

105-107 Prospect Street – Adolphus W. Greely's Home, Famous Arctic Explorer



Back in August of 1884, Mr. Greely's birthplace and residence was bedecked with ribbons and a huge roadside banner in front of his home that said, "Here lives a hero". You would think that his accomplishments and deeds have settled into the dust of history but not so. I just watched a documentary last week on how the receding ice cap has finally made the legendary Northwest Passage navigable. His exploration of Ellesmere Island and parts of Greenland was a significant achievement and has contributed to the navigation knowledge of this now important shipping lane. But where is his home? It is located at the bottom of Parsons Street in the South End. Shockingly, there are no

banners, plaques or markers anywhere on the house indicating this famous Congressional Medal of Honor winner (granted 1935) lived.

The home is marked in the assessor's records as 1850 but the historical survey reveals the actual truth that no one knows the exact date of this Georgian home. The architectural style hints that the construction was somewhere in the late 1700's. It was converted to separately deeded half-houses somewhere in the 19th century. Pictures of the home with the hero banners shows it had already been converted into two homes so the division may have occurred around 1850 but no one is actually sure.

Adolphus Washington Greely was born in this house on March 27, 1844 and when he was not serving in the military lived here. Mr. Greely fought in some of the bloodiest conflicts in the Civil War and was promoted through the ranks by his valiant deeds. After the war, he remained in the service and joined the U.S. signal corps in 1876. He was married in 1878 to an Antoinette and shortly thereafter became the commander in charge of the Lady Franklin Bay Expedition, the first to the North Polar Sea. The purpose of the expedition was to establish the first of a chain of international circumpolar meteorological stations which could be used later as a staging ground to reach the North Pole. He created a large settlement called Fort Conger. In fact, Colonel Peary later used the base for his successful attempt at the North Pole in 1909.

Regrettably, Relief ships failed to reach Greely's party and as planned as an emergency Greely's group travelled south to Cape Sabine; where the third attempted relief vessel arrived in 1884. By that time, only Greely and six others survived and the rest had perished from starvation, drowning, or exposure. The survivors themselves were near death, and one died on the homeward journey.

After his return, he was roundly criticized but when all the information came in on his exploits, he was acknowledged to have conducted himself heroically and honorably. He continued in the army and became the chief signal officer for the entire U.S. Army and moved to Washington, D.C. When he retired in 1908, he was at the rank of Major-General. Among his other achievements, he directed the relief efforts after the great San Francisco earthquake and fire and was commended for his conduct. He also founded the National Geographic Society after returning from a world-wide trip. He died shortly after receiving the Congressional medal of honor in 1935 and is buried in the Arlington National Cemetery.



His wife kept the home until 1943 when it was sold to a Harold Hudson. It changed hands several times until a Linda J. Maquire owned it in 1984. In the next sale in 1985, it became divided into separately owned properties.

His Humble Beginnings

Adolphus Washington Greeley was born March 27, 1844, to John Balch Greeley, a shoemaker, and Frances Cobb Greeley, who worked as a weaver in the cotton mills. He

grew up on Prospect Street and graduated from Brown High School in 1860. Greely became a career Army man, enlisting in the 19th Massachusetts Volunteer Infantry in 1861, when he was just 17 years old, serving throughout the Civil War.

Growing up in Newburyport, Greely would have been familiar with the abolitionist writings of his fellow Newburyporter William Lloyd Garrison, and of Haverhill abolitionist and poet John Greenleaf Whittier. Little wonder, then, that Greely volunteered for the Union cause in 1861.

Civil War Service

Greely served, and was wounded at, several of the major battles of the war, including Ball's Bluff, Antietam, and Fredericksburg. In 1863, Greely accepted a commission in the 81st Colored Troops, and commanded black soldiers in the occupation of New Orleans.

In 1867, having risen from the rank of private to Brevet General of Volunteers, Greely was then commissioned as a second lieutenant in the regular army, and was assigned to the 36th infantry, where he began to study electricity and telegraphy – new technologies he had seen put to good use by the Union Army during the war.

The Signal Corps

With his newly acquired knowledge of telegraph technology, Greely joined the Army Signal Corps in 1867. After serving two years in the Nebraska campaign against the Cheyenne, Greely was assigned to Washington D.C., where he was asked to help Signal Corps founder Albert Myer organize the US Weather Bureau.

Now an adept meteorologist, Greely spent the next several years, from 1873 to 1881, using his scientific knowledge and technical know-how to oversee construction of thousands of miles of frontier telegraph lines in the Southwest U.S.

During his tenure as Chief Signal Officer, from 1887 until 1906, Greely modernized the Corps, introducing radio and automobile technologies into military use. He also spent \$50,000 in 1898, to convince Samuel P. Langley to

produce a flying machine for the military. Though unsuccessful, Langley's work encouraged the Wright brothers, who sold a specially modified Wright Model A to the Corps in 1909; the first military airplane.

Greely was also the officer in charge of San Francisco's earthquake relief efforts in 1906 and represented the U.S. Army at George V's coronation in 1911.

Lady Franklin Bay Expedition

In 1881, Greely volunteered to lead an Army scientific expedition to the Arctic, taking a 25-man party to establish a meteorological station.

Greely sailed on the USS Proteus, reaching his base camp at Fort Conger, on the eastern shore of Lady Franklin Bay, off Ellesmere Island, in August 1881. Greely collected data for two years but realized he was in trouble when, by August of 1883, two relief ships had failed to reach camp.

The expedition then made their way south by boat to Cape Sabine, where they expected to find help, but was forced to winter there with dwindling provisions. By June 1884, when the ships USS Thetis and USS Alert finally reached Cape Sabine, nineteen of the twenty-five men were dead.

Returned to Portsmouth, New Hampshire, by the Thetis and the USS Bear, Greely returned to Newburyport on August 14, when the city held a parade, reception, and fireworks; an all-day affair, welcoming him back home as a hero. Local historian John Currier noted that "arches, bearing appropriate mottoes, were placed across State Street, Prospect Street, and in front of City hall." Initially, Greely was publicly criticized for his leadership, including unsubstantiated reports of cannibalism, though he was later exonerated when it was determined he had "performed correctly and courageously," according to his orders.

Co-founder of the National Geographic Society

Notwithstanding the awful ordeal of the Lady Franklin Bay Expedition, Greely's expedition data on Arctic weather and tidal conditions earned him recognition by both the Royal Geographical Society of London (Founder's Medal) and the Société de Géographie (Roquette Medal) in 1886.

In 1888, Greely joined with thirty-two other pre-eminent U.S. scientists and explorers, to organize "a society for the increase and diffusion of geographical knowledge." The National Geographic Society was incorporated on January 27.

General Greeley the Author

In addition to authoring several books, including "Three Years of Arctic Service" (1886), "American Weather" (1888), and "Handbook of Arctic Discoveries" (1896), Greely contributed regularly to National Geographic magazine and donated his collection of Arctic books and scrapbooks to the Society.

Medal of Honor

Greely was the only volunteer private to attain the rank of Brigadier and Major General in the Regular Army. He received the Medal of Honor, a week before his 91st birthday in 1935.



Greely died seven months later, on October 20th, and is buried in Section 1 at Arlington National Cemetery.

His Achievements

Newburyport's first national hero, Adolphus Greely, was on the cutting edge of technology. He was one of the first telegraphers in the military, a founder of the U.S. Weather Service, and introduced the radio and the automobile to the military, as well. A fearless Polar Explorer who withstood impossible odds and survived. He went on to be a co-founder of the National Geographic Society and an active member of the famed Explorer's Club in New York City.



References:

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