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The Pike-Pawnee Flag Incident: Reexamining a Vexillological Legend

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Introduction

Visitors to the Pawnee Indian Village State Historic Site near Republic, Kansas are greeted by a granite monument (title page) commemorating one of the great moments in the vexillological history of the state.

ERECTED BY THE STATE OF KANSAS
1901

To mark the site of the Pawnee Republic, where
LIEUT. ZEBULON M. PIKE
caused the Spanish flag to be lowered
and the flag of the United States to be raised,
September 29, 1806.¹

To most who view the monument, it is yet another historical marker noting an event of which they had never heard. To the vexillologist, however, it is a challenge—another legend etched in stone that needs to be investigated and verified. Once widely believed to be the site of the first U.S. flag-raising in Kansas, scholars no longer consider this village the one visited by Pike in 1806. However, the legend persists and the story resurfaces from time to time in popular accounts of Kansas history. This paper will examine the story of the Pike-Pawnee flag incident in four areas: 1) an examination of the primary sources that record the incident; 2) the growth of the story as a Kansas legend; 3) the scholarly debate over where the incident actually occurred, and 4) actions being taken to correct the monument.

Primary Sources

Zebulon Pike's exploration of Kansas was part of his second expedition. In July 1806 he departed from St. Louis, Missouri on what has become known as his "Arkansaw Journey". His route took him west along the Missouri River to the Osage River. The party then traveled overland through Kansas until reaching a Pawnee village near the present Kansas-Nebraska border. Known to whites as the Republican Pawnee, the *Kitkehahki* band inhabited several historic villages near the border area

¹ George P. Morehouse, "The Case for Kansas: Full Report of the Special Committee, Kansas Historical Society—1926", *Nebraska History Magazine* 10, no. 3 (1927): 227.

at the time Americans were exploring the Louisiana Territory. The village in question, according to Pike's journal and other sources from the period, had been visited recently by a large contingent of Spanish soldiers who had left the flag of Spain flying in the village when they departed. As the legend goes, Pike demanded that the Pawnee lower the Spanish flag and replace it with that of the United States.²

There are several primary sources that describe the Pike-Pawnee flag incident. Each source must be evaluated before a conclusion on the accuracy of the story can be made. The most detailed account is that offered by Pike, himself.

Sept. 29th Held our grand council with the Pawnees, at which were present not less than 400 warriors, the circumstances of which were extremely interesting. The notes I took on my grand council held with the Pawnee nation were seized by the Spanish government, together with all my speeches to the different nations. But it may be interesting to observe here, in case they should never be returned, that the Spaniards had left several of their flags in this village, one of which was unfurled at the chief's door the day of the grand council; and that among various demands and charges I gave them was, that the said flag should be delivered to me, and one of the United States' flags be received and hoisted in its place. This probably was carrying the pride of nations a little too far, as there had so lately been a great impression on the minds of the young men, as to their power, consequence, etc., which my appearance with 20 infantry was by no means calculated to remove.

After the chiefs had replied to various parts of my discourse but were silent as to the 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, took down the Spanish flag, brought it and laid it at my feet; he 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 American protection. Perceiving that every face in the council was clouded with sorrow, as if some great national calamity were about to befall them, I took up the contested colors, and told them "that as they had shown 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 around 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 again during our stay". At this there was a general shout of applause, and the charge was particularly attended to.³

² Elliot Coues, ed., *The Expeditions of Zebulon Montgomery Pike*, volume 1 (New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1987) viii-ix. The journals use the spelling "Arkansaw", rather than the present spelling "Arkansas." In Kansas, the name of the river is pronounced "Ar - Kansas" (är-kan-'zes).

³ Elliot Coues, ed., *The Expeditions of Zebulon Montgomery Pike*, volume 2 (New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1987) 414-416.

It is important to note that in this entry Pike mentions that his original notes about the incident were taken from him by the Spaniards. Pike's capture occurred on 27 February 1807 after his party split into two groups. Near what is now Great Bend, Kansas, the troops led by Lieutenant James Biddle Wilkinson had followed the Arkansas River to its mouth, while Pike's party had turned upstream towards present-day Colorado. While there is no reason to believe that Pike invented the entire episode, it is relevant that the entry was rewritten after his release. For this reason, it is vital to compare Pike's description with that of other witnesses. Fortunately, Lieutenant Wilkinson also recorded the flag incident. He described the party's entry into the village on the morning of September 25, and events that occurred during its stay there:

At a council held some few days after our arrival, Lieutenant Pike explained to them the difference of their present situation and that of a few years past; that now they must look up to the president of the United States as their great father; that he [Pike] had been sent by him [Jefferson] to assure them of his good wishes, etc.; that he perceived a Spanish flag flying at the council-lodge door, and was anxious to exchange one of their great father's for it; and that it was our intention to proceed further to the westward, to examine this, our newly acquired country. To this a singular and extraordinary response was given—in fact, an objection started in direct opposition to our proceeding further west; however they gave up the Spanish flag, and we had the pleasure to see the American standard hoisted in its stead.⁴

Wilkinson's account seems to support the story of the flag incident as related by Pike. However, the account cannot be considered to be completely without bias. In an explanatory note to the printed report, Pike comments on the Lieutenant's work:

The following Report was written by Lieutenant Wilkinson at a time when it was expected I had been cut off by the savages. It consequently alluded to transactions relative to the Expedition previous to our separation, which I have since corrected. But the adventures of his party, after our separation, are given in his own words.—Z.M.P.⁵

By editing Wilkinson's report, Pike has denied us the benefit of an independent second account of the Pawnee flag incident. While it cannot be assumed that this was done to be deceitful, it has weakened the historical value of both accounts of this event. Wilkinson's unaltered account could have validated Pike's recollection of exactly what happened in the village that day. Two other accounts of the incident are available in the primary literature. The first purports to be the text of Pike's speech to the Pawnees. An editor's note explains that the text is "a transcript in the hand of Juan Pedro Walker . . . dated at Chihuahua, April 8, 1807, signed with Walker's name and rubric. It probably was copied from Pike's letterbook, one of the two documents not returned by the Mexican government in 1910". Walker, a native of New Orleans, was a lieutenant in the Spanish dragoons. General Salcedo, Pike's captor, had assigned Walker to assist Pike in translating and explaining his papers to the general. For historians, the lack of a clear provenance already makes this source less reliable. Even more disturbing, Walker omitted part of the text, replacing it with "x x x".

⁴ Coues, vol. 2, p. 542-543.

⁵ Coues, vol. 2, p. 539.

[September 29, 1806]

MY BROTHERS; Here is an American Flag which I present you—but it must never be hoisted by the side of that Spanish one which I desire in return—for the one I present you.

MY BROTHERS; You cannot have two Fathers—your former Fathers the Spaniards have now no further Authority over you—if we permit their traders to come amongst you it will be for your good—But after next year we will not permit Spanish officers, or soldiers; to come into this country to present medals or Flags—as all those marks of Distinction must come through your American Father—x x x⁶

As if to make matters worse, the final primary source tells a different version of the event, for it suggests that there were two flags flying in the village when Pike and his men arrived. This source is a letter written by Zebulon Pike to Secretary of War Henry Dearborn, dated 1 October 1806:

On our arrival, we found the Spanish and American flags both expanded in the village, and were much surprised to learn, that it was not more than three or four weeks, since a party of Spanish troops (whose number were estimated by the Indians of this town, at 300) had returned to Santa Fe.⁷

Since this letter is dated only days after the incident occurred, it is possible that it is the most accurate account of the event. Were there two flags flying over the village when Pike's party arrived? Perhaps, on rewriting his journal after his release, Pike either accidentally or intentionally altered his description of the flag incident. Regardless of his intent and the questions raised by the letter's account, Pike's story as written in his journal was widely accepted as a valid description of what occurred in that Pawnee village in September 1806. Still, this final piece of evidence casts significant doubt upon the claim of many Kansans that Pike's flag was the first U.S. flag raised in what is now the state of Kansas.

Growth of a Kansas Legend

Remains of Pawnee villages can be identified by the distinctive circular impressions that remain in the prairie long after the earth lodges have been destroyed. The lodges used dome-shaped timber frameworks covered by turf. As the buildings degraded, the earth coverings were deposited in ring-shaped embankments encircling the depressions of lodge floors. Other evidence of human occupation is usually found on the surface as well. In 1875, George and Elizabeth Johnson found the remains of a Pawnee village near the town of Republic, Kansas. Elizabeth had been interested in the story of Pike and the Pawnee flag incident since her father told her of it in 1874. Wondering if the village could have been that visited by Pike in 1806, she read Pike's journals and was convinced that she had found the site. Aware that there was a similar site across the state line she sent her husband and another man to Red Cloud, Nebraska to investigate. They found very little evidence of a village and returned

⁶ Coues, vol. 2, p. 656; Donald Jackson, ed., *The Journals of Zebulon Montgomery Pike: with Letters and Related Documents*, vol. 2 (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1966) 147.

⁷ Jackson, p. 148.

home concluding that Pike's Pawnee village had been in Kansas. On several occasions Elizabeth prevented the site from being plowed and she and her husband eventually purchased the land. The Johnsons donated eleven acres to the state of Kansas for preservation in 1901. With the donation of the land, the state legislature appropriated \$3,000 to fence and mark the site. The cornerstone for the monument, a 26-foot tall granite shaft, was laid in a ceremony on 4 July 1901 and the dedication was held on Monday, 30 September 1901, the day after the 95th anniversary of Pike's visit. Five years later, in September 1906, a 4-day celebration was held at the site to commemorate the centennial of Pike's visit to the Pawnee Indian village.⁸

The popularity of the Pike-Pawnee flag incident as a Kansas historical event grew following the erection of the monument. As noted in the 1926 book *History of Kansas: State and People*, "the incident of the flag came to be a matter of pride to the Kansas people. There is nothing like it in the history of any other state". A more lively story-book account of the incident appeared in a publication of the Kansas State Board of Education in 1953. In this account, Pike's bold demand that the Spanish flag be lowered impressed an old warrior among the Pawnee.⁹

"He loved brave men and his heart warmed to Pike. He stepped to the pole, pulled down the Spanish flag, received the Stars and Stripes from Pike and raised it to the top of the pole. Kiwiktaka's friends and relatives stood at his side and the young chief did not dare oppose him as he conducted the first raising of an American flag in Kansas".¹⁰

There is no evidence that this event, if it did occur in Kansas, was the first U.S. flag-raising in the state. It is likely that the Stars and Stripes was first posted when Meriwether Lewis and William Clark passed through the northeast corner of present-day Kansas during their exploration of the Louisiana Purchase in 1804. Regardless of its probable historical inaccuracy, this belief has only added to the popularity of the Pike-Pawnee flag incident as a Kansas legend. The story has continued to reappear in books published after 1953 and was even the topic of a speech by the Historian General of the National Society of the Daughters of the American Revolution at the rededication of the monument in 1996. The most interesting aspect of the entire legend is that it continues to be preserved in the popular history of the state long after the Kansas Historical Society and other experts in Kansas history conceded that the event most likely occurred in Nebraska.¹¹

⁸ Jeff Taylor, "The Pike Pawnee Indian Village Controversy", *Journal of the Kansas Anthropological Association* 8, no. 8-9 (1988): 163-164; Morehouse, p. 226-227; Mrs. Robert Rehl, Historian General of the National Society of the Daughters of the American Revolution, Remarks at the Rededication of the Pawnee Indian Village Marker in Republic County, 21 September 1996, on file at the Pawnee Indian Village State Historic Site.

⁹ William E. Connelley, *History of Kansas: State and People; Kansas at the First Quarter Post of the Twentieth Century*, vol. 1 (Chicago: American Historical Society, 1928) 73-76. This account does mention the Nebraska claim, but discounts it noting that "the preponderance of the evidence and local tradition are in favor of the site marked by Kansas, and there can be little question of the accuracy of its identity." Connelley, p. 76.

¹⁰ Bliss Isely and W. M. Richards, n.t. ([Topeka:] Kansas State Board of Education, 1953) 32-33, from the files of the Kansas State Historical Society Library and Archives.

¹¹ Nyle H. Miller, Edgar Langsdorf, and Robert W. Richmond, *Kansas: A Pictorial History* (Topeka: Kansas Centennial Commission and the State Historical Society, 1961) 5. While this book does not actually state that the Pike-Pawnee flag incident occurred in Kansas, it has an illustration of Pike with the text "In September, 1806, Capt. Zebulon Pike persuaded the Pawnee Indians on the Republican river to fly the American flag. Then he traveled south and west to the Arkansas River and the Colorado peak that bears his name." A 1992 revision of the work also includes similar text implying to all but the astute vexillologist that the event occurred in Kansas. Robert W. Richmond, *Kansas: A Pictorial History*, revised edition (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 1991) 18. Mrs. Robert Rehl, the Historian General of the National (continued on page 6...)

Scholarly Debate Over Pike's Pawnee Village

The Kansas Monument Site, also known by the archaeological designation "14RP1", had been accepted by the State of Kansas as Pike's Pawnee village and duly marked as a historic site. Some historians, however, continued to believe that indications of the distances traveled and landmarks, as described in Pike's journal, indicated that the site of Pike's village was probably located to the north and west of the Kansas village. In addition, there were significant differences in terrain between the Kansas Monument Site and the Pawnee village described by Pike and Wilkinson. Most notably, the journals say that Pike's party climbed a large hill and viewed the Pawnee village at its base. The Kansas village is located on a hill and there is no other hill in the area from which the village could have been viewed. It appears that, in the absence of a positively identified site north of the border, it was easy to overlook "minor discrepancies" and conclude that Kansas was the location of Pike's Pawnee village. As was previously noted, a site in Nebraska was investigated by the Johnsons, but they had found little evidence of the village because the site had already been disturbed by agricultural activities. It was not until 1923 that a village fitting Pike's description was positively identified in Nebraska. Once archaeologists began to investigate both sites scientifically, the issue of the proper location for the Pike-Pawnee flag incident was again questioned.¹²

The Nebraska site was identified by A. T. Hill in 1923. While living in Kansas, Hill had attended the dedication ceremony at the Kansas Monument Site. Intrigued by the story of Pike and the Pawnee village, he read the journals that described the incident. After studying Pike's line of march and comparing the terrain described by Pike with the topography of the Kansas site, Hill concluded that the state had marked the wrong location. Following a move to Nebraska, he began a search for Pike's village north of the border. Though his surface investigations yielded no clues about the village's location, interviews with people familiar with the area led him to the farm of George DeWitt. The farmer recalled that before his father, who homesteaded the area in 1872, plowed the land it had been covered with lodge circles and other evidence of an Indian village.¹³

Hill visited the site and excavated a grave which revealed evidence of white contact—a Spanish bridle bit and spur. He notified the Superintendent of the Nebraska

(continued from previous page...) Society of the Daughters of the American Revolution, reinforced this Kansas legend when she appeared at the rededication ceremony of the monument hosted by the Kansas Society of the D.A.R. on 21 September 1996. Her speech recounted the trials and tribulations of Elizabeth Agamonta Johnson as she worked to gain recognition for the site as Pike's Pawnee village. Dr. Ramon Powers, Executive Director of the Kansas State Historical Society, spoke after Mrs. Rehl and explained that while the site was no longer believed to be the village visited by Pike it was still important to the history of the state. Both speeches can be found in the files of the Pawnee Indian Village State Historic Site. With the emergence of the World Wide Web, the Internet is also playing an important part in continuing the Kansas legend of the Pike-Pawnee flag incident. A website entitled "Kansas Timeline", located at the University of Kansas lists the 26-29th of September 1806 as the date "when the "Stars and Stripes" (American flag) were first raised in Kansas by a Pawnee Indian Chief." Stephen Chinn, "Kansas Timeline", <http://history.cc.ukans.edu/heritage/research/timeline.html>, accessed 1 August 1997.

¹² Waldo Rudolph Wedel, *An Introduction to Pawnee Archeology*, Smithsonian Institution Bureau of American Ethnology Bulletin 112 (Washington, D.C.: USGPO, 1936): 33-36; Taylor, p. 164-165; Frank J. Munday, "Pike-Pawnee Village Site: Review and Summary of the Evidence in the Case", *Nebraska History Magazine* 10 #3 (1927): 168-169, 173-176.

¹³ A. T. Hill, "Mr. A. T. Hill's Own Story", *Nebraska History Magazine* 10 #3 (1927): 162-163.

Historical Society about his discovery. A comparison of the site with Pike's journal convinced them that the village could be the site of the Pawnee village where the flag incident occurred. Among the features found were gun pits on the top of a large hill overlooking the village—a hill like the one where Pike's men had camped. Superintendent Sheldon and Hill retraced Pike's steps from the village south to the great bend of the Arkansas River. They also visited the Kansas Monument Site to study the topography there. Their journey reinforced their belief that they had found the correct location. Interested in investigating and preserving what remained of the village, Hill bought the land in 1925. While he continued to farm there, he made arrangements for the survey and scientific study of the site.¹⁴

In 1925 an issue of *Nebraska History Magazine* presented the cases for both sides of the Kansas-Nebraska debate. A report by a special committee of the Kansas State Historical Society argued that the Kansas Monument Site was the correct location of the Pike-Pawnee flag incident. Many of the committee's arguments were based upon assumptions that journals describing the events contained errors that accounted for the discrepancies between the Kansas site and the village that Pike visited. The Nebraska case, however, was supported fully by the journal accounts and succeeded in convincing many historians and archaeologists that the Hill site, designated "25WT1" by the archaeologists, deserved the title of "Pike's Pawnee Village". Waldo Rudolph Wedel, an expert in Pawnee archaeology and a native Kansan, agreed with the Nebraskans. In his *Introduction to Pawnee Archeology*, he concluded that the archaeological, historical, and geographic factors all indicated that the Hill site was most likely the village visited by Pike in 1806. Eventually, the Kansas State Historical Society acknowledged Nebraska's claim to the location of the historic village.¹⁵

Actions Being Taken to Correct the Kansas Monument

While it has been many years since the Kansas Historical Society relinquished the claim to Pike's Pawnee village, until recently the monument remained unaltered and no exhibits inside the museum explained that historical and archaeological evidence all seemed to support the claim of the Nebraska site. During the early 1990s, however, the exhibits at the museum were redesigned and now indicate a more historically accurate view of the Kansas Monument Site's importance. The exhibit on white contact with the Pawnee now contains this text:

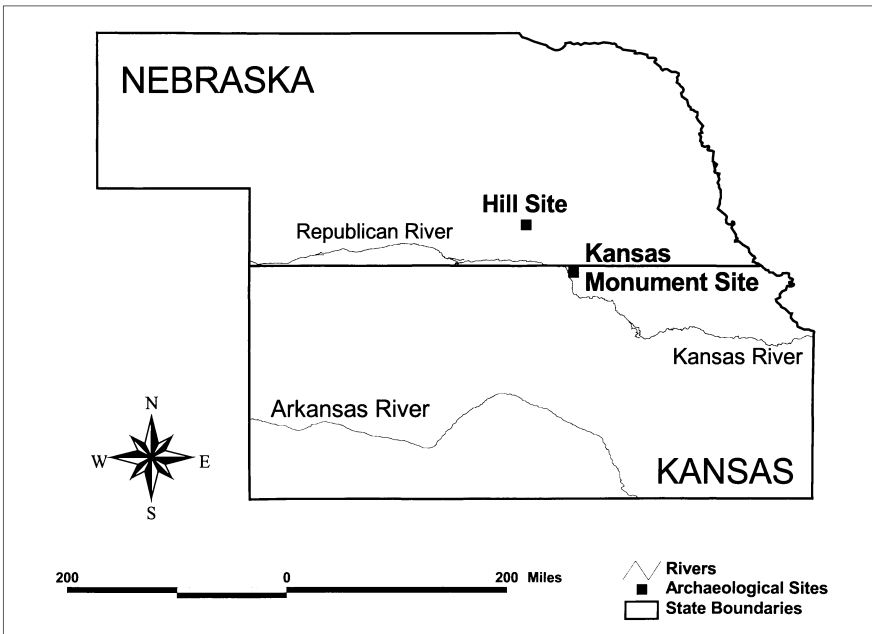
Much information about the early years of Pawnee contact with the Americans remains hidden from the historical record. Until rather recently most scholars thought that Lieut. Zebulon Pike and his party of American explorers had stayed in this Republican Pawnee village during their trip across the Louisiana territory in 1806. In fact, the site was called "Pike's Pawnee Village" for many years. Now there is evidence from historical documents and from archaeological discoveries that he actually visited a village just north of the present Kansas-Nebraska state line.¹⁶

¹⁴ Hill, p. 163-166; Taylor, p. 164-165.

¹⁵ Morehouse, p. 226-254; Munday, p. 168-192; Taylor, 164-168; Wedel, p. 33-36; Ricky L. Roberts, *Archaeology of the Kansas Monument Site: A Study in Historical Archaeology on the Great Plains*, Master's Thesis, University of Kansas, October 1978, p. 4-7.

¹⁶ Richard Gould, Site Curator, Pawnee Indian Village State Historic Site, personal communication, 6 August 1997; "White Contact", exhibit case #9, Pawnee Indian Village State Historic Site, from the files of the Pawnee Indian Village State Historic Site.

The Historical Society plans to place a new sign explaining this historical opinion next to the monument during reconstruction of the surrounding sidewalk and fence. However, redesigned exhibits and a new sign are unlikely to completely erase the legend of the Pike-Pawnee flag incident as a piece of Kansas history. While the vexillological history of the incident has not been completely cleared up, it is certain that this legend has in fact been beneficial to the historical record of Kansas as a whole. Because of its almost sacred stature as Pike's Pawnee village, the village site in Kansas has been preserved and has provided historians and archaeologists with valuable information on the early history of the state. It is the only preserved Pawnee village in the central plains. The village in Nebraska, while now believed to be the site of the flag incident, has long since been tilled and farmed, destroying valuable evidence about its history. When the final chapter is written on this vexillological event, historians will likely consider the perseverance of the legend a worthwhile price to pay for the preservation of the remains of the village.¹⁷



Map of Kansas and Nebraska showing the relative locations of both archaeological sites. Developed in the ASU Libraries' Map Collection with ArcView using data from ESRI and the USGS.

¹⁷ Richard Gould, Site Curator, Pawnee Indian Village State Historic Site, personal communication, 24 September 1997 and 25 February 1999; Dr. Ramon Powers, Executive Director of the Kansas State Historical Society, "Presentation at the Rededication of the Pawnee Indian Village Marker in Republican County, September 21, 1996," from the files of the Pawnee Indian Village State Historic Site; Thomas A. Witty, "The Pawnee Indian Village Museum Project," *Kansas Anthropological Association Newsletter* 13 #5 (January 1968): 2.