

This Day in History... November 17, 1820

First Americans Sight Antarctica

On November 17, 1820, American sealer Nathaniel Brown Palmer and his small crew made history when they became the first Americans to see the icy continent of Antarctica. Their sighting marked an important moment in early American exploration and opened a new chapter in the world's understanding of the far southern regions of the globe.

Nathaniel Palmer was born in 1799 in the coastal town of Stonington, Connecticut. Growing up in a bustling port community, he developed a deep love for the sea at a young age. His father worked in shipbuilding, and Palmer spent much of his childhood playing in the shipyard, watching vessels take shape and listening to stories told by sailors returning from long voyages. By the time he was fourteen, Palmer had already begun working aboard ships, starting a lifelong career that would eventually take him farther south than any American had ever gone.

In the early 1800s, Stonington was one of the most active sealing ports in the United States. Sealing was a dangerous but profitable business, especially because seal skins were in high demand in China. Young Palmer proved himself to be a bold and skilled seaman, regularly traveling to South America and mastering the techniques of locating seal rookeries, navigating rough waters, and making quick decisions in unpredictable environments. His reputation grew quickly. At just twenty-one years old, he was trusted with his first command: a small but sturdy 47-foot sloop named *Hero*.

By 1820, sealing grounds near South America and the Falkland Islands were becoming overhunted. This forced sealers to push farther into unknown southern waters in search of new colonies. That year, American sealers, including Palmer, headed toward the recently reported South Shetland Islands. The region was cold, foggy, and largely unmapped, but the promise of new sealing grounds drew many ships.

Palmer joined the expedition as captain of the *Hero*, a vessel small enough to slip through narrow passages and explore areas that larger ships could not safely enter. When the main sealing fleet found little promise in the South Shetlands, Palmer pushed on. His willingness to go farther and investigate every possible inlet gave him an advantage over more cautious captains.

The Antarctic Treaty was signed in 1961 to foster scientific cooperation in the region.

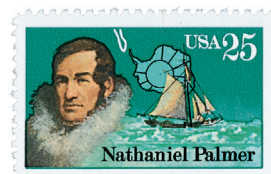


On November 17, 1820, while sailing south from Deception Island, Palmer sighted what he described as "land not yet laid down on my chart." Rising beyond the ice-streaked waters were the rugged, snow-covered mountains of the Antarctic Peninsula. Palmer and his men had become the first Americans to see Antarctica. Although two explorers from the British Navy—Edward Bransfield and William Smith—had sighted parts of the continent earlier that same year, Palmer's discovery was still significant. His sighting helped confirm that a major landmass existed far to the south and encouraged later expeditions to investigate further. The region he observed was later named Palmer Land in his honor.

Palmer returned to the southern waters the very next year. In 1821, he joined in the discovery and charting of the South Orkney Islands, further expanding geographic knowledge of the region. These voyages also strengthened his reputation as one of America's most capable young captains.

As sealing opportunities declined, Palmer shifted gears and entered the fast-growing trade of sailing express freight around the world. During his long career at sea, he studied the strengths and weaknesses of the ships he sailed. His observations led him to design improvements that helped influence the development of the famous American clipper ships—swift, graceful vessels known for their speed and long-distance capability.

In his later years, Palmer returned to Stonington and invested in clipper ships, leaving the sailing to younger captains while he managed his business interests. Yet his influence on exploration did not fade. Today, Palmer's name lives on across Antarctica. The Palmer Archipelago, Palmer Station (a modern US research base), the icebreaker Nathaniel B. Palmer, and even Hero Bay, named for his little sloop, all honor the achievements of the young captain from Connecticut who dared to venture farther south than most believed possible.



Stamp pictures Palmer, his sloop Hero, and an outline of Antarctica.



Issued for the 50th anniversary of the Antarctic Treaty.

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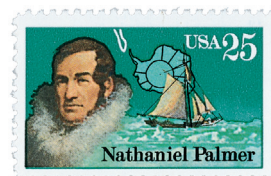
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