George Rogers Clark

National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior

National Historical Park
Indiana



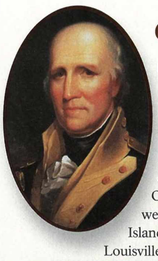
Out of despair and destruction [Clark] brought concerted action. With a flash of genius the twenty-six-year-old leader conceived a campaign that was a brilliant masterpiece of military strategy. Franklin D. Roosevelt, 1936

By 1775 when the long, bitter struggle for American independence began in the east, waves of emigrants had already begun moving west. In the wild, remote country near present-day Lexington, Kentucky, then part of Virginia, about 300 resourceful men and women had carved a rough existence. Among them was George Rogers Clark, from a Charlottesville family of patriots.

British Lt. Gov. Henry Hamilton, who commanded Fort Detroit, tried to stem the tide of westward emigrants. He recruited Native surrogates—already angry over the Americans' invasion of their lands—to attack the small forts and stations.

As the raids grew more frequent, George Rogers Clark (1752–1818) raised a citizen militia that fought back with ferocious vengeance. In the winter of 1777–78, he persuaded Gov. Patrick Henry of Virginia to let him carry the revolution west into British-controlled territory north of the Ohio River. Clark's public orders were to protect the Kentucky frontier. His secret instructions from the governor were to forge an alliance with French nationals who lived in the British-controlled posts at Kaskaskia and Cahokia *(see map below)*. If Clark succeeded in turning the French against the British, the ultimate prize—Fort Detroit, key to the contested region west of the Appalachians—would lie within his grasp.

Above: British Lt. Gov. Henry Hamilton surrenders Fort Sackville to George Rogers Clark, February 25, 1779 (detail)
PAINTING BY H. CHARLES MCBARRON / US ARMY CENTER OF MILITARY HISTORY



Clark's Campaign to Win the West from Britain

May–August 1778 In May 1778, Clark left western Pennsylvania with 150 volunteers and a daring plan to take Britain's outposts north of the Ohio River. He floated west 900 miles to Corn Island (near present-day Louisville, Kentucky), then marched 120 miles farther west across present-day southwestern Illinois to Kaskaskia, on the Mississippi River.

On the evening of July 4 Clark approached the village. He took it without firing a shot, by disclosing the recent French-American alliance and promising the villagers religious freedom.

He sent Capt. Joseph Bowman and a group of Kaskaskians northwest to Cahokia where residents also embraced the patriot cause. Bowman traveled northeast to Vincennes and Fort Sackville. Father Pierre Gibault, vicar-general of the Illinois country and head of Kaskaskia's Roman Catholic mission, helped sway Vincennes' French inhabitants and militia to switch their allegiance to the American side.

Placing Capt. Leonard Helm in command of Fort Sackville, Clark then moved west to Kaskaskia. From this base he sought, and secured, hostile Native tribes' temporary neutrality.

October–December 1778 Clark's web of intrigue did not hold for long. When the British learned that Fort Sackville had fallen into American hands, Lt. Gov. Henry Hamilton headed south from Fort Detroit with a small force of British regulars and still-loyal French militia. Hundreds of Native warriors still allied to the British joined him along the way. Overwhelmed, the French renounced their recent alliance with the Americans. Capt. Helm surrendered to the British in December 1778. Hamilton then dismissed most of his Native allies and French militia for the winter. It proved to be a tactical error.

February 1779 When an Italian merchant-trader, Francis Vigo *(see other side)* informed the Americans that Fort Sackville was vulnerable, Clark seized the opportunity. With 170 volunteers, he marched across 160 miles of "drowned country," at times wading through icy, shoulder-height water. Clark's men took positions around the fort and opened fire on the surprised British, who surrendered. *(See painting, top.)*

Despite his recapture of Fort Sackville, Clark never reached Fort Detroit, but he weakened British resolve. In 1783 the United States and Britain acquired the lands west of the Appalachians in the Treaty of Paris. Four years later, the Continental Congress established the "Territory Northwest of the River Ohio," made up of present-day Illinois, Indiana, Michigan, Ohio, Wisconsin, and eastern Minnesota.

It was an uneasy peace. North of the Ohio River, Native resistance continued to slow westward migration. In 1794 American Gen. Anthony Wayne's troops defeated warriors from several tribes at the Battle of Fallen Timbers, in present-day Ohio. Westward emigration surged. By 1800 the Northwest Territory population had swelled to nearly 60,000.

Two new Shawnee leaders—Tecumseh and his brother Tenskwatawa—arose to lead a new wave of Native resistance. It culminated in the Battle of Tippecanoe in 1811, when William Henry Harrison, governor of Indiana Territory, defeated Tenskwatawa. The final defeat of the British and their Native surrogates in the Northwest Territory did not come until the War of 1812.

Above: Portrait of George Rogers Clark, 1825
PAINTING POSSIBLY BY MATTHEW HARRIS JOUETT, AFTER JOHN WESLEY JARVIS, FILSON HISTORICAL SOCIETY, LOUISVILLE



Clark's Route, Redstone to Kaskaskia May–July 1778

Hamilton's Route, Fort Detroit to Vincennes Oct.–Dec.1778

Clark's Route, Kaskaskia to Vincennes Feb. 1779

Native Tribes' Shifting Alliances

Of about 8,000 British troops scattered across North America when the American Revolution began in 1775, only about one hundred garrisoned Fort Detroit. It was the main British post west of the Appalachian Mountains.

The British supplemented their numbers with warriors from Native tribes. Many tribes had transferred allegiance from the French to the British in the 1760s after the French and Indian War (1754–63).

