

How might this story be used as a learning activity?

From Nathaniel Philbrick. *Sea of Glory: America's Voyage of Discovery, the US Exploring Expedition 1838-1842* (New York, NY: Penguin Books, 2004), pp. 18-21

“In 1818, John Cleves Symmes was a thirty-eight-year-old retired army captain living with his wife and ten children in the frontier town of St. Louis. He was a trading agent with the Fox Indians, but his mind was not on his work. Instead, his dreamy blue eyes were often lost in abstraction as he pondered his own theory of the world, a theory that put him at odds with such scientific luminaries as Sir Isaac Newton. But what the largely self-educated Symmes lacked in intellectual credentials, he more than made up for in audacity and pluck.

Symmes had read somewhere that arctic species such as reindeer and foxes migrated north each winter and returned south in the spring, unaccountably well fed and healthy despite having wintered in what most considered an uninhabitable region of frigid temperatures. *Where did these creatures go?* After many years of contemplation, Symmes announced his answer in a single-page circular dated April 10, 1818: ‘TO ALL THE WORLD! I declare the earth is hollow . . . , containing a number of solid concentric spheres, one within the other, and that it is open at the poles 12 or 16 degrees; I pledge my life in support of this truth, and am ready to explore the hollow, if the world will support and aid me in the undertaking.’

Symmes was, by no means, the first to invest the unknown portions of the globe with miraculous properties in the name of science. As late as the midpoint of the eighteenth century, French and English geographers had speculated that an immense and temperate continent known as *Terra Australis Incognita* (The Unknown Southern Land) must exist in the high southern latitudes so as to offset the landmasses to the north and thereby ‘balance’ the earth. But in 1774, when Cook voyaged beyond the Antarctic Circle and found only icebergs and whales, the fig-ment of *Terra Australis Incognita* appeared to have vanished forever.

Symmes believed that beyond the region of ice surrounding each of the poles lay a mild and navigable sea that flowed into a large portal leading to the interior of the earth. He claimed that the crew of a ship sailing to the edge, or ‘verge,’ of one of these holes would not even be aware that they had begun to sail down into the earth. On either side of the central hole would be successive layers of land, flourishing with wildlife and, perhaps, people. Because of the earth’s tilt, this miraculous new land would be flooded with sunlight. It was up to that former New World, America, to launch the voyage of discovery that would outdo Columbus, Magellan, and Cook.

He was not a particularly good speaker or writer, but Symmes’s theory of the ‘Holes in the Poles’ began to find a following. He lectured tirelessly, traveling by horse and wagon across the states of Kentucky and Ohio. There were even some prominent men of science who gave Symmes their cautious approval. Dr. Samuel Mitchell, an astronomer in Cincinnati, Ohio, spoke in support of the theory. A globe patterned on Symmes’s ideas became part of the collection at the prestigious Academy of Natural Science in Philadelphia. John J. Audubon sketched Symmes’s portrait in 1820, helping to establish his reputation as the ‘Newton of the West.’

In March 1822, Symmes wrote a petition that was presented to Congress by the state of Kentucky. In addition to pronouncing ‘his belief of the existence of an inhabited concave to this globe,’ the petition, which was ultimately tabled, called for ‘two vessels of 250 or 300 tons for the expedition.’ Thus was born the concept of a voyage that would take another sixteen years to fulfill.

In 1824, during a string of speaking engagements in his native Ohio, Symmes gained the support of an energetic acolyte by the name of Jeremiah N. Reynolds (no relation to Passed Midshipman William Reynolds). Just twenty-four years old, Jeremiah had attended Ohio University before becoming editor of the *Wilmington Spectator*. Soon after meeting Symmes, he decided to scrap his promising newspaper career in favor of a life on the road promoting the notion of a hollow earth. An articulate and charismatic speaker, Jeremiah also had a flair for making influential friends. Symmes’s theory began to catch hold as never before, and this improbable duo spoke in sold-out lecture halls all across the United States.

Over time, Jeremiah began to develop a different perspective on his master’s theory. Whereas Symmes advocated an expedition north, Jeremiah became increasingly intrigued with the prospect of a voyage south. In 1823, the English sealer James Weddell had sailed farther south than even Cook. Instead of ice he reported to have found open water as far as the eye could see and surprisingly warm temperatures. While Symmes clung to his belief in a hole at the pole, Jeremiah was now willing to entertain the possibility that an American exploring ship might drop anchor at ‘the very axis of the earth’—an unforgivable heresy as far as Symmes was concerned. In Philadelphia the two visionaries went their separate ways.

Jeremiah continued to broaden his original concept of a voyage of discovery. In addition to searching out the South Pole, the expedition would survey and chart the islands of the South Pacific. This was the voyage that maritime communities in New England and beyond had been pleading for, and Jeremiah soon saw his base of support swell until it had become a force that Washington could no longer ignore. At Jeremiah’s urging, marine and scientific societies began to bombard Congress with memorials, and in May 1828, the House passed a resolution requesting President Adams to send a naval vessel to the Pacific. In addition to collecting information helpful to American commercial interests, the expedition was to have a small scientific corps similar to what had accompanied previous European ventures. Jeremiah was designated a special agent to the navy, and in September he filed a report describing more than two hundred uncharted islands and shoals that should be investigated by the expedition. A few weeks later, the 118-foot sloop-of-war *Peacock*, almost completely rebuilt for a voyage of exploration, was launched at the New York Navy Yard.

Despite his earlier connection with the pseudoscientist Symmes (who would die the following year in Ohio, a hollow globe attached to his gravestone), Jeremiah was put in charge of finding a qualified naturalist and astronomer for the voyage. That fall he met with a steady stream of scientists and naval officers interested in joining the expedition. . . .”