

Patrick Gass

June 12, 1771 (Falling Springs, PA) – Apr 2, 1870 (Wellsburg, WV)

THE ROCKIES CONSIST OF fifty-one unique mountain ranges. Of those fifty-one ranges, the Grand Teton range is the most spectacular. That's because the Tetons are the most youthful of America's mountains, a mere six or seven million years old with peaks and spires approaching 14,000-foot elevations, not yet blunted by the scourge of time.

But there is one peak if you can call it that, that will catch your eye. Not for its beauty or its awe-inspiring crest, but for the reason it has neither of those attributes. It stands out because it is a stunted, unattractive, ugly baby mountain surrounded by a host of tall, stately siblings.

It is a small, gray, broad-nosed mountain that appears like an unsure toddler, to have fallen on its side and then raised itself almost to a sitting position before giving up, and topping out at a strangely angled 8,405-foot elevation.

Now, tuck that mountain, a gimpy mountain with an attitude, in the back of your mind.

We'll come back to it later.

Patrick Gass was born to Ben and Mary Gass of Falling Springs, Pennsylvania. At the age of six, his parents gave him to his grandfather, ostensibly to educate the youngster. But, if Patrick's behavior was as strong-willed as a toddler as it was as an adult, Ben and Mary Gass may have found a way to make their own lives more comfortable.

In 1792, Gass, twenty-one, joined a Virginia militia and fought against the Indians on the western frontier of the colonies, near present-day Wheeling, West Virginia.

At twenty-three, he worked as a carpenter's apprentice, helping to build the home of a family named Buchanan. There he became acquainted with "Little Jimmy" who grew up to become President James Buchanan.

Patrick worked as a carpenter until 1799 when it looked as if the colonies would soon be at war with France, at which time he enlisted in the 10th Regiment under the command of General Alexander Hamilton.

When war with France was avoided, he was discharged, but the ever-restless Gass reenlisted in 1801 to join Captain Russell Bissell's company stationed on the distant edge of America's western frontier, Kaskaskia, Illinois, near St. Louis.

In 1803, Secretary of War Henry Dearborn asked Captain Bissell to furnish a couple of men by the names of Meriwether Lewis and William Clark, along with "one Sergeant and eight good men," to form the core of a unique project that would later become known as the Lewis and Clark Expedition.

Gass volunteered to join the special project, but Captain Bissell denied the request because of Gass's expert carpentry skills. Meriwether Lewis, however, pulled some strings in Washington, and Gass became one of the "eight good men."

A year later (1804), the expedition's sergeant, Charles Floyd, died unexpectedly. The military, run differently in those days, cast ballots, and the men elected Gass to replace Floyd.

Sergeant Gass kept a daily journal of the Lewis and Clark expedition, and although his writing was rough, it was detailed, and he became a valued and respected member of the team. Enough so that when both Lewis and Clark left on short exploratory excursions, Gass was left in charge, becoming the expedition's *de facto* leader.

When the expedition was over, Gass, with the help of schoolteacher David McKeehan (who turned Gass's journal into readable English), published an account of the Lewis and Clark Expedition a full seven years before Lewis and Clark published their memoir.

When Britain's harassment of American merchants brought about the War of 1812, Gass was among the first to enlist. During that time, he fought in several battles, including one that cost him an eye.

In 1814, he fought in Pittsburgh and Niagara to thwart a potential invasion from Canada.

In 1815, Gass, now forty-four, was discharged from the military, after which he tried to settle down and relax. But relaxing didn't agree with his lifestyle, so he worked on a ferry, then at a brewery, hunted stray horses, worked in a mill, and in his spare time, helped to build a Baptist church.

In 1829, at the age of fifty-eight, he moved in with a man named John Hamilton, the father of a twenty-year-old daughter named Maria, and old man Gass fell in love.

At sixty, Patrick Gass married twenty-two-year-old Maria Hamilton.

By 1846, and seventy-five years of age, Gass had fathered seven children, and then tragedy! Maria died of measles, leaving Gass to raise the children alone, a difficult task on his army pension of \$96 a year.

When the Civil War broke out in 1861, Gass, now ninety-one, tried to enlist to fight the rebels. He had to be physically removed from the recruiting station when he refused to leave.

On April 2, 1870, the last surviving member of the Lewis and Clark Expedition died when Patrick Gass, forty days shy of his 100th birthday, finally called it quits.

Think back now.

Do you remember the big gray broad-nosed mountain mentioned earlier? The ugly baby mountain in the middle of the towering Tetons that looks like it stumbled, fell, and raised itself partially to a sitting position before calling it quits?

Its official name today is Mount Patrick Gass.¹

Sometime between now and the end of your life, someone will see that mountain on their map of the Tetons, and ask, “Who, for crying out loud, was Patrick Gass?” Chances are good that you’ll be the only person for miles around, perhaps the only person in your town or state, to know the answer.

Make the most of the opportunity by impressing everyone with your astonishing well-read knowledge of the tough old man for whom Mt. Patrick Gass is named.

1. Mount Patrick Gass (Tetons) is not to be confused with Gass Peak in Nevada. A browser search of “Mount Patrick Gass” will turn up several excellent websites and views of the almost tipped-over mountain.

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Exploration is really the essence of the human spirit.

Frank Borman (1928–) astronaut