GEORGE ROGERS CLARK AND THE REVOLUTION IN THE WEST

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The American Revolution was fought on a small scale when compared with later conflicts, but the war in the west along the Ohio Valley was waged in miniature dimensions even when measured against the engagements of the eastern seaboard. The war in the west differed from that waged in the east in yet another aspect. Had the Revolution been suppressed, a few of the eastern ringleaders would probably have been executed as examples to other potential rebels, but most of the participants would have resumed their previous status with little disruption to their lives. In the west however, much of the fighting was done by Indians, and warriors seldom paused to check political affiliations before taking a scalp. If the people living in Kentucky were defeated, they might flee eastward, be carried into captivity, or be killed. The war in the west was fought for survival; there was no civilian population.

By early 1777 an estimated 300 settlers had fled from the Kentucky area and several small settlements had been abandoned because of Indian attacks. The men of fighting age numbered under 150, and they were confined to the remaining settlements at Harrodsburg, Boonesborough, and Logan's Station. Hunting was dangerous, crops were almost impossible to raise, and the Kentucky settlements appeared to be on the verge of extinction. In one of Kentucky's darkest hours, when many men thought only of survival, George Rogers Clark determined to carry the war to the enemy.

Clark was born in Albemarle County, Virginia, in 1752. He received little formal education, but he had an excellent mind and he developed a love of reading and an effective style of writing despite erratic spelling. Sometime before his twentieth birthday he qualified as a surveyor, and between 1772 and 1775 he began clearing land on a site some 40 miles below Wheeling, West Virginia. In 1774 he served as a captain of militia in Dunmore's War against the Indians. It was apparently during this brief expedition that he became aware of his rare ability to lead men.

Clark reached Harrodsburg for the first time about the end of May, 1775. A few weeks later he wrote a brother that "a richer and more Beautifull Country than this I believe has never been seen in America yet." The ownership of Kentucky was in dispute, but Clark decided during this period that the region's prospects were best under Virginia's supervision. Little is known about Clark's reactions to the events leading to the outbreak of the Revolution, but he cast his lot with the rebels when the conflict began.

A meeting that Clark called at Harrodsburg in 1776 sent him and John Gabriel Jones back east to seek help for the frontier. The General Assembly had adjourned, but Clark visited Governor Patrick Henry and secured a favorable recommendation to the Executive Council. That body expressed sympathy and offered to lend 500 pounds of gunpowder to their "Friends in distress"; they could not

do more since the Kentuckians "were a detached people not yet united to the state of Virginia." Clark replied "that if the country was not worth protecting, it was not worth claiming." If Virginia did not want it, the Kentuckians would have to look elsewhere. The Council then decided that it could provide the gunpowder, and Virginia created Kentucky County in December, 1776, an action that was vital in Kentucky's development.

Clark became a major in the county militia; among the officers he outranked were Daniel Boone, James Harrod and Benjamin Logan. The command was important, for Indian raids increased during the spring of 1777. A diary that Clark kept during this period contained such items as: "March 6. Thomas Shores & Wm. Ray killed at the Shawnee Spring." "March 7. The Indians attempted to cut off from the fort a small party of our men. . . . We had 4 men wounded and some cattle killed. We killed and scalped one Indian, and wounded several." By May 1 Harrodsburg had only 84 men fit for military service, and the other stations were in even worse plight.

As Clark wrote later, "I was frequently afraid that people would think of making their peace with Detroit and suffer themselves and their families to be carried off." Or they might flee Kentucky for the safety of the lands east of the mountains. "This led me to a long train of thinking, the result of which was to lay aside every private view and engage seriously in the war and have the interest and welfare of the public my only view. . . ." With Kentucky as a base, he believed that the war could be carried to the enemy.

Two young hunters, Sam Moore and Ben Linn, were sent to the Illinois towns to gain intelligence, but, "To prevent suspicion, neither did they, nor any person in Kentucky ever known my design, until it was ripe for execution." His spies reported that the enemy was well prepared but felt secure; that the Indians were actively pro-British; that some of the French were pro-American. Armed with this information, Clark went to Virginia in the autumn of 1777 to seek approval and assistance for his plans.

