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The Arctic Expedition of Commander Adolphus Washington Greely

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Commander Adolphus Washington Greely commanded the ill-fated expedition that explored the Arctic from 1881 to 1884. (*Harper's Weekly*, August 9, 1884)

Cover: The *Thetis* and the *Bear* were tossed in gale winds when they rescued the Arctic explorers with Commander Greely. (*Harper's Weekly*, August 2, 1884)

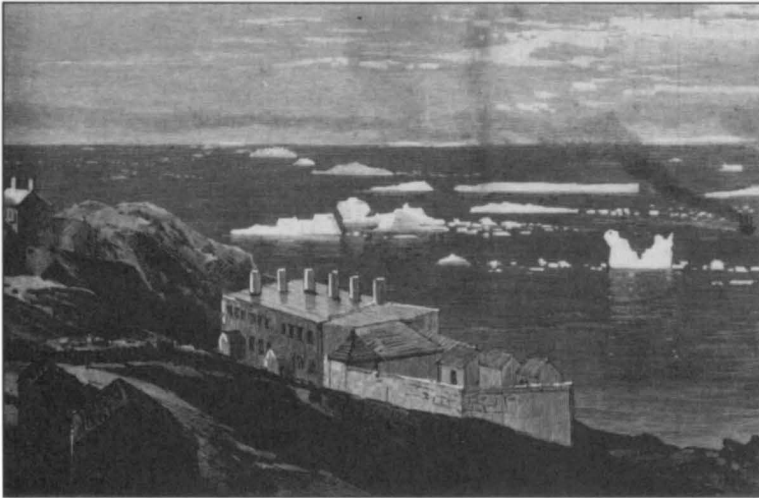
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The Race To The North Pole

The United States had been mapped, but much of the land and water north had not. Several countries were engaged in seeking a northwest passage through the frozen waters. Several countries were independently gathering information and mapping these little known reaches of the far north. In 1875 Karl Weyprecht of Norway suggested that countries exploring the polar regions share information; so in 1882-83 the first International Polar Year was established. Eleven nations, including the United States, Norway, Sweden, Denmark, Finland, Russia, the Netherlands, Germany, Austria and Great Britain joined together to share scientific research gathered from explorations of the northern reaches of Canada, Greenland and the Arctic region.

Though nations began to cooperate in exploration, international competition began in a race to reach the North Pole. When the 1895 exploration of the central polar basin by Norwegian Fridtjof Nansen revealed that no land



Ice floating as here in St. John's Harbor, Newfoundland caused serious problems for the explorers. (Harper's Weekly October 4, 1884)

masses existed at the North Pole, the explorers began personal competitions to be the first to reach the Pole.

Rochester's Arctic Explorer

The idea of international exploration was taking form in 1880 during the American Indian Wars when Lt. Frederick Kislingbury of Rochester was a scout stationed at Fort Custer in Montana Territory. He left the fort for days, sometimes weeks at a time, checking on Indian movements and picking up information. In December of that year he received a dispatch from the fort informing him that his second wife had contracted Mountain Fever. Though he was 150 miles from the fort, he traveled on horseback unceasingly through deep snow and bitter cold; but by the time he reached her, she had lapsed into a coma.



Houseboats and toboggans set outside of the Arctic quarters built by the Greely men. (Harper's Weekly, April 19, 1884)

His wife, whom he had married only six months earlier, died at his side soon after his arrival. She was the sister of his first wife so that she was aunt as well as step-mother to his four children. Now the children were again without a mother.

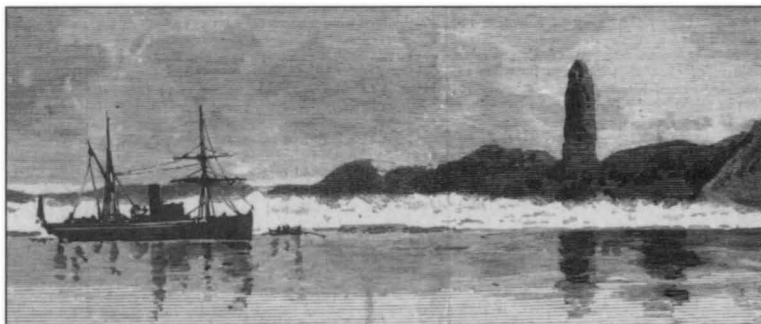
Physically exhausted by his travel and depressed by the death of his new wife, Kislingbury fell into a nervous

depression. Then he received an Army dispatch from Washington offering him a position as second in command of an Arctic expedition under Lt. Adolphus Washington Greely. Greely was to command the U.S. station at Fort Conger on the northeastern side of Ellsmere Island. The challenge to further the success of the United States in the world's race to the North Pole interested Kislingbury and he accepted the command.

