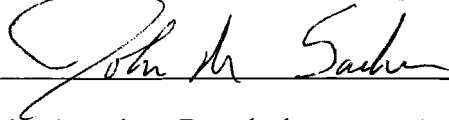


## AN ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS OF

Ethan A. Schmidt for the Master of Arts in American History presented on September 7, 2001.

Title: Wilderness Warrior: The Life of George Rogers Clark.

Abstract approved: \_\_\_\_\_



When asked about the American Revolution, most Americans relate images of philosophically enlightened leaders at the head of regular armies. The war that most Americans picture largely took place near the major urban centers of the east coast. Yet, a vicious guerrilla war often involving neighbors, brothers, women and children raged across the American frontier from the so-called “shot heard ‘round the world” in 1775 to the Peace of Paris in 1783 and beyond. Out of this conflict came several of the new nation’s early military heroes.

Certainly, George Rogers Clark was one of the foremost of such men. Born in Albemarle County, Virginia in 1752, he rose to fame as the most successful American commander in the Old Northwest Territory. Yet, despite his celebrity, George Rogers Clark quickly fell into disrepute after the revolution. In fact, his reputation plummeted so far that by the time he was thirty years old, his public image was all but ruined. This thesis will present a complete picture of George Rogers Clark and will spend considerable time analyzing his penchant for brutality and his expertise at psychological manipulation as well as his daring and courage. It will examine Clark’s faults as well as his successes and endeavor to unravel the confusion surrounding speculations about his romantic life and his rapid descent from hero to charity case. In short, the aim of this project is to present a scholarly biography of Clark the man, not a romantic myth of Clark

the hero. In a larger sense, by examining Clark this thesis will also present an overall picture of the harsh realities of frontier warfare and attempt to analyze its effects on the moral compass of those who participate in it.

Wilderness Warrior:  
The Life of George Rogers Clark

A Thesis

Submitted to

The Division of Social Sciences

Emporia State University

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts

by

Ethan A. Schmidt

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Thesis  
2001  
3

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In any work similar in scope to this one, there are many individuals, in addition to the author, who play an integral part in its production. This thesis is no different. First of all, the members of my thesis committee deserve special recognition. Dr. Ron McCoy has been a valuable participant in both my thesis committee and in my overall graduate education. Dr. Karen Manners-Smith has been involved in this project since its inception as an independent research project in the summer of 2000. Her efforts in critiquing those first chapters produced that summer cannot be underestimated. My thesis director, Dr. John Sacher, while serving in that capacity for the first time in his young career, has been an invaluable mentor and sounding board for me in this process. I am eternally grateful to all three of these individuals for their expertise, dedication and caring.

I am also deeply indebted to the staffs of the Missouri State Historical Society, Wisconsin State Archives, Watson Library at the University of Kansas and William Allen White Library at Emporia State University. In particular, I wish to thank Steve Hanschu for his help in obtaining materials through Interlibrary Loan. I would also like to thank my uncle, Layne Pierce for donating his library skills on occasion to help me locate resources.

I would like to thank all of my past teachers in general and two in particular. Faie Frederickson first kindled a spark of intellectual curiosity in me when I was in the fourth grade, and it has burned ever since. Dr. Christopher Phillips did more than anyone to fuel that tiny spark into the fire it has become. I will never forget his many contributions to my career and life.

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Susie Schmidt for raising me to believe in myself, and for allowing me to explore my thoughts and feelings at an early age. I would also like to tell my wife/research assistant how much I appreciate her support and love as I continue along the path I have chosen. Were it not for her love and encouragement, this work would not have been possible.

## PREFACE

I first became aware of George Rogers Clark in 1994 while I was still in high school. I encountered him while watching a documentary series on the Arts and Entertainment network about the American Revolution. At that time, I considered myself quite the expert on the struggle for independence. So I was very surprised when the documentary spent ten minutes (out of six hours) discussing a general I had never heard of, who operated in an area I did not realize was inhabited during the revolution. That general of course was George Rogers Clark, and the area was the Illinois Country. As the documentary recounted the story of his epic starvation march to retake the post of Vincennes, in present-day Indiana, I grew more and more fascinated with Clark.

As I began my work toward a Master of Arts in History in the winter of 1999-2000, that fascination with Clark resurfaced. In the intervening six years, I had learned that I was not the only one who had never heard of him. I then began to think that he might be a credible subject for a thesis. As I examined the topic further, I discovered that contemporary historians had largely forgotten him as well. The last biography of Clark, Lowell H. Harrison's *George Rogers Clark and the War in the West*, was published in 1974. Since its aim was simply to highlight Clark's wartime service, it offered little or no insight into his early life and his post-war years and therefore consisted of a little more than one hundred pages. The only full-scale biographies of Clark, James Alton James's *The Life of George Rogers Clark* and John Bakeless's *Background to Glory: The Life of George Rogers Clark*, were published in 1928 and 1957 respectively. With this in mind, I decided that the topic of George Rogers Clark deserved a re-evaluation.

The aim of this work is to present a well rounded and therefore, much more human picture of George Rogers Clark. While many of Clark's exploits were certainly heroic, there is much more to him than has made it into the pages of history. Past historians dismissed his penchant for brutality and psychological manipulation in favor of a more benign portrayal of the man known to his enemies and friends as "The Long Knife." Yet, to emphasize only Clark's positive attributes and contributions (of which there are many) constitutes a disservice to those who seek the full picture of America's beginnings. George Rogers Clark the man, as opposed to George Rogers Clark the hero, existed in a world where the line between wrong and right often blurred into the line between winner and loser. George Rogers Clark was a true wilderness warrior. He lived and fought in a place radically different from the eastern side of the Appalachians. Frontier inhabitants, ate, drank, dressed, loved, and fought differently from their contemporaries in the east. In a larger sense, this thesis deals with those differences via the use of Clark as the epitome of the frontier fighter.

Chapters one and two compose a general introduction to Clark and recount his exploits up to the eve of the American Revolution. The next four chapters focus on his successful invasion of the Illinois Country in 1778 and 1779, which represents the pinnacle of his life. Chapters seven, eight and nine detail the deterioration of his career and reputation toward the close of the conflict, while chapter ten centers around his final descent into bitterness and alcoholism. While this thesis is by no means intended to be the final word on George Rogers Clark, it is the hope of this author that it will contribute in some way to our understanding of Clark and to the American Revolution on the frontier.

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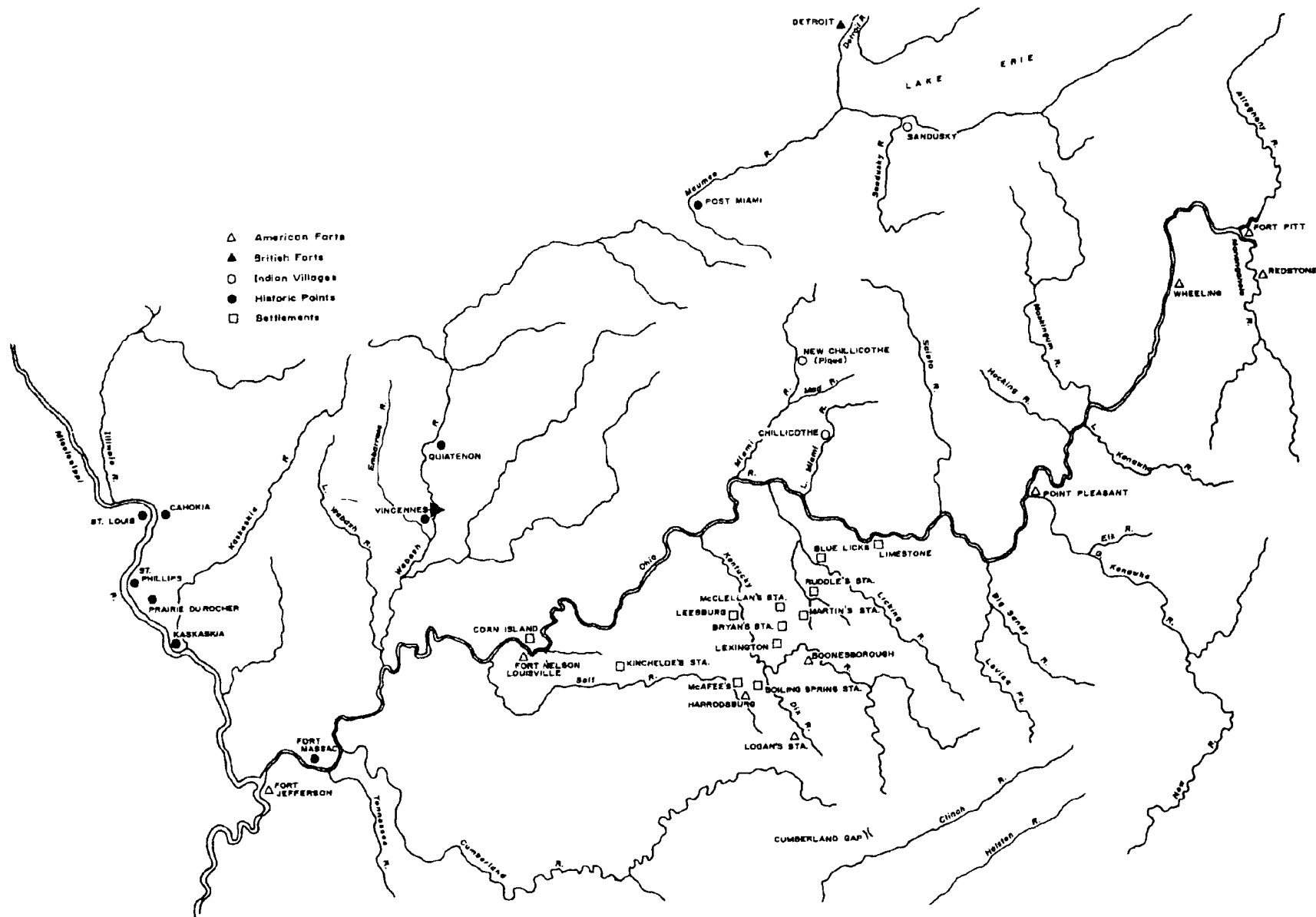
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# The West During the American Revolution



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## **Chapter I**

### **Introduction**

On a winter day in January of 1778, a twenty-five year old, red-headed giant of a Virginian set out from Williamsburg for Redstone on the Ohio River. He was about to embark upon a mission so secret and vital to the fledgling United States that Virginia Governor Patrick Henry had dispatched him with two separate sets of instructions. Fresh off the overwhelming victory over the British at Saratoga, American military and political leaders like Governor Henry were awash in a new wave of self-confidence. One set of instructions issued to the newly appointed Lieutenant Colonel was for public discussion while the other contained the true nature and scope of the expedition the young man was to command. Henry had ordered him to the farthest reaches of the new nation. From there, he would return in little more than a year as one of its most successful battlefield commanders.<sup>1</sup> The young man was George Rogers Clark. At just the same time many soldiers in the Continental Army were suffering the ultimate sacrifice at Valley Forge, Clark was happily anticipating the thought of the great service he planned to do his country.<sup>2</sup>

In just over one year, from January of 1778 to February of 1779, George Rogers Clark captured three critical British frontier outposts and led his men on an epic winter starvation march to retake one of them after the British had recaptured it. Along the way, he negotiated with several Indian tribes and maintained American friendship along the border with the Spanish. He is also widely credited with securing what was at the time the American frontier for the young nation. His exploits in the territory that now encompasses parts of the states of Illinois, Indiana, Kentucky, and Ohio are the stuff of legend. However, there is much more (both heroic and not so heroic) to George Rogers

Clark and his Illinois campaign of the late 1770's than has managed to make it into the mainstream annals of history.

The earliest attempt at a Clark biography was the work of former Wisconsin State Historical Society Executive Lyman Draper in the latter half of the nineteenth century. Draper spent most of his life collecting sources related to the frontier experience during the American Revolution and took a particular interest in George Rogers Clark. Draper however, died before he finished *The Life and Times of George Rogers Clark*. While the unfinished manuscript is valuable source material insofar as it is a repository for Draper's massive research effort, its analysis of Clark must be interpreted in light of Draper's admitted hero worship of his subject. In a letter he wrote to a member of the Clark family, Draper expressed "feelings akin to filial love—nay almost adoration itself," for Clark. Draper's work holds value far beyond its incomplete biography of Clark. In dedicating the latter part of his life to the study of the American Revolution in the frontier country, he left behind an enormous body of interviews, notes, manuscripts and original documents which constitute the largest share of evidence on which all other studies of George Rogers Clark are based.

Subsequent historians have presented Clark in much the same fashion as Draper. They have depicted him as an almost mythical hero capable of no wrong and spurred on by only the most virtuous of motives. Most of the books dealing with Clark or the war in the Illinois country have characterized him as a man dedicated above all else to his mission. Historians have rarely presented the human side of George Rogers Clark, and consequently it is hard to find mention of any occasion when he was in doubt or mistaken. The only notable attempt to present a complex Clark crossed over into the

realm of pure speculation. John Bakeless' *Background to Glory: The Life of George Rogers Clark*, which is now nearly forty-five years old, was the last full-scale biography of Clark. In it, the author proposes the idea of an alleged courtship between Clark and Theresa De Leyba, daughter of Francisco De Leyba, the Spanish Governor at St. Louis. Bakeless wrote of the relationship as if it were fact, yet there is no evidence to support such a claim. Bakeless did attempt to present Clark as something other than the perfect soldier however, and he should be given credit for the effort. Despite Bakeless's best efforts, his Clark (like the Clark of all of the early biographies) had an answer for every situation his men found themselves in. He was immune to fear, bullets, rage, emotion and ambition.<sup>3</sup>

The first scholarly biography of Clark, James Alton James's *The Life of George Rogers Clark*, refrains from such sweeping speculation regarding the details of Clark's personal life. Written in 1928, it is very much a product of its times. James's work abounds with stereotype upon stereotype regarding Native Americans and the French inhabitants of the Illinois Country, while painting Clark in only the most heroic of terms.

The entire responsibility for this treatment of Clark does not belong solely to historians. Some of it belongs to Clark himself. He was a man who was two hundred years ahead of his time when it came to public relations and psychological warfare. Clark understood very well, (although he seems to have forgotten it later in life) that perception is a very powerful thing. He was a master of the art of influencing others' perceptions of himself in such a way as to advance his cause. If he could convince his men that they and he were invincible, then they were. If he could persuade his enemies that he outgunned, outmanned, and outsmarted them, then he did. Time and time again,

Clark convinced his enemies that his troop strength was as much as ten times greater than it was. He inspired confidence in his fellow officers and citizens with his calculated demonstrations of bravado. In addition, he subdued many would-be enemies by first presenting himself to them as a cruel authoritarian conqueror, and then a few days or hours later as a merciful and benevolent leader. It is likely that Clark employed the same strategies when writing the dispatches and diaries he had to have known would somehow find their way into the pages of the Revolutionary story, or at the very least make their way to his contemporaries. In November of 1779, Clark included a long and detailed account of his campaign in the Illinois Country in a letter to George Mason. Though the letter was likely not meant for public perusal, it found its way into several histories of the war published in the nineteenth century. In one passage from the letter, Clark discussed his attitude toward accepting command of troops in the west:

I had just Reasons known to few but myself that occasioned [*sic*] me to resolve not to have any farther Command whatever . . . I must confess that I think myself often to blame for not making use of interest for my promotion, but to merit it first is such a fixed principal with me that I never could, and I hope never shall ask for a Post of Honour, as I think the Publick ought to be the best Judge whether a Person deserves it or not, if he did he would certainly be Rewarded according to the Virtue they had.<sup>4</sup>

While it is comforting for Americans to believe in the virtuous public spirit of their Revolutionaries, Clark's claim to non-interest in a commission is most likely disingenuous. Clark was not only interested in this battlefield command, he had been positioning himself for it for months. The Clark that is evident in his accounts of his exploits and the accounts of those who witnessed them left nothing to chance. He exerted his dominant control over every situation in which he found himself. He felt it his duty to command men in the Revolution, and he most certainly would not have said the opposite

unless he was sure it would endear him to his superiors. It seems probable that the statement quoted above (written long after he had been granted a command) was calculated to show the proper level of disinterested public spirit required by someone of Clark's station. A true republican gentleman would not actively seek a post of honor, but certainly would not shy away from one either. Such a requirement of disinterest did allow for subtle hints. One can make the case that Clark's after-the-fact denial of his desire to command troops in the old Northwest sprang from the same source as Washington's wearing of his militia uniform to the Second Continental Congress, yet publicly denying his interest in the command of the Continental Army.

George Rogers Clark was certainly no different from his fellow Virginian in respect to diffidence. There is no doubt that Clark wanted the command of the expedition against the frontier posts of the Northwest. He and John Gabriel Jones had been sent to Williamsburg in 1776 with a broad set of instructions to represent the citizens of West Fincastle County to the House of Burgesses. The settlers of Virginia's frontier region were in their own words "desirous of contributing to the utmost of their power to the support of the present laudable cause of American Freedom . . ." <sup>5</sup> With this charge in mind, Clark "immediately Resolved to Encourage an Expedition to the Illinois." It seems only logical that he would expect to take some great part in it. <sup>6</sup>

Therefore, it is safe to say that, at least in this instance George Rogers Clark was not nearly so self-effacing as he claimed to be. This discovery is hardly earth shattering news considering that historians have recently debunked the images of other American revolutionaries. However, just because Clark almost certainly coveted the command of troops in the Virginia backcountry does not mean that he was any less of a soldier or

historical figure. In fact, it means just the opposite. His obvious desire for battlefield glory, combined with several other like exploits, gives us a picture of George Rogers Clark the man. George Rogers Clark was a great soldier and a hero of the American Revolution. Like so many of our national heroes, though, he was also a human being subject to humanity's inherent imperfections and idiosyncrasies. As such, George Rogers Clark was the epitome of frontier America-rough, brutal, and violent. He was a direct reflection of the frontier that shaped him. Life in frontier Kentucky (then a county of Virginia) was, to borrow a phrase from the English philosopher Thomas Hobbes, "nasty, brutish, and short."<sup>7</sup> The successful frontier citizen overcame battles with disease, various Native American tribes, other ethnic groups, wild animals, government, treacherous terrain, and weather. Their culture and way of life naturally reflected their responses to those challenges. Away from the gentility of society along the eastern seaboard, frontier residents differed from their fellow colonists in eating habits, modes of dress, alcohol consumption, leisure time activities, and, most important of all, their methods of warfare.

In battle, wilderness warriors often visited their wrath upon women and children as well as men. Typical frontier fighters rarely wore uniforms, other than the clothes of ordinary citizens, and more often than not used guerrilla tactics rather than meeting an enemy in the open field. A common myth of frontier warfare is that only Indians committed acts that today's society considers atrocities. That is simply not true. Wilderness warriors, both Indian and white, killed women and children, burnt villages, kidnapped, scalped, tomahawked, and otherwise tortured prisoners. They generally relied upon the fear that these acts created to deter further aggression by their enemies. George Rogers Clark, rather than being the exception, typifies this frontier style of war. He was

a violent man because he existed in a violent society. His treatment of enemies fell directly in line with the treatment he expected from them.

Because historians have conditioned Americans to believe no ill of their Revolutionaries, some of Clark's exploits may seem shocking to the average reader. These patriots are viewed not as men but demi-gods, and there are no massacres like My Lai in our collective memory of the Revolution. Our society clings to the idea that no eighteenth century American would ever callously kill prisoners of war in the middle of the street or lie to his men about their orders. Yet George Rogers Clark did both of these things, and Patrick Henry, then governor of Virginia, lied to the Virginia legislature about the true nature of Clark's expedition. Only through an open discussion of these episodes can we see the complete picture of George Rogers Clark and by extension, the complete picture of war on the early American frontier.

Yet, Clark's story does not end with the American Revolution, although for his sake, it might have been better if it had. From the zenith of his triumphs and power during the Revolution, the latter forty years of Clark's life were a steady descent into private and public ruin. Based upon his battlefield successes and his obvious talent for manipulating almost any situation to his favor, Clark should have achieved a place in post-war society akin to that of the other great battlefield heroes like the Marquis de Lafayette and General Nathanael Greene. Instead, Clark spent much of the rest of his life penniless and in constant danger from creditors. The denials of his claims for redress of debts incurred while serving in the Illinois Country by both the federal government and Virginia only served to embitter him and hasten his rapid decline into the depths of alcoholism from which he never recovered. Upon learning of this tragic ending, one is



apt to wonder how this could happen to a man who seemingly exerted infinite control over every facet of his world. In all fairness, the fault does not lie just with Clark. After the war, many other ambitious men coveted the laurels and posts he received. In particular, James Wilkinson, a nefarious, if only recently unmasked traitor to the United States, came to particularly despise Clark and endeavored to discredit him.<sup>8</sup> In addition, the governments of the United States and Virginia in refusing to reimburse Clark for the enormous amount of supplies he had signed for on his own personal credit while in their service must also share the blame.

After studying the George Rogers Clark of 1777-1781, one is still left wondering why a man as resourceful and savvy as he could not have overcome these difficulties as he had overcome countless others. In his element, i.e. frontier warfare, Clark was confident, calculating and well aware of the power of perception. Conversely, in peacetime he seemed to forget the lessons that years of frontier warfare had taught him. He became docile and ignored the fact that he had allowed his enemies to color the rest of the world's perception of him. Instead of taking swift action to head off the personal calamity that awaited him, action he would not have hesitated to take had he been fighting a frontier instead of a propaganda war, he allowed his critics to defile and thus define him.

This particular part of Clark's story, while not nearly so heroic, is just as important as his deeds during the American Revolution. Yet, in all of the scholarly works dealing with his life, it is merely a postscript. Apparently, authors like James and Bakeless believed that to devote too much time to such a sad chapter would defeat their efforts to tell the story of "Clark, the conquering hero." In that respect, they were right.

The whole story of “Clark, the human being,” however, also deserves telling, and it begins with the beginning of the American story.

## Notes to Chapter I

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<sup>1</sup> George Rogers Clark, *Campaign in the Illinois* (Cincinnati: Robert Clarke and CO., 1869), 24; Kathrine Wagner Seineke, *The George Rogers Clark Adventure in the Illinois and Selected Documents of The American Revolution at the Frontier Posts* (New Orleans: Polyanthos, 1981), 3.

<sup>2</sup> James L. Stokesbury, *A Short History of the American Revolution* (New York: William Morrow and Co., 1991), 174-75.

<sup>3</sup> Indiana Historical Bureau Website, <http://www.state.lib.in.us/www/ihb/sackbib.html>; John Bakeless, *Background to Glory: The Life of George Rogers Clark* (Philadelphia: J.B. Lippincott Company, 1957),

<sup>4</sup> Clark, *Campaign in the Illinois*, 21-22.

<sup>5</sup> Petition of the Inhabitants of Kentucky to the Assembly of Virginia, 20 June, 1776, in *The George Rogers Clark Adventure in the Illinois and Selected Documents of the American Revolution at the Frontier Posts*, ed. Kathrine Wagner Seineke (New Orleans: Polyanthos, 1981), 305.

<sup>6</sup> Clark, *Campaign in the Illinois*, 22.

<sup>7</sup> Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, Chapter 13, Available on-line at <http://www.knuten.liu.se/~bjoch509/works/hobbes/leviathan.txt>.

<sup>8</sup> L. Edward Purcell, *Who was Who in the American Revolution*, (New York: Facts on File, 1993), 509-10.

## Chapter II Beginnings

George Rogers Clark's American roots ran remarkably deep considering the relatively short length of time that had passed since the European settlement of North America. As with most of the evidence from colonial America, sources are not clear as to when the Clark family came to Virginia. Even previous Clark biographers differ as to when the earliest Clark arrived. According to early authors like Lyman Draper and James Alton James, a Clark migrated from Scotland in the early seventeenth century. Draper went so far as to provide particulars about this Scottish Clark. "The remotest ancestor of the Clark family, of whom we have any account, was John Clark, who emigrated from England about the year 1630, and settled on James River, Virginia, as a Tobacco planter."<sup>1</sup> However, Draper did not provide documentation for this claim. John Bakeless places the date of the family's establishment in America as the latter seventeenth century. Despite the discrepancies regarding the early lineage of the Clark family, (see figures 2.1 and 2.2), all of the sources converge around one Jonathan Clark in the early eighteenth century. According to Draper, Jonathan Clark married Elizabeth Wilson and settled in Drysdale Parish, King and Queen County, Virginia, in 1725. Their marriage ended with Jonathan's early death in 1734, but not before the two had witnessed the birth of four children, John, Ann, Benjamin and Elizabeth. Sometime during their marriage, Jonathan Clark either relocated the family westward to Albemarle County or intended to do so. According to James Alton James, upon Jonathan's death, his eldest son John inherited a 400-acre tract of land two miles east of Charlottesville on the Ravenna River.<sup>2</sup>

Figure 2.1-Clark Genealogy According to Lyman Draper and James Alton James

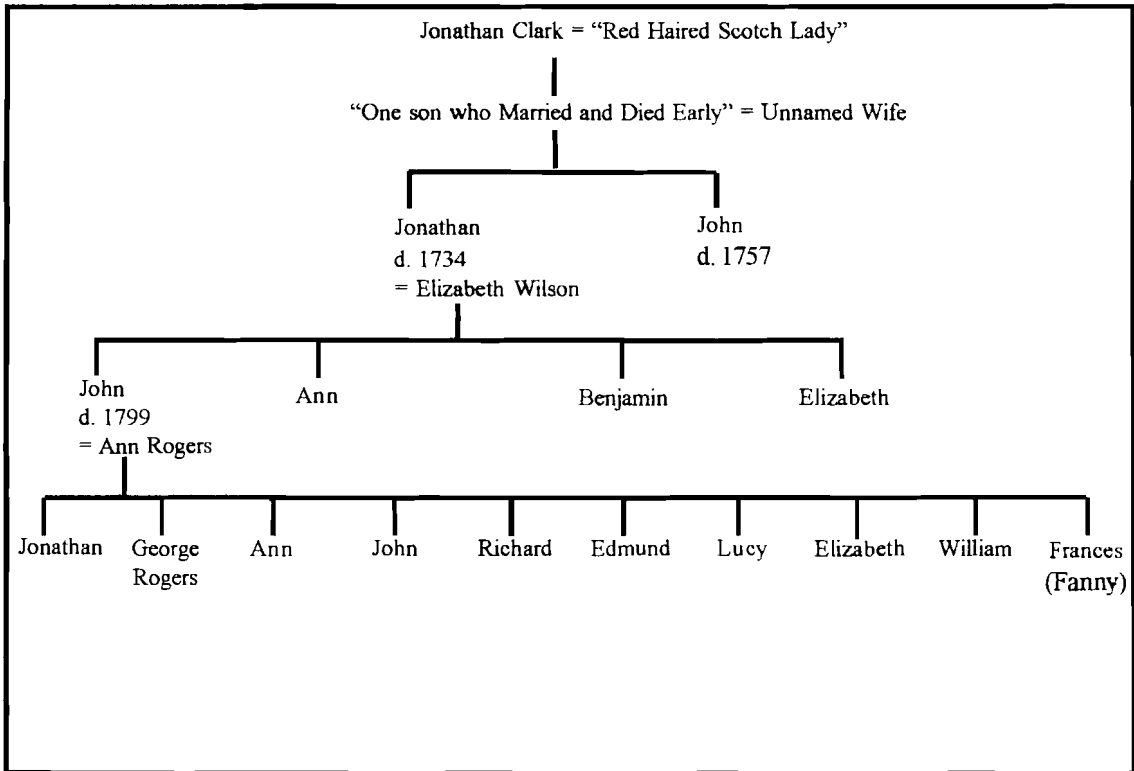
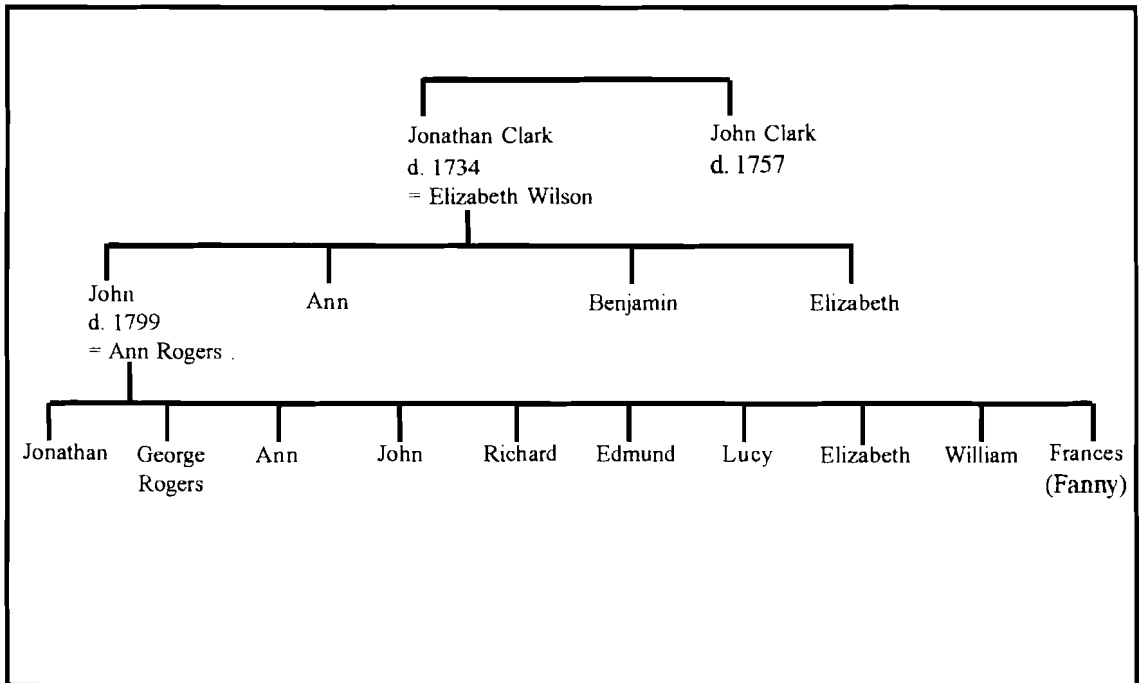


Figure 2.2-Portion of Clark Genealogy on Which All Sources Agree



This tract of land was located next to the one where, in 1743, Peter and Jane Jefferson welcomed their first son Thomas into the world.