Sometime in December Clark presented his plan to Governor Henry. There were serious objections to it: Could Virginia spare the men and supplies? Would such an effort only arouse the Indians to even greater raids? Should Virginia engage in such an effort in an area to which she was preparing to give up her claims? Could Clark's plan possibly succeed? But the Governor recognized both the value of the scheme and the need for secrecy, and after approving it he confided it to only a few gentlemen such as Thomas Jefferson, George Mason and George Wythe. They promised to seek liberal land grants for the participants in the expedition. Since there was doubt about the legality of conducting an expedition across the Ohio, the Assembly was asked only to authorize a force for the protection of Kentucky. But the measure did not indicate where that force should be employed.

Clark was promoted to Lt. Col., given £1200 in Virginia currency, and authorized to recruit 7 companies of 50 men each. Henry's secret instructions endorsed Clark's proposal: to go down the Ohio, then march overland to take Kaskaskia; to win over the French and to neutralize the Indians; to seek supplies from the Spaniards. The young commander was given wide discretionary powers to move on to even more ambitious goals, such as the capture of Detroit.

As he headed westward Clark began his recruitment of men and appointment of officers. He was particularly fortunate in the selection of Leonard Helm and Joseph Bowman - loyal, dependable

men who never failed to execute his orders. Few Pennsylvanians volunteered to assist Virginia, and few men came from the Holston area where 200 had been expected; the anticipated little army of 350 was reduced to half that number. "I knew our case was desperate," Clark admitted, "but the more I reflected on my weakness, the more I was pleased with the enterprise."

In May, 1778 he started westward, and his party of some 150 soldiers and several civilian families readied the Falls of the Ohio on May 27. While a number of people such as Thomas Bullitt had already visited that area, the beginning of a permanent settlement at the Falls is generally dated from Clark's arrival. Cabins and blockhouses were constructed on Corn Island as quickly as possible, and land was hastily cleared for late crops. As the labor progressed, Clark and his officers began to drill the men and to instill some discipline in them. "You already know the situation in which you left me at the Falls and the kind of people with whom I had to deal," Clark later wrote a friend, "but after I had knocked some down and punished and imprisoned others, they became the best people that can be imagined."

John Bowman brought some reinforcements from the Kentucky stations, but Clark, reluctantly, kept only 20-25 of them. Kentucky had suffered a severe blow in the late winter when Daniel Boone and some 27 salt makers had been captured by Indians near Blue Licks, and Clark realized that he could not strip the forts of too many defenders. When Clark finally revealed his plans to the men most of A Company escaped to the Kentucky shore and fled from the madman. But progress was made, and on June 24, 1778 Clark and some 170 men shot the rapids and began their invasion of the Northwest. Clark knew that the British kept a careful watch over traffic at the juncture of the Ohio and Mississippi rivers, so he left his boats at a point some 9 miles below the mouth of the Tennessee River and marched overland to Kaskaskia, a town of nearly 800 inhabitants that lay 120 miles distant.

The march was difficult. Food ran out, and the men ate berries the last two days. Their guide became lost, but his memory was stimulated by Clark's threat to execute him at sundown, and he succeeded in finding the trail. The Americans took the town and fort by complete surprise on the night of July 4, and patrols were sent out to prevent word from reaching other communities. To win over the French, Clark had recourse to applied psychology. He ordered his men to have no conversation with the terrified French citizens, and the next day he suddenly placed some of the French militia officers in irons. When the priest, Father Pierre Gibault, and some elderly gentlemen came to beg permission for the French to take leave of each other in their church before their anticipated exile, they were visibly shocked by the wild half- naked appearance of the American officers.

But Clark had made the desired first impression; of course they could assemble in the church. When the delegation returned later to ask timidly if families could be kept together in exile, Clark decided that "This was the point I wished to bring them to." American were not savages, he assured them; they did not war on civilians or the Catholic Church; the people should resume their normal lives. Since the King of France had recently made a treaty with the United States, there was hope that the war would soon be over. Within minutes bells were ringing, the church was crowded; the town was filled with joy. Clark had won over the French.