On August 14, 1881, after battling ice for seven days, Kislingbury and his men were delivered to Discovery Bay aboard the Proteus. The explorers had enough supplies and fuel to last a few years, but a supply ship was scheduled to come annually with fresh food and some supplies. On Ellsmere Island the men set about building a permanent command post 60 by 20 feet with a double frame for



The officers of the Thetis, the most powerfully built rescue boat ever outfitted up to the time of rescuing the Greely party in 1884. The men standing are: Chief engineer G. W. Melville; ice pilot J. W. Norveau, Lt. S.C. Semly; surgeon E. H. Green and Ensign C. H. Harlow. Seated are: Lt. Emory H. Taunt, Commander W. S. Shley and Lt. Urell Sabree. (Harper's Weekly, July 26, 1884)



The Devil's Thumb at Melville Bay from a sketch by Lt. Chambers of the Loch Garry. (Harper's Weekly, November, 1884)

insulation. They named it Fort Conger after Michigan Senator Conger whose bill to Congress authorized the expedition.

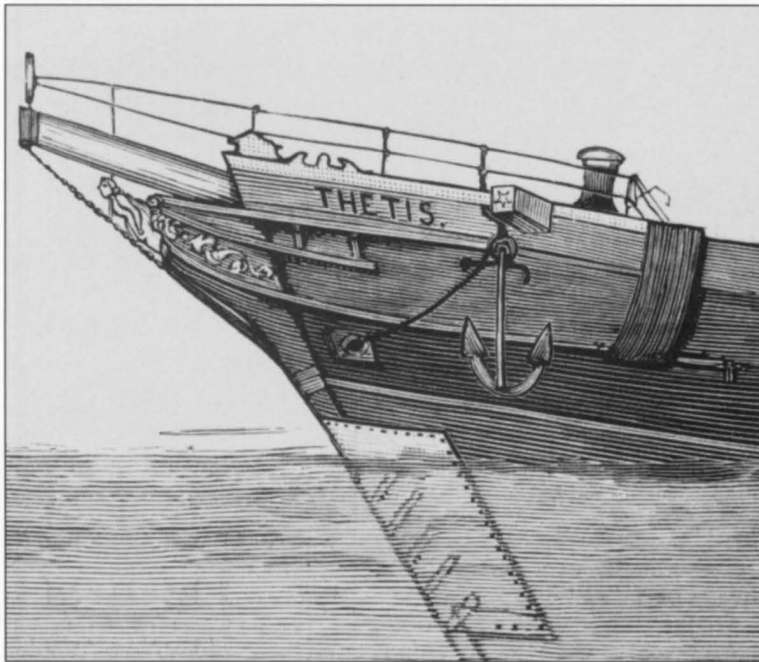
After four days, the Proteus left and the explorers settled in their new quarters. The ship returned with a letter from Kislingbury to his two brothers in Rochester in which he wrote that wildlife was abundant. He had killed several walrus, but could not retrieve them. The men also killed ten musk oxen and several polar bears and seals. He said life there agreed with him, he had never eaten so well and was gaining weight. There were no further communications from the Greely party until their rescue two years and eleven months later.

There were 25 men stationed at Fort Conger including 22 Americans; Octave Pavy, a doctor from Disco, Greenland who served as assistant surgeon; Jeno Edward, an Eskimo hunter and guide and Frederick Thoverly Christiansen from Proven, Greenland. A military discipline was practiced in order to maintain the men's schedule, health and morale. One hour of exercise and a weekly bath were required and they ate at 8 A.M., 4 P.M. and 9 P.M. Special meals were made on national holidays and Christmas gifts were exchanged. All living areas had to be kept clean. The crews of two ships under Commander Nares in 1875 suffered from scurvy so that every effort

was made to prevent this dreaded disease on the Greely expedition.

Over the nearly three year exploration, more than 500 observations and recordings were made by the 25 men. Harper's Weekly reported that records were kept daily on "meteorology, sea temperatures, ice thickness, tidal motion and velocity of sound at different temperatures." Flora, fauna and mineral samples were collected. It was learned that even at extreme sub-zero temperatures, hares, lemmings, snow-birds, polar bears, musk oxen and some plants survive. With sled dogs laced in a fan pattern, small groups of men were sent in sledges to explore and map Ellsmere Island. Among their discoveries were Lake Hazen and Greely Fjord.

