

RAMSEY COUNTY  
**History**  
*A Publication of the Ramsey County Historical Society*

Zebulon Pike and Fur Trader  
James Aird: The Explorer and  
the 'Scottish Gentleman'

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Summer, 2005

Volume 40, Number 2

*Rendezvous at the Riverbend*

Pike's Seven Days in the Land of Little Crow—  
The Wilderness that Later Became St. Paul

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*A view of Pike Island with Fort Snelling in the distance as painted by Seth Eastman. The fort, of course, did not exist at the time of Pike's 1805 expedition, but Pike had recommended its site as the location for a military fort. Minnesota Historical Society collections.*

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# RAMSEY COUNTY History

Volume 40, Number 2

Summer, 2005

THE MISSION STATEMENT OF THE RAMSEY COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY  
ADOPTED BY THE BOARD OF DIRECTORS IN JULY 2003:

The Ramsey County Historical Society shall discover, collect, preserve and interpret the history of the county for the general public, recreate the historical context in which we live and work, and make available the historical resources of the county. The Society's major responsibility is its stewardship over this history.

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## A Message from the Editorial Board

September 23, 2005, marks the 200th anniversary of the signing of what is known as Pike's Treaty—an agreement between a number of Mdewatanton leaders and Lieutenant Zebulon M. Pike in which the Native Americans granted an area that includes today's historic Fort Snelling to the United States in return for what eventually was about \$2,000. Historian Gary Brueggemann leads off this issue with a carefully drawn account of Pike's visit to Minnesota in 1805 and the consequences of this treaty.

Complementing Brueggemann's article is a short piece by Duke Addicks, who is a historical re-enactor. Addicks tells readers how he, as a modern-day storyteller, portrays the nineteenth-century Scottish fur trader James Aird, who met Pike just days before the Pike party arrived in Minnesota.

Readers may remember that in our Winter 2005 issue, we carried an essay reconstructing the history of the DeLoop Parking Ramp using building permits in the RCHS's St. Paul Building Permits Collection. In this issue, Steve Trimble gives us a photo essay in which he uses photographs to demonstrate the many ways in which parking garages helped shape the urban landscape of St. Paul.

This issue concludes with a "Growing Up" piece in which Alexandra (Sandy) Klas fondly remembers her aunt, Frances Boardman, the long-time journalist for the *St. Paul Dispatch*. Frances Boardman was a colorful and compelling St. Paul writer whose death in 1953 was mourned by many friends as well as others who had simply enjoyed reading her many theater, music, and other reviews in the newspaper over the years.

*John M. Lindley, Chair, Editorial Board*

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# Zebulon Pike and James Aird: The Explorer and the 'Scottish Gentleman'

## Duke Addicks and James Aird

Less than three weeks after leaving St. Louis, the starting point of his exploration of the upper Mississippi, Lieutenant Zebulon Montgomery Pike breakfasted on the shore of the Mississippi River, just below present-day Rock Rapids, Iowa, with Scottish-born fur trader James Aird. In his journal entry for that morning, Pike called Aird a "Scottish gentleman," and acknowledged that he received "considerable information" from Aird at this chance meeting. In a letter written a few days later to General James Wilkinson, who had sent Pike on his adventure up the Mississippi, Pike recommended James Aird to Wilkinson's attention "as a gentleman to whose humanity and politeness I am much indebted."

Who was this James Aird? What information did he give Pike? Why was Pike so grateful? Why should we care? As a fur trade era re-enactor, I decided to find out. That quest resulted in my taking on the persona of Gentleman James Aird when I tell my fur trade era tales, and especially when I want to remind my audience not to forget Zeb Pike.

The advantage in telling Pike's story as Aird is that I can describe and comment on what Aird had personally experienced. Aird is telling a personal story about something that changed both his and Pike's lives. Speaking in the first person gives considerably more power to the presentation than if I just stand before an audience as an historian lecturing about something that happened 200 years ago.

Aird is a good character for me to portray. In 1818, the year from which he speaks and the year before he died, Aird was sixty-one, about my age. I have a slight accent that sounds Scottish to some.

I'm honored to serve as the Chief Justice and storyteller for the Mdewakanton Indian Community of Mendota. I'm proud of my genetic and cultural Eastern

Cherokee heritage. I've lived with the Ojibwe people in Canada and learned from their storytellers. So I have a good background when, as Aird, I talk about his Mdewakanton wife and her brother Wabasha as well as the other Mdewakanton and Ojibwe leaders whom Pike met and with whom Aird had lived and traded for more than forty years.

So, what about those questions I raised earlier? Let's let Gentleman James Aird respond.

\* \* \*

My name is James Aird. I met Lieutenant Pike for the first and only time on August 28, 1805. I had just attended my daughter's wedding to my associate Tom Anderson in Prairie du Chien. As a wedding present, Tom was taking over my fur trade post located on what would come to be known

as Pike Island where I had been trading with the Mdewakanton for the past twenty years. My partners had put me in charge of our operations on the Missouri River where we'd also been trading off and on for many years, and that was where I was heading.

The mid-morning air was cold for August. I was standing beside my thirty-foot Mackinaw boat on the west shore of the Mississippi River after coming through Rock Rapids. My young head boatman Pete Parrant was burning our breakfast. I was playing my Great Highland Bagpipes just to amuse myself and annoy my young clerk recently over from Scotland, Ramsey Crooks. We were waiting for my other three boats to come through the rapids without bouncing off of too many boulders, when I saw a heavily loaded, seventy-foot keelboat flying the American flag and being slowly rowed



Duke Addicks as James Aird, in the front yard of Aird's French-Canadian style log home. Built in the 1770s by voyageur and carpenter Francois Vertefeuille on one of Aird's many farms on the Mississippi just north of Prairie du Chien, this is the oldest structure in Wisconsin on its original site. It is still used as a private residence.

against the wind as well as the current up the very shallow river.

The keelboat veered over to where we were. As soon as the bow touched the shore, a tall young man with bright blue eyes and light hair, wearing an American soldier's uniform, jumped onto the shore.

He said he was Lieutenant Zebulon Pike. He had been sent to explore the Upper Mississippi. He was going all the way to its source. He wanted to tell both the British fur traders and the Indians that both sides of the Mississippi were now part of the United States. He was to stop the Dakota and the Ojibwe from fighting each other and encourage them to be friends of the United States. And, he was looking for some places for the Americans to build forts.

When he paused for breath, I asked him to join me for tea and breakfast. As we ate, he admitted he was new to this exploring business, didn't know much about where he was going, and asked for any advice or information that might help him. I'm always full of advice, and most people take it. Pike took my advice which I believe greatly assisted him in carrying out his mission. What advice did I give him?

"First," I said, "when you reach Prairie du Chien, trade that huge keelboat for a couple of boats like mine. They're only thirty feet long and will take you farther up the river. Eventually, though, you'll have to switch to canoes, and then snowshoes and a sled and team of dogs." Winter was coming fast this year, and I was not certain how far upriver he could get by boat before the river froze.

Then I told him that at Prairie du Chien he should ask around for Wabasha, brother of my wife, Grey Cloud. "He's a great chief of the Dakota Sioux and about your age," I said. "But his father led a thousand Indians on the side of the British against the Americans in the Revolutionary War, and Wabasha is very interested in continuing to trade with me and the other British fur traders." At least I hoped so.

Pike told me that General Wilkinson had met with Wabasha in May and that Wabasha claimed to be interested in cooperating with the Americans but didn't act like it. Pike was apprehensive about meeting with Wabasha, but I thought they might get along. "Tell Wabasha I met you," I said, "and I think he should help you get to know

the Indians upriver. We'd all benefit if they stopped fighting."

Also, I told Pike about my son-in-law's fur trading post on the island where the Mississippi and St. Peter's [Minnesota] Rivers meet, and that the bluff above it would be a great place for a fort. Of course, having Tom Anderson's fur trading post near a military fort would greatly increase his business when, and if, the fort was built.

I told Pike to find my partner Murdoch Cameron who could introduce him to Chiefs Little Crow and Le fils de Penichon. We traded with Little Crow at our post on the island and Murdoch's post was located at Le fils de Penichon's summer village just up the Minnesota River. "Tell Murdoch I said to help you. Upriver from St. Anthony Falls is my partner Robert Dickson's territory. He and our employees at the various posts along the Mississippi will help you as well if you just tell them I said it's allright."

Pike took my advice. He found Wabasha, who invited him to spend a few days with him. At the end of their visit, Wabasha gave Pike a special pipe, one all of the Indians would recognize as Wabasha's Pipe. "Smoke this pipe with the Indians you meet," Wabasha told him, "and they will treat you with friendship and respect."

Pike also found Murdoch Cameron, or rather Cameron found him, and Cameron did introduce Pike to Little Crow and Le fils de Penichon and persuaded them that a fort in their area would help protect them from the Ojibwe. Cameron acted as the main witness when the treaty was signed granting land for a fort where the rivers meet.

As Pike traveled farther up the Mississippi, he found that even the chiefs of the Ojibwe, those enemies of the Dakota, respected Wabasha and his pipe. Pike persuaded some of them to join in peace talks the next spring with leaders of the Dakota.

I didn't meet Pike again. By the time he came back down the Mississippi the next year, I was headed to our post far up the Missouri where I met with Lewis and Clark as they were returning from their journey of exploration. But that's another story.

I would have liked to have seen Pike again, and discussed what he learned. I read his journal when it was published, as did almost everyone on the river who

could read English, to see what he said about us. He may not have accomplished all he set out to do, but he treated the Indian people with respect and was interested in them and how they lived. They won't forget him.

In the eight years from the time I met him until he died in the War of 1812 he became a great explorer and military leader. He was so well known and well liked that the President read his eulogy before a joint session of Congress. I'm sure General Pike will be remembered as a hero of our country. I say our country because, after the war, I became an American citizen. I for one, won't forget Zeb Pike.

*Duke Addicks is a member of the board of directors of the Ramsey County Historical Society. As James Aird, he will be telling Pike's story on Pike Island in Fort Snelling State Park at 7 p.m. on September 23, 2005, the actual location and 200 years to the day after Pike, Little Crow, and Le fils de Penichon signed the treaty granting the area to the United States Government. Bagpipes will be played. The author wishes to thank the many Mdewakanton people who have helped Aird remember the details of his life.*

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One of Seth Eastman's paintings which he labeled "Permanent Residence of the Sioux" and probably is the village of Ka-so-ja (Kaposia) as it looked in 1846 when Eastman was an officer at Fort Snelling. Minnesota Historical Society collections.

**R.C.H.S.**  
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