John Clark was born in Drysdale Parish on October 9, 1726. According to his nephew Thomas Rogers, John Clark was, “a man of amiable excellent character, of sedate, thoughtful appearance, and not apt to say much in company . . .”<sup>3</sup> Little is known of his early life until 1749, when he married his fifteen-year-old second cousin, Ann Rogers. Their union not only stood the test of time, but also produced several children, almost all of whom played some part in the creation and expansion of the United States.<sup>4</sup>

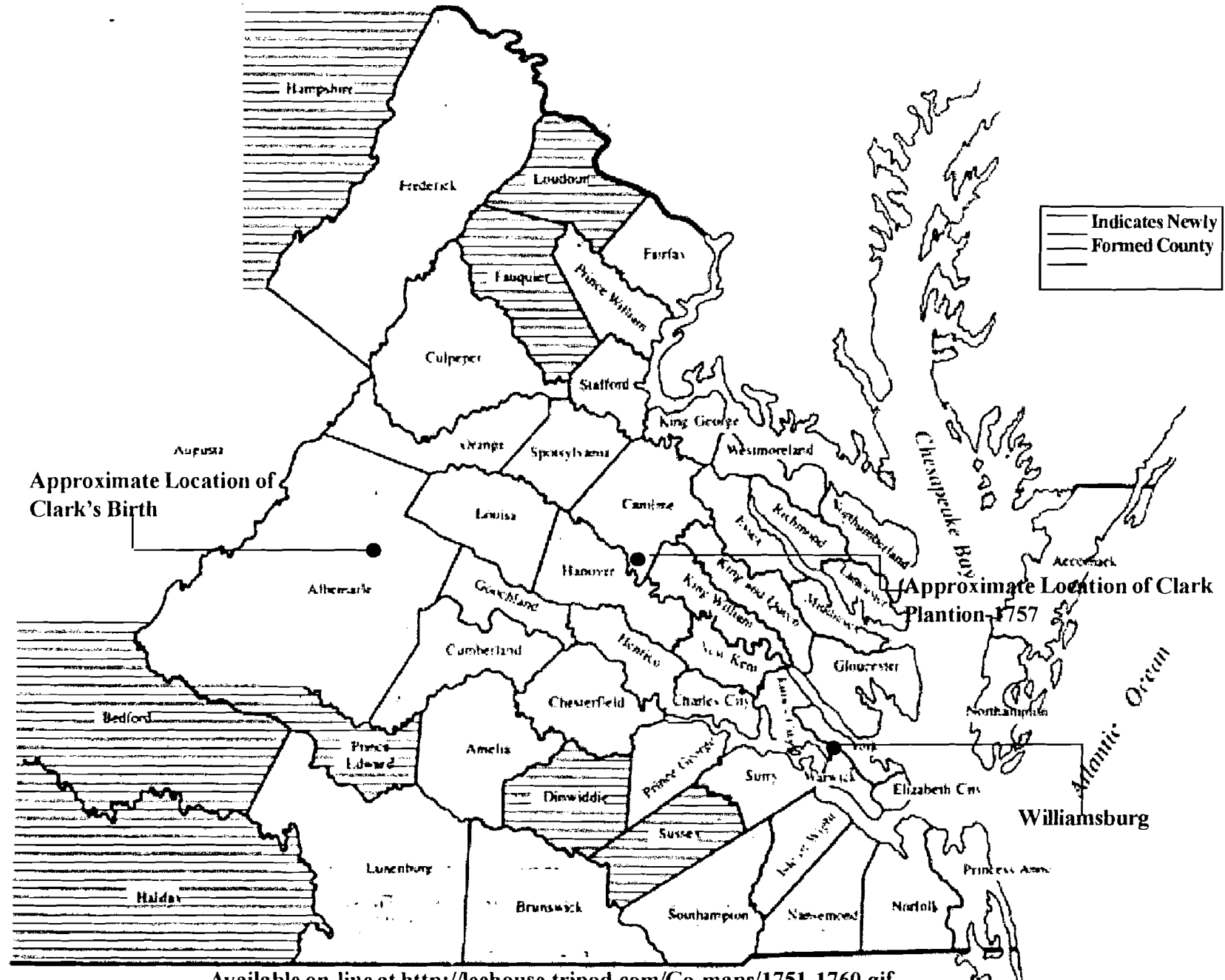
On November 19, 1752, John and Ann Clark’s second child and second son, George Rogers Clark was born. Over the next twenty years, Jonathan and Ann would add eight more children to the Clark family. In her later years, Ann Clark must have been an extremely proud mother. Five of her sons served as officers during the Revolution. According to one tradition, when a gentleman tried to console Mrs. Clark on her having sent five sons off to fight in the Revolutionary War, she replied that nothing could have made her happier. Additionally, her youngest son William became half of one of the most famous duos in American history when he accepted their former neighbor Thomas Jefferson’s invitation to join Meriwether Lewis in an expedition to the land beyond the Mississippi River.<sup>5</sup>

In 1757, John Clark’s uncle and namesake died having never married and leaving John as his only heir. As such, he inherited a farm in southwest Caroline County to which he immediately moved his growing family. In addition to John, Ann and their second son George was their eldest son Jonathan, a daughter Ann, and their youngest child, a boy named John. The farm to which they moved was located near the North

Anna River, the branch of the Pamunkey River that divides Hanover and Caroline Counties (see map on page 16). Here the Clark's six younger children, Richard, Edmund, Lucy, Elizabeth, William and Frances were born.<sup>6</sup> It was also here that young George Rogers Clark spent the majority of his formative years. Of his early boyhood, not much is known, but his younger years probably conformed to the typical picture of family life in planter society. He and his older brother Jonathan would almost certainly have been taught the techniques of tobacco agriculture and by the time they reached early adolescence, they would have worked alongside their father. There is no evidence that the Clark family owned slaves or indentured servants. Lyman Draper described the family cabin in Albemarle County as "rude," yet characterized the early Clark plantation as yielding, "a profusion of the substantial necessities of life." The Clarks probably belonged to the middling planter class of early Virginia. While they were by no means wealthy or leisured in the manner of the major planters of the tidewater area, they were certainly not poor. The family was actually rather well stocked for land thanks in large part to the surveying activities of Ann Clark's father and to John Clark's inheritance from his uncle.<sup>7</sup>

Planter society required that families educate their male children. Most middling planter families like the Clarks could not afford to send their children to one of the great universities in England or to hire private tutors. To gain access to classical learning for their offspring, they often turned to local country schools. John and Ann Clark were fortunate in that Ann's younger sister Rachel had married Donald Robertson, master of a boarding school near the Rogers family home in Drysdale Parish. When the two oldest Clark boys were entering their teenage years, sometime in the early to mid-1760's, their

# Virginia Counties 1751-1760



Available on-line at <http://leehouse.tripod.com/Co-maps/1751-1760.gif>  
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parents sent them to live with their maternal grandfather John Rogers in Drysdale Parish so they could attend their uncle's school.<sup>8</sup>

Donald Robertson was born in September of 1717 at Mar, near Inverness and educated in the college at Inverness and the University of Edinburgh. He emigrated from Scotland to the British Colonies in North America in 1752. Rachel Rogers was actually his second wife. His first wife died as Robertson was making plans to return to Scotland to bring her across the Atlantic. Shortly thereafter, near the banks of the Mattaponi River, he established his small school, which soon grew into a relatively well-renowned academy for young Virginia boys. According to Draper, "Such was the high reputation of its' founder for learning and integrity, that several of the young men who received their education at this school, rose to the highest stations of honor in the United States."<sup>9</sup> The most notable of such men was none other than future President James Madison. According to John Bakeless, the school, while relatively well esteemed in the colonies, was also affordable enough for families of modest means:

Boarding pupils paid £13 a year, not necessarily in hard cash, for Robertson's account book shows payments in brandy, wheat, cider and "Half-homony beans." The master's wife thriftily sewed trousers (1 shilling), shirts (two and six pence), and jackets (two and six), for her husband's pupils.<sup>10</sup>

Life at the school must have been somewhat restrictive for a boy who had spent the first fifteen years of his life in the backcountry of Albemarle County, or engaged in plantation work. By all accounts, Clark was at best an average student. As his future writings show, he certainly attained a firm grasp of language and description. However, when his writings are compared to documents left behind by his contemporaries, it is obvious that he was largely deficient in the area of spelling. Besides a fondness for reading, and aptitudes for geography, and mathematics, it soon must have become

apparent that Clark was not cut out for a classical education. Robertson's school emphasized the acquisition of Greek, Latin, French and Spanish. Judging by Clark's silence on these subjects in his writings and his reliance upon interpreters when dealing with the French and Spanish during his campaigns, it is safe to say that he did not take to them while at Robertson's school. According to two of his early biographers, Clark was actually sent home after eight months at Robertson's school as an educational lost cause. Both authors however, cite only family tradition, which if documented lies well hidden. No extant documents support this tradition regarding Clark's dismissal from the school. Whether he left school or not, Clark soon turned his educational pursuits almost solely in the direction of mathematics. More than likely, he decided at an early age to follow in the footsteps of his maternal grandfather, John Rogers and become a surveyor.

Early in the seventeenth century, John Rogers, while surveying the farthest reaches of Virginia, decided to make his home there. In 1712, he claimed western lands despite the misgivings of the inhabitants of the more settled regions of Virginia. They, according to Thomas Rogers, John Rogers's grandson and George Rogers Clark's cousin, "wondered what he wanted with land so far away in the wilderness, to which the settlements, they said, would never extend during his life. He lived however, as I have been informed till the country was settled as far back as Pittsburg."<sup>11</sup> It was at his grandfather's house on this very piece of land that George Rogers Clark and his older brother Jonathan came to live while they attended school. By that time, the boys' grandfather had been a surveyor for over fifty years.<sup>12</sup> It is likely that while they were there, John Rogers entertained his grandsons with stories of his days of exploration in the Virginia backcountry. Despite George's alleged failures at more classical subjects, he

became quite adept at mathematics, especially that involved in surveying. By the time he was nineteen years old, Clark had embarked upon a full-fledged surveying career.

During this period, he was away from home for varying lengths. More than likely, he was already heavily engaged in the profession. A letter to his brother Jonathan dated April 14, 1771, is believed to be the earliest surviving writing of Clark. In its text, it seems apparent that Clark was engaged in some sort undertaking that had taken him from home and would continue to do so for most of the immediate future:

Dear Brother

This is to let you know that I am well and hope this will find you so I intend to go home next Saturday and hope that you will be here as I shant have another oportunity until June . . . <sup>13</sup>

In another letter to Jonathan, dated January 9, 1773, Clark discussed his newly established homestead on the western frontier:

Dear Brother

I embrace ye oportunity by Mr Jarrot to let you know that I am in good health hoping that this find you in the same as to health I am settled on my land with great plenty of provisions, and drive on pretty well as to clearing hoping by this spring to get a full Crop I know nothing more worth acquainting you with but that this Cuntrey Setels very fast (and Corn is in some parts a 7/6 Pr Bushel but I have got great plenty) the people is a settling as low as ye Siotho River 366 Below Fort Pitt land Rais almost as Dear here as below I had an offer of a very considerrable sum for my place I get a good deal of cash by surveying on this River pray write to me by ye first oportunity after the receipt of this nothing more but your affectionate Brother . . . <sup>14</sup>

In the time between writing these letters, George Rogers Clark did a tremendous amount of growing up. Much of it seems to have happened on his first trip to the lands west of the Ohio River. In the summer of 1772, Clark made his first foray into the fertile Ohio country in the company of the Reverend David Jones, who was on a mission to the Indians of the Ohio River area. In his journal for June 9, 1772, Jones recorded, "left Fort Pitt in company with Mr. George Rogers Clark, and several others, who were disposed to

make a tour through this new world.”<sup>15</sup> From Fort Pitt, they traveled roughly seventy miles downstream by canoe without reaching a single settlement until they passed close to a town of Seneca Indians called Mingos. Clark and his party didn’t actually make contact with this group of Indians. Someone in his party had heard that this particular Mingo group was fond of stealing canoes so they avoided the town altogether. By June 13, the party had arrived at a creek known as Captina or Captain’s Creek. Although he did not know it at the time, this particular creek would come to play a role in George Rogers Clark’s future. It was here that he joined in the violence that touched off the conflict known as Lord Dunmore’s War, a little remembered war between the Native American groups of western Virginia and English colonists in 1774.

A few days later, the group arrived at the mouth of the Little Kanawha. Upon finding it too shallow for their canoes, the explorers decided to return to Captina Creek. On June 30, they arrived there and were met by a Delaware from a local village requesting a council with Reverend Jones. At once, Clark, Jones and the rest of the group set out on foot for the Delaware village. The journey proved an arduous one and Clark, while a hardy nineteen year old, had not yet developed the ironclad toughness he would display during the Revolution. According to Jones, who was also no sturdy adventurer, “The season was very warm; all except myself had loads to carry, so that on the 2d day of July with much fatigue, we arrived . . . faint, weak, weary and hungry—especially Mr. Clark and myself.”<sup>16</sup> Before they could enter the Delaware town however, a second messenger appeared with the news that the chief who wished to consult with Jones was at Fort Pitt and wanted to meet the reverend there. So, on July 14, over one month after

they started, Reverend Jones and his companions set out on the last leg of their journey back to Fort Pitt.<sup>17</sup>

Sometime after his return from the Jones expedition, George Rogers Clark established his first land claim near Wheeling (now in West Virginia). According to Jones' diary, the expedition had spent time there on their return to Fort Pitt, and it might have been then that Clark decided to plant himself there. One of his companions on the trip down the Ohio, James Higgins decided to settle there with him. John B. Roy, while on a similar trip in the company of Clark's father John, mentioned the claim in a letter to Jonathan Clark dated November 22, 1772:

. . . your Brother Geo & James Higgins we left keeping house about 130 miles below Pittsburg on a Bottom of fine land on the Ohio, which would be Valuable were it not for it being so Surrounded with mountains surpassing any thing you ever saw . . .<sup>18</sup>

In the spring of 1773, as tensions between Great Britain and her colonies were quickly approaching a crisis level over the Tea Act, the indefatigable Clark longed for another adventure in the Ohio country. According to a letter from his father to his elder brother, George had, "set out with a company the first of April, for the mouth of the Scioto [the Scioto River]." Though the evidence is not conclusive, it is likely that this particular company was that of Captain Thomas Bullitt of Virginia, who, in the spring of 1773, sailed down the Ohio to explore the Kentucky country with an eye toward settling it.<sup>19</sup> According to Lyman Draper, one other piece of evidence supports the idea that it was the Bullitt party to which Clark's father referred. One of the members of the Bullitt party was a gentleman from Fauquier County named Leonard Helm. Helm went on to become one of Clark's most trusted lieutenants during the campaign in the Illinois Country. It is likely that the Bullitt expedition marked their first meeting. Another reason

for his conclusion was Clark's avowed intention to explore Kentucky, and a letter of his stating he explored the area in the spring of 1773, upon which exploration he formed his determination to make a settlement there the next spring.<sup>20</sup> Little did Clark know that his attempt to settle in Kentucky in 1774 would place him directly at the epicenter of a conflict between ever encroaching settlers and the Native Americans whose land they thirsted for. Throughout most of 1774, George Rogers Clark and other frontiersman engaged in a bloody, no-holds barred struggle to wrest the Ohio country from its original inhabitants. For Clark, it was merely his first lesson in the type of warfare he later excelled at.

The 1774 Virginia Anglo-Indian conflict known as Lord Dunmore's War was small in comparison to other similar disputes between colonists and Native Americans such as King Philip's War in 1675-76 and the more recent uprising led by the Ottawa Chief Pontiac in 1763. These earlier clashes, and more importantly, the American Revolution itself, which broke out less than a year later, have overshadowed the fighting on the Virginia frontier. For twenty-one year old George Rogers Clark, however, the conflict constituted his first foray into frontier warfare. While scholars cite various combinations of precipitants and triggers to explain Lord Dunmore's War, its most immediate roots stretch back six years from its outbreak and more than five hundred miles to Fort Stanwix near present-day Rome, New York.

The 1768 Treaty of Fort Stanwix, brokered between British Indian Superintendent Sir William Johnson and the Six Nations of the Iroquois Confederacy in New York, effectively sold the land of the Shawnees of western Virginia out from under them. According to Native American historian Colin Calloway, the Iroquois delegates wanted

“to ensure that white expansion went south, not north.”<sup>21</sup> Neither the Shawnee nor any other southern or western tribe was party to the treaty, in which the Six-Nations sold all the lands “to which the Iroquois had claim on the south side of the Ohio River as far as the mouth of the Tennessee River.”<sup>22</sup> The Iroquois ceded land that was not theirs to dispose of in the first place. The Shawnee inhabited the land covered by the Treaty. The Shawnee, like many other southern nations, had for many years recognized the supremacy of the Six Nations. However, that recognition did not give the Iroquois Confederacy the authority to give away Shawnee land. Regardless of this, the Treaty of Fort Stanwix was justification enough for the hundreds of Virginians and Pennsylvanians who quickly began to establish claims in the area. To land-hungry colonists, it represented the all-clear signal for their planned settlement of the area that became the state of Kentucky among others. George Rogers Clark was one such colonist.

This country was explored in 1773. A resolution was formed to make a settlement the spring following, and the mouth of the Little Kenaway was appointed the place of general rendezvous in order to descend the river from thence in a body . . . The whole party was enrolled and determined to execute their project of forming a settlement in Kentucky, as we had every necessary store that could be thought of.<sup>23</sup>

Little did Clark know at the time that his proposed settlement would trigger a bloody conflict throughout the summer and fall of 1774.

According to historian C. Hale Sipe, the Treaty of Fort Stanwix was only one of three principal causes of Dunmore’s War, the other two were the massacre of unarmed Indians at the mouth of Captains Creek and the murder of the family of the Mingo Chief Logan. George Rogers Clark played a direct or indirect role in each of these events.<sup>24</sup> In a letter written in 1798, Clark recounted the events of the spring of 1774 that led to hostilities. According to Clark, the party of settlers that he joined that spring, consisted

of approximately eighty or ninety men. During the journey, an unidentified group of Indians fired upon a party of hunters near the settler's encampment. This act brought Clark and his companions to the conclusion that, "the Indians were determined to war." With the intentions of the Ohio River nations supposedly clear, Clark's party instantly transformed itself from a settlement company to a militia. Clark continued, "An Indian town called Horsehead Bottom on the Sciota . . . lay nearly in our way. The determination was to cross the country and surprise it. Who was to command was the question." The settlers found their answer in another settlement group nearby commanded by Captain Michael Cresap. Cresap, a former merchant from Baltimore, had recently come west to establish a settlement near Wheeling.<sup>25</sup> Since Cresap had more experience with warfare than anyone in Clark's party, they decided to ask him to command their impromptu expedition. Upon hearing of their request, Cresap came at once to the campsite. According to Clark, now that their "army" had a commander, "the destruction of the Indians," would surely follow.<sup>26</sup>

Michael Cresap, however, seemed to be the only cool head among the group. To Clark's astonishment, Cresap did his best to dissuade the would-be raiders from harming the village. He convinced the party that even though the conduct of the nameless Indian assailants was certainly criminal, an attack on a defenseless village would undoubtedly start an all-out frontier war, and he was not about to ignite that powder keg. Instead, Cresap advised that they should all retire to Wheeling and await news from official channels as to whether or not the area tribes were indeed inclined toward war. If a war did break out, they could then join the militia units that would inevitably form to put it down. If the attack on the hunters proved to be the act of only a few individuals, then



there would still be plenty of time left for them to continue with their settlement plans.<sup>27</sup> The party agreed to this proposal and within two hours was on its way to Wheeling. They found the settlement in a general state of uproar. Other reports of “Indian aggressions” were flooding the frontier outpost. Some of these reports might have been true, but in reality, it did not matter. Men much higher in the chain of command than either Clark or Cresap had been looking for any excuse to go to war against the Shawnee and their allies for some time and now they had it. In fact, the main architect was John Dunmore, the Royal Governor.\*

In 1771, Lord Dunmore had been named Royal Governor of Virginia, the most prestigious of colonial appointments. Dunmore’s time in Virginia was relatively short and very controversial. Twice in the span of one year, he dissolved the House of Burgesses, first in 1773 for organizing a committee of correspondence, and then again a year later when the House voted to establish a day of fasting and mourning in protest of the Boston Port Bill. At this same time, Dunmore began to take steps to encourage a confrontation with the Shawnee of western Virginia and their leader Cornstalk. It seems likely that he prosecuted the war with the Shawnee for one of two reasons or perhaps a combination of both. The first possible explanation is that he needed a diversion to draw the public’s thoughts from the revolutionary rhetoric of Patrick Henry and his radical followers. The second is that he quite simply wanted to extend his domain even further to the west. Either way, his pursuit of settlement to the west stood in direct violation of the

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\* John Murray, the fourth Earl of Dunmore, was born in Scotland in 1732. His father, the third Earl of Dunmore, had actually participated in the Jacobite rebellion of 1745, but George II later pardoned him. Dunmore, a descendant of the House of Stuart on his mother’s side, inherited his title upon his father’s death in 1756. In 1761, he became a representative Scottish peer to the House of Lords and moved to London, where he engaged in a vigorous official and social life. Appointed Royal Governor of New York in 1770, he came to the colonies in October of that year.

Proclamation of 1763, which forbade settlement beyond the headwaters of rivers flowing into the Atlantic Ocean. Of course, the Proclamation of 1763 had done very little in eleven years to stop anyone from settling wherever they wished, but it was one thing for an intrepid colonist to violate it and quite another for the representative of the crown in Virginia to set it aside. <sup>28</sup>

To aid in the prosecution of his plans, Dunmore appointed Dr. John Connolly Captain Commandant of the District of West Augusta of which Pittsburgh was the county seat. He also ordered Connolly to reoccupy Fort Pitt, which the King had ordered abandoned a few years earlier. Connolly not only reoccupied it, but renamed it Fort Dunmore. <sup>29</sup> In his capacity as Captain Commandant of West Augusta, Connolly decided to provide the direction that Michael Cresap and George Rogers Clark went to Wheeling to find. According to Clark, within days they received a message from Connolly stating that a war with the Shawnee and their allies was indeed imminent. Before Cresap or Clark could respond to this first message, Connolly addressed a second letter to Cresap. This one informed them that the Indians had openly declared war and ordered him to, “cover the country by scouts until the inhabitants could fortify themselves.” Connolly and Dunmore did not need to say much else. Clark, Cresap, and the Virginians did the rest:

The reception of this letter was the epoch of open hostilities with the Indians. A new post was planted, a council was called and the letter read by Cresap. All the Indian traders being summoned on so important an occasion, action was had and war declared in the most solemn manner; and the same evening two scalps were brought into camp. <sup>30</sup>

Sometime during the last week in April, Cresap’s men encountered a party of Indians in canoes on the Ohio River. They gave chase for almost fifteen miles until they

forced them ashore. They opened fire and wounded some of them. Either that same evening or the next day, depending on which account one consults; Cresap's men attacked an encampment of Indians at the mouth of Captina Creek killing most of them.<sup>31</sup>

On April 28, after the attack at Captina Creek, the party debated whether to attack the camp of the traditionally friendly Mingo Chief Logan some thirty miles up the Ohio. The majority of the men favored it, and they proceeded upriver, but during a halt five miles into the march, Cresap argued against such a plan. Upon Cresap's recommendation, the group then decided to call off the attack and headed for the settlement of Redstone below Fort Pitt.<sup>32</sup> The violence they had initiated however, would only intensify.

By Clark's account, two days later Logan's encampment was indeed attacked with disastrous consequences. The Indians encamped with Logan at the mouth of the Yellow Creek were not hostile. Apparently Daniel Greathouse, a member of Cresap's party who had argued for the attack on Logan's camp, stayed behind with some men when Cresap and Clark left for Redstone. After the two men had departed, Greathouse and twenty men set out for Baker's Bottom, opposite the mouth of Yellow Creek. They arrived there on the evening of April 29. The next morning, Greathouse and some of his men crossed the river and invited the Indians to join them at Baker's tavern. Logan was away on a hunting trip at the time. Several Indians accepted the invitation and went to the tavern. Many of them left their guns behind. While at the tavern, three of the Indians got very drunk. The sober ones, including Logan's brother John Petty, "were challenged to shoot at a mark. The Indians shot first, and as soon as they had emptied their guns, Greathouse's band shot down the sober Indians in cold blood." They then quickly

executed the remaining Indians, most of whom were too drunk to offer any sort of resistance. Within minutes, ten Indians lay murdered in the tavern including Logan's mother, brother and sister.<sup>33</sup>

When Logan discovered the murder of his family near Yellow Creek, he was enraged. According to one account, Logan proceeded to lead raids throughout the summer in which he collected nearly thirty scalps and prisoners.<sup>34</sup> Mistakenly though, Logan blamed Cresap's party, including Clark, for the murder of his family. He had heard that Cresap's party was in the area the day before his family was murdered and that they had attacked the encampment at Captina Creek as well.

In Dunmore's report to his superiors in London, he characterized the attack on Logan's family as cruel and inhumane, yet justified it on the grounds that the Indians, "had recently repeated their blows, and given too much cause for these People, not much less Savage than themselves to Justify their Sanguinary deeds."<sup>35</sup> The raids continued back and forth throughout May and into June until Dunmore decided that the time was right to personally lead an army west.

On October 10, after much marching and countermarching, eleven hundred Virginia militia under the command of Colonel Andrew Lewis came under attack by a Native American force of nearly one thousand strong composed of Shawnee, Mingo and Delaware warriors. The Battle of Point Pleasant had begun in earnest. By that evening, the Indians had retreated across the river. When it was over, three militia officers and sixty-six soldiers were dead. The official total of Native American dead recovered stood at thirty-three, but many suspected they had thrown the bodies of their wounded into the river so the actual number may have been much higher. Whatever the case, the Shawnee

Chief Cornstalk signed a peace treaty with Lord Dunmore in November at Chillicothe, Ohio and the conflict ended.<sup>36</sup>

George Rogers Clark, while conspicuous in the initial events of the clash, was much less so in its major battles. By all accounts, he was not present at the Battle of Point Pleasant, though he had been commissioned Captain of the Militia of Pittsburgh and its dependencies in May of 1774. According to Lyman Draper, Clark's company participated in a raid against one of the Mingo towns, and he was sent as a messenger to a Shawnee town on the east side of the Scioto River to invite them to the peace treaty that ended the war. Supposedly, Clark set out on the mission alone covered in war paint. As the coming years would prove all too well, George Rogers Clark had paid attention during his apprenticeship in frontier warfare.<sup>37</sup>

## Notes to Chapter II

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<sup>1</sup> James Alton James, *The Life of George Rogers Clark* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1928), 2; Draper Manuscript Collection (MSS) 1 J 36-128 (Wisconsin Historical Society, Madison; microfilm copy at the University of Kansas, Lawrence, KS)

<sup>2</sup> John Bakeless, *Background to Glory: The Life of George Rogers Clark* (Philadelphia: J.B. Lippincott, 1957), 14; James, *The Life of George Rogers Clark*, 2; Draper MSS 13 J 151.

<sup>3</sup> Thomas Rogers to Lyman Draper, 10 March 1847, Draper MSS 10 J 115.

<sup>4</sup> Draper MSS 1 J 36-128; George Rogers Clark, *Campaign in the Illinois* (Cincinnati: Robert Clarke and CO., 1869), 24; Kathrine Wagner Seineke, *The George Rogers Clark Adventure in the Illinois and Selected Documents of The American Revolution at the Frontier Posts* (New Orleans: Polyanthos, 1981), 3.

<sup>5</sup> William Hayden English, *Conquest of the Country Northwest of the River Ohio 1778-1783 and Life of Gen. George Rogers Clark*, vol. 4 (Indianapolis: The Bowen-Merrill Company, 1896), 1142; Bakeless, *Background to Glory: The Life of George Rogers*, 15.

<sup>6</sup> Draper MSS 1 J 36-128; Draper MSS 10 J 115.

<sup>7</sup> Draper MSS 1 J 36-28.

<sup>8</sup> Draper MSS 13 J 129-132.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid; Draper MSS 10 J 122.

<sup>10</sup> Bakeless, *Background to Glory: The Life of George Rogers Clark*, 17.

<sup>11</sup> Draper MSS 10 J 112-114.

<sup>12</sup> Draper MSS 1 J 36-128.

<sup>13</sup> George Rogers Clark to Jonathan Clark, 14 April 1771, in James Alton James, ed., *George Rogers Clark Papers, 1771-1781*, (Springfield, Illinois: Illinois State Historical Library, 1912), 2.

<sup>14</sup> George Rogers Clark to Jonathan Clark, 9 January 1773, in James, ed., *George Rogers Clark Papers, 1771-1781*, 2.

<sup>15</sup> David Jones. *A Journal of two visits made to some nations of Indians on the west side of the river Ohio, in the years 1772 and 1773* (New York: J. Sabin, 1865), 16-31

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> John B. Roy to Jonathan Clark, 22 November 1772, in James, ed., *George Rogers Clark Papers, 1771-1781*, 1-2.

<sup>19</sup> Draper MSS 1 J 36-128.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

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- <sup>21</sup> Colin G. Calloway, *The American Revolution in Indian Country*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 189.
- <sup>22</sup> C. Hale Sipe, *The Indian Wars of Pennsylvania* (Harrisburg PA: The Telegraph Press, 1931), 479-505.
- <sup>23</sup> George Rogers Clark to Samuel Brown, 17 June 1798, in James Alton James, ed., *George Rogers Clark Papers, 1771-1781* (Springfield, Illinois: Illinois State Historical Library, 1912), 3-9.
- <sup>24</sup> Sipe, *The Indian Wars of Pennsylvania*, 479-505.
- <sup>25</sup> George Rogers Clark to Samuel Brown, 17 June 1798, in James, ed., *George Rogers Clark Papers, 1771-1781*, 3-9; L. Edward Purcell, *Who was Who in the American Revolution*, (New York: Facts on File, 1993), 118.
- <sup>26</sup> George Rogers Clark to Samuel Brown, 17 June 1798, in James, ed., *George Rogers Clark Papers, 1771-1781*, 3-9.
- <sup>27</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>28</sup> Draper MSS 3 D 81-86 (Wisconsin Historical Society, Madison; microfilm copy at the University of Kansas, Lawrence, KS); Purcell, *Who was Who in the American Revolution*, 118.
- <sup>29</sup> Sipe, *The Indian Wars of Pennsylvania*, 479-505.
- <sup>30</sup> George Rogers Clark to Samuel Brown, 17 June 1798, in James, ed., *George Rogers Clark Papers, 1771-1781*, 3-9.
- <sup>31</sup> Ibid; Sipe, *The Indian Wars of Pennsylvania*, 479-505; Charles McKnight, *Our Western Border* (Philadelphia: J.C. McCurdy & Co., 1876), 161-69.
- <sup>32</sup> George Rogers Clark to Samuel Brown, 17 June 1798, in James, ed., *George Rogers Clark Papers, 1771-1781*, 1912), 3-9.
- <sup>33</sup> Sipe, *The Indian Wars of Pennsylvania*, 479-505.
- <sup>34</sup> Reminiscences of Judge Henry Jolly in Reuben Gold Thwaites and Louise Phelps Kellogg, eds., *Documentary History of Dunmore's War, 1774*, (Madison, WI: State Historical Society of Wisconsin, 1905), 9-14.
- <sup>35</sup> Dunmore's Account in Thwaites and Kellogg eds., *Documentary History of Dunmore's War, 1774*, 368-95.
- <sup>36</sup> Dunmore's Account in Thwaites and Kellogg eds., *Documentary History of Dunmore's War, 1774*, , 1905), 368-95; Sipe, *The Indian Wars of Pennsylvania*, 479-505; McKnight, *Our Western Border*, 161-69.
- <sup>37</sup> John Murray, Earl of Dunmore, "Appointment of George Rogers Clark as Captain of Virginia Militia," in Seineke ed., *The George Rogers Clark Adventure in the Illinois and Selected Documents of the American Revolution at the Frontier Posts*, 150-151; Draper MSS 7 J 106-112, 145

## **Chapter III**

### **A Daring Plan**

George Rogers Clark's service to the revolutionary cause officially began in June of 1776. At that time, Clark was a twenty-four year old surveyor living in present-day Kentucky. Land companies from both Virginia and North Carolina claimed the area, and the Proclamation of 1763 exacerbated tensions between colonists and Native Americans and between colonists and British officials. The British Crown's attempt to maintain peace among Native Americans and colonists by forbidding settlement of the area west of the Appalachian Mountains did little to discourage settlers from moving into Kentucky.<sup>1</sup> As a result, violence between Indians and colonists erupted constantly.

In the spring of 1775, settlers reoccupied the previously abandoned Kentucky settlement of Harrods Town southwest of present-day Lexington. At the same time, fighting broke out between British Regulars and Colonial Militia at Lexington and Concord in Massachusetts. When news of the so-called "shot heard round the world" finally reached the frontier nearly three weeks after the battle, the citizens of Kentucky began to wonder where to turn for protection. Most agreed that they should take up arms against the British Crown. In retrospect, this seems the most logical of the choices. The Kentuckians were already in defiance of the mother country solely by virtue of their having settled west of the Appalachians. In addition, they were already fighting the various Indian tribes that they had displaced, most of which were allies of King George III. However, since they were only nebulously connected with any of the newly forming United States, the Kentuckians feared no one would take up the issue of their protection from the British and their Indian allies. However, George Rogers Clark had a plan:



I immediately fixed on my plans . . . of assembling the people get them to Elect deputies and send them to the assembly of Virginia Conditions was procured to declare our selves Citizens of the State otherways Establish an Independent Government . . . to Carry this Schem into effect I appointed a genl Meeting at Harrods Town on the 6<sup>th</sup> June 76 . . .<sup>2</sup>

When June 6 arrived, delegates from all over the Kentucky territory descended upon the town. They were rather surprised, and some probably angered, when the man who had called the meeting did not show up until late in the evening. Despite Clark's tardiness, things went exactly as he had envisioned. After some debate, the Kentucky delegates decided to appeal to Virginia for rights as a recognized county of that state. The delegates also drew up two petitions. One dated June 15, 1776, spells out the reasons why the Kentuckians felt the Virginia legislature should include Kentucky under its protection:

Obstacle would be Removed. Population increase . . . A new source of wealth would then be opened, as Trade and Navigation under the Auspices of Virginia would Flourish in this Western world.<sup>3</sup>

In addition to asking for county status, the Kentuckians at Harrods Town decided to send two representatives along with the petitions to try to force the issue by demanding seats in the legislature. When the question of who to send came to a vote, the delegates chose John Gabriel Jones and George Rogers Clark.<sup>4</sup>

After a long journey, Clark and Jones arrived in Williamsburg in August of 1776, only to find that the assembly had adjourned for the summer. They decided to wait until the beginning of the fall session to present their case and to attempt to take their seats. When the legislature finally convened for the autumn session, they denied the Kentuckians seats. However, later in the session the Virginia Assembly did recognize Kentucky as a separate county of the state of Virginia and ordered ammunition and supplies sent there under the guard of Jones and Clark. After picking up the stores at Fort Pitt, which the Americans had

captured, Clark and Jones set off for Kentucky. On the way, however, they met a group of surveyors who informed them that Colonel John Todd was in the area with a party of Virginia militia. Clark and two other men decided to press on to Harrods Town to try to catch up with Todd. He instructed Jones to wait until he and Todd's men returned to carry the stores and ammunition the rest of the way. Not long after Clark left, Todd and his men arrived at the spot where Jones was waiting. He and Jones then decided to take the supplies the rest of the way to the settlements. On Christmas Day 1776, Indians, who had been trailing them during their journey, attacked Todd and Jones's party. They killed John Gabriel Jones and three others. Fortunately for Clark and the Kentuckians, the supplies remained hidden by the river and a party sent out from Harrods Town recovered them.<sup>5</sup>

Ten months of skirmishes followed. The Kentucky militia, commanded by Clark (who was now a Major) faced the various Indian tribes of the area. Clark then hatched another bold plan. He set out for Williamsburg again in October of 1777. According to his memoir, (written nearly ten years after the end of the Revolution) Clark thought long and hard during those ten months about what course of action would be in his and Kentucky's best interest. These thoughts included the possibility of making a separate peace with the British. However, by the fall of 1777, Clark had decided, "to lay aside every private View ingage seriously in the war and have the Interest and welfare of the publick my only View untill the fate of the Fall of the continent should be known . . . ."<sup>6</sup>

In examining such statements, one should be aware that Clark wrote two recollections of his exploits during the American Revolution. The earlier one, contained in a letter to George Mason, was written in 1779 while the events were still fresh in his mind. In addition, he wrote it at the high watermark of his reputation and public standing. His second and

lengthier memoir covering the period from 1773-1779, was written in 1791, at which time Clark's star had already begun to fade from prominence. The letter to Mason contains much more detail about Clark's state of mind and motives than the later memoir. One gets the sense in reading the second account of his exploits in the Illinois Country, that Clark wrote it with the intent that it would revive his sagging reputation. Did Clark really have an epiphany of public spirit in 1777? It is hard to tell. He certainly carried out his subsequent missions with the zeal of a true revolutionary convert. While his earlier account of his campaigns mentions no such soul-searching, probably because he did not feel the need to justify his loyalty to America in 1779, it is not outside the realm of possibility. It is more likely however, that Clark became convinced that his self-interests could best be served by attaching himself to the American cause after he returned from Williamsburg.

No matter what the state of his conscience, Clark arrived in Williamsburg at the beginning of the winter of 1777. He carried in his mind one of the most daring plans of the Revolution. He planned to take the fight to the British and Indians on the frontier. Clark came to Virginia to sell the Governor and the Legislature on an idea to send an expedition to the Illinois country to the north and west of Kentucky.

The Illinois country occupied what is now present-day Illinois, Indiana, and parts of Kentucky and Ohio. As such, it was an essential staging area for Indian raids into Kentucky and Ohio. From their stronghold at Detroit, the British supported the outposts of Cahokia and Kaskaskia in what is now Illinois, and Vincennes or St. Vincents in present-day Indiana. From these outposts, British regulars aided and supplied the various Native American groups hostile to white encroachment. George Rogers Clark knew that taking these posts and then

ultimately Detroit would deliver a serious blow to the British and their Indian allies ability to raid into the American settlements.