At the newly discovered Lake Hazen, an abandoned Eskimo village was discovered. Signs of sledges, dogs

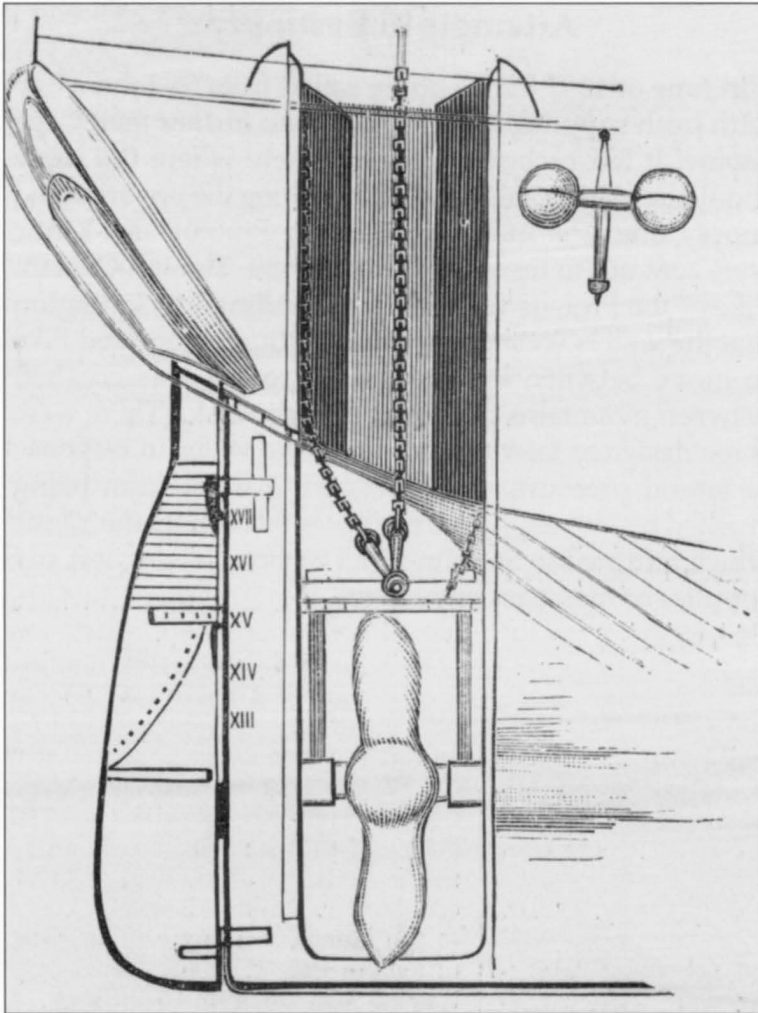


The Thetis was reinforced at the bow to prevent damage from ice. (Harper's Weekly, April 19, 1884)

and iron were left. The explorers concluded that at one time the valley was abundant with vegetation and wildlife and that the cold climate was moving slowly south forcing the migration of the Eskimo. Greely recorded a record low temperature of minus 62° and the



The armored bow of the Bear effectively cut its way through ice on its way to rescue the stranded explorers. (Harper's Weekly, November, 1884)

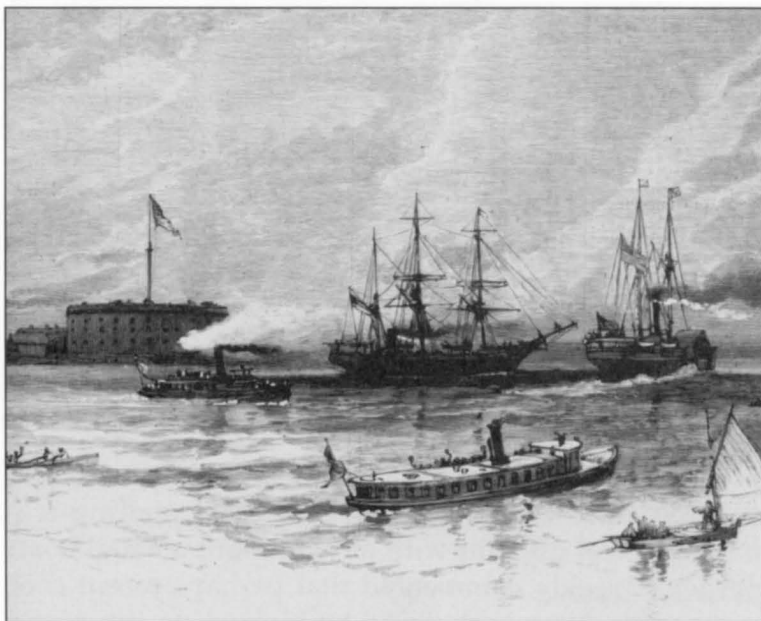


The Bear was outfitted with an apparatus that could lift the propeller out of the ice if it became lodged. (Harper's Weekly, November, 1884)

men watched the formations of mountainous icebergs. In some areas rivers were formed from melting ice, making travel difficult with anything but a small boat. Harper's Weekly commented that perhaps recent cool summers in New York could be blamed on the Arctic changes.

