



HELPING SHAPE AMERICA

Sgt. Patrick McLene Gass

This Month In NCO History: Aug. 20, 1804, An NCO Rises To Help Shape America

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The Lewis and Clark expedition is renowned as the venture that mapped what is now the western portion of the United States. What isn't well known is that an NCO was an integral part of the famed Corps of Discovery mission.

Sgt. Patrick McLene Gass almost wasn't part of the campaign led by Capt. Meriwether Lewis and 2nd Lt. William Clark from May 1804 to September 1806. Gass, who was born June 12, 1771, in present day Chambersburg, Pa., and joined the Army in 1799, was so adept as a craftsman that Capt. Russell Bissell, his commander at the Illinois Territory village of Kaskaskia, denied his request to join the exploring mission. Gass appealed to Lewis who eventually interceded, enlisting Gass as a private on Jan. 3, 1804.

Gass' military records indicate he was 33 years old during the expedition's first year, making him one of the elders among the group of 33 volunteers who set out across the continent. History paints him as a first-rate Soldier with excellent people skills. It's probably the reason he was promoted to sergeant Aug. 20, 1804, after the death of Sgt. Charles Floyd. The other men in

the group were allowed to elect Floyd's replacement, and they chose Gass with 19 votes.

In addition to his leadership ability, Gass proved to be an invaluable addition to the expedition as a carpenter. He oversaw construction of the group's winter quarters located in Camp Dubois, Ill., Fort Mandan, N.D., and Fort Clatsop, Ore. He applied his woodworking skills to the hewing of dugout canoes used to negotiate waterways in Idaho and Montana. Those same skills were used to modify the wagons to portage the canoes overland around a series of falls along the Missouri River.

On July 3, 1806, during the party's return from the Pacific, Lewis and Clark divided the group into three separate detachments. Gass was given command of the largest, and entrusted to lead them 18 miles around the Missouri River waterfalls. All three parties successfully rejoined near the mouth of the Yellowstone River and made the trek home, arriving in St. Louis on Sept. 23, 1806.

Gass kept a diary during the expedition, which was published in 1807. He is credited with coining the term "Corps of Discovery." The phrase used to

describe the group of volunteers was boldly scrawled on the journal's title page.

Gass remained in the Army after the Corps of Discovery returned. He served in the War of 1812. Legend has it he was escorted out of a recruiting station during the Civil War when, at age 91, Gass tried

to enlist to fight with the Union. At age 60, he married Maria Hamilton. The couple had seven children while living in Wellsburg, W. Va. Gass died there April 2, 1870, at age 98. At the time of his death, the nation had grown to 38 states, several of them in the very lands he was a vital part of mapping. ■



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