

George Rogers Clark

National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior

George Rogers Clark
National Historical Park



Capt. Joseph Bowman - Clark's Campaign Chronicler



Jo. Bowman

A short story

For 18 days during Feb. 1779, Col George Rogers Clark led 170 men from Kaskaskia to Vincennes in order to capture British Fort Sackville in Vincennes. End of Story!

The power of the pen

That brief opening statement easily could be all that is known today about the midwinter campaign which culminated with the conquest of the Old Northwest Territory. That skimpy account *could have been* all there was – if not for Capt. Joseph Bowman. As one of the 170 men on that now famous march, Bowman forced his nearly frozen legs to push forward through

each water-laden step. But as Clark's personal secretary, Bowman also had to force his cold stiff fingers to push a pen or pencil in an effort to write the story of a military march which virtually defied description. With Bowman's journal, generations of Americans could . . .

In his own words

. . . appreciate the precautions taken.

"Pitched our camp in a square, baggage in the middle, every company to guard their own squares."

. . . hear, with each ax stroke, the sound of solutions to obstacles.

"Crossed the river of the Petit Fork upon trees that were felled for that purpose, the water being so high there was no fording it."

. . . feel anxiety rise as the potential for detection by the enemy increased with each mile traveled.

"Orders not to fire any guns for the future, but in case of necessity."

... marvel at what dedicated people will do.

"... made rafts for four men to ... go up to town (Vincennes) and steal boats, but they spend day and night in the water ... , for there was not one foot of dry land ... the four men returned, after spending the night on some old logs in the water."

... witness the mounting anguish within the soldiers who were facing a seemingly endless torturous watery path to Fort Sackville.

"Many of the men much cast down, particularly the volunteers. No provisions of any sort, now two days. Hard fortune! Camp very quiet but hungry; some almost in despair; many of the creole volunteers talking of returning (to Kaskaskia)."

... be moved deeply as human endurance was pressed to the limit as there was no anticipated relief from aching muscles, empty stomachs, utter exhaustion, and overwhelming gloom.

"Marched on in the waters. Those that were weak and famished from so much fatigue went in the canoes. We came one league (about three miles) farther to some sugar camps, where we staid all night ... No provisions yet. Lord help us!"

... be inspired by the spectacle of gallant leadership which fostered superhuman efforts.

"Set off to cross the plain called Horse-shoe Plain, about four miles long, all covered with water breast high. Here we expected some of our brave men must certainly perish, having frozen in the night, and so long fasting. Having no other resource but wading this plain, or rather lake, of waters, we plunged into it with courage, Colonel Clark being first, taking care to have the (two) boats try to take those that were weak and numbed with the cold into them. Never were men so animated with the thought of avenging the wrongs done to their back settlements as this small army was."

... revel in the journal's transition from the march to reach Fort Sackville to the attack upon Fort Sackville.

"The cannon played smartly. Not one of our men wounded. Men in the fort badly wounded. Fine sport for the sons of Liberty."

... experience the pride and the sense of great success that came with the crowning glory of Clark's campaign and the soldiers' reward – the surrender of Fort Sackville.

"About ten o'clock (on Feb. 25, 1779) Captain Bowman's and Captain McCarty's companies paraded on one side of the fort gate. Governor Hamilton and his garrison marched out, while Colonel Clark, Captains Williams' and Worthington's companies marched into the fort, relieved the sentries, hoisted the American colors, secured all the arms. ... shut the gate."