Upon his arrival in Williamsburg, Clark wasted no time in presenting his plan to the proper authorities. “I proposed the plan to a few Gentlemen, they communicated it to the Governour, it was immediately determined on, to put in Execution as soon as a Bill could be passed to enable the Governour to order it . . . .” Virginia Governor Patrick Henry however, and doubtless others with whom Clark shared the plan, recognized that it had one serious flaw. Most of the areas Clark wanted to take with Virginia militia were far beyond even the most liberal interpretations of the state’s borders. The government of Virginia did not technically have the power to order such an expedition. In addition, few Virginians were willing to serve in a militia action hundreds of miles away from their homes. Therefore, Governor Henry ordered one of the first, but certainly not the last, covert operations in the history of the United States. According to Clark, “it [the bill] accordingly passed, though but a few in the House knew the real intent of it.”<sup>7</sup>

Henry’s plan called for two sets of instructions regarding the expedition. The first, barely a paragraph in length and distributed in public, mentioned only that the object of the men under Clark’s command was to defend Kentucky:

You are to proceed without Loss of Time to inlist Seven Companies of Men officered in the usual Manner to act as Militia under your Orders They are to proceed to Kentucky & there to obey such orders and Directions as you shall give them for three months after their arrival at that place, but to receive pay &c. in case they remain on Duty a longer Time.<sup>8</sup>

The second set of instructions, written on the same day as the first, contained much more detail. In them, Henry sanctioned Clark to, “attack the British post at Kaskasky,” and to keep the true Destination of your Force secret.”<sup>9</sup> According to historian Kathrine Wagner

Seineke, the authorization for Henry's behavior rested in an act passed by the assembly that same October which allowed the Governor to, "provide for the farther protection and defence of the frontiers . . . against any of our western enemies."<sup>10</sup> To Henry, the complete secrecy of Clark's mission was a critical factor in implementing the act. Therefore, he felt justified in hiding the true aim of the Clark expedition from the legislature.

It was with this *carte blanche* authorization that George Rogers Clark, now a Lieutenant Colonel in the Virginia Army, set out from Williamsburg in January of 1778. According to his account of the expedition in his letter to George Mason, he understood his orders to involve more than just the stated attack on Kaskaskia. He wrote, "I was ordered to Attack the Illinois, in case of success to cary my Arms to any quarter I pleased." Just how he arrived at this conclusion remains a mystery. It is possible that Patrick Henry verbally gave him permission to attack other settlements in the vicinity of Kaskaskia. It is also possible that Clark mentioned attacks on settlements beyond Kaskaskia when he first presented the plan and assumed that the governor's approval applied to the whole plan as he first conceived it. Finally, one cannot rule out the possibility that Clark exceeded his charge knowingly and willingly in his zeal to rid the frontier of the British and their partisans. It is certain that Henry's orders, either spoken or written, did not include Detroit as one of Clark's objectives. Clark admitted as much in his writings. According to the Mason letter, Clark had hopes that his expedition against the Illinois posts might set off a ricochet effect. Before the expedition had begun, he had already set his sights on Detroit. His hope was that any success he enjoyed would so weaken the garrison at Detroit that, "it would be an easy prey for me. I should have mentioned my design to his Excellency, but was convinced, or afraid that it

might lessen his esteem for me. as it was a general opinion that it would take several thousand to approach that Place.”<sup>11</sup>

The vagaries of his orders notwithstanding, Clark set out from Williamsburg on January 18, 1777, for the frontier settlements of Virginia and for Fort Pitt. Initially, it seems that he had no trouble recruiting men for his expedition. According to Clark, he recruited his complement of troops in half the time he had expected. However, matters started to deteriorate very quickly. Many of the men Clark had recruited on his trip to Fort Pitt never showed up. Many who did show up deserted within a few days. Clark believed that for whatever reason, many of the leading men of the frontier encouraged the absentees and desertions. Other than Clark's accusations, however, there is no further evidence of an elite conspiracy to stop Clark's recruits from showing up. More than likely, the reason for the recruiting problems was the same as in any other location during the Revolution. Colonial soldiers were notorious for the lack of discipline and their propensity for desertion. Colonial militias were even worse in this regard.<sup>12</sup>

Clark decided to begin the expedition with the few troops who reported. Before leaving Williamsburg earlier in the month, Clark estimated that he could take the Illinois country and Detroit with 500 men. Patrick Henry gave him authorization to raise an army of 350. When he began the expedition, his army consisted of only 150 volunteers.<sup>13</sup>

In early May, the small frontier army set sail from Redstone for the falls of the Ohio River near present-day Louisville, Kentucky. George Rogers Clark's greatest adventure had begun. Three British outposts and several Indian tribes loyal to the British crown lay ahead. Only twenty-five years old, the tall, redheaded Virginian had begun his march into history. In less than one year, he would return at the pinnacle of his career and his life.

## Notes to Chapter III

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<sup>1</sup> Kathrine Wagner Seineke, *The George Rogers Clark Adventure in the Illinois and Selected Documents of The American Revolution at the Frontier Posts* (New Orleans: Polyanthos, 1981), 5.

<sup>2</sup> Clark's Memoir in James Alton James, ed., *George Rogers Clark Papers 1771-1781*, (Springfield, Illinois: Illinois State Historical Library, 1912), 208-209.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid; "June 15, 1776 West Fincastle County Legislative Petition" in Seineke, ed., *The George Rogers Clark Adventure in the Illinois and Selected Documents of the American Revolution at the Frontier Posts*, 180-81.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Clark's Memoir in James, ed., *George Rogers Clark Papers 1771-1781*, 214-15.

<sup>6</sup> Clark's Memoir in James, ed., *George Rogers Clark Papers 1771-1781*, 216-17.

<sup>7</sup> George Rogers Clark, *Campaign in the Illinois* (Cincinnati: Robert Clarke and CO., 1869), 22.

<sup>8</sup> Two Letters of Patrick Henry Authorizing Clark Expedition, 2 January, 1778, in Seineke, ed., *The George Rogers Clark Adventure in the Illinois and Selected Documents of the American Revolution at the Frontier Posts*, 214-215.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Seineke, *The George Rogers Clark Adventure in the Illinois and Selected Documents of The American Revolution at the Frontier Posts*, 215.

<sup>11</sup> Clark, *Campaign in the Illinois*, 23-24.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid; Don Higginbotham, *The War of American Independence* Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1971), 398-403.

<sup>13</sup> Clark, *Campaign in the Illinois*, 25.

## **Chapter IV**

### **The Expedition to the Illinois Country**

From the very beginning, Patrick Henry, other prominent insiders in the Virginia government, and probably George Rogers Clark himself saw the expedition to the Illinois as more than just a military exercise. Long before Clark presented the Virginia legislature with the West Fincastle Petitions containing Kentucky's reasons for its incorporation as a Virginia county, many Virginia statesmen looked upon the Illinois country and dreamed of the riches such a fertile area could bring to the coffers of the newly-formed state. It is safe to say that one of the unspoken reasons for the Illinois expedition was a classic American land-grab. Apparently some of the Virginia Assembly did know something of Henry's secret instructions for Clark. On January 3, 1778, just over two weeks before his departure from Williamsburg, Clark received a letter signed by prominent statesmen George Wythe, George Mason and Thomas Jefferson.

As some Indian Tribes . . . without any provocation, massacred many of the inhabitants upon the Frontiers of this Commonwealth, in the most cruel and barbarous Manner, and it is intended to . . . punish the Aggressors by carrying the War into their own Country.

We congratulate You upon your Appointment to conduct so important an Enterprize in which We most heartily wish you Success; and we have no Doubt but some further Reward in Lands, in that Country, will be given to the Volunteers who shall engage in this Service . . .<sup>1</sup>

Judging from the letter, it seems that the three prominent Virginians were at least partially informed of the real nature of Clark's expedition, and it is likely that the source for the breach in secrecy may have been Clark himself. He and George Mason were very close friends, and he had spent the first few years of his life as young Thomas Jefferson's neighbor. More important than their apparent knowledge of at least some of Clark's orders was their justification for fighting in Kentucky and their plans for the land they



believed would be gained in doing so. Their reasoning for supporting Clark's plans to carry the war to the Illinois Country had nothing to do with British tyranny, or with the creation of a nation of liberty. On the contrary, the reasons set forth in the letter from Wythe, Mason and Jefferson to Clark are simply the destruction of the Native Americans of the Illinois Country and the forceful acquisition of their lands. Their attitude represents a fundamental difference between the American Revolution in the east and its counterpart in the Old Northwest. Bloodshed over clashing ideals characterized the war in the East. In the West, hatred and fear dominated the minds of the combatants.

There is no record of whether or not Clark's true design ever made it past just himself, Henry and the three influential legislators who wrote that letter. So it is impossible to tell if Clark's poor luck in recruiting and keeping men in his small army was due to a leak of the real destination or to the personal animosity directed toward him. Whatever the case, Clark's luck hardly improved upon reaching the falls of the Ohio. Shortly after landing, he was informed that a Captain Smith, who had promised to meet him there with two hundred men, was not coming.<sup>2</sup>

According to Clark, Smith had fallen prey to the conspiracy of "leading Men" that had plagued his earlier recruiting efforts. Only a scant detachment of Smith's men under a Captain Delland or Dillard ever joined Clark. Although not yet officially in the Illinois country, Clark faced the first of many crucial decisions. Seeking to maintain the expedition's secrecy as long as possible, he had not even informed his officers of the true nature of their orders. He was well aware that any mention of attacking a post nearly one thousand miles from their homes would send the rest of his tiny army scampering back to the east. Sooner or later though, if he wanted to march on Kaskaskia, Clark would have to

tell them. He eventually found the answer to his quandary in geography. “To stop the desertion I knew would ensue on the Troops knowing their Destination, I had encamped on a small Island in the middle of the falls, kept strict Guards on the Boats . . .”<sup>3</sup>

On the island, Clark set to work drilling his men with his usual no nonsense discipline. “I first began to discipline my little Army . . . most of them determined to follow me, the rest feeling no probability of making their escape I soon got subordination as I could wish for . . .”<sup>4</sup>

By June 26, approximately the same time that Washington’s army took the field at Monmouth in the east, Clark felt his small force was ready to march. They set off from the falls of the Ohio River, shooting the rapids at the same time as a solar eclipse. Whatever the portent of such an occurrence, Clark was determined to do two things. The first was to keep his force and its objective completely secret from the enemy. The second, a means toward accomplishing the first, was to move with as much speed as possible. He ordered the oars double-manned both day and night. He pushed his men until, by the fourth day, they reached the mouth of the Tennessee River. Here, their relatively simple journey by water came to an end as they put ashore on an island to begin preparations for an overland march.<sup>5</sup>

Shortly after landing at the mouth of the Tennessee, Clark experienced the first of many strokes of good fortune to come during his expedition. His men captured a boatload of French hunters who had set out from Kaskaskia eight days earlier. According to Clark, the hunters wanted very much to support Clark in his mission. However, their news of Kaskaskia worried him. While Edward Abbot, the Governor at Vincennes, had left the Illinois country for Detroit, he had left in his place at Kaskaskia Philippe Francois

de Rastel, Chevalier de Rocheblave. The hunters informed Clark that the Kaskaskia militia was well trained, that Rocheblave had spies all over the area and that the fort there was in very good condition. At this point, the Virginian was faced with another quandary. If this intelligence circulated among his men, morale would suffer greatly. However, unbeknownst to Clark or the hunters, Rocheblave, a Frenchman by birth, was so sure that there were no Americans near Kaskaskia that he disbanded the town's French citizen militia.<sup>6</sup> There is little documentation as to when the Frenchman gave the order, but if Clark had not come across these hunters, he might very well have attacked Kaskaskia without any real knowledge of the garrison's strengths and weaknesses. In the area of intelligence gathering and analysis, George Rogers Clark was two hundred years ahead of his time. This skill saved his expedition and his scalp on many occasions. He now had some intelligence of the enemy he faced and he knew what to do with it. He granted the hunters permission to join his expedition on one condition. They were to tell no one in his army what they knew of the strength of the garrison of Kaskaskia. Apparently the men chose to abide by this restriction. Clark wrote of them, "they observed my instructions which put the whole in the greatest spirits."<sup>7</sup>

In his memoir, Clark admitted that the most troubling component of the intelligence he received from the hunters was that the inhabitants of Kaskaskia (mostly French) regarded Americans as "more savage than their Neighbours the Indians." With such a small army Clark had counted on the sympathy of the French settlers in the Illinois country. After all, they were only British subjects because their mother country had been defeated in the French and Indian War. At that moment, Clark decided that if and when he took Kaskaskia or any other post in the Illinois country, he would take drastic

measures to ensure the loyalty of the citizenry. By drastic measures, the psychologically savvy Clark did not mean brute force. He had a much more covert and subtle plan for bringing the Illinois settlers to the American cause:

I was determined to improve upon this if I was fortunate enough to get them into my possession, as I conceived the greater the Shock I could give them at first the more sensibly would they feel my lenity and become more valuable friends; this I conceived to be agreeable to Human nature . . .<sup>8</sup>

Having made preparations for the march and finished with his interrogation of the French hunters, Clark ordered his army to move out. In both his memoir and the letter to Mason, he mentioned nothing of the first three days of the journey except to say that the weather was exceptional for such an event and that game was plentiful. On the third day, John Saunders, the expedition's primary guide, became confused and disoriented. Already on edge due to the intelligence received about Kaskaskia three days earlier, and apprehensive about the secrecy of his mission, Clark did not take Saunders's apparent bewilderment well. According to his earlier sketch of the campaign he, "never in my life felt such a flow of Rage." He questioned Saunders and accused him of duplicity in getting them lost. When Saunders protested that the Illinois country often confused even the most experienced guide, Clark decided to apply some pressure. He told the guide that he had until the evening to find the right path or he would be put to death. By that evening Clark noted that Saunders had miraculously found his way. "He accordingly took his course, and in two hours got within his knowledge."<sup>9</sup>

In his later memoir, Clark described the guide as a "poor fellow," who was simply, "bewildered." Yet, according to both accounts of the journey, he certainly had no qualms about the possibility of putting the man to death. It seems certain that John Saunders was not a traitor as Clark feared. Clark never spoke ill of him again and there

are no known reports of his having betrayed either Clark's men or others loyal to the patriot cause. If Clark had followed through with his threat, which is likely, judging by his behavior in the coming battles for the Illinois country, he would have killed an innocent man. If that realization ever bothered him, he left no record of it. Compassion of that type was a quick ticket to death on the frontier; it probably was acceptable to Clark to kill a few innocents if it meant that he would still be around to accomplish his mission.

On the evening of July 4, 1778, the second anniversary of the Declaration of Independence, Clark and his small army reached the outskirts of Kaskaskia on the far side of the river that bore the same name as the town. That night they marched to a farm about a mile above the sleeping settlement. He and his men quickly took the farmer and his family hostage to prevent word of their arrival from reaching town. Clark gleaned more crucial intelligence from this family. They told him that the preparations for an immediate attack by the Americans on the town had been called off only a few days previous. The spies had returned finding nothing, and the militia had gone home. Most importantly, almost all the Native American allies who had been in town waiting for an American attack had returned to their villages. George Rogers Clark was, to say the least, very pleased with this new development. "I was now convinced that it was impossible that the inhabitants could make any resistance as they could not now possibly get notice of us time enough to make much resistance."<sup>10</sup>

Having procured some small boats from the hostage farmer, Clark began quietly ferrying his men across the Kaskaskia River under cover of darkness. Once across, he separated his force into three small units. The first group would march directly to the fort

under the command of Clark himself. The other two would each occupy various sections of the town and would advance to meet their commander once he gave the signal. Clark approached his first major engagement of the war with meticulous organizational skill. He sincerely wanted to capture the town in as short a time as possible and with the least amount of confusion. He left nothing to chance. He ordered any of his men who spoke French to run through the town announcing that anyone appearing on the streets would be killed. The actual taking of Kaskaskia was rather anti-climactic. The warnings to the citizenry worked, and very few attempted even to glance outside their doors, let alone escape. By daybreak, the Americans had secured the town and its inhabitants, as well as the fort and Philippe de Rocheblave.<sup>11</sup>

Rocheblave however, did not submit to captivity willingly. According to Clark's memoir, the Frenchman and his wife barricaded themselves inside their room for several hours. While there they probably destroyed many crucial British documents, since Clark made note that his men found very few such documents when they finally apprehended them.<sup>12</sup>

Just as Clark had been warned, the French citizens of Kaskaskia expected the worst from their American captors. According to Clark's letter to Mason, "nothing could excell the Confusion these people seemed to be in, being taught to expect nothing but Savage treatment from the Americans . . . they were willing to be Slaves to save their Families." Clark decided to capitalize on this opportunity to bring his mastery of things psychological to bear. When Father Pierre Gibault, the local priest asked for and was granted permission for an interview with Clark, the American commander received him in circumstances that certainly reinforced the French idea of American soldiers. When

Clark granted the elderly priest permission to see him, he and his principal officers were in their quarters all half-naked since they had left most of their clothing behind when they crossed the river. They were scratched from head to foot from their journey across the river and into the town. One does not have to use too much imagination to understand just how savage these "Bostonians,"(as the locals called them) appeared. Gibault and the few elders with him asked Clark to allow them a few moments to meet at the Church so that loved ones might say goodbye to one another before the Americans separated them. Apparently, the citizens of Kaskaskia mistakenly believed that the Americans planned to ship them all to the east as prisoners of war. Clark casually remarked to them that he did not care whether they gathered at their Church or not as long as they announced to those there that no one was to leave the town. After the gathering at the Church, Gibault came back to Clark begging him to spare the citizens' families the pain of separation. He also told him that the French citizenry had many times helped the Americans and that they felt no loyalty to the British Crown. They played right into the Clark's hands. The Virginian scolded them for thinking that Americans would separate them from their families and steal their clothes, stores and property. He went on to tell them that he and his men had attacked their village to prevent more deaths at the hands of raiding Indians and that they had not come there for plunder. Clark informed them that they would be freed if they would attach themselves with zeal to the American cause. As soon as the French citizens heard this, they thanked him and declared their allegiance to him and the Americans.<sup>13</sup>

George Rogers Clark then set his sights on the next objective on his list: Cahokia.

"In meantime I prepar'd a Detachment on Horseback, under Captain Joseph Bowman, to make a Decent on Cohos, about sixty miles up the Country . . ." Some Kaskaskia

townspeople informed him that the Cahokia garrison (often called Cohos by Clark) was so weak that he could take the town by merely sending an envoy from Kaskaskia to encourage its defection. The careful Virginian, however, decided to ensure the outcome by sending a detachment of thirty men under the command of Captain Joseph Bowman as well. Apparently, news of Clark's exploits had already reached Cahokia. When Bowman and his detachment arrived on July 6, the frightened inhabitants submitted almost immediately in deference to their fear of the so-called "Big Knives." According to Clark's letter to George Mason, "in a few days the Inhabittants of the Country took the Oath subscribed by law and every Person appeared to be happy."<sup>14</sup>

Having secured two of the three key British outposts in the Illinois country, Clark now faced another dilemma. His army consisted of less than two hundred men and he had to garrison two posts out of that number and whatever French militia he could convince to join them. He did not have confidence that the French would fight the British and their Indian allies should they show up. He was certainly justified in his thinking. Only a few days before, the same French militia had been sworn to help the British and did nothing to stop his invasion. Neither the French nor Clark knew of the treaty uniting France and the United States, which had been signed in February of 1778. In light of this, the French, understandably, sought only to side with the combatant that could best protect their lives. For the moment, that was Clark and the Americans. Compounding his problems, he still had to take Vincennes, or Post St. Vincent as he sometimes referred to it, to secure his hold on the Illinois Country. Clark found the solution to his dilemma in an unlikely place. He found it in a priest.

It is not clear that it was Clark who hatched the idea to use Father Gibault to win



the capitulation of Vincennes. The confusion arises from Clark's two separate accounts of the matter. In his earlier sketch of the campaign, contained in the letter to Mason, Clark states that Gibault came to him asking permission to go to Vincennes and win the town for him. According to Clark's later memoir, he summoned Gibault and asked him if he thought he could perform the task. Whatever the case, Gibault was willing to undertake the mission. He told Clark he would win him friends there by giving "them such hints in the Spiritual way, that would be very conducive to the business." Gibault and a few companions set out on July 14, with a proclamation from Clark to be read when the town capitulated. Within two days of their arrival, Gibault and his companions accomplished their mission. The majority of the townspeople of Vincennes went directly to the church and took the oath of loyalty. They then raised the American flag over Fort Sackville to the astonishment of the nearby pro-British Indians.<sup>15</sup>

Almost six months after he left Williamsburg, George Rogers Clark had secured an American foothold in the Illinois country. The three main British posts of the area were now in American hands, and he had suffered no real casualties. He now set about the difficult task of establishing effective military and civil administration in the region. The year 1779 would bring with it a challenge infinitely more difficult than any he had faced. His actions had not gone unnoticed by the British. They and their Indian allies were making plans to retaliate against George Rogers Clark and his Big Knives.

## Notes to Chapter IV

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- <sup>1</sup> George Wythe, George Mason and Thomas Jefferson to George Rogers Clark, 3 January, 1778, in Kathrine Wagner Seineke ed., *The George Rogers Clark Adventure in the Illinois and Selected Documents of the American Revolution at the Frontier Posts*, (New Orleans: Polyanthos, 1981), 216.
- <sup>2</sup> George Rogers Clark, *Campaign in the Illinois* (Cincinnati: Robert Clarke and CO., 1869), 24-27.
- <sup>3</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>4</sup> Ibid. , 27.
- <sup>5</sup> Ibid. , 28; Clark's Memoir in James Alton James, ed., *George Rogers Clark Papers 1771-1781* (Springfield, Illinois: Illinois State Historical Library, 1912), 223-24.
- <sup>6</sup> Clark, *Campaign in the Illinois*, 28; Clark's Memoir in James, ed., *George Rogers Clark Papers 1771-1781*, 225; L. Edward Purcell, ed., *Who was Who in the American Revolution*. (New York: Facts on File, 1993), 400.
- <sup>7</sup> Clark, *Campaign in the Illinois*, 28; Clark's Memoir in James, ed., *George Rogers Clark Papers 1771-1781*, 225-26.
- <sup>8</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>9</sup> Clark, *Campaign in the Illinois*, 29-30; Clark's Memoir in James, ed., *George Rogers Clark Papers 1771-1781*, 226-27; The Approach to and Capture of Kaskaskia, From Clark's Own Writings, in Seineke ed., *The George Rogers Clark Adventure in the Illinois and Selected Documents of the American Revolution at the Frontier Posts*, 259-60.
- <sup>10</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>11</sup> Clark's Memoir in James, ed., *George Rogers Clark Papers 1771-1781*, 228.
- <sup>12</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>13</sup> Clark's Memoir in James, ed., *George Rogers Clark Papers 1771-1781*, 230-31; Clark, *Campaign in the Illinois*, 31-33.
- <sup>14</sup> James Alton James, *George Rogers Clark Papers 1771-1781*, Vol. 1, (Springfield, Illinois: Illinois State Historical Library, 1912), 231-33; Clark, *Campaign in the Illinois*, 33-35.
- <sup>15</sup> Clark's Memoir in James, ed., *George Rogers Clark Papers 1771-1781*, 237-38; Clark, *Campaign in the Illinois*, 35-36.

## Chapter V The Fall of Vincennes

By the late summer of 1778, George Rogers Clark possessed all three of the major posts in the Illinois country. From this position he could launch an attack at the nerve center of the British frontier war effort: Detroit. Clark however, woefully lacked men and materials. He was surrounded on all sides by Indian tribes loyal to the crown, and his men were eager to return to the relative safety of Kentucky and Virginia. In addition, Clark's orders from Patrick Henry only mentioned an attack on Kaskaskia. Having succeeded in that and two other "engagements," he was not sure how much further he should continue. The moment of doubt passed quickly. After some thought, Clark decided that since he was the only American authority in that part of the country, then his was the only permission needed:

. . . to abandon the Cuntrey and all the prospects that opened to our View in the Indian department at this time for the want . . . of Instruction in certain cases . . . would amount to a reflection on government as having no confidence in Me I Resolved to usurp all Authority nessesary to Carry my points . . .<sup>1</sup>

Most of all, Clark needed men. He decided to recruit French volunteers to serve under him and to try to convince most of his own troops to stay. He succeeded in persuading nearly one hundred of his troops to remain. Clark also resorted to more psychological tactics to convince the French citizens to support his cause. Knowing that the French, while still frightened of him, saw him as their best protection against the British (whom they had just recently deserted) and the various Native American groups in the area, he told the citizens that he intended to leave. Clark was positive that they would beg him to stay and promise him any help they could give. They did exactly that and he began recruiting a company of local militia.<sup>2</sup>

As for the prisoner Philippe de Rocheblave, Clark made an effort to be a gentlemanly host. On one occasion, he asked Rocheblave to dine with him, but Rocheblave berated and insulted Clark so much that Clark immediately sent him to the guardhouse. The meeting also convinced Clark to display no mercy when dealing with Rocheblave's personal property. "His slave was sold and divided among the [men] . . . amounted to about 1500 pounds." According to Clark, "the principals of this Gentleman was so fixed and Violent agains the united [States] that was quite unsitiable [to have him remain]." Clark therefore decided to send Captain John Montgomery to escort Rocheblave to prison in Williamsburg. Since Clark still faced a dearth of soldiers, he also sent dispatches with Montgomery asking Governor Henry to reinforce the Illinois country as soon as possible.<sup>3</sup>

Want of men was only one of a triumvirate of problems facing Clark in August 1778. More men would be useless if he could not adequately supply them, and the provisions obtained from Fort Pitt were long gone. A trip to Virginia to secure authorization for more supplies, followed by another to Fort Pitt to obtain them was out of the question. Clark therefore decided to act on his own judgment in this instance as well. On August 6, he drafted a letter to Oliver Pollock; a merchant in Spanish controlled New Orleans friendly to the American cause. In the letter, Clark asked Pollock to allow him to purchase supplies from him on credit. At the time, Clark believed that Virginia would pay the bills when presented with them. He was to discover that this was not the case. Perhaps no other event is more significant in the life of George Rogers Clark than his decision to equip his men in this fashion. In signing the notes, Clark sentenced

himself to a post-war life of financial ruin. In retrospect though, Clark felt he had no other choice available to him other than to quit, and he was not about to do that.

Judging from Clark's letter to Pollock, he was nearly destitute of all provisions. He requested an extremely large amount of goods by the monetary standards of the day. In particular he made requests for, "Five thousand Dollars worth of Goods most Suitable for Soldiers and Indians as my situation obliges me to give them small presents," and "four thousand Pounds of Powder."<sup>4</sup> In addition to lack of men and supplies, Clark worried about the various Native American groups in and around the Illinois country. After placing Captain Leonard Helm, his old friend from the Matthew Bullitt expedition, in command of Vincennes, Clark turned his full attention toward winning allies among the local tribes, especially around Cahokia. Many of the tribes were very confused as to how to proceed because the French and Spanish had been so friendly to the invading Americans, who had until recently been connected to France and Spain's ancient enemy Great Britain. According to Clark, some tribes immediately sued for peace. He also sent letters to the Kickapoo and Pinkashaw nations, "desiring them to lay down their Tomahawk." Though Clark professed to have eschewed what he called the American way of dealing with Indians through a mixture of threats and subterfuge, his promises of dreadful consequences should the tribes not ally with him seem directly in line with previous American-Indian relationships. In the same letter to the Kickapoos and Pinkashaws, Clark exhorted them to fight like men if they chose not to lay down the tomahawk and promised them that they would yet see their "Great Father" King George given to the dogs to eat. He went on to promise them that the Big Knives would not lead them astray as the British had done. Upon reading these letters, at least some of the tribes

sought peace with Clark.<sup>5</sup> They asked him to outline the reasons why the Big Knives were at war with the English. The response Clark delivered to their request is enough to make any twentieth century war propagandist proud:

The Big Knife are very much like the Red people they don't know well how to make Blanket powder and cloath &c they buy from the English (whom they formerly desended from) and live chiefly by making corn Hunting and Trade as you and the French your Neig[h]bors do. . . . the Big Knife Dayley geting more numerous like the Trees in the woods so that the Land got poor and Hunting scarce having but little to Trade with the women began to cry to see their Children Naked and tryed to learn to make cloathes for them themselves and soon gave their Husbands Blankets of their own making and the men learned to make Guns and Powder so that they did not was to buy so much from the English they got mad and put Strong Garison through all our Cuntrey (as you see they have done among you on the Lakes and among the French) and would not let our women Spin nor the men make powder nor let us trade with any body else but said that we should Buy all from them and since we had got saucy they would make us give them two Bucks for a Blanket that we use to get for one . . . killed some of us to make the reast fear . . .the Women and Children was cold and Hungry and continued to cry the young men was lost and no counselors to put them in the Right path the whole land was Dark and the old men hung down their Heads for shame as they could not see the sun . . . At last the great sperit took pity on us and kindled a great Counsill fire that never goes out at a place called Philadelphia struck down a post and left a war Tomahawk by it and went Away. The sun amediately broke out and the sky was Blue the old men heled up their Heads and assembled at the Phire took up the Hatchet sharpened it and put in into the hands of the young men and told to strike English as long as they could find one . . . Thus the war began . . .<sup>6</sup>

At that point in the speech Clark skillfully scolded the Indians by telling them that the Great Spirit was angry with them for fighting the wrong people. Clark's embellishments and omissions are obvious. Nevertheless, the speech worked. According to Clark's memoir, the tribes who had heard this speech made peace with him the next day. Clark then repeated this method with several other tribes in the area to varying degrees of success. For the moment, Clark had managed to forge peace with several of the area Indian tribes. However, with the exception of some of the Delawares, peace would not last.<sup>7</sup>

One other incident of note occurred involving Clark and the Indians of the Illinois country during that summer. One evening, a group of Indians Clark referred to as "Puans," attempted to force their way into his quarters at Kaskaskia and abduct him. According to his memoir, the attempt occurred at around one o'clock in the morning. Unable to sleep, Clark was up and sitting at his desk when the attack commenced. Shots rang out, and the commotion must have awakened the citizens, for in a matter of minutes the whole town was under alarm. Upon seeing the townspeople up in arms and the size of Clark's personal guard, the perpetrators snuck back to their quarters. However, the sergeant of Clark's guard soon apprehended them. The Indians insisted the attack was only to see if the French would come to Clark's aid, but Clark would have none of it. The attackers had inadvertently given him an opportunity to prove his mettle and he was going to take it. The prisoners asked to speak to Clark, but he refused. They tried to get others to speak to him, but he denied them saying his attackers were English villains. To show his strength and disregard of any threat posed to him, Clark stayed in his lodgings a hundred yards from the fort without a noticeable guard. He even went so far as to hold a ball that evening as a sign of his contempt for his attackers.<sup>8</sup>

In the morning, Clark summoned a council. After some time he produced "a Bloody Belt of Wampom," a symbol of warfare to the Native Americans gathered there. He then told the Indians that their English allies were weak, and that he was convinced that the Indians were now his enemies. He would let the tribes go, but they must "not do any mischief until three days after they left the town. . . that if they did not want their own Women and Children massacred, they must leave off killing ours and only fight Men under Arms, which was commendable; that there was the War Belt, we should soon see

which of us would make it the most Bloody . . .” According to Clark, most of the nations assembled then professed their loyalty to him again. He presented them with a Peace Belt and a War Belt and told all but those who had attacked him to choose one. They chose peace. "I told them I would defer Smoking the Peace Pipe until I heard that they had called in all their warriors, and then we would conclude the Treaty with all the Ceremony necessary for so important [an] Occasion.”<sup>9</sup>

The Indians implicated in the kidnapping plot begged Clark for mercy. They even offered the lives of two young braves to atone for their conduct, but Clark spared them. Getting the submission he wanted, he then returned to Kaskaskia to spend the winter in preparing for a campaign against Detroit. Clark was thoroughly convinced that his greatest triumph still lay ahead of him. He was correct in believing so, but it would not come at Detroit.<sup>10</sup>

By this time, Lieutenant Governor Henry Hamilton, the British commander at Detroit, had learned of Clark’s deeds in the Illinois country. According to a report he later submitted to his superior at Quebec, General Frederick Haldimand, he learned of the fall of the three Illinois posts on August 6. The news came by way of Francis Maisonville, a British spy Hamilton had stationed in the Illinois settlements. According to Maisonville, de Rocheblave, “was laid in Irons and put into a place where hogs had been kept, ankle deep in filth.” More than likely, this account of Clark’s actions regarding de Rocheblave is true. Such treatment corresponded with that which Clark or any of his lieutenants expected should they fall into the hands of the British or their Native American allies.<sup>11</sup>



The day after learning of the events in the Illinois, Hamilton dispatched a letter to Governor Guy Carleton at Quebec, who at the time was Hamilton's superior. Three days later, Hamilton added a longer and more detailed dispatch. In it, Hamilton scoffed at the notion of any substantive American force operating in the Illinois country. He was right insofar as the size of Clark's force was concerned, but he made a critical mistake when he underestimated the courage and daring of Clark.

