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GEORGE ROGERS CLARK ~ ARCHAEOLOGY OF A FRONTIER HERO

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As often happens, when we learn about many important figures in American history it becomes apparent that they were multi-talented individuals, and multi-faceted. General George Rogers Clark, that great figure in the history of our state and nation, was just such a man. Well known are his heroic military skills and accomplishments, and how those dramatic accomplishments helped form our nation at a critical point in its early development. We might also be aware of his surveying, diplomatic, and inventing skills. But, perhaps not everyone knows that this man also had interests in archaeology, paleontology, geology, and natural history (Thomas and Conner 1967).

Archaeology by, and related to, George Rogers Clark in Indiana can be separated into several locations to highlight. The first of these is Fort Sackville, the British outpost described as one “of several forts built by the French, British or Americans from 1732 to 1813 in this important frontier settlement [Vincennes, Indiana]” (National Park Service 2004). Lt. Col. Clark and his brave men in 1779 captured the fort from the British. In recognition of the importance of this military feat, and its significance in our country’s history, the country erected the impressive Beaux Arts monument which stands today in Vincennes (Figure 1).

The monument and grounds are now part of the George Rogers Clark National Historical Park, administered by the National Park Service. Sadly, no professional archaeological investigations appear to have been conducted prior to when the site for the monument was cleared of other existing structures, and the excavation preparations for the monument were conducted in the 1930s. Bearss (1970:Chapter 6 (C) (2)), citing an undated newspaper article from Vincennes, reports that when the sprinkler system for the memorial grounds was being installed, human remains were recovered, and that “soon after being exposed, they began to rapidly deteriorate. Local historians speculated that as the bones were deep in the gravel, where the earth had not been disturbed [by monument construction related activities], they were probably those of a soldier or Indian buried in the 18th century.” Modern archaeological investigations, attempting to locate remains of the fort and information from that time period have, however, been conducted in the area (Tomak 1972). Other discoveries and archaeological investigations (e.g. Bringelson 2010; Frost 1988, 1990; Kaufmann et al. 2012; Lagemann 1975; Ruby 1997) have been made in the vicinity.



Figure 1. Historic postcard showing the memorial in Vincennes (card from author’s collection).

In 1970 and 1971, archaeologists from Indiana University conducted excavations (Figures 2, 3) with the goal of recovering information relevant to the British Fort Sackville. A summary of the results of the excavations follows:

The project was complicated by the facts that locational and descriptive data for Fort Sackville are less than desirable, that the area has been continuously occupied up to the present time, and that within the present park there are buildings, pavements, trees, areas of fill, etc. which pose problems for excavation. Moreover, in addition to Fort Sackville (1777-1782), two other forts are reported to have been built in the same general location. These are the French Post Vincennes (c. 1732-?) and the American Fort Knox No. 3 (1813-1816). . . . Some but not a great amount of artifacts and features which are or may be eighteenth century were found. . . . Of particular concern are the remains of two fort walls. . . . Just how they are related to other features is not clear. Fort Knox No. 3 is seemingly represented at least by Wall A. Perhaps some remnant of Fort Sackville has been found. Post Vincennes apparently remains undiscovered [Tomak 1972:62-63].

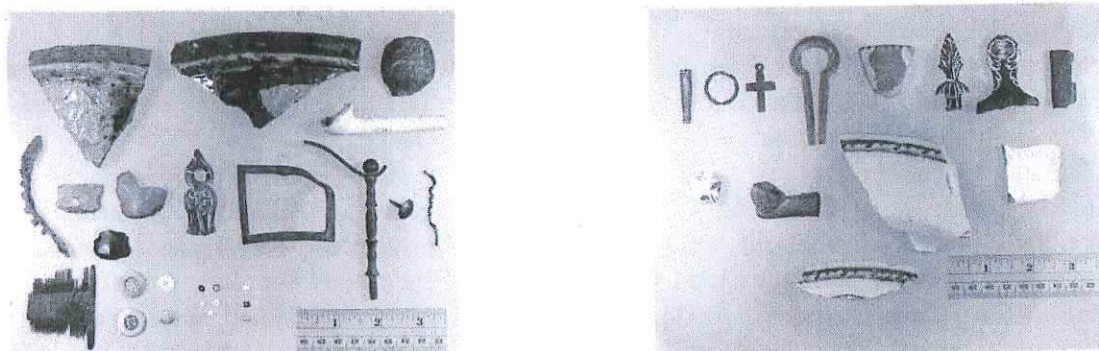


Figure 2. Left: Historic artifacts recovered from one of the excavated trenches (Tomak 1972:Fig. 15). Right: Artifacts such as a brass tinkler, brass crucifix, pipe fragment, and ceramic fragments (Tomak 1972:Fig. 14).

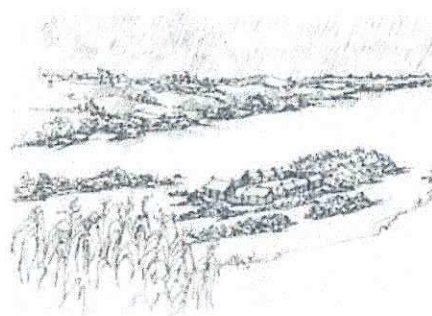


Figure 3. Archaeological excavation unit showing the jog in Wall A which was uncovered (Tomak 1972:Fig. 12).

