

## Pike's Hill

Opposite the place where the Wisconsin River empties into the Mississippi rises a bold promontory known as Pike's Hill. It is a part of the range of steep, almost perpendicular bluffs cleft here and there by deep ravines, which form the Iowa shore of the Mississippi River above Dubuque. Visited by Lieutenant Zebulon M. Pike on his journey up the river in the fall of 1805, and selected by him as a site suitable for the erection of a military post, it has since been known by the various names of Pike's Peak, Pike's Mountain, and Pike's Hill.

Writing of this spot in his report to General James Wilkinson, Pike said:

I therefore pitched on a spot on the top of the hill on the W. side of the Mississippi which is [ ] feet high, level on the top, and completely commands both rivers, the Mississippi being only one-half mile wide and the Ouiscousing about 900 yards when full. There is plenty of timber in the rear, and a spring at no great distance on the hill. If this position is to have in view the annoyance of any European power who might be induced to attack it with cannon, it has infinitely the preference to a position called the Petit Gris on the Ouiscousing, which I visited and marked the next day.

Twenty-two years after Pike recommended this



site for a military post, another officer of the United States Army, Major General Edmund R. Gaines, then in command of the Western Department, proposed that a fort should be erected on Pike's Hill to replace the fast decaying Fort Crawford. Fort Crawford had been erected at Prairie du Chien during the summer of 1816, and was occupied continuously by a garrison from that date till October, 1826, when its troops were withdrawn and sent to Fort Snelling. In August, 1827, it was reoccupied due to the threatening attitude of the Winnebago Indians and the uneasiness of the inhabitants of the village and the nearby settlers. In the fall of 1827, General Gaines after inspecting the posts in his department made a report which includes the following statements in regard to Fort Crawford:

Fort Crawford, consisting of block-houses and huts, all of wood, is, as heretofore reported, so much decayed as to be uninhabitable without extensive repairs, and even with repairs the barracks cannot be rendered sufficiently comfortable to secure the health of the troops. The floors and lower timbers are decayed in part by frequent overflowing of the river, which has left the wood soaked and filled with damp sediment. Orders have been given to Major Fowle, the commanding officer, to repair the barracks in the best manner the means under his control will permit. Ten thousand feet of plank was brought from Fort Snelling, and an additional supply ordered to be furnished for the purpose, with the requisite tools. With these supplies it is believed that the mechanics of Major Fowle's command will



be able to render the troops tolerably comfortable until the next spring, when it is apprehended that the usual freshets in the river will again overflow the place. These freshets have often brought the high water into the barracks to the depth of four feet for several days in succession. This has sometimes occurred in the months of June and July. When this is the case bilious diseases are sure to follow.

At the time of his visit, Gaines found one officer and forty-four enlisted men sick out of a total force of one hundred and seventy-seven officers and men—more than one-fourth of the garrison. In addition to this several women and children in the families of the officers were ill.

The general embodied in his report a statement from R. M. Coleman, the assistant surgeon of the garrison, to the effect that the location of Fort Crawford was decidedly unhealthy and that a site across the river would be better suited to the health of the men. Major John Fowle, commandant at Fort Crawford, confirmed the report of Doctor Coleman in respect to the sickness of the place. He, too, felt that the health of the garrison would be improved by its removal to the opposite shore and recommended Pike's Hill as the best site for the post.

Accordingly, General Gaines, fully convinced of the necessity of a new location for Fort Crawford, not only because of the unhealthfulness of the place but also because of its nearness to "tippling shops" in the adjoining village, recommended the erection of a new fort upon Pike's Hill "on the right bank



of the Mississippi, nearly opposite to the mouth of the Wisconsin, about four miles from Fort Crawford, and in full view of the fort and the neighboring village."

Against his proposal he foresaw the objection that Pike's Hill did not afford immediate protection to the village of Prairie du Chien and that the expense of transporting supplies to the top of the hill would be greater than that incurred at Fort Crawford. However, he argued that this expense would be more than offset by the advantages of the new site from the standpoint of health and by its nearness to a supply of timber for building and fuel. He believed that a road could be built by ten men in the course of a week, which, avoiding the precipitous face of the bluff, would extend in a series of grades from the top of the hill to the landing below at a distance of about a mile. A spring in the hollow of the hill about one hundred and fifty yards from the top would furnish an ample supply of excellent water.

The top of the site consisted of about five acres of almost level tableland which, Gaines asserted, would afford sufficient space for the fort with room for company and battalion exercise. Back of the hill-top for half a mile stretched a field sufficiently level and "well adapted to all purposes of cultivation as should occupy the attention of the troops, viz: for gardening, grass lots and pasturage".

Convinced of the feasibility of his proposal, Gaines drew up and incorporated in his report a



plan for a fort on Pike's Hill. On the opposite page this plan, slightly reduced, is reprinted from a cut which appears with the report in *American State papers: Military Affairs*, Vol. IV, p. 125. The following descriptive and explanatory matter is reprinted from the same source:

