? Could that explain the disputed loose leaves? Were they inserted to bolster the journal rejected as unacceptable by the National Geographic Society committee? One point raised by the committee in its rejection of the first account was that Peary had not even mentioned reaching the Pole.

It can certainly be ascertained from examination of Journal No. 1, 1909, that the pages and cover are remarkably clean. As previously stated, it is hard to believe that the notebook is in such good condition after purportedly making such an arduous trip. The handwriting throughout the 1909 Journal is, in my opinion, too neat and flowing. Even if Peary was a person of infinitely meticulous ways, it is inconceivable that all entries would have been prepared in such a flowing hand and would be free from soiling.

According to author Berton, the only official organization that requested examination of Peary's records was the British Royal Geographic Society. (The National Geographic Society was not then considered a scientific society but a magazine publishing company.) Surprisingly, no other scientific body requested that Peary provide any records. To further complicate matters, Peary provided the Royal Society with "copies of his Journal and some of his observations" (Ref 3, p. 619). The Royal Society examined the documents Peary provided, and, of the 17 members who reviewed the documents, 8 voted in favor of accepting them as proof, 7 voted against, and 2 abstained.

The foremost question in my mind is just how many copies of Peary's Diary/Journal there were. Does the National Archives have custody of the so-called original, or is the 1909 Journal in their custody, as Pierre Berton suggests, a rewrite of the original, because of the lack of soiling (Ref 3, p. 680)? It would certainly be plausible for one to make rough notes which would later be put into legible form upon returning to civilization. But why then a blank entry for "Apr. 7," the day Peary was at the "Pole"? This would have been the most important day in Peary's life. The following entry is also blank. If it had been rewritten from notes, it would not have been necessary to insert a separate sheet exclaiming, "The Pole at last!!!" Why does the notebook cover presently at the National Archives have a blank area where the words "North Pole" should be (Fig. 1)? Note that the cover notations were written in ink and, the expedition completion date was noted; therefore, it had to have been prepared after the completion of the expedition.

No amount of speculation will solve all the questions raised concerning Peary's 1909 expedition and the 1909 Diary/Journal. It is my opinion, from examination of the Journal entitled "No. 1, Roosevelt to _____ & Return, Feb. 22 to Apr. [28 (crossed out)] 27 1909, R. E. Peary, U.S.N." (Fig. 1), in the possession of the National Archives, that it is not a chronicling of events that were happening when the journal was written.

Postscript

Subsequent to the writing of this paper, the Navigation Foundation, an organization commissioned by the National Geographic to examine "all the evidence regarding the Peary claim" [4], completed a year-long analysis of the documentary evidence. Their conclusion was that Peary and Henson, along with four Eskimos, "reached the near vicinity of the North Pole on April 6, 1909" [4]. With the help of the U.S. Navy and a technique known as a close-range photogrammetry, analysis of Peary's soundings, and photographs taken during the 1909 expedition, the Foundation unanimously concurred that Peary had reached the North Pole.

In a subsequent letter to the editor published in the *National Geographic*, explorer and author Wally Herbert continues to question Peary's claim, as well as the findings of the Navigation Foundation. So it would seem that the controversy continues despite the wishes of the *National Geographic*.

Although I have not read the full report of the Navigation Foundation, I, like Herbert, am not convinced by the so-called "close range photogrammetry" evidence as explained in the *National Geographic*. I do not question the techniques but do question the interpretation of data obtained from poor-quality prints and negatives. I venture the above comments only because the Navigation Foundation speculated on the "anecdotal evidence" put forth by Peary detractors concerning the "Pole at last!!!" entry (Fig. 2). The Foundation surmised that this entry is from a second notebook carried by Peary. The second notebook referred to may have been the second notebook provided to me. If so, it is even cleaner than the disputed Diary. In addition, the entries I examined were prepared using an ink-dip pen.

As we look back upon some of the great events of the past which have been made the subject of dispute among historians and have been interpreted in opposite senses, according to the weight which each has attached to external factors, such as the probable motives of those concerned or the gossip of the time, the thought at once suggests itself that if we could only have had contemporary scientific evidence embodying our knowledge of to-day, the general verdict of posterity might have been very different.

C. Ainsworth Mitchell
The Scientific Detective and the Expert Witness (1931)

APPENDIX

Suggested Bibliography

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