It is possible that additional archaeological excavations in Vincennes could provide further understanding of the military and civilian occupations that took place there. Tomak (1972:50) suggested specific locations to have additional, as well as new, archaeological investigations. As a result of an overview of the archaeological work which had taken place to date in the vicinity of the park, the National Park Service's Midwest Archeological Center (Nickel 2002:i) recommended a geographic information system (GIS)-based cultural resource base map be produced, geophysical surveys of the area be conducted, and oral histories regarding the park's development be recorded. Nickel stated that future ground disturbance down to the historic grade may encounter archaeological deposits (2002:11). In a recent report (Bringelson 2010:1) regarding archaeological monitoring for proposed utility upgrades at the park, it is stated that "The archaeological resources associated with the Fort Sackville period... are considered to be highly significant and directly related to the park's legislative purpose."

Records indicate that prior to embarking on the campaign to take Vincennes, Clark and his troops arrived at Corn Island at the Falls of the Ohio area. Troops and settlers occupied the island, a blockhouse and cabins were built, and land was planted in corn (Figure 4; English 1897: 131, 471; Indiana Historical Bureau 1997:9). Remnants of these types of features would be valuable archaeological evidence regarding this launching point location for the Vincennes campaign. Unfortunately, the geography of the island (in a river setting), and its subsequent damage in later periods, prevent any current archaeology from being conducted at this important location.

Figure 4. Rendering of Corn Island (Indiana Department of Public Instruction and Indiana State Museum 1976:45).



Coming back to the Falls of the Ohio area in 1803, Clark settled on land (Clark's Point) in what is now part of the Falls of the Ohio State Park in Clarksville, Indiana. He had a log cabin and mill (Barnhart and Riker 1971:254) there on the property, but sadly the original cabin does not still stand. Today there is a reconstruction of what is thought to be the style of his cabin in the general area (Figure 5). Archaeological excavations have been conducted in the general area by several individuals (Anslinger 2001:1-2; Janzen 1972), and more recent archaeological (White 2003) investigations have resulted in additional data to help interpret the history and prehistory of the area.



Figure 5. Professional excavation for construction adjacent to the re-constructed Clark's cabin. Work conducted by, and photograph courtesy of, Indiana University-Purdue University Fort Wayne, Archaeological Survey.

In those latter years of his life, Clark “indulged his life-long interest in natural history. As a pioneer archaeologist of the area [Clarksville], he collected the remains of extinct animals, and other fossils, sending many specimens to Thomas Jefferson for his personal collection” (The Indiana State Museum Society 1976:52). He held in common his interest in these archaeological and paleontological pursuits with Thomas Jefferson, President of the United States from 1801-1809. With his explorations of an Indian burial mound on his Virginia estate in the 1780s, Jefferson conducted the first attempt at a scientific excavation, with understandings of stratigraphy, and its importance, and the development of excavation techniques (Ceram 1971:3, 6-8). Clark’s interests in paleontology, archaeology, and Native Americans continued while in this area, although sadly, “there are no published reports of Clark’s archaeological activities” (Janzen 1972:306).

The General was even interested in what today can still sometimes be a controversial topic: the “mound builders” and their origins (Janzen 1972:307). For many years, various historians, scientists, and archaeologists wrestled with the question of whether early earthworks and sites were made by ancestors of living Native Americans, or constructed by others. As a result of his own studies and investigations of sites, Clark refuted others’ theories about these mounds and earthworks, including one person’s belief that they had been constructed by Hernando DeSoto and his men, and came to the conclusion that they were in fact built by ancestors of existing tribes (Thomas and Conner 1967:208).

Clark’s life ended in 1818 at his sister’s home (Locust Grove) near Louisville, Kentucky, and he was originally buried in the small graveyard there. Over the years, various individuals hoped that the hero could have a more fitting burial location and memorial (Thomas 1967). In 1869, Clark family members had the remains of the General exhumed and reinterred in the Cave Hill Cemetery in Louisville (Thomas 1967:37; Thruston 1936:213), where he still rests today.

In the description of the exhumation, we can gain some archaeological insight into how the body was positively identified as General George Rogers Clark. Citing English (1896), Thomas states the following: “He [English] wrote that Col. R.T. Durrett was present at the reinterment and communicated to him that 9 graves were opened, with the identification being made from remaining gray-red hair, military buttons, and absence of left leg” (1967:37). Details and clues such as these are just the types of information that are critical for identifications in archaeological recovery of burials. It is difficult to know how much actual care was taken in 1869 at recovering all of the materials and specific artifacts, such as the military buttons. Had an archaeological investigation been conducted today in this type of situation, meticulous care would have been taken to recover every burial artifact and all of the remains, and detailed notes, maps, and other documentation would have been recorded. Military burials, in particular, can provide invaluable clues into aspects of life at that time in regards to uniform materials, styles, associated military artifacts, etc.

In October 2003, the Kentucky Archaeological Society, with help from the Falls of the Ohio Archaeological Society, conducted archaeological investigations at Mulberry Hill, the site of the Louisville home of Clark’s parents, and his home for some time. The dig, which involved children, professional and avocational archaeologists, was focused on determining whether intact remnants of the home exist (Falls of the Ohio Archaeological Society 2003; Rodriguez 2003).

Although one hundred ninety-five years have passed since George Rogers Clark’s death, there is still valuable information that can be learned, specifically through archaeology, about this hero’s time and activities.

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