

George Rogers Clark

National Historical Park
Indiana
National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior

Official Map and Guide



Cover: *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 a young commander named George Rogers Clark in the remote backcountry west of the Appalachian Mountains. Here, fighting for their very survival, American frontiersmen successfully countered British and Indian military moves. Their heroic efforts helped win the Revolutionary War and make possible the westward expansion of the United States.

Settlers started crossing the Appalachians in significant numbers about the time the 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, however, the British at Detroit were sending Indian war parties to raid and destroy their settlements. To survive, the frontiersmen adopted Indian tactics of wilderness warfare; properly led, they 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.

During the winter of 1777-78, he persuaded Gov. Patrick Henry and a select group of other Virginia officials to let him carry the war into British-controlled territory north of the Ohio River. Commissioned lieutenant colonel in the Virginia Line, Clark was authorized to raise a force of 350 men. His public orders from the legislature were to protect the Kentucky frontier; his secret instructions from Governor Henry, however, were to operate against the British-controlled posts of French inhabitants at Kaskaskia and Cahokia in the Illinois country and Vincennes on the Wabash River—stepping stones to Clark's ultimate objective, the capture of Detroit.

March to Victory

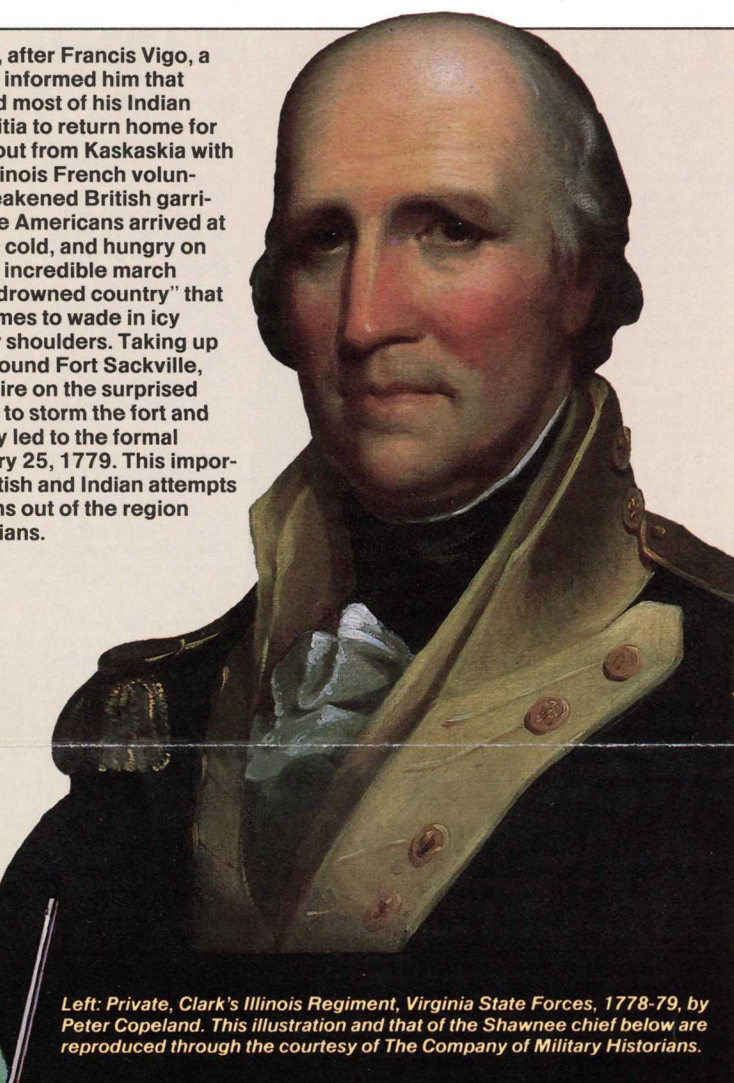
In the spring of 1778, Clark floated his 150 Virginia volunteers down the Ohio River from western Pennsylvania to Corn Island, opposite present-day Louisville, Ky. Late in June, after being joined by a small number of men from the Kentucky and Tennessee regions, he took his little army further down this waterway to the west. Hiding their boats near an abandoned fort, Clark and his men marched overland toward the Mississippi River across what is now southwestern Illinois. They made their final approach to Kaskaskia at dusk on July 4 and took the village without firing a shot.

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 the residents also quickly embraced the American cause. And 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 Americans. Placing Capt. Leonard Helm in command of Fort Sackville and the French militia at Vincennes, Clark met at Cahokia with warriors from some of the previously hostile tribes and gained their temporary neutrality through a mixture of bluff and outward disdain of danger.

When word of Clark's conquests reached 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 this bold intruder. Joined along the way by hundreds of Indians who remained allied to the British, Hamilton quickly 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.

