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History

The tale of Hans Hendrik

Ever wonder who put the 'Hans' in Hans Island? The story behind it is perhaps the only uneventful thing that happened in his life as an explorer

CULTURE No man is a kidney (Photo: Arktisk Institut)

October 7, 2016 - 8:52pm - By Iben Bjørnsson

You may have heard about a tiny rock in the waters between Greenland and Canada, named Hans Island. You may also know that Canada and Denmark sporadically feud over it. What you may not know is that the 'Hans' in Hans Island was a Greenlander named Hans Hendrik.

According to Danish author Jan Løve, who recently published a biography of Hans Hendrik, he was something of a trailblazer, and sometimes did unexpected things: "He went on five Arctic expeditions, and that is a bit unusual. What is also unusual is that he was recruited for all but the first expedition he went on."

Hans Hendrik was born in 1834, in southern Greenland, in the settlement of Fiskenæsset (present-day Qeqertarsuatsiaat), some 100 kilometres south of Nuuk. His father worked for the Moravian church, which was the dominant Christian mission in the area. It was only natural, then, that Hans Hendrik, who was born with the Greenlandic name Suersaq, would be baptised and given a Christian name. He attended school with the Moravians and learned to read and write. Apart from that, he had a traditional Greenlandic upbringing, which included learning to hunt for seals and drive a dog-sledge.

Hans Hendrik's birthplace, Fiskenæsset, Qeqertarsuatsiaat photographed in 1898 (Photo: Arktisk Institut)

In 1853 a ship anchored at Qeqertarsuatsiaat. It was the *Advance*, captained by American navy physician and explorer Elisha Kent Kane. Advance was on a search mission. In 1845 the British *Northwest Passage Expedition*, led by Sir John Franklin had set out to find – as the name suggests – the Northwest Passage. Since then, no-one had heard from them and the area was almost overrun by search expeditions.

In 1859, no less than nine expeditions set out to search for the lost expedition, all of them in vain. It wasn't until 2014 that the first of Franklin's ships would eventually be found. The other was found **just a few weeks ago**. In 1853, however, just three search expeditions were going on when the *Advance* set sail.

As **previously mentioned**, Europeans and Americans found out that the chances of survival when exploring the Arctic increased if an expedition included Arctic natives who were able to navigate and survive off the land. According to Mr Løve, this was around the time when they started to realise the advantage of hiring local members for expeditions. Perhaps the many failed expeditions had something to do with it.

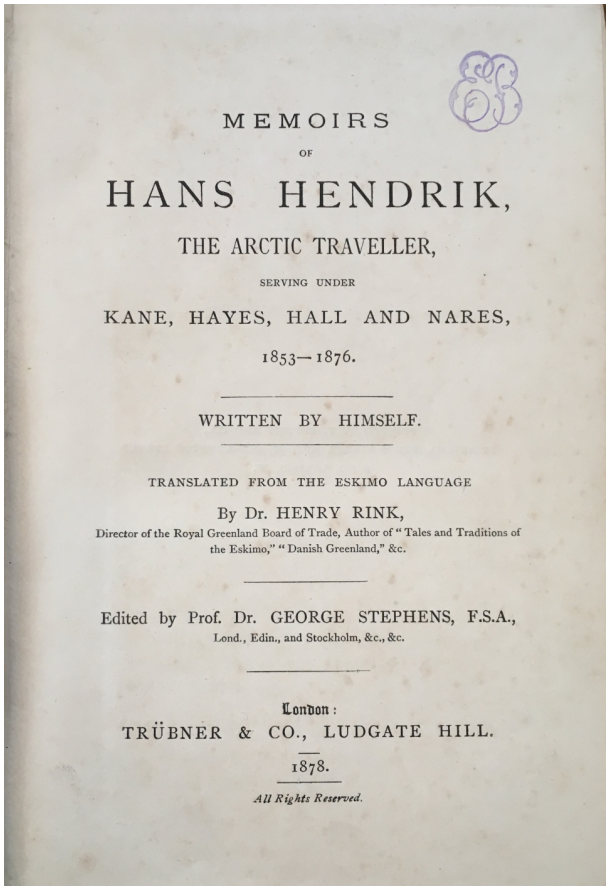
When the *Advance* anchored at Qeqertarsuatsiaat, it was precisely for that purpose. And Captain Kane found what he was looking for; Hans Hendrik was hired as a musher, seal hunter and guide who could help when they came in contact with local tribes.

