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PIKE'S PEAK

Early ascents that put Pikes Peak on the map

by Wesley A. Brown

In late 1806, Lieutenant Zebulon Montgomery Pike and 20 men travelled across the plains in a daring attempt to find the headwaters of the Arkansas River and thereby determine a western boundary of the recently expanded territory of the United States. Only three years earlier, the nation had purchased the enormous Louisiana Territory from France, adding 885,000 square miles to the young nation. Prior to 1806, no section of the mountains rising starkly above the eastern plains of the region that is now Colorado had ever

appeared on a map that still exists. Pike's bold expedition brought several of his men close to death and proved a diplomatic embarrassment when, later in the trip, Pike was captured by the Mexicans for trespassing on Spanish Territory. However, Pike's journey would add significantly to the knowledge of the Southwest by putting what is today's eastern Colorado on the map for the first time.

Before the group left the stockade near present-day Pueblo at 1 p.m. on 24th November 1806, Pike had estimated they would arrive at the

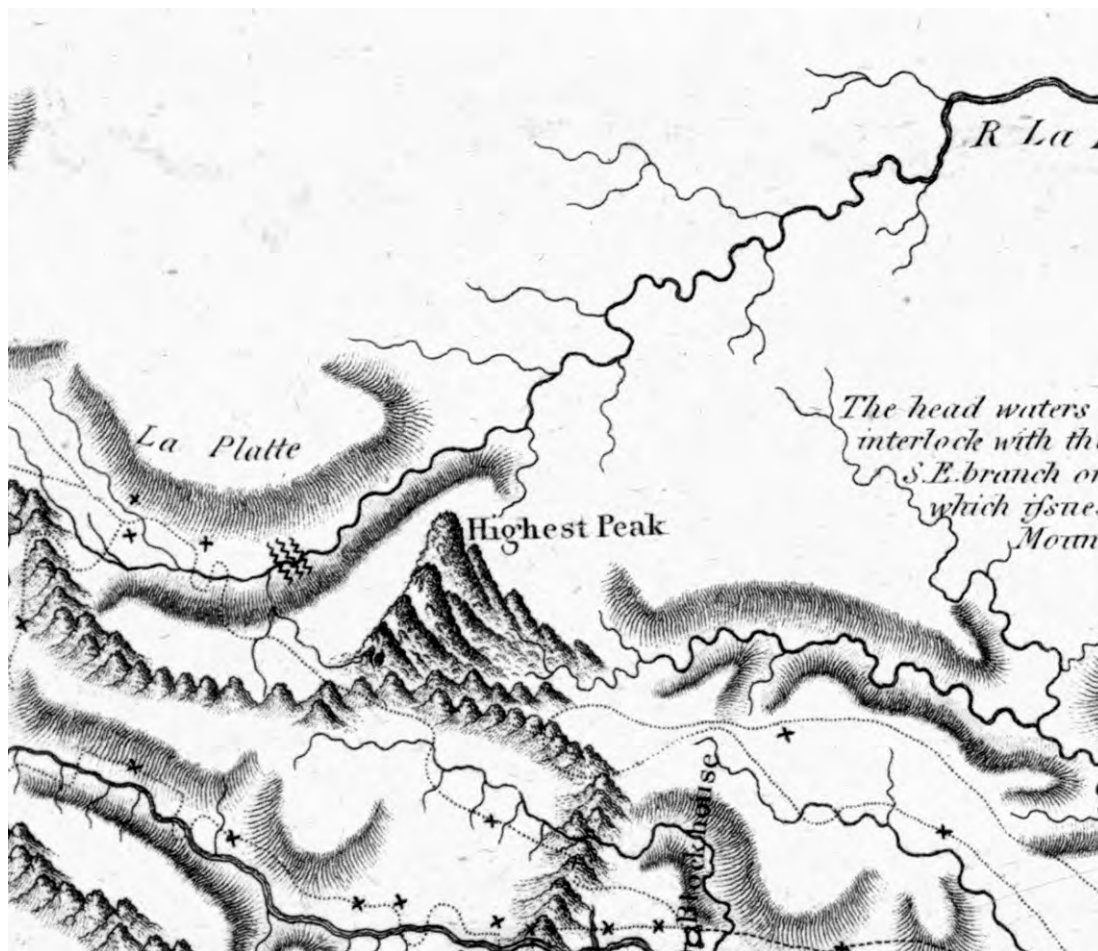


Fig. 1
A portion of Lieutenant Zebulon Pike's 1810 map, which shows 'Highest Peak' (Pikes Peak). Courtesy of Wesley A. Brown.



