

Theme 7c7  
 Theme 7c6 (Dunbar Apts.)

Form 10-300  
 (Rev. 6-72)

UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR  
 NATIONAL PARK SERVICE

**NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES  
 INVENTORY - NOMINATION FORM**

(Type all entries - complete applicable sections)

STATE: New York
COUNTY: New York
FOR NPS USE ONLY
ENTRY DATE

**1. NAME**

COMMON:  
 Dunbar Apartments (Matthew Henson's residence)

AND/OR HISTORIC:  
 Matthew Henson Residence

**2. LOCATION**

STREET AND NUMBER:  
 246 W. 150th Street, Apartment 3F

CITY OR TOWN:  
 New York

CONGRESSIONAL DISTRICT:  
 Twentieth

STATE:  
 New York

CODE:  
 36

COUNTY:  
 New York

CODE:  
 061

**3. CLASSIFICATION**

CATEGORY (Check One)	OWNERSHIP	STATUS	ACCESSIBLE TO THE PUBLIC
<input type="checkbox"/> District <input type="checkbox"/> Site <input type="checkbox"/> Object <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Building <input type="checkbox"/> Structure	<input type="checkbox"/> Public <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Private <input type="checkbox"/> Both	Public Acquisition: <input type="checkbox"/> In Process <input type="checkbox"/> Being Considered <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Occupied <input type="checkbox"/> Unoccupied <input type="checkbox"/> Preservation work in progress	Yes: <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Restricted <input type="checkbox"/> Unrestricted <input type="checkbox"/> No

PRESENT USE (Check One or More as Appropriate)

<input type="checkbox"/> Agricultural	<input type="checkbox"/> Government	<input type="checkbox"/> Park	<input type="checkbox"/> Transportation	<input type="checkbox"/> Comments
<input type="checkbox"/> Commercial	<input type="checkbox"/> Industrial	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Private Residence	<input type="checkbox"/> Other (Specify)	_____
<input type="checkbox"/> Educational	<input type="checkbox"/> Military	<input type="checkbox"/> Religious	_____	_____
<input type="checkbox"/> Entertainment	<input type="checkbox"/> Museum	<input type="checkbox"/> Scientific	_____	_____

**4. OWNER OF PROPERTY**

OWNER'S NAME:  
 IES Corporation

STREET AND NUMBER:  
 50 Union Avenue

CITY OR TOWN:  
 Irvington

STATE:  
 New Jersey

CODE:  
 36

**5. LOCATION OF LEGAL DESCRIPTION**

COURTHOUSE, REGISTRY OF DEEDS, ETC.:  
 Surrogates Court

STREET AND NUMBER:  
 31 Chamber Street

CITY OR TOWN:  
 New York

STATE:  
 New York

CODE:  
 36

**6. REPRESENTATION IN EXISTING SURVEYS**

TITLE OF SURVEY:  
 Official New York City Landmark

DATE OF SURVEY: July 14, 1970  
 Federal  State  County  Local

DEPOSITORY FOR SURVEY RECORDS:  
 Landmarks Preservation Commission

STREET AND NUMBER:  
 305 Broadway

CITY OR TOWN:  
 New York

STATE:  
 New York

CODE:  
 36

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**7. DESCRIPTION**

CONDITION

(Check One)

Excellent     Good     Fair     Deteriorated     Ruins     Unexposed

(Check One)

Altered     Unaltered

(Check One)

Moved     Original Site

DESCRIBE THE PRESENT AND ORIGINAL (if known) PHYSICAL APPEARANCE

The information used in the description below was supplied by the City of New York Landmarks Preservation Commission. We thank them for its use here.

The Dunbar Apartments, named after the famous black poet of the turn of the century, Paul Laurence Dunbar (1872-1906), occupies the entire block bounded by 149th and 150th Streets and Seventh and Eighth Avenues in Harlem. It was the first large cooperative built for blacks and was Manhattan's earliest large garden apartment complex. Matthew Henson's residence was located at 246 W. 150th Street in this complex.

