Frederick F. Kislingbury: Rochester’s First Arctic Explorer

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Frederick Kislingbury knelt on a rocky cliff off of the serrated coast of Disko Island, Greenland, wind cutting into his face like knives, sun hugging the horizon. Below him was an expanse of blinding masses of ice, their fractures immersed by the deep blue sea. All he could hear, feel, and taste was the blowing wind; no trees or traces of life were in sight. He was about to depart on an expedition to the High Canadian Arctic, so he wrote a letter to his son, Douglas, ending with “Do not worry the slightest about me, I know that all will go well.” Yet, within a week, he found himself in the middle of a predicament lasting three years, which only six of twenty-five men would survive.

In Range 3 of Mt. Hope Cemetery, underneath a nineteenth century granite stone with shallow inscriptions, lays a 700 pound iron casket (Figure 1). The ordinary look of the stone does not give justice to the extraordinary feats and heart-wrenching decisions of the man beneath it. He was Frederick Kislingbury, Rochester’s first Arctic explorer. Kislingbury was born in Berkshire, England around 1846 and moved to the United States with his family when he was about ten, residing in Rochester. Next to nothing is known about his years as a child or a young adult, except that he enlisted in the Eleventh Infantry of the United States Army in the 1860’s.

In 1866, he married Agnes Bullock from Windsor, Canada, and together they had four sons. The first, Harry, was born in 1867, and Walter was born in 1869. Frederick received word in the early 1870’s that he was to move to Fort Concho in western Texas to help build a telegraph network across the southern plains. He moved his family there, and worked under the command of Lieutenant Adolphus Greely. Frederick and Agnes had two sons while in Texas: Douglas in 1874 and Wheeler in 1876.

When Agnes suddenly died in April of 1878, Frederick had her returned to her family’s home in Windsor, Canada for burial. While on a two month leave from his duties in Detroit, he learned of an expedition to the Arctic, planned by the United States Army and led by his former commander Greely. Frederick wrote to Greely, stating that if he needed a man who was willing to learn and could lead through hardships, “then I [Frederick] am your man. I can say no more, I think, to convince you of my eagerness to go”.

Frederick married Agnes’ sister, Jessie, in 1879, and he returned to his duties out west with his family, this time stationed in Colorado. While on assignment in the field a year later, Frederick received word that Jessie was dying, and he rushed back to the base to see her. Frederick lost his second wife on December 8, 1880.

That winter was a particularly harsh one, and the broken family was snowed in at the base until March. About a month after Jessie’s death, Kislingbury was asked by Greely to be the second lieutenant in command on the Arctic expedition. Kislingbury accepted, saying that the invitation came “as a boon...the separation from my children will be nothing as compared to the prospect of having been with those who may accomplish some great and lasting good.” In March, Kislingbury left the base in Colorado to bury Jessie next to Agnes in Canada; he left his four sons with friends’ families to watch over them during his sojourn.
Greely’s Arctic Expedition Announced

On April 3, 1881, The Washington Post announced the details of the Arctic expedition to the public and reported that Kislingbury had been chosen to be the second officer in command. The motivation behind the expedition stemmed from the fact that, at this time, the Arctic region remained unexplored. The pole had eluded men for years, and the closest anyone had come was a British team about 10 years prior who made it to 83°20’ N. Not only did the American expedition want to break this record, they hoped to reach the North Pole. The Greely expedition was one of the main components comprising the first International Polar Year from 1882 to 1883, an international collaboration on research in the Polar Regions. The team would make scientific observations during their time north, measuring air and sea temperatures, wind velocity and direction, terrestrial magnetism, and the aurora. The team would experience 24 hours of darkness during the winters and 24 hours of sunlight in the summers.

The men would be in the Arctic for three years, and re-supply ships were to drop off goods at the base camp during the summers of 1882 and 1883. The men had 2 years worth of rations to begin the expedition. If ships were unable to reach the base camp, they were to leave the supplies at Cape Sabine, 250 miles to the south; if Cape Sabine could not be reached, the ships were to return home with their full loads. If the men were not visited by re-supply ships in 1882 or 1883, they would move their camp to Cape Sabine and wait out the winter with caches of left-over supplies. A ship would pick them up in the summer of 1884 and bring them home. In June of 1881, a photographer in Washington D.C. took a picture of the 22 crew members before they left the United States to board their ship, the Proteus (Figure 2).

The Expedition Continues to a Tragic End

Kislingbury’s hopes rose every summer, but ships could not find a clear path through icebergs to return to Newfoundland. The expeditions’ re-supply at Fort Conger was next summer, so he would have to wait. Kislingbury’s time waiting was a horrible situation he was in. The next time a ship could make it to Fort Conger was next summer, so he would have to wait. Until then, he would not be part of the scientific expedition and could not interact with the crew.

Turmoil in the Arctic

The ship left port on July 8, 1881, and two weeks later picked up the expedition’s doctor and two Inuit guides on Disko Island, Greenland. They departed Disko Island in late July to navigate between ice floes and icebergs in the Nares Strait between Ellesmere Island and Greenland. On August 26th, packed up his belongings, and walked out to board the Proteus to go home. However, Kislingbury’s timing could not have been worse; he watched the ship disappear through the icebergs. He ran to the shore, fully realizing the horrible situation he was in. The next time a ship could make it to Fort Conger was next summer, so he would have to wait. Until then, he would not be part of the scientific expedition and could not interact with the crew.