Attempts to Resupply

In June of 1882 the Neptune sailed from St. John's Bay with fresh supplies, but it could go no further than Cape Sabine. It left caches of supplies there where the party should have been able to find them along the pre-arranged supply line. The following year the Proteus and Yantic were sent out to resupply the explorers. Though Captain Pike of the Proteus warned Commanding Lt. Garlington that the waters were dangerous, Garlington ordered Pike to move between icebergs. The Proteus was crushed between mountains of ice and quickly sank. (There were ships designed later that raised in the water in response to lateral pressure, thus preserving them from being crushed by ice bergs). The crew was rescued by the Yantic which returned to St. John's Bay without having left any supplies or messages anywhere.



The eyes of the world were upon the Thetis as it was escorted past Governor's Island bound for the Arctic Ocean and the rescue of the stranded explorers. (Harper's Weekly, November, 1884)

The Rescue of the Greely Expedition

Greely's orders were to abandon the Fort by September 1, 1883 if no supplies had arrived. On August 9, 1883 the explorers left the fort and headed south arriving at Baird Inlet on September 29. Greely abandoned his boats there and remained adrift on an ice floe for thirty days before they floated into Smith Sound on October 31, 1883. There at Cape Sabine, they established a permanent base named Camp Clay.

For nine months Greely's men lived on small amounts

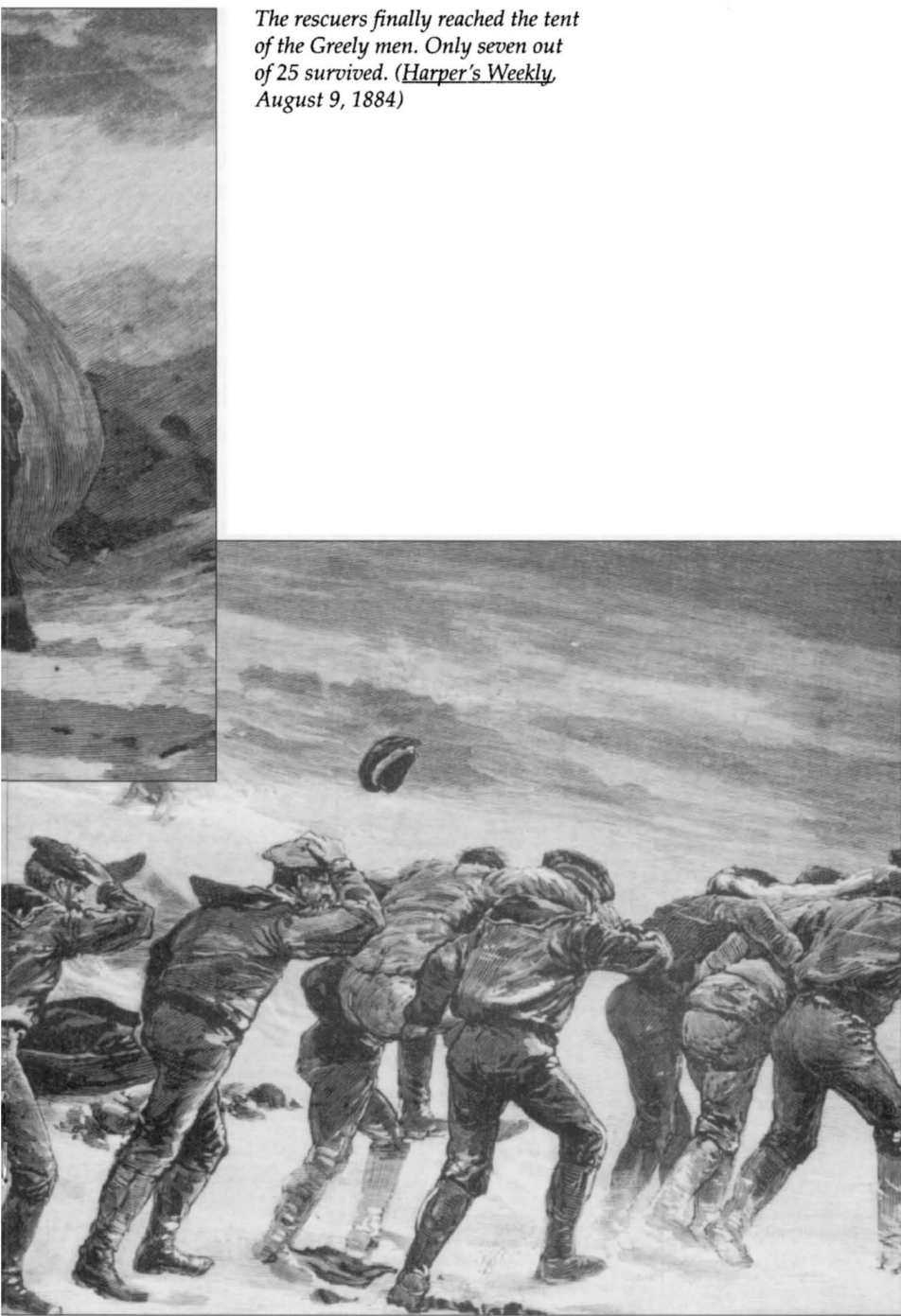


From Cape Sabine, a sailor waves a scarf to the steam launch of the Bear to let the crew know that the location of the Greely men had been found. (Harper's Weekly, August 9, 1884)