Hamilton suffered from the same shortcomings as many of the other British officials in the new world. At the time, many British governors and their subordinates served a dual role as a civilian administrator and military commander. They were often deficient in one or sometimes both of these roles and Henry Hamilton was no different. By all indications, he was a very capable civil official, but even a cursory examination of this correspondence paints Hamilton as a less than decisive commander. His August 11 letter to Carleton ended with, "My Situation is thoroughly disagreeable at present – however I still look with patience from [for] some Instruction by which to guide myself and others." A day later, he began a letter to Carleton by saying; "You may well imagine how earnestly I look towards Canada for intelligence instructions orders."<sup>12</sup>

The rest of the dispatches were nothing more than Hamilton's effort to convince his superiors that he was actually doing something about Clark. He talked of sending representatives to his Indian allies with belts and gifts. He also mentioned several times that he felt he could not act without orders from Quebec. It seems ridiculous for a Lieutenant Governor of a British possession to refuse to act unless ordered to by his superior hundreds of miles away. Hamilton certainly had the authority as the highest-ranking British official near the Illinois country to deal with George Rogers Clark as he

saw fit. It was also already a part of his responsibility to protect the area from American encroachment. In June 1777, Carleton had ordered him to commence Indian raids on the American settlements in Kentucky, Ohio and the Illinois country. Hamilton's Indian allies had carried out the attacks with such ferocity that the Americans nicknamed him Henry "the Hair Buyer," for his supposed willingness to pay Indians in return for American scalps. Why, then, did the infamous Hair Buyer General sit and wait for Guy Carleton (who unbeknownst to Hamilton had been replaced by Frederick Haldimand) to give him permission to act?<sup>13</sup>

Interestingly enough, Hamilton's graphic sobriquet may hold the answer. In reality, Hamilton was not much of a scalp buyer at all. In a letter to Haldimand in September of 1778, Hamilton expressed great satisfaction when Indians came to Detroit with prisoners instead of scalps:

Many of the War parties bring in prisoners and have shewn a humanity hitherto unpracticed among them, they never fail of a gratuity on every proof of obedience they show, in sparing the lives of such as are incapable of defending themselves.<sup>14</sup>

In a speech to an Indian council held in the summer of 1778, Hamilton encouraged the various nations to show humanity toward non-combatants. "I hope you act the same part, and not redden your axe with the blood of Women and children or Innocent men – I know that men kill men and not Children . . ." In that same council, Hamilton congratulated the tribes on the taking of prisoners and scalps, but there is no mention of his ever paying a particular price for a scalp. He certainly accepted the scalps offered to him by Indians friendly to the British, and he most certainly gave them presents in reward for their loyalty to the crown. To refuse to do so would have been an insult to the warriors. These same warriors however, would have taken the scalps

regardless of Hamilton's feelings on the matter. The practice of scalping did not originate with the British. Conversely, had George Rogers Clark's speeches to the Indians of the Wabash River area secured him more Native American support than he ultimately received, he most certainly would have accepted many British scalps from his new allies.<sup>15</sup>

Labeling Henry Hamilton as "the Hair-Buyer," has forever crippled American historians' objectivity in dealing with him. Americans cannot get rid of the picture created by such a nickname. It is a picture akin to that of a Nazi death camp official or terrorist leader. In reality, Hamilton was nothing more than a vacillating British official. If Henry Hamilton had gotten his way, he would not have left Detroit in the fall of 1778. However, Frederick Haldimand was in charge, and he was not impressed with Hamilton's reports of presents given to Indians, or prisoners and scalps taken in the last year; nor did he like Hamilton's hypotheses of Clark's intentions, and fears of abandonment by Indians. Hamilton reported everything he could think of to the governor except whether or not he actually planned to do anything about Clark. By the end of August, a full three weeks after he had learned of Clark's victories in the Illinois country, Hamilton still had not prepared an expedition to retake the frontier posts. After hinting to Hamilton that he should march from Detroit against Clark, Haldimand finally reached the limits of his patience with his subordinate's lack of initiative:

I have communicated to you in my publick dispatches accompanying this, every instruction which at this distance I thought it prudent to give you on the present occasion. But as you must now be so well Acquainted With the degree of Confidence which is to be placed in the Savages, and What numbers of them you could collect to serve upon emergency; with the Numbers also and disposition of the Militia of your district, and the Company which I understand you have raised and put on actual pay ready for Service . . . I must therefore desire that you will

immediately and by the safest and most expeditious conveyance acquaint me with your Ideas of practicability of recovering the possession of the Illinois . . .<sup>16</sup>

Upon receipt of this rather terse dispatch from Haldimand, Hamilton finally stirred from his lethargy and began to plan an expedition (see map on page 61). The preparations took nearly six weeks. Finally, on October 7, 1778, as the war in the east settled into a bloody sort of equilibrium, Hamilton set out from Detroit down the Maumee and Wabash Rivers bound for the Illinois country and an appointment with George Rogers Clark.<sup>17</sup>

Despite his reluctance to embark on the expedition, Henry Hamilton succeeded in gathering a respectable force to march on the Illinois. Figure 5-1 is an accounting of his volunteer troop strength that Hamilton included in a dispatch to Haldimand.

**Figure 5-1 Return of Detachment of the Royal Artillery, Capt. Lamothe's Company of Volunteers and the Volunteer Militia of Detroit who offered themselves between the 17<sup>th</sup> & 24<sup>th</sup> of September 1778 to Serve on an Enterprise against the Rebels**

	<b>Commissioned Officers</b>		<b>Staff</b>				<b>Non-Commissioned Officers</b>				
	Majors	Captains	Lieutenants	Adjutants	Quartermaster	Surgeon	Serjeants	Drummer	Mattrosses	Volunteers	
Royal Artillery			1						2		
Lamothe's Company of Volunteers		1	1				3			35	
Volunteer Militia	1	2	4	1	1	1	4			71	
<b>Total</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>7</b>		<b>2</b>	<b>106</b>	

In addition to the volunteers listed in the table, Hamilton's expedition also boasted thirty regulars of the King's Eighth Regiment and sixty Indians. He also planned to recruit more Indians as he traveled.<sup>18</sup>

As the winter of 1778-79 approached Kaskaskia, George Rogers Clark fought

# Campaigns in the West and South 1778-1781



frantically to hold his tiny army together. He knew that the British would attempt to retake the Illinois country. It seemed likely that they would attack in the spring. In the eighteenth century, armies rarely fought in the winter if they could help it. With this in mind, Clark, now all of twenty-six years old, knew he had two to three months to prepare his small force for the spring campaign season and the coming British offensive. He spent his days drilling and re-drilling his troops, or “harangueing them on Parade,” as he liked to call it. He spent his nights pondering their chances of success. As the temperature dropped and the last lonely leaves of autumn fell to the ground, Clark began to worry. He had not heard from Governor Henry or anyone connected with the government in Virginia since he set out in January, and no reinforcements had arrived. He also encountered difficulties recruiting a French militia. Fearing that the British would set out immediately from Detroit to take back the Illinois territory if they found out just how thin his defenses actually were, Clark did his best to conceal his weakness from friend and foe alike. “I suffered no Parrade except the Guards for a considerable time, and took every other precaution to keep every Person ignorant of our numbers, which was generally thought to be nearly double what we really had.”<sup>19</sup>

On October 20, as Clark worked to prepare his men for the winter, Henry Hamilton reported to Haldimand that his force had indeed grown since their departure, “We have been joined by several on our road & I am persuaded shall have as many as we can manage or wish for.” However, even with this increase in his numbers, Hamilton continued to loiter about, marching from one Indian village to another. He lingered there because the lieutenant governor never intended to take back the whole of the Illinois country. Vincennes was his only goal from the beginning. He must have figured that

retaking Vincennes would show Haldimand that he had done something. Then his commanding officer could turn his attention elsewhere and Hamilton could do as he pleased.<sup>20</sup>

. On November 1, Hamilton reported his updated troop strength in a dispatch to Haldimand. His army was now over three hundred strong. This number included nearly one hundred Indians who had joined him during the journey. If Hamilton had made any real effort at gathering intelligence on the Illinois country, he would have realized that his force was more than a match for Clark's troops at Kaskaskia, Cahokia, and Vincennes combined. However, he attempted no intelligence gathering until he was much closer to Vincennes and that only came after he learned by accident of the weakness of the Vincennes garrison. Disregarding the information, Hamilton continued to move slowly, complaining that the intelligence was not reliable. "The account of the Strength of the Rebels varies so much that I am at a loss to form a judgement of it." Instead of sending his own reconnaissance parties ahead, he did nothing until December 15 when a scouting party from Vincennes fell into his lap. According to the captives, Vincennes was indeed in poor condition, "from these Men I learned, that the Commandant has permitted almost all his people to return to their homes, & depended on the French Militia who had all taken an oath of fidelity to the States." Apparently, this information was enough to spur Hamilton to action.<sup>21</sup>

On the morning of the sixteenth, Hamilton planned his attack on Vincennes. It would commence the next day. In direct opposition to his reputation as an instigator of Indian massacres, the Hair Buyer planned to use his Indian volunteers to guard the roads leading to and from Vincennes and not in the actual attack. He was afraid that they

would get into the post's liquor supply and then kill women and children. He selected the detachment of the King's Eighth Regiment and the other volunteers to make the assault. However, things went quickly awry. Upon seeing the assault force move out, the Indians decided to go with them so as not to miss out on the action. After some time, Hamilton and the chiefs managed to restrain them.<sup>22</sup>

At that same time, Captain Leonard Helm, the Commandant of Vincennes, realized his peril. The French Volunteer militia, most of his garrison, had just deserted him upon learning of Hamilton's approach. Without the French militia, Helm had only three soldiers to defend Fort Clark (formerly Fort Sackville). He had no choice but to surrender the garrison. He sent a hurried dispatch to Clark at Kaskaskia apprising him of the situation. Helm then sat down and waited for his opportunity to surrender. It came shortly as Hamilton himself led the approach to the fort. "I proceeded to the fort with the detachment of the King's regiment the 6 pr. [six pounder] in front, and sent to summon the Officer."<sup>23</sup>

The negotiations between Hamilton and Helm took less than a minute. After all, Helm was in no position to bargain and Hamilton just wanted to end the whole thing. For all his talk in earlier dispatches about making the rebels pay, Hamilton offered Helm magnanimous terms. One of the reasons for this leniency was that Hamilton had other pressing matters on his mind. His Indian allies were now descending on the fort. They had killed no one and had taken none of the plunder that Hamilton had promised them. He was therefore in a hurry to secure the fort before his Native American allies took matters into their own hands. Once the gate opened, Hamilton immediately posted sentries to stop them from entering. However, according to Hamilton's journal, several



of the fort's gun ports were still open and in a matter of minutes the warriors streamed inside the fort:

A scene of confusion now followed for the Savages first object was the securing some horses which had been bought up at the Illinois for Congress, and which had been kept up in the Fort to the number of 32 . . . Centries being immediately posted at Captain Helm's door, I hoped to secure for him any furniture or goods he might have, but the Savages hoping to find Plunder or Rum, went to the rear of the house and Presently got in at the Windows,--Captain Helm told me there was a barrel of Rum in the house and he apprehended the consequences should the Savages get at it, a centinel was immediately set who secured it .<sup>24</sup>

Once the Indians calmed down, Henry Hamilton officially made Leonard Helm his prisoner, but Helm still held out hope that the courier he sent to Clark would bring relief. That hope vanished minutes later, however, when the scouting parties Hamilton had sent to guard the roads entered the fort with the messenger in tow. Hamilton took Vincennes without a shot. Now he could settle down and rest for the winter. It was almost Christmas, and Hamilton knew that the news of Vincennes' fall would not reach Clark for weeks. Soon the rivers of the Illinois country would flood as they did every winter. Only a madman would attempt to march through that gigantic icy lake.

## Notes to Chapter V

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<sup>1</sup> George Rogers Clark, *Campaign in the Illinois* (Cincinnati: Robert Clarke and CO., 1869), 36; Clark's Memoir in James Alton James, ed., *George Rogers Clark Papers 1771-1781* (Springfield, Illinois: Illinois State Historical Library, 1912), 239.

<sup>2</sup> Clark, *Campaign in the Illinois*, 36-37.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.; Clark's Memoir in James, ed., *George Rogers Clark Papers 1771-1781*, 240.

<sup>4</sup> George Rogers Clark to Oliver Pollock, 3 August 1778, in Kathrine Wagner Seineke ed., *The George Rogers Clark Adventure in the Illinois and Selected Documents of the American Revolution at the Frontier Posts*, (New Orleans: Polyanthos, 1981), 268.

<sup>5</sup> Clark, *Campaign in the Illinois*, 39-40.

<sup>6</sup> Clark's Memoir in James, ed., *George Rogers Clark Papers 1771-1781*, 244-45.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 248-49; Clark, *Campaign in the Illinois*, 41-44.

<sup>9</sup> Clark, *Campaign in the Illinois*, 45-46.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Clark's Memoir in James, ed., *George Rogers Clark Papers 1771-1781*, 176.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid. ; Henry Hamilton to Guy Carleton: Received by Haldimand, 7 August 1778, in Seineke ed., *The George Rogers Clark Adventure in the Illinois and Selected Documents of the American Revolution at the Frontier Posts*, 269; Henry Hamilton to Guy Carleton, 11 August 1778, in Seineke, ed., *The George Rogers Clark Adventure in the Illinois and Selected Documents of the American Revolution at the Frontier Posts*, 270-71;

<sup>13</sup> Henry Hamilton to Unidentified Officer at Quebec, 12 August 1778, in Seineke, ed., *The George Rogers Clark Adventure in the Illinois and Selected Documents of the American Revolution at the Frontier Posts*, 271; L. Edward Purcell, ed., *Who was Who in the American Revolution*. (New York: Facts on File, 1993), 210.

<sup>14</sup> Henry Hamilton to Frederick Haldimand with Two Enclosures, 5 September 1778, in Seineke, ed., *The George Rogers Clark Adventure in the Illinois and Selected Documents of the American Revolution at the Frontier Posts*, 282-86.

<sup>15</sup> Summary of Hamilton's Report on Two Indian Councils in Seineke, ed., *The George Rogers Clark Adventure in the Illinois and Selected Documents of the American Revolution at the Frontier Posts*, 246-56.

<sup>16</sup> Frederick Haldimand to Henry Hamilton, 26 August 1778, in Seineke, ed., *The George Rogers Clark Adventure in the Illinois and Selected Documents of the American Revolution at the Frontier Posts*, 275-76; Frederick Haldimand to Henry Hamilton, 27 August 1778, in Seineke, ed., *The George Rogers Clark Adventure in the Illinois and Selected Documents of the American Revolution at the Frontier Posts*, 276-77.

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- <sup>17</sup> Henry Hamilton's Diary of His Journey to Vincennes, 7 October-15 December 1778, in Seineke, ed., *The George Rogers Clark Adventure in the Illinois and Selected Documents of the American Revolution at the Frontier Posts*, 319-26.
- <sup>18</sup> Henry Hamilton to Frederick Haldimand, 22 September – 5 October 1778, in Seineke, ed., *The George Rogers Clark Adventure in the Illinois and Selected Documents of the American Revolution at the Frontier Posts*, 308-317.
- <sup>19</sup> Clark, *Campaign in the Illinois*, 47-51; Clark's Memoir in James, ed., *George Rogers Clark Papers 1771-1781*, 261-62.
- <sup>20</sup> Henry Hamilton's Diary of His Journey to Vincennes, 7 October-15 December 1778, in Seineke, ed., *The George Rogers Clark Adventure in the Illinois and Selected Documents of the American Revolution at the Frontier Posts*, 319-26; Henry Hamilton to Frederick Haldimand, 20 October 1778, in Seineke, ed., *The George Rogers Clark Adventure in the Illinois and Selected Documents of the American Revolution at the Frontier Posts*, 329.
- <sup>21</sup> Henry Hamilton's Diary of His Journey to Vincennes, 7 October-15 December 1778, in Seineke, ed., *The George Rogers Clark Adventure in the Illinois and Selected Documents of the American Revolution at the Frontier Posts*, 319-26; Henry Hamilton to Frederick Haldimand, 4 December 1778, in Seineke, ed., *The George Rogers Clark Adventure in the Illinois and Selected Documents of the American Revolution at the Frontier Posts*, 331-32.
- <sup>22</sup> Henry Hamilton's Diary of His Journey to Vincennes, 7 October-15 December 1778, in Seineke, ed., *The George Rogers Clark Adventure in the Illinois and Selected Documents of the American Revolution at the Frontier Posts*, 319-26.
- <sup>23</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>24</sup> Ibid.

## **Chapter VI**

### **The Big Knife Strikes**

As the fall of 1778 gave way to winter, the lack of news from Williamsburg and especially Vincennes weighed heavily on George Rogers Clark. While the combatants in the east had long since ceased offensive operations for the winter, the most intense fighting yet was in store for Clark and his men. In his memoir, he recalled the tense early weeks of winter, “no information from St. Vincents for some time past as once a fortnight was the fixed time of the post we began to suspect some thing was wrong we sent spies that did not Return and we remained in a state of suspence.”<sup>1</sup>

Finally, in mid-December of 1778, Clark received two dispatches from Patrick Henry. Unfortunately, Henry’s dispatches mentioned nothing about reinforcements for Clark other than to say that the Continental Congress had decided to send troops to the frontier at some point in the future. The only other news of interest to Clark was that Henry had included a promotion for him. As of December 16, 1778, George Rogers Clark was a colonel.

During that same month, Clark made two rare errors. Receiving information from his spies of Hamilton’s departure from Detroit, he incorrectly assumed that Hamilton had abandoned Detroit as indefensible and was on his way to attack General Lachlan McIntosh whom Clark had heard was marching on Detroit from Fort Pitt. Clark further assumed that Hamilton had decided his only chance to defeat McIntosh was to harass him on his way to Detroit. In reality, at this time Hamilton had almost reached Vincennes. Clark decided to celebrate Christmas and wait to hear of Detroit’s fall. “It being near Christmas we feasted ourselves with the hopes of immediately hearing from Detroit, and began to think that we had been neglected in an express not being sent with the Important

news of its being ours.” Clark then made another mistake. One of Hamilton’s spies, apprehended in Cahokia, informed Clark, after much torture that McIntosh had returned to Fort Pitt without engaging the enemy and that Hamilton was marching on the Illinois Country. Clark decided that Hamilton must have been heading for Kaskaskia since it was the strongest garrison and his headquarters. He soon realized his mistake.<sup>2</sup>

Clark decided to travel to Cahokia in the hope that he might discover some news there. After a delay of several days due to a blizzard, he set out in early January 1779. Clark and his entourage left Kaskaskia while it was still snowing. After about thirty minutes, the snow let up and Clark and his men noticed signs that several people had been on the road shortly before they had set out. Unfortunately, the group did not have long to ponder this development. A few minutes after they noticed the tracks, one of the carriages sank into a rut. Apparently, the rut was deep enough to upset the carriage and prevent the jostled passenger from getting out. According to Clark, the passenger had to wait for help until the rest of the assembly could recover from their laughter.<sup>3</sup>

Unbeknownst to Clark or his jovial companions, the infamous “Hair Buyer” had put a price on his head. Some time earlier, Hamilton had sent out a party of warriors along with white officers to capture the Chief of the Big Knives. A small scout party of the detachment Hamilton had sent to abduct Clark lay concealed within arrow shot. The Indians chose not to fire on the party. Clark later learned, probably from Hamilton, just how close he came to capture or even death that night. He wrote of the incident in both his memoir and his letter to George Mason. In the earlier account, a humble Clark assigned the credit for sparing his life to Hamilton, “I believe nothing here saved me, but the Instruction they not Kill me, or the fear of being overpowered, not having an

opportunity to Alarm the main Body, (which lay a half a mile off) without being discovered themselves.” In his later memoir though, Clark never mentioned Hamilton’s orders, “I imagine the truth was they ware afraid to discover themselves as they [we] ware near double their numbers . . . .”<sup>4</sup>

After their brush with disaster, Clark and his party made their way to the small French village of Prairie du Rocher less than fifteen miles from Kaskaskia. While they were there, the inhabitants of the town decided to hold a ball for the colonel and his companions. The Americans enjoyed themselves at the ball until around midnight when a rider arrived with the erroneous news that Hamilton was within three miles of Kaskaskia with eight hundred men. Clark later learned that the same party of Indians who had nearly ambushed him had been discovered by locals and had told them the bogus story of Hamilton preparing to attack Kaskaskia. Clark then realized that every person at the ball had turned to him for some sign of what to do. He characteristically seized the opportunity to boost the morale of the local population and their faith in him by his actions.<sup>5</sup>

Without hesitation, he ordered his horse saddled and announced his intention to ride to Kaskaskia to direct the defense of the town personally. According to his letter to George Mason, several of those assembled begged him not to return to Kaskaskia, as it surely must already have fallen. Some even proposed that Clark escape to Spanish territory across the Mississippi. Clark responded with the bravado that was characteristic of his legend. He ordered the ball to continue.

I thanked them for the Care they had of my Person, and told them it was the fate of War, that a good Soldier never ought to be afraid of his Life where there was a Probability of his doing service by ventureing of it which was my Case. That I hoped that they would not let the news Spoil our Divirsion sooner than was

necessary, that we would divert ourselves until our horses was ready, forced them to dance, and endeavoured to appear as unconcerned as if no such thing was in Adjutation.<sup>6</sup>

Clark's conduct apparently inspired several of the young men in attendance to take to their horses with him. Once he saddled his horse, Clark paused only to send an express to Joseph Bowman at Cahokia requesting reinforcements and then set off. He then instructed each of his men to take a blanket to disguise themselves as Indians if they should meet the enemy. All the dash and agitation were in vain, as they discovered Kaskaskia just as they had left it. Clark still believed, though, that Hamilton was in the area and figured the Englishman had only postponed the attack until better weather. He then set about preparing Kaskaskia's defense. As he was doing this, Father Gibault came to him in great distress. The priest was frightened (and justifiably so) at what Henry Hamilton might do to him should the Hair Buyer take control of the town. After all, Gibault was the one who had convinced Vincennes to support the Americans, thus becoming a traitor in the eyes of the British. Taking a coerced oath of allegiance to Clark and his government was one thing. Willingly aiding Clark in the subjugation of a British town and fort was another. Clark again took the opportunity to display his mastery and downright enjoyment of the manipulation of other's minds to achieve his aims.

The Priest, of all Men the most afraid of Mr. Hammilton, he was in the greatest consternation, determined to Act agreeable to my Instruction. I found by his Consternation that he was sure the Fort would be taken, Except Reinforced by the Garrison of Cohos which I did not chuse to let him know would be the case although I knew him to be a Zealous Friend. I pretended that I wanted him to go the Spanish side with Publick Papers and Money, the Proposition pleas'd him well, he immediately started & getting into an island the Ice passing so thick down the Messicippi, that he was obliged to Encamp three days in the most obscure part of the island with only a Servant to attend him.<sup>7</sup>

While Father Gibault spent the night huddling for warmth, Clark spent it worrying

about whether or not the French inhabitants of Kaskaskia would fight against the British. This worry was very reasonable given their rather quick decision to aid him when he took the post. The problem of French loyalty was a very real one for Clark during his occupation of the Illinois country. While news of the Franco-American Alliance had reached the frontier in the late summer of 1778, shortly after Clark's first campaign, many Frenchmen were still apprehensive about actively joining the Americans for fear of their fate should the British win the war. The dilemma of whether or not to support the Americans, while incredibly frustrating and incomprehensible to Clark, was a very real one for the French citizens. They did not ask for the American Revolution, yet they also had not asked to be British subjects. More than likely, the average Frenchman living in the Illinois country at this time simply wished to go on living. Much like many of the Native Americans in the area, the French were probably trying to determine which side could protect the things they held dear such as their homes, families and crops. In his near-fanatical zeal for the American cause, Clark could never understand this dilemma and therefore attributed it to some sort of weakness on their part. He decided to order those men with no families to defend the fort in case of siege, while he ordered those with families to remain neutral. He also resolved to defend the fort, only giving it up once the British had paid a dear price for it. If Captain Bowman arrived before the British, then Clark planned to hole up in the fort and hold out until Hamilton's Indian allies tired and left for their villages. To test their loyalty, Clark held a council with the inhabitants of Kaskaskia to determine what they would do in the event of an attack. After much talk and consternation, the inhabitants decided to do nothing, but assured Clark that they were on the American side. They told him that if his chances of success were greater, they would



join him. Clark was incensed. After delivering what he termed, “a Lecture suitable for a set of Traitors,” he ordered the individuals who had expressed such an opinion out of the fort. The whole episode was a calculated attempt on Clark’s part to render the inhabitants of Kaskaskia even more dependent upon him and to make himself and his garrison seem weaker than it really was. “I determined to make myself appear to them as desperate as Possible that it might have a Greater effect on the Enemy.”<sup>8</sup>

Sensing he had the townspeople in his hands, Clark seized the opportunity. He listened to them as they asked him to order all provisions into the fort to withstand the siege and let them stay as well. He answered them by saying that they could send the provisions if they wanted, but that they must leave the fort and that he was going to burn the town. He also ordered them to stay inside their houses. Carrying forward his bluff he set fire to a couple of out buildings, which, covered with snow, burned for a while and then fizzled out. According to Clark, the citizenry were in great distress. They had angered their protector and now supposedly stood alone to face Hamilton’s Indians, whom they were sure would show them no mercy. They were completely dependent upon Clark for their survival. Their dependence was not exactly loyalty, but it was close enough for George Rogers Clark.<sup>9</sup>

By nightfall, the inhabitants had brought six months’ worth of provisions into the fort. One citizen however, disobeyed Clark’s order to stay inside. While riding outside the city, he met a man who told him that a party was heading to the island to apprehend Father Gibault. He rushed back to town to tell Gibault’s brother-in-law, but begged him not to tell Clark that he had disobeyed his order. In his anguish, the Priest’s brother-in-law rushed to Clark and told him the whole story. Clark sent for the man and ordered

him hanged. More than likely, this was another publicity stunt he never intended to carry out. Conveniently, Clark relented at the appearance of the man's wife and seven children.

The next day, Captain Bowman arrived with his own company of volunteers plus a company of militia from Cahokia. "We now began to make a tolerable appearance and seemed to defie the Enemy." At this point Clark saw another opportunity to psychologically bind the French citizens of Kaskaskia to his purpose,

I took advantage of the favourable opportunity to Attach them intirely in my Interest, and instead of Treating them more sevear as they expected on my being Reinforced, I altered my conduct towards them and treated them with the greatest kindnes, granting them every request, my influence among them, in a few hours was greater than ever; they condemning themselves and thought that I had treated them as they deserved; and I believe, had Mr. Hamilton appear'd we should have defeated him with a good deal of ease not so numerous but the Men being much better. <sup>10</sup>

Shortly thereafter, Clark's spies returned with the news that the supposed "army" was nothing more than the forty men Hamilton had dispatched to try to capture him.

Not long after the false alarm, on January 29, 1779, Francis Vigo, a Spanish merchant who had been at Vincennes, came to Clark with the news of its capitulation. From Vigo, Clark learned very valuable intelligence about the size and nature of Hamilton's force and about the surrender of Vincennes and Ft. Sackville. Vigo told him that when Hamilton had taken possession of the town (December 17, 1778), his force consisted of around eight hundred men, most of whom were Indians. He reported that Hamilton had decided it was too close to winter to attempt to take Kaskaskia, so he sent nearly all of his Indians out in war parties. This dismissal of allies and some desertions decimated Hamilton's force to a garrison of 80 men. According to Vigo, his Indians were not to return until the spring. Hamilton had also sent dispatches to the southern

Indians, and was expecting nearly five hundred of them to join him soon. <sup>11</sup>

Clark's situation was deteriorating quickly and he knew it. Vincennes had fallen to the British. His own army had dwindled to approximately one hundred men plus whatever French militia he could convince to join him. In addition, their participation in Hamilton's campaign against Vincennes made it clear to Clark that his negotiations with many of the area Native American tribes had not succeeded. Vigo's news weighed heavily on his mind for days. Clark and his men were in his own words, "cut off [by flood] from any Intercourse between us and the [rest of the] continent." In the letter to Mason, Clark expressed his desperation upon learning of Hamilton's success at Vincennes. "Our Situation appear'd desperate, it was at this moment I would have bound myself seven years a Slave, to have had five hundred Troops." The possibility of a sizable reinforcement was even more remote than Clark surmised. By this time, the British had decided to relocate the focus of their war effort to the south. Consequently, any troops that the Continental Congress or Virginia could spare, would be engaged in the Carolinas and Virginia for the duration of the war. <sup>12</sup>

After much rumination, Clark decided that the only thing to do was exactly what Hamilton would not expect him to. He decided to take the fight to Hamilton at Vincennes. More importantly, he decided to do so in the middle of winter. Clark then gathered his officers together to explain his daring plan. According to him, they were all in favor of it. If Clark's account of the officer's council is true, it must not have been easy for Clark's subordinates to agree to such a plan, but the case for the attack was compelling for two reasons. First, Hamilton's strength would only increase during the winter and early spring. If they did nothing now, the rest of the Illinois would succumb

easily in the spring of 1779. Second, Clark had led them to victory every time they fought. There was no reason to doubt him. <sup>13</sup>

Clark then sent dispatches to Cahokia ordering the return of the garrison there under a Captain McCarty and set about preparing his small army for the arduous winter march ahead of them. In addition to the snow and cold, they would also have to deal with the yearly flood of the Wabash River. Because of the flooding, Clark decided to include a naval component in the attack. Purchasing a large “Mississippi Boat,” the colonel set his men to work converting it to a warship. Within a few days, the former civilian boat boasted two four pounders and four large swivel canons as well as a crew of forty-six under the command of Captain John Rogers. On February 4, 1779, the galley, now called *The Willing* embarked with orders from Clark to sail up the Wabash to the mouth of the White River and wait until Clark arrived with his land force.<sup>14</sup>

Clark took much pride in his vessel and in its effect on the inhabitants of Kaskaskia. According to him, they were very impressed with it. However, one wonders if he had any inkling of what to do with it other than to raise the morale of his men and the local populace simply by parading such a dreadnought before them. Since some of the water routes to Vincennes would almost certainly be frozen, it seems doubtful that *The Willing* would even make it close enough to Vincennes to use the cannon. The more likely possibility is that Clark planned to dismount the cannon once the vessel was near Vincennes and march its crew and cannon into the town. If that was his plan, *The Willing's* tardiness in arriving at the rendezvous point put an end to it. In regard to morale though, *The Willing* worked like a charm as Clark again demonstrated his uncanny ability to inspire confidence in those around him during the preparations for the

march.

I conducted myself as though I was sure of taking Mr. Hamilton, instructed my officers to observe the same Rule. In a day or two the Country seemed to believe it, many anxious to Retrieve their Characters turned out, the Ladies began also to be spirited and interest themselves in the Expedition, which had great effect on the Young Men.<sup>15</sup>

On February 5, 1779, Clark set out from Kaskaskia with 170 men and what little supplies he had been able to secure from the inhabitants of the Illinois and the irregular shipments of goods from Oliver Pollock in New Orleans. In addition to its obvious importance for the security of the western settlements, Clark's campaign commenced at a time when the Americans needed a victory very badly. Washington's best showing during 1778 had been a bloody draw at Monmouth, and in December the city of Savannah, Georgia had fallen to the British. Even though Clark was most certainly not aware of the added psychological importance of his campaign, history has understood it.

After a three-mile march through flooded country, they encamped for the night. Clark's little army remained at its campsite until February 8. He never gave a reason for this uncharacteristic three-day pause in either his memoir or his letter to George Mason. However, he did mention that the weather was exceptionally wet and that he allowed his men to shoot whenever available to keep the rigors of the journey off their minds. Perhaps one or both of these factors played a part in Clark's decision to encamp for so long.<sup>16</sup>

Not long after they began marching again, the trail became increasingly harsh. After five days of grueling marching through terrain, "under water for several Inches," Clark and his men reached the Little Wabash River. What they found there nearly destroyed all of their hopes. According to Clark, the area normally contained two small

tributaries three miles apart. Because of this fork, settlers often referred to the area as the two Little Wabashes. When he and his men reached this point on approximately February 14, the two Little Wabashes had become one. An area five-miles wide, from the near banks of one tributary to the far banks of the other, lay under two to four feet of ice-cold water. To many other armies, and in particular, many other commanders, this obstacle would have ended the expedition, but Clark was determined to cross. He saw in the river crossing, another opportunity to reinforce his standing among the troops.<sup>17</sup>

I amediately Set to work without holdig any consultation about it or suffering any body else to do so in my presence . . . and acted as though crossing the water would be only a piece of diversion . . .<sup>18</sup>

Clark however, was anything but calm on the inside. In his memoir, he admitted to a certain amount of anxiety when he realized that making such a crossing would cut off all retreat for him and his men. Nevertheless, he ordered a large canoe built and ferried his army across the deepest areas. They waded the rest of the way. After three bone-chilling days, Clark and his men camped on the other side of the “Little” Wabash. According to Clark, it rained nearly three quarters of the march, but he never called a halt no matter how torrential the downpour. His calculated risk paid off in two very important ways. His army was now safely across the Little Wabash, and his men now began to believe that nothing, either natural or man-made, could stand in their way.<sup>19</sup>

As his men grew in confidence, George Rogers Clark began to doubt the mission’s success. He still worried that the flooding of the low country would doom his expedition. He knew that the British could easily defeat his force if they discovered it and that he could go nowhere in retreat. Clark also worried that Captain Rogers and *The Willing* would not reach the rendezvous point. Whatever doubts plagued him, though,

Clark managed to suppress them long enough to lead his men onward toward Hamilton and Vincennes. On February 17, they reached the Embarrass River valley. It, too, was under water, and they were still nine water-soaked miles from Vincennes. Clark then decided to march below the mouth of the Embarrass to cross the Wabash itself. Finally, on February 18, at around two o'clock, Clark and his army reached the banks of the Wabash River three leagues below Vincennes. The Wabash, however, was much too deep for them to wade. Clark then sent several parties out in the one canoe they still had (they had lost several others in the course of the march) to try to find Captain Rogers and *The Willing*. At the time, Clark assumed that it was the only way they could cross the Wabash. The search parties all returned with no trace of the galley.<sup>20</sup>

At this point, the morale of Clark's men began to falter. According to Clark's memoir, he tried to laugh off their pleas to turn the expedition around, while he struggled to find a solution to their predicament. Clark still had no answers when, on February 20, one of his search parties captured a boatload of French hunters. From them, Clark learned that Hamilton was unaware that Clark had marched from Kaskaskia and that the townspeople of Vincennes would assist the Americans if they attacked. The Frenchmen also told Clark that two boats which he could use to make his crossing were adrift upriver. Clark's men succeeded in securing one of the boats, and by the early morning hours of the twenty-first, Clark and his troops finally began crossing the Wabash.<sup>21</sup>

The Wabash had also exceeded its banks. Clark and his men again found themselves up to their waists in icy water. The French hunters had told Clark that the nearest dry land was only a short distance away at a place called the Sugar Camps. Clark sent a detachment in a canoe to try to find it. They soon returned and reported nothing

but water as far as they could see. Clark decided to determine whether his men could march through the flooded river. Within a few steps, the water came up to his neck. Clark's apprehension deepened and he made a near catastrophic mistake. After emerging from the water, he spoke to one of his officers in a very somber manner in front of his men. Although none of them heard what he said, his already downcast troops took this as a sign of resignation on the part of Clark. Within minutes, the news that the expedition had failed raced through the camp. According to Clark's memoir, he watched the confusion for a moment or two. What he did next epitomizes his mastery in motivating the common soldier. Sensing that he was about to lose the respect of his men, and therefore his chance to surprise Hamilton, Clark quietly ordered his officers to follow his lead and he stepped toward the water. Next, he took some water in his hand, mixed it with black powder and smeared it all over his face. He then gave, "the war hoop and marched into the water without saying a word."<sup>22</sup>

This particular episode requires close scrutiny, however, as it is one of the few occurrences that Clark included in one account of the expedition while leaving it out of the other. The tale of the Wabash crossing appears only in Clark's later memoir. Clark did not include it in his letter to George Mason, although he did mention that the story of the river crossing was so fantastic that no one would believe it. At first glance, it seems possible that Clark mentioned the story in his memoir only in an attempt to resurrect a reputation that had suffered severely since the end of the war. In fact, without further investigation, that conclusion not only seems possible, it seems probable. However, in addition to Clark's mention of the unbelievable circumstances regarding the crossing, there is other evidence to examine. Captain Joseph Bowman, Clark's second in



command, mentioned in his journal that the crossing would not have taken place had Clark not inspired his men by his actions. Bowman did not record precisely what those actions were, but his account does suggest that Clark did do something out of the ordinary to motivate his troops to make the crossing. Therefore, it is likely that Clark's later version of the crossing is closer to the truth.

