

About the Franklin Expedition

In 1845, Sir John Franklin and his crew set sail from England aboard two ships: HMS *Erebus* and HMS *Terror*. Their goal was to chart the unknown portion of the Northwest Passage — a coveted polar shortcut from the Atlantic to the Pacific — which was seen as the key to an easier trade route between Europe and Asia. By 1845, Europeans had been trying to chart this route for more than four centuries, and only a small remainder of the Northwest Passage was left to be mapped.

The Franklin Expedition was the largest of its kind ever sent to the Arctic by Great Britain. The expedition's ships — originally Royal Navy bomb vessels — were significantly altered for the voyage. Each was fitted with iron plating on the bow, a furnace, a new system that distilled fresh water, and a steam locomotive engine with a retractable screw propeller.

The Franklin Expedition boasted the finest crew and technology in the British Empire, and had enough supplies to last three years. Like many explorers in Arctic-obsessed Britain, Franklin was a national hero. Hopes were high that Franklin would succeed in traversing the whole of this elusive passage, a task that had become a focus of national pride.

Two years later, the expedition had not returned. Its 129 men had vanished, seemingly without a trace, somewhere in the Arctic Archipelago.

In England, Lady Jane Franklin fanned the public's fascination with polar exploration to spark a massive search. It took more than a decade to establish the main facts: that all 129 men were dead and the two ships lost — although how and why remained a mystery.

Between 1847 and 1880, more than 30 search expeditions ventured into the Arctic. From the little bits of information discovered, a story began to emerge. It was clear that the expedition had spent its first winter on Beechey Island, which all but three of the men had survived. Searchers in 1850 discovered evidence of the campsite and three graves. They found no clues suggesting where the Expedition had intended to go next. A few years later, however, explorer John Rae met Inuit on Boothia Peninsula, who possessed Franklin expedition artifacts and had stories to tell.

Inuit accounts reveal that the expedition had headed south from Beechey Island, ending up in some of the thickest sea ice in the world. Both ships became icebound near King William Island in a region known as Tununig, which Inuit avoided because they associated it with unrelenting cold, poor hunting, and starvation.

The following summer, the ice did not melt enough to free the ships, and a dwindling number of officers and crew had to spend another winter locked in pack ice. Inuit

accounts described the expedition crewmembers in a state of starvation north of the Back River. When Inuit visited the ice-bound expedition ships, they discovered bodies and signs of cannibalism, which has since been verified by forensic evidence.

In 1854, after the expedition had been missing for more than seven years, the British Admiralty declared the men dead. Lady Franklin, however, initiated additional searches, based on the information provided by Inuit. It was not until 1859 that the famous Victory Point Note, which contains the only firsthand account of the desertion of the ships, was found. This record revealed key information, such as Sir John Franklin's death on June 11, 1847.

The search for the Franklin Expedition continues to this day. Most recently, more of the story was revealed when Parks Canada, working closely with Inuit historians, identified the two missing expedition ships. *Erebus* was located in 2014 off the west coast of the Adelaide Peninsula in Queen Maud Gulf, while *Terror* was found in 2016 in Terror Bay, on the south coast of King William Island. As a result of the Franklin Expedition and the search efforts it incited, multiple Northwest Passages were charted and much of the Arctic Archipelago was mapped, forming a northern cornerstone for the new Canadian nation. Initially claimed by Britain, these areas were transferred to Canada in 1880, contributing to the distinctive map of Canada that we know today.

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