

George Rogers Clark

National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior

National Historical Park
Indiana



The Surrender of Fort Sackville, February 25, 1779, by H. Charles McBarron

Courtesy: Department of Defense, Washington, D.C.

In the long and bitter struggle for American independence, some of the most daring and far-reaching military exploits occurred under the leadership of commander George Rogers Clark in the remote country west of the Appalachian Mountains. Here, fighting for their very survival, frontier settlers successfully countered British and Indian military moves. Their heroic efforts helped win the American Revolutionary War and made possible the westward expansion of the United States.

Settlers started crossing the Appalachians in significant numbers in 1776, about the time the American Revolution began

in the East. The spearhead of their advance was into the Kentucky region, which Virginia officially claimed as part of its territory. There, around present-day Lexington, some 300 resourceful pioneers, most of whom supported the rebellion against England, maintained a marginal existence in small forts or stations.

By 1777 the British at Fort Detroit were sending Indian war parties to raid and destroy the settlements. To survive, these settlers adopted Indian warfare tactics and became formidable fighters. As the frequency of Indian attacks increased, George Rogers Clark became one of

Kentucky's military leaders and was convinced that the best defense was a strong offense. In the winter of 1777-78, he persuaded Gov. Patrick Henry and a group of Virginia officials to let him carry the war into the British-controlled territory north of the Ohio River. They authorized Clark to raise a force of 350 men. His public orders from the legislature—to protect the Kentucky frontier. His secret instructions from Governor Henry—to operate against the British-controlled posts of French inhabitants at Kaskaskia and Cahokia in the Illinois country and Vincennes on the Wabash River. These were stepping stones to Clark's ultimate objective, the capture of Fort Detroit.

Campaign in the West—March to Victory

In the spring of 1778 Clark floated his 150 Virginia volunteers down the Ohio River from western Pennsylvania to Corn Island, opposite present-day Louisville, Ky. Late in June men from the Kentucky and Tennessee regions joined him, and he took his little army down this waterway to the West. Clark and his men hid their boats near an abandoned fort, then marched overland toward the Mississippi River across what is now southwestern Illinois. They approached Kaskaskia at dusk on July 4 and took the village without firing a shot. (See the map below.)

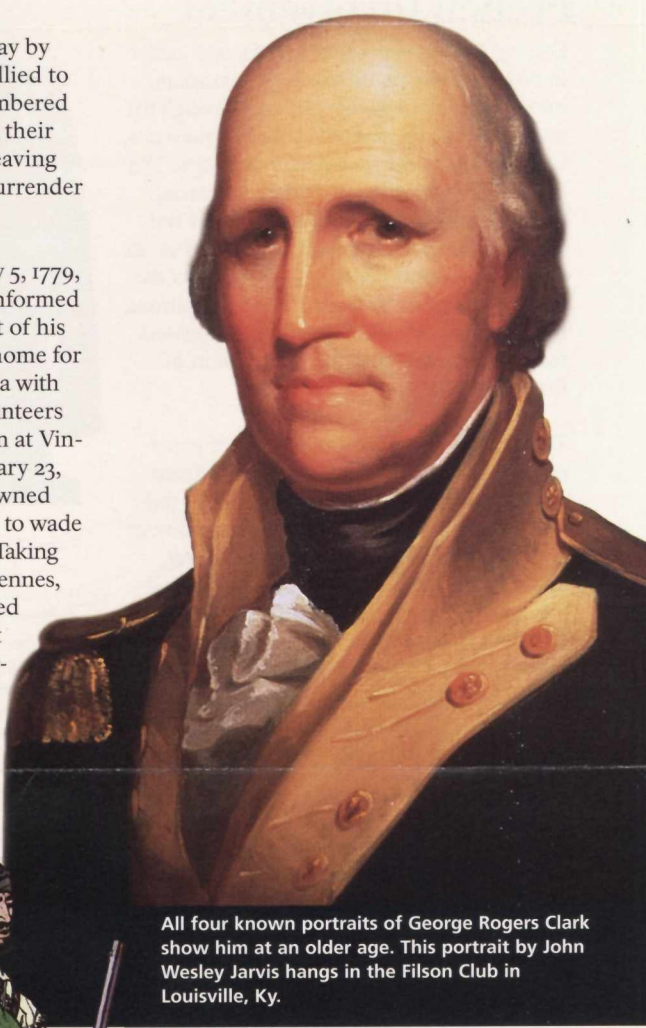
Clark won over the inhabitants of Kaskaskia by telling them of the recent alliance between France and the United States and by promising religious freedom. Next he sent Capt. Joseph Bowman and a group of Kaskaskians north to Cahokia, where those residents also quickly embraced the patriot cause. Father Pierre Gibault, vicar-general of the Illinois country and the head of Kaskaskia's Roman Catholic mission, influenced the people of Vincennes to swear allegiance to the patriots. At Vincennes, Clark placed Capt. Leonard Helm in command of Fort Sackville and the French militia. Then, at Cahokia, Clark met with warriors from some of the previously hostile tribes and gained their temporary neutrality through a mixture of bluff and an outward disdain of danger.