On February 5, 1779, after Francis Vigo, a merchant and trader, informed him that Hamilton had allowed most of his Indian allies and French militia to return 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 Americans arrived at their destination wet, cold, and hungry on February 23, after an incredible march across 180 miles of "drowned country" that had forced them at times to wade in icy waters reaching their shoulders. Taking up strategic positions around Fort Sackville, Clark's men opened fire on the surprised British. Clark's threat to storm the fort and give no quarter finally led to the formal surrender on February 25, 1779. This important victory foiled British and Indian attempts to drive the Americans out of the region west of the Appalachians.

Only four portraits of George Rogers Clark are known to exist. All of them show Clark at an advanced age. This one, by John Wesley Jarvis, hangs in the Filson Club in Louisville, Ky.



Left: Private, Clark's Illinois Regiment, Virginia State Forces, 1778-79, by Peter Copeland. This illustration and that of the Shawnee chief below are reproduced through the courtesy of The Company of Military Historians.



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The Aftermath

Although Clark was unable to gather a sufficient force to capture Detroit or gain total victory over the English north of the Ohio River, his activities during the remainder of the war further weakened British control west of the Appalachians. His efforts also helped the United States to 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 that has come to be known as the Old Northwest and which evolved into the present states of Ohio, Indiana, Illinois, Michigan, Wisconsin, and the eastern portion of Minnesota.

The influx of Americans west of the Appalachians continued after the Revolutionary War, but Indian resistance, now quietly encour-

aged by the British, slowed the course of settlement north of the Ohio River. Migration accelerated after 1794, however, 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, the Shawnee Prophet. Their major opponent was William Henry Harrison, governor of the Indiana Territory that had been created out of the Northwest Territory. Tecumseh's plans to hold the line against the further loss of land to white 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 in the region west of the Appalachians during the latter stages of that war ensured the continued American development of the region won by the heroic efforts of George Rogers Clark and his frontier army three decades earlier.



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The Indian Factor

Although 8,000 British troops were scattered throughout North America at the beginning of the Revolution in 1775, only a few were stationed west of the Appalachians. Detroit, the main British post in the region, was garrisoned by just over a hundred redcoats. Because of their relatively small numbers, the British had to rely on the Indians in their military efforts against the Americans. Most of the tribes had shifted their allegiance from the French to the British in the 1760s after the French and Indian War.

At first, the British refrained from using the Indians in unrestricted frontier warfare, but by 1777 British Lt. Gov. Henry Hamilton at Detroit was equipping and sending northern Indians across the Ohio River to attack frontier people in the Kentucky country, western Pennsylvania, and what is now West

Virginia. As the tribes were already angry over the incursions into their lands by these settlers, most of the warriors needed little urging to make their devastating raids.

The Indian manner of waging war made them particularly dangerous to the frontier settlers. Warriors were able to traverse the forest undetected, select cabins or settlements to attack, strike with sudden ferocity, and then withdraw before a pursuing party could be gathered.

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

The tribes in the vast area between the Appalachian Mountains and the Mississippi River (see map below) included the Wyandot, Mingo, Miami, Wea, Piankashaw, Delaware, Shawnee, Ottawa, Chippewa, Menominee, Winnebago, Sac, Fox, Potawatomi, Kickapoo, Illini, Choctaw, Chickasaw, Creek, and Cherokee. (The last four of these Indian groups were located south of the Ohio River.) These tribes collectively had thousands of warriors, making them by far the most potentially powerful force in the region.



The Northwest Campaign 1778-1779

Lt. Governor 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 militia 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 floated across Lake Erie, up the Maumee River, across the portage to the Wabash River, and 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.

Area that became the "Old Northwest" **WEA** Indian tribal name and area
Thirteen original colonies **x** Selected portage site

“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, at the dedication of the Clark Memorial, June 14, 1936.

A Daring Tactician

George Rogers Clark had a combination of qualities commonly found in heroes of romantic novels and adventure films but rarely met with in real life. At 6 feet 2 inches tall with auburn-reddish hair, he was a striking figure of a man. As an organizer of the Kentucky militia and commander of its defenses, he was known as a skilled and fearless fighter. He had the gifts of a magnetic leader and persuasive orator, and he was a master of psychological warfare like few other men of his time. Most importantly, he understood Indian customs and habits of thought. And he had the capacity to see far ahead and to think strategically.

Throughout the Revolution and later, Clark was the leader toward whom many turned in every recurrent crisis. It was largely because of his tireless exertion and the extraordinary force of his personality that the western frontier was held in the face of odds that seemed to call for a retreat. Clark's defense of Kentucky, his trans-Ohio River conquests, and the defeats he inflicted on the western 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 more territory than all the armies that raged back and forth in Europe's wars, and added to the United States a rich area as large as the original thirteen colonies.