With Hans Hendrik now a part of the expedition, the *Advance* set sail heading north, to the waters today known as the Nares Strait, between Ellesmere Island and north-western Greenland. But also this expedition failed; stuck in the ice, the *Advance* could go no further than the northern coast of the present-day Thule district, just northeast of Cape Alexander, where she had to sit tight for two winters.

Part of the crew left the ship in an attempt to get as far south as Upernavik, but failed and ended up returning to the ship, weak and fatigued. Two people died. Everyone had scurvy.

In may 1855, the crew successfully escaped, pulling boats on sledges over the ice, until they reached open water. They reached Upernavik in August, exhausted and having lost another expedition member. Hans Hendrik, however, was not with them. He had left the expedition earlier in the spring. Being the meat provider of the expedition, he often went on hunting trips away from the ship. During these trips he met and sometimes spent a few days with local Inuit tribes and, after an episode in which Captain Kane reportedly threatened to shoot him, he left the expedition for good to join a tribe with which he had become friendly.

In his memoirs, he wrote: *In intended to return but then I started envying the natives, making their own living and leading a happy life. In the end I wholly joined them when they moved southwards.*



MEMOIRS

OF

HANS HENDRIK,

THE ARCTIC TRAVELLER,

SERVING UNDER

KANE, HAYES, HALL AND NARES,

1853—1876.

WRITTEN BY HIMSELF.

TRANSLATED FROM THE ESKIMO LANGUAGE

By Dr. HENRY RINK,

Director of the Royal Greenland Board of Trade, Author of "Tales and Traditions of the Eskimo," "Danish Greenland," &c.

Edited by Prof. Dr. GEORGE STEPHENS, F.S.A.,

Lond., Edin., and Stockholm, &c., &c.

London:

TRÜBNER & CO., LUDGATE HILL.

1878.

Hans Hendrik's memoirs were published in Danish and English by the colonial director for Greenland, Hinrich Rink (Photo: Arktisk Institut)

There might have been another thing life with the tribe could offer that the expedition could not: women. After various liaisons, Hans Hendrik took a wife, Mequ, who later took the Christian name Birgithe Judithe.

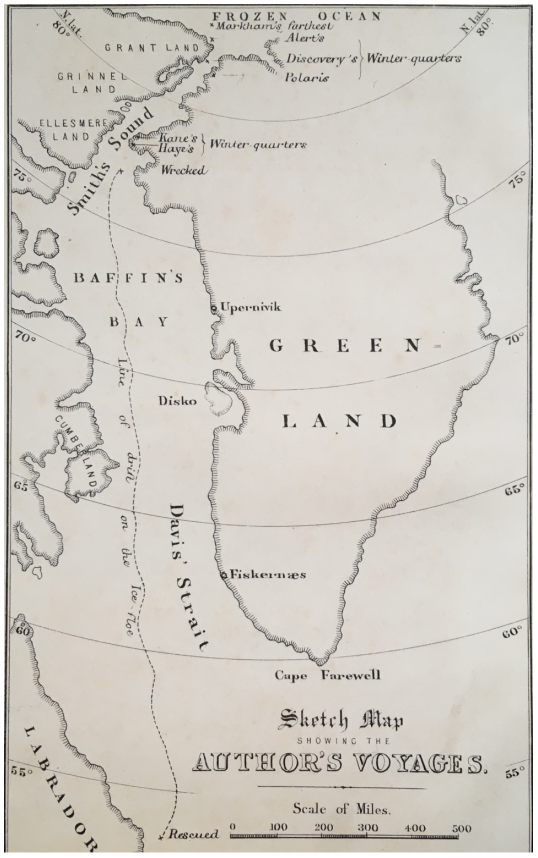
Aboard the *Advance* there was a doctor named Isaac Hayes (yes, that was his actual name). In 1860 he started out on an expedition on the ship United States.

Back then it was a commonly held that the North Pole was surrounded by open sea, and Hays wanted to get a boat across the ice pack to reach it. Also participating in this expedition was the astronomer August Sonntag, who had also been aboard the *Advance*.

At this time, Hans Hendrik had settled near the Cape York coast with his wife, their child and his wife's parents. Hayes, who knew Hans Hendrik from Advance, tracked him down and asked him to come along once more as a musher and hunter. Hans Hendrik agreed, if he could bring Mequ, their daughter and their tent.

