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Article Summary: In 1806 Zebulon Pike, sent to solicit the allegiance of the Pawnee, had to begin by persuading them to pull down the Spanish flag. Both Kansas and Nebraska have long laid claim to the site where the United States flag subsequently flew.

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Photographs / Images: Zebulon Pike, view from "the hill over the town" noted by Pike on his arrival at the Pawnee village in 1806

ZEBULON PIKE AND NEBRASKA

BY DONALD JACKSON

LIEUTENANT Zebulon Pike sat on the ground on a hillside overlooking the Republican River and—using the back of a book as a writing desk—penned a letter to the Secretary of War. The time was October 1, 1806, and for the past week young Pike had been holding councils with the band of Indians called the Republican Pawnee.

His white linen trousers may have become rather grimy by this time, and his blue coat with the scarlet cuffs could not have looked its best. His small band of soldiers, a detachment from the First Infantry Regiment, surely looked even less dapper than he—and the matter was of some importance, for Pike and his men were there to influence the Pawnee.

As Pike was now saying to the Secretary of War, the task of impressing these Indians would have been easier if they had not recently been visited by a most impressive troop of Spanish soldiers. Three hundred dragoons and militiamen from Mexico, under the command of Lieutenant

Dr. Jackson, editor of the University of Illinois Press, delivered this paper at the annual meeting of the Nebraska State Historical Society held in Lincoln on October 1, 1966.

Facundo Melgares, had come into the Pawnee camp with a display of affluence and military pomp, drums rolling and flags aloft. They had been visiting other tribes on the Plains, and they were there, as Pike said, "for the purpose of striking a dread into those different nations of the Spanish power, and to bring about a general combination in their favor."¹

Now here was Pike with a detachment of only eighteen men, hoping to undo the effect of that Spanish visit on a people who loved finery, pageantry, and above all, power. To the chiefs who had seen the Spanish riding on fine cavalry mounts, Pike was actually applying for the purchase of additional horses so that he could continue his journey. To the chiefs who had seen hundreds of Spanish footmen armed with European muskets, and cavalrymen with excellent swords and pistols, Pike now represented the United States with little more than an indifferently armed bodyguard.

The United States had owned the Louisiana Territory for only three years, and its leaders were probing it as vigorously as possible. The Spanish, from the land they called New Spain, were not only prepared to resist this advance, and dispute the boundaries and even the legality of the Purchase itself, but were still doing some probing of their own—testing the loyalty of the tribes on the Great Plains.

Between these two powers, which would be at odds for many more years, the Pawnee were in a key position. The tribe was divided into four divisions at this time: the Republican, the Grand, the Tapage, and the Skidi, all settled on the waters of the Republican and the Platte rivers. Further west, another powerful tribe held forth, the Comanche—even more thoroughly dominated by the Spanish

¹ Pike to Henry Dearborn, Oct. 1, 1806, in Donald Jackson, ed., *The Journals of Zebulon Montgomery Pike, with Letters and Related Documents* (Norman, Okla., 1966), II, 149. This work, hereafter referred to as *Journals*, is the source of all the information to follow if no other source is given.

than were the Pawnee. They, too, were on Zebulon Pike's agenda.

The instructions given to Pike in St. Louis were wide-ranging.² He was to conduct some Osage Indians to their home in what is now southwest Missouri; he was to try to make peace between the Osage and Kansa tribes; then he was to head for the Pawnee country on a dual mission. He was first to solicit the allegiance of the Pawnee, and then get them to help him contact the Comanche by supplying him with horses and interpreters.

Pike's letter to Secretary of War Henry Dearborn, and one he wrote the next day to the commanding general of the Army, James Wilkinson,³ reveal the meagerness of his success with the Pawnee. First, they were most reluctant to sell him any horses, and indeed the principal chief was insisting that he turn back and go no further into "Spanish" territory. Also, Pike had been unable to persuade the Pawnee to provide him with an interpreter for his dealings with the Comanche—not even a Comanche prisoner who might conveniently have been freed for the purpose. Neither had he been able to convince the chief that he should appoint some influential men to accompany the expedition back to Washington, where they might parley with President Jefferson and other officials.