The Native surrogates fought in a style unlike that of the British or Americans. They chose isolated cabins or settlements, struck with sudden ferocity, then withdrew before a pursuing party could gather.

After Clark took Kaskaskia, Cahokia, and Vincennes, some tribes chose neutrality. Others continued to attack the invaders. The violence between Native peoples and foreigners continued for over a century.



Shawnee tribal member *(right)*. One of many tribes who lived north of the Ohio River *(see map above, listed in brown ink)*, the Shawnee led a wave of resistance against the Americans.

COMPANY OF MILITARY HISTORIANS / ILLUSTRATION BY PETER COPELAND

A Daring Tactician

George Rogers Clark had qualities common among heroes of novels and adventure films but rare in real life. Six feet two inches tall with auburn hair, he cut a striking figure.

A magnetic leader, persuasive orator, and master of psychological warfare, Clark had the capacity to plan and think strategically. He also understood Native tribal customs, habits of thought, and warfare.

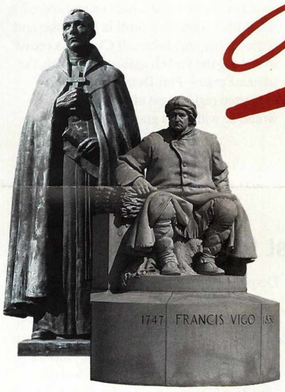
Clark mounted a spirited defense of American emigrants to Kentucky Country, as the western counties of Virginia were known in the late 1700s. He paved the way for westward expansion, as did his brother William Clark's explorations of Louisiana Territory. His successes hinged on an ability to craft alliances with the French against the British and their Native surrogates.

Only a few decades after Clark launched his campaign to wrest the western territories from British control, the United States gained an area as large as the original thirteen colonies.



Right: George Rogers Clark (1752–1818) migrated to the wilderness beyond the Appalachian Mountains at age 20. Within three years he became a military leader in the Kentucky region. General Lafayette believed Clark second only to George Washington in military prowess.

NPS / SCULPTURE BY HERMON A. MACNEIL



Father Pierre Gibault *(above left)*, whose parish extended from the Mississippi to the Wabash rivers, persuaded French inhabitants of Vincennes to surrender their town to the Americans.

NPS / SCULPTURE BY ALBIN POLASEK

Francis Vigo *(above right)*, an Italian 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.

NPS / SCULPTURE BY JOHN ANGEL

French Involvement

French explorers, fur traders, missionaries, and soldiers arrived in North America in the early 1600s. Many took Native wives and lived among the tribes. The French spread throughout the continent's interior via the St. Lawrence, Great Lakes, and Mississippi waterways.

Claiming sovereignty over the interior, the French established small forts and posts. They did not usurp Natives' rights to fish, trap, or hunt. The fur trade that fueled the French economy depended upon the Natives' providing a steady supply of skins. The important French settlements—Detroit, Michilimackinac, Kaskaskia, Cahokia, and Vincennes—divided into an upper class of military officers and wealthy traders along with a lower class of smaller traders, farmers, and artisans.

The conflict between France and Britain for control of the interior culminated in the French and Indian War (1754–63). Britain emerged the victor. The French who stayed in the Ohio River valley had to serve in militias to supplement British forces.

At forts Detroit and Michilimackinac, French militias supported the British during the American Revolution. At Kaskaskia, Cahokia, and Vincennes, the French militias first supported the British, then the Americans. They renounced their support for the patriots when British Lt. Gov. Henry Hamilton arrived in Vincennes with an overwhelming force of Native warriors.

Visiting the Park

Visitor Center Stop first at the visitor center for information, exhibits, a film, and bookstore. Staff can answer questions and help you plan your visit. Closed most federal holidays but open Memorial Day, July 4, and Labor Day.

The Memorial In the mid-1920s, during the 150th anniversary celebration of the American Revolution, Indiana residents sought to commemorate George Rogers Clark's accomplishments. Congress created a commission to design and construct a memorial. Frederick Hirons 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. The rest of the ceiling and rotunda walls are Indiana limestone. The floor is Tennessee marble. Seven murals depict Clark's role in winning the region west of the Appalachians.



NPS / FREDERICK HIRONS

Accessibility We strive to make our facilities, services, and programs accessible to all; call or check our website.

George Rogers Clark National Historical Park is one of more than 400 parks in the National Park System. To learn more visit www.nps.gov.

Emergencies call 911

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

National Park Foundation.
Join the park community.
www.nationalparks.org

Visiting Historic Sites in Vincennes (Eastern Time Zone)

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

1 Old Cathedral Complex (205 Church St.) Dating from 1749, the Basilica of 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.) The home of fur trader Michel Brouillet, built about 1806, is one of the few vertical log houses surviving in North America. Visit the American Indian museum behind the house.

4 Grouseland (3 W. Scott St.) William Henry Harrison, first governor of Indiana Territory and ninth president of the United States, lived in this house, 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 territorial legislature occupied the capitol in 1811. Nearby is a replica of the print shop where, on July 4, 1804, Elihu Stout first published the *Indiana Gazette*, the territory's first newspaper.

6 Sugar Loaf Prehistoric Indian Mound (2401 Wabash Ave.) Woodland Indians (CE 600–1000) used it as a burial site.

7 Fort Knox II State Historic Site The fort served as the staging area for troops that fought in the Battle of Tippecanoe (1811). Also significant for its association with William Henry Harrison, Zachary Taylor, and Shawnee leader Tecumseh, it is three miles north of the city, at 3090 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, cabins, and a campground. The park is next to Fort Knox II State Historic Site, at 3500 N. Lower Fort Knox Rd. Call 812-882-4316.

Safety Watch children closely when near the Wabash River.

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