When word of Clark's conquests reached Fort Detroit, British Lt. Gov. Henry Hamilton led a small force of regulars and still-loyal French militia south to put an end to the activities of

the bold intruder. Joined along the way by hundreds of Indians who remained allied to the British, Hamilton awed the outnumbered French at Vincennes into renouncing their recent alliance with the Americans, leaving Captain Helm with no choice but to surrender the fort on December 17, 1778.

A Bone-chilling Trek On February 5, 1779, Francis Vigo, a merchant and trader, informed Clark that Hamilton had allowed most of his Indian allies and French militia to go home for the winter. Clark set out from Kaskaskia with 170 Virginians and Illinois French volunteers to attack the weakened British garrison at Vincennes. The patriots arrived on February 23, after a march across 180 miles of "drowned country" that had forced them at times to wade in icy waters reaching their shoulders. Taking positions around Fort Sackville at Vincennes, Clark's men opened fire on the surprised British. Clark's threat to storm the fort and give no quarter led to a British formal surrender on February 25, 1779. This victory foiled British and Indian attempts to drive the Americans out of the region west of the Appalachians.

A private in Clark's Illinois Regiment, Virginia State Forces, 1778-79, by Peter Copeland (right). This illustration and the Shawnee chief (below right) courtesy of The Company of Military Historians.



All four known portraits of George Rogers Clark show him at an older age. This portrait by John Wesley Jarvis hangs in the Filson Club in Louisville, Ky.

Aftermath of the Campaign

Clark was unable to gather a sufficient force to capture Fort Detroit or gain total victory over the English north of the Ohio River, but his activities weakened British control west of the Appalachians. Clark's efforts helped the United States acquire this vast region north and south of the Ohio River in the peace settlement of 1783. Four years later, the Continental Congress established the "Territory Northwest

of the River Ohio," a political entity known as the Old Northwest, which evolved into the states of Ohio, Indiana, Illinois, Michigan, Wisconsin, and the eastern portion of Minnesota.

The influx of Americans west of the Appalachians continued after the American Revolution, but Indian resistance, encouraged by the British, slowed settlement north of the Ohio River. Migration acceler-

ated after 1794 when troops under Gen. Anthony Wayne defeated warriors from several tribes at the Battle of Fallen Timbers in present-day Ohio. By 1800 the Northwest Territory's population had reached nearly 60,000. A resurgence of Indian resistance to American settlement started five years later under two new Indian leaders—Tecumseh and his brother Tenskwatawa, known as the Shawnee Prophet.

Their major opponent was William Henry Harrison, governor of the Indiana Territory. Tecumseh's plans to prevent further loss of Indian territory to settlers received a temporary setback from forces under Harrison at the Battle of Tippecanoe in 1811. Final defeat for the Indians in this region came during the War of 1812. The United States victory over the British and the Indians west of the Appalachians in

the latter stages of that war ensured continued American development of the region started by the efforts of George Rogers Clark and his frontier army three and a half decades earlier.

American Indian Involvement

Although 8,000 British troops were scattered throughout North America at the beginning of the American Revolution in 1775, only a few were stationed west of the Appalachian Mountains. Just over a hundred redcoats garrisoned Fort Detroit, the main British post in the region. Because of their small numbers, the British relied on American Indians in their military efforts against the patriots. Most tribes had shifted their allegiance from the French to the British in the 1760s after the French and Indian War (1754-1763).

At first the British refrained from using Indians in unrestricted frontier warfare, but by 1777 British Lt. Gov. Henry Hamilton at Fort Detroit was equipping and sending Indians across the Ohio River to attack frontier settlers in Ken-

tucky country, western Pennsylvania, and what is now West Virginia. Because the tribes were already angry over the incursions into their lands by these settlers, most warriors needed little urging to make their raids. The Indian manner of fighting made them particularly dangerous to the frontier settlers. Warriors traversed forests undetected, selected cabins or settlements to attack, struck with sudden ferocity, and then withdrew before a pursuing party could gather.