His only real success, and a temporary one, was in persuading the chief to pull down the Spanish flag and substitute the United States flag. Zebulon Pike was a highly patriotic man—some have said he was over-patriotic—and it bothered him to see foreign flags waving above soil he thought belonged to his country. On his earlier expedition up the Mississippi in 1805-1806, he had become so incensed at the sight of the British flag flying over a North West Company trading post that he had personally severed the halyard with a rifle shot and brought the banner to the ground. The Spanish colors aroused him in much the

² James Wilkinson to Pike, June 24 and July 12, 1806, in *Journals*, I, 385-90.

³ Pike to James Wilkinson, Oct. 2, 1806, in *Journals*, II, 150-53.

same way. This is how Pike recounted the story of the Pawnee flag-raising in his journal:

After the chiefs had replied to various parts of my discourse, but were silent as to the [Spanish] flag, I again reiterated the demand for the flag, adding that it was impossible for the nation to have two fathers; that they must either be the children of the Spaniards or acknowledge their American father. After a silence of some time, an old man rose, went to the door, and took down the Spanish flag, and brought it and laid it at my feet, and then received the American flag and elevated it on the staff, which had lately borne the standard of his Catholic majesty. This gave great satisfaction to the Osage and Kans, both of whom, decidedly avow themselves to be under the American protection. Perceiving that every face in the council was clouded with sorrow, as if some great national calamity was about to befall them, I took up the contested colors, and told them that as they had now shewn themselves dutiful children in acknowledging their great American father, I did not wish to embarrass them with the Spaniards, for it was the wish of the Americans that their red brethren should remain peaceably round their own fires, and not embroil themselves in any disputes between the white people: and that for fear the Spaniards might return there in force again, I returned them their flag, but with an injunction that it should never be hoisted during our stay. At this there was a general shout of applause and the charge particularly attended to.⁴

Not exactly a tremendous victory for American diplomacy, perhaps, but it was a beginning; the stars and stripes were flying, not from Pike's own flagstaff but from that of a Pawnee chief who had long been under Spanish influence, and who placed a heavy emphasis on flags, medals, and other tangibles which represented authority.

A few days later, when the expedition was preparing to leave the Indian village and push on toward its next objective, another significant incident occurred. Acting under instructions from the Spanish commander, the old chief of the Pawnee was prepared to prevent Pike from continuing his westward journey. The story of what happened was told by the chief himself to an Indian agent a few years later, and the agent set it down in his journal:

"The morning came, and the rising sun found Pike with his men, all mounted, well armed and equipped; their heavy broadswords drawn. The old Warrior Chief had summoned his forces also, and there they stood, more than *Five hundred*

⁴ *Journals*, I, 328-29.

in number, armed with Bows & Arrows, spears and tomahawks, in gloomy silence; each party waiting in painful suspense the orders of their respective chiefs. The chief recalled that he approached Pike and earnestly urged him to cancel his journey. Pike pointed to a spot in the sky just above the eastern horizon, and told the chief he would set out when the sun reached that spot, saying that "nothing but death can stop us—it is my duty as I have already fully explained to you—if you think it is yours to obey the Spaniard, so to stop me, be it so: but be assured that the attempt will cost the lives of many brave men—this you may be sure of."

Pike's detachment was completely surrounded by Indians with their bows strung, some with arrows ready, and some with firearms; Pike's hand was on the hilt of his sword. He was ready to signal, by drawing his sword, that his men were to attack.

"What a moment!" wrote the agent in recounting the story. "In a few minutes probably an hundred men or more would bite the dust. One word from the Pawnee chief was only wanting to prevent this senseless waste of human life. The good sense & humanity of the chief prevailed: he ordered his people to put up their arms, to open the way and permit the little band to pass freely, and go unmolested in whatever direction their young chief chose to lead them."⁵

Pike tells the story somewhat differently in his own journal, but there can be no doubt that the Indians contemplated stopping the expedition by force. And so, because a U.S. army lieutenant did not blink in the face of danger, a Pawnee chief disobeyed the injunction of the Spanish government. The inevitable domination of the Pawnee by the United States was under way.