*The rescuers carried the few survivors
to the launch of the Bear. (Harper's
Weekly, August 9, 1884)*

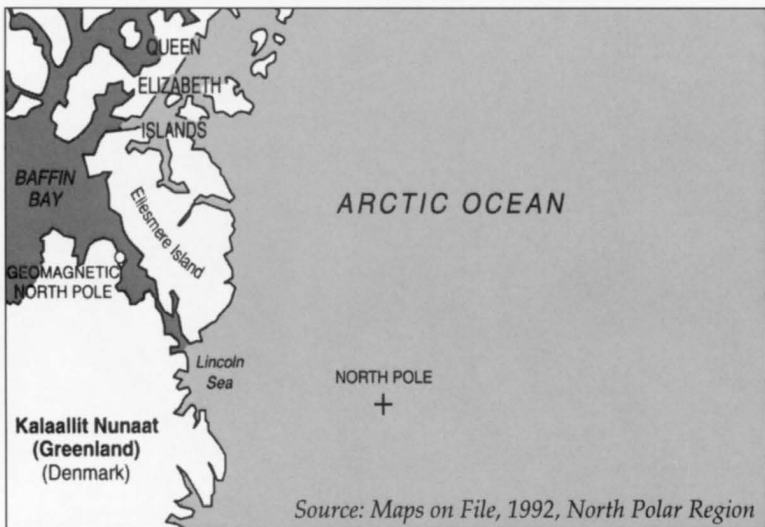
The rescuers finally reached the tent of the Greely men. Only seven out of 25 survived. (Harper's Weekly, August 9, 1884)



of food they brought with them from Fort Conger or that they had found from the 1883 wreck of the Proteus; a few supplies left by the Neptune at Cape Sabine in 1882 and caches left by Sir George Nares at Payer Harbor and Cape Isabella in 1875. Many of those supplies had been damaged by time. When provisions ran out, the men boiled strips of seal skin from their clothing and ate lichens. They found catching shrimp exhausting because it required about 1,300 of them to make one gallon. Some of the men suffered frost bite while searching for food. Sgt. Brainerd rescued three of the men who huddled together in a frozen sleeping bag too weak to return to the tent. All winter gale winds prevented the men from crossing the Sound to Littleton where they knew there were supplies.

In Congress and in the newspapers the rescue of the explorers was discussed and demanded. Some opposed the rescue claiming that the men would have to be dead after three years without fresh supplies and after the crushing of the Proteus, other men should not be endangered. Kislingbury's brothers and most other Americans and Congressmen believed an attempt to rescue the explorers had to be made and that they may, indeed, be alive.

Harpers Weekly commented, "The crushed ships, the





The rescuers found the explorers dead or nearly starved and frozen. (Harper's Weekly, August 9, 1884)

unknown, unmarked graves, the frozen dead and the mourners of all nations are spectres which rise to demand that every emergency shall be met."

