

# The Expedition of General George Rogers Clark

By Jeannette Holland Austin



battle of Ft. Vincennes in Indiana

George Rogers Clark was born on November 19, 1752 in Charlottesville, Virginia, near the home of Thomas Jefferson. During 1756, after the outbreak of the French and Indian War, the family moved away from the frontier and settled in Caroline County, Virginia where Clark became a surveyer of lands in Kentucky along the Ohio River.

In 1774, when Clark was preparing to lead an expedition of ninety men down the Ohio River, war broke out with the American Indians. Four years later, General Clark received guns from Virginia for his expedition to the Mississippi River and his regiment descended the Ohio River with 150 men.

Clark sent messages to Harrodsburg to raise a company to join them at the Falls. Although, Kentucky sent only about 80 men, 250 soldiers mustered on June 24th at the Falls. On the 28th, Clark and his company passed the Falls of Ohio and landed on a creek about three leagues below the Tennessee River.

They had no mules or horses, so carried their own luggage and equipment into the town of Kaskaskia, but it took four days. Upon reaching Kaskaskia,

they successfully disarmed the inhabitants, but put ten to twelve men thought to be dangerous in irons. "Kaskaskia was a handsome village, and contained a considerable number of very decent respectable inhabitants, both male and female, extremely polite and agreeable; they were principally French."

Meanwhile, on July 5, 1778, Captain Joseph Bowman was detached to a party of men on horseback to capture the village of Cohn, which was about twenty leagues from Kaskaskia. The inhabitants (like those at Kaskaskia) immediately took the oath of allegiance to the State of Virginia. When it was known that tribes of Indians were in the vicinity, General Clark visited with the chief of Cohn, Battisse, and attended the conferences of the chiefs. Battisse first arose and made a speech about the history of his fathers and of the Sacks for hundreds of years back. Meanwhile, at the post of St. Vincennes on the banks of the Washbash River, there was a Lieutenant who had left a few troops behind while he went to Detroit. As a result, 500 British, Canadian and Indians descended the Wabash to St. Vincennes, and, capturing Captain Helm, held him as a prisoner of war. Then, these troops were sent by Governor Hamilton from Detroit to attack Clark at Kaskaskia. Also, the governor posted a \$30,000 reward to the person or persons who would capture Clark. Thus, many plans were in the works to entrap Clark. When Clark heard that Governor Hamilton had taken St. Vincennes, he decided to dislodge him before the governor obtained re-enforcements. So it was that in the cold of winter, Clark manned a boat of forty men with a piece of cannon down the Mississippi River to the Wabash and Ohio Rivers to attack the town. It was evening when the first fire was given. Governor Hamilton, Captain Holsh and several gentlemen were playing a game of Whist. Holsh jumped to his feet and exclaimed "By G--, that's Clark!" About 10:00 Clark demanded a surrender of the fort. Three flags were flown and the terms agreed upon. Hamilton surrendered a strong defensive garrison. Then Clark received word that Mr. DeJean was descending the Wabash from Detroit with stores for Vincennes. So he quickly dispatched Captain

Helms to help surprise DeJean and his party in the night, and took eighty-five men.

All that the State of Virginia gave him was 150,000 acres of land as well as some small tracts of land for his soldiers. This is why, on February 2, 1793, Clark offered his services to Edmond-Charles Genet, the controversial ambassador of revolutionary France, hoping to earn money to maintain his estate. Clark proposed to Genet that, with French financial support, he could lead an expedition which would drive the Spanish from the Mississippi Valley.

Then he organized a campaign to seize New Madrid, St. Louis, Natchez, and New Orleans with the assistance of his old comrades, Benjamin Logan and John Montgomery, and some support from Governor Isaac Shelby of Kentucky. But it cost Clark \$4,680 of his own money for supplies.

Disaster struck when President Washington issued a proclamation in 1794 forbidding Americans from violating U. S. neutrality and threatened to dispatch General Anthony Wayne to Fort Massac to stop the expedition.

As a result, the French government recalled Genet and revoked the commissions he granted to the Americans for the war against Spain. It became impossible for Clark to continue holding his land and Clark, once the largest landholder in the Northwest Territory, was left with only a small plot of land in Clarksville. During the next two decades the embittered Clark struggled with alcohol abuse, resentful that Virginia had failed to finance his projects.

Then, in 1809 Clark suffered a severe stroke and fell into an fireplace. His leg was so severely burned that it was necessary to amputate that limb. Afterwards, the disabled Clark resided in the home of his brother-in-law, Major William Groghan near Louisville, Kentucky.

Soon after a second stroke, Clark died at Locust Grove on February 13, 1818 and was buried at Locust Grove Cemetery two days later. In his funeral

oration, Judge John Rowan succinctly summed up the stature and importance of George Rogers Clark during the critical years on the Trans-Appalachian frontier:

"The mighty oak of the forest has fallen, and now the scrub oaks sprout all around." Later, on October 29, 1869, his body was exhumed with other members of the family and reburied Cave Hill Cemetery in Louisville.

Footnote: Having financed most of his military campaigns on borrowed funds, Clark, unable to get recompensed from Virginia or the United States Congress. lived the rest of his life in debt.

Source: The Southern Recorder, Milledgeville, Georgia. November, 1826.