



The surrender of Fort Sackville

What did Hamilton *really* hand

Nobody alive today witnessed the surrender of Fort Sackville in Vincennes. That event occurred more than 225 years ago. Yet today there are numerous images of that defining moment when British Lt. Gov. Henry Hamilton formally yielded possession to American Col. George Rogers Clark.

One striking rendition of this event is the fifth painting in the George Rogers Clark Memorial. There, Hamilton is depicted presenting a ceremonial sword to the victor. But what did Hamilton *really* hand over to Clark at 10 a.m., Thurs., Feb. 25, 1779?



Ezra Winter's surrender painting in the Clark Memorial

More than a mere fort

On the face of it, the surrender involved the transfer of a minuscule one-acre outpost from the British to the joint American-French forces who had laid siege to it 38 hours earlier. Thus, Fort Sackville was taken by Clark. Big deal. There were other better-built more prestigious forts such as Detroit, Harrod, and Pitt. Why the fuss over Fort Sackville?

Accounts of the surrender do not reveal any extraordinary details. Members of the garrison solemnly marched out with their arms, accoutrements, and knapsacks. The defeated knew

they were giving up a fort for which they had spent hazardous hours in dodging lead balls, in fighting frayed nerves, and in maintaining hope that there would be another way out of the siege -- other than through a humiliating surrender.

Members of Clark's army eagerly passed the prisoners and headed straight for the open gates. The victors knew they were gaining a fort for which they had spent dangerous days in marching through flooded icy river water; in fighting near starvation and total exhaustion; and in maintaining hope that there would be a way to force a surrender.

Vincennes – The epicenter

The crowning touch of the capitulation came as an American flag was raised up the garrison flagpole. Inching its way with each tug of the rope, it finally struck the top of the pole. Yet, not one of the more than 250 estimated spectators there at that moment ever reported feeling the earth shake when that flag came to a halt.

At that precise moment on Feb. 25, 1779,

Vincennes became the epicenter of international, political, economic, and military relations for a struggling United States. Shockwaves would radiate through the lives of millions of future Americans as a result of the transfer of a second-rate fort into the hands of a 26-year-old ambitious Virginian.

The moment that American flag reached the top of the garrison pole was the moment of the birth of the United

States north of the Ohio River. From that time on, there always has been an American flag flying at Vincennes.

Effectively, the United States had taken one of its two feet that had been in Kentucky and now firmly planted that foot 80 miles north of the Ohio River. That step, which came down squarely in Vincennes, truly was a giant leap in this nation's westward expansion.

Yet, St. Louis, not Vincennes, is known as the Gateway to the West. But for Americans, it would

remain a locked gate. The nation controlling the interior waterways also would control the interior. The United States first would have to be a viable strong presence upon the east bank of the Mississippi River before it ever could move onto the west bank.

Negotiators working toward a treaty in Paris would square off to settle the border dispute. It was evident that the Ohio River could not be used as the boundary – not with American possession well north of that river. But then, exactly where should the line go?

Pushing for lakefront property

The scene easily could have resembled an exchange often witnessed between overly tired adults and nagging children. Just as opportunistic youngsters relentlessly will plead, “I want,” and “Gimme,” the American representatives emulated them by incessantly demanding lakefront property from their weary British counterparts. The nagging worked.

Britain conceded the Old Northwest Territory which contained about 270,078 square miles (the present states of Ohio, Indiana, Illinois, Michigan, Wisconsin, and the eastern portion of Minnesota). There would be joint use of four Great Lakes, full American control of Lake Michigan, and US rights over a major section of the Mississippi River. Britain had handed over the “key” to unlock the Gateway to the West -- St. Louis. With the subsequent Louisiana Purchase, the way was opened to the Pacific Ocean.

Another testament to Clark's conquest was sprouting throughout the fertile fields of the Old Northwest Territory. Stalks of corn, rows of beans, and waving grains of wheat were the visible

guarantees that the new United States would not be a third world country. It would be able to feed its own people and the world as well.

Not only had Clark seen to it that his country could become a superpower among nations, he actually had seen to it that his country could exist at all. During the war, Continental commanders had to face the enemy throughout the East by turning their backs to the West. But one day, they easily could have swung around and could have cringed upon seeing the British and their Indian allies approaching from the West.

British plans called for the elimination of Kentucky settlers to be followed with major attacks upon the western borders of Pennsylvania and of Virginia. The British would grin as they subdued the middle colonies. The North and the South would be isolated from each other. Being demoralized and facing a potential increase in British military efforts, the northern populace might lose heart first or maybe it would be the southern region that would fall next. Either way, Britain could win the war by coming through the back door. But that did not happen because Clark blocked the doorway.

Land = cash

Once the United States did win the war, many of its veterans returned to their farms to await a reward from a grateful, but financially strapped, nation. Thanks to Clark's conquest, there would be a viable solution to monetary compensation. Sections of Ohio and of Indiana were distributed to veterans who could opt for the land or who could sell it for cash.

That's what the federal government also needed – cash. The nation was burdened with a heavy debt. Relief came with each pioneer who, with money in hand, entered a government land office to purchase his little patch of heaven. This cash flow

into the United States Treasury helped to put the nation on a sound fiscal footing.

But there would be one element not permitted footing upon the new land. Slavery was prohibited throughout the Old Northwest Territory. As each new slave state from the South entered the Union, a state from north of the Ohio River also was admitted. This balanced the power between slave and non-slave states, thus, temporarily keeping the peace. It bought the United States valuable time – time in which to learn how to pull together as one nation instead of one nation pulling itself apart over the issue of slavery.

Shockwaves

It has been more than 225 years since Lt. Gov. Henry Hamilton surrendered Fort Sackville to Col. George Rogers Clark. Yet the international, political, economic, and military shockwaves of that event still reverberate. The best summary of the surrender's significance came from Clark who

said, “Great things have been effected by a few men well conducted.”

Yet, never could that brilliant leader have imagined just *how great* those things would be.