According to Bowman, most of Clark's men marched through the water. Those who were too weak went in canoes. By February 22, they made it to the Sugar Camps. Here, they rested for the night and awoke to the sound of Henry Hamilton's morning artillery salute from Fort Sackville approximately five miles away.<sup>23</sup>

The next day, the army marched across the four-mile long Horseshoe plain. It too, lay submerged in chest high ice-choked water. As much as his men and officers feared for their survival, Clark never hesitated in his push through the waterlogged countryside. Bowman, however, felt that the four-mile march through the plain would cost them. "Here we expected some of our brave men must certainly perish, having frozen in the night, and so long fasting." However, Clark pushed ahead, breaking trail for his men and visibly putting his life in jeopardy before theirs. According to Bowman, Clark's doggedness achieved the desired effect. "Never were men so animated with the thought of avenging the wrongs done to their back settlements as this small army was."<sup>24</sup>

Toward the end of the march, Clark noticed that more and more of his men were on the verge of collapse, and he was not far behind them himself. There were no trees or brush for the men to steady themselves with, and the ice was as much as three-quarters of an inch thick in some spots. He ordered the canoes to push ahead to dry land and after unloading their cargo to come back and pick up any man who could not make it. At

around one o'clock in the afternoon of February 23, Clark's frozen and emaciated army reached dry land and encamped at a grove of trees known as Warrior's Island. They were within two miles of Vincennes.<sup>25</sup>

Soon they noticed some local citizens out hunting ducks. Clark quickly dispatched some of his French volunteers to capture them. Upon interrogation, Clark discovered that one of them was sympathetic to his cause. The prisoner confirmed much of the intelligence Clark had learned from previous hostages. He also told Clark that the British had finished making repairs to the fort that morning and that several Indians were in the town. Clark also learned that a party of English was encamped to the north and if they found out about Clark's intentions, they might raise enough Indians to come and lift a siege. Again, Clark decided his best weapon was deception and psychological warfare. "I resolved to appear as Daring as possible, that the Enemy might conceive by our behaviour that we were very numerous and probably discourage them." He sent a dispatch to the townspeople. It informed them of his presence and that he wished those loyal to him to stay in their houses and those enamored of the British to go to the fort. He would kill anyone on the streets when he arrived. He also included in the letter, the compliments of several officers whom he expected to join him, and probably some he did not to add emphasis. Clark dispatched the prisoner with the letter and, to give the news time to circulate waited until almost sundown to attack.<sup>26</sup>

In the meantime, Lieutenant Governor Henry Hamilton had learned of Clark's presence in the area. According to Hamilton's journal, on February 22, one of his scouts, Francis Maisonville, reported that he had spotted fourteen fires on the east side of the Wabash River earlier in the day. Hamilton immediately sent out a detachment of twenty

men under Captain LaMothe to patrol the surrounding area. He also ordered scaffolding erected along the walls for small arms fire and directed Captain Helm and the other American prisoners (on parole in the town), as well as all available militia to report to Fort Sackville. However, it was too little too late. It took until the evening of February 23 before Hamilton could finish gathering his troops, and they did not even complete roll call before the attack began.<sup>27</sup>

Clark and his army approached the town, contriving the lines to give the impression that a great host was marching on Vincennes. Clark ordered as many colors raised as would signify an army of one thousand men. This was not lost on the inhabitants of Vincennes as they peered out from behind their shuttered windows and doors. To better effect this ruse, Clark kept all but the standards of his “regiments” out of view until nightfall. Those at the fort could not see the army’s approach at all since the houses of the town obstructed their view. In addition, Clark’s letter brought another stroke of magnificent luck. No one dared leave their house to go to the fort. Therefore, Clark’s attack caught the defenders of Fort Sackville completely by surprise.

Clark first sent a detachment under a Lieutenant Bailey to attack the Fort at his signal. He then led the rest of the force into the town itself to take possession of several key objectives. The surprise at Fort Sackville was so complete that when Hamilton and his officers heard the first shots, they assumed it was drunken Indians and paid no attention. Then, one of the British sentries fell wounded, shot through a gun port. Hamilton and his officers now knew that the Big Knife had returned.

Clark then sent another detachment to join Bailey at the fort. Several pro-British Indians in town fled, while the Kickapoos and Pinkashaws that were present, sympathetic

to Clark's cause, grabbed their weapons and rushed to join the attack. According to Clark, they numbered around one hundred. However, Clark suggested that they go back to their quarters, so none of his men would mistake them for British allies. Their chief agreed and sent them back, but he stayed on to help Clark direct the attack. By this time, Clark's men had surrounded the garrison. According to Clark, both sides exchanged fire for nearly eighteen hours with little or no damage. He encouraged his men to "be daring, but prudent. every place near the Fort that I could cover them was crouded, and a very heavy firing during the Night, having flung up a considerable intrenchment before the gate where I intended to plant my Artillery when Arrived."<sup>28</sup>

All the while, Clark knew that he must end the siege as quickly as possible to escape detection from the various parties of English and Indians about in the countryside. Clark discovered that one such party was on its way to town with some prisoners from the Ohio country. That party was the patrol Hamilton had sent out under Captain LaMothe earlier in the day. Clark ordered out a detachment to intercept them, but then changed his mind. He actually withdrew his men a distance to let them gain entry into the fort. He did so because he was convinced that keeping them out of the fort, would only force them to leave the town and warn the British-friendly tribes. By this time, several townspeople had joined Clark's bombardment. The next morning at around eight clock Clark ordered the firing to cease and sent a courier into the fort to demand Hamilton's surrender. Henry Hamilton would have none of it. "Having called the Officers together I read them Colol Clarke's letter . . . and told them I was determined if they and the Men were of my mind to hold out to the last, rather than trust to, or accept Colonel Clarkes proposition—They all declared themselves willing to second me."<sup>29</sup>

Upon receiving Hamilton's answer, Clark renewed the attack on the fort with powder hidden in and around the town by Francois Bosseron, one of Clark's many agents in the vicinity. During the early stages of the fighting, Clark's men captured Francis Maisonville, the scout who discovered their fires along the Wabash and who had been an active participant in Hamilton's Indian raids. The conduct of Clark and his men toward Maisonville after his capture was an item of much dispute among the participants at Fort Sackville. Clark did not even mention Maisonville's capture in his letter to Mason, but did include it in his memoir. However, Clark's version and Henry Hamilton's version (likely told to him by Maisonville) differ considerably. According to Clark, two of his men captured Maisonville and (unbeknownst to him or his officers) decided to use the prisoner as a human shield. After some time, an officer discovered them and ordered them to place Maisonville under guard with the rest of the prisoners. They did so, but for reasons not mentioned by Clark, the two decided to take a small portion of Maisonville's scalp along the way, but they otherwise delivered him to the guard unharmed.<sup>30</sup>

According to Hamilton, Clark, familiar with Maisonville's service to the British, ordered the mutilation himself:

Mr Francis Maisonville who I had mentioned was betrayed to Colol. Clarke, being questioned by him if he had been out with the Indians, answerd in the affirmative, upon which the Colonel orderd him to be placed in a chair, and one of Clarkes men was told to take off his scalp, which probably was meant only in terrorism, however this poor man who had a great deal of firmness told the Colol. he was at his mercy and he might do his pleasure. The executor of the Colonel's pleasure hesitating to act as he was desired, was called to with an imprecation to do as he was orderd, on which he raised two pieces of the Skin of the size of a sixpence, just then one of his brothers who had come from the Illinois with Colol. Clarke stepped up and interceded for on which he was set at liberty.<sup>31</sup>

While no one can be sure of exactly who did what to Maisonville, Hamilton's description of the incident contains much more detail than Clark's. Hamilton's version is also much more plausible. Why did Clark's two nameless assailants take just a few pieces of his scalp when they had been willing to kill him earlier? In disfiguring him, they were already disobeying a direct order and violating the rules of warfare concerning prisoners. It is also possible that Clark never mentioned the incident in his first account of the battle, because he did not want it to become public knowledge. However, once Henry Hamilton related his account of the event in his report to his superiors, Clark had no choice but to address it in his memoirs. Quite possibly, Clark then decided to fabricate the story of the two overzealous soldiers to protect his reputation from further damage. Torturing a known Indian collaborator like Maisonville certainly complies with George Rogers Clark's character. Clark was a man who threatened lost guides with death, summarily sentenced hostile Indians to death, and willingly caused untold mental anguish to citizens of occupied towns. Again, he was a violent man in a violent world and his actions denoted such. It is not a stretch to imagine him ordering his men to disfigure Maisonville.

Clark decided that he would not listen to terms until he captured the fort. From that point on, he engaged only a portion of his troops while he made preparations to storm the fort with the others. While he was doing this, a flag appeared from the fort with a request by Hamilton for a three-day cessation of fire and a conference between commanders. According to Hamilton's journal, the English of the garrison were all in favor of resisting Clark's attack. However, the French militia did not appear so anxious to sacrifice themselves for the British Crown. Hamilton found himself facing a very bleak

situation. One half of his garrison refused to fight. Fighting alone, his English troops stood no chance. Forcing the French to fight would invite betrayal, and sending them out of the fort would add strength to Clark's forces. He therefore decided that his only hope was to seek acceptable terms for surrender. He offered to meet Clark at the gate of the fort. Clark initially refused, but relented and met him at a nearby church.<sup>32</sup>

The meeting did not go well. Though Hamilton offered to surrender, he would not do so in terms that met with Clark's approval. Clark was at his most inflexible during the conference. He informed Hamilton that the only acceptable terms were unconditional surrender. "He received such treatment on this Conference as a Man of his known Barbarity deserv'd. I would not come upon terms with him, and recommend'd to him to defend himself with spirit and Bravery, that it was the only thing that would induce me to treat him and his Garrison with Lenity in case I stormed it which he might expect."<sup>33</sup>

Around the same time as the parley at the church, the most controversial incident of the Illinois campaign occurred. According to Clark's memoir and Bowman's journal the incident occurred without Clark's knowledge while he and Hamilton talked at the church. According to Hamilton's journal, the incident happened just before he requested the parlay. Whatever the case, the final major occurrence of Clark's siege is so shocking that most histories of the American Revolution do not mention it at all.<sup>34</sup> While who ordered and carried out the atrocity is open to debate, its occurrence is not.

Sometime in the afternoon of February 24, a party of approximately twenty Indians returning from a raid near the falls of the Ohio River came in sight of Vincennes. According to Clark's later account of the expedition, one of Clark's subordinates sent a party out to capture them. Since the Indians approaching the town could not see the fort,

they did not detect anything out of the ordinary. When the American detachment came out to meet them, they at first thought it was a party sent by Hamilton to greet them. Before the Indians realized their mistake, the Americans fired upon them. In a matter of seconds, the Americans killed several in the party and captured the rest. Then, according to Clark's memoir, the soldiers tomahawked the captured Indians and threw them in the river.<sup>35</sup>

Henry Hamilton wrote a very different account of the Indian massacre. In his journal, Hamilton claimed that the Americans captured the party at nearly the same moment he made up his mind to seek terms from Clark. He went on to claim that as he ordered his officers to display a flag of truce, Clark himself ordered his men to line the prisoners up in front of the stockade. At this point, Captain McCarty, the commander of one of Clark's regiments interceded on behalf of one of the prisoners to whose father he owed his life. According to Hamilton, Clark or one of his officers then tomahawked one of the Indian prisoners. Hamilton's own words best describe the ghastly scene that followed:

One of the others was tomahawked either by Clarke or one of his Officers, the other three foreseeing their fate, began to sing their Death song, and were butchered in succession, tho at the very time a flag of Truce was hanging out at the fort and the firing had ceased on both sides—A young chief of the Ottawa nation called *Macutte` Mong* one of these last, having received the fatal stroke of a Tomahawk in the head, took it out and gave it again into the hands of his executioner who repeated the Stroke a second and third time, after which the miserable being, not entirely deprived of life was dragged to the river, and thrown in with the rope about his neck where he ended his life an tortures—This horrid scene was transacted in the open Street, and before the door of a house where I afterward was quartered, the master of which related to me the above particulars—The Blood of the victims was still visible for days afterwards, a testimony of the courage and Humanity of Colonel Clarke.<sup>36</sup>

The most damaging account of the massacre did not come from Henry Hamilton.



George Rogers Clark admitted to ordering the killings in his letter to Mason. Whether Clark forgot that he had already described his part in the massacre in detail when he wrote his memoir is unclear. Certainly, he never intended the Mason letter for public consumption. Therefore, it is likely that since the letter to Mason was not public knowledge at the time he wrote his memoir, Clark assumed that it would never become such. In any case, Clark's account of the massacre in the Mason letter is even more chilling than the one in Hamilton's journal. It depicts the depths of Clark's penchant for calculated psychological terror better than any other writings of or about him.

I had now a fair opportunity of making an impression on the Indians that I could have wished for; that of convincing them that Governour Hamilton could not give them that protection that he had made them believe he could, and some measure to insence the Indians against him for not Exerting himself to save that Friends[hip]: Ordered the Prisoners to be Tomahawked in the face of the Garrison. It had the effect that I expected: insted of making their friends inviterate against us, they up- braided the English Parties in not trying to save their friends and gave them to understand that they believed them to be liers and no Warriars.<sup>37</sup>

Clark then met with Hamilton. According to the Englishman's journal, Clark washed the blood and stench from his hands and face in front of Hamilton, and then began the parlay. Hamilton also claimed that Clark boasted of his part in the massacre. He then proceeded to tell Hamilton that to defend the fort was useless, and that he would soon have his cannon in position. Clark also declared that if Hamilton forced him to assault the fort, he would spare no one. He therefore proposed that Hamilton surrender the fort and all its stores at ten o'clock the next morning. He also agreed to allow Hamilton and his men to retain their baggage and personal belongings. After deliberating with his officers for a short time, Hamilton agreed and signed the articles of capitulation.<sup>38</sup>

At ten o'clock on February 25, the gates of Fort Sackville opened and George Rogers Clark made Lieutenant Governor Henry Hamilton his prisoner. Only twenty-six years old, Clark now stood at the pinnacle of his life though he did not know it. He had already fixed his steely gaze upon Detroit. If he could take it, then the British could never threaten the backcountry again. For all his hopes and his plans however, Clark never threatened Detroit and the British continued to raid down the frontier. For years to come however, British soldiers and their Indian allies continued to tremble at the mere mention of the bloodiest of the big knives.

## Notes to Chapter VI

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<sup>1</sup> George Rogers Clark, *Campaign in the Illinois* (Cincinnati: Robert Clarke and CO., 1869), 47-51; James Alton James, *George Rogers Clark Papers 1771-1781*, Vol. 1, (Springfield, Illinois: Illinois State Historical Library, 1912), 261-62.

<sup>2</sup> Clark, *Campaign in the Illinois*, 51-52.

<sup>3</sup> Clark's Memoir in James, ed., *George Rogers Clark Papers 1771-1781*, 262.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 264; Clark, *Campaign in the Illinois*, 53-54.

<sup>5</sup> Clark, *Campaign in the Illinois*, 54.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 56.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 56-58.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 59-60.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 61.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 62; Clark's Memoir in James, ed., *George Rogers Clark Papers 1771-1781*, 266-67.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>13</sup> Clark, *Campaign in the Illinois*, 64.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*; Clark's Memoir in James, ed., *George Rogers Clark Papers 1771-1781*, 268.

<sup>15</sup> Clark, *Campaign in the Illinois*, 64.

<sup>16</sup> Clark's Memoir in James, ed., *George Rogers Clark Papers 1771-1781*, 65.

<sup>17</sup> Clark, *Campaign in the Illinois*, 66.

<sup>18</sup> Clark's Memoir in James, ed., *George Rogers Clark Papers 1771-1781*, 270.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 270-71.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 272-73; Clark, *Campaign in the Illinois*, 66.

<sup>21</sup> Clark's Memoir in James, ed., *George Rogers Clark Papers 1771-1781*, 272-73.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 74; Bowman's Journal, in William Hayden English ed., *Conquest of the Country Northwest of the River Ohio 1778-1783*, (Indianapolis: The Bowen-Merrill Company, 1896), 567-78.

<sup>23</sup> Bowman's Journal, in English, ed., *Conquest of the Country Northwest of the River Ohio 1778-1783*, 567-78.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid. ;Clark's Memoir in James, ed., *George Rogers Clark Papers 1771-1781*, 275-77.

<sup>26</sup> Clark, *Campaign in the Illinois*, 67-68.

<sup>27</sup> "The Journal of Henry Hamilton, 1778-1779, in John D. Barnhart ed., *Henry Hamilton and George Rogers Clark in the American Revolution*, (Crawfordsville, Indiana: R. E. Banta, 1951), 102-205.

<sup>28</sup> Clark, *Campaign in the Illinois*, 69-70.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid. ,71; The Journal of Henry Hamilton, 1778-1779, in Barnhart, ed., *Henry Hamilton and George Rogers Clark in the American Revolution*, 102-205.

<sup>30</sup>Clark's Memoir in James, ed., *George Rogers Clark Papers 1771-1781*, 283.

<sup>31</sup> The Journal of Henry Hamilton, 1778-1779, in Barnhart, ed., *Henry Hamilton and George Rogers Clark in the American Revolution*, 102-205.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid. ; Clark, *Campaign in the Illinois*, 71-72.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> Don Higginbotham, *The War of American Independence*, (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1971); James L. Stokesbury, *A Short History of the American Revolution*, (New York: William Morrow and Company, 1991; Colin G. Calloway, *The American Revolution in Indian Country*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

<sup>35</sup> Clark's Memoir in James, ed., *George Rogers Clark Papers 1771-1781*, 288.

<sup>36</sup> The Journal of Henry Hamilton, 1778-1779, in Barnhart, ed., *Henry Hamilton and George Rogers Clark in the American Revolution*, 102-205.

<sup>37</sup> Clark, *Campaign in the Illinois*, 73-74.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid. ,75; The Journal of Henry Hamilton, 1778-1779, in Barnhart, ed., *Henry Hamilton and George Rogers Clark in the American Revolution*, 102-205.

## Chapter VII So Close, Yet So Far

After Clark accepted Henry Hamilton's surrender outside Fort Sackville, he and his men entered the fort, which he immediately renamed Fort Patrick Henry. Upon entering the fort, he was surprised that Hamilton had given it up so easily. He found the post very well equipped with twelve guns and well-stocked with ammunition.<sup>1</sup>

According to Hamilton's journal, Clark did not have much time to ponder the situation. Soon after his men hoisted the American colors above the fort, Clark ordered a thirteen round salute fired from one of the guns. The results were less than impressive. "A cask of cannon cartridges took fire, and blew up Captains Bowman and Widdrington [Worthington] of the Americans with two others of their men, and a Soldier of the King's one of our additional gunners who tho scorched and most of his skin blown from his face and arms and nearly blinded was tolerably recovered before we left Post Vincennes."<sup>2</sup>

After the fiasco with the cannon, Clark and Hamilton reportedly met as gentlemen to discuss both the battle and the overall progress of the war. According to John Bakeless, Hamilton was visibly impressed with Clark's account of the frozen march through the Illinois country. Bakeless felt that Hamilton's praise for Clark's campaign was sincere since he was still mentioning it in reports to his superiors years later. In one such dispatch to Lord George Germain he wrote, "The difficulties and dangers of Colonel Clark's march from the Illinois were such as required great courage to encounter, and great perseverance to overcome."<sup>3</sup> While Hamilton's admiration of Clark may well have been sincere, it is also highly possible that he, like many other defeated British commanders, felt the need to praise the audacity and skill of his foe to lessen the shame of his own defeat. Other entries in his journal seem to suggest a period in which he cast the blame

for his defeat on anyone he could think of. According to Hamilton, several things beyond his control contributed to his downfall. The condition of the fort with its many gaping holes, through which bullets could enter, the treachery of the French militia, and the poor condition of many of the wounded forced him to surrender. The fact that he considered Clark and his men “an unprincipled motley Banditti,” only made the sting of the defeat more painful for Hamilton. <sup>4</sup>

Whether Hamilton genuinely admired Clark’s campaign or not, things did not always run smoothly between the Hair-Buyer and the Long Knife during the period immediately following the surrender of Vincennes. One of Clark’s first actions was to order that all British officers who had participated in Indian raids on the frontier wear leg and neck irons. This reportedly incensed Hamilton, but according to Bakeless, the furor subsided quickly when Clark and his men discovered that there were no shackles to be found in all of Vincennes.<sup>5</sup> Hamilton’s sufferings did not end there, however. A day or two after the surrender, Hamilton awoke to make a grisly discovery outside his tent. “This day the scalps of the poor murdered Indians were hung up just at our tent.” Since Hamilton never named Clark as the perpetrator of the stunt, historians, including Bakeless, have assumed that, “A few grim jokers took the scalps of the Indians Clark had ordered executed and hung them near Hamilton’s tent.” Such a conclusion is wholly unsubstantiated by the available evidence. Even though Hamilton did not single out Clark as the instigator of the prank, he also did not name anyone else. Bakeless and the other Clark biographers can offer no proof as to the identity of the supposed pranksters. Therefore, the evidence does not allow one to claim Clark or anyone else specifically as the author of the macabre joke. <sup>6</sup> However, the event is wholly consistent with Clark’s

bent for psychological intimidation. It is at least a possibility that he was involved in it in some way.

In reality though, Henry Hamilton was the least of Clark's worries in late February of 1779. In fact, Hamilton was probably toward the bottom of the list. The recapture of Vincennes brought about new issues that the Virginian now had to face. His paramount objective from the beginning of his service in the northwest had always been Detroit. As long as the British fort at Detroit remained, the British and even deadlier Native American raids on the Illinois Country would continue. In capturing Hamilton and his troops (nearly all of whom had come from the garrison at Detroit), Clark had come closer than ever to realizing that goal. However, Clark had only 130 men at his disposal, and nearly half of those were French militia. He was also keenly aware that Detroit was not the only issue facing him. He had to establish better administration in the Illinois Country and secure some sort of peace with the neighboring Native American tribes if he was to have any hope of maintaining his previous conquests<sup>7</sup>. However, the lure of a weakened Detroit proved too much for Clark to resist, especially when, on February 27, 1779, *The Willing*, the armed boat Clark had ordered to rendezvous with him near Vincennes finally arrived carrying expresses from Thomas Jefferson, the newly elected governor of Virginia. With intelligence of the enemy's fortifications at Detroit and with news from the east, Clark set his sights fully upon Detroit. Jefferson's letters promised Clark a complete battalion and he expected Illinois and Kentucky militia to join him as well. In a March 10, letter to Benjamin Harrison, a prominent member of the Virginia Legislature, Clark expressed his hope that his next stroke would end the frontier war for good.

By my public letters you will be fully acquainted with my late successful expedition against Lt Govr Hamilton who has fallen into my hands with all the principal Partizans of Detroit. This stroke will nearly put an end to the Indian War, had I but men enough to take the advantage of ye present confusion of the Indian Nations, I could silence the whole in two months, I learn that five hundred men is ordered out to reinforce me, If they arrive, with what I have in the country; I am in hopes will enable me to do something Clever<sup>8</sup>

In fact, the news of reinforcements coupled with the intelligence he had of the conditions at Detroit from his prisoners as well as his spies instilled such confidence in Clark of Detroit's imminent fall that he could not resist resorting to his familiar pattern of psychological terrorism. On March 16, 1779, Clark sent a letter to Captain Richard B. Larnolt, now commanding at Detroit. In it, Clark flippantly announced his intentions of marching there next. "I learn by your letter to Govr Hamilton that you were very busy making new works, I am glad to hear it, as it saves the Ammericans some expences in building."<sup>9</sup> The letter, and the tales of Clark's campaign against Vincennes brought him much respect from his enemies. Shortly after receiving this letter from Clark, Larnolt remarked, "If the fortune of war Turns on Col. Clarks side and I am taken prisoner, I had Rather be taken by him than any other person."

Before he could begin his preparations in earnest however, Clark knew that he had to take care of the other issues facing his command. Chief among these issues was freeing his men from the responsibility of guarding Henry Hamilton and the British prisoners. Guarding 101 prisoners, most of them the French militia who had served Hamilton until the last minute, was occupying almost all of his men. To alleviate this problem, Clark did two things. First, he chose to free those members of the French militia who had not fought in Indian raids. He hoped that by doing so he would gain the good graces of their kinsmen and friends in Detroit. Surprisingly, upon the prisoners'



return to Detroit, things worked out as Clark had hoped. He then sent Captain John Rogers to the Falls of the Ohio with Hamilton and his main officers. From there, he was to take the prisoners to Williamsburg.<sup>10</sup>

Relieved of the burden of looking after the prisoners, Clark set out to win the allegiance, or at least the neutrality, of the neighboring Indians. "I knew that Mr. Hamilton had endeavoured to make them believe that we intended at last to take all their Lands from them, and that in case of Success we would shew no greater Mercy for those who did not Join him than those that did." He called a conference with the Kickapoos, Pinkashaws, and others who had not been active allies of Hamilton. At the conference, Clark endeavored to win them to the American side by any means possible.

Extoll'd them to the Skies for their Manly behviour and fedility; told them that we were so far from having any design on their Lands, that I looked upon it that we were then on their Land where the Fort stood, that we claimed no Land in their Country; that the first Man that offered to take their Lands by Violence must strike the tomhk in my head; that it was only necessary that I should be in their Country during the War -and keep a Fort in it to drive off the English, who had a design against all People; after that I might go to some place where I could get Land to support Me:"

The nations agreed to a treaty with Clark and invited him to sit with them in council the next day. At the council, the tribes further conferred upon him an honor once reserved only for Henry Hamilton. They began to refer to him as their father and protector. The tribes at the council actually decided to give Clark land in their country in return for his promise that he would take none by force.<sup>11</sup> However, days before he made this promise to the Pinkashaws and Kickapoos, he had written to Patrick Henry of the abundance of land in the area ripe for the taking. "There is glorious Situations and bodies of land in this Country . . . I am in hopes of being able in a short time to send you a Map of the whole."<sup>12</sup> In addition, the offer of land played right into Clark's hands. "I was well

pleased at their offer as I had then an opportunity to deny the acceptance, & farther convince them that we did not want their Land; they appear'd dejected at my Refusal."

Clark then suggested a celebration for that evening and left them with taffy and other provisions before he left. The results of his conduct were almost immediately visible. A few days later, some Chippewas who had recently accompanied Hamilton came to see Clark. According to him they:

begged me to excuse their blindness and take them into favour . . . I told them that the Big Knives was merciful . . . that I should send Belts and a speech to all the Nations; that they after hearing of it might do as they pleased but must blame themselves for future misfortunes and dispatched them.<sup>13</sup>

The baseness of his motives notwithstanding Clark had once again demonstrated his understanding of Native American culture and power relationships. The fact that he understood what acts and deeds carried weight with the tribal cultures of the Ohio valley made him all the more dangerous to them. According to Clark himself, "nothing destroys Your Interest among the Savages so soon as wavering sentiments or speeches that shew the least fear."<sup>14</sup> Soon after these encounters, Clark began to realize the extent of his standing among the local tribes. The Indians had considered Hamilton almost god-like. Clark's capture of him had elevated his status that much higher. They paid attention to him because of this. He decided to send a written speech to all of the area tribes, even those that had fought against him at Vincennes.\* Again, Clark's penchant for

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\* To the Warriors of the Different Nations.

*"Men and Warriors:* it is a long time since the Big Knives sent Belts of peace among You Siliciting of You not to listen to the bad talks and deceit of the English as it would at some future day tend to the Destruction of Your Nations. You would not listen, but Joined the English against the Big Knives and spilt much Blood of Women and Children. The Big Knives then resolved to shew no mercy to any People that hereafter would refuse the Belt of Peace which should be offered, at the same time One of War. You remember

psychological warfare paid dividends. During the next few weeks, several Native American groups came to Vincennes to make peace with the leader of the Big Knives. However, much like his earlier attempts at alliances, these too would fall apart. The Native Americans, much more savvy than Clark or the Americans were ever willing to give them credit for, knew that they could never fully trust the word of men who for years had made it their mission in life to seize their lands. The decision regarding who to support during the American Revolution was never really a very tough one for most tribes. While it was certainly a choice between the lesser of two evils, the fact that the British had maintained and attempted to enforce policies designed to stop encroachment by the very Americans whom Clark represented made the choice relatively obvious. However, Clark like most American frontier commanders still spent a considerable amount of time attempting to forge alliances with Native Americans.<sup>15</sup>

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last summer a great many People took me by the hand, but a few kept back their Hearts. I also sent Belts of Peace and War among the nations to take their choice, some took the Peace Belt, others still listned to their great father (as they call him) at Detroit, and Joined him to come to War against me. The Big Knives are Warriors and look on the English as old Women and all those that Join him and are ashamed when they fight them because they are no Men.

I now send two Belts to all the Nations, one for Peace and the other for War. The belt that is for War has you great English fathers Scalp tied to it and made red with his Blood; all You that call yourselves his Children, make your Hatchets sharp & come out and Revenge his Blood on the Big Knives, fight like Men that the Big Knives may not be ashamed when they fight you; that the old Women many not tell us that we only fought Squaws. If any of You is for taking the Belt of Peace, send the Bloody Belt back to me that I may know who to take by the hand as Brothers, for you be Assured that no peace for the future will be granted to those that do not lay down their Arms immediately. Its as you will I dont care whether You are for Peace or War; as I Glory in War and want Enemies to fight us, as the English cant fight us any longer, and are become like Young Children begging the Big Knives for mercy and a little Bread to eat; this is the last Speech you may ever expect from the Big Knives, the next thing will be the Tomahawk. And You may expect in for Moons to see Your Women & Children given to the Dogs to eat, while those Nations that have kept their words with me will Flourish and grow like the Willow Trees on the River Banks under the care and nourishment of their father, the Big Knives.”

With his alliances seemingly firm, Clark next turned his attention to preparing the Illinois Country both administratively and militarily for the upcoming expedition against Detroit. On March 20, 1779, less than one month after he captured Vincennes, Clark set out via water for Kaskaskia with eighty men of the Illinois Regiment as it was now called. He left Captain Leonard Helm behind as civil and military commander of Vincennes and as Superintendent of Indian affairs. In addition, Clark stationed Lieutenant Richard Brashears and a garrison of forty men inside Fort Patrick Henry.<sup>16</sup>

Once he arrived at Kaskaskia, Clark immediately began preparations for the move against Detroit. According to his journal, he had intended to rest, but could not. Detroit occupied his thoughts constantly. Not long after he returned, he received word from Colonel John Bowman in Kentucky informing him that he was on his way with 300 men for the expedition. He also received word that Colonel John Montgomery was also bringing fresh recruits to Kaskaskia. These numbers when added to the 500 troops promised by Governor Jefferson would give Clark at least 1,000 men, nearly ten times the number he had when he first invaded the Illinois Country in 1778.<sup>17</sup> According to intelligence gathered by Helm at Vincennes, this number would be more than enough to subdue Detroit. Helm's spies had recently reported to him that only 100 men garrisoned Detroit and that another 100 were on the way there from Michilimackinac at the juncture of Lake Huron and Lake Michigan to the north.<sup>18</sup> With this news in hand, Clark decided to attack sooner rather than later. He sent a courier to Bowman ordering him to meet him at Vincennes on June 20 with as many men as possible. Clark also sent out one of his captains to the neighboring Indian nations to enlist them and to gain more intelligence of the situation at Detroit. Having been relieved as civil administrator for the Department of

the Illinois by the newly appointed Colonel John Todd, Clark was now free to concentrate solely on Detroit. A few days after Todd's arrival in May, Colonel Montgomery arrived with less than half the men Clark had expected him to bring. There was still hope though, as Clark also received a letter from Bowman promising "considerable Reinforcement." Clark altered his plan somewhat to require only enough men to appear formidable to the Indian tribes, allowing him to enlist their aid upon encountering them. He estimated that 300 men would be sufficient to take the garrison at Detroit due to the poor state of its fortifications.<sup>19</sup>

At this point, Clark's efforts with the Indians paid off again. The British at Detroit, in an effort to delay Clark's march, sent out a party of Indians against Vincennes. However, several of the Indians that had recently made peace with Clark learned of the plan and sent word to Clark. Upon learning that their plan had been discovered, the Indians gave up.