Pike left the Pawnee on October 7, 1806, and he later wrote that when he had reached the summit of the hill which overlooked the village, "I felt my mind as if relieved

⁵ George C. Sibley, the agent at Fort Osage on the Missouri, visited the Republican Pawnee in June, 1811, and prepared an account of his visit upon his return home. For that portion dealing with Pike, see his "Notes of an Official Excursion from Fort Osage. . . ." in *Journals*, II, 370-77.

of a heavy burthen. . . ." He led his party almost due south, to the vicinity of Great Bend, Kansas, and spent several days preparing to ascend the Arkansas River. His detachment was then divided, Lieutenant James B. Wilkinson (the general's son) and five soldiers returning down the Arkansas to civilization while Pike and the rest started up the river toward the Rockies.

During the fall and winter, the expedition saw and approached the great mountain later to be called Pikes Peak, then wandered up into the South Park area of Colorado, touched on the waters of the South Platte, and came back down the upper reaches of the Arkansas in the mistaken belief that it was the Red River. After a winter of incredible hardship, including a partial descent of the Royal Gorge and a bout with cold and hunger in the Wet Mountain Valley, the men crossed the Sangre de Cristo range and built a stockade on a branch of the Rio Grande—once more believing they were on the Red River and thus still in United States territory. They had found not a single Comanche with whom to parley.

On February 26, 1807, a detachment of Spanish regulars and militiamen discovered Pike, informed him he was encamped and flying the American flag on Spanish soil, then escorted him down to Santa Fe. After interrogation by the governor of New Mexico, Joaquin del Real Alencaster, he was sent on down the *camino real* to Chihuahua. Some of his men were left to follow him later, also in arrest, and during this period the only fatality of the expedition occurred when Sergeant William Meek killed Private Theodore Miller with a bayonet.⁶

In Chihuahua, Pike was confronted by Nemesio Salcedo, commandant-general of the Interior Provinces of New Spain, who had grave suspicions about the young officer's motives. After opening a three-way correspondence with

⁶ Meek was tried in Mexican courts, and although there is no record of the verdict he was detained in Mexico until 1820. For a translation of the court proceedings, see *Journals*, II, 209-24.

his superiors in Spain and with such United States officials as Secretary of State James Madison, the commandant-general decided to release Pike and escort him to the Mexican border at Natchitoches, Louisiana, but to retain his maps, letters, and other papers.

Many aspects of Pike's expedition and its aftermath are not pertinent here: the question of whether he was spying; whether he told the truth when he claimed he was lost on the Rio Grande; whether he was in league with General James Wilkinson and even Aaron Burr, in schemes which might have disrupted the federal union and brought turmoil to the West. We are more particularly concerned with the effects of the expedition on the later formation and development of Nebraska and her neighboring states.

When Pike's journal was published in 1810, it contained one observation which may have had a deterrent effect on the settling of the Trans-Missouri West: his famous pronouncement on the so-called Great American Desert. One section of his journal was called "A dissertation on the soil, rivers, productions, animal and vegetable, with general notes on the internal parts of Louisiana. . . ." In this section, Pike wrote in part as follows:

Numerous have been the hypotheses formed by various naturalists, to account for the vast tract of untimbered country which lies between the waters of the Missouri, Mississippi, and the western Ocean, from the mouth of the latter river to the 48° north latitude. . . . I would not think I had done my country justice, did I not give birth to what few lights my examination of those internal deserts has enabled me to acquire. In that vast country of which we speak, we find the soil generally dry and sandy, with gravel, and discover that the moment we approach a stream, the land becomes more humid with small timber. . . . These vast plains of the western hemisphere, may become in time equally celebrated as the sandy deserts of Africa; for I saw in my route, in various places, tracts of many leagues, where the wind had thrown up the sand, in all the fanciful forms of the ocean's rolling wave, and on which not a speck of vegetable matter existed.