The complex consists of six independent u-shaped buildings, containing 511 apartments, and is clustered around a large interior garden court. Eight arched entranceways lead into the court and to public staircases. With its lawns, shrubs and trees, the garden court provides a quiet, green oasis removed from the traffic and noise of the surrounding streets.

Architecturally, the dominant note is one of simplicity. The cold monotony of many later housing projects has been successfully avoided by breaking up the massive wall surfaces. The heights of the buildings vary from five to six stories with alternately projected and recessed adjoining units and a variety of window alignments and sizes. The warm tones of the Holland vari-iron balconies and window guards and architectural terra cotta at the roof level complete the decorative scheme.

The Dunbar Apartments complex was acclaimed on all sides as a model of what housing developments should be. The architectural excellence of the project was immediately recognized with the award in 1927 of First Prize for walk-up apartments by the New York Chapter of the American Institute of Architects to Andrew J. Thomas, designer of the complex. These bold planning concepts served as inspiration and model for later state and federal housing programs. Construction was begun in October, 1926 and completed in February, 1928.

A list of tenants in the Dunbar reads like a Black "Who's Who:" Contee Cullen, poet; W. E. B. Du Bois, editor; A. Philip Randolph of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters; Paul Robeson, actor; Bill (Bojangles) Robinson, dancer; and Matthew A. Henson, were all Dunbar residents, to name only a few of its notable occupants. Henson, who lived at the Dunbar from 1929 until his death in 1955, is memorialized by a tablet at the Seventh Avenue entrance, dedicated April 6, 1970. Because of the numerous famous black residents - and Matthew Henson in particular - who inhabited the Dunbar Apartments, the entire complex should be nominated for national commemoration.

\*\*\*The Consulting Committee determined that Apartment 3F alone be considered the landmark.

SEE INSTRUCTIONS

**4. SIGNIFICANCE**

PERIOD (Check One or More as Appropriate)

- Pre-Columbian;       16th Century       18th Century       20th Century  
 15th Century       17th Century       19th Century

SPECIFIC DATE(S) (If Applicable and Known) 1866-1955 (Henson)

AREAS OF SIGNIFICANCE (Check One or More as Appropriate)

- |   |   |  |   |
|---|---|--|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Aboriginal                 | <input type="checkbox"/> Education              | <input type="checkbox"/> Political           | <input type="checkbox"/> Urban Planning             |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Prehistoric                | <input type="checkbox"/> Engineering            | <input type="checkbox"/> Religion/Philosophy | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Other (Specify) |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Historic                   | <input type="checkbox"/> Industry               |  | <u>Afro-American History</u>                        |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Agriculture (Dunbar Apts.) | <input type="checkbox"/> Invention              | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Science  | _____   |
| <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Architecture    | <input type="checkbox"/> Landscape Architecture | <input type="checkbox"/> Sculpture           | _____   |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Art                        | <input type="checkbox"/> Literature             | <input type="checkbox"/> Social/Humanitarian | _____   |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Commerce                   | <input type="checkbox"/> Military               | <input type="checkbox"/> Theater             | _____   |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Communications             | <input type="checkbox"/> Music                  | <input type="checkbox"/> Transportation      | _____   |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Conservation               |   |  | _____   |

STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

On April 6, 1909, Matthew Henson, a black American became the first known man to reach the North Pole. As the trailblazer of an expedition team that was commanded by a white lieutenant, Robert E. Peary, and included four Eskimos, Henson was the first known man to reach the historic point of that isolated frontier.

Henson was born on a farm in Charles County, Maryland, in 1866. There are two different accounts of his early childhood. In his autobiography, A Negro Explorer at the North Pole, published in 1912, he states that his parents moved to Washington, D. C. soon after he was born and that his mother died when he was seven. His uncle sent him to school in the District for several years and after that he went to sea from the port in Baltimore at age twelve, sailing around the world for several years before meeting Peary. However, Henson's biographers, Bradley Robinson, author of Dark Companion, and Floyd Miller, author of Ahdoolo, with whom he collaborated, give a different account. In these versions Henson reportedly states that his mother died when he was two and that his father remarried but also died when Henson was eight. Cruelly abused and whipped by his stepmother, young Matt ran away to Washington, D. C., where he met a black woman who took him in and put him to work as a dishwasher in her restaurant. He did not have time for schooling and after awhile he made his way to Baltimore where he procured a job as a cabin's attendant aboard the merchant ship Katie Hines. It was commanded by Captain Childs who was very interested in the young boy's education and taught him during daily lessons. After Childs' death, when Henson was eighteen, the young man left the ship.

