

# THE PALIMPSEST

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## Zebulon Montgomery Pike

On July 30, 1805, while Lewis and Clark were battling their way up the Jefferson Fork of the Missouri River above Three Forks, Montana, General James Wilkinson ordered Lieutenant Zebulon Montgomery Pike to lead a small force of soldiers up the Mississippi to its source. Pike's expedition was the first American force to ascend the Upper Mississippi. His detailed report added much information about the land directly west of the Mississippi which Jefferson had acquired in the Louisiana Purchase.

The leader of this expedition, Zebulon Montgomery Pike, was born at what is now Trenton, New Jersey, on January 5, 1779. His father was Major Zebulon Pike, an officer who served in the United States Army both during and after the Revolutionary War. Growing up at Easton, Pennsylvania, where he received such education as the common schools of the time afforded, young Zebulon entered his father's infantry company as a cadet at the age of about fifteen, and was com-



missioned an ensign at the age of twenty. On April 1, 1802, he was given the rank of first lieutenant in the First Regiment, United States Infantry. Of Pike a fellow soldier reported:

No officer could be more attentive, prompt and efficient in the execution of the several duties of his office — nor was there any more emulous to acquire a perfect knowledge of the Military profession, nor more zealous, ardent and persevering in the pursuit of scientific improvement.

It was these qualities and disposition of mind that laid the foundation of the subsequent Character and fame of Zebulon M. Pike and would probably have introduced him had he lived, to the highest honors, at least, in the military profession under the Republic. . . .

Pike was very gentlemanly in his deportment — manners agreeable & polished, rather reserved in general and somewhat taciturn except when incited to conversation on some topic in which he felt interest and considered worthy of his attention. He had less levity in his character than even many of his brother officers Senior to him in Years and Rank. His appearance was military yet somewhat peculiar. He generally leaned or inclined his head on one side so that the tip of his Chapeau touched his right shoulder when on parade — His Stature was about five feet eight inches, tolerably square and robust for his Age which I think must have been Twenty Years in 1800. His Complexion was then Ruddy, eyes blue, light hair and good features. His habits were in keeping with his character, uniformly abstemious and temperate; his attention to duty unremitted.

General James Wilkinson's orders to his 26-year-old officer were clear-cut. He was to explore and report upon the Mississippi River from St.



Louis to its source, select sites for military posts, treat with the Indians he encountered along the way, make peace if possible between the Sioux and Ojibways, and discover if possible how many British traders still occupied trading posts in the Louisiana Purchase.

Pike left St. Louis on August 9, 1805, wintered in the wilds of northern Minnesota, and returned to St. Louis on April 30, 1806. Pike's success on his Upper Mississippi exploration led General Wilkinson to send him on an exploration up the Arkansas (July 15, 1806 - February 26, 1807). While on this excursion Pike was captured by the Mexicans and taken on an enforced tour of Mexico (February 27, 1807 - July 1, 1807) before he was finally released.

Upon his return Pike published *An Account of Expeditions to the Sources of the Mississippi and through the Western Parts of Louisiana* in 1810. A London edition was published in 1811, and the work was translated into French (1812), Dutch (1812), and German (1813). He supplemented these journals with letters and valuable appendices which added much to their value.

At the time he compiled his journals Pike had serious doubts as to their value. "Books of travels, journals, and voyages have become so numerous, and are so frequently impositions on the public," Pike declared in his preface, "that the writer of the following sheets feels under an obligation to



explain, in some measure, the original circumstances that led to the production of this volume." Soon after Jefferson acquired Louisiana, that "enlightened" president sent Lewis and Clark to explore the Missouri while General James Wilkinson had dispatched Pike to explore the Mississippi to its source. Lieutenant Pike had no illusions as to the difficulty of the assignment and the responsibilities that were his in making his report.

In the execution of this voyage I had no gentleman to aid me, and I literally performed the duties (as far as my limited abilities permitted) of astronomer, surveyor, commanding officer, clerk, spy, guide, and hunter; frequently preceding the party for miles in order to reconnoiter, and returning in the evening, hungry and fatigued, to sit down in the open air, by firelight, to copy the notes and plot the courses of the day. . . .

As a military man — as a soldier from the time I was able to bear arms — it cannot be expected that a production of my pen can stand the test of criticism; and I hope, by this candid appeal to the justice and indulgence of the learned, to induce them to spare their censure if they cannot award their praise.

What Pike may have lacked in literary qualities he made up for in his meteoric military career. He was commissioned major in 1805, colonel in 1812, and, following the outbreak of the War of 1812, brigadier-general in 1813. When the attack on York (now Toronto), Canada, was launched in April, 1813, Brigadier General Zebulon Montgomery Pike commanded the troops. He led his



men to victory, but was killed in the assault when the enemy's powder magazine exploded on April 27. Even as he died, Pike turned his head to the soldiers gathered round him and cried, "Push on my brave fellows and avenge your general."

The Battle of York was one of the first American victories in the War of 1812 and may be rightly considered the third most important engagement of the conflict — ranking behind Jackson's triumph at New Orleans and Harrison's victory at the Thames on October 5, 1813. Both Jackson and Harrison achieved the presidency and Pike himself might have won high honor had he lived.

News of his victory stirred the nation. The press eulogized him, President Madison paid him special tribute in an address to Congress, and a new warship at Sacketts Harbor was christened the *General Pike*. Posterity must agree with *Niles' Register* which declared on June 5: "His memory shall live, and be with us many generations."

The memory of Zebulon Montgomery Pike lives on in Iowa as well as American History. Pike's Peak in Colorado looms as a monument to his memory. Pike's Peak below McGregor and Lock and Dam No. 11 at Dubuque are mute reminders of the dashing young army lieutenant who skirted the eastern border of Iowa in his keelboat a century and a half ago. Citizens of Burlington may remember with pride that Pike selected what is



now beautiful Crapo Park as a suitable site for a military post.

In pioneer days Pike's portrait was frequently displayed in frontier taverns. The first steamboat to reach St. Louis was appropriately named in his honor. Ten counties in as many states, and eighteen towns and villages now bear his name, as do several bays, rivers, and lakes. A number of states have erected monuments or plaques to his memory. Pike County Ballads were known from the banks of the Mississippi to the golden shores of California. Truly death did not blot out the memory of this intrepid soldier.

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