

Travel Tales

for Montgomery Community Media

Josiah and Matthew Henson and The Explorers Club

by Lew Toulmin

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Last week I described the astounding life of Josiah Henson and the new Montgomery County Parks Museum that has just opened in his honor. This week I will tell you how I got involved in his story, researched his family and possible links to explorer Matthew Alexander Henson, and how all this relates to the famous Explorers Club.

I have always been interested in history and archaeology, so a year ago I started volunteering at the Montgomery County Parks Archaeology Laboratory at Needwood Mansion. There, while cleaning artifacts from the Josiah Henson site, I learned that the long-awaited Josiah Henson Museum would be opening soon. Since I am a Fellow of The Explorers Club and know that explorer Matthew Alexander Henson, co-discoverer of the North Pole, was the first black member of the Club, I asked, "What is the relationship between Josiah Henson and Matthew Alexander Henson?" The answer from Cassandra Michaud and Heather Bouslog, the lead archaeologists on the project, was, "We get that question all the time. Nobody knows!"

As an experienced genealogist, my eyes lit up. A puzzle to be solved! In researching this question, I quickly discovered that no-one had scientifically studied the genealogy of the Henson clan. It was known that both men were born in Charles County, Maryland, and while the US Senate had asserted a linkage, one of the best of Matthew's biographers was very skeptical.

I worked with James Henson, a famous lawyer and "Living Legend of Alexandria, Virginia" and proved his line back to Matthew Henson. Together we discovered an old family chart with an asserted (but not yet proven) link between Matthew Henson and Josiah, through the previously unknown Paul Henson, the asserted brother of Josiah and the reported father of Lemuel Henson -- the proven father of Matthew Henson. So, if proven, Matthew would be the grand-nephew of Josiah. (Covid has hampered further research, and I suspect that only a major family DNA effort will solve this mystery.)

Excited by this discovery, I couldn't stop myself, and kept digging. I proved seven lines of descent from Josiah Henson down to the present; estimated Josiah's birth date as between 1796 and 1799 (later than asserted previously); proved that one of the toddlers on Josiah's back during the famous 1830 escape was a girl, contrary to previous biographers' assertions that all four escaping children were boys; and largely proved a descent from Matthew Henson down to Taraji Henson, the star in the film "Hidden Figures." I also developed a better timeline for the

confusing early years of Matthew Henson. And I was able to show that while escaping the Henson family, toddlers and all, walked an astounding 14 to 16 miles per day, mostly at night, over rough terrain! I wrote a 134-page report on my findings (available free from LewToulmin@aol.com).

All this work was part of an Explorers Club Flag Expedition. The Club was founded in 1904 and members were first to the North and South Poles, first to the summit of Mt. Everest, first to the deepest ocean depths, and first to the Moon. Members and Fellows can apply to “carry the Flag” of the Club on worthy efforts.

I applied, and was approved to carry Flag #50 of the Club in an archaeological and genealogical effort to research the Henson clan. The archaeological part was to try to find the missing slave quarters on the Riley/Henson plantation site in Rockville, but this effort was thwarted by Covid. The genealogical part was quite successful, however. I was proud to carry Flag #50, since it had been into space with Virgin Galactic and had been around the world in the first solar-powered airplane flight.

But since there is still archaeological work to do, and I am now hooked on the genealogy of this famous clan, I think there is another Henson Expedition in my future!

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Lew Toulmin, PhD, FRGS, is a Fellow of the Royal Geographical Society and of The Explorers Club. He has worked in 30 developing countries and traveled to 145 of the world’s 196 nations. He and his wife Susan live in Silver Spring.

Photos (all credit to Lew Toulmin)

- A. Sketch of Josiah Henson carrying two toddlers on his back for 600 miles to freedom in Canada, with his wife Charlotte and two other children. The author’s research was able to prove that one of the toddlers was a girl, contrary to earlier biographers who asserted that all four children were boys.
- B. Explorer Matthew Alexander Henson was the first man to the North Pole by 45 minutes, inadvertently beating his co-discoverer Captain Robert Peary. Henson was later honored by becoming the first black member of The Explorers Club, an organization which has included most of the American astronauts, Sir Edmund Hillary, Charles Lindbergh, Thor Heyerdahl, Roy Chapman Andrews (the inspiration for Indiana Jones of “Raiders of the

Lost Ark”), President Theodore Roosevelt, film-maker James Cameron, Prince Albert of Monaco, the Duke of Edinburgh, etc.

- C. Notional view of the Riley plantation during the Josiah Henson period. Note the Riley House and log/slave kitchen beside it, in the center. “You are here” is a location behind the new, small modern museum/welcome center. The blacksmith’s shed, overseer’s house and slave quarters in the rear of the property have not yet been found.
- D. Author Lew Toulmin holds the logo of the Henson expedition, and Flag #50 of The Explorers Club, which has been into space and around the world on the first solar-powered flight. He stands beside an image of Rev. Josiah Henson, on the west side of the new Henson Museum in north Bethesda on Old Georgetown Road.
- E. Greenland stamp showing Matthew Alexander Henson, co-discoverer of the North Pole and first person to the Pole – by 45 minutes. He was scouting ahead of the main party under Capt. Robert Peary, and inadvertently beat Peary to the Pole! Matthew is possibly the grand-nephew of Reverend Josiah Henson.
- F. Montgomery County Parks has undertaken extensive excavations inside the historic kitchen/slave hut-cabin, and has found the floor level (about three feet below present ground level, in front of the fireplace) and related artifacts that can be dated to Henson’s time. However, the cluster of slave cabins behind the main house, where Henson actually lived most of the time, has yet to be found – more work for archaeologists and volunteers.
- G. The logo of the Henson Expedition shows the hands of Josiah Henson and Matthew Henson both pointing north – Josiah towards Canada and Matthew towards the North Pole.
- H. Image and signature of Reverend Josiah Henson, whose amazing life played a major role in ending slavery in America.

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