

George Rogers Clark

National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior

George Rogers Clark
National Historical Park



Not Lewis and Clark



**George Rogers
Clark**

A ruined man at 64, one year
before death rescued him.



William Clark

Famous enough in his mid-
30s to have a portrait
painted.

George Rogers Clark was a Revolutionary War hero. His younger brother William was the Clark of Lewis and Clark Expedition fame. The difference between these two American patriots of long ago is only a matter of when they accomplished their great deeds.

George

George was the first to come along November 19, 1752, and his highlight adventure happened in February of 1779. His capture of the lieutenant governor of British Canada, Henry Hamilton, was a turning point in American history. After invading Vincennes, Hamilton had set himself up to destroy every American settlement west of the Appalachians, using his Native allies. This British/Indian military action (that never happened) would have removed the

“Kentucky Country” buffer. Without these American posts (which absorbed the direct attacks), the eastern colony-states would have been devastated. The British army on one side and the full fury of Shawnee, Delaware, and Miami Indian warriors on the other may have been too much for the patriots in revolution. Fortunately for the fledgling nation, George Rogers Clark was watching the back door.

William

William was born almost 18 years later than George on August 1, 1770, and his Corps of Discovery left for the Pacific Ocean and destiny in May of 1804. They were both Virginians born to John and Ann (Rogers) Clark. Being colonial Virginians, they knew their place in the world as upper class, land owning, slave holding, new-world-aristocrats. Great things were expected of

them from their parents, siblings, friends and colleagues. The pressure to succeed must have been immense. As seen in their many accomplishments, the brothers Clark met the test of their lofty positions, but in some cases the stress was too much to bear. Ah!...to be born a common man with only mortal hopes and dreams.

Brothers and Leaders

Unlike the average colonial Americans, George and William were strikingly tall, red-haired frontiersmen who commanded respect just by their presence. They were born and bred to lead. The most undisciplined and individualistic hunter-pioneers would follow them to the limits of their abilities; beyond when their feet started bleeding or were too frozen to feel. The Clarks' inspiring methods of leadership were very similar, as happens when a younger brother idolizes the older. They just knew they were better than their subordinates, and so could

merely will the men to superhuman efforts. This instilled confidence in them and in their followers. On the flip side, this haughty so-Virginian-like nature caused both brothers to lose support at critical junctures in their lives. George would helplessly witness his soldier's mutiny on a 1786 expedition no matter how much he pleaded on the banks of the Wabash. **William would lose out on becoming Governor of Missouri** because he assumed it was his destiny. It seems they were naturally gifted leaders but only under certain circumstances.

A Matter of Money

Life's ups and downs certainly made differences in whether these brothers succeeded or not. If only George had said yes to Thomas Jefferson in 1783 when he was offered the expedition to find the water route to the Pacific Ocean. Instead, Meriwether Lewis grabbed the glory 20 years later and by coincidence chose George's brother to share in the captaincy. As William's star rose, George's life was spiraling ever downward. As a good brother William Clark took over the monumental task of grappling with the lawsuits leveled at George for unpaid war debts. **Virginia balked on a settlement. It seems the eastern, colonial "bean counters" didn't**

understand wilderness war expenses. It was necessary for William to travel extensively, including to Vincennes many times, to soothe the creditors and merchants. During the episodes of hostilities they gave trade goods freely based solely on George's good name. Who can blame them for wanting their money "after all the shooting was over?" **In typical Clark family thinking, William was merely repaying George for all the frontier-life lessons. What did it matter that William's fortunes were being eroded as he sold land to pay debts. He was "my brother" after all.**

On the Banks of the Ohio

Many years earlier, when George was running circles around the western British army, William celebrated with the whole Clark family. Later, George, in turn, happily sent his younger brother off to the Pacific Ocean. Upon William's return, George welcomed him back to Indiana with a pat on the back and a warm embrace. Likewise, as

the burdens of debt and ruined reputation buried the older sibling, young William almost lost heart and feared for George's sanity. Eventually, they lived together in a log cabin on the banks of the Ohio – each consoling the other over their many losses, but also reminiscing over their incredible contributions to America.