

Convocation Remarks, August 30, 2022

Next spring, we will dedicate the new John and Lile Gibbons Center for Arctic Studies—one of the two new buildings under construction behind Smith Union. Along with labs and classrooms, the building will also serve as the new home for our renowned Peary-MacMillan Arctic Museum.

It will be exactly seventy years since the College's board of trustees began discussions on the possible creation of an Arctic museum at Bowdoin, and a long way from the initial "museum room" in the basement of the Searles Science Building, where children loved to ride a musk ox, but where the displays themselves really pleased no one.

Bowdoin's interest and active role in Arctic exploration began in 1860 when Paul Chadbourne, a professor of chemistry and natural history, took twenty students from Bowdoin and Williams College to Labrador and Greenland to study the natural history of the region. In several subsequent voyages to the Arctic, interest in, and interdisciplinary study of, the North was firmly established at Bowdoin.

Most certainly, Bowdoin's connection to and celebration of Arctic exploration is rooted in the work of two men, Robert Peary, of the Class of 1877, and Donald MacMillan, of the Class of 1898.

Peary's trips to the Arctic began in 1886 and continued to grow in size and ambition throughout the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Part of Peary's success was his willingness to learn from Inuit, the indigenous people of northern Canada, parts of Greenland, and Alaska. He brilliantly combined American and Inuit technologies that allowed him and his team to reach far north destinations never previously achieved.

General Thomas Hubbard (Class of 1857), the individual who financed the construction of Hubbard Hall (completed in 1902) to serve as the College's library (and where he kept an apartment!) was one of the people who provided Peary financial support. By 1909, Peary was an internationally recognized figure, and in the fall of that year he announced that he, along with Matthew Henson, his talented African American assistant, and four of the most talented Inuit hunters and dog sledge drivers, were the first people to reach the North Pole.

Donald MacMillan joined Peary's 1908–09 North Pole expedition and returned to the Arctic repeatedly between 1910 and 1954, involving dozens of Bowdoin students in exploration, technological innovation, and humanitarian efforts. He named his schooner, designed to be frozen into the ice, after his alma mater, taught at the College briefly, and became a well-known public figure, lecturing throughout the country with films he had shot in the north.

Eventually, many of Peary and MacMillan's collections of artifacts, photographs, and journals found their way to the College, and other people started donating Arctic-related materials to Bowdoin. By 1953, when the College decided to consider a designated space to boast of its important alumni and showcase its Arctic artifacts, taxidermized animals, and photographs, the collection included the Hubbard sledge, one of five sledges used by Peary's team to reach the North Pole, as well as the logs, journals, and photographs from Robert Bartlett, a famous navigator in his own right and a member of Peary's 1908–09 expedition.

It wasn't until 1964—with the new Hawthorne-Longfellow Library under construction—that directed and substantive conversations on an Arctic museum resumed, and the College's governing boards, with the support of then President

Coles, voted to turn the main reading room of the library in Hubbard Hall into a museum focused on the Arctic. This is the space the museum occupies today.

Three years later and fifty-eight years since Peary's announcement that he had been the first to reach the North Pole, the museum was officially named for Peary and Donald MacMillan.

College documents, starting in 1966, identify Ian White, as the museum's initial designer and curator. White had a perfect combination of skills for the job. A museum professional, he had sailed the Arctic with Donald MacMillan.

White quickly set to work, envisioning three distinct galleries and when it came time for the museum doors to open in 1967, Peary's daughter, Marie Peary Kuhne, President Coles, and Donald MacMillan, then ninety-three years old, along with his wife Miriam, were present to cut the ribbon.

Over time, the museum has evolved, expanding its mission, programs, and curricular reach. This work has led to imaginative exhibitions, public programs, international workshops, and academic courses in which people learn to

understand and appreciate the people, cultures, environments, and history of this northern place.

One of only a handful of northern-focused museums in the world, the museum offers robust interdisciplinary scholarship, while simultaneously making its exhibits available to the public and elementary schools throughout Maine.

Additionally, the museum works collaboratively with Northern indigenous groups to position centrally their voices and perspective in exhibits and provide their communities access to Bowdoin's collections and resources.

Today, Arctic issues are increasingly important throughout the world. Tensions over the commercial use of the now seasonally ice-free Arctic Ocean; effects of global warming on species, food security, and communities; technological and economic developments, and a growing recognition of identity politics among indigenous groups are just some of the many issues that are relevant and in need of scholarship and understanding.

Seventy years on from that musk ox in the basement of Searles, our College is well positioned to explore the complexity of the Arctic through cultural and

environmental lenses, while also recognizing the geopolitical forces that are at play in the North. Through scholarship and educational efforts, the Gibbons Center—with new teaching and laboratory spaces and modern, state-of-the-art galleries and support spaces for the museum—will showcase this important part of the world and what it means for understanding place, history, humanity, global environments, economics, and politics. Robert Peary and Matthew Henson—who are still showing up all over the world these days in the form of dolls created by the museum—will surely make their way back for the grand opening!