This expedition didn't reach its goal either, obviously, since we know today that open sea does not surround the North Pole. But that wasn't the only problem: during a sledge journey, Sonntag fell through the ice and Hens Hendrik barely managed to pull him up from the ice-cold water. He brought Sonntag to a snow-hut and got him in a warm sleeping bag, but to no avail. Sonntag died not long after.

Hayes had to abandon the expedition, and Hans Hendrik along with his family was set ashore in Upernavik. The colonial manager provided work for Hans Hendrik in the Upernavik area for the next ten years. Then, in 1871, another ship anchored.



Hans Hendrik's travels, from his memoirs (maps of present day names below) (Photo: Arktisk Institut)

This time it was the steamship *USS Polaris* and its captain, CF Hall, who was trying to reach the North Pole. He wanted Hans Hendrik to come with him as well. Once again, Hans Hendrik accepted, on the condition that he be permitted to bring his wife and children, which he now had three of. This time, Mequ wasn't to be the only woman on board. On the Polaris were also Joe and Hannah, an Inuit couple from Baffin Island. There was also a familiar face for Hans Hendrik: Second Mate Morton who had been aboard the *Advance*.

The *Polaris* was yet another in a long succession of ships that didn't reach the North Pole. What was worse, after a sledge journey exploring the north-western coast of Greenland, Captain Hall fell ill and died after two weeks.

Still, the expedition could claim some accomplishments, for example, the *Polaris* had gone further north than any ship before her. She reached the northern mound of the Nares Strait, where the polar sea begins, before being halted by ice.

Observatory built by the 'Polaris Expedition' at their wintering site in Thank God Harbor, 1871. Photographed in 1922 (Photo: Arktisk Institut)

A record was set on land as well: a sledge with a crew including Hans Hendrik reached the 82nd parallel in May 1872. Or, perhaps we should say, a Western record was set; Inuit had travelled, and lived, as far north before.

It was on this expedition that Hall named a tiny island in the northern part of the Nares Strait, midway between Greenland and Canada, after Hans Hendrik. In Greenlandic, the island is known as Tarupaluk, meaning kidney-shaped.

In August 1872, Mequ had another baby on board: a son named Charles Polaris after the ship and its captain.

At this point they were on their way home, but the *Polaris* got stuck and thoroughly trapped in the ice. Nineteen people left the ship, thinking she was about to be wrecked. Fourteen stayed aboard. Hans Hendrik wrote about that night: *As the others drifted from us, we were certain they would go down, while we were in a pathetic state of sadness and tears.*

However, the 14 people aboard managed to get the *Polaris* out from the ice's grip and towed ashore on Littleton Island (known today as Pikiuleq). Here, they were helped by locals to build a house in which they could stay for the winter. Later, they built some smaller boats from parts of the *Polaris* and sailed south. After several weeks, they were picked up by a ship.

It was worse for Hans Hendrik and those who had left the ship. They were now on a big ice floe. They had left the ship in the night, and in the light of the next day they saw that the *Polaris* had reached the shore yet they were drifting in the other direction, unable to get there. They had brought two smaller boats, but could not get them into the water due to stormy weather.

Instead they settled on the ice floe. They built three snow huts on it, and drifted along while living off of the seals Hans Hendrik and Joe were able to hunt. Along the way, they had to burn a boat to keep warm.

They had left the *Polaris* in October. They lived and drifted on the ice floe all the way down the Nares Strait until March, when it started to break up. March was followed by a hectic April in which they alternated between being in the boat, which was way too small for all of them, and on ever smaller ice floes. On the last day of April they were rescued by a ship from Newfoundland, the *Tigress*, out hunting for seals.

From Newfoundland they travelled to Washington, DC, where they were questioned by a commission about the expedition and the other members, who were still unaccounted for. The *Tigress* joined the search, and on the way returned Hans Hendrik and his family to Upernavik. This was 1873.

The cairn containing Captain Hall's last report, copied by RW Coppinger in 1876. It was found by Peter Daves in 1966. The report itself is pictured below (Photo: Arktisk Institut)

Once back, Hans Hendrik returned to work for the Royal Greenland Trade Company, but no more than two years passed before another ship anchored and wanted him to come along on an expedition. It was the British Arctic Expedition, led by commander Nares (now you know why it is called the Nares Strait). The expedition consisted of two ships, *HMS Alert* and *HMS Discovery*.

