

THE FLUME

The Park County Republican & Fairplay Flume

Park County History Zebulon Pike 1806 expedition Expedition route being studied for designation as national historic trail

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May 28, 2020



In 1806, Zebulon Pike mounted an expedition to find the source of the Arkansas and Red Rivers. This painting is by Ed French, a noted former Disney artist. (Image of the Ed French painting courtesy of the Pike National Historic Trail Association)

Park County was a cold host for a young U.S. Army lieutenant and his band of men in the early winter of 1806. Lt. Zebulon

Pike, who had just completed a mission to explore the headwaters of the Mississippi River, was leading his men on

an expedition to find the source of the Arkansas and Red Rivers in the southwest portion of the newly-purchased Louisiana Purchase.

When President Jefferson bought the 827,000 square miles of the Louisiana Purchase, he was eager to understand just what that new addition to the United States territory looked like, and what resources were there. In 1804, he sent out a party of explorers under Merriweather Lewis and William Clark to head northwest past the Mississippi River to observe and report on what they found there. Shortly after, General James Wilkinson, newly appointed governor of the northern Louisiana Territory, sent a twenty-six year old Lieutenant Zebulon Pike to find the headwaters of the Mississippi River.

When Pike returned with his successful report of that expedition in April of 1805, Wilkinson ordered the young officer to launch another expedition to the southwestern portion of the new Louisiana Purchase to find the headwaters of the Arkansas and Red Rivers and to establish friendly relationships with local Native Americans and Spanish-speaking settlers.

Pike collected his men and supplies and mounted his second exploratory trip, leaving St. Louis, Mo., July 15, 1806, on his most famous mission of his short life. The importance of that expedition has led to a feasibility study by the National Park Service for the route's designation as the Pike National Historic Trail.

While they had encountered cold and hardships earlier, Pike and his men entered Park County near Guffey and set up camp between Saddle Mountain and Cover Mountain. The next day he followed West Fourmile Creek and came

over the pass between Thirty-nine Mile Mountain and Saddle Mountain.

The party encountered the South Platte River, thinking it was the Red River, and followed it up Elevenmile Canyon, Dec. 14, into the area now covered by the Elevenmile Reservoir, and noted that there was sign of a previous Native American encampment, writing in his journal that there was "sign made by their horses that was astonishing, and would have taken a thousand horses some months."

The group struggled north along the river, and by the time they reached the site of Arthur between Reineker Ridge and Redhill Subdivision, Pike wrote, "My poor fellows suffered extremely with cold, being nearly naked." The expedition had foregone winter uniforms for lighter summer gear early in the expedition.

Pike crossed over Tomahawk Ridge (probably at the water gap at Buffalo Peaks Ranch, or Garo) and headed across country following the Middle Fork of the South Platte River to Antero and over Trout Creek Pass into what is now Chaffee County.

An informational sign on U.S. Highway 285 and 24 north of Buena Vista, marks their camp where many had no blankets, makeshift shoes of raw buffalo hide, and "eight hundred miles from the frontiers of our country" on Christmas Day.

Pike's expedition was every much as harrowing and as valuable in providing information for the settlement of the western portion of the United States as that of Lewis and Clark.

The Pike National Historic Trail Association, with headquarters in Conifer, has worked diligently for the eventual official designation of the route as a

National Historic Trail, and has had bipartisan support at both the state and federal level.

Last year, Congress approved the establishment of the feasibility study to be conducted over the next several years by the National Park Service to determine if the route can be nationally designated.

Because Colorado figures so strongly in the history of that expedition, as the researchers from the National Park Service begin their three-year study, they will be looking for Colorado communities eager to promote the Pike trail and will be picking a number of locations in which to hold public scoping meetings to investigate the potential for increased educational, recreational and economic opportunities in their area.

The Park Service does not purchase land along a National Historic Trail, but does assist communities along a trail in promoting the trail and the attractions, businesses, history and educational opportunities unique to each area.

Governments, educators, historical organizations and business organizations are invited to support the trail coming through their area and to contact the Pike National Historic Trail Association for more information on the work underway for official designation.

To learn more about the work of the Pike National Historic Trail Association and about Zebulon Pike's life and service to his country, and to join the organization, go to <https://www.zebulonpike.org/>.