But from these immense prairies may arise one great advantage to the United States, viz: The restriction of our population to some certain limits, and thereby a continuation of the union. Our citizens being so prone to rambling and extending themselves, on the frontiers, will, through necessity, be constrained to limit their extent on the west, to the

borders of the Missouri and Mississippi, while they leave the prairies incapable of cultivation to the wandering and uncivilized aborigines of the country.⁷

Pike was speaking as one who had never been west of the Mississippi before his expeditions, and who could not predict the potentials for development of the regions he had seen. He was, moreover, not alone in his pessimistic appraisal. Several years later, explorer and engineer Stephen H. Long wrote of the same area, "I do not hesitate in giving the opinion, that it is almost wholly unfit for cultivation, and of course uninhabitable by a people depending on agriculture for their subsistence."⁸

Pronouncements by men such as these, who had crossed the plains, could not but reinforce the official view of the government during this period that the Trans-Mississippi West could best be used as an enormous reserve for the Indians. Thomas Jefferson, who was still President when Pike returned but not when he published his journal, had once seriously considered barring white migration into the Louisiana Purchase, and instead transporting all Indians westward across the Mississippi where they could not hinder the development of previously settled areas.⁹

Pike made another statement, not as well known as his comment on the Great American Desert, in a letter he wrote to Albert Gallatin in 1809. He suggested that the United States return to the Spanish all the lands west of the Mississippi River, in exchange for Florida.

"Florada to us is necessary," he wrote, "and will in time become quite as much so, as New Orleans was previous to our obtaining possession of it. . . . Should Spanish America declare themselves independant we would naturally turn our eyes to Mexico the seat of Government to seal the Negotiations [for Florida], where I am sincerely of an opinion it might be done by ceding all the West bank of the Mississippi

⁷ *Journals*, II, 27-28.

⁸ Edwin James, *Account of an Expedition from Pittsburgh to the Rocky Mountains*, in *Early Western Travels* (Cleveland, 1905), IV, 147-48.

⁹ Meriwether Lewis to Thomas Jefferson, Dec. 28, 1803, in Donald Jackson, ed., *Letters of the Lewis and Clark Expedition* (Urbana, Ill., 1962), 148-55.

making the Missouri the Line: I have not paid due attention to the question therefore will not presume to decide if we could Constitutionally transfer upper Louisiana and all the people of the West bank to a foreign power, and dominion. But the policy of the measure cannot for a moment be doubted, as our territorial limits are now immense, and the Mississippi is a natural barrier, with which we could always keep open a communication if we possess'd the Florida's & Cuba.¹⁰

It is ironic that Pike expressed this view to Albert Gallatin, who had been Jefferson's Secretary of the Treasury when the Louisiana Purchase was negotiated, had been instrumental in launching the Lewis and Clark expedition to the Pacific, and who was an avid student of everything concerning the West.

Pike's positive contributions to the region far outweigh the negative ones. If the American people were deterred for a while from migrating across the Mississippi and Missouri, by Pike's tales of a great desert, they were not deterred long; and they were immediately aroused by the prospects for trade with the Indians and the Spanish. The opening of the Santa Fe trail, an increase in trade with the plains and mountain tribes, an increased use of waterways including the Platte, and a general quickening of the inevitable westward expansion—these things were brought about in no small measure by Pike's published reports. Even if he had little regard for the vast land through which he had struggled, he put the fever for westward migration into the hearts of men with greater vision.

One aspect of Pike's expedition has remained a topic of speculation for Nebraskans and Kansans down to this day. The boundary between the states of Nebraska and Kansas runs along the fortieth parallel. On the south side of the line, in Republic County, Kansas, is the site of a large Pawnee Indian village. On the north side of the line, in Webster County, Nebraska, lies the site of another such village. Until recently our knowledge of Pike's route was imprecise, based on a rather sketchy map which he pub-

¹⁰ Pike to Albert Gallatin, June 20, 1809, in *Journals*, II, 360-62.

lished with his journal in 1810. And since the two village sites are only about thirty miles apart, it was natural that residents of the two states should reach differing conclusions about which village Pike visited. Did the Spanish flag come down, and the Stars and Stripes go up, in Kansas or Nebraska?

The Kansas site was known long before the Nebraska site, and Pike's map of 1810 seemed to some scholars to lead directly to it. So in 1901 the people of Kansas erected a granite shaft, on a handsome hillside in Republic County, to commemorate Pike's visit. The so-called Pike site belonged to Kansas exclusively until the early 1920's, when the Pawnee site was found in southern Nebraska.¹¹ Interested persons in both states began to re-examine the evidence, look at artifacts which had come from these locations, and re-evaluate Pike's journals and maps. An unfortunate term came into use, "the war between Nebraska and Kansas."