But he knew that he occupied a vulnerable position, and his dreams extended far beyond what had been accomplished. Captain Bowman took 30 Americans and some French. Volunteers and

occupied Cahokia, 50 miles to the north. Contacts were made with the Spanish officials on the west bank of the Mississippi who might be able to ease the serious supply situation. When Simon. Kenton reported that no British troops were at Vincennes, Father Gibault and other French leaders went there and persuaded the inhabitants to accept American control.

Everything had gone off unbelievably well, but Clark was still in a precarious situation. He had to expect British counter-measures from Detroit when Col. Henry Hamilton, who had displayed considerable skill and energy in directing Indian raids against the Americans, learned of his invasion. The enlistments of his men would soon expire, and many of Clark's soldiers wanted to go home. It was one of the critical moments of the campaign, and Clark's actions reveal a great deal about his character.

"I resolved to usurp the authority necessary to carry my points," he later explained. By persuasion and great promises he persuaded 100 men to re-enlist, and he recruited additional troops from among the French. To give the impression that a large army was behind him, he headed letters (that the French were allowed to see) "Headquarters Western American Army, Falls of Ohio, Illinois Detachment."

Clark also worked to neutralize the Indian tribes that had been so long under British influence. No one of that period was more successful than he in .conducting such diplomacy. As he described his technique, he "gave Harsh language to supply the want of Men: well knowing that it was a mistaken notion in many that soft speeches were best for Indians." He warned the Wabash tribes to stand aside and leave the Americans a wide path to Detroit, and he convinced some of the Indians that George III meant to tax them as he had the Americans. After a month of intensive talks, some 10-12 tribes had accepted the white belt of peace.

While Clark consolidated his position, Lt. Governor Henry Hamilton of Detroit prepared to dislodge him. Of Scottish background, Hamilton had served in America as early as 1758. During a visit to the American colonies he described the people as "naive, simple, kindly, and uncorrupted" -an opinion he later changed. His Detroit appointment dated from April, 1775, and in early summer, 1777, he had been instructed to use Indians "in making a Diversion and exciting an alarm upon the frontiers of Virginia and Pennsylvania." By September he had sent out 1,150 Indians, usually in small war parties, and by January 15, 1778, he had received 73 prisoners and 129 scalps in Detroit. The gifts he gave the Indians for their cooperation led to the frontier belief that he actually purchased scalps, a charge that historians have long since discarded.

Hamilton learned of Clark's presence in Illinois about August 8. Moving perhaps with too much dispatch, he left Detroit on October 7, 1778 with some 176 whites and 70 Indians; many other Indians were recruited along the way.

On December 17 Hamilton captured Vincennes without firing a shot as Capt. Helm's French troops deserted him. Hamilton then set to work to put Fort Sackville in good condition and to counteract Clark's influence among the Indians. He was confident that no further action could be undertaken before early summer; the 1778 campaign was ended.

A Spanish merchant, Francis Vigo, brought Clark news of the capture on January 29, 1779. The American officers, Clark said, "now Viewed ourselves in a very critical Situation." If they retreated to Kentucky, they would be over-whelmed there in the spring. Clark's little army had dwindled in size and nearly half of its members were now French, but he concluded that his only chance was to attack Hamilton at once; "I knew if I did not take him he would take me."

Clark began preparations without a hint that he doubted total success. A large river boat, re-named *The Willing*, was armed with two 4-pounders and 4 swivels, crewed with 40 men under Capt. John Rogers, and started off on Feb. 4 to make the long journey to a spot on the Wabash River south of Vincennes. The next day Clark and some 130 men set off overland. "Over water" might be more accurate, for the flat countryside was flooded, and the men marched and slept in sodden discomfort. Clark was everywhere along the column, joking, shouting and leading nightly entertainments "like Indian War Dances." A 14 year old drummer boy who sang comic songs while floating on his drum added to the merriment; when a tall sergeant carried the lad on his shoulders through a deep spot the men followed with shouts of laughter.