Clark's good fortune ended abruptly soon after the aborted Indian raid. His Detroit plans suffered a shattering blow when he learned that the majority of the Kentucky militia had marched against the Shawnee. Instead of following Clark's orders to meet him at Vincennes, John Bowman had marched against the Shawnee town of Chillicothe, in present-day Ohio, in May. While his expedition succeeded in burning most of the town and in killing the Shawnee war chief Blackfish, it also managed to encourage further Indian raids and destroyed much of the fragile peace Clark had built just two months earlier. When Clark belatedly arrived at Vincennes on July 1, 1779, only thirty volunteers instead of the 200-300 he had expected met him there.<sup>20</sup> Faced with this development, and the fact that it was now increasingly clear that Jefferson's talk of 500

new recruits was simply talk, Clark made the painful and somewhat surprising decision to call off the expedition against Detroit. The decision is surprising in that Clark still had approximately 350 men under his command between Cahokia, Kaskaskia and Vincennes. If Detroit was actually as weak as he believed (judging from most accounts it still was), his odds were at least as good as they had been when he set out to challenge Hamilton at Vincennes. In fact, they were probably better, given the fact that the march to Detroit in the summer would not be near as arduous as the winter expedition to Vincennes. In addition, Clark actually had allies among the Native Americans of the area that he had not been able to count on against Vincennes. However, in his writings, he did not say actually how he calculated his strength of 350, and it is possible that it already included Native Americans.<sup>21</sup> That possibility notwithstanding, it still seems out of character for Clark to back down from his intentions against Detroit. It had been the centerpiece of his strategy for the Illinois Country since the beginning. Why then would he allow a slight deterioration of his favorable odds deter him? Six months earlier, the odds had been with Henry Hamilton and the British, yet Clark attacked. Now the odds of his success were approximately even, and he hesitated.

Upon examining his correspondence, a possible solution suggests itself. In a letter to New Orleans merchant Oliver Pollock on June 12, Clark acknowledged that several of the debts he had run up with Pollock on behalf of Virginia had been refused by the state. "I am sorry to learn you have not been supplied with funds as Expected your protesting my late Bills has surprised me."<sup>22</sup> Writing to Jefferson in September, Clark divulged many of the other problems that had beset the Illinois Country since his capture of Vincennes.

The Illinois under its present Circumstances is by no means able to Supply the Troops that you Expect in this department which provisions as the Crops at St Vincines was so Exceedingly bad that upwards of Five Hundred Souls will have to depend on their neighbours for Bread I Should be exceedingly glad that you would Commission Some persons to furnish the Troops in this Quarter with provisions as the greatest part must Come from the Frontiers for the Ensuing year as I cant depend on the Illinois for Greater Supplys than will be Suffitient for two Hundred and fifty Men<sup>23</sup>

Faced not only with a lack of soldiers, but also with inadequate means to supply them, Clark foresaw disaster for the Illinois Country. In addition, the Continental and Virginia paper money issued to Clark was rapidly depreciating. While it took longer for the calamitous drop in American paper currencies to hit the Northwest, when it did, it hit Clark and the Illinois Regiment very hard. Speculators rushed to the west ahead of the fall to take advantage of this situation and in their wake left a collapse in currency as bad as that back east as well as thousands of angry duped French citizens.<sup>24</sup>

Earlier in the summer, Clark wrote to his father of his successes. In the letter, he revealed much of his personal wealth. "I instructed one Mr Randolph that does business for me to give you Ten Thousand Pounds to keep for me . . . it will be worth Severn years Trouble of my Brothers to Seek after my Fortune which at this time Cant be less than Twenty Thousand Pounds Sterling as my success in Trade has been Equal to that of war."<sup>25</sup> The realization that whatever portion of his fortune was tied in paper currency was now gone must have hit Clark hard. The exchange rate for pounds to specie (gold) was roughly 1 to 1 in 1779. Therefore, Clark's 20,000 pounds sterling equated to \$20,000 in gold specie. There is no evidence to indicate how much of his net worth was in paper currency. However, since he was paid his salary in it, and given the enormous amount of it in the northwest at the time, one can assume that no small part of his fortune consisted of Virginia and Continental paper money. According to economic historian

Charles Calomiris, by July of 1779, Continental paper currency traded at a specie exchange rate of 24. Hence, it took twenty-four dollars of Continentals to equal one dollar of specie. If all of Clark's estimated fortune were in Continentals, then his worth, which had been so high earlier in the year, would have plummeted to the equivalent of \$875 in specie.<sup>26</sup> This fact, coupled with the disturbing news that the treasury had refused to pay his drafts on the state of Virginia, thus making him personally liable for them, had to have jarred his confidence. It is no surprise therefore, that Clark abandoned his plans for Detroit. In a letter to Governor Jefferson, he referenced a plan to build a fort at the mouth of the Ohio. The building of what became Fort Jefferson, much to the detriment of the defense and provision of the posts he had earlier captured, now became the focus of Clark's military efforts. His focus shifted from one of attack to one of defense. While the reduction of Detroit still loomed large in his mind as the only way to secure permanent peace for the Illinois Country, he now directed the majority of his exertions to defending the settlements of Kentucky from Indian raids. This strategy would earn him censure, not only from the posts he abandoned in the Illinois country, but also from those he sought to defend in Kentucky.<sup>27</sup>



## Notes to Chapter VII

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<sup>1</sup> “The Journal of Henry Hamilton, 1778-1779,” in *Henry Hamilton and George Rogers Clark in the American Revolution*, ed. John D. Barnhart (Crawfordsville, Indiana: R. E. Banta, 1951), 102-205; James Alton James, *The Life of George Rogers Clark*, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1929), 145.

<sup>2</sup> “The Journal of Henry Hamilton, 1778-1779,” 102-205.

<sup>3</sup> John Bakeless, *Background to Glory: The Life of George Rogers Clark*, (Philadelphia: J.B. Lippincott Company, 1957), 211.

<sup>4</sup> “The Journal of Henry Hamilton, 1778-1779,” 102-205.

<sup>5</sup> Bakeless, 212.

<sup>6</sup> “The Journal of Henry Hamilton, 1778-1779 102-205; Bakeless, 212.

<sup>7</sup> John Rogers to Jonathan Clark, 6 May 1779, in James Alton James, ed., *George Rogers Clark Papers, 1771-1781* (Springfield, Illinois: Illinois State Historical Library, 1912), 316.

<sup>8</sup> Clark to Benjamin Harrison 10 March 1779, in James, ed., *George Rogers Clark Papers, 1771-1781*, 305.

<sup>9</sup> Clark to R.B. Lernoult 16 March 1779, in James, ed., *George Rogers Clark Papers, 1771-1781*, 307.

<sup>10</sup> George Rogers Clark. *Campaign in the Illinois* (Cincinnati: Robert Clarke and CO., 1869), 77.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid*, 78-79.

<sup>12</sup> Clark to Patrick Henry 9 March 1779, in James, ed., *George Rogers Clark Papers, 1771-1781*, 303.

<sup>13</sup> George Rogers Clark. *Campaign in the Illinois*, 79-80.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>15</sup> Colin G. Calloway, *The American Revolution in Indian Country*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995), xii-xiii, 23-25.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid*, 82; Bakeless, *Background to Glory: The Life of George Rogers Clark*, 231.

<sup>17</sup> George Rogers Clark. *Campaign in the Illinois*, 83.

<sup>18</sup> Leonard Helm to Clark, 9 May 1779, in James, ed., *George Rogers Clark Papers, 1771-1781*, 316-17.

<sup>19</sup> George Rogers Clark. *Campaign in the Illinois*, 84-85.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid*, 86; Bakeless, *Background to Glory: The Life of George Rogers Clark*, 233.

<sup>21</sup> George Rogers Clark. *Campaign in the Illinois*, 86.

<sup>22</sup> Clark to Oliver Pollock 12 June 1779, in James, ed., *George Rogers Clark Papers, 1771-1781*, 330-31.

<sup>23</sup> Clark to Thomas Jefferson 23 September 1779, in James, ed., *George Rogers Clark Papers, 1771-1781*, 335-36.

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<sup>24</sup> Don Higginbotham, *The War of American Independence*, (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1971), 288-96; James, *The Life of George Rogers Clark*, 156-57, 166-68; James L. Stokesbury, *A Short History of the American Revolution*, (New York: William Morrow and Company, 1991), 176, 222-23.

<sup>25</sup> Clark to his Father, John Clark 15 June 1779, in James, ed., *George Rogers Clark Papers, 1771-1781*, 335-36.

<sup>26</sup> John J. McCusker, *Money and Exchange in Europe and America, 1600-1775: A Handbook* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1978), 11; Charles W. Calomiris, "Institutional Failure, Monetary Scarcity, and the Depreciation of the Continental," *The Journal of Economic History*, Volume 48, Issue 1, (March 1998), 47-68.

<sup>27</sup> Clark to Thomas Jefferson 23 September 1779, in James, ed., *George Rogers Clark Papers, 1771-1781*, 335-36.

## Chapter VIII Disappointment

The idea of building a fort at the mouth of the Ohio River was not a new one. According to historian James Alton James, the French constructed a fort there as early as 1702. More immediately, both Henry Hamilton and Patrick Henry had plans to fortify the area as early as 1777, but the struggle to control the Illinois country had taken precedence in the strategies of both nations until 1780.<sup>1</sup> George Rogers Clark and Thomas Jefferson arrived at the decision to build the fort after a series of disappointing failures in late 1779 and early 1780. A year that had begun in triumph had recently ended in stagnation for the American war effort on the western frontier. The failure of his planned expedition against Detroit forced Clark to make what must have been a very painful decision. A combination of poor harvests, disaffected settlers, crumbling Native American alliances, and want of troops necessitated an American retreat from the Illinois Country to the southeastern side of the Ohio River.

In August of 1779, Clark returned to Kentucky for the first time since the summer of 1778. While there, he hoped to receive word from Thomas Jefferson of reinforcements. That fall, Clark received the disturbing news that his second in command and most trusted friend, Colonel Joseph Bowman had died at Vincennes on August 18. Apparently, Bowman had never recovered from wounds received during the Vincennes campaign. In addition, Clark learned that Virginia had a new military problem that far outweighed the needs of the Illinois Regiment. The British had recently adopted a new strategy in America. In January 1780, the British Commander in Chief, Sir Henry Clinton as well as his new second in command, Charles, Earl Cornwallis landed near Savannah, Georgia with a force of 14,000 men. The principal theater of the war, which

had up to that point been North, shifted to the South. This new development, coupled with the scarcity in currency and supplies, further weakened Jefferson's ability to augment Clark's forces in the west. "A powerful army forming by our enemies in the south renders it necessary for us to reserve as much of our militia as possible free to act in that quarter." However, Jefferson then proceeded to raise Clark's spirits by informing him of recent intelligence of an impending British and Native American attack on the frontier that Clark would have to thwart by taking Detroit. Clark immediately set about making plans for the reduction of Detroit.<sup>2</sup>

That fall, the British and their Indian allies descended upon the frontier settlements en masse. The deadliest of the raids occurred in October when a large band of warriors led by Loyalist partisan Simon Girty attacked a convoy returning from a supply trip to New Orleans. The attackers killed nearly all of the seventy men accompanying the supplies including the convoy's commander. The need to defend the Kentucky settlements from Indian raids like this one as well as the continuing shortage of men and materials doomed Clark's second attempt at an expedition against Detroit. On October 18, 1779, George Washington expressly forbid Colonel Daniel Brodhead, the commandant of Fort Pitt, from supplying Clark's expedition from the stores there.<sup>3</sup> There would be no help from Williamsburg either, as Governor Jefferson informed Clark in January of 1780:

the less you depend for supplies from this Quarter the less will you be disappointed by those impediments distance & a precarious foreign Commerce throw in the way for these reasons it will be eligible to withdraw as many of your men as you can from the West side of the Ohio leaving only so many as may be necessary for keeping the Illinois Settlements in Spirits & for their real defence.<sup>4</sup>

In the end, Mother Nature saved the frontier settlements from further attack. The so-called “Hard Winter” of 1779-1780 brought all activity to a stand-still in Kentucky. For nearly three months, snow blanketed the west, and subzero temperatures froze rivers, animals, and settlers alike. Food became so scarce that the price of corn quadrupled in less than six months.<sup>5</sup>

By March of 1780, the weather moderated and settlement continued at the same rapid pace as before. Despite the privation of the “Hard Winter,” an estimated twenty thousand people moved to Kentucky in 1779 and 1780. Several settlements were now thriving in Kentucky including Harrodsburg, Boonesborough, Logan’s and Bryan’s Station, and Lexington to name a few. Sometime after the winter loosened its grip on the backcountry, Clark withdrew the remnants of the Illinois Regiment, which, without its French auxiliary militia, amounted to around one hundred and fifty men, across the Ohio River and back into Kentucky. The Virginian must have grimaced in disgust at the thought of garrisoning Fort Patrick Henry at Vincennes with a single company of French militia. Forced to abandon nearly everything he had gained over the previous two years, Clark succumbed to melancholy. In a letter to his brother Jonathan, he decried “the universal loss of publick Virtue on the Continent,” and expressed his disappointment at the failure of his Detroit expedition. “Du Troit would have been Mine last Spring Could I have disposed of My Valuable prisoners to advantage otherways than being obliged to keep near half my Troops to Guard them . . .”<sup>6</sup>

In the midst of this dejection, Clark began to hear reports of the deterioration of the Illinois posts at Kaskaskia, Cahokia and Vincennes and of increasing British and Native American raiding activity. In February, he received a letter from Pierre Prevost,

one of the French citizens of Vincennes. In the letter, Prevost warned Clark of an increase in British efforts to convince the local tribes to make war on the Americans. In particular, the British were employing their Pottawatomi allies to threaten the neighboring Sac and Fox tribes with destruction if they did not declare war on “the Bostonians.”<sup>7</sup>

On March 10, 1780, the inhabitants of both Boonesborough and Bryan’s Station sent Clark petitions begging him to defend them against the attacks of the Shawnee.<sup>8</sup> Shortly after he received these petitions, Clark wrote John Todd, the civil commander of the district, expressing his suspicion that the British had more on their mind than just a few minor raids:

By the Acts from Every Post in the Illinois So nearly Corresponding I make no doubt of the English Regaining the Interest of Many Tribes of Indians and their designs agst the Illinois (Perhaps on Govr Hamiltons plan) and without some speedy Check may prove Fatal to Kentucky and the Total loss of the Westn Cuntrey on the Mississippi<sup>9</sup>

To counter this new threat, Clark began to plan and implement a defensive strategy. Both he and Jefferson believed that a fort at or near the junction of the Ohio and Mississippi Rivers held the key to the entire western trade as well as the defense of the Kentucky settlements. In addition to the fort near the mouth of the Ohio, the Virginia legislature ordered Clark to construct four other forts—one each at the mouths of the Licking, Big Sandy, and Guyandotte Rivers, as well as one at the eastern end of the Wilderness Road in an area known as Powell’s Valley. Because of the scarcity of men, Clark and Todd decided that the best hope for an adequate defense of the Kentucky frontier lay in concentrating all of their approximately one hundred and fifty men at the proposed fort near the mouth of the Ohio River. In mid-April, Clark began to survey that

area for a suitable location. By the end of the first week in May, he had selected a site approximately five miles below the mouth of the river. Because nearly all the lands near the southern banks of the river flooded annually, Clark was forced to choose a location distant from the actual juncture of the two rivers.<sup>10</sup>

In addition to the ability to check raids by pro-British Indians and partisans, locating the fort near the mouth of the Ohio also allowed the Americans to keep an eye on a potential future adversary. Both Clark and John Todd expressed suspicions that the Spanish, who while not formally allied with the Americans, but with France against Great Britain, might look to take advantage of the situation and grab territory from both the Americans and the British. In the same letter in which Clark proposed the concentration of American forces at the mouth of the Ohio River, he also made public his suspicions about the motives of his neighbors in New Spain. “I am not Clear but the Spaniards would fondly Suffer their Settlements in the Illinois to fall with ours for the sake of having the opertunity of Retaking Both. I doubt they are too fond [of] Territory to think of Restoring it again.” Later on that summer, in a letter to Governor Jefferson, John Todd partly justified the decision he and Clark had made on the grounds that the fort, “might serve as a Check to any Incroachments from our present Allies the Spaniards whose growing power might justly put us upon our guard & whose fondness for engrossing Territory might other wise urge them higher up the River upon our side than we would wish.” Whether or not the Spanish planned an immediate attack, the British had other plans for area. Far to the north of St. Louis, Major Arent De Peyster, Hamilton’s successor as Lt. Governor, and Patrick Sinclair, Lieutenant Governor of

Michilimackinac, had set in motion an attack that would force the Spanish and the Americans to fight together to preserve their joint control over the region.<sup>11</sup>

Unbeknownst to Clark or Todd, the British had decided that their best chance of ending the war lay in the western theater. According to James Alton James, this thorough British strategy called first for the capture of the Illinois country and the Falls of the Ohio River and then Fort Pitt and Fort Cumberland. The British plan also called for simultaneous attacks on New Orleans and other posts in Spanish territory along the southern portion of the Mississippi River. In addition to cutting off supplies and communication between the west and the east, this strategy, if successful, would also allow British troops and their Native American allies in the west to augment British forces in the east. One major obstacle to De Peyster and Sinclair's strategy was George Rogers Clark himself. His feats of the previous two years had earned him the respect of the British officers at Detroit. They determined to do their best to draw Clark away from the mouth of the Ohio, therefore making it easier for them to achieve their primary targets of St. Louis, Cahokia and control of the Mississippi River. To lure Clark away from Fort Jefferson, a large force under the command of Captain Henry Bird set out for the Falls of the Ohio harassing every settlement they came to. De Peyster and Sinclair believed that when Bird's force began to raid the area, the settlers would cry out for Clark to come and defend them. They were right. The citizens of the Kentucky settlements did petition Clark to come to their aid. However, due to intelligence Clark received from his many agents like Pierre Prevost, he had reason to suspect an attack on the Illinois Country and therefore stayed nearby.<sup>12</sup>



By March of 1780, the Spanish at St. Louis also believed that a British-led Native American attack was imminent and made an effort to fortify the town. Between this discovery and the British attack, which took place almost two months later, the Spanish governor, Fernando de Leyba raised a force of twenty-nine Spanish regulars and nearly three hundred volunteers. According to the official Spanish report of the attack, the British force of approximately one thousand British regulars, loyalist militia, and Native Americans under the command of Captain Emanuel Hesse arrived at around one o'clock on May 26. In addition to the small arms of his troops, De Leyba also had a handful of cannon at his disposal. Not realizing that the Spanish had known for two months they were coming, the British expected little resistance and were therefore very surprised when De Leyba's cannon opened fire on them as they approached the city. After a short skirmish in which they took moderate casualties, the British abandoned the attack. In addition to the loss of the element of surprise, many authors have long assumed that one other factor contributed to the British retreat from St. Louis: the idea that the very news that George Rogers Clark was in the area with a body of men caused most of the Native Americans accompanying the British to withdraw. James cites an account by a writer named Stipp in *Western Miscellany* in 1827, which states that Clark, who had been warned of the attack by the citizens of nearby Cahokia, had hastened there on May 13 with a force of approximately three hundred men. Arriving there the day before the attack, he hurried across the river to, "review the troops as well as the works of defence." The account goes on to state that De Leyba actually offered command of the Spanish defenders there to Clark who declined until he could determine whether the British would attack Cahokia or St. Louis.<sup>13</sup>

This version of events is highly unlikely for several reasons. First, the idea of a Spanish Lieutenant Governor relinquishing control of his forces to an American General, one with a state commission instead of one from the Continental Congress, seems quite unlikely. Secondly, as much as the Native Americans allied with the British respected Clark's abilities and even feared him, it is doubtful that the Menominee, Sac, Fox, Winnebago and Sioux warriors who made up the bulk of Hesse's force would back down in the face of an enemy. In fact, the nearly two hundred Sioux warriors who participated in the expedition had never faced Clark before and therefore were not likely to fear him to any great degree. According to Sinclair, the Sioux were, "undebauched, addicted to War, & Jealously attached to His Majesty's Interest." He went on to state that, "Lieut. Govr. Hamiltons disaster has nothing in it to make the Scioux and other nations far to the Westward, event to recollect the circumstance, many of them never heard of it." <sup>14</sup> Finally, neither James Alton James, John Bakeless, nor Lowell Harrison, the three principal published biographers of Clark, cite any primary source documents either of Clark's, de Leyba's or anyone else connected with the skirmish at St. Louis that place Clark in the city at any time prior to or during the confrontation. Instead, they all cite each other as well as Lyman Draper, Temple Bodley and other nineteenth century Clark biographers. Draper's writings form the foundation upon which this claim rests, and while he was certainly as credible a source regarding George Rogers Clark as there has ever been, the fact remains that not a single shred of primary source evidence exists to corroborate these speculations. That Clark never wrote of any participation on his part in the defense of St. Louis speaks volumes. He wrote detailed reports of every other military engagement he ever played a key role in to either his superiors and/or the public.

If Clark had been as instrumental in the defense of St. Louis as his biographers claim, then he surely would have reported it to Governor Jefferson. Therefore, the evidence does not allow one to say that Clark was there or participated in the defense of St. Louis, much less commanded it. In fact, it points in exactly the opposite direction. More than likely, these biographers could not stomach the thought of a major victory in the west in which Clark did not participate, not to mention the thought of one achieved by the treacherous Spanish.

Whether he participated in the defense of St. Louis or not, Clark had another problem on his side of the Mississippi. Upon learning of the British defeat at St. Louis, Henry Bird and his force of twelve hundred men, nearly one thousand of whom were Native American warriors, gave up the idea of attacking the Falls of the Ohio. However, Bird and his men would not go back to Detroit empty handed. During the march back to Detroit, Bird ordered his men to attack the Kentucky settlements of Ruddles and Martin's stations on the Licking River. The small stockaded posts fell easily in the face of Bird's two cannon. Ruddles Station capitulated first on June 24. Martin's Station suffered the same fate a few days later. Satisfied with his victories, Bird turned for Detroit. In addition to the usual plunder, Bird took nearly all three hundred and fifty survivors as his prisoners. He gave two hundred of the prisoners to his Indian allies as gifts while taking the rest with him to Detroit. Several of the captives did not survive the march north. According to one source, "Many of the women and children, unable to bear the strain of the march, were relieved of their sufferings through the use of the tomahawk."<sup>15</sup>

Upon learning of Bird's attack and his treatment of the prisoners, Clark immediately set about planning a retaliatory strike. For once, he had no trouble in

recruiting volunteers as the attack had stirred the blood of practically every eligible male in Kentucky. In addition to the Kentucky militia, fresh troops had recently arrived from Virginia under the command of Colonel George Slaughter. By August 1, Clark's force had grown to nearly one thousand men. Clark and his officers, including several prominent Kentucky settlers such as Daniel Boone, Levi Todd and Benjamin Logan as well as Colonel Slaughter, decided to strike at the Shawnee villages on the north side of the Ohio River. The Shawnee, longtime enemies to settlement in the west had comprised a large portion of Bird's forces. In addition, many of the Kentuckians had not forgotten Lord Dunmore's War and craved an opportunity to finish the job they began in the summer of 1774.<sup>16</sup>

On August 6, Clark and his men arrived at the principal Shawnee town of Chillicothe. Aware of Clark's expedition, the Shawnee had deserted the town hours before. Clark ordered the town burned and marched his army northeast to the town of Piqua on the Miami River. All the while Clark suspected that the retreat by the Shawnee was only part of a strategy to lure his force to ground well suited for an ambush. Nevertheless, he pushed on. Determined to exact revenge for the Bird raid, Clark and his force came within sight of Piqua on August 8. Clark barely had time to survey the situation when the Shawnee, along with Delaware, Mingo and Wyandotte warriors amounting to a total strength of three hundred, sprang their trap. Confident in the abilities of his troops, Clark ordered them to meet the attackers head on.<sup>17</sup>

The confidence the enemy had of their own strength and certain victory, or the want of generalship, occasioned several neglects, by which those advantages were taken that proved the ruin of their army, being flanked two or three different times, drove from hill to hill in a circuitous direction, for upwards of a mile and a half; at last took shelter in their strongholds and woods adjacent, when the firing ceased for about half an hour, until necessary preparations were made for

dislodging them. A heavy firing again commenced, and continued severe until dark, by which time the enemy were totally routed.<sup>18</sup>

According to Clark's report to Thomas Jefferson, the Shawnee and their allies had not counted on his bringing cannon along with him. Unable to find adequate shelter from Clark's artillery, their situation soon became untenable. At the end of the battle, Clark reported fourteen dead and thirteen wounded. The Shawnee carried off their dead and wounded during the night except for a few that lay too close to Clark's lines, but he estimated their casualties at approximately fifty warriors. While the American victory was a considerable one, Clark realized that it could have been much greater. The terrain had prevented him from employing his whole force; therefore allowing the Shawnee to escape once the battle was decided. Having set out with very few supplies, Clark had no choice but to turn the expedition back toward Kentucky.<sup>19</sup>

His victory at Piqua notwithstanding, the latter half of 1780 found Clark facing one disappointment after another. Shortly after the attack on the Shawnee, Clark learned that they had been warned of his coming nearly ten days before he arrived and the evidence pointed to the French at Vincennes as the culprits. Apparently, since Clark had left the Illinois Country, those he left in command had been less than benevolent to the French citizenry. On June 30, the townspeople of Vincennes sent a petition to Williamsburg decrying their treatment at the hands of Clark's surrogate, Colonel John Montgomery. The petition charged Montgomery, John Todd and Leonard Helm with, among other things, "killing our cattle in the fields, and our hogs in our yards, taking our flour from the mills, and the corn in our granaries, with arms in their hands threatening all who should resist them and the destruction of the fort we built at our own expense."<sup>20</sup>

In addition to complaints against his officers in the Illinois Country, Clark himself became the target of various charges. In August, Clark received a letter from J.M.P. LeGras, a French militia officer complaining that the Virginia government had refused the bills of exchange Clark had given him as payment for various supplies. Also that summer, Clark received a letter from Oliver Pollock in New Orleans stating that he had not received payment for \$60,000 worth of notes signed by Clark and his officers. Pollock also informed Clark that he had been unable to purchase cannon for the various forts Clark was constructing on the frontier. While Clark was one of the most able battlefield commanders the Revolution produced, he demonstrated complete ineptitude when dealing with logistics and financial matters. He therefore did nothing about either of the disturbing letters. Instead, he focused his attention once again on Detroit.<sup>21</sup>

Eager to convince his superiors that he could take Detroit, Clark set out for Williamsburg in the fall of 1780. He arrived there as the war in the South began to swing toward the Americans with their victory at King's Mountain in October. By Christmas day, he had convinced Jefferson that the safety of the frontier and therefore, the safety of the Continental Army in the South depended upon the capture of Detroit. The logic for such a conclusion was sound. If the British overran the frontier, the Americans would find themselves trapped between Cornwallis to their south and De Peyster's forces to their west. As Jefferson prepared for the last six months of his term, he penned instructions to Clark for a major assault on Detroit.<sup>22</sup>

A powerful army forming by our enemies in the south renders it necessary for us to reserve as much of our militia as possible free to act in that quarter. at the same time we have reason to believe that a very extensive combination of british and indian savages is preparing to invest our western frontier to prevent the cruel murders and devastations which attend the latter species of war and at the same time to prevent its producing a powerful diversion of our force form the southern

quarter in which they mean to make their principal effort and where alone success can be decisive of their ultimate object. it becomes necessary that we aim the first stroke in the western country and throw the enemy under the embarrassments of a defensive war rather than labour under them ourselves. we have therefore determined that an expedition shall be under taken under your command in a very early season of the approaching year into the hostile country beyond the Ohio, the principal object of which is to be the reduction of the British post at Detroit. the force destined for this enterprise is the Illinois battalion. Colo. Crockett's battalion, major Slaughter's corps, with detachments of militia from the counties of Fayette, Lincoln, Jefferson, Ohio, Monongalia, Hampshire, Berkeley Frederic and Greenbrier making in the whole 2000 men. . . At Pittsburg we depend on orders to be given by you for the removal of Men and Stores to the Falls of Ohio by the 15 of March. . . Thus you will perceive that we expect all to be in readiness at the Falls of Ohio by the 15. of March. . . You will then with such part of your force as you shall not leave in garrison proceed down the Ohio and up the Wabache or along such other route as you shall think best against Detroit.<sup>23</sup>

Within days after he wrote these orders, circumstances forced Jefferson to postpone their implementation. On December 31, 1780, Benedict Arnold landed along the James River with approximately 1,000 British troops. Caught unprepared, the Continental Army in Virginia under the command of Major General Baron Friedrich von Steuben needed every officer it could get. Clark volunteered and von Steuben placed him in command of 240 men near Hood's Ferry. There on January 10, 1781, Clark ambushed part of Arnold's force reportedly killing seventeen and wounding thirteen before he was forced to retreat in the face of a bayonet charge. Three days later, Governor Jefferson requested Clark's release from Continental Army service in order to begin preparations for the upcoming Detroit campaign.<sup>24</sup>

Within a few days, the plans for the Detroit campaign hit another snag. In fact, Clark nearly resigned his commission altogether. Apparently, Clark's name had recently come up in the Continental Congress for a General's commission in the Continental Army. However, the Continental Congress denied him the commission largely due to the efforts of the Virginia delegates. There are two possible explanations for this alleged

slight. In addition to his successes, word of the massive debts accumulated by Clark, and more specifically those under his command in the Illinois Country had also reached the ears of Virginia's delegates to Congress. In fairness to Clark, the debts he incurred in the name of Virginia had all been for legitimate military purposes. Many of the notes signed for by Clark's subordinates were for less than genuine motives and constituted an outright fraud against the state. Those implicated in the fiscal scandal included Colonel Slaughter, Colonel Montgomery and John Todd. Therefore, the denial of Clark's promotion may have been fallout from the fiscal improprieties of his command. Another possible explanation came from the Commander in Chief of the Continental Army himself. In a letter to Jefferson, Washington explained that since Clark did not intend to give up his state commission (therefore forfeiting his command of the Detroit expedition) he was not eligible to hold a Continental commission. Whatever the case, Clark was noticeably offended by the affair. However, Jefferson wisely diffused the situation by promoting Clark to brigadier general in the Virginia army.<sup>25</sup>

On January 18, 1781, Clark reported to Jefferson that he was ready to continue with the expedition. Within four days, he set out for Fort Pitt to begin recruiting his force. From that point on one disaster after another befell Clark. Jefferson had assumed that Colonel Daniel Brodhead, in command at Fort Pitt, would allow Colonel John Gibson and his company of two hundred men to join Clark's force. A letter from Washington to Jefferson in late December of 1780 only reinforced this assumption. In particular, a copy of Washington's orders to Brodhead regarding the expedition provided much of the basis for Jefferson and Clark's belief that Brodhead would release Gibson and his men. Washington began by expressing his support for Clark, "I do not think the charge of the



enterprise could have been committed to better hands than Colo. Clark's." The Commander in Chief then proceeded to instruct Brodhead to, "give every countenance and assistance to this enterprise, should no circumstances intervene to prevent its execution."<sup>26</sup>

One source in discussing Daniel Brodhead described him as "not, apparently, an easy man to get along with." When Clark arrived at Fort Pitt, he found that Brodhead had indeed determined that circumstances had intervened which would prevent the execution of Washington's orders. Low on men and supplies himself, Brodhead refused to allow Gibson or any of his men to accompany Clark against Detroit. To make matters worse, the majority of the militia troops ordered to meet Clark at Fort Pitt refused to go as well. Berkeley, Hampshire and Frederick counties were to furnish 255, 275, and 285 men respectively. These men constituted approximately forty percent of Clark's proposed troop strength. By mid February, officials in these counties wrote Clark informing him that only a fraction of the requested men would join. Berkeley County reasoned that such a draft would drain them of nearly one half of the militia fit for duty there. Frederick County reported that they only had twenty guns with which to equip their portion of the troops. In Hampshire County, seventy men actually mutinied when told they must report to Clark. This reality, forced Jefferson to abandon the militia call-up and issue a call for volunteers.<sup>27</sup>

When Clark learned that Brodhead would not release Gibson's company he decided to take his case straight to the top. In a letter to General Washington in May of 1780, Clark urged him to order Brodhead's compliance. In addition to Washington, Clark also appealed to the Board of War. However, Washington, stood by the commander of

Fort Pitt, "it was at the discretion of the Commandant and in case they could be safely spared . . . if therefore Col. Brodhead saw that the post could not be defended if such a detachment of Infantry was made, he was justifiable by the spirit of my order in not sending it."<sup>28</sup>

When it became clear that he would get neither Gibson's company nor the amount of troops originally ordered by Jefferson, Clark set out for the Falls of the Ohio in early August with approximately four hundred volunteers. In a letter to Jefferson he expressed his frustration with this third failed attempt at attacking Detroit. "Whoever undertakes to Raise an army in this Quarter will find himself disappointed. . . This country calls aloud for an Expedition wishing me to put it into Execution but . . . all the methods I have been able to pursue will not draw them into the field." Having given up on Detroit once again, Clark also informed Jefferson that he instead planned to "make some stroke among the Indians before the Close of the Campaign." He planned that stroke for early September. As part of a two-pronged thrust against the tribes of the Ohio valley, Clark was to attack the Shawnee who had reoccupied Chillicothe and Piqua while Gibson would lead a campaign against the Wyandotte. As part of this plan, approximately one hundred Pennsylvania volunteers under the command of Colonel Archibald Lochry were to join Clark somewhere near Wheeling. Arriving at Wheeling shortly after Clark's departure on August 16, Lochry sent a small detachment ahead to tell Clark he had arrived. A party of one hundred Loyalists and Indians nearby under the Command of the Mohawk Chief Joseph Brant captured the detachment. Aware of Lochry's presence, they set a trap for the Americans and attacked them while they ate breakfast. Brant's men killed one third of the Pennsylvanians and made prisoners of the rest. As they marched back north, they

killed several of the prisoners including Lochry. Upon learning this news, Clark decided not to attack the Shawnee, but to return to the Falls of the Ohio. Upon arriving there, he received even more bad news. The condition of the various western posts was at an all-time low. The Illinois Regiment had not been paid in nearly three years. Desertions occurred daily. The situation at Fort Jefferson had become so desperate in Clark's absence that the garrison there had to evacuate in June of 1781. In October, Clark wrote to Thomas Nelson, Jefferson's successor as governor. In complete contrast to his self-assured writings of two years earlier, this letter reeked of dejection and self-pity. "I have lost the object that was one of the principal inducements to my fatigues & transactions for several years past—my chain appears to have run out. I find myself enclosed with few troops, in a trifling fort, and shortly expect to bear the insults of those who have for several years been in continual dread of me."<sup>29</sup>

By September of 1781, Clark had to abandon nearly every inch of territory he had gained since 1778. In a letter to the county commissioners of Kentucky, he advocated a consolidation of all available troops in a fort at the mouth of the Kentucky River as the only hope of defending the Kentucky settlements. In the text of the letter, Clark's disenchantment came through clearly. "Gentlemen—For a series of years past I have made it my study to support and protect the back Settlements of our States, not from any particular Attachment I had to them, but knowing the very great advantage they were of the Whole Continent as a Barrier against the Indians . . . I have come to you, & should be glad to know, what you could wish to be done. The forces ordered by Government to be furnished by your Country added to those I have present are not Sufficient to execute

anything of moment (owing to the great Desertion that took place on my passage) a greater Number must be Called to the Field.”<sup>30</sup>

By this time, news of the fiscal improprieties committed by Clark’s lieutenants had reached the Kentucky settlements. In addition, many in Pennsylvania and elsewhere blamed Clark for the death of Lochry and his men. These factors and the failure of his campaign against the Shawnee damaged Clark’s reputation among the Kentuckians. They refused his request to furnish men to garrison the fort at the mouth of the Kentucky River. “Upon the whole as Jefferson County must be excused from . . . building and defending the new Garrison & as it is solely intended for our Defence . . . we conclude that we are willing to foregoe the many advantages which wd attend it for this Season and think it better to defend ourselves near home.”<sup>31</sup>

As the autumn of 1781 marched toward winter, Clark and the Kentuckians took turns blaming each other for the poor state of affairs in the west. Conversely, in the east, euphoria swept over the Americans as George Washington accepted the British surrender at Yorktown on October 20. While this all but ended the war in the east, the conflict over control of the western frontier would continue for another two years. For George Rogers Clark, the next year and a half would only hasten the decline of his once sterling reputation.

