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The Death of Zebulon M. Pike

BY ROBERT M. WARNER*

Few men have left such impressive monuments to preserve their memories as Zebulon Montgomery Pike whose memorial is probably America's best known mountain. This mountain, which bears the alliterative name of Pikes Peak, was "discovered" by Pike in 1806 while leading an expedition, his second, into the interior of the newly acquired Louisiana Territory.

In August of that year he was promoted to a captaincy¹ and shortly thereafter was made a major. By 1810 this thirty-one-year-old officer, in the small American army, had risen to the rank of colonel of infantry. His career, however, was destined to be of short duration.

In the War of 1812 Pike, who now held the rank of brigadier general, led the United States' assault on York (present-day Toronto, Ontario), which at that time was the capital of Upper Canada. On April 25, 1813, his forces of about 1,700 troops sailed in the squadron commanded by Commodore Chauncey² from Sackets Harbor, New York, across Lake Ontario to attack the settlement.

During a lull in the attack on the fort, the British exploded their powder magazine sending stones and other debris in all directions. Pike, struck by one of the flying missiles, was fatally injured.

* Robert M. Warner, son of Dr. Mark T. Warner of Montrose, Colo., is an Assistant in Research at the University of Michigan at Ann Arbor. Mr. Warner recently found a letter written by Samuel Dung (an), which he has transcribed exactly as it was written in 1813 for *The Colorado Magazine*, from which this article is reprinted.

¹ On August 12, 1806, Pike was made a captain.—Francis B. Heitman, *Historical Register and Dictionary of the United States Army 1789-1903*. (Washington, G.P.O. 1903), Vol I, p. 792.

² Isaac Chauncey (Feb. 20, 1772-Jan. 27, 1840), naval officer, was born in Black Rock, Fairfield County, Conn. Descended from Charles Chauncey [q.v.], the second president of Harvard College, he was the fifth of nine children born to Wolcott and Ann (Brown) Chauncey . . . Chauncey, early in September 1812, was made commander of the naval forces on Lakes Ontario and Erie.—*Dictionary of American Biography*. (Scribner's Sons, N. Y. 1930), p. 40 c. 2.

An interesting though somewhat morbid account of the general's death and burial is recorded in a letter from Dr. Samuel Dungan of Canandaigua, New York, to his wife, Elisa. Dungan was making a trip by stage and steamboat from his home to visit relatives in New Jersey when he met the general's widow, who was then returning from her husband's funeral. The fore part of this letter, here omitted, discusses family affairs of Dungan. The letter now is located in the Nathaniel Balch Papers in the Michigan Historical Collections, University of Michigan.

[May 29, 1813]

(Salutation destroyed)

Mrs. Pike (widow of General Pike) came in company with me from Albany and rode in the same stage with me from [New] Brunswick—poor woman appears sorrowful enough. She was at Sackets harbour when the general fell—the general was put into a hogshead of spirits and carried by Commodore Chauncey to Sackets harbour where he was buried with the honors of war within the walls of the garrison—his wife saw the corpse and says it looks natural but very pale, which the spirits would occasion. Poor woman, she had all his effects with her, she had the coat surtout that he had on when the stone struck him, the coat was very much cut where the stone struck behind his shoulder and arm or rather more under and behind the arm pit, she had also the British flag with her, that was flying over Little York when it was taken, it was given to her by Commodore Chauncey, poor soul my heart felt for her yesterday when she wanted something from the trunk that the general's clothes was in, her servant or rather the general's, when he was getting out the article she wanted, the gentlemen, all discovered it was the general's and begged the favour to look at them, which she kindly permitted and assisted the servant in getting them out. Poor woman, she looked ready to faint, she showed his coats, the British flag and his sword which she carried in her hands when she rode in the stage. It was a mournful sight to behold, indeed. I could not help shedding a flood of tears as I helped her servant close the trunk, which she was doing when I offered my assistance she was glad to accept it and seemed to be relieved of an unpleasant task. . . .

I remain yours affection[ately]

SAMUEL DUNGLAN

GENERAL PIKE'S SWORD

The sword of General Pike, now in the museum of

the State Historical Society of Colorado, at Denver, was given by Mrs. Pike to Maj. Donald Fraser, Aide de Camp to General Pike. The story of how it came into the possession of the Society includes the correspondence and affidavits authenticating same by S. W. Thomas, P.O. Box 86, Wrightsville, Georgia, who first offered to sell the two swords which he said belonged to his uncle, Maj. Donald Fraser. Thomas' asking price was \$300 for the two swords. After an exchange of letters, the society obtained them for the sum of \$150.

The larger sword is described as a brass-mounted sword in an iron or steel scabbard, with gilt cord and tassel and short strap with buckle attached and bearing on the back of the handle or hilt the following inscription:

"The Sword of the late Gallant Gen' Pike presented by his Lady to Lieut. Donald Fraser his Aid D' Camp."

Indentations appearing on the scabbard of the sword are said to have been caused by the shower of falling stones from the explosion which killed General Pike. The sword had remained in Major Fraser's possession during his life time and he always kept it hung in his bedroom.

The smaller of the two swords purchased by the society bears the inscription on the outside of the scabbard: "From his fellow citizens of New York to Major Donald Fraser. A tribute to his Gallantry as a soldier and inestimable worth as a citizen."

This sword was presented to Major Fraser June 25, 1836, in the Governor's room of the City Hall in New York City, the presentation speech having been made by his Excellency, William L. Marcy, Governor of the State of New York. Both swords were given by Major Fraser to his nephew, the father of Samuel Willis Thomas, who sold same to the society.

In 1911, Mr. Thomas wrote to the society asking to buy back the swords, stating that his mother was getting old and would like to see the family relics, but his offer was not accepted and today the Pike sword is on display in the Pioneer Room of the State Museum of Colorado.

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