summit the following afternoon. Unfortunately, expecting to return to camp the next evening, the party left their blankets behind. After they had hiked for three days, Pike wrote on the morning of 27th November: "Arose hungry, dry, and extremely sore, from the inequality of the rocks, on which we had lain all night."¹ Later that day they found themselves waist-deep in snow, with temperatures dropping to 4° below zero. Still 15 miles from the summit, Pike decided to turn back, speculating that "no human being could have ascended to its pinnacle."² His decision was based on "the condition of my soldiers who had only light [cotton] overalls on, [moccasins] and no stockings, and every way ill provided to endure the inclemency of the region."³ So ended the first recorded attempt to climb one of Colorado's famed "fourteeners." Pike's map (see Figure 1) is the first to illustrate the grand mountain designated "Highest Peak." This map accompanied the expedition's official report published in 1810.

Twelve years later, in 1819, Dr. John Robinson named the peak after Lieutenant Pike. Robinson, a member of Pike's expedition, and one of Pike's three companions to attempt the climb, considered Pike a friend and sought to honour him after he had died in the War of 1812. The label on the map (see Figure 2) stated "Pikes Mountain 10,851 feet above its Base." Dr. Robinson and Pike had incorrectly estimated the mountain's altitude. Much to the relief of modern hikers, Pikes Peak only rises approximately 8,100 feet above its base at Colorado Springs. Robinson's giant map of the West, today a valuable rarity, had modest circulation after publication in 1819, and its influence at the time was limited.

The next expedition to the region was that of Major Stephen H. Long, who was conducting a 'scientific expedition' for the War Department's new Topographical Bureau. Exploring the South Platte River upstream, Long's men "were cheered by a distant view of the Rocky Mountains" on 30th June, 1820. "For some time we were unable to decide whether what we saw were mountains, or banks of cumulus clouds skirting the horizon."⁴ They soon spied a high peak, which they did not climb, but which was ultimately named Long's Peak for the Major. Long's men trekked south along the South Platte and Plum Creek. They crossed the Monument Divide, getting closer to the "Highest Peak" that Pike had described 14 years earlier, and established a camp in the area that became Colorado Springs. From this vantage point they carefully measured the peak's altitude, determining it was 11,500 feet above sea level.

Fig. 2 (above)
A portion of Dr. John Robinson's map showing Pikes Peak with its current name. Courtesy of Virginia Garrett Cartographic History Library, Special Collections, The University of Texas at Arlington Library, Arlington, Texas.



Fig. 3 (right)
Part of the map created in 1823 by Major Stephen Long. Note the name 'James' Peak' for Pikes Peak.

Dr. Edwin James, who served as the expedition's botanist, and two companions departed to assault the peak.

Leaving their horses at the boiling springs near present-day Manitou Springs, they soon encountered "loose and crumbled granite, rolling from under our feet, rendering the ascent extremely difficult. We began to credit the assertions of the guide, who had conducted us to the foot of the Peak; and left us with the assurance, that the whole of the mountain to its summit, was covered with loose sand and gravel, so that though many attempts had been made by the Indians and by hunters to ascend it, none had ever been successful."⁵ Nevertheless, at 4 p.m. the following day, the weary party arrived at the summit. After an hour, they descended, eventually reaching the timberline. "It has now become so dark, as to render an attempt to proceed extremely hazardous, and as the only alternative, we kindled a fire, and laid ourselves down on the first spot of level ground we could find. We had neither provisions nor blankets; and our clothing was by no means suitable for passing the night in so bleak and inhospitable a station.... By the aid of a good fire, and no ordinary degree of fatigue, we found ourselves able to sleep during a greater part of the night."⁶

In 1823, three years after the expedition, Long produced his map. On it he named the summit James Peak after the friend who had been the first to reach the top. (See Figure 3) In Long's words, "Dr. James having accomplished this difficult and hazardous task, I have thought proper to call the Peak after his name, as a compliment, to which his zeal and perseverance ... give him the fairest claim."⁷



Fig. 4
Part of the map created in 1836 by Lieutenant Enoch Steen to show the expedition of Colonel Henry Dodge naming Pikes Peak. Courtesy of Wesley A. Brown.

