

REVOLUTIONARY

WAR

IN

THE

WEST

Compiled

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The Revolutionary War in the West

In 2026, as you all know, we are celebrating the 250th anniversary of the adoption and signing of the Declaration of Independence. While this Declaration proclaimed the independence of the North American colonies from Britain, the events and successful conclusion of the Revolutionary War accomplished that independence. The Revolutionary War actually started in April 1775 when Britain had sent troops to Massachusetts Bay Colony to put down unrest and to rein in a population that had been rubbed raw by British rule, taxes, and law enforcement. This British military presence and tactics helped convince a significant segment of the American population to shift from hope of reconciliation with Britain to a commitment to independence and formation of a new nation. What led to the events of 1775-1776?

We may think the terms “forever wars” and “world war” are relatively recent terms. However, in the eighty years preceding the American Revolutionary War there were four lengthy wars that affected the English colonies on the eastern coast of North America. All of these wars were primarily fought among the great nations of Europe and involved their colonies around the world. The fourth of these wars, the French and Indian War (1754-1763) set the stage and led directly to the Revolutionary War. In 1754, Britain controlled the Atlantic seaboard of North America which was becoming settled by English colonists. France possessed the vast area west and north of the Appalachian Mountains, the St. Lawrence River Valley, the Great Lakes, and the Ohio, Mississippi, and Missouri River Valleys. French areas were used primarily as sources of trading materials...furs, minerals, etc. The entire area was home to various tribes of Native Americans, primarily hunters with some agricultural production areas. French settlements were clustered in a widely separated regions: St. Lawrence Valley of Canada, villages in the St. Louis area, and New Orleans. English colonists were beginning to move westward over the Appalachians into areas with Native American populations that had co-existed more easily with the French claimants of their lands. English Americans intended to permanently settle and to own and develop the lands where they moved. The result was conflict, both with the French and with Native American tribes. Conflict led to all-out war by

1754. Both Britain and France sent their professional military forces and men of both sets of colonies joined these forces. Both Britain and France made alliances with Indian tribes that brought existing tribal enmity and rivalries into attacks and counter-attacks. The result.....the British won. In 1764 France lost all its North American possessions with Canada and the land east of the Mississippi river going to Britain and the lands west of the Mississippi going to Spain.

An aggravating legacy of the French and Indian War were taxes imposed by the British government to pay for the cost of the war. The British monarch thought that the war was fought primarily to ensure the safety of English colonists, especially those who were moving westward into wilderness territories west of the Appalachian Mountains, and that the colonists should help to pay for the war effort. And to prevent a replay, the king established The Line of 1763 along the ridgeline of the Appalachians and issued a proclamation forbidding English colonial settlers from moving west of that line.

The Line of 1763 Proclamation was already disconnected from reality. As early as 1750, a group of investors in Virginia had organized as the Loyal Land Company to purchase a vast tract in southeast Kentucky. One investor, Dr. Thomas Walker (ancestor of some in the Sturgeon & Allied Families Association), led an expedition to claim and explore what they had bought. By 1770, American settlers led by Daniel Boone and others were streaming into this western wildness, establishing permanent stockade settlements in central Kentucky. In 1773, the Corn Island settlement was started on an island alongside the south bank of the Ohio River just above the Falls of the Ohio...the first settlement in the Louisville area.

The stage is set for our look at George Rogers Clark, the young hero of the Revolutionary War in the West.

George Rogers Clark was born in 1752 near Charlottesville in Albemarle County then on the western fringe of settlement. He was the second son in a family that eventually numbered 10 siblings. The family moved eastward to more settled area for safety during the French and Indian War. But the heart of George Rogers Clark was always directed toward the West. He was trained by his grandfather as a surveyor. At age 19, he was already at work surveying in the Kanawha River

region of Virginia (now West Virginia) and learning the area's natural history and the lore and customs of its various tribes. In 1774, as a captain in the Virginia militia, he led troops involved in Lord Dunmore's War against the Shawnee tribe which threatened settlers on the Kanawha frontier. By 1776, he was in Kentucky proper and was named as one of two delegates to travel to Williamsburg with a settlers' petition to organize Virginia's formal governmental control of Kentucky. Governor Patrick Henry and the Virginia General Assembly organized the County of Kentucky. At age 24, George Rogers Clark returned to Kentucky as a major in Kentucky County militia bringing 500 lbs. of gunpowder to defend its settlements.