This time, Hans Hendrik didn't bring his family along and he missed them. His situation only got worse when the overheard what he thought were plans by the crew of the *Discovery* to beat him. Unlike the other expeditions, he was the only Inuit aboard and hadn't met any of them before setting sail.

As countrymen, these people stick together. I am the only one here without a friend of my own nation, the only one left out.

He considered running away, but knew perfectly well that there was nowhere to run to and survive. But he also felt unsafe on the ship.

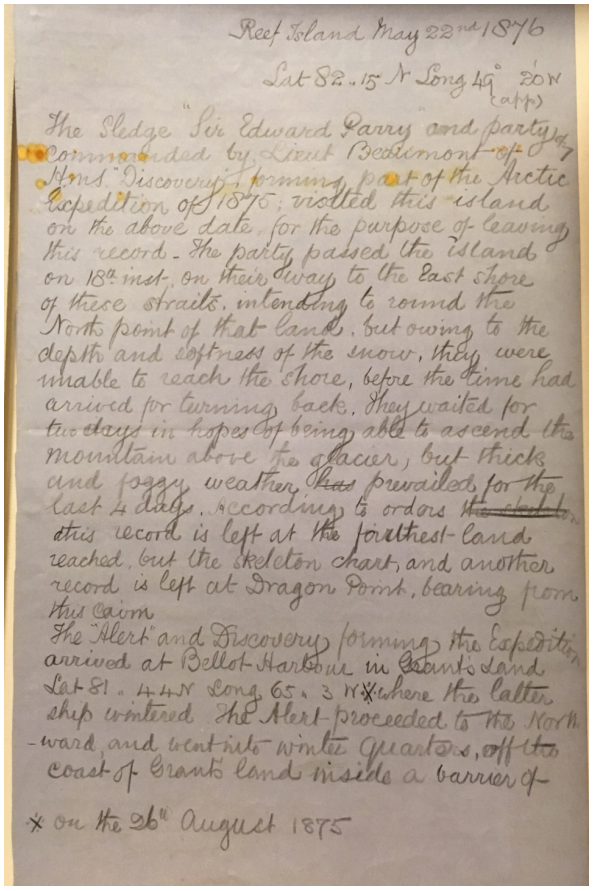
I went ashore, dug a hole in the snow and laid down in it.

Here, a search team found him and brought him back – without beating him. He wrote that he thought he heard the crew talk behind his back a couple of times more. And whether or not they did, the incident speaks volumes about what loneliness and homesickness could do to a person on these expeditions, perhaps especially if that person didn't care all that much about the purpose of said expedition.

That appears to have been true for Hans Hendrik, Mr Løve says: "He thought it was more fun to hunt for polar bears than explore geography. By his own records one can be led to think that it was all a big hunting trip with some travelling in between."

Characteristically, Hans Hendrik was most depressed during the dark months, when he couldn't go hunting. When the light returned, so did his good mood. And he probably wasn't the only one who experienced that.

Whatever the crew might have said about him, he was about to give them something to be grateful for: in the spring of 1876, scurvy hit a sledge team led by *Discovery's* second in command, Beaumont. Beaumont sent one man back, but he died anyway. More and more men from Beaumont's team were hit, to the extent that the trip back went at snail pace because they had to transport the sick, which meant less men to pull the sledge.