## Notes to Chapter VIII

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<sup>1</sup> James Alton James, *The Life of George Rogers Clark* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1928), 195-96.

<sup>2</sup> Lowell H. Harrison, *George Rogers Clark and the War in the West* (Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 1976), 67; James L. Stokesbury, *A Short History of the American Revolution* (New York: William Morrow and Company, 1991), 229; Jefferson to Clark, 25 December 1780 in James Alton James, ed., *George Rogers Clark Papers, 1771-1781* (Springfield, Illinois: Illinois State Historical Library, 1912), 485.

<sup>3</sup> Harrison, *George Rogers Clark and the War in the West* (Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 1976), 68-69.

<sup>4</sup> Thomas Jefferson's Instructions to Clark, 29 January 1780, in James, ed., *George Rogers Clark Papers, 1771-1781*, 386-91.

<sup>5</sup> James, *The Life of George Rogers Clark*, 185.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid; Draper MSS 49 J 89 (Wisconsin Historical Society, Madison; microfilm copy at the University of Kansas, Lawrence, KS); Clark to Jonathan Clark, 16 January 1780, in James, ed., *George Rogers Clark Papers, 1771-1781*, 381-383.

<sup>7</sup> Pierre Prevost to Clark, 20 February 1780, in James, ed., *George Rogers Clark Papers, 1771-1781*, 394-95.

<sup>8</sup> Petition from the Inhabitants of Boonesborough to Clark, 10 March 1780, in James, ed., *George Rogers Clark Papers, 1771-1781*, 398-400.

<sup>9</sup> Clark to John Todd, Jr., March 1780, in James, ed., *George Rogers Clark Papers, 1771-1781*, 404-07.

<sup>10</sup> Clark to Thomas Jefferson 23 September 1779, in James, ed., *George Rogers Clark Papers, 1771-1781*, 335-36; James, *The Life of George Rogers Clark*, 197; Clark to John Todd, Jr., March 1780, in James, ed., *George Rogers Clark Papers, 1771-1781*, 404-07.

<sup>11</sup> Clark to John Todd, Jr., March 1780, in James, ed., *George Rogers Clark Papers, 1771-1781*, 404-07; John Todd Jr., to Thomas Jefferson 2 June 1780, in James, ed., *George Rogers Clark Papers, 1771-1781*, 422-23.

<sup>12</sup> James, *The Life of George Rogers Clark*, 198-99; Pierre Prevost to Clark, 20 February 1780, in James, ed., *George Rogers Clark Papers, 1771-1781*, 394-95.

<sup>13</sup> James, *The Life of George Rogers Clark*, 203-207.

<sup>14</sup> Sinclair to Brehm, in *Collections of the Wisconsin State Historical Society, Vol. XI*, (Madison, WI: Wisconsin State Historical Society, 1888-1931), 147.

<sup>15</sup> Harrison, *George Rogers Clark and the War in the West*, 73; John Bakeless, *Background to Glory: The Life of George Rogers Clark* (Philadelphia: J.B. Lippincott Company, 1957), 253; James, *The Life of George Rogers Clark*, 209.

<sup>16</sup> Draper MSS 50 J 7; Clark to Jefferson, 22 August 1780, in James, ed., *George Rogers Clark Papers, 1771-1781*, 451.

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- <sup>17</sup> Clark to Jefferson, 22 August 1780, in James, ed., *George Rogers Clark Papers, 1771-1781*, 451.
- <sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*; Petition of the Inhabitants of Vincennes to the Governor of Virginia, 30 June 1780, in James, ed., *George Rogers Clark Papers, 1771-1781*, 430-33.
- <sup>21</sup> J.M.P. Le Gras to Clark, 1 August 1780, in James, ed., *George Rogers Clark Papers, 1771-1781*, 435; Draper MSS 50J 33-34.
- <sup>22</sup> Stokesbury, *A Short History of the American Revolution*, 235-36; Bakeless, *Background to Glory: The Life of George Rogers Clark*, 269.
- <sup>23</sup> Jefferson to Clark, 25 December 1780, in James, ed., *George Rogers Clark Papers, 1771-1781*, 485.
- <sup>24</sup> Harrison, *George Rogers Clark and the War in the West*, 77-78; Bakeless, *Background to Glory: The Life of George Rogers Clark*, 270-71; Draper MSS 30J 35-39.
- <sup>25</sup> Clark to Jefferson, 18 January 1781, in James, ed., *George Rogers Clark Papers, 1771-1781*, 485; Harrison, *George Rogers Clark and the War in the West*, 78.
- <sup>26</sup> Clark to Jefferson, 18 January 1781, in James, ed., *George Rogers Clark Papers, 1771-1781*, 485; Jefferson to Clark, 25 December 1780, in James, ed., *George Rogers Clark Papers, 1771-1781*, 485; George Washington to Daniel Brodhead, 29 December 1780, in William Chauncey Ford, ed., *The Writings of George Washington*, Vol. IX (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1891), 83.
- <sup>27</sup> Clark to George Washington, 20 May 1781, in James, ed., *George Rogers Clark Papers, 1771-1781*, 551-53; James, *The Life of George Rogers Clark*, 230-33.
- <sup>28</sup> Clark to George Washington, 20 May 1781, in James, ed., *George Rogers Clark Papers, 1771-1781*, 551-53; George Washington to the Board of War, 8 June 1781, in James, ed., *George Rogers Clark Papers, 1771-1781*, 562-63.
- <sup>29</sup> John Gibson to George Washington 25 August 1781, in James, ed., *George Rogers Clark Papers, 1771-1781*, 590-93; Clark to Thomas Jefferson 4 August 1781, , in James, ed., *George Rogers Clark Papers, 1771-1781*, 577-78; James, *The Life of George Rogers Clark*, 241-45; Clark to Thomas Nelson, 1 October 1781, in James, ed., *George Rogers Clark Papers, 1771-1781*, 605-08.
- <sup>30</sup> Clark to the Kentucky County Commissioners, 5 September 1781, in James, ed., *George Rogers Clark Papers, 1771-1781*, 596-98.
- <sup>31</sup> John Todd Jr. and Benjamin Logan to Clark 13 October 1781, in James Alton James, ed., *George Rogers Clark Papers, 1781-1783* (Springfield, Illinois: Illinois State Historical Library, 1926), 5-6.,

## **Chapter IX**

### **Independence and Ruin**

By the beginning of 1782, George Rogers Clark had become a shadow of his former self. Not only had he been forced to give up the Illinois posts and Fort Jefferson, but his reputation had been so damaged by charges of malfeasance and dereliction of duty that he could scarcely recruit enough men to defend the Kentucky settlements. One other factor that contributed to Clark's mounting troubles was a change in civilian leadership in Virginia. For most of his active service, Clark dealt with either Patrick Henry or Thomas Jefferson as governor. However, shortly before his term expired in the summer of 1781, Jefferson fled Richmond for Monticello in the face of Colonel Banastre Tarleton's invasion of Virginia. When the rest of the Virginia government reconvened in Charlottesville, Jefferson remained at Monticello, in effect, vacating the office. In response to the ensuing leadership vacuum, William Fleming and then Thomas Nelson assumed the office for the remainder of 1781.<sup>1</sup>

With the close of 1781, came a newly elected governor, Benjamin Harrison, a wealthy planter from one of Virginia's most prominent families and a former delegate to the Continental Congress. He immediately set about the nearly impossible task of defending Virginia and the frontier while repairing the state's financial woes. The budgetary situation Harrison inherited shocked him. In December of 1781, he wrote the Continental Congress, "Our paper money is at an end, and . . . the credit of the State is at a very low ebb." Yet, in the face of this crisis, Harrison realized that the surrender at Yorktown would do little to stop the bloodshed in the west. The war in the west had not been fought for the same reasons nor on the same terms as that in the east. While the small British force in the west might follow orders and cease hostilities, the various

Native American and Loyalist groups would not. On December 21, 1781, he wrote to Clark for the first time, “an offensive cannot at this Time be carried on. we must therefore turn our Attention to defensive measures and make use of every means in our power that this be done in the most effectual Manner.” He went on to give Clark specific instructions as to how to defend the frontier. From the militia of Jefferson, Fayette, and Lincoln counties, Clark was to garrison Fort Nelson at the Falls of the Ohio River with one hundred men, and to man each of the three forts located at mouth of the Kentucky River, the Licking River and Limestone Creek with sixty-eight men apiece. This particular letter represents a fundamental change in Clark’s relationship with the Virginia government. The Henry and Jefferson administrations gave him general orders to protect the frontier and attack the British in any way he saw fit. Benjamin Harrison took a much more active role in the war on the frontier. He probably did so for many reasons. First, the war in the east had virtually ended, allowing the government to focus all of its efforts on the frontier. Second, Clark’s performance since the recapture of Vincennes was less than admirable. Finally, Harrison and the Virginia legislature, which had relocated to Richmond in 1781, were deeply concerned about the alleged misuse of public money by various commanders in the west.<sup>2</sup>

In fact, the legislature had gone so far as to appoint a special five-man commission to investigate the financial dealings of the officers of the frontier posts. In particular, the legislature suspected many of Clark’s subordinates of conspiring with local merchants to draw large bills on the state of Virginia for payment in specie, which the conspirators would then split. The investigation deeply offended Clark, who assumed that he was its principal target of the investigation. Already troubled by the losses of the



previous year, and quite possibly already under the grip of the alcoholism that characterized his later years, Clark tendered his resignation. However, the investigation was not focused primarily on Clark. According to Harrison, the legislature's suspicion fell most heavily on Clark's subordinates, John Montgomery and Robert George as well as Oliver Pollock at New Orleans. In his dispatch to Clark in December, Harrison rejected Clark's resignation and did his best to soothe the Big Knife's ego. "It was a matter of great Surprise to us that we could not conceive how General Clarke could take that resolution as aimed at him whose Character has ever stood unimpeached."<sup>3</sup>

While Clark did remain on active duty after receiving this letter, he never got over the perceived insult. From this point until the end of the war in the west, Clark wrote fewer letters to both his family and the government. When he did write, he could barely contain his resentment and melancholy. In February of 1782, he wrote to his brother Jonathan of his disaffection with the Virginia government. In the letter, Clark states that Harrison, when refusing his resignation, placed the blame for Clark's recent misfortunes in the west squarely on the shoulders of the government. "Being so Repeatedly disappointed by government that I warmly solicited them for leave to quit this Department intending to Retire . . . but have met with a Refutial such as put it out of my power to leave the Cuntrey with propriety they have been generous Enough (as I suppose they term it) to own that the misfortunes that I have met with was owing to their own disability and neglect" All available evidence indicates that the statement was false. The fact that Clark fabricated this admission of blame by the state of Virginia says much about his state of mind in early 1782. Harrison's December 21, letter is the only known communication which dealt with Clark's resignation. An examination of that letter

reveals no outright admission of blame on the part of the government and nothing that Clark could have misinterpreted as such.<sup>4</sup>

In addition to Clark's written communication, there is other evidence that the Virginian was not himself. In his instructions to Clark, Governor Harrison outlined a defensive strategy employing a system of forts across Kentucky. As the summer of 1782 approached, Clark abandoned most of the plan. In fact, with the exception of Fort Nelson at the Falls of the Ohio, he did nothing to garrison or equip the Kentucky forts. Instead, he embarked on a plan to build several armed boats with which to control the Ohio River. In his dispatches to Harrison, Clark mentioned his gunboat strategy, but remained somewhat ambiguous about the fact that he planned to implement it instead of Harrison's fort strategy. Harrison liked the idea of patrolling the Ohio River with the armed boats and even tried to send Clark several cannon from Fort Pitt to help with the endeavor. In the end, Clark succeeded in completing only one boat, which he stationed at the mouth of the Licking River. The events that occurred later in the year indicate Harrison did not realize that Clark had failed to garrison the other three forts.<sup>5</sup>

In Clark's defense, relations between the citizens of the west and the army made his orders very complicated. The war was entering its seventh year and it had been over three years since Clark's regular troops had received either pay or fresh supplies. Of the 110 men Clark assigned to the gunboat on the Licking River, thirty-eight deserted. Some militia units refused to report for duty at all. Extremely poor discipline ran rampant among the soldiers who did report. In addition, several leaders from the major Kentucky settlements began to push for the creation of an independent state of Kentucky and therefore felt no obligation to obey the orders of the representatives of Virginia.<sup>6</sup>

However, George Rogers Clark had overcome similar obstacles in 1778 and 1779. Through a combination of bravado and calculated displays of force, Clark had turned a similarly undisciplined gang into a rather effective and highly motivated fighting unit. Why did he not succeed in 1782? Apparently, by 1782, Clark had lost confidence in himself as a commander of men. The disappointments of 1781 coupled with the criticisms leveled at him from Kentucky, Fort Pitt and Williamsburg turned his former boldness into timidity. Furthermore, when Clark achieved his string of victories in the Illinois Country, he had far fewer responsibilities. Even after he captured all three of the Illinois posts, he still had only three garrisons to supply and less than three hundred men to command. By 1782, due to the rather poor military organization of the west, Clark held at least partial responsibility for five forts, and close to twenty towns stretching from Limestone in eastern Kentucky to Cahokia\* on the banks of the Mississippi River. Clark quite simply could not handle the logistical requirements of such a vast district. Nor could he, after the revelations of their financial misdealing, count on his subordinates to relieve him of part of the burden. While still a very capable battlefield commander, Clark was in over his head when it came to the administrative aspects of high command.

Kentuckians refer to 1782 as “The Year of Blood.” As early as February, Indian warriors descended upon the most remote settlements burning livestock, homes and killing or capturing several settlers. These attacks however, constituted only the preliminaries to a much larger thrust planned against Clark at Fort Nelson. However, Clark’s reputation stopped this campaign before it could begin. According to James

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\* While Clark had withdrawn his regular troops from the Illinois Country, he had left at least one officer in each location to command the citizen militias that were to serve as the region’s only defense. As long as the British had not reoccupied them, and by 1782, they had not, the citizens of Vincennes, Cahokia, and Kaskaskia still looked to Clark as their protector.

Alton James, so many erroneous reports of Clark making a move against Detroit reached the British commanders there that they postponed the attack until they could ascertain his whereabouts. Clark had no plans and no means of marching against Detroit. However, a force of 480 men marching from Pennsylvania under the command of Colonel William Crawford was making its way toward the Wyandotte and Shawnee near the southern shore of Lake Erie. Wary that this might be a diversion to allow Clark to take Detroit, Major De Peyster dispatched only a company of volunteers and Indians from the Great Lakes tribes to meet Crawford. Although they gained strength from the Wyandotte and Delaware along the way, Crawford still outnumbered them by almost two hundred when they met up on June 4. After an all-day battle in which neither side gained much ground, a group of nearly one hundred and fifty Shawnee joined the battle and tipped the scales in favor of the Native American warriors. In the ensuing chaos, the Americans lost ten percent of their force and the Indians captured Colonel Crawford. After they forced him to run the gauntlet, his captors tortured Crawford to death by burning him.<sup>7</sup>

When news of the defeat reached William Irvine, who was now commanding at Fort Pitt, he immediately began to plan a retaliatory campaign. Finally, Clark saw a chance at commanding troops in the field for the first time since his expedition against the Shawnee nearly two years earlier in 1780. Irvine accepted Clark's help and directed him to cross the Ohio River and attack the Shawnee from the south while he advanced west from Fort Pitt. However, word of their preparations reached De Peyster and he immediately assumed that the Americans intended to march against Detroit. Leaving nothing to chance, he ordered eleven hundred loyalists and Indians under Captains Alexander Caldwell, Alexander McKee Joseph Brant, and Simon Girty to abandon a

planned expedition against Wheeling and return to Detroit. Girty, a backcountry loyalist who had betrayed the Americans a few years before, decided that they could not return from the expedition empty handed and crossed the Ohio along with three hundred warriors in mid-August and headed for the settlement of Bryan's Station.<sup>8</sup>

On the morning of August 16, 1782, Girty and his three hundred warriors surrounded the settlement of Bryans Station. The Indians intended to surprise the fort, but were unaware that during the night the inhabitants detected their presence. During the subsequent attack, the Kentuckians managed to sneak a few men safely past the Indians to go for help. Realizing that rescue parties were now on their way, the Indians and Girty withdrew on the morning of the seventeenth. Taking their time destroying every field they came upon, Girty and his men encamped at a place on the north side the Licking River known as the Blue Licks on August 19. Unbeknownst to Girty, militia from Lincoln County as well as that of Fayette County under the command of Colonels Benjamin Logan and Daniel Boone pursued them. By the morning of the nineteenth, the advance guard of this militia force spotted Girty's men across the river. At a hastily organized officer's council, Boone urged caution, but Major Hugh McGary, commander of the Lincoln County militia would not listen. He ordered the militia to cross the river and attack. Within five minutes, Girty's men outflanked and routed the Americans. As the militiamen tried to retreat back across the river, the Indians poured volley after volley into them, and tomahawked many of the Kentuckians as they tried to swim to safety. By the time the Americans made it back to Bryan's Station, they had lost sixty-six men including two Colonels.<sup>9</sup>

While Clark had not been present at the Battle of Blue Licks as the Kentuckians called it, the incident exposed his failure to carry out Harrison's instructions to fortify posts in addition to Fort Nelson. On October 17, 1782, Harrison sent Clark a sharp rebuke for his lack of communication (Clark had not written him since May), and for his failure to carry out orders.

No official account from you of the situation in the part of the Country committed to your care have reached me for several months, for which I am at a loss to assign a reason . . . these [the events of Blue Licks] are circumstances so much within your line of Duty, that I can not help expressing my very great surprise at your Silence. In my Letter of the 20<sup>th</sup> December last you were directed to erect forts at the Mouth of Kentuckey river, the mouth of licking creek and at the mouth of limestone creek, and to garrison each of these posts with sixty eight men to cover and protect the Country, Whether you have comply'd with these orders or not you have not thought fit to advise me, but I have every reason to suppose from other information that they have altogether been neglected, to which much of the present misfortune is to be attributed, as such establishments would have been a great curb on the Indians, the country might from these posts have been alarm'd at the approach of an Enemy, and with the assistance of the garrisons better enabled to repel their attacks, these reasons governed the Executive when they gave the orders, and induced them to fix on you to execute them, and it gives me great pain to find that you have disappointed us in our expectations.<sup>10</sup>

Clark further damaged his relationship with the governor when, the day after Harrison penned the above rebuke, Clark wrote to the governor extolling the virtues of his plan of fortifying only Fort Nelson. In the same letter, he also disparaged the American commanders at the Battle of Blue Licks. "Those preparations that were made and the measure taken to let the Enemy know that we were fully acquainted with their design (which in part we were) I believe has sav'd the western country . . . And had it not have been for that Imprudent affair at the blue licks the country would have sustained very little damage, I learn Colo Logan has sent you a full acct of the whole transaction The conduct of those unfortunate Gent was Extreemly Reprihensible." Given the tone of

Harrison's letter to Clark, this cannot have been what he expected from Clark's next communication.<sup>11</sup>

Oblivious to Harrison's displeasure, Clark set about making plans for his intended campaign against the Shawnee. However, as it had at nearly every turn since Vincennes, luck deserted George Rogers Clark again. In accordance with the plan he and William Irvine devised, Clark intended to cross the Ohio early in November and march along roughly the same route he had more than two years earlier. Just like in 1780, the Shawnee towns of Piqua and Chillicothe were his primary objectives. After the disaster at Blue Licks, the Kentucky men were anxious for revenge, and Clark had no trouble filling his ranks. On November 4, 1782, Clark set out with over one thousand men. Three days later, William Irvine wrote Clark informing him of some very unfortunate news. George Washington, upon hearing of the expedition, countermanded Irvine's orders for Continental regulars to rendezvous with him at Fort McIntosh. Apparently, General Washington, "had been assure[d] by the British General, that all the Savages were called in from the frontiers, and were not to commit any farther depredations upon the inhabitants." Of course, since Irvine wrote the letter three days after Clark departed, this news was of little use to the Virginian. Even if Irvine had contacted Clark in time, one doubts that he would have called off the expedition. First, his troops were out to avenge their comrades killed at Blue Licks. Secondly, Clark himself had not commanded an expedition in the field for more than two years. With his litany of failures all occurring while he was in a defensive rather than an offensive position, Clark likely craved the opportunity to take the fight to the enemy once again. In fact, by all accounts, flashes of the old Clark appeared during the campaign. He maintained firm discipline among his

troops, much as he had in 1778 and 1779. He planned his attacks down to the smallest detail, leaving nothing to chance. In less than three weeks, Clark burned five Shawnee towns, including Chillicothe, destroyed countless Shawnee grain fields, took ten scalps and ten prisoners.<sup>12</sup>

The 1782 Shawnee campaign is another excellent example of the lengths frontier warriors went to in their warfare. The Indians had shown no mercy at Blue Licks because they meant to avenge an American attack on a peaceful Moravian Delaware settlement earlier in the year. Likewise, Clark and his men gave little quarter to the Shawnee. In addition to scalping their warriors, Clark sentenced the Shawnee women and children to a slow death of hunger and exposure. After nearly eight years of raiding, stalking, burning, scalping, torturing and killing, there was little restraint left on either side. Actually, Clark himself expressed disappointment at not being able to accomplish more. “We might probably have got many more scalps and prisoners would we have timely known whether or not we were discovered.”<sup>13</sup>

Three days after Clark reported to Harrison of his successes against the Shawnee, he received the letter in which Harrison criticized him for his failure to carry out orders regarding the various forts. That day he wrote Harrison a reply. In it, he maintained he had done nothing wrong. He referred the governor to his earlier letters, in which he discussed his plan for fortifying Kentucky by using gunboats. He went on to blame the disaster at Blue Licks on the recklessness of the militia commanders in charge of the pursuit. Finally, Clark ended the letter by blaming all the complaints lodged against him (by this point, there were many) on a “party,” which sought to poison Harrison’s mind against him. However, Clark never elaborated on just who or what this party was. It is



likely that this supposed saboteur was nothing more than Clark's ability to blame everyone but himself for his misfortunes manifesting itself again.<sup>14</sup>

Once again, Clark's curt and surly reply to his superior did nothing to help his standing in Richmond. While he was accurate in his statements regarding the poor judgment of the men in command at Blue Licks, Harrison's position that the disaster could have been avoided had Clark garrisoned the Kentucky posts as he had been instructed carried much weight in the capital. By this time, nearly every merchant whom Clark had bought supplies from on the credit of Virginia had been refused payment by the government. Every month he received letters from the distressed creditors threatening, cajoling and pleading with him to make good on his debts. In addition, the commissioners sent by the government to investigate the financial discrepancies in the western department continued to uncover instances of corruption and abuse. While no evidence pointed to Clark as a culprit, the scandal had occurred on his watch and therefore further tarnished his reputation.

By the beginning of 1783, Clark wanted out. With a peace settlement imminent, Governor Harrison readily obliged him. That spring, Harrison accepted Clark's resignation effective as soon as the need for offensive operations against the Native Americans ceased and ordered him to come to Richmond when that time came. On July 2, 1783, Harrison informed Clark that Virginia no longer needed his services. He then thanked him rather magnanimously for his efforts. "But before I take leave of you, I feel myself called on in the most forcible manner to return my thanks and those of my council for the very great and singular services you have rendered your country in wresting so great and valuable a territory out of the hands of the British enemy, repelling the attacks

of their savage allies, and carry on successful war in the heart of their country.” With that, General George Rogers Clark became citizen George Rogers Clark. As such, he was practically destitute. Earlier that spring, in anticipation of his trip to Richmond, his financial situation forced Clark to write what must have been the most humiliating letter of his still young life. “Nothing but necessity could Induce me to make the following Request of your Excellency, Which is to grant me a small sum of money on Acct, I can assure you Sr that I am Exceedingly distress’d for the want of necessary cloathing &c and dont know of any channell thro which I could procure any—Except that of the Executive.” George Rogers Clark had literally given everything he had in service to his home state of Virginia. He spent the rest of his life in one desperate attempt after another to regain what he lost.<sup>15</sup>

## Notes to Chapter IX

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<sup>1</sup> L. Edward Purcell, *Who was Who in the American Revolution*, (New York: Facts on File, 1993), 256-58.

<sup>2</sup> Benjamin Harrison to Clark 20 December 1781, in James Alton James, ed., *George Rogers Clark Papers, 1781-1783* (Springfield, Illinois: Illinois State Historical Library, 1926), 19-21.

<sup>3</sup> James Alton James, *The Life of George Rogers Clark* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1928), 259-60; Benjamin Harrison to William Fleming 29 January 1782, in James, ed., *George Rogers Clark Papers, 1781-1783*, 32-34; Benjamin Harrison to Clark 20 December 1781, in James, ed., *George Rogers Clark Papers, 1781-1783*, 19-21.

<sup>4</sup> Clark to Jonathan Clark 16 February 1782, in James, ed., *George Rogers Clark Papers, 1781-1783*, 38-40; Benjamin Harrison to Clark 20 December 1781, in James, ed., *George Rogers Clark Papers, 1781-1783*, 19-21.

<sup>5</sup> Clark to Benjamin Harrison 5 March 1782, in James, ed., *George Rogers Clark Papers, 1781-1783*, 34-45; Benjamin Harrison to Clark 17 October 1782, in James, ed., *George Rogers Clark Papers, 1781-1783*, 133-35.

<sup>6</sup> James, *The Life of George Rogers Clark*, 260-63.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 265-67.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 268-69.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 270-72; Draper MSS 52 J 37; The Battle of the Blue Licks 19 August 1782, in James, ed., *George Rogers Clark Papers, 1781-1783*, 89-93.

<sup>10</sup> Benjamin Harrison to Clark 17 October 1782, in James, ed., *George Rogers Clark Papers, 1781-1783*, 133-35.

<sup>11</sup> Clark to Benjamin Harrison 18 October 1782, in James, ed., *George Rogers Clark Papers, 1781-1783*, 135-37.

<sup>12</sup> Clark to Benjamin Harrison 27 November 1782, in James, ed., *George Rogers Clark Papers, 1781-1783*, 157-58.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>14</sup> Clark to Benjamin Harrison 30 November 1782, in James, ed., *George Rogers Clark Papers, 1781-1783*, 161-63.

<sup>15</sup> Benjamin Harrison to Clark 9 April 1783, in James, ed., *George Rogers Clark Papers, 1781-1783*, 221-25; Clark to Benjamin Harrison 21 May 1783, in James, ed., *George Rogers Clark Papers, 1781-1783*, 235.

## **Chapter X**

### **Last Days of the Big Knife**

Even before his departure for Richmond during the summer of 1783, George Rogers Clark's conduct in the west was being investigated by the Virginia government. At first, the inquiries seemed to paint Clark very favorably. By July 1, 1783, commissioners sent to examine the accounts of the western department had determined that Virginia owed Clark over three thousand pounds for supply reimbursements and back pay. Unfortunately, charges of malfeasance and a general lack of discipline among the officers under Clark's command remained. In addition, the sum granted Clark by the commissioners, while helpful, came nowhere near reimbursing him for all of the debts he had encumbered during the war. In fact, earlier in the year, the commissioners issued a report in which they stated their criteria for paying bills drawn on the state in the Illinois and Ohio territories. According to its report, the commissioners planned to hold fast to the principle that they would only honor bills drawn by authorized signers. At first glance, this boded well for Clark. For most of the war, he was the only authorized agent of Virginia in the west, so he had reason to believe that he would be reimbursed for his drafts. The commission report, however, also stated that, "many Bills are drawn by those authorized by Government, for which they can produce no vouchers for artickles for which these Bills were drawn, and of course the Bills become chargable to the Drawers." Furthermore, the commissioners decided that since so many bills were drawn by Clark and his lieutenants without adequate proof that the supplies were bought, the decision of whether to pay them could not be made by the commission and must therefore come before the legislature.<sup>1</sup>

Though the commission did not flatly refuse payment of Clark's debts, the fact that they left the decision up to the legislature sentenced him to at least, short term financial difficulty and possibly long-term destitution. Furthermore, the commissioners were not the only officials interested in the affairs of the western department. From late 1782 onward, several prominent Virginia politicians began to focus their attention on the various reports of improprieties concerning the western department. For various reasons, ranging from the fact that he was the highest ranking officer in the area to personal jealousy, many of them aimed their attacks at Clark personally. In October of 1782, Arthur Campbell, a frontier militia leader, wrote of Clark's complete failure to command the respect of both his men and people of the west. "Genl. Clarke is in that country, but he has lost the confidence of the people, and it is said become a Sot; perhaps something worse."<sup>2</sup>

The following month, Clark received a letter from Thomas Jefferson. In the letter, Jefferson, apparently unaware of the specifics of such charges, sought to console Clark with the notion that such character attacks came with fame.

I perceive by your letter you are not unapprised that your services to your country have not made due impression on every mind. that you have enemies you must not doubt, when [you] reflect that you have made yourself eminent. if you meant to escape malice you should have confined yourself within the sleepy line of regular duty. when you transgressed this and enterprized deeds which will hand down your name with honour to future times, you made yourself a mark for malice & envy to shoot at. of these there is enough both in and out of office.<sup>3</sup>

In January of 1783, James Monroe, who until this time had been a great admirer of Clark's, wrote to him of the investigation into the western department. A member of the board of commissioners investigating Clark, Monroe held nothing back in the letter. This piece of communication is unique in that it marked the first time anyone in any

official capacity laid the blame for the behavior of Clark's subordinates solely on Clark and his inability to control them.

A variety of communications respecting yr particular conduct have been made to us. Yr draughts to an immense amt. on Oliver Pollock at N. Orleans & others in ye western country who have taken up bills on ye treasury, have been presented for paymt . . . These draughts are immense calculated to exhaust and impoverish ye state & ultimately we fear to turn to no publick benefit. we are with respect to them much surpris'd you woud upon any occasion permit yr inferior officers to draw bills . . . If howe'er yr officers have acted without yr. orders, or even consent, in ye many instances wherein exceptions have arose to their conduct, we cannot conceive why you have not arrested, broke & dismiss'd them from ye service, for certainly you must be aware that by no subjecting them to censure you give them yr countenance.<sup>4</sup>

Later in the letter, Monroe enumerated the other charges which had been brought by various individuals against Clark, "that you are personally engag'd in private speculations wh at least do not promote ye publick interest & further that you drink to excess." According to James Alton James, Clark replied to Monroe, yet did not dispute the charge that he drank too much. While there is no definitive proof that Clark had degenerated into complete drunkenness as early as 1783, there is nothing to disprove it either.<sup>5</sup>

Contrary to James, (and just about every other Clark biographer), one could make a case that this period constitutes the most likely beginning of Clark's alcoholism. By the summer of 1783, Clark had been removed from command, blamed for the Blue Licks disaster, tangentially implicated in a slew of fiscal improprieties, upbraided by Governor Harrison for not carrying out orders, berated by various creditors for debts incurred in the name of Virginia, refused immediate reimbursement for those debts, and pushed further along the road to complete financial ruin. It seems much more likely that he surrendered to drinking at this period than at any other time afterward. In addition, it was during this

time that multiple reports from credible sources (even friends of Clark) detail his excessive drinking. Whatever the case, the Clark that returned to Virginia in 1783, brought with him a severely damaged reputation as well as strained financial circumstances.

Early in the fall of 1783, Brigadier General George Rogers Clark joined his brothers, Lieutenant Colonel Jonathan and Lieutenants Edmund and John Clark at the family plantation in Caroline County. The reunion marked the first time they had been together in nearly eight years. Only Richard Clark, still on active duty in Kentucky, remained absent. Begun in happiness, their brief reunion soon saddened when on October 29, Lieutenant John Clark, the fifth child of John and Ann Clark, died of health problems stemming from his six years as a British prisoner.<sup>6</sup>

It is not clear how Clark spent the majority of his time during that first winter free from military service. Certainly, he occupied much of his time petitioning the legislature for reimbursement of his expenses in the west and in answering correspondence. One particular letter from the period stands out. On December 4, 1783, Thomas Jefferson wrote Clark of his fears that the English (who still occupied forts at Detroit and Michilimackinack) harbored thoughts of seizing the country west of the Mississippi.

I find they have subscribed a very large sum of money in England for exploring the country from the Mississippi to California . . . I am afraid they have thoughts of colonising into that quarter. Some of us have been talking here in a feeble way of making the attempt to search that country but I doubt whether we have enough of that kind of spirit to raise the money. How would you like to lead such a party?<sup>7</sup>

Clark declined the offer, but ironically, his teen-age brother William eventually gained fame for his participation in just such an expedition at the request of Jefferson.