Publications of the historical societies in both states during this period reflected the friendly but determined efforts of all parties to settle the matter in favor of local interests. For example, writing on behalf of Kansas State Historical Society, George P. Morehouse said, "No fair person can read Pike's account of his approach to, his experience in, and his description of the Pawnee Republic village, then fully examine the ruins and environments of the Kansas site, and not come to the conclusion that Kansas and the Kansas State Historical Society marked the right place. . . . Beyond any doubt, it was the place Lieutenant

¹¹ The Nebraska site was located largely through the efforts and investigations of A. T. Hill, of Hastings, who was skeptical about the Kansas site and spent many hours exploring and excavating in the vicinity of Guide Rock and Red Cloud. Eventually he purchased the land upon which the Nebraska site had been discovered. See "Mr. A. T. Hill's Own Story," *Nebraska History Magazine*, 10 (July-Sept., 1927), 162-67.

Pike visited them from September 25 to October 7, 1806.
...¹²

For another point of view, here is Addison E. Sheldon, writing in the *Nebraska History Magazine*: "It is the judgment of the Nebraska State Historical Society Board that the true site is in Nebraska, between the towns of Guide Rock and Red Cloud, on the south side of the Republican river, about thirty miles northwest of the Kansas monument. It is the belief of Nebraska that the original Pike documents, the topography of the country, and the Indian village remains prove Nebraska's case beyond a doubt."¹³

And now the narrative becomes personal, although the historian is ever reluctant to make himself a part of his story.

No one can satisfactorily prepare a set of explorer's journals for publication from within the stacks of a library or a manuscript repository. The editor must withdraw his head from the dark confines of a microfilm reader and prepare to get his face sunburned. In the spring of 1964 I set out to follow as much of Pike's route, on both his Mississippi River and western expedition, as would be practicable and useful. I was not on a pilgrimage, but rather on a "tour of discovery," as Pike himself might have said, so I improved upon his means of transportation wherever possible. For example, on the middle reaches of the Mississippi I traveled on a towboat through the courtesy of the Federal Barge Lines. In the valley of the Upper Arkansas and the region around Pikes Peak, I took to the

¹² "Report of the Committee Appointed to Determine the Site of the Pawnee Village Visited by Pike in 1806," *25th Biennial Report*, Kansas State Historical Society (Topeka, 1927), 128.

¹³ "A Proposition by the Nebraska State Historical Society to the Kansas Historical Society," *Nebraska History Magazine*, 10 (July-Sept., 1927), 159-60. Nearly the entire issue of the magazine is devoted to the matter of the Pike site, and the title page bears the heading: "The War Between Nebraska and Kansas: Both Sides of the Dispute." For an archaeologist's viewpoint, see Waldo R. Wedel, "An Introduction to Pawnee Archaeology," *Bulletin of the Bureau of American Ethnology*, 112 (1936).

air for a faster and more accurate surveillance of the land. But mainly I traveled in a station wagon, with a sleeping bag and a camping stove, a bundle of U.S. Geological Survey quadrangle maps, and that handiest of all traveling accessories—a credit card.

I had one other tool, also very important—a set of photostats of the field notebook which was confiscated from Pike in Chihuahua, in 1807, and not returned to the United States for a century. This book would have been available to those involved in the controversy of the 1920's over the location of the Pike council site, but no one directly concerned with that inquiry seems to have consulted it.¹⁴ The manuscript maps in the notebook are not a crystal-clear delineation of his route, for Pike was poorly trained in cartography. Rather, they are a puzzle to be solved. Each day Pike set down in this notebook a series of sketches purporting to show the creeks and rivers he had crossed, and the land he had traversed. Of course there were no place names for the smaller streams; his courses and distances were mere estimates; and his observations often were made during extremes of fatigue. With these variables in mind, I trailed him from the two villages of the Great and Little Osage, in southwest Missouri, up to the village of the Pawnee on the Republican River.