George Rogers Clark was one of the great figures of the American frontier. Born in Virginia on November 19, 1752, he migrated to the wilderness beyond the Appalachians 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, standing atop a marble pedestal in the center of the memorial building, is a fitting tribute to the man whom Lafayette ranked next to George Washington as a military leader.



Clark

French Involvement

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

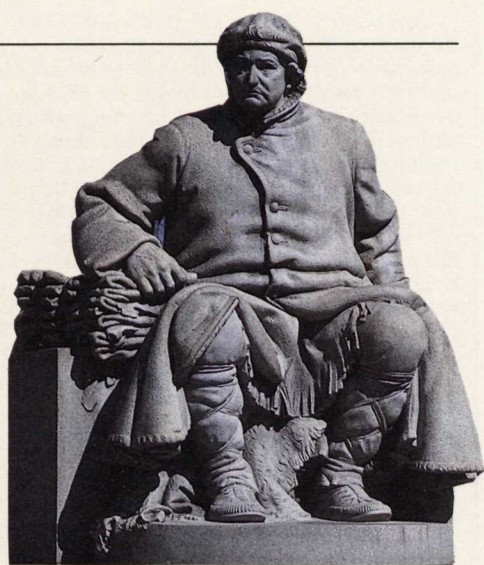
Although the French made a general claim of sovereignty over lands of the interior, they did nothing to disturb the Indians' actual possession of them, aside from establishing



small forts and posts. The most important of these settlements were Detroit, Michilimackinac, Kaskaskia, Cahokia, and Vincennes, whose populations were divided into an upper class of military officers and wealthy traders, and a lower class of smaller traders, farmers, and artisans. The fur trade with the Indians dominated the economy and much of the daily activity.

French civilians had been allowed to remain in North America fol-

lowing England's victory over France in the French and Indian War in 1763. Organized into militia units under British authority, the French could supply several hundred fighting men in the West. The French were also important because of their continuing influence with the Indians. While there was some sympathy for the American cause due to residual antipathy toward England, the French outwardly supported the English when the war began, especially in the Great Lakes region at Detroit and Michilimackinac, where the British were firmly 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, an important merchant in Spanish-controlled St. Louis, was well-known and respected by the French in the Vincennes area. Vigo embraced the American cause and helped finance and supply Clark's campaign.

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 developed an intense interest in commemorating the great accomplishments of George Rogers Clark. As the commemorative proposals gained momentum, Congress created the George Rogers Clark Sesquicentennial Commission to design and construct an impressive memorial that would be in keeping with the contributions of Clark and the American frontiersmen.

The magnificent plans of Frederick Hiron won a national architectural competition, and construction of the memorial began in 1931. Built in the classic Greek style, the granite exterior of the building is encircled by sixteen huge columns support



President Franklin D. Roosevelt dedicated the memorial in 1936. Four years later it became a unit of the Indiana Department of Conservation. In 1966 Congress made it part of the National Park System.

ing a massive round roof. In the center of the interior, a larger-than-life bronze statue of George Rogers Clark stands atop a marble pedestal. High above, a large circular art glass skylight illuminates the interior. The remainder of the ceiling and the rotunda walls are Indiana limestone. The floor is of Tennessee marble. Seven large murals in the interior depict Clark's important role in the region west of the Appalachians.

Access
The visitor center and park grounds are accessible for wheelchairs.

More Information
Write: Superintendent, George Rogers Clark National Historical Park, 401 South Second St., Vincennes, IN 47591. Call: 812-882-1776. Fax: 812-882-7270. Internet: www.nps.gov/gero.

Of Related Interest

These and other related sites reflect the early development of Vincennes.

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

2 Old State Bank State Historic Site (114 N. 2nd St.) This structure was built for the State Bank of Indiana in 1838. The interior of the building includes the original two-door iron vault.

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

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

5 Vincennes State Historic Sites (1 W. Harrison St.) The Indiana Territory, with Vincennes as its capital, included at various times the present states of In-

diana, Illinois, Michigan, and Wisconsin, and part of Minnesota. The capitol was occupied in 1811 by the territorial legislature. Nearby is a replica of the print shop where Elihu Stout began publishing the *Indiana Gazette*, the first newspaper in the territory, on July 4, 1804.

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 the troops that fought the Battle of Tippecanoe. It is also significant for its association with William Henry Harrison, Zachary Taylor, and the Indian leader Tecumseh. It is located three miles north of the city on Fort Knox Road.

8 Quabache (Wabash) Trails Park Located 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. Phone 812-882-4316.

Safety
Parents and teachers should keep young children under direct observation when in the immediate vicinity of the railroad track and Wabash River.

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