Clark's capture of Kaskaskia, Cahokia, and Vincennes greatly impressed some of the tribes, and they decided to adopt a neutral attitude. Others realized the threat the incoming settlers posed to their way of life, and they continued their attacks on American settlements.

Tribes in the area between the Appalachian Mountains and the Mississippi River (see map below) included Wyandot, Mingo, Miami, Wea, Piankashaw, Delaware, Shawnee, Ottawa, Chickapoo, and Illini. The Choctaw, Chickasaw, Creek, and Cherokee (not shown on this map) were south of the Ohio River. Together these tribes had thousands of warriors, potentially making them the most powerful force in the region.



The Campaign in the West 1778-1779

Lt. Gov. Henry Hamilton administered the area between the Ohio and Mississippi rivers and the Great Lakes from the British post at Fort Detroit. When Clark implemented his plan to secure the outlying posts for the American cause, Hamilton took action.

Clark's route, Redstone to Kaskaskia, May 12-July 4, 1778

Clark and his Virginia militiamen floated 900 miles down the Monongahela and Ohio rivers, stopping at Corn Island to train for most of June. Near the ruins of Fort Massac, they headed overland, marching 120 miles to Kaskaskia.

Hamilton's route, Fort Detroit to Vincennes, October 7-December 17, 1778

Hamilton, British troops, and Indian allies crossed Lake Erie, traveled up the Maumee River, portaged to the Wabash River, and traveled down the Wabash to Vincennes, a total of 600 miles.

Clark's route, Kaskaskia to Vincennes, February 5-23, 1779

Clark marched 180 miles through the prairies and flooded river valleys of the Illinois country.

- | | |
|---|--|
| ☐ Thirteen original states | ☒ Selected portage site |
| ☐ Other British colonies | ☐ 1778 colonial boundary |
| ☐ Spanish colonies | ☐ Modern boundary (included for reference only) |
| ☒ WEA Indian tribal name and area | |

Out of despair and destruction he brought concerted action. With a flash of genius the twenty-six-year-old leader conceived a campaign that was a brilliant masterpiece of military strategy.

Franklin D. Roosevelt dedicating the George Rogers Clark Memorial, June 14, 1936.

A Daring Tactician

George Rogers Clark had qualities commonly found in heroes of romantic novels and adventure films but rarely met with in real life. Six feet two inches tall with auburn hair, he was a striking figure of a man. He organized the Kentucky militia and commanded its defenses and was known as a skilled and fearless fighter. He was a magnetic leader, a persuasive orator, and master of psychological warfare, unlike most men of his time. Importantly, he understood Indian customs and habits of thought. And, he had the capacity to see ahead and think strategically.

During the American Revolution and later, Clark was the leader toward whom many turned in crisis. It was largely because of his tireless exertion and the extraordinary force of his personality that the western frontier was held, despite odds that seemed to call for a retreat. Clark's defense of Kentucky, his Ohio River conquests, and the defeats he inflicted on the Indians gave weight to America's postwar claims to the Old Northwest. In the end, George Rogers Clark and his American soldiers, aided at times by the French, decided the future of a vast new territory and added an area to the United States that was as large as the original thirteen colonies.

George Rogers Clark was born in Virginia on November 19, 1752. He migrated to the wilderness beyond the Appalachian Mountains in 1772. By 1775 he had gained a position of leadership in the Kentucky region during a time of political and military upheaval.

Sculptor Hermon A. MacNeil's larger-than-life bronze statue of Clark (*right*) is a fitting tribute to the man whom General Lafayette ranked next to George Washington in military prowess.



French Involvement

During the 150 years that France was active in North America, explorers, fur traders, missionaries, and soldiers spread through the interior of the continent via the St. Lawrence, Great Lakes, and Mississippi waterways. The French arrived in New France (Canada) eager to take to the woods and enter the lucrative fur trade. Roving French *coureurs de bois* and *voyageurs* became a vital part of the North American frontier. They lived among the Indians and, as the generations passed, many tribes came to have an infusion of French blood.

The French made a general claim of sovereignty over interior lands. But, aside from establishing small forts and posts, they did not disturb the Indians' actual possession of land. Important settlements were Detroit, Michilimackinac, Kaskaskia, Cahokia, and Vincennes, whose populations divided into an upper class of military officers and wealthy traders and a lower class of smaller traders, farmers, and artisans.