Figure 3: Map of the High Canadian Arctic. The red star is Fort Conger, the blue circle is Greely Fjord, and the green triangle is Camp Clay, all on Ellesmere Island. The black box is Expedition Fjord, Axel Heiberg Island. Nares Strait is between Ellesmere Island and Greenland.

Figure 4: The Proteus unloading its cargo at Fort Conger during the first weeks of August, 1881. (L.F. Gutteridge)
The first death was in January of 1884. Kislingbury died on June 1, 1884. One man was executed for stealing bits of food three days after Kislingbury’s death. The few remaining men were found on June 23rd, emaciated and barely alive. The rescuers loaded them and their dead, who had been buried in a hill near the tents, onto the rescue boats. The relief squadron with the six survivors and the bodies of their fallen comrades sailed into New York City in early August. Kislingbury’s casket arrived in Rochester on the evening of August 9th, and a military funeral was held the next day at the Monroe County Court House with more than 20,000 present to pay their last respects (Figure 5). He was interred the same day at Mount Hope Cemetery.

Accusations of Cannibalism

However, suspicions had been aroused among the public and the media after the rescue party had arrived in New York City Harbor. The six survivors came back strong and fit after living the last eight months on 60 days worth of rations. The survivors claimed that they had chewed on their shoe leather and had eaten moss that they had gathered. Still some wondered if the men been hungry enough to eat each other. Moreover, the Army had told the grieving families of the dead, that they should inter the remains right away and, under no circumstances, should they open the caskets. The public began to ask if Frederick was even in the casket or if he had been left behind buried in the Arctic. The Rochester Post pressed the issue, curious about the nature of the expedition and Kislingbury’s body. They offered to pay the expenses to exhume Frederick and examine the remains to put an end to the rumors if Frederick’s three brothers, John, William and Frank, would agree to this. The relatives would also be allowed to watch the examination at the Mount Hope Cemetery Chapel. They agreed and four days after the body was buried, it was exhumed. In the morning hours of August 14th, 1884, fifty two bolts were loosened and the lid was removed. What was found was horrific.

The Boston Globe was given the rights to publish the details of Kislingbury’s autopsy in vivid detail. Fifty pounds of remains were found wrapped up in a wool blanket with the strong smell of alcohol. Kislingbury’s body had no skin and little flesh remaining from his head downward. His arms and legs were only held on by the ligaments. After less than an hour of examination, the casket was sealed. The two doctors who examined the body concluded that he had died of starvation, and that he also had inflammation of the bowels. The only thing found in his digestive tract was a mass of indigestible hair, moss and woolen fibers. Kislingbury’s body was methodically carved, and there was no evidence of him being
purposely killed. The relatives accepted that Frederick had been consumed by others of the expedition under horrible circumstances, but they were more upset that they were not told about the nature of the last days of the expedition.  

Conclusion
Frederick Kislingbury rests after a heart-wrenching turn of events in the last years of his life. The efforts of the expedition crew not only helped to map and characterize the area, but also pushed further north than anyone else ever had: to 83°24' N. They also pushed further west and discovered an unexplored fiord on the western part of Ellesmere Island, now called Greely Fiord, after the Expedition's leader. Unfortunately, much of the area in the Arctic remains poorly mapped and exploration is still difficult and extremely dangerous. Today, all that is left on Cape Sabine are pieces of the men's tents, rims of the supply barrels and the shallow graves on the burial ridge with large rocks as headstones. These items were discovered and photographed in 1987 by researchers and historians from the Arctic Institute of North America.

I was fortunate to travel to the High Canadian Arctic as a part of a scientific expedition of the Paleomagnetism Research Group at the University of Rochester, led by John Tarduno. We were there in July of 2006, about 120 years after Kislingbury was there. I was doing field mapping as a part of a class project and assisting in fossil collecting supervised by Deborah Vandermark on Axel Heiberg Island (79°30' N). We were also on the western edge of Ellesmere Island at 80°N at a seasonal camp called Eureka, on the southern part of Greely Fiord, first discovered by Kislingbury's team.

My work in the Arctic has led me to a greater appreciation for nature and the elements, and for the courageous strength of past Arctic explorers including Frederick F. Kislingbury. For, unlike Greely's crew, our expedition was transported to the Arctic by helicopter and a twin engine plane. We made radio contact with a base camp twice daily to receive information about the weather and any polar bear sightings. Our food was shipped in wooden crates many months before we left Rochester and was waiting for us at our camp site. We were able to drink fresh water from the glacially fed Dragon River. We did not have the amenities of home and only our tents as shelter on the uninhabited island. Moreover, our party had to carry two shotguns in the case of a polar bear encounter. But there were 24 hours of sunlight, and in the end, we fared much better than Greely and his men.

References
2. Ibid., pg.37.
3. Ibid., pg.39.
5. Gutteridge, Ghosts, pg.36.
9. Gutteridge, Ghosts, pp.7-8, 41.
10. Ibid., pp.47-48, 61.
13. Ibid., pp.64-65.
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