By Feb. 19 the Americans were on the flooded Wabash 9 miles below Vincennes. Food was almost gone, the waters were high, the *Willing* was not in sight; morale finally began to sag. But Clark kept the men moving. When some seemed ready to quit he daubed his face with dampened gunpowder, shrilled a war-whoop, and plunged into the flood -and the men followed. They ate an unwary fox and some possums, and a hunter brought in a deer. Two canoes they had found ferried those who collapsed on ahead to an island about two miles from Vincennes. As Clark said: "Our situation was now Truly critical, no possibility of Retreating in case of Defeat, in full View of a Town that at this time had upwards of Six Hundred Men in it, Troops, Inhabitants and Indians."

But a French hunter was sent in to tell the inhabitants to "be tranquil," and they obeyed. Clark's men infiltrated the town so quietly that when they opened fire on the fort Col. Hamilton thought that some drunks were shooting off their weapons. But accurate rifle fire wounded several of the British regulars and kept them from manning the fort's artillery pieces. Still, Hamilton had 79 men in the garrison and a supply party coming down the Wabash might be able to rally Indian support. Clark needed a quick surrender, and again he had recourse to psychological warfare.

The heavy firing convinced Hamilton that he was greatly outnumbered. While negotiations were underway on February 24 the Americans intercepted a party that was returning from a raid with scalps and captives. "I had now a fair opportunity of making an impression on the Indians," Clark explained, ". . . that of convincing them that Governor Hamilton could not give them that protection that he had made them to believe he could."

So, while four of the captives sang their death songs, they were tomahawked in sight of the garrison and their bodies tossed into the river. This grisly execution profoundly affected the British commander, and after some haggling Hamilton accepted terms that saved his pride but amounted to unconditional surrender. His French militiamen were sent home, the approaching supply boats were captured and the spoils divided, and on March 8 Col. Hamilton and 26 other prisoners began the long march to captivity in Virginia.

George Rogers Clark had reached the height of his career. Here was a young man, not yet 27 years old, who had performed brilliantly under the most adverse conditions and had not lost a man to enemy action. With these initial accomplishments, one might have expected his career to soar to ever greater achievements. Instead, he operated for a time on a sort of plateau, his main goal always just beyond his reach; then his career crashed, and the remainder of his life was a bitter anticlimax to his early successes.

Clark's immediate objective was poorly defended Detroit, which could be taken, he believed, with 500 men. But he could not muster that number before June when promised reinforcements were expected. Supplies remained a problem, and when the government's credit was exhausted Clark personally endorsed notes - for which he then became personally responsible.

When the reinforcements arrived, there were only 30 men from Kentucky instead of the 300 expected; and only 150 instead of the 500 John Montgomery had promised to bring from Virginia. By July; 1779 the bitterly disappointed Clark admitted that he would have to postpone his scheme. He scattered his forces among several Illinois towns, then returned to Louisville where he made his headquarters for the rest of the war.

Living on Corn Island had greatly complicated hunting, and the settlers and troops left there had moved to the south shore of the Ohio in late 1778 or early 1779. A fort some 100 x 200 feet was constructed near the foot of what was later 12th Street. Clark spent some of his time in the fall of 1779 drawing up plans for the future city of Louisville. He placed great emphasis upon what he called "public lands," that is parks. Unfortunately, his plans were not adopted. Soon after his arrival at the Falls Clark sent out invitations to the interior settlements for a celebration party. Some would-be guests were turned back by the appearance of Indians, but the James Harrods opened the dance in the largest room in the fort, and the rum and sugar Clark had brought back from the French towns kept the party going for several days. Such interludes, while welcome, were rare, for Clark still dreamed of taking Detroit.

