

# The Race for “The Big Nail”

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That Commander Robert Edwin Peary was first man to reach the North Pole is apparently one of the more incontrovertible facts of American history. The event is documented in numerous record books, almanacs, encyclopedias, dictionaries and history books. Not only is Robert Peary a full-fledged American hero, but his servant, Matthew Henson, has recently become a hero of black Americans for his part in Peary's 'conquest' of the North Pole. It is less well-known that another American, Dr. Frederick A. Cook, claimed to have reached the North Pole in 1908 - a year before Peary. Because Dr. Cook had wintered in the Arctic after *his* 'conquest' of the North Pole his success became public only five days before Peary's news was announced. Since that time, what amounts to an Orwellian rewriting of history has occurred. Cook's name has largely been erased from the record, and Peary is generally credited with being the first to the North Pole.

The events surrounding this occurrence will form the basis for the paper. Both Cook and Peary were very conscious that their achievement would be of little scientific value, and both recognized that their attempts, and the attempts of others, to reach the North Pole represented a sporting event rather than an event which would make a major contribution to mankind. When both Cook and Peary announced their success within a few days of each other the whole United States and much of the Western world began to take sides, supporting either Cook's claim or Peary's claim. The press 'ballyhooed' the event and its aftermath for months. However, Peary had a number of wealthy and powerful supporters who had formed the Peary Arctic Club in order to finance Peary's expedition. In return, they received the lasting glory of having geographical features named after them by Peary.

Peary's supporters used their power in order to discredit Cook's claim to have reached the Pole. Their actions are very reminiscent of the 'dirty tricks' associated with modern American politics. Eventually, only Peary's name came to be associated with the North Pole and Cook became a forgotten man. Recent evidence indicates that both claims may have been fraudulent, and that neither individual reached the North Pole. Orwell's vision of 1984 may not have been so prophetic when the events surrounding the attempts to reach the North Pole during the first decade of the Twentieth century are considered.