By 1777, the Revolutionary War in the West intensified. British military headquarters at Fort Detroit had provided weapons to Indian tribal allies and encouraged those tribes to attack American settlers who had moved onto lands previously part of tribal domains. Virginia and other colonies (now states) were occupied with combating British troops in their own areas, so the militia members of Kentucky County under Clark's leadership were on their own. Clark devised a strategy to seize British outposts north of the Ohio River to destroy British influence among their Indian allies. In December 1777, Clark presented this plan to Governor Patrick Henry and requested permission to lead a secret expedition to capture British outposts at the villages of Kaskaskia, Cahokia, and Vincennes in the Illinois Country. Governor Henry commissioned Clark as Lt. Colonel in the Illinois Regiment of Virginia State Forces and authorized him to raise and train troops for this secret mission. Volunteers came from Virginia, Pennsylvania, and North Carolina. The regiment gathered first at Redstone in Pennsylvania near Fort Pitt and moved along rivers to Fort Pitt, then down the Ohio River in stages, taking on supplies and training for the mission. They reached the Falls of the Ohio on May 27, 1778, and paused a month at Corn Island to complete their preparations. The total group included 10 to 20 families in ten boats that remained on Corn Island where a blockhouse, stockade, and cabins were built as a support and communications base for the Illinois Regiment expedition. This enlargement of the Corn Island settlement is recognized as the founding of Louisville with George Rogers Clark as leading founder.

In July 1778, Clark led 175 men of the Illinois Regiment from the Falls of the Ohio to Fort Massac on the north side of the Ohio near its junction with the Tennessee River. They marched overland to Kaskaskia on the east bank of the Mississippi about sixty miles south of St. Louis. Kaskaskia and Cahokia, both about eighty years old, were the only fortified settlements along that sixty mile stretch of French-settled agricultural area of the Mississippi Valley. Britain had not established a military presence on the east bank of the Mississippi, so Clark's force captured the area without firing a shot. Clark opened a cordial, co-operative relationship with Spanish lieutenant-governor Don Fernando de Leyba who controlled St. Louis and the west bank. Clark also met and became romantically attracted to de Leyba's sister, Terese. Clark immediately marched his regiment eastward across the Illinois Country to the French village of Vincennes on the Wabash River where the British garrison at Fort Sackville surrendered in August, seemingly successfully completing Clark's "secret expedition". On the way back to Cahokia/St. Louis, Clark's forces captured several other villages and British outpost forts.

But surprise! British lieutenant-governor Henry Harrison moved southward from headquarters at Fort Detroit with a small force that recaptured Fort Sackville in December 1778. Harrison's probable plan was to winter over at Vincennes, then move against the Americans at Cahokia and Kaskaskia. But Clark planned another surprise attack on Fort Sackville/Vincennes. On February 6, 1779, the 170 men of the Illinois Regiment left Kaskaskia on an arduous overland trek, encountering melting snow, ice, and cold rain, wading waist-deep through flooded rivers and creeks. The regiment reached Vincennes on February 23 and besieged Fort Sackville. After just two days, Henry Harrison surrendered the British garrison and himself to the Americans. This winter expedition was George Rogers Clark's most significant military achievement and became the basis for his reputation as an early American military hero. This success was celebrated by General Washington and the news was used to encourage France in the rightness of its alliance with the American side. Washington also recognized that Clark's achievement had been gained without support from the regular army, either in manpower or funding. Clark's ultimate plan appears to have been to move his

forces up the Wabash and portage over to rivers that led to Fort Detroit and to capture this British headquarters. But funds never became available and his men wanted to return to the Ohio River area to protect their homes and families in Kentucky from Indian attacks. Nevertheless, when peace talks eventually started, Clark's victories in the Illinois Country insured that the new American nation would stretch to the Great Lakes in the north and to the Mississippi River on the west. Britain would only retain Canada on the north side of the Great Lakes.

George Rogers Clark was involved in two other activities in the West in 1780.

To counter the continuing British threat to the Mississippi River, Governor Thomas Jefferson ordered the building of an American fort on the east bank of the Mississippi River just south of the Ohio River junction. For this activity, Jefferson called on three significant people with roots in his home territory around Charlottesville, Albemarle County, Virginia. George Rogers Clark was ordered to send/lead his militia forces to help build and man this fort, to be named Fort Jefferson. Dr. Thomas Walker (a Sturgeon ancestor) and Daniel Smith, an early settler in Nashville, Tennessee, were requested to survey proposed locations to be sure that the fort would be within American boundaries. Treaties with the Cherokee nation in Tennessee had set its northern boundary. Dr. Walker and Smith had previously set and surveyed the Virginia-Tennessee border and Walker had worked on the Kentucky-Tennessee border, so they had the knowledge and tools to calculate where the extended border would hit the Mississippi River. In the course of organizing the Fort Jefferson effort, Clark, Walker, and Smith moved groups at different or the same times between the Falls of the Ohio, Fort Massac, Kaskaskia, and the Fort Jefferson site. Clark and Walker may have made a side trip up to meet with Spanish forces in St. Louis.