Many factors combined to thwart Clark's plans during the last years of the war. His success in the Northwest had eased some of the danger to the Kentucky settlements; men were less willing to volunteer for extended tours of duty. The flood of immigrants that gave Kentucky an estimated 20,000 inhabitants by the summer of 1780 added to the sense of security, although Indian raids continued to be costly. The probability that Virginia would relinquish her claims north of the Ohio to the central government decreased the concern of the Old Dominion for that region. People were weary of the demands of the war, and the economic situation was grim; should money be lavished on enterprises that no longer seemed urgent? And there was jealousy of Clark and his success, along with efforts to hold him responsible for failing to attain all his objectives or to prevent Indians from crossing the Ohio.

When the British attempted to re-take the western country from the United States and Spain in 1780 Clark reacted with his usual vigor. He reached Cahokia with reinforcements the day before the Indians attacked and they were beaten off. Then Clark rushed back to Louisville before Captain Henry Bird got there with some whites, several hundred Indians, and a few cannon that could render log stockades useless. Bird's Indians paid Clark a supreme compliment; hearing that Clark was already at the Falls, they refused to go there. They caused extensive damage in the Licking River area where they

took both Ruddle's and Martin's stations, but when Clark was reported on his way there, Bird withdrew across the Ohio.

In order to mount a retaliatory raid Clark closed the Harrodsburg land office and ordered the seizure of horses and weapons of anyone who tried to flee eastward. By the end of July he had assembled 1,000 men at the mouth of Licking River. He built a small fort across the Ohio River to store supplies and protect the ill or injured men who had to remain behind. Then he led the volunteers against the Shawnees, destroying crops and villages and routing their warriors at a sharp little engagement at Piqua. But he could not pin them down for a decisive battle, and his men demanded to return home.

The Indians were not suppressed, and Clark still dreamed of Detroit, and he returned to Virginia in the fall of 1780 in another effort to secure the force that would permit success. Clark received his commission as a Virginia brigadier general, and he was promised assistance by both General Washington and Governor Jefferson.

A crisis was fast developing in the Illinois towns as the supply situation became critical. Kaskaskia was abandoned in February, 1781, and the Vincennes commander wrote Clark that "I cannot keep Garrison any longer without some speedy relief from you. My Men have been 15 days upon half allowance; there is plenty of provisions here, but not credit." Fort Jefferson on the Mississippi River beat off a Chickasaw attack, but then the fort had to be abandoned on June 8. When the garrison reached Louisville, they found the situation there almost as bad. As Col. Montgomery wrote Clark, ". . . not a mouthful for the troops to eat, nor money to purchase it with . . . . the credit of the government is bare . . . . unless supplies soon arrive I fear the consequences will be fatal."

But the British invasion of Virginia held troops there; Patrick Henry in an Assembly speech revealed Clark's plan to invade the Northwest; few Pennsylvanians would enlist in a Virginia cause; and the expedition began to collapse before it ever got underway. In August, 1781George Rogers Clark led 400 men down the Ohio; he had expected to have 2,000. Joseph Brant, the Mohawk chief, then killed or captured 106 of 107 Pennsylvania rangers on their way down the Ohio to join Clark. When he consulted with the Kentucky militia colonel s at the Falls, a disappointed Clark admitted that "The forces ordered by government to be furnished by your country, added to those I have, are not sufficient to execute anything of moment. . . ."

Clark was deeply hurt by a resolution of the Virginia Assembly "to call to account certain officers and others in the western country" for "waste and misapplication of public property." Assuming that it was aimed at him, he offered his resignation to Governor Benjamin Harrison and warned him that Kentucky would fall unless strong measures were taken.

The resignation was refused, but the Assembly, influenced by such defensive minded Kentuckians as John Todd and Benjamin Logan, prohibited the proposed Detroit expedition. Instead, Clark was ordered to erect forts at the Kentucky and Licking rivers and Limestone Creek. Six gunboats were to be built to patrol the Ohio crossings. But the needed supplies and men were not provided, the scheme could not be completed, and Clark was then blamed for not obeying the order. He was also severely criticized by such people as Daniel Boone for keeping his headquarters at Fort Nelson, constructed at Louisville in 1782, instead of moving eastward to protect the interior

settlements against the Shawnees. Such critics ignored Clark's responsibility for the Illinois country as well as the Kentucky settlements. Louisville was a central point from which he could move quickly in either direction as needed.