For a year after his departure from the Katie Hines, Henson took a variety of jobs along the east coast until he returned to D. C. in 1885. In 1887, while working as a stock clerk in Steinmetz Haberdashery, he met Lieutenant Robert E. Peary who came in to get a sun helmet. The owner of the store recommended Henson as a valet for the explorer's trip to Nicaragua to survey a canal route. Soon Peary found the young black man's services to be more valuable than that of a servant. Because of his experiences with the sea and his own natural ability as an explorer, Henson was a great asset on the trip, especially in the hacking and charting of a path through the swamps and jungles of the Caribbean region.

Because of the ability and resourcefulness that he displayed on this trip with Peary, Henson accompanied the commander on all future expeditions. Although Peary had

SEE INSTRUCTIONS

**9. MAJOR BIBLIOGRAPHICAL REFERENCES**

Fauset, Arthur Huff. For Freedom; A Biography of the American Negro. Philadelphia: Franking, 1927.  
 Henson, Matthew A. A Negro Explorer at the North Pole. New York: Walker and Co., 1969.  
 Miller, Floyd. Ahdoola: The Biography of Matthew A. Henson. New York: Dutton Co., 1963.  
 Robinson, Bradley. Dark Companion. New York: R. M. McBride, 1927.

( P A R T I A L L I S T I N G )

**10. GEOGRAPHICAL DATA**

LATITUDE AND LONGITUDE COORDINATES DEFINING A RECTANGLE LOCATING THE PROPERTY			O R	LATITUDE AND LONGITUDE COORDINATES DEFINING THE CENTER POINT OF A PROPERTY OF LESS THAN TEN ACRES		
CORNER	LATITUDE	LONGITUDE		LATITUDE	LONGITUDE	
	Degrees Minutes Seconds	Degrees Minutes Seconds		Degrees Minutes Seconds	Degrees Minutes Seconds	
NW	° ' "	° ' "		° ' "	° ' "	
NE	° ' "	° ' "		° ' "	° ' "	
SE	° ' "	° ' "		° ' "	° ' "	
SW	° ' "	° ' "		° ' "	° ' "	

UTM: 18.589500.4519720

APPROXIMATE ACREAGE OF NOMINATED PROPERTY: *less than one acre*

LIST ALL STATES AND COUNTIES FOR PROPERTIES OVERLAPPING STATE OR COUNTY BOUNDARIES

STATE:	CODE	COUNTY	CODE

**11. FORM PREPARED BY**

NAME AND TITLE:  
**Marcia Greenlee, Historical Projects Director**

ORGANIZATION: **Afro-American Bicentennial Corporation**      DATE: **December 1974**

STREET AND NUMBER:  
**1420 N Street, N. W., Suite 101**

CITY OR TOWN: **Washington, D. C. 20005**      STATE: \_\_\_\_\_      CODE: **11**

**12. STATE LIAISON OFFICER CERTIFICATION      NATIONAL REGISTER VERIFICATION**

<p>As the designated State Liaison Officer for the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966 (Public Law 89-665), I hereby nominate this property for inclusion in the National Register and certify that it has been evaluated according to the criteria and procedures set forth by the National Park Service. The recommended level of significance of this nomination is:</p> <p>National <input type="checkbox"/>      State <input type="checkbox"/>      Local <input type="checkbox"/></p> <p>Name _____</p> <p>Title _____</p> <p>Date _____</p>	<p>I hereby certify that this property is included in the National Register.</p> <p>_____  <i>Director, Office of Archeology and Historic Preservation</i></p> <p>Date _____</p> <p>ATTEST:</p> <p>_____  <i>Keeper of The National Register</i></p> <p>Date _____</p>
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8. SIGNIFICANCE - page two