Finally authorized by Congress, the ships, Thetis and Bear, were refitted and the Alert was presented by England. The Thetis was the flagship of the Greely rescue expedition. It was a whaling steamer and like the Bear, was made in Dundee, Scotland specifically for Arctic waters. Men at the Brooklyn Navy Yard where the rescue ships were refitted, complained that their prior service as whaling ships was evident in the oily, fishy odors, the foul holds, greasy woodwork and unpainted, much used appearance. The Thetis became the most powerful relief boat ever outfitted for an Arctic expedition.

On May 1, 1884, under the command of W. S. Schley, the



Photographer Sergeant Rice died on a sledge in the desolate Arctic region. (Harper's Weekly, August 2, 1884)

Thetis was pulled by a tug boat, Catalpa, past Governor's Island on its way to rescue the Greely party. On July 5, 1884 the ships anchored at Disco, Greenland, sailing for St. John's Bay four days later. The Thetis, Bear and transport Loch Garry arrived at St. John's Bay on July 17 where they waited for the Alert which had become separated in a heavy gale.

When the two ships arrived at Cape Sabine, landing parties scoured the hills for records. Within an hour a shout was heard from a seaman running toward the ships crying, "We have found the Greely party!" The records he held were dated October 31, 1883. They noted the line of retreat,

the location of the camp and other information. The Bear's steam launch was sent to the camp site indicated and quickly reached the lost explorers.

Only seven of the 25 men were still alive including Lt. Adolphus Greely, Sgt. Francis Long, Sgt. Joseph Ellison, Sgt. David Brainerd, Sgt. Julius Fredericks, hospital steward Henry Biederbeck and Private Maurice Connell. The first indication to the rescuers that anyone survived was the voice of Greely who ordered, "cut the tent!" referring to the front of the tent that had collapsed onto



Crowds gathered at the New York Harbor as the rescue ships arrive carrying the remains of the Arctic explorers. (Harper's Weekly, August 16, 1884)

three of the men nearly three days earlier. Near starvation and freezing, the survivors were given small amounts of food and drink and were carried on board the boats. The rescuers struggled to stand against a continuous gale wind as they loaded the dead that could be found. After gathering the records and instruments, the ships steamed toward Disco fighting ice and gale winds most of the way. The Alert was met enroute by the Loch Garry and together the ships arrived at Disco on July 5, 1884.

Camp Clay was described by Ensign Harlow of the Thetis. The location five miles west of Cape Sabine was chosen because there were enough rocks nearby to build a shelter, a small fresh water lake was available and the scattered supply lines were not too distant. The already weakened men stacked six-inch thick stones three feet high around a twenty-five by seventeen foot perimeter. The overturned whale boat from the Neptune formed the center support for a canvas that stretched across as a roof. Snow was packed between the rocks to block the wind. The two by three foot doorway was backed to the wind on the south side where a covered tunnel exited the winter house for twenty-five feet. Only an eskimo blubber lamp gave off a dim glow during the dark winter nights in the windowless shelter.

In May the summer thaw forced the men to move to drier ground 250 yards east of the house. Instruments, clothing, cans, utensils and other debris were strewn about the camp. The photographer found it difficult to record the scene at 11 P.M. that night as gale winds blew over the camera and hampered the photographer.

Sgt. Joseph Ellison died soon after rescue having had his frozen hands and feet amputated on board ship. Frederik Christiansen was buried at Godhavn, Greenland, and the other bodies recovered were placed in alcohol for preservation on the long trip home.

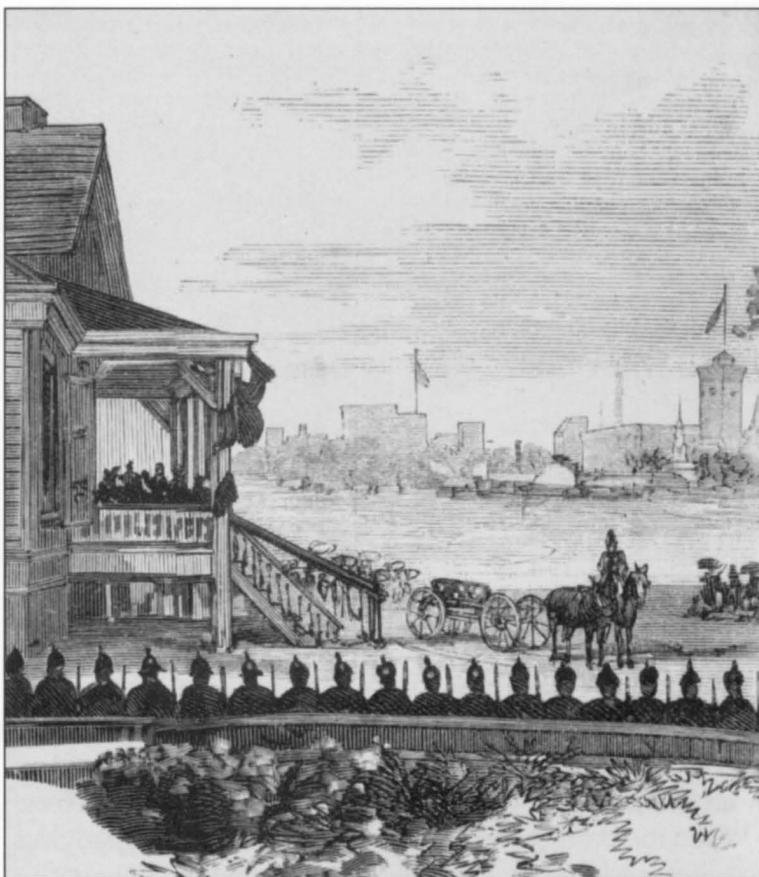
John and William Kislingbury went to Governor's Island to meet the boat that was returning their brother's body