The Revolution may have ended in Virginia in the autumn of 1781, but in Kentucky 1782 was "The Year of Blood." The British were unable to supply their red allies as they had in the past, but by February Simon Girty, Alexander McKee and William Caldwell were leading as many as 1,000 Indians against the Kentucky settlements.

Clark was so feared that many Indians refused to invade any part of Kentucky where he was reported to be. But he could not be everywhere, even in rumor, and some 300 Indians attacked Bryan's Station on August 16-17, 1782. They retreated leisurely to the Blue Licks where they ambushed their rash pursuers, killed nearly 60, and routed the rest. It was Kentucky's worst disaster of the war.

This debacle allowed Clark to organize his last expedition of the Revolution against the Indians. General William Irvine was to lead 1,200 men into the Sandusky area while Clark punished the Shawnees. If all went well -perhaps Detroit would be within reach at last. But Irvine was ordered not to go, and it was Clark who started 1,050 men toward the Indian country on November 4, 1782. Scouts and strong flanking par- ties guarded against ambushes, and Indian homes, corn and other supplies were destroyed in the Miami River area, but Clark was again unable to pin the Indians down to a decisive battle. They were, however, willing to begin peace talks that brought a temporary peace to the frontier.

Before leaving on the expedition, Clark renewed his request to resign, and on December 19, 1782 Governor Harrison wrote that he would accept it. In May, 1783 Clark went to Virginia to try to settle his tangled accounts, and on July 2 Harrison relieved Clark of his command. In doing so, the Governor graciously and belatedly extended "my thanks and those of my Council for the very great and singular services you have rendered your Country in wrestling so great and valuable a territory out of the hands of the British enemy, repelling the attacks of their Savage allies and carrying on successful war in the Heart of their Country." The war had finally ended for thirty year old George Rogers Clark.

Clark conducted his war on a small scale, in a large territory, and no one can say how he would have performed under other conditions. He possessed a keen sense of both strategy and tactics; no one saw more clearly than he what should be done in the Northwest and how it could be accomplished. He was an inspirational leader and a master of applied psychology. His diplomatic skills were displayed time and again as he dealt with the Indians, French and Spanish who complicated life for him. He was, in my opinion, one of the most capable American commanders of the Revolution.

He did not dislodge the British from the Great Lakes, and he was never able to move beyond that target to even more ambitious goals. Indian raids continued against Kentucky, and in the early 1790s the Indian problem became critical in the Northwest Territory. His success in the Illinois country was probably not the major reason why that area became a part of the United States in the peace treaty.

But if the British had held the Northwest in 1781, they would have been much more likely to have retained it or created an Indian territory under their influence. Clark probably saved the Kentucky settlements from destruction, and his success made possible the flow of immigrants that led to statehood in another decade.

He failed; it seems to me, primarily because of inadequate, support. Washington and Congress reckoned his plight to be a Virginia concern, Virginia assigned a low priority to her citizens beyond the mountains, and the westerners could not be persuaded to volunteer in sufficient numbers for long enough periods of time to enable Clark to undertake the campaign that might have accomplished his goals.

In the years just after the War of 1812 travelers who passed by Locust Grove, an estate a few miles from Louisville, might have seen the wrecked hulk of a man slumped in a wheelchair. His wasted body hinted of once great strength, but the vacant eyes gave no indication of the active mind and powerful personality that had once inhabited that body. Paralyzed, a leg amputated, his speech lost, his mind almost gone, George Rogers Clark lingered in a twilight existence until death released him on February 13, 1818. As he waited for that day, as he gazed outward from Locust Grove, was there ever a moment when he remembered things as they were? Did Clark still dream of Detroit.

81st General Council Meeting
General Society of Colonial Wars
Cincinnati, Ohio
May 6, 1977