

# Famous New Yorker Ross Gilmore Marvin

Ross Gilmore Marvin could have enjoyed a comfortable academic career in an Ivy League university, but chose to risk his life in one of the last great adventures of the age of discovery.

Ross G. Marvin was born on January 28, 1880, in Elmira, Chemung County, where his father was overseer of the poor. The Marvin family struggled after Ross's father died, but after attending public schools and the Elmira Free Academy Ross won scholarships to attend Cornell University in Ithaca.

Ross would take time off from Cornell for health reasons, but was determined to earn his way through school. He took classes, and then became an instructor, while crossing the Atlantic Ocean on the *U.S.S. St. Mary's*, the training ship of the New York Nautical School. A reinvigorated Marvin returned to Cornell in 1904 to earn his bachelor's degree.

Marvin was a quiet student due to a speech impediment caused by a deformed lip. For that reason he may have preferred the hands-on life of an explorer to a teaching career. He made friends with an Ithaca businessman, Louis C. Bement, who had assisted U.S. Navy Commander Robert E. Peary in an attempt to become the first man to reach the North Pole. Bement introduced Marvin to Peary, who was seeking Cornell talent for another expedition. On Marvin's graduation day, he received a letter from Peary hiring him as the expedition's secretary and staff scientist.

Peary gave Marvin many responsibilities. Marvin's math skills were essential for navigation in the far north. He was also in charge of supplies, helped hunt game to feed the expedition, and helped supervise Peary's Eskimo workers. Peary came to consider Marvin his right-hand man. While he failed to reach the Pole this time, Peary advanced farther north than anyone had before. On returning home in 1906, Marvin told friends he had never felt healthier than he had in the Arctic.

While Peary began planning another try for the Pole, Marvin taught math at Mercersburg Academy in Pennsylvania. He also returned to Cornell to teach civil engineering while studying for his master's degree. He took a leave of absence in 1908 to join Peary's next expedition.

Once again Peary's chief scientist, Marvin kept the expedition's log and made observations of the tides and weather. As Peary closed in on the Pole, Marvin took charge of one of the support parties that set up advance camps for Peary's main team. There was no plan for Marvin to go to the Pole. Instead, having supplied Peary, he would lead a team of Eskimos back to Peary's ship.

Peary reached what he believed to be the North Pole on April 6, 1909. When he returned to his ship, he learned that Ross Gilmore Marvin was dead. What happened to Marvin remains a mystery. Peary was told that Marvin had fallen through shallow ice and drowned. Years later, one of the Eskimos in the support team claimed to have killed Marvin in a fit of panic. Whatever the real story was, Marvin had made history in a tragically short life. The marker Peary left behind in his memory was the northernmost monument ever erected for a man.

---

To learn more the expeditions to the North Pole go to the *Smithsonian Magazine* at [www.smithsonianmag.com/history/who-discovered-the-north-pole-1166337461](http://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/who-discovered-the-north-pole-1166337461). This is one of a series of *Famous New Yorker* profiles written by Kevin Gilbert for the *NYNPA Newspaper In Education Program*. All rights reserved 2017.

For a teaching guide go to [www.nynpa.com/nie/niefamousny.html](http://www.nynpa.com/nie/niefamousny.html)



Courtesy of the Chemung County  
Historical Society Museum



Elmira is in the Southern Tier of New York and a short distance north of the Pennsylvania state line.