The military received the remains of the explorers with ceremony at New York Harbor. (Harper's Weekly, August 16, 1884)

from the Arctic. They waited for days from the expected August 7 date to August 10 when the ships finally arrived. It was difficult to plan the funeral in Rochester where Lt. Frederick Kislingbury's body was to lie in state at City Hall or at the Monroe County Court House surrounded by an honor guard. Burial was to be at Mt. Hope Cemetery.

When the brothers reclaimed the body, an accompanying dispatch ordered that under no circumstances was the casket to be opened. The body was buried at Mt. Hope Cemetery; but later, amid rumors of cannibalism, it was exhumed at the insistence of the brothers. An autopsy was performed at the chapel at Mt. Hope Cemetery by Dr. Charles Buckley and F. A. Mandeville. Commissioner of Deeds Edward Angevine and brothers William and John Kislingbury were witnesses. The body lay in an iron casket wrapped in cotton batting and a woollen blanket. The autopsy revealed that he had eaten hair, moss and wood in an attempt to survive; but more startling was the fact that skin and muscles had been systematically removed from his body and legs by a sharp instrument. Greely denied that any cannibalism had taken place on the



Some of the survivors were taken to the hospital for recovery from hunger, exhaustion and frost bite. (Harper's Weekly, August 16, 1884)

expedition. If it had, he said, it was individually and without his knowledge.

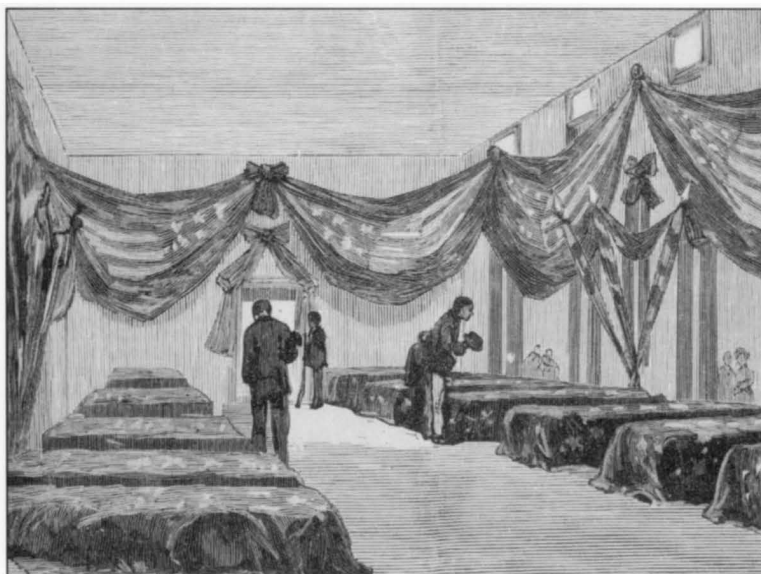
Though anxious to hear of the welfare of the lost explorers, the public complained of the publication of gory details. Greely's narrative revealed some of the hardships endured by the party at Cape Sabine. By the time the party was rescued, ten men had perished from hunger and two were nearly starved. Several others had lost consciousness. Charles B. Henry had been executed after he was caught stealing bacon and seal skin boots from the party's hunter.

He had already been warned. Greely said the execution was necessary for the safety of the rest of the party.

Greely was welcomed home by cheering crowds and a parade. He passed through the streets of Newburyport in a carriage under four arches on his way to a special reception. Governor Robinson gave a speech while the band played "Hail to the Chief" and "Home Again." He gave brief comments to the public and said he was saddened that his comrades were too ill to enjoy the festivities.

