

**READING**

# GEORGE ROGERS CLARK: THE AMERICAN REVOLUTION IN ILLINOIS

## CHAPTER 4

**G**eorge Rogers Clark, the daring leader of American revolutionary forces in Illinois, has been called “the George Washington of the West.” Facing savage Indians and British soldiers in a thinly populated and distant land made his goal of winning the Illinois Country for the United States seem at times impossible. Clark was not a person who gave up easily. His courage and determination won him a hero’s place in Illinois history. Clark was born on November 19, 1752. Fascinated by the woods as a boy, Clark was only twenty years old when he left home in Virginia to survey and explore the fertile and game filled valleys and mountains of Kentucky. That same year (1772) he settled on the Kentucky side of the Ohio River.

### **The British and Indians Attack Settlers**

Indian trouble had been a recurring problem for the Kentucky settlers. When the American Revolution began, the British armed and aroused the Indians against the settlers. George Rogers Clark, already a commissioned major in the militia, undertook the defense of Kentucky. Throughout the spring and summer of 1777, the Indians repeatedly attacked the Kentucky settlements. Clark noted in his diary that the settlers seemed to spend all their time defending themselves, caring for the wounded and burying the dead. Kentucky was a buffer zone, taking the brunt of the Indian attacks protecting the more settled and embattled east from the Indians. Clark reasoned that Kentucky should do more than defend itself; the Kentuckians should attack the source of the trouble.

### **Clark Spies on the British**

In April of 1777, he sent spies into the Illinois Country, and they returned with the information that the British, operating out of Detroit, were rewarding the Indians with presents when they attacked the Kentucky settlements. The spies also reported that the British were so confident of their hold on Illinois that no regular troops were garrisoned in the settled villages. However, quantities of military supplies were stored there. This was precisely what Clark had hoped to hear. He re-

solved to launch an offensive and worked out a daring plan for the capture of Kaskaskia, Cahokia and Vincennes.

### **The Raid on Kaskaskia and Cahokia**

That winter the state of Virginia agreed to finance Clark’s raid into Illinois. He was authorized to raise seven companies of frontiersmen, but their mission remained a closely guarded secret. It took months to raise even a few hundred men. Clark did not tell his men their true mission until they reached the Falls of the Ohio River where Louisville, Kentucky, now stands. After he had outlined his plan, fifty of his men decided the raid could not succeed and left the party. Clