

Museum Notes

for the week of April 24 – 30, 2022

by Kristen Parrott, curator

An old stone marker by Battle Island, along the Mississippi River near Victory, tells three local history stories. Last month we looked at one of those stories, about Nora Spaulding saving a train in 1904. That history is carved at the bottom of the marker. At the top of the marker is a reminder that the Black Hawk War ended nearby in August 1832, a tragic history that we have also covered here in this column in the past.

But in the middle of the marker, with the fewest words, is a third story: “Major Zebulon M. Pike encamped on this island on Sept. 9th, 1805.” This is a water story, which ties in with the travelling exhibit, “Great Lakes Small Streams: How Water Shapes Wisconsin”, that will be at the museum in May.

President Thomas Jefferson negotiated the purchase of what was called the Louisiana Territory, which included the Mississippi River, in 1803. The Lewis and Clark expedition of 1804-6 explored some of this territory. The Zebulon Pike expedition of 1805-6 explored another part, that of the Upper Mississippi River.

Pike travelled from St. Louis, Missouri, up the Mississippi to locate the source of the river for the U.S. Army. He left on August 9, 1805, with one sergeant, two corporals, and 17 privates in a 70-foot keel boat. He was ordered to take notes on “rivers, creeks, highlands, prairies, islands, rapids, shoals, mines, quarries, timber, water, soil, Indian villages, and settlements”.

In 1810, several years after the expedition was over, Pike published his notes in a book entitled, *An Account of Expeditions to the Sources of the Mississippi, and through the Western Parts of Louisiana*, etc. This book can be read online at the Wisconsin Historical Society’s website, wisconsinhistory.org, in the “American Journeys” section. There you can read what Pike did on September 9, 1805, when he “came on to an island on the east side, about five miles below the river Iowa, and encamped.”

This is the day that Dr. C.V. Porter commemorated in stone in 1930. The stone marker is one of several in southwestern Vernon County along the end of the Black Hawk Trail. This marker is in Blackhawk Park, off Highway 35, and will be a little hard to get to this season due to road construction, but the next time you are there, remember Zebulon Pike and his Mississippi River journey.

You can learn much more about water at the upcoming exhibit, “Great Lakes Small Streams: How Water Shapes Wisconsin”. This travelling exhibit from the Wisconsin Historical Society will be at the Vernon County Museum from Monday, May 2, through Friday, May 27. It will be set up in the museum’s first-floor, wheelchair-accessible conference room, and will be available during the museum’s regular public hours of Monday through Friday, noon to 4PM, or by appointment.

On Tuesday, May 3, we’ll celebrate the opening of this special exhibit with a party at the museum from 7 to 9PM. Refreshments will include cookies and coffee and, of course, water. All of the museum’s exhibits will be open, including the new water exhibit. Everyone is welcome to attend.