Pike left the Osage villages on September 1, following the south bank of the Little Osage River, and three days later was about on the future boundary line between Missouri and Kansas, in Bourbon County, Missouri. A couple of days later, with some of his Osage guides leaving him and others showing a strong fear of the Kansa Indians, he began a wide swing to the west of the Kansa stronghold. By the evening of September 7 he was encamped on Deer Creek, an affluent of the Neosho River southwest of Car-

¹⁴ Stephen H. Hart, not involved in the debate and unaware of the Nebraska site, did use Pike's manuscript materials in tracing the route, but misinterpreted them and placed Pike at the Kansas site. Stephen H. Hart and Archer B. Hulbert, eds., *Zebulon Pike's Arkansas Journal* (Denver, 1932), 76-80.

lyle, Kansas. By the thirteenth he was proceeding northwest in the vicinity of Marion. On the seventeenth he struck the Smoky Hill River at about twelve miles south of Salina, still traveling northwest. He then crossed the Saline River, camped three days near Minneapolis in Ottawa County. On the twenty-third he crossed the Solomon near Beloit, and on the twenty-fifth he camped between Salem and Burr Oak, on White Rock Creek, in Jewell County, Kansas.

Pike's tables of course and distance show that on September 26, in order to reach the Pawnee village, he traveled twelve miles northwest. By my calculations—and allowing for Pike's usual errors in computing distance—this would put him on the Republican River in Webster County, Nebraska.

As I have observed many times, nobody knows more about the lay of the land in his own county than an official of the Soil Conservation Service. I was pleased to learn that Ralph Ferebee was no exception. Not only was he informed about the location of the Pawnee site, but he was also interested in Indian lore himself. He soon had me pointed in the right direction.

I found no marker there, nor on the highway near by, to inform the public that here was believed to be one of the great historic sites of the American west. But now there is a marker on the highway near the site, and the site has been designated by the National Park Service as a "Registered National Historic Landmark."

All the data available to me in determining the location of the Pike council site is now available to anyone, for Pike's field notebook and traverse tables are in print for the first time.¹⁵ I am not the first researcher to trail Pike up across Kansas to the banks of the Republican, nor am I the first to conclude that he entered Nebraska. I believe

¹⁵ *Journals*, Plates 1-48.

I am probably the first to so conclude on the basis of Pike's own detailed maps and data.

Earlier researchers had to rely upon that faulty map, the descriptions of the lay of the land set down in the journals of Pike and Lieutenant Wilkinson, and a good deal of geographer's logic and common sense. Let us consider for a moment the plight of Elliott Coues, one of the great editors of travel narratives in the late nineteenth century. In 1895 he published an edition of Pike's journals—the first full edition since 1810—and without covering the ground in person he traced Pike to Nebraska. He had no knowledge of the Nebraska Pawnee site, for it had not yet been discovered. But he said, "the place where Pike struck it [the Republican] was certainly in that portion of its course which runs in Nebraska. . . . For the present I can only tentatively assume longitude $90^{\circ} 31' W.$ "¹⁶ This reading would have placed the site a short distance southeast of Red Cloud.

After the Coues edition appeared, however, Kansans pointed out the Pawnee site in their state as the location of Pike's council. So Coues reversed himself, told his correspondents he had erred, and wrote: "At present I see no reason to doubt that you have the right of it, and that, when you have fully formulated your results, there will remain no question of the exact location of the Pawnee village or of Pike's memorable camp."¹⁷

So nothing can ever be completed for all time in the world of historiography. That is why I have been so presumptuous as to re-edit Elliott Coues's fine edition of Pike's journals, published seventy years ago, and it is also why some future historian—shaking his head sadly over the shortcomings of my edition—will turn once more to the task of presenting Zebulon Pike to a new generation. May

¹⁶ Elliott Coues, ed., *The Expeditions of Zebulon Montgomery Pike* (New York, 1895), 410-11.

¹⁷ Coues to Gomer T. Davies, March 1, 1896, in *25th Biennial Report*, Kansas State Historical Society, 126.



Zebulon Pike



View from "the hill over the town" noted by Pike on his arrival at the Pawnee village on September 25, 1806. The earth lodge village located and excavated under the direction of the late A. T. Hill covered the terrace

he realize one important thing: to do the job adequately, he must be prepared to get his face sunburned.