

Greenland, Robert E. Peary, & Field Museum

James W. Van Stone



Robert Edwin Peary

The traveling exhibition "Greenland: Arctic Denmark," which opened at Field Museum on November 11 and will run through March 8, 1973, recalls the circumstances of Field Museum's first involvement with Greenland research and exploration, more than 80 years ago.

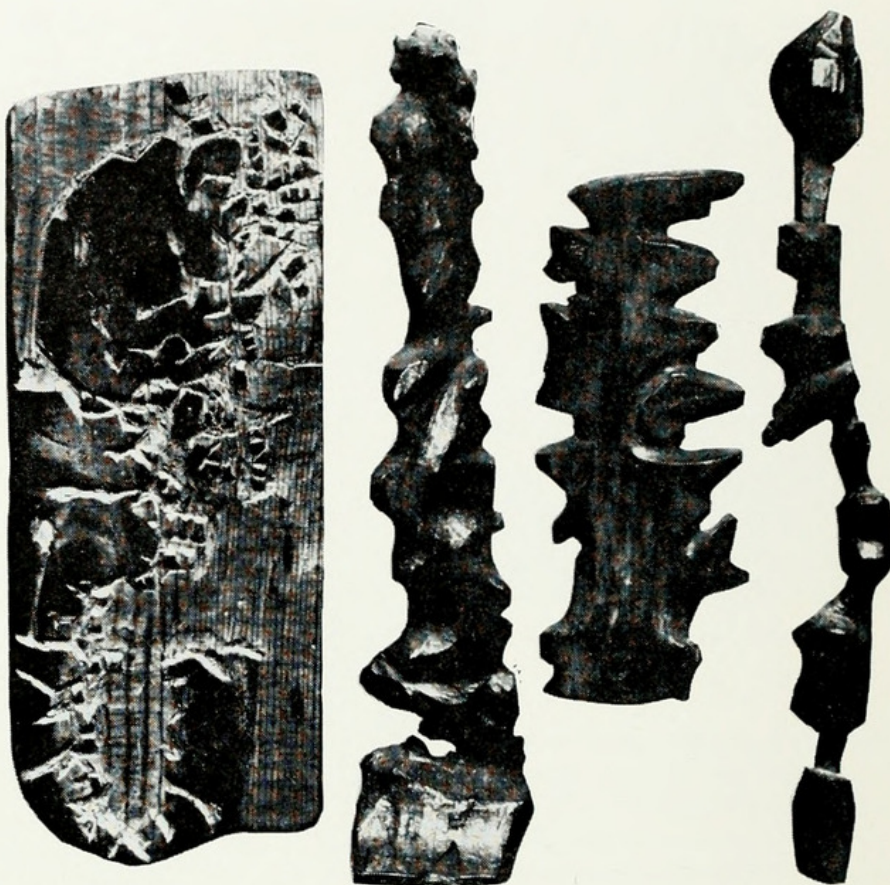
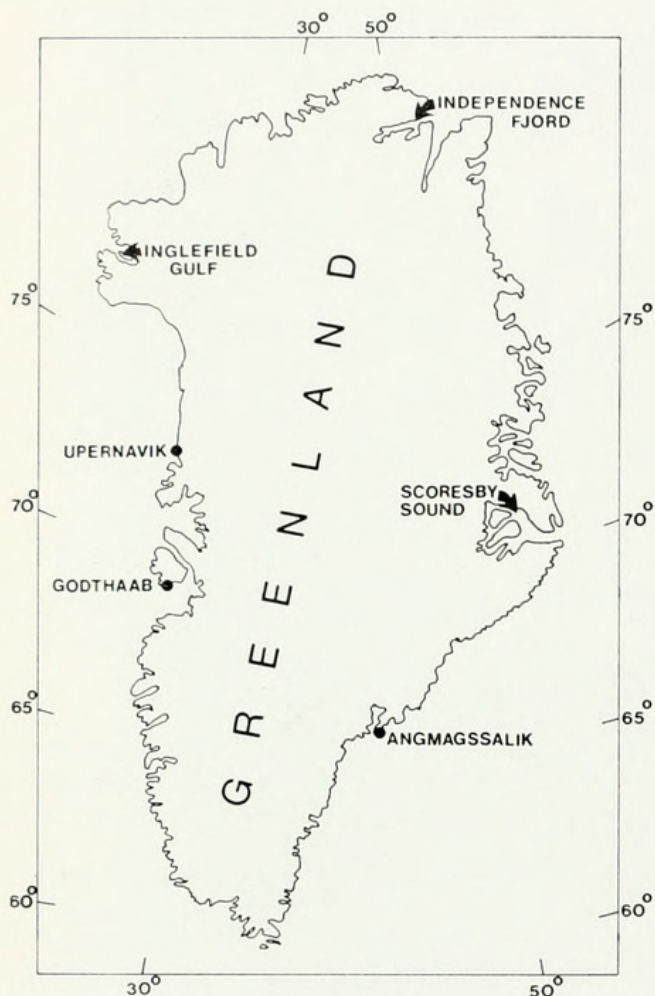
In 1891 Frederic Ward Putnam, as Chief of the Department of Ethnology and Archaeology for the World's Columbian Exposition here in Chicago, was given the task of assembling a large anthropological collection for the 1893 fair. Field parties to various parts of the world were directed to collect ethnographic specimens representing many different cultures. One of these parties, an expedition to northwest Greenland, was under the command of

Lieutenant Robert Edwin Peary of the United States Navy.