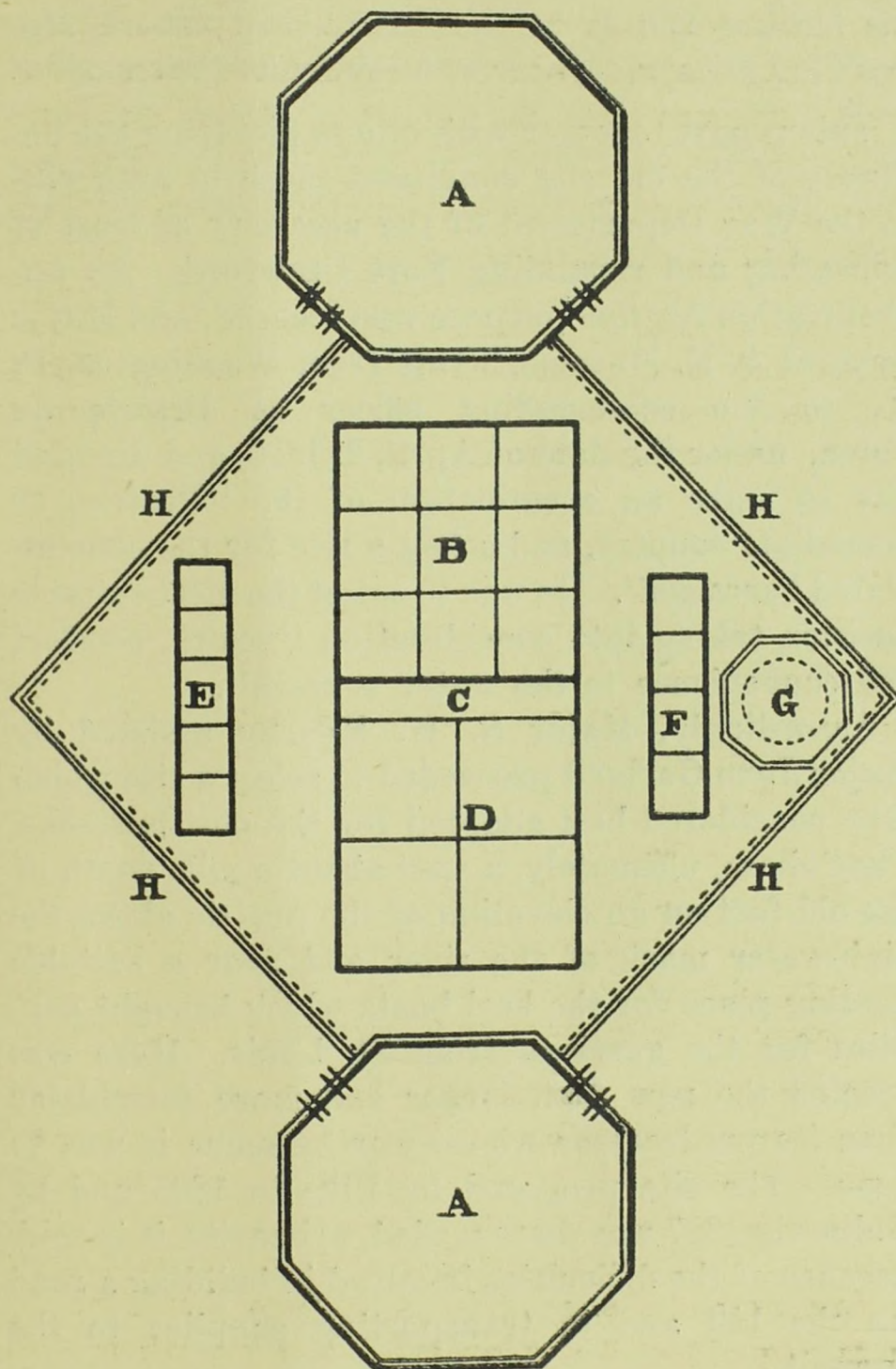
Ground plan of a fort for one hundred and twenty-five officers and men, recommended to be erected on Pike's Hill, near Prairie du Chien. To be considered with a view to defense against small arms only.

- A.— Stone towers, 30 or 40 feet in diameter, two stories high.
- B.— Barracks, two stories high.
- C.— A passage 12 feet wide.
- D.— Officers' quarters, two stories high.
- E.— Kitchens.
- F.— Storehouses.
- G.— Magazine.
- H.— Stone wall and ditch.

NOTE.— The stone wall need not be more than 2 feet thick. The ditch 4 feet deep, and 8 feet wide; 2 six-pounders, and 2 five-inch howitzers to be put into each tower.

The work to be constructed should consist of two small stone towers or castles placed 120 feet apart, with the intermediate space filled up with a block of stone barracks. These to be enclosed by a wall with a ditch, terminating at each castle, and so constructed as to receive the support of a flank fire from each castle. This work should not be larger than to accommodate a garrison of five officers, with







one hundred and twenty non-commissioned officers, artificers and privates, together with storage for their supplies.

This report together with others picturing the unfitness of the old site convinced those in authority in the War Department of the necessity at least of relocating and rebuilding Fort Crawford. An appropriation for this purpose was secured, and Major General A. E. Macomb, wrote from Washington, D. C., to the commanding officer at Prairie du Chien, under the date of April, 2, 1829, and directed him to make an examination of the "Prairie, or immediate country, and select a site for the contemplated barracks". He was to select the most suitable position taking into consideration "health, comfort and convenience to the water courses".

Accordingly, Major S. W. Kearny assisted by Major John Garland proceeded to select a site which they considered best adapted for the new barracks. They chose, ultimately, a spot about a mile south of the old fort on an elevation of the prairie above the high-water mark of the river and near a suitable landing place for the keel boats which brought supplies for the garrison from St. Louis. Here was erected the new fort, larger and more formidable than its predecessor whose worthy name it was to bear. The site proposed by Pike in 1805 and by Gaines in 1827 was disregarded, primarily, it is said, because of the difficulties involved in building a road up the hill and in transporting supplies to the summit.



Pike's Hill was never fortified, but even to-day the visitor who has climbed to its top and has looked at the river below dotted with wooded islands and at the sweep of prairie on the opposite shore is struck with the advantages of this spot as a military site.

BRUCE E. MAHAN