



George Rogers Clark National Historical Park

401 South Second Street, Vincennes, Indiana 47591 (812) 882-1776

Historical Site Bulletin



Fort Sackville was a British outpost located in the frontier settlement of Vincennes. Begun in 1777 and named for a British government official, it was one of several forts built by the French, British or Americans from 1732 to 1813 in this important frontier settlement.

During the opening years of the Revolution, the British dominated a large portion of the Trans-Appalachian frontier. From their posts north of the Ohio River they sent Indian war parties against American settlers, including those in Kentucky. In an attempt to end these attacks on the Kentucky



settlements, Clark led a small force of frontiersmen into the Illinois country. In the summer of 1778 they captured the British posts of Kaskaskia and Cahokia near the Mississippi River. Clark

gained the support of the French inhabitants of these communities. Father Pierre Gibault and Dr. Jean Laffont volunteered to travel to Vincennes on behalf of the Americans and soon that settlement also gave its support to Clark. Although under British rule after the French and Indian War, these posts were populated by French settlers that had no great affection for the British. The French on this portion of the Trans-Appalachian frontier quickly transferred their allegiance to the Americans. The French at Detroit and other northern posts however, maintained the outward support of

Fort Sackville at Vincennes

the British.

In December 1778, British Lieutenant-Governor Henry Hamilton came down from Detroit, with a mixed force of English soldiers, French volunteers and militia and Indian warriors, to retake Fort Sackville. Faced with this formidable array, the French settlers of Vincennes returned to their British allegiance.

Hamilton then made a fateful decision allowing most of his force to return to their homes for the winter and postponed his intended invasion of the Illinois country. Hamilton planned to gather his army in the spring and attack Clark's forces: he thine intended to join with tribes from south of the Ohio River to drive all American settlers from the Trans-Appalachian frontier.

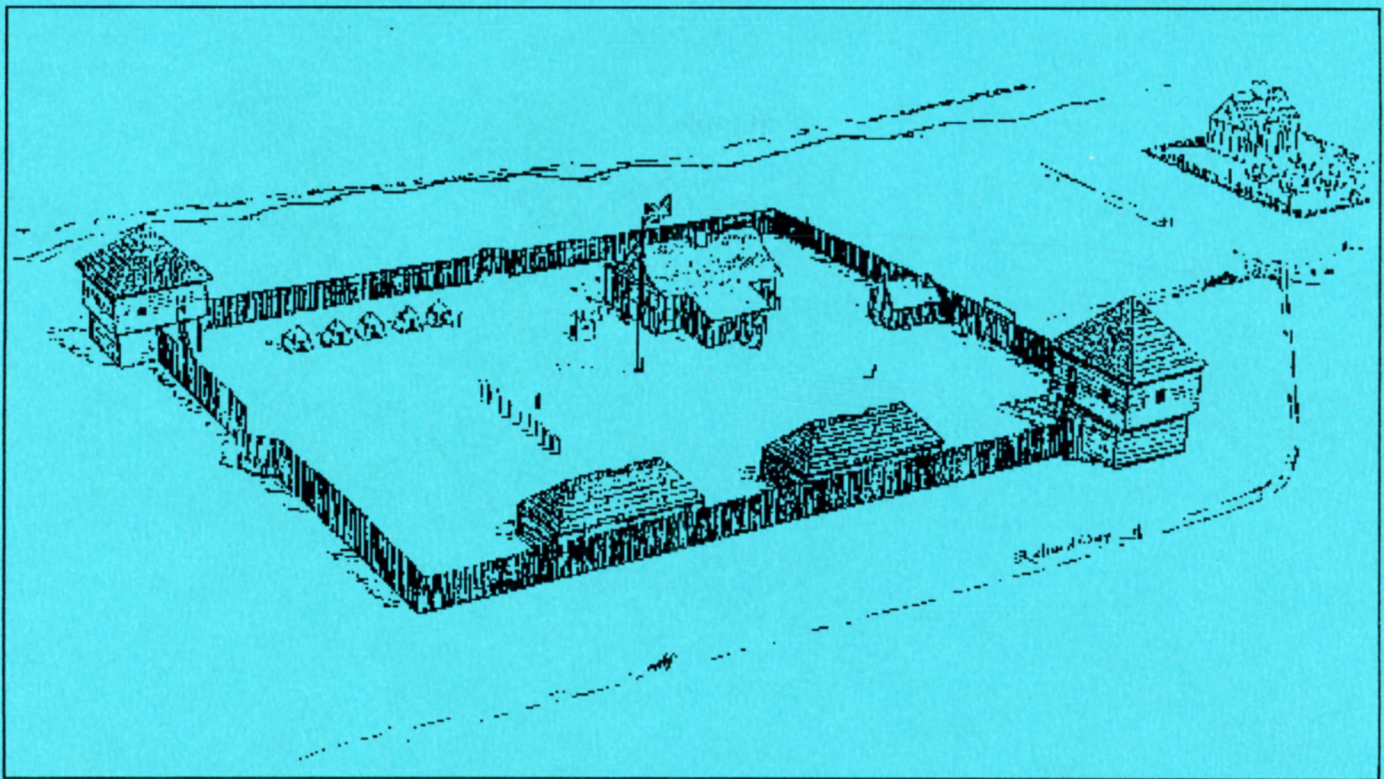
Determined to capture Hamilton, Clark and his force of approximately 170 American and French frontiersmen made an epic 18 day trek from Kaskaskia through the freezing waters of the flooded Illinois country. At times in icy water up to their shoulders, it was Clark's determined leadership that brought them through this incredible midwinter journey. They arrived in Vincennes after nightfall on February 23, 1779. The French citizens, eager to again renounce the British, greeted Clark's men warmly, providing food and dry gunpowder. Clark surrounded the

fort and gave the impression of having a much larger army. Hamilton's garrison now consisted of approximately 40 British soldiers and a similar number of French volunteers and militia from Detroit and Vincennes. These French troops were not enthusiastic when they realized that the French inhabitants of the town had, once again, embraced the Americans. To further unnerve the garrison, Clark ordered tunneling operations to begin from behind the riverbank a short distance from the fort; such tunnels were used to plant explosive charges under fort walls or powder magazines. Barricades were thrown up and entrenchments dug to provide additional cover.



Contemplating his predicament with increasing foreboding, Hamilton became resigned to surrendering and decided to request a meeting with Clark. After a lengthy and heated discussion at the nearby church, they returned to their respective posts, having failed to agree on what terms of capitulation would be acceptable. Hamilton was trying to hold out for liberal conditions; Clark was insisting on unconditional surrender.

At this time, an event occurred which caused the British to realize what might be their fate if the



Americans were forced to storm the fort. An Indian raiding party, that had been sent out by Hamilton to attack American settlers on the Ohio, River came back to Vincennes.

Their return came during a lull in the battle and they saw the British flag flying as usual from the fort. The unsuspecting warriors, gleefully yelling and firing their weapons in the air, realized their mistake too late. Several Indians were killed or wounded by the frontiersmen and others were captured.

In retaliation for Indian raids, which had killed large numbers of men, women and children on the frontier, Clark ordered four of the captured warriors to be tomahawked in full view of the fort. The executions were intended to heighten the psychological pressure on the British, while illustrating to Indian

observers that the redcoats could no longer protect those tribes that made war on the Americans.

Following this grim scene, a second meeting between Hamilton and Clark took place. Shortly afterwards, the lieutenant-governor reluctantly agreed to Clark's final terms, which in effect were just short of unconditional surrender. At 10 o'clock on the morning of February 25, 1779, Hamilton led his troops out of the fort to lay down their arms.

Although unable to achieve his ultimate objective of capturing Detroit, Clark successfully countered British and Indian moves during the remainder of the conflict, preventing them from achieving their goal of driving the Americans from the Trans-Appalachian frontier. As a result of Clark's military activities the British ceded to the United States a vast area of land west of the Appalachians, including the present day states of Ohio, Indiana, Illinois, Michigan, Wisconsin and the eastern portion of Minnesota.

Most of our information regarding Fort Sackville comes from a plan drawn by British Lieutenant Henry DuVernet and from the description of subsequent changes made by Hamilton. Hamilton added a powder magazine, well, guardhouse, two barracks and

two blockhouses to the existing eleven foot high palisade walls and headquarters building. Measuring about 200 feet long, Fort Sackville did not form a perfect rectangle: each of the four sides was of a different length.

The exact location of the fort is not known. The fort site is located on the present day George Rogers Clark National Historical Park, roughly between the Clark Memorial and the Lincoln Memorial Bridge.