More than likely, Clark concentrated much of his efforts that winter in settling the various land claims of his men. In fact, his efforts in this area began long before his removal from command. In order to encourage men to fight in the Continental Army, the Continental Congress enacted legislation granting land bounties to those who enlisted.<sup>8</sup> From the very beginning of his service, Clark began lobbying the Virginia legislature for the same provisions for those who served in state regiments. By early 1781, his efforts paid off. On January 2, 1781, the legislature passed a bill granting 150,000 acres to the men of the Illinois Regiment. The bill specified that the land be located northwest of the Ohio River. A majority vote of the officers would decide the specific locale. It seems that rumors of Clark's poor conduct and alcoholism were not yet strong enough to completely prevent him from serving in the public sphere. When the officers of the Illinois Regiment met on February 1, 1783, "Clark was chosen president of the board and also chairman of the committee of five deputies who were to represent the board when a general meeting was impracticable."<sup>9</sup>

In May of 1783, Clark, on behalf of the Illinois Regiment, presented a petition to the legislature requesting permission to lay out their claims on the opposite side of the Ohio from Louisville, Kentucky. The officers justified their choice on the grounds that such a settlement would serve as a buffer between the Kentucky settlements and the Native Americans of the Wabash and Miami River areas as well as a key post for trade between those tribes and the Americans. In addition to serving as President of the Board of the land company, Clark was also appointed as principal surveyor of the public lands allotted to the men of the Virginia state line. The legislature confirmed the appointment on February 9, 1784, but only after Clark and William Croghan, the other principal



surveyor and husband of Clark's sister Lucy, passed an examination at William and Mary in December of 1783. This marked the first time he had ventured into any formal educational setting since he left his uncle Donald Robertson's school in the mid-1760s. Coincidentally, the first signature on the certificate proclaiming his proficiency in the art of surveying is none other than that of Robertson's other famous pupil, James Madison.<sup>10</sup>

Though technically a principal surveyor, Clark devoted very little of his time to the project. His financial and legal problems as well as other duties he took on kept him from taking an active part in the survey. Croghan conducted the everyday business of the survey while corresponding regularly with Clark. The settlement the two men laid out on across the river from Louisville was called Clarksville in honor of the Big Knife. The business that took Clark away from the survey was all too familiar to him. When he arrived in Louisville during the spring of 1784, he found the surrounding Native American tribes in bad humor over the failure of the United States to conclude a separate peace with them. Even before his departure from Virginia, Governor Benjamin Harrison enlisted Clark to represent the state to the tribes of the Ohio country. In fact, part of his mission was to continue a process that had been going on since Europeans first arrived in America. Governor Harrison's plan to deal with the Native Americans on Virginia's border was to make them white. Harrison was not the first, and certainly not the last to employ such a strategy. His particular scheme called for Clark to convince the Indians to send, "their Children to the College [of William and Mary] for education." In addition, Clark was to receive ten pounds "per head," when the children arrived in Williamsburg.<sup>11</sup>

On March 2, 1784, George Rogers Clark was once again serving in an official capacity concerning Native American-white relations. A letter from Thomas Jefferson

informed Clark that Congress had recently appointed him to a commission whose charge was to negotiate peace with the tribes of the west. It seems that Jefferson's personal friendship with Clark, as well as Clark's obvious qualifications went far in procuring this particular post. In the letter, Jefferson goes to great lengths to point out to his former neighbor that this appointment could do much to gain Clark national notoriety. He urges Clark to take the position, "because you can render essential service in it, & because too it will bring you forward on the Continental stage." Judging by the other members of the commission, Jefferson spoke truthfully. The other appointees were, Continental Army General and hero of the Southern Department Nathanael Greene, former delegates to the Continental Congress Oliver Wolcott, and Stephen Higginson, and Brigadier General Richard Butler.<sup>12</sup> Clark heeded Jefferson's advice and accepted the appointment.

Treating with Native American tribes was not the only thing occupying Clark's mind during the late spring and early summer of 1784. Beyond his service as an Indian Commissioner and land surveyor, Clark reportedly entered into a partnership with Dr. Alexander Skinner and John Saunders (the same man Clark had threatened to kill when he almost got Clark's army lost on the way to the Illinois Country in 1778) to supply beef, bear meat and oil, and venison to Louisville. Unfortunately, by the end of the year, the scarcity of game due to the rapid influx of settlers forced the venture out of business. In addition to all of this, Clark began preparations to move his mother and father to Louisville from Caroline County.<sup>13</sup>

Clark's various ventures, both personal and public, were not the only events that shaped his life during 1784. Two occurrences, both national in scope, did much to shape the future of the Big Knife. First, at roughly the same time Clark became an Indian

Commissioner, the state of Virginia formally ceded all of its land claims in the territory northwest of the Ohio River. Second, politicians in both Virginia and the Kentucky territory began to advocate the creation of Kentucky as a separate state. These events affected Clark's future enormously because with the ceding of the Old Northwest to the new national government, Virginia washed its hands of the obligation to reimburse Clark and others for their service in the west. Clark had incurred the debts in an area that Virginia no longer held claim to, thereby absolving them of any obligation to pay them. Furthermore, when Kentucky became a state, Clark's supporters in Virginia, such as Thomas Jefferson, George Wythe and Patrick Henry, did not have the power to maintain Clark in public positions in Kentucky. Clark now had to answer to the citizens and politicians of Kentucky directly. His performance in 1781 and 1782 in Kentucky made that a rather risky proposition. The fact that the post of Indian Commission was a national office constituted his only solace. However, in time, his financial situation and drunkenness cost him that appointment.<sup>14</sup>

At the time, Clark had no idea of the effect these political changes would have on his life. He spent most of his time working to secure peace with the area tribes. It seems that early on, Clark did more than any other commissioner to negotiate a successful conclusion to years of hostilities between settlers and Native Americans. According to John Bakeless, Clark was the only commissioner to hold formal talks with the tribes in the fall of 1784. One reason for the slow progress of the peace negotiations was that two of the original commissioners, Nathanael Greene and Stephen Higginson, had refused their appointments and Congress then appointed General Benjamin Lincoln and Arthur Lee, a former delegate to Congress, to the commission, causing a considerable delay in

the activities of the commission. In addition, the Iroquois of New York again caused strife between the tribes of the west and the Americans. In October of 1784, in yet another Treaty of Fort Stanwix, the Seneca Chief Cornplanter and Captain Aaron Hill, Chief of the Mohawks, presumed to speak for all of the western tribes as well as the Six Nations. During the treaty negotiations attended by Commissioners Wolcott, Butler, and Lee (Clark had returned to Kentucky and had temporarily resigned from the commission) as well as the Marquis de Lafayette, the Seneca and Mohawks surrendered Native American title to all lands north and west of the Ohio River. Much like the earlier treaty of Fort Stanwix, the tribes actually living in the west refused to honor this agreement since they had not participated in the negotiations.<sup>15</sup>

Realizing rather quickly that they must negotiate separately with the western tribes, the commission, which Clark had now rejoined, issued invitations for a meeting at Fort McIntosh in November. Slowly, the representatives of the Wyandotte, Ottawa, Chippewa and Delaware tribes joined Clark, Lee and Butler at the fort. After all the representatives arrived, the negotiations began. Finally, on January 21, 1785, the parties agreed to a treaty granting the United States the territory northwest of the Ohio River in exchange for the promise that the government would distribute various goods to the tribes and allow them to retain possession of an area of land in the northwestern part of the present-day state of Ohio. In addition, all parties agreed to exchange any prisoners taken during the war. However, one tribe remained conspicuously absent from the treaty negotiations. The Shawnee, who had been a long-time enemy to white intrusion, refused to attend the negotiations. No one felt that an agreement reached without their consent

could endure for long, but Clark and the other commissioners believed that under the circumstances it was the best result that could be achieved.<sup>16</sup>

The fledgling United States government knew that a lasting peace depended upon the cooperation of the Shawnee, who at the time were the most powerful tribe in the west. As more and more settlers flooded into the area, robbery, violence, and general disorder broke out between Native Americans and whites who settled in areas forbidden to white settlement by previous treaties. To make matters worse, the British (still in possession of Detroit and Michilimackinack) did very little to discourage Native American hostility, and quite possibly encouraged it. The Confederation Congress realized that it needed someone with experience in dealing with the western tribes to help resolve these problems. On April 18, 1785, Congress appointed Clark, Butler and Wolcott once again to hold peace talks with the tribes of the northwest including the Shawnee. In case Butler and Wolcott were unable to attend, Congress granted Clark the power to conduct the talks by himself. This time the commissioners decided to hold the talks at the mouth of the Miami River in October of 1785. As October slipped into November, few of the tribes had answered the invitation to the talks. By mid-November, the offer of gifts attracted representatives of the Wyandotte and Delaware, but still no Shawnee arrived. Finally, Clark and the other commissioners issued a threat of war if the Shawnee did not attend the council, and on January 13, 150 Shawnee arrived to begin the negotiations.<sup>17</sup>

By the end of January 1786, the parties reached a general agreement that granted the United States sovereignty over all of the territory ceded by Great Britain in the Treaty of Paris and reserved the land between the Miami and Wabash Rivers for the tribes present at the treaty negotiations. George Rogers Clark and the other commissioners left

the meeting confident that they had secured a significant and lasting peace. Within weeks however, their optimism faded. As soon as the Shawnee returned to their villages, they and the British repudiated the treaty saying that they only signed it to gain time to exact revenge upon the Americans and on Clark in particular. The failure of this round of negotiations convinced the Confederation government that they must employ other methods to gain undisputed possession of the Northwest Territory. <sup>18</sup>

As the spring of 1786 approached, George Rogers Clark became convinced that only a show of force could convince the Ohio Valley tribes that the Americans were powerful enough to enforce their treaties. Clark received regular reports of increasingly daring and deadly Native American raids from posts as far distant as his once impenetrable stronghold of Vincennes.

This place that once trembled at your victorious arms, and the savages overawed by your superior power is now entirely anarchial, and we shudder at the daily expectation of horrid murders and probably total depopulation of the Americans by imperious savages . . . <sup>19</sup>

By mid-summer, the Indians of the Wabash River area made known their intentions to eliminate all American settlements in the Northwest. In the middle of July nearly five hundred warriors advanced down the Wabash River against the American settlements in the Illinois Country. This force nearly succeeded in taking Vincennes but was forced to retreat when they learned a party of 130 Kentuckians sent by Clark was approaching the town. However, hostilities did not end there. As raid after raid claimed the lives of many settlers during the spring and summer of 1786, the citizens of the Kentucky, Illinois and Ohio territories besought Clark to lead a retaliatory expedition. After the Confederation Congress and Virginia government denied requests to fund an expedition, the inhabitants of the west decided to mount their own campaign against the

Shawnee. A meeting of area militia officers held on August 2, 1786 granted command of the expedition to George Rogers Clark. Finally, he had the opportunity to make up for his military failures at the close of the war and bring peace to the west.<sup>20</sup>

Clark immediately began preparing his expedition. He ordered the militia captains to rendezvous with him at Clarksville on September 10. Clark expected to command a force of nearly 2,500 men. However, George Rogers Clark was still as controversial a figure in the west as he had been during his previous command there. The rumors of his drinking had not dissipated; in fact, they had grown even stronger since 1783. According to the quartermaster of the Lincoln County militia, "I know to my own knowledge that I had business with the General while there he was drunk chief of the time and not capable of business."<sup>21</sup> Though enough officers still believed in his abilities to win him command of the expedition, it seems that the rumors of his alcoholism and general lack of decorum kept several militia from marching to the rendezvous site. Most of Clark's early biographers went to great lengths to prove that Clark was sober before and during the campaign, and there is not enough conclusive evidence to prove that Clark drank to excess during the planning and execution of the campaign. However, whether he did so or not is irrelevant. The fact that the rumors convinced many officers not to serve under him is damning enough. It is clear that Clark drank heavily toward the end of his service during the revolution and continued to do so afterwards. Therefore, he really had no one to blame but himself for the rumors that surrounded him during his Wabash Campaign, as historians have named his action against the Shawnee in 1786.

By mid-September, only half of the expected troops had arrived at Clarksville. Just as he had in the summer of 1779, Clark decided that his troop strength was not

sufficient to carry out a campaign against the Shawnee. Even though he had nearly 1,200 men at his disposal, he decided to march the force against the Wabash Indian villages near Vincennes rather than strike into Shawnee territory. He also ordered Colonel Benjamin Logan to return to Kentucky, gather up the troops who had not reported and attack the Shawnee with this force. This decision, more than anything else, seems to prove that, while Clark may or may not have been drinking, he was certainly only a shade of his former bold self. In 1780, he had attacked the Shawnee towns of Chillicothe and Piqua with one thousand men. He now had at least that many, yet decided against a similar attack. Instead, he passed off the attack against the Shawnee to Benjamin Logan with a force roughly equal to that of his own. It seems likely that George Rogers Clark never recovered from the disappointments of the last two years of the revolution. He never regained the audacity and self-assurance that characterized his victories in the Illinois Country. It was almost as if the George Rogers Clark who commanded the aborted Wabash Campaign was a different man altogether than he who had bested the Hair Buyer in 1779.<sup>22</sup>

Things got even worse for him on the march to Vincennes. Supply trains that Clark expected to meet along the way never showed up causing the march to take more than a week longer than expected. Upon reaching Vincennes, his attempts to draft more men failed, and the ironclad discipline of his earlier campaigns disappeared. After three days of hard marching with very little rest or food, two hundred of Clark's troops, mostly those from Lincoln County, mutinied and went home. Clark tried in vain to rally his troops onward, but a council of war decided that the expedition should head back to Vincennes. George Rogers Clark's last military effort on behalf of the United States



ended in disgrace. While Logan did manage some small successes in his attack against the Shawnee, they were by no means decisive enough to force them to capitulate. Clark's failure to keep his army together, much less carry out an attack, coupled with the rumors of his drinking sunk his reputation to its lowest level. In addition to his financial dealings during the revolution, which were still in litigation at the time, Clark's failed Wabash Campaign sparked calls for new investigations into his conduct. Bereft of position, finances, and reputation, Clark had no choice but to retire to his parents' newly established estate, Mulberry Hill at Louisville.<sup>23</sup>

Little documentation exists concerning the next six years of Clark's life other than legal proceedings against him. With the exception of a short-lived plot to establish an extra-legal settlement in Spanish territory at the mouth of the Yazoo River in present-day Mississippi, Clark all but retired from active participation in the affairs of the west. However, this particular affair soon became a major component in the various investigations of Clark's conduct by both local and national officials. According to both John Bakeless and James Alton James, Spanish officials interpreted Clark's participation in the Yazoo settlement scheme as a cover for an all out invasion of Spanish territory. Bakeless and James further state that the basis for these charges stemmed from an organized smear campaign run by General James Wilkinson. Nearly all previous Clark biographies make the same claim that Wilkinson, jealous of Clark's fame and reputation endeavored to discredit Clark and therefore win a position of leadership in Kentucky affairs for himself.<sup>24</sup>

James Wilkinson certainly qualifies as one of the most notorious crooks of the revolutionary period. Born in Maryland in 1757, he served in Benedict Arnold's invasion

of Canada in 1775 before moving on to a staff position with Horatio Gates. By 1777, the Continental Congress appointed Wilkinson deputy adjutant general for the Northern Department, and he served during the Saratoga Campaign against British General John Burgoyne. After Saratoga, Wilkinson, who had been sent to deliver the news to Congress, stopped off to sample the local tavern life in Reading, Pennsylvania. He remained there for several days and when he finally arrived in Philadelphia on November 3, he apparently modified the tale of the battle to give himself a large part in it. Congress promptly promoted him to brigadier general. Later in the war, he served as clothier general to the army but was dismissed after eight months on charges that he stole from his official accounts. After the war, he moved to Kentucky and began to agitate for Kentucky statehood while also accepting money from the Spanish to deliver parts of Kentucky to them. He later joined with Aaron Burr in an ill-fated scheme to separate the western part of the United States from the Union but escaped prosecution by betraying Burr. After less than meritorious service during the war of 1812, Wilkinson removed to Mexico where he died in 1825.<sup>25</sup>

Obviously, James Wilkinson was capable of doing just about anything to advance his own cause. However, Wilkinson's less than sterling character is not in itself proof that he endeavored to ruin George Rogers Clark. James and Bakeless do offer other proof to back up their claims against Wilkinson. According to James, Wilkinson's actions while presiding over a convention considering the issue of Kentucky statehood, confirm the existence of his plot against Clark. Instead of dealing with Kentucky's bid for statehood, Wilkinson turned the meeting into a referendum on Clark's conduct while at Vincennes during the Wabash Campaign and his participation in the Yazoo settlement

fiasco. In addition, James asserts that Wilkinson authored an anonymous letter to a gentleman in Philadelphia in which he accused Clark of seizing, “on a Spanish Boat with 20,000 Dollars, or rather seized three stores . . . worth this sum and the Boat which brought them up.” The letter which soon found its way into the public record continued, “Clarke is eternally drunk, and yet full of design.” In the report of the Kentucky statehood committee, submitted to Virginia Governor Edmund Randolph, Wilkinson again accused Clark of scheming to march on the Spanish near the Yazoo River and of seizing Spanish property at Vincennes.<sup>26</sup>

James’s contention that Wilkinson authored the letter sent to Philadelphia seems probable. However, James failed to note that George Rogers Clark actually did recruit men to establish an illegal settlement on Spanish territory near the Yazoo. He also confiscated Spanish goods while at Vincennes during the aborted Wabash Campaign. While Wilkinson’s motives for reporting these incidents were probably not genuine, one should not excuse Clark’s poor judgment in perpetrating them. Just as in the case of his drinking, Clark had no one to blame but himself for engaging in activities that fueled such controversies. While Wilkinson may have deliberately tried to ruin Clark’s reputation, he told the truth in doing so.<sup>27</sup>

In addition to the scandals surrounding the Yazoo settlement and the Wabash Campaign, the debts Clark incurred during the revolution now came back to haunt him. His creditors filed suit after suit to force Clark to pay them. In turn, Clark filed several suits and petitions with both the state and national governments to reimburse him for his service in the Illinois Country. Throughout the late 1780s and into the 1790s, Clark received one round of bad news after another regarding his claims for redress. In 1792,

his brother Jonathan, representing Clark's case to the Virginia Assembly wrote him, "I am sorry to inform you that the whole of your claims against the state are by the assembly rejected."<sup>28</sup> Devastated financially, and ruined publicly in the United States, George Rogers Clark began to look elsewhere for one last opportunity to regain his place of honor. He soon came to believe that the recent revolution in France had provided just such an opportunity.

By the early 1790s, it was obvious that simply founding a new nation from the former English colonies in eastern North America was not an effective deterrent to the colonization schemes of the three major European powers. Spain and England continued to occupy various lands surrounding the young United States. In addition, the revolutionary and militant spirit unleashed on the European continent by the French Revolution sought to make its presence felt in the New World. That spirit arrived in the person of newly appointed minister to the United States Edmond Charles Édouard Genêt. According to Frederick Jackson Turner, historians often place little importance on "Citizen Genêt." "The mission of Genêt has been chiefly considered as a matter of his own personality, in the effects which his enthusiasm and his democratic societies produced upon party crystallization, and in regard to his demands for money and the use which he made of our ports." However, Genêt's whirlwind-like tenure as minister to the United States produced a profound impact on both the west and George Rogers Clark.<sup>29</sup>

France had longed to recover Louisiana and Canada ever since the end of the Seven Years War in 1763. That ambition only grew stronger with the abolition of the French monarchy. In addition, the early euphoria and approbation felt in America for revolutionary France helped to make this dream a possibility. After all, who would the

Americans rather have as their neighbors, the aristocratic and monarchical governments of Spain and England, or the liberty loving French? The English still occupied their forts in the Northwest Territory and had begun forcefully impressing American sailors into the British Navy. The Spanish had recently barred American commercial traffic from the port of New Orleans, effectively cutting off the flow of American commerce down the Mississippi River. In addition, both nations continued to encourage Native American raids on American settlements in the west. The new French government hoped to play upon these animosities and the natural geographical and psychological separation between the American settlements west of the Appalachian Mountains and their counterparts in the east. France's ultimate goal was to create a brand new French colony encompassing all of the western territory. In November of 1792, the revolutionary government appointed Genêt, who had recently returned from a diplomatic mission in Russia, "with a secret mission to foment the revolution." Knowing that the mere act of accepting him as minister would anger Spain and England nearly to the point of open war, the French government instructed Genêt to immediately seek to establish an alliance with the United States against the other two powers. According to Turner, this treaty would, "conduce rapidly to the freeing of Spanish America, to the opening of the navigation of the Mississippi to the inhabitants of Kentucky," and possibly lead to the reacquisition of Canada. However, if Genêt found the Americans unwilling to comply with these aims, his instructions authorized him to, "take all measures . . . to propagate the principles of the French Revolution in Louisiana and in the other provinces of America adjoining the United States."<sup>30</sup>

In the meantime, George Rogers Clark, just forty years old, felt himself wasting away. According to a letter he wrote to his younger brother Edmund, he spent his time hunting, fishing and reading among other things. However, in other letters, Clark made it clear that retirement, especially a forced one, did not suit him well. The Virginia and United States governments had denied his claims for reimbursement. The new federal congress, had denied his petitions for a memorial pension like those given other revolutionary officers. In addition, there was no market for what land he still owned. George Rogers Clark, who had once attached himself to the cause of the United States with the zeal of a true patriot, felt betrayed by the country he helped create. "As for the Politicks of this country," he wrote, "suppose a swarm of Hungary persons gaping for bread you may conclude that their ideas are not Genly Virtuous but as I dont meddle in their affairs I know but little about them." By the early 1790s, he was a man looking for a new cause and a new country, or quite possibly, death.<sup>31</sup>

Upon arriving in America in the summer of 1793, Genêt received a letter from Clark written in February of that year. Dr. James O'Fallon, who in addition to his work with Clark in the failed Yazoo settlement scheme was a friend and supporter of Genêt, told Clark about the project. In the letter, Clark stated that he could take New Orleans and all of Louisiana with eight hundred men assisted by two or three naval vessels. He offered his services as commander of the expedition for three thousand pounds, a sum equivalent to less than one tenth of his total debt.<sup>32</sup> With that letter, Clark involved himself in a conspiracy to commit treason against the United States, for George Washington, unmoved by Genêt's entreaties to the contrary, had recently proclaimed neutrality as the official position of the United States in regard to the wars on the

European continent. Genêt accepted Clark's offer and the two began planning the invasion. However, Genêt soon made a critical mistake. Aware of his affinity for the French Revolution, Genêt divulged his plans to Thomas Jefferson, "not as Secretary of State, but as Mr. Jefferson." According to Jefferson, the plan called for an attack on Louisiana based out of Kentucky and the establishment of Louisiana as an "independent state connected in commerce with France and the United States." While Jefferson agreed with the notion of expanding the United States to the territories of the west and thus gaining access to the mouth of the Mississippi River, he nonetheless understood the import of Genêt's plan in light of Washington's policy of neutrality. "I told him," he wrote, "that his enticing officers and souldiers from Kentucky to go against Spain, was really putting a halter about their necks, for they would assuredly be hung if they commenced hostilities against a nation at peace with the United States."<sup>33</sup> Aware of the plot, Jefferson assured the Spanish representatives to the United States that the Washington administration would prevent any United States citizen, by force if necessary, "from sharing in any hostility by land or sea against the subjects of Spain or its dominions." George Rogers Clark, however, continued to gather men and supplies for the coming expedition, which he believed would restore him to his former glory, but George Washington had had enough of Citizen Genêt and wrote the newly installed Jacobin French government asking for his recall. The new government, much less supportive of Genêt than its predecessor, quickly complied and the new French embassy in the United States issued a proclamation in March of 1794 repudiating Genêt and forbidding the infringement of American neutrality. In addition, Washington issued a

similar proclamation threatening severe punishment of anyone caught conspiring to violate Spanish territory.<sup>34</sup>

While these proclamations ended the expedition, George Rogers Clark continued to style himself a “major general” of the French army. In fact, to reward him for his loyalty, and to make up for its inability to pay him, the French government later appointed him brigadier general, without activity. In this capacity, he continued to agitate for the separation of Louisiana, and in 1798 traveled to Philadelphia to prevent the government from falling under the control of what he termed an “English” faction bent on bringing about a general war with France. Upon his arrival there, the national government immediately threatened him with imprisonment for treason. By this point, France and Spain were now on friendlier terms and Clark immediately turned to the Spanish Ambassador for refuge, who “offered me all the protection which a friend and ally of France could to one of her officers.” Clark hastily returned to Kentucky from whence, when met with an order from newly elected President John Adams for his arrest, he escaped to Spanish St. Louis.<sup>35</sup>

Clark’s final pathetic attempt at recapturing his fame, reputation and standing had backfired. He was now a penniless, fugitive with neither country nor command. With the return of normalized relations between France and the United States at the end of 1798, Clark began to consider a return to his parents’ estate in Louisville. While it is not clear exactly when he returned there, he did write his brother William from Mulberry Hill in June of 1799. More than likely, he hastened there shortly after learning of his mother’s death in April of that year. Jonathan Clark, the elder, followed his wife Ann in death less than three months later, leaving Jonathan, the younger and George Rogers Clark as



executors of the family estate. Aware of his son's financial circumstances, Jonathan Clark left George only two slaves as his creditors could confiscate any other property left to him. Clark lived at Mulberry Hill, which his father left to William, until 1803. A combination of fate and poor judgment reduced the once larger than life conqueror to a life dependent upon his family's benevolence. In fact, William even went so far as to sell his own farm to settle his brother's debts. While living with William, it seems that Clark gave himself over completely to the solace of whiskey. In 1799, William wrote Jonathan, "I am sorry to inform you that Brother George has given up more to that vice [liquor] which has been so injurious to him than ever."<sup>36</sup>

In 1803, Clark moved across the river to a two-room cabin in Clarksville, and involved himself in a project to construct a canal from the town to the Falls of the Ohio River. However, the project while warmly received initially, never came to fruition. In 1809, an accident forced Clark to remove to the home of his sister and brother-in-law William and Lucy Croghan at Locust Grove, some eight miles from Louisville. Evidently, Clark suffered the first of several strokes, and fell comatose on the floor of his cabin near the lit fireplace, burning his right leg so severely that a surgeon had to amputate it.<sup>37</sup> He spent the rest of his life corresponding with the children of his brothers and sisters, whose company it seems he thoroughly enjoyed. In February of 1849, Lucy Temple, Clark's niece, wrote Lyman Draper. "In the Spring of 1797 we movd to Ky and came to my Uncle Clark's Gen. Clark lived there at that time, he seemed to be fond of my society, and conversed with me often, he would point out to me his Battlegrounds, on the Maps, etc." Clark also carried out a vigorous correspondence with several of his nephews regarding the news of the day and often, requesting them to send him books.

One nephew replied to him, “I have sent you the life of Frederick, the second, but I suppose you have Read them. We have no Other Books that will Suit you . . . I will try and get some for you—perhaps I will be down this afternoon.”<sup>38</sup>

Finally, on February 20, 1812, the Virginia legislature voted Clark a pension of \$400 a year and a ceremonial sword from the state armory. In light of his many years spent in poverty, one might have expected Clark to react indignantly to such a gesture. The George Rogers Clark of 1779, most certainly would have refused such a small pension. However, years of both physical and mental deprivation had softened the Long Knife. In a letter penned for him due to his paralysis, by his brother in law, he responded very graciously. “Flattering indeed, he says it is to him to find that his exertions when doing his Duty Should meet the Approbation of so respectable a body of his fellow Citizens as Your Excellency & the General Assembly of Virginia.”

Approximately, one year later, Clark suffered a severely debilitating stroke that impaired his ability to speak and move and forced him to resign from the board charged with administering the lands allotted to his men in the Illinois Regiment. Throughout his turbulent post-war life, Clark had faithfully attended the meetings of the board whenever possible. To the end, he remained intensely loyal to the soldiers that carried him to victory over Henry Hamilton so many years earlier in what must have seemed like another life in another place.<sup>39</sup>

On February 13, 1818, George Rogers Clark suffered one final stroke and passed away at the age of sixty-five. Two days later, his family buried him on the grounds of William and Lucy Croghan’s estate. Though largely forgotten during the last thirty-five years of his life, his death did not escape notice.<sup>40</sup>

The members of the bar of the Chancery Circuit Court, now in session in this town, as a testimony of their respect for the memory of Gen. Clark, have entered into a resolution to wear crape on the left arm for thirty days.

The few remaining officers of the Revolution in this neighborhood adopted the same resolution.<sup>41</sup>

George Rogers Clark lived much more of his life in ruin than he did in glory.

Nevertheless, so many Americans, especially in the old Illinois Country, consider those few moments in 1778 and 1779 so pivotal that his name and likeness appear on everything from schools to hotels to national historic monuments, but just how important and heroic was George Rogers Clark? That question remains. Many early historians credited him with winning the Old Northwest for the United States, but as discussed earlier, George Rogers Clark had abandoned the Illinois Country by the end of the war. Furthermore, one doubts that the dignitaries who ironed out the Treaty of Paris in 1783 gave much thought to the campaigns of a woodsman from the Virginia backcountry operating under a state commission. Certainly, Clark's participation in various illegal schemes to form new colonies in the west and seize Louisiana make him an important, if villainous, character in our history, but if that episode marks his sole importance, then why is he so celebrated in Indiana, Kentucky and Illinois? How could someone whose once promising career degenerated into nearly forty years of aimless inebriation still command the imagination of school children every February 25 when the state of Indiana celebrates George Rogers Clark Day?

It is possible because of what Clark represents, not who he is. To the few Americans who actually know of him, George Rogers Clark represents an ideal. He embodies the mythos fostered by our belief in the American destiny. On the surface, Clark's superhuman exploits on behalf of the fledgling United States call to mind the

sacrifice required for the acquisition and defense of liberty. His rugged backwoods lifestyle invokes images of the rugged individualism so often extolled, but rarely experienced by today's American. On another level, his proclivity for psychological manipulation and outright brutality appeal to the parts of us that love a larger than life adventure story. However, the less than glamorous components of Clark's life and personality deserve attention as well. For, much like the rest of us, he was certainly far from perfect. Just as much as he represents the rugged individualism of the American story, he also represents its ethnocentric and self-interested facets. In short, George Rogers Clark appeals to us not as a man, but as the embodiment of the wilderness warrior.

## Notes to Chapter X

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<sup>1</sup> James Alton James, *The Life of George Rogers Clark*, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1928), 288-91; Clark's Accounts with Virginia 1 July 1783, in James Alton James, ed., *George Rogers Clark Papers, 1781-1783* (Springfield, Illinois: Illinois State Historical Library, 1926), 245; The Northwestern Commissioners and Western Debts 14 April 1783, in James, ed., *George Rogers Clark Papers, 1781-1783*, 224-225.

<sup>2</sup> Arthur Campbell to William Davies 3 October 1782, in James, ed., *George Rogers Clark Papers, 1781-1783*, 121-22.

<sup>3</sup> Thomas Jefferson to Clark 26 November 1782, in James ed., *George Rogers Clark Papers, 1781-1783*, 155.

<sup>4</sup> James Monroe to Clark 5 January 1783, in James ed., *George Rogers Clark Papers, 1781-1783*, 178-80.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid*; James, *The Life of George Rogers Clark*, 352-53.

<sup>6</sup> John Bakeless, *Background to Glory: The Life of George Rogers Clark*, (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott Company, 1957), 309-10.

<sup>7</sup> Thomas Jefferson to George Rogers Clark 4 December 1783, in Paul Ford ed., *The Writings of Thomas Jefferson*, Vol. III (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1892-1899), 351.

<sup>8</sup> James, *The Life of George Rogers Clark*, 298.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>10</sup> Officers of the Illinois Regiment to the General Assembly of Virginia 21 May 1783, in James ed., *George Rogers Clark Papers, 1781-1783*, 233-35; Draper MSS 53J 2-3 (Wisconsin Historical Society, Madison; microfilm copy at the University of Kansas, Lawrence, KS).

<sup>11</sup> James, *The Life of George Rogers Clark*, 300; Draper MSS 53 J 4.

<sup>12</sup> Draper MSS 53 J 6; Bakeless, *Background to Glory: The Life of George Rogers Clark*, 313; L. Edward Purcell, *Who was Who in the American Revolution*, (New York: Facts on File, 1993), 74, 199, 228, 518.

<sup>13</sup> Bakeless, *Background to Glory: The Life of George Rogers Clark*, 314-15.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>15</sup> James, *The Life of George Rogers Clark*, 306-08.

<sup>16</sup> Draper MSS 46 J 94.

<sup>17</sup> James, *The Life of George Rogers Clark*, 334-338; Draper MSS 53 J 18.

<sup>18</sup> James, *The Life of George Rogers Clark*, 339.

<sup>19</sup> Draper MSS 53 J 23.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid*, 12 S 71-73.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid*, 11 J 79.

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- <sup>22</sup> Ibid, 12 S 118-120; James, *The Life of George Rogers Clark*, 354-55.
- <sup>23</sup> Bakeless, *Background to Glory: The Life of George Rogers Clark*, 324, 331; James, *The Life of George Rogers Clark*, 354-55; Draper MSS 12 S 120
- <sup>24</sup> Draper MSS 14 S 80-86; Bakeless, *Background to Glory: The Life of George Rogers Clark*, 334-35; James, *The Life of George Rogers Clark*, 373-73.
- <sup>25</sup> L. Edward Purcell, *Who was Who in the American Revolution*, (New York: Facts on File, 1993), 509-10.
- <sup>26</sup> James, *The Life of George Rogers Clark*, 376-77.
- <sup>27</sup> Draper MSS 53 J 53, 59-61.
- <sup>28</sup> Draper MSS 53 J 91.
- <sup>29</sup> Frederick Jackson Turner, "The Origins of Genêt's Projected Attack on Louisiana and the Floridas," *American Historical Review*, Volume 3, Issue 4, (July 1898), 650-71.
- <sup>30</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>31</sup> Draper MSS 34 J 7; Draper MSS 2 L 26-28.
- <sup>32</sup> Turner, "The Origins of Genêt's Projected Attack on Louisiana and the Floridas," 650-71.
- <sup>33</sup> Ibid; James, *The Life of George Rogers Clark*, 421.
- <sup>34</sup> Turner, "The Origins of Genêt's Projected Attack on Louisiana and the Floridas," 650-71.
- <sup>35</sup> James, *The Life of George Rogers Clark*, 427, 437, 445.
- <sup>36</sup> Ibid, 457-58; Draper MSS 5K 245.
- <sup>37</sup> Draper MSS 55 J 82.
- <sup>38</sup> Ibid, 10 J 45; 55 J 63.
- <sup>39</sup> Ibid, 55 J 82; James, *The Life of George Rogers Clark*, 471.
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