Father Pierre Gibault (*above*), whose parish extended from the Mississippi River to the Wabash River, aided Clark's efforts in the Illinois country by persuading French inhabitants of Vincennes to surrender their town to the Americans.

French civilians had been allowed to remain in North America following England's victory over France in the French and Indian War (1754-1763). Organized into militia units under British authority, the French could supply hundreds of fighting men in the West. The French were also important because of their influence with the Indians. Fur trade with the Indians dominated the French economy.

There was some sympathy for the American patriot cause due to residual antipathy toward England, but the French outwardly supported the English when the war began, especially in the Great Lakes region at forts Detroit and Michilimackinac, where the British were in control. When Clark and his men arrived at Kaskaskia, Cahokia, and Vincennes, however, most of the French inhabitants in those settlements quickly showed their underlying dislike for the English by supporting the Americans.



Italian Francis Vigo (*above*), a merchant in Spanish-controlled St. Louis, was well-known and respected by the French in the Vincennes area. Vigo embraced the patriot cause and helped finance Clark's campaign.

Visiting the Park

Visitor Center Stop first at the visitor center. Here you will find information, exhibits, a film, and a bookstore. Staff can answer questions and help you plan your visit. The visitor center is open daily, except Thanksgiving, December 25, and January 1. The visitor center and grounds are accessible for visitors with disabilities.

The Memorial In the mid-1920s, during the 150th anniversary celebration of the American Revolution, residents of Vincennes, Knox County, and the State of Indiana wanted to commemorate the accomplishments of George Rogers Clark. Congress created the George Rogers Clark Sesquicentennial Commission to design and construct a memorial in keeping with Clark's contributions. Frederick Hiron won the national competition, and construction began in 1931.

Touring the Memorial Built in classic Greek style, the granite exterior is encircled by 16 columns supporting a massive round roof. Inside, a bronze statue of George Rogers Clark stands on a marble pedestal. A circular glass skylight illuminates the interior. The rest of the ceiling and rotunda walls are Indiana limestone. The floor is Tennessee marble. Seven murals depict Clark's important role in developing the region west of the Appalachians.



George Rogers Clark National Historical Park is one of more than 380 parks in the National Park System. The National Park Service cares for special places saved by the American people so that all may experience our heritage. To learn about national parks and National Park Service programs in America's communities, visit www.nps.gov.

For More Information
George Rogers Clark
National Historical Park
401 S. Second Street
Vincennes, IN 47591
812-882-1776
www.nps.gov/gero

Visiting Historic Sites in Vincennes

Visit these sites to learn more about the early development of Vincennes.

1 Old Cathedral Complex (205 Church St.) Dating from 1749, the St. Francis Xavier Cathedral is Indiana's oldest parish church. The present structure was begun in 1826. The Old Cathedral Library, bordering the historic French and Indian Cemetery, houses a collection of rare books and documents.

2 Old State Bank State Historic Site (114 N. 2nd St.) Built in 1838 for the State Bank of Indiana, the interior includes the original two-door iron vault.

3 Old French House (509 N. 1st St.) Built about 1806, this home of fur trader Michel Brouillet is one of the few remaining vertical log houses in North America. It contains authentic furnishings. An American Indian museum is behind the house.

4 Grouseland (3 W. Scott St.) Home of William Henry Harrison, first governor of Indiana Territory and ninth President of the United States, who lived here during this important period in his life. The house was completed in 1804.

5 Vincennes State Historic Sites (1 W. Harrison St.) Indiana Territory, with Vincennes as its capital, included at various times the present states of Indiana, Illinois, Michigan, Wisconsin, and part of Minnesota. The capitol was occupied in 1811 by the territorial legislature. Nearby is a replica of the print shop where, on July 4, 1804, Elihu Stout began publishing the *Indiana Gazette*, the territory's first newspaper.

6 Sugar Loaf Prehistoric Indian Mound (2401 Wabash Ave.) The mound is a natural formation used as a burial site by late woodland Indians (A.D. 600-1000).

7 Fort Knox II State Historic Site The fort served as the staging area for troops that fought in the Battle of Tippecanoe (1811). It is also significant for its association with William Henry Harrison, Zachary Taylor, and the Indian leader Tecumseh. It is three miles north of the city on Fort Knox Road.

8 Ouabache (Wabash) Trails Park On 254 acres of wooded, rolling hills the park includes two picnic areas, with playgrounds, shelter houses, and a campground. The park is next to Fort Knox II State Historic Site. Call 812-882-4316.

Safety

Parents and teachers should keep all children under direct observation when near the railroad track and the Wabash River.

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