The need for installations like Fort Jefferson became apparent even as it was under construction. One prong of a British grand scheme to end and win the 'world war' of which the Revolutionary War was part, was to send a force of allied Indian tribes under fur trader leadership southward down the Mississippi from Prairie du Chien, Wisconsin, to capture Spanish St. Louis and Natchez. Hearing rumors that this force was on the way, Governor de Lauro moved to fortify the

village of St. Louis. Work started feverishly to dig an earthen trench/moat around the wooden houses and fur trading buildings with a stone tower at each corner. There was only time to build one tower which was called Fort San Carlos. Cannons were mounted atop the forty feet tall tower. Other cannons were set along the trenches to rake across attackers. French settler militia moved up from Ste. Genevieve to aid in the defense of St. Louis. George Rogers Clark arrived at the fortified American garrison across the river, but did not have time to help in St. Louis itself before the Indian/British force arrived on May 25. The Indian force attacked and killed French settlers working in fields outside St. Louis village. They also moved against the American fort at Cahokia but were dissuaded from a full attack because of the strength of the fort and the reputation of George Rogers Clark and his American regiment as frontier fighters. Spanish forces and the French militia remained behind their trench surrounding St. Louis. Governor de Leyba denied permission for the militia to make sorties outside the trench. There was disagreement on the Indian/British side about continuing their attack with some tribal groups refusing to fight. The attackers retreated northward back to their canoes, burning farm buildings and field crops and killing livestock. This Battle of Fort San Carlos (or the Battle of St. Louis) was the last major military engagement of the Revolutionary War in the West. And, though he may not have realized it at age 28, the heroic life of George Rogers Clark entered a slow, downward decline.

The militia returned to the Kentucky area and Clark did lead expeditions to counter Indian attacks from Ohio toward the end of the war and afterwards. He did not return to St. Louis. His romantic involvement with Teresa de Leyba ended. Though details of this romance are sketchy at best (and it may never have existed at all), Teresa returned to New Orleans (and maybe to Spain) with other female members of the de Leyba family, and eventually entered an Ursuline convent as a nun. George Rogers Clark never married and he lived alone for the next 27 years. His military credentials and performance were questioned. He was charged with being drunk on the job and denied opportunity to refute these charges and other rumors. He was denied command positions. His financial position deteriorated. Due to failure of Virginia to underwrite the total expenses

of his expeditions, Clark used his own funds and solicited loans from friends and others. Though he received grants of land, supposedly as compensation for his wartime expenses, he had no funds to develop that land. The land gradually slipped away, much of it becoming the City of Clarksville under the ownership of others. Clark lived alone in his cabin on the north river bank at the Falls of the Ohio for many years. He still had some connections and was respected as an explorer/surveyor. In the 1780's, Thomas Jefferson was already thinking about an expedition to explore in detail the lands west of the Mississippi River clear to the Pacific Ocean, none of which was then part of the United States. Jefferson approached George Rogers Clark about leading such an enterprise. Clark declined then, primarily due to his disastrous financial situation. When Jefferson became President, he asked Clark again about leading an expedition. This time George Rogers Clark suggested that Jefferson ask his (much) younger brother William Clark, who accepted. William Clark shared leadership of this Corps of Discovery, with Meriwether Lewis, Jefferson's private secretary. The Corps of Discovery became known to history as the Lewis & Clark Expedition. When this expedition-in-formation sailed down the Ohio, they stopped at Clark's cabin and George Rogers Clark assisted with recruiting men and gathering supplies, a process that was completed at the official start of the expedition at St. Louis. In 1806, the returning expedition passed through Louisville on their way to Washington, D.C. They were feted with a big family celebration at Locust Grove, home of William and Lucy Clark Croghan (Lucy was sister of George Rogers and William Clark). This was probably George Rogers Clark's "last day in the sun". Alcoholism and series of strokes took their toll. In an unsteady moment alone in his cabin, Clark fell into the fireplace, receiving burns on his leg that led to amputation. In 1809, George Rogers Clark, an invalid and indigent, was taken in by his sister Lucy and lived his final nine years at Locust Grove.... a sad end to an heroic life.