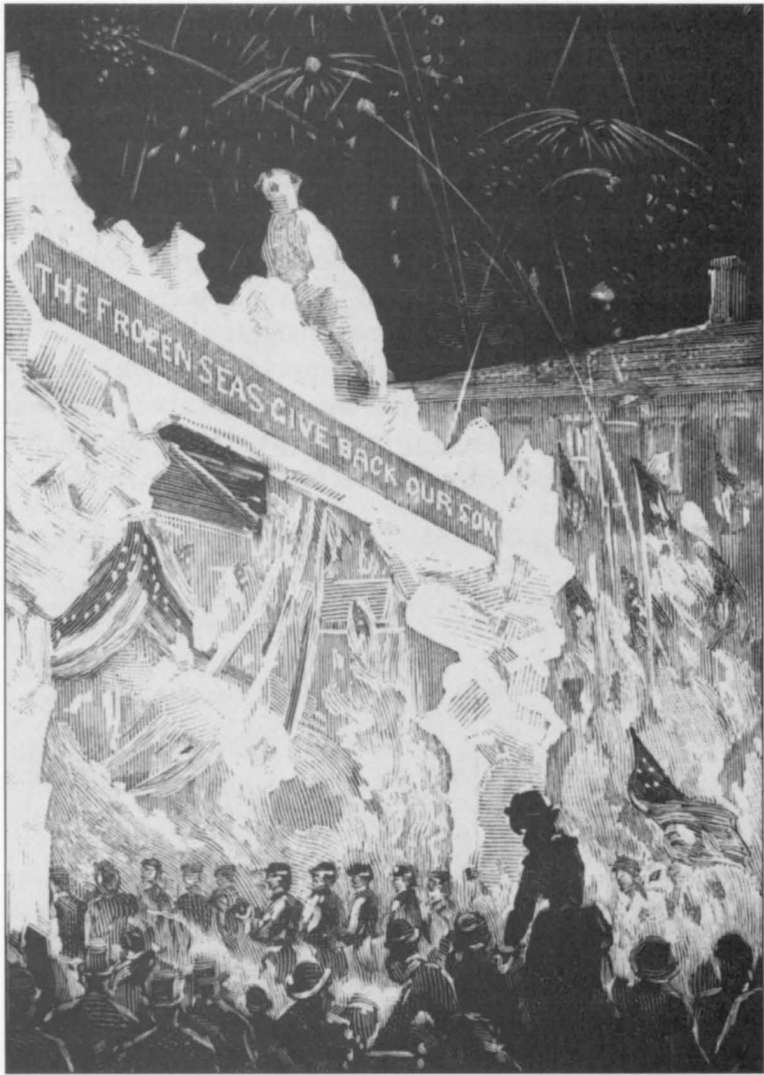
Two years after his rescue Greely published Three Years of Arctic Service. He later published A Handbook of Polar Discoveries. He was promoted to chief signal officer and finally brigadier general in 1887. The following year, 1888, he helped to found the National Geographic Society.

In 1895 one of the survivors, Francis Long, was sent by the Army to Rochester as a weather observer. He was interviewed by the Union & Advertiser about the expedition and periodically told stories to friends. He and



The bodies of the explorers brought back from the Arctic were draped in patriotic cloth and held under guard. (Harper's Weekly, August 16, 1884)

an Eskimo had gone hunting by sledge killing scores of birds, a few seals and once killing a bear that fed the party for a month. The two men survived the hunting treks by huddling together in a sleeping bag and napping for a



In Greely's hometown of Newburyport, amid fireworks and a cheering, flag waving crowd, the Greely welcoming procession passes under the Arctic Arch banner that calls "The frozen seas, give back our son." (Harper's Weekly, November, 1884)



Greely was welcomed back to his home at Newburyport by admiring crowds. (Harper's Weekly, August 23, 1884)

half hour before moving on. Finally Long did not have enough strength to hunt.

Harper's Weekly commented in 1884, "It is evident from Lt. Greely's narrative (exploration records) that had the relief expeditions succeeded in reaching Ft. Conger, or in making caches of supplies where they could be found along his line of retreat, the whole party might have returned alive, with the story of the most successful Arctic expedition that ever spent their winters in the 'land of desolation.'" The party had set a contemporary record reaching 83° 24' N. latitude in the international race for the North Pole.



Commander Greely and his fellow explorers. Note Greely, Kislingbury and executed Henry. (*Harper's Weekly*, August 9, 1884)