But Long's attempt to rename the mountain James Peak did not last. Pike's name was once again associated with the peak on the map produced in 1836 by Lieutenant Enoch Steen. (See Figure 4) This map chronicles the 1835 expedition of Colonel Henry Dodge, who led a company of U.S. Army dragoons across the western plains to the Front Range of today's Colorado. The mountain men, some of whom Dodge employed as guides, had continued to refer to the peak in Pike's honour, ignoring Long's suggestion of James Peak. From this point

Fig. 5
Map published in 1859 by Toledo, Wabash & Great Western Rail Road advertising the route to Pikes Peak gold region. By courtesy of Yale Collection of Western Americana, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library.

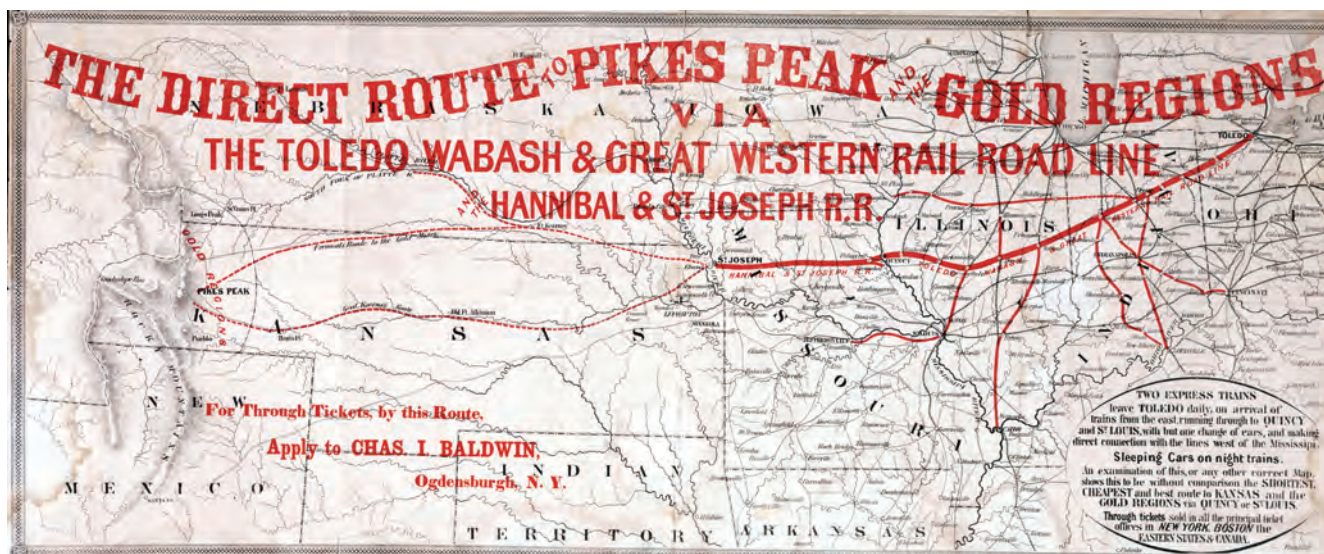




Fig. 6
Julia Archibald
Holmes who climbed
Pikes Peak in
August 1858 with
her husband John
Holmes. Courtesy of
the Western History
Department, Denver
Public Library.

onward, most maps would identify the grand mountain above Colorado Springs as Pikes Peak. Stephen Long's name would later be associated with his own "Highest Peak," first depicted on his map (Figure 3). In 1866, the name of James Peak was assigned to the prominent "thirteener" across from Winter Park Ski Area.