Lieutenant Peary eventually became a rear-admiral and received worldwide recognition for his arctic explorations, particularly his achievement in reaching the North Pole in 1909. In 1891, however, he was serving as Chief Engineer at the Philadelphia Navy Yard when he received an appointment to lead an arctic expedition for the American Geographical Society and the Academy of Natural Sciences in Philadelphia. It was during this expedition (1891-1892), the first of many to the remote country of the Polar Eskimo in northwest Greenland, that Peary made the collection for Putnam and the 1893 Exposition.

The North Greenland Expedition, as it was called, consisted of Peary, his wife, and five associates. The party left Philadelphia on June 5, and although the explorer broke a leg aboard ship a few days later, he was sufficiently recovered to direct the establishment of a permanent base camp at the entrance to Inglefield Gulf on July 25. The ship then departed and the little party prepared to spend the winter. The expedition's surgeon and ethnologist was Dr. Frederick A. Cook, who later gained considerable notoriety for his claims to have reached the North Pole before Peary. It is likely that the bulk of the ethnographic specimens collected for the World's Columbian Exposition were obtained by Dr. Cook.

This map of contemporary Greenland shows only a few of the many coastal towns and settlements; the interior of Greenland, which has an elevation of from 6,000 to 10,000 feet, is covered with glacial ice of great thickness.



Above: Eskimo-made maps carved of wood, from Angmagssalik, in "Greenland: Arctic Denmark" exhibit at Field Museum through March 8; largest map is probably an imitation of European maps.

When Peary's ship landed on the shores of northwest Greenland, he was greeted by the Polar Eskimo from villages in the vicinity of the expedition's camp. These remote people, who numbered less than 250 individuals at the time of Peary's visit, have long been famous in anthropological literature as the world's most northerly inhabitants.

Students in ethnographic survey courses are frequently told how this small band of arctic peoples, occupying a region well above 75° N. latitude, had lived in total isolation for so long that, when first contacted by the English explorer John Ross in 1819, they believed themselves to be the only people in the world. Following the explorations of Ross, the Polar Eskimo had intermittent contact with English and Scottish whalers and later, in the

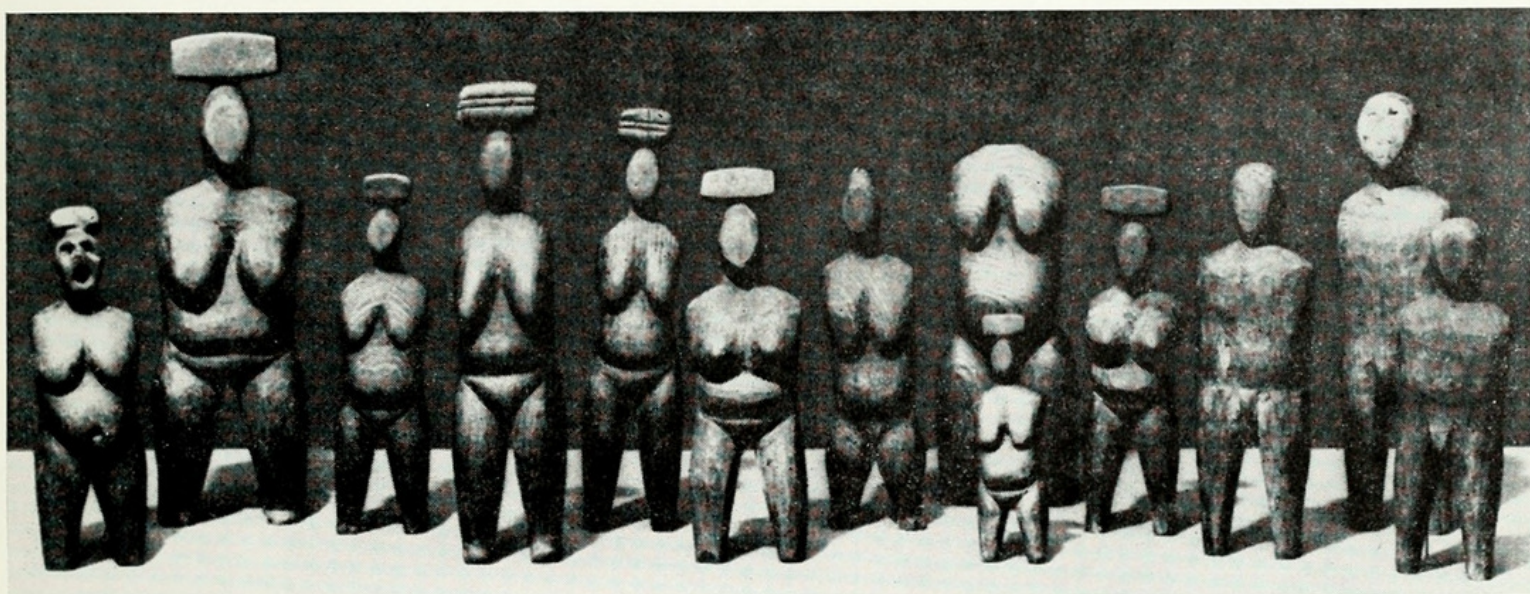
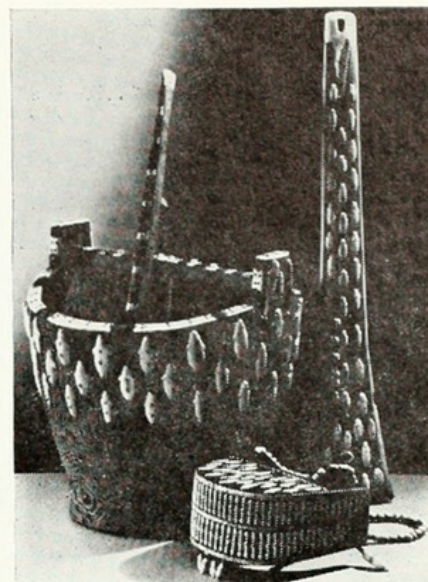
early 1850s, with expeditions in search of Sir John Franklin. Nevertheless, at the time of Peary's stay among them, the Polar Eskimo continued to be one of the most primitive and remote peoples to be found anywhere in the world.

