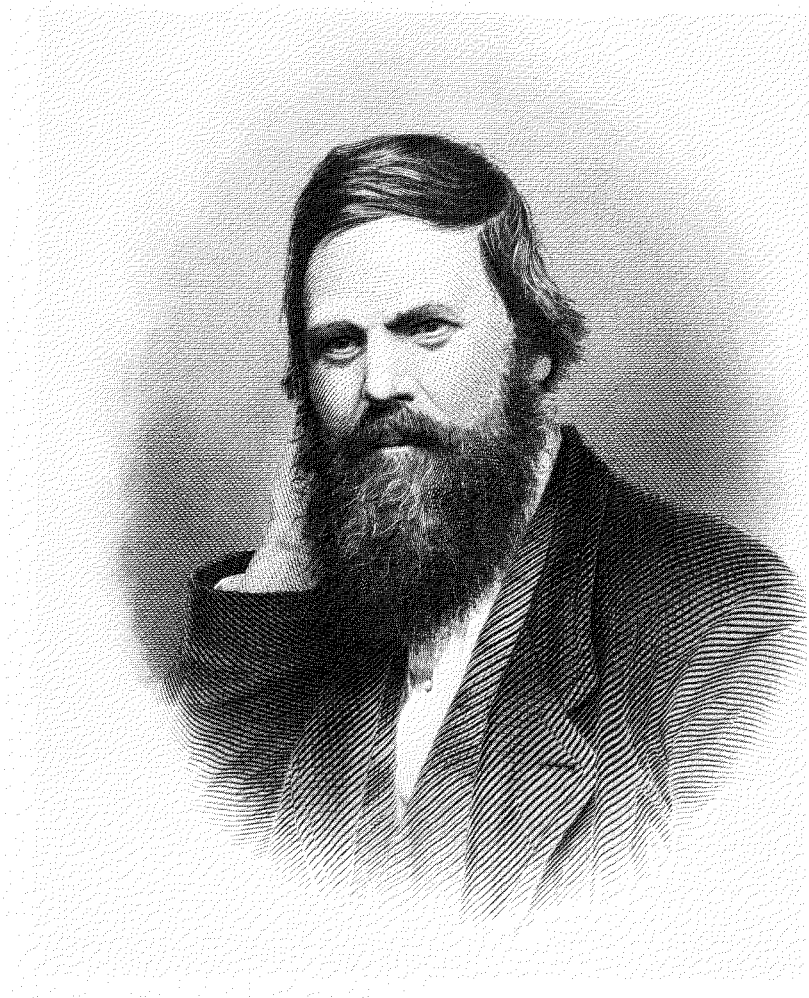


## Charles Francis Hall (1821-1871)



*C. F. Hall*

Marking Charles Francis Hall's desolate grave in northwest Greenland is a bronze plaque set up by the British Polar Expedition of 1875, four years after his death. It reads in part:

SACRED TO THE MEMORY OF  
CAPTAIN CHARLES FRANCIS HALL  
OF THE U.S. SHIP POLARIS  
WHO SACRIFICED HIS LIFE IN THE ADVANCEMENT OF SCIENCE  
ON NOV<sup>br</sup> 3rd 1871.

In proper naval fashion, the English gave Hall his titular rank of "Captain", but truth is that the title was only a token of his temporary leadership of a disastrous expedition. Essentially the man had been a loner, a pioneer in arctic travel without the naval protocol and cumbersome paraphernalia so common in nineteenth-century exploration of the distant North.

Hall came to arctic exploration relatively late in life. Born in New England in 1821, as a youth he went west to settle not on the frontier but in the booming city of Cincinnati, Ohio. For ten years, as a businessman there, he seemed well pleased with urban life. He was in his late thirties when he began to show an interest in the Arctic, probably stimulated by continued international excitement about the disappearance of Franklin's expedition in the late 1840s. In 1859, although many search expeditions had sailed during the preceding decade, Hall suddenly decided he would mount one of his own, arguing to potential backers that Franklin survivors might still be living with the Eskimos. Hall was energetic, determined, and pious enough to believe that God had destined him to succeed where professional naval officers and explorers had failed.

He received some small financial backing from merchants and in 1860 sailed to Baffin Island aboard a whaling vessel. Put ashore at the mouth of what was then called "Frobisher Strait", he was fortunate to encounter an English-speaking Eskimo couple. Ebierbing ("Joe") and Tookoolito ("Hannah") had been brought to England by a whaler several years before; they became Hall's tutors in arctic survival and remained his loyal companions for the rest of his life. Hall hoped to travel through the "strait" to the area of King William Island, where relics of the Franklin expedition had been found. He soon discovered that the strait was in fact a bay. His first expedition was a failure in that he never even left the area of Frobisher Bay, but he did learn the art of living in the Arctic and he made one remarkable find. Some Eskimos, who talked to him about the sixteenth-century Frobisher expeditions as if they were recent events, took him to a place where he found foundations of a building and other relics of Frobisher's activities in the 1580s.

After two years in Frobisher Bay, Hall returned home with Joe and Hannah to find his country embroiled in civil war. He was determined to go north again, nonetheless, and to continue his search for Franklin survivors. He virtually ignored the war and set about gathering funds, writing a book about his experiences — *Arctic Researches and Life Among the Esquimaux* — and giving many lectures. He was able to gather only small sums of money, however, and when he returned to the Arctic in 1865 he again travelled by whaling vessel with minimal equipment.

This time he was put ashore at Roe's Welcome Sound in northern Hudson's Bay. In the four arduous years that followed, he made repeated attempts to reach King William Island but was constantly frustrated by Eskimos who refused to cooperate. Finally, in the spring of 1869, he reached the island, but he found only a few more relics of the Franklin expedition, including some skeletons. At this point, even Hall gave up the idea of survivors.

But he was not through with the Arctic. He determined to return, this time to the North Pole. When he reached the United States in 1869, the war was over. President Grant heard him lecture in Washington, and soon Hall had what he had always wanted: a full-scale expedition. Congress voted funds, and he was supplied with a ship, a crew, and even a scientific staff.

The *Polaris* sailed north in 1871, making for the gap between Ellesmere Island and Greenland. Aboard there

were strains, particularly between Hall and Dr. Emil Bessels, the German head of the scientific staff. After the *Polaris* was set for the winter in what is now called Hall Basin, Hall made a brief sledge journey northward, returned to the ship, then became violently ill after drinking a cup of coffee. He died in two weeks, during his illness often accusing Dr. Bessels and others of murdering him. He was buried ashore. In the spring, the demoralized expedition headed southward, but the *Polaris*, badly damaged by ice, had to be run aground near present-day Thule. After all the crew were rescued, a naval Board of Inquiry was convened. Among its conclusions: Charles Francis Hall had died of what Dr. Bessels called "apoplectical insult" — a stroke.

In 1968, Hall's biographer, Chauncey Loomis, exhumed his body and Dr. Franklin Paddock performed an autopsy. Later tests proved that Hall had received large doses of arsenic during the last two weeks of his life. Arsenic was commonly used as a medicine in the nineteenth century, and the question of whether or not Hall was murdered remains unanswered. Bessels could have intentionally or unintentionally overdosed him. (It should be noted, however, that Bessels did not tell the Board that he had administered any arsenic.) On the other hand, Hall, who hated Bessels and who for a period refused treatment by him, might have overdosed himself. In either case, there is some irony implicit in the statement made on the plaque that still stands at the foot of Hall's grave — the statement that he "sacrificed his life in the advancement of science."

#### FURTHER READINGS

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