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Minnesota History Vignettes - Zebulon Pike

Tags: Minnesota History

Lost "leggins, mockinsons, socks, etc…. no trivial misfortune." ~ Lt. Zebulon Pike in 1805

In 1805, there was a flamboyant young lieutenant in the American army named Zebulon Pike. His first major exploration assignment was to lay claim to the territory that stretched from the Minnesota River (then called St. Peter's River) to the source of the Mississippi River after the completion of the Louisiana Purchase in 1803. With a squad of 19 men, he left St. Louis traveling up the Mississippi in August and by September had arrived at and purchased the land now known as Fort Snelling from the Dakota tribes that resided at the confluence of these two great rivers. The picturesque island below Fort Snelling at the tip of that confluence still bears his name: Pike Island.

Once late October rolled around, Lt. Pike and his expedition paddled canoes to what is now Little Falls, setting up a temporary fort. However, sitting out the winter in a fort wasn't in Lt. Pike's nature, for he had yet to confront any of the British traders who were scattered out across Northern Minnesota, trading with the Ojibwa tribes on American soil. That December he took a small detachment of his men and went out in search of these traders. It took them almost a full month in the freezing cold and wet weather before they would stumble nearly starved and frozen to death into the British Northwest Company stockade on Big Sandy Lake between the modern-day cities of Grand Rapids and Brainerd. The above uneasy quote was from Pike's diary while wandering through the Northwoods.

Even though they were Americans visiting a British trading post in a vast and unforgiving wilderness without any real exit strategy, Lt. Pike pointedly told the unsuspecting British traders that the fort was on American soil. He even had the audacity to shoot the Union Jack from the top of the flagpole and replace it with the Stars and Stripes. Even so, the British treated the bearers of their bad news hospitably. Pike recorded in his journal that the post was very civilized and had all the comforts of a modern residence in the East.

After Pike and his men left the hospitable post, it is more than likely that the British agents raised the Jack again. The traders would not pay duty to America for quite some time, since American dominance over the region was not established until Fort Snelling was built about fifteen years later. Unlike the grand excursion of Lewis and Clark near the same time, the best thing that can be said about Pike's expedition is that even though it was ugly, nothing truly bad happened. This is probably the reason why it is not a well-known piece of American or, for that part, Minnesota history.

As you might have guessed, Pike later went on to a much more famous expedition where he discovered the renowned peak outside of Colorado Springs that bears his name. By the War of 1812, Pike had been promoted to Brigadier General and was a key player in the Battle of York (now Toronto). However, it wouldn't end well for him, as a retreating British garrison set off an explosives bank without warning during surrender negotiations, and the rubble sadly took General Pike's life.

The Santa Fe Trail Association formed a Zebulun Pike Bicentennial commission to celebrate some of his more renowned expeditions into the Southwest and it is a good place to read more about this American hero.

You can visit Pike's island just below Fort Snelling. The fort's website has a little more reading on the subject.

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