It was in the spring of 1892 that the major work of the expedition was carried out. Departing from Inglefield Gulf in late May, Peary and one companion, proceeding overland by dog team, reached the head of Independence Fjord on July 4, thus determining for the first time the northernmost extension of the subcontinent. They were back at the base camp by August 6, and during their absence Dr. Cook had obtained a sizable collection of ethnographic specimens from Eskimos living in the vicinity in exchange for pieces of iron

and brass, barrel staves, metal tools, boxes, and miscellaneous lumber fragments no longer needed by the expedition. While Peary was away, a ship from Philadelphia arrived to take the expedition home and, although delayed by the loss of one member of the party on a glacier near the base camp, the explorer and his remaining companions left Greenland on August 24, reaching Philadelphia exactly one month later.

The Peary collection of Polar Eskimo material culture consists of more than 250 items, including clothing, household utensils, hunting and fishing gear, and ceremonial equipment. At the conclusion of the World's Columbian Exposition, these objects together with other scientific collections which had been acquired with Exposition funds, were turned over to the Field

Items in "Greenland: Arctic Denmark" exhibit. *Top:* Runic stone (shown approximately life-size) found in 1824 at Kingigtorsuak, just north of Upernavik. It reads: "Erling Sigvatsson, Bjarne Thordarsson, and Eindride Oddsson erected Saturday before Rogation Day these cairns and runes well." Date is interpreted as April 25; type of runic letters places the year in the 14th century. *Below:* Typically armless carved wooden doll amulets, 2½ to 5 inches high, of the Thule culture, from Nualik, north of Angmagssalik. *Right:* Early 20th century water bucket, scoop, throwing stick for harpoon, and eyeshield, decorated with representations of the seal carved from bone.



Columbian Museum as a nucleus to found this institution, now Field Museum of Natural History. The material collected by Peary is thus one of the oldest collections in the Department of Anthropology, and although not on exhibition at the present time, is part of the Department's large reserve collections utilized by scholars for research purposes.

Virtually every explorer from Ross to Peary who had contact with the Polar Eskimo noted the small amount of wood and metal utilized by the people in the manufacture of their tools, utensils, and weapons. Such exotic materials as were available to the Eskimos have generally been attributed to contact with whaling ships, the various explorers themselves, and occasional wrecked ships or driftwood fragments. However, if Polar Eskimo

material culture was relatively unaffected by outside influences until Peary's first expedition, we would expect his collection to be notably lacking in items utilizing iron and wood in their construction. This is definitely not the case. These materials were utilized extensively by the Eskimos who made the tools, weapons, and other objects collected by Peary in 1891 and 1892.

Trade materials such as wood and iron may have been introduced by migrating Canadian Eskimos in the mid-19th century or, more likely, they were obtained through trade with Eskimos to the south along the west coast of Greenland, where driftwood was plentiful and where there had been contact with European whaling ships in the 18th century. It would appear, therefore, that although the Polar

Eskimo were, beyond a doubt, an extremely isolated people, they probably had more contact over a longer continuous period of time with the peoples of southwest Greenland and northeastern Canada than has been generally noted. It is therefore possible to doubt whether, even in Ross's day, the Polar Eskimo really believed themselves to be the only people in the world. Field Museum's Peary collection thus not only associates the institution with one of the most famous names in arctic exploration, it also provides us insight into the lifeways of the most northern human population.

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