Reef Island May 22nd 1876

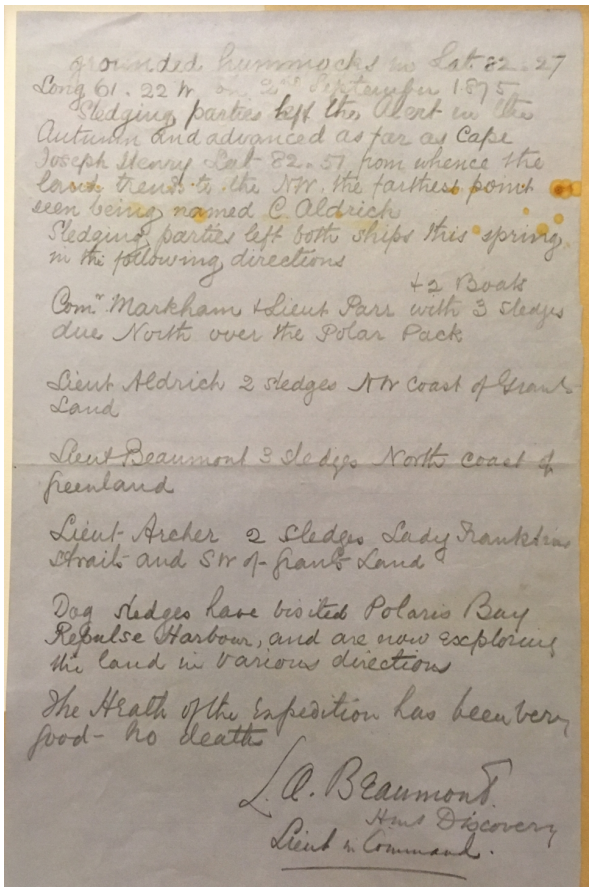
Lat 82.15 N Long 49° 20 W (apx)

The Sledge "Sir Edward Parry" and party commanded by Lieut Beaumont of H.M.S. "Discovery" forming part of the Arctic Expedition of 1875; visited this island on the above date, for the purpose of leaving this record. The party passed the island on 18th inst. on their way to the East shore of these straits, intending to round the North point of that land, but owing to the depth and softness of the snow, they were unable to reach the shore, before the time had arrived for turning back. They waited for two days in hopes of being able to ascend the mountain above the glacier, but thick and foggy weather prevailed for the last 4 days, according to orders this record is left at the farthest land reached, but the skeleton chart, and another record is left at Dragon Point, bearing from this Cairn

The "Alert" and Discovery forming the Expedition arrived at Bellot Harbour in Grants Land Lat 81.44 N Long 65.3 W* where the latter ship wintered. The Alert proceeded to the North-ward, and went into winter Quarters, off the coast of Grants land inside a barrier of-

* on the 26th August 1875

HA cairn report from Beaumont, 1875. Page 1 of 2 (Photo: Arktisk Institut)



grounded hummocks in Lat 82.27 Long 61.22 W on 2nd September 1875

Sledging parties left the Alert in the Autumn and advanced as far as Cape Joseph Henry Lat 82.57 from whence the land trends to the NW. the farthest point seen being named C. Aldrich

Sledging parties left both ships this spring in the following directions

+2 Boats

Com.r Markham & Lieut Parr with 3 sledges due North over the Polar Pack

Lieut Aldrich 2 sledges NW coast of Grant Land

Lieut Beaumont 3 Sledges North coast of Greenland

Lieut Archer 2 Sledges Lady Franklins Strait and SW of Grants Land

Dog Sledges have visited Polaris Bay Repulse Harbour, and are now exploring the land in various directions

The Health of the Expedition has been very good- No death

L. A. Beaumont
H.M.S. Discovery
Lieut & Commd.

HA cairn report from Beaumont, 1875. Page 2 of 2 (Photo: Arktisk Institut)

Luckily, a search team with Hans Hendrik as musher had been sent out to look for them. He was the one who caught sight of Beaumont's tattered group, which had lost yet another man by then. In subsequent reports, Hans Hendrik was praised, not only for handling the dogs so well on that particular occasion, allowing a quick rescue of Beaumont and his men, but also for his skills as a hunter in general.

In June, a team from the *Alert* set a new northern record: they reached the 83rd parallel. But they were suffering from scurvy as well. Two men from that team died. Commander Nares decided to terminate the expedition and return home.

With that, Hans Hendrik returned to his family in 1876. In 1881 Mequ died and Hans Hendrik remarried in a ceremony carried out by Knud Rasmussen's father. According to Hinrich Rink, a former colonial director of South Greenland who had also served as director of the Royal Greenland Trading Company and who, in 1878, had Hans Hendrik's memoirs translated and published, Hans Hendrik and his family were able to live comfortably from expedition salaries and the wage he earned working for the company.