made one trip in 1886 before he met Henson, the two were constant companions on the next seven ventures to the sub-zero, northern wasteland (1891-1892, 1893-1895, 1896-1897, 1898-1902, 1905-1906, 1908-1909). In this strange, cold barren land, Henson became the key to the success of the explorations because of his ability to cooperate with the natives who thought of him as a brother because his skin was non-white like theirs. It was Henson, also, who saved Peary's life several times — rescuing him from an ice slick crevasse, killing an angry musk-ox that was charging the commander, and nursing the leader's frozen feet. It was not only the black man's ability and experience that kept the expeditions intact and moving forward, but it was also his courage and indomitable spirit that were vital factors in the success of those expeditions.

Finally, in 1909, the most famous exploration that the two were to make took place, traveling across 450 miles of Artic ice and snow. The five whites who accompanied Henson and Peary were sent back one by one on their dog sledges with teams of Eskimos as each had performed his function as a support team. Henson was the only one selected to go the last lap of the trip. In his book How Peary Reached the Pole (1934), one of the whites who had been sent back, Commander Donald MacMillan explained why the black man had been chosen to go the length of the exploration:

He was the most popular man aboard the ship with the Eskimos. He could talk their language like a native. He made all the sledges which went to the Pole. He made all the stoves. Henson, the colored man, went to the Pole with Peary because he was a better man than any of his white assistants.

Peary himself, feeling compelled to explain to a race-conscious America why he had selected a black man over a white, echoed MacMillan's statement that Henson was simply the best man suited for the job:

Matthew Henson, my Negro assistant, has been with me since 1887. . . . This position I have given him primarily because of his adaptability and fitness for the work, and secondly on account of his loyalty. He is a better dog driver and can handle a sledge better than any man living except some of the best Eskimo hunters. I couldn't get along without him.

As the indispensable trailblazer of the final expedition, Henson went ahead of Peary, building igloos at each stopping point which not only marked the path but provided Peary with a place to rest. Henson said that he knew that he had arrived at the North Pole when the compass no longer registered North. Peary soon arrived and gave the black man the

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8. SIGNIFICANCE - page three

customary honor of planting the American flag on that historic spot.

On their return to the states the honor and acclaim that were due Peary and Henson were delayed until the fraudulent claim of Dr. Frederick Cook, who declared that he had reached the Pole a year earlier, was exposed as a hoax. After Cook's assertion was exposed Peary was showered with honors, including the promotion to Rear Admiral and the passage of a Congressional resolution of thanks. Henson, however, was ignored and forgotten. Parking cars in a Brooklyn garage in 1913, he was discovered by a black politician who secured for the forty-seven year old explorer a government job in a custom house as a messenger boy, earning \$900 a year. By the time he retired he had worked his way up to a \$2000 a year clerkship. Four attempts, in 1926, 1936, 1938, 1949, to grant Henson Congressional approval for a Federal pension as acknowledgement of his exceptional service to his country in the exploration of the North Pole were all unsuccessful.

Henson did, however, live long enough to receive some belated appreciation from a neglectful and insensitive country. In 1937 the Explorers' Club made him an honorary member. In 1944 Congress issued a commemorative medal in acknowledgement of the entire expedition's accomplishment. In 1950 President Truman saluted Henson in Pentagon ceremonies and in 1953 President Eisenhower honored him at the White House. In 1961 the Maryland legislature passed a bill that posthumously placed a plaque in the State House to commemorate its native son as a co-discoverer of the North Pole.

Matthew Henson died in New York City in 1955 at age 88. The Dunbar Apartments, his home for the last twenty-seven years of his life (1928-1955), today bear a plaque noting his residence and achievements.

Matthew Henson is of national historical significance because he was one of the pioneers, if not the first known person, to reach the North Pole. As a trailblazer of an exploratory expedition, he was very instrumental in the total success of the entire expedition because of his skills and ability to get along with Eskimos. Through his personal and linguistic skills he helped to open up another part of the world's surface to the rest of mankind.