Pikes Peak would enter the national consciousness with the gold rush to the Front Range of Colorado. The area that was to become Denver had no permanent inhabitants in spring 1858, but by the close of 1859, about 100,000 people had come to the region in search of riches. Although most eventually returned to their eastern homes, thousands remained to build the city of Denver. Miners found 'ripe diggings' at the confluence of the South Platte and Cherry Creek, but prospectors at the eastern foot of Pikes Peak came up empty handed. Even so, the gold rush was named for Pikes Peak, at that time

the most famous landmark in the area. A rare map published by the Toledo, Wabash & Great Western Rail Road in 1859 advertised "The Direct Route to Pikes Peak and the Gold Regions." (See Figure 5)

Of all the rugged characters who figured in the early climbs of Pikes Peak, my favourite is a slender young woman. Modern climbers feel accomplished when they reach the summit of Pikes Peak from Manitou Springs, but Julia Archibald Holmes climbed the peak hiking from over 500 miles away in eastern Kansas! Hearing that gold might exist along the Front Range, John Holmes and his bride, Julia, were among the earliest travellers to the rough prairie reaches of what was then western Kansas. Mrs Holmes, a 20-year-old adventurer and ardent member of the woman suffrage movement, was one of the first non-Hispanic white women to enter what would become Colorado.

In her journal, Julia described their departure for the peak on 1st August 1858. "After an early breakfast this morning, my husband and I adjusted our packs to our backs and started for the ascent of Pike's Peak. My own pack weighed 17 pounds; nine of which was bread, the remainder a quilt and clothing."⁸ Beginning on the east side of what is today Colorado Springs, they planned on six days to climb the peak. For an intellectual companion, Julia carried a favourite volume of Ralph Waldo Emerson.

Arriving at the summit on 5th August, Holmes read some favourite passages by Emerson and finished a letter to her mother.

"I have accomplished the task which I have marked out for myself, and now I feel amply repaid for all my toil and fatigue. Nearly every one tried to discourage me from attempting it, but I believed that I should succeed; and now, here I am, and I feel that I would not have missed this glorious sight for anything at all. In all probability I am the first woman who has ever stood upon the summit of this mountain and gazed upon this wondrous scene, which my eyes now behold. How I sigh for the poet's power of description, so that I might give you some faint idea of the grandeur and beauty of this scene. Extending as far as the eye can reach, lie the great level plains, stretching out in all their verdure and beauty, while the winding of the great Arkansas is visible for many miles.... Then the rugged rocks all around, and the almost endless succession of mountains and rocks below, the broad blue sky over our heads, and seemingly so very near; all, and everything, on which the eye can rest, fills the mind with infinitude, and sends the soul to God."



Pikes Peak, climbed by the intrepid Julia Archibald Holmes in 1858.

Notes

1. Major Z. M. Pike, *An Account Of Expeditions To The Sources of the Mississippi, and Through the Western Parts of Louisiana ...* (Philadelphia: C. & A. Conrad, & Co., 1810), p. 168.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 169.
3. *Ibid.*
4. Edwin James, *Account of an Expedition from Pittsburg to the Rocky Mountains Under the Command of Major Stephen H. Long.* 2 vols. (Philadelphia: H. C. Carey and I. Lea, 1823), Vol. I, p. 489.
5. *Ibid.*, Vol. II, p. 25.
6. *Ibid.*, Vol. II, pp. 32 -33.
7. *Ibid.*, Vol. II, p. 45.
8. Agnes Wright Spring, editor, *A Bloomer Girl on Pike's Peak, 1858: Julia Archibald Holmes, First White Woman to Climb Pike's Peak.* (Denver: Denver Public Library, 1949), pp. 30-31.
9. *Ibid.*, p. 39.

he served as President and where he is still active in acquisitions for the institution's important western collections. He has published many papers on maps. Wes has been employed as an investment banker for 29 years specializing in arranging financings and mergers for banks.

He has been a mountain climber most of his life and has climbed about 400 different named peaks in Colorado.



The author, Wesley A. Brown in mountaineering gear.

Wesley Brown has been a collector, student, and author concerned with old maps for thirty years. He confines his map collecting to two areas (1) the earliest world maps up to the year 1540 and (2) the exploration and settlement of Colorado from the 16th through 20th centuries. A Denver resident, he co-founded the Rocky Mountain Map Society in 1990 and served as its President for its first seven years. He has served on the steering committee of the Philip Lee Phillips Society (the national map and geography society of the Library of Congress) for ten years including three years as Co-Chairman. He has served on the Council of the Society for the History of Discoveries. He has long been associated with the Denver Public Library, including eight years as one of its mayoral-appointed Commissioners where