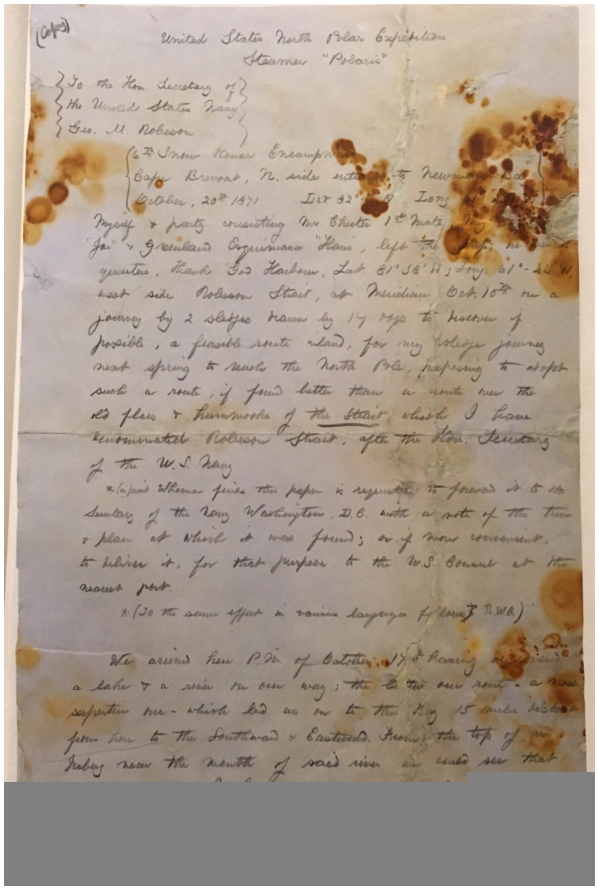
This may be why, when he was asked to come along on a Swedish expedition to Cape York in 1883, he said he would – but only for the summer. He was done with going on expeditions during the cold and darkness of winter. He was 50. Thirty years had passed since he had embarked on his first expedition.

Hans Hendrik at the time of the Swedish expedition (Photo: Arktisk Institut)

But even if he finally had enough of expeditions, he allegedly never tired of telling tales from his adventures. He died in 1889, aged 57.

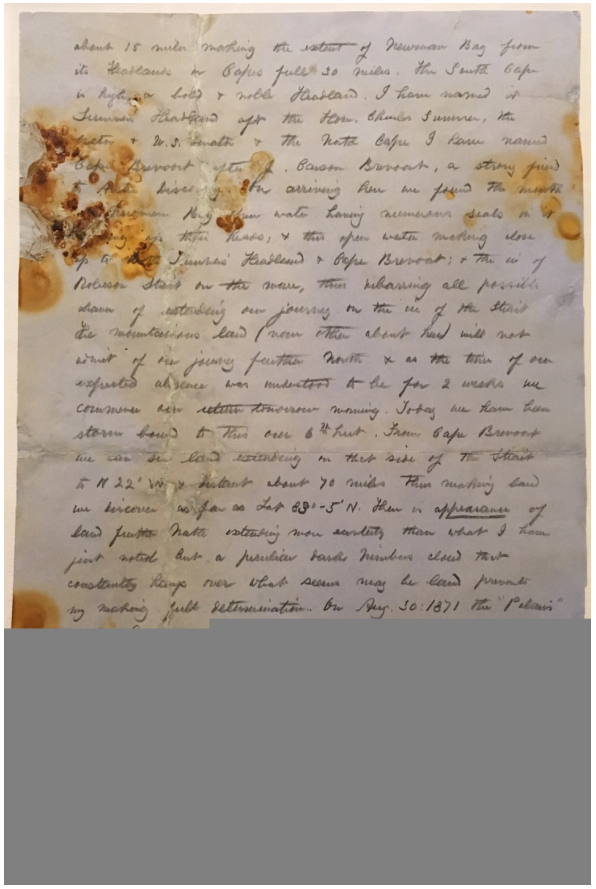
Article based on Hans Hendrik's memoirs and Jan Løve, 'Hans Hendrik og Hans Ø', Det Grønlandske Selskab, 2016

Present-day names of places visited by Hans Hendrik on his travels (Map: Arktisk Institut)

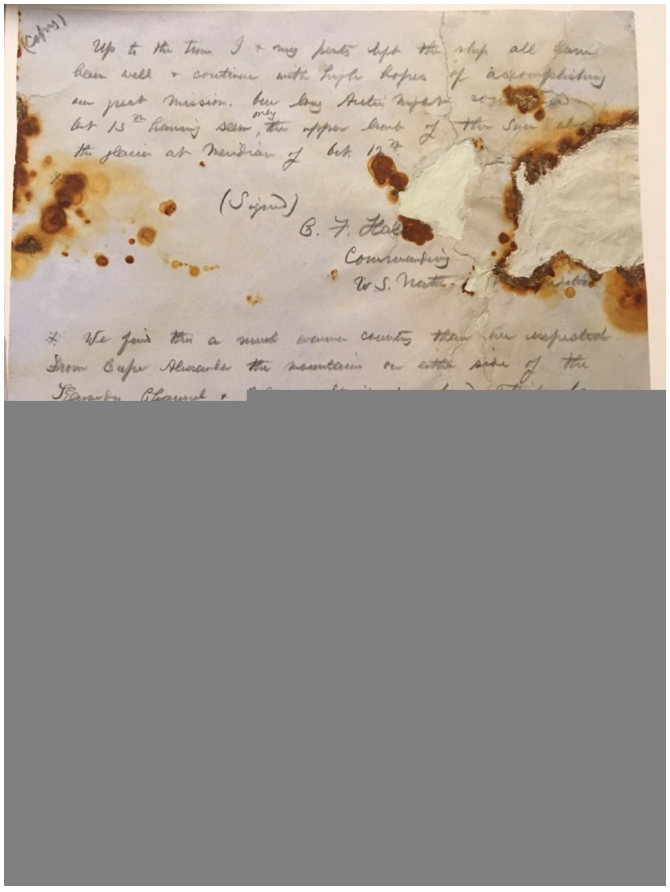

United States North Polar Expedition
Steamer "Polaris"

To the Hon. Secretary of the United States Navy
Geo. M. Robeson

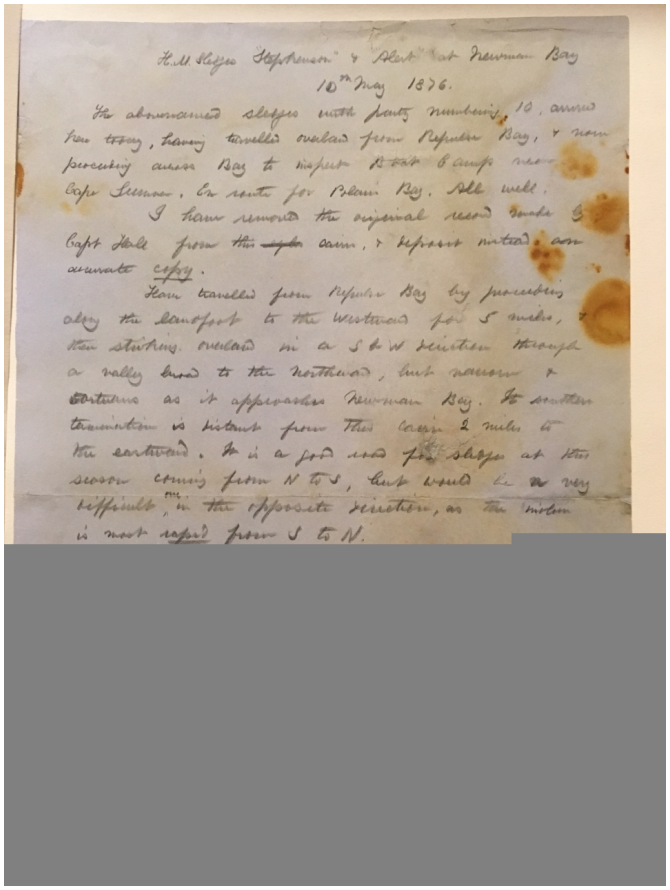
Captain Hall's last report, page 1 of 4 (Photo: Arktisk Institut)



Captain Hall's last report, page 2 of 4 (Photo: Arktisk Institut)



Captain Hall's last report, page 3 of 4 (Photo: Arktisk Institut)



Captain Hall's last report, page 4 of 4 (Photo: Arktisk Institut)

*The article above is the fifth in a series published in collaboration with **Arktisk Institut/The Danish Arctic Institute**, which seeks to inform the public about Danish-Greenlandic history.*

*The articles are based on the institute's **Arctic Stories** podcast series, which is produced by the author.*

*The original version of this podcast (in Danish only) can be heard below. All of the episodes in the series are available on from most podcast platforms, including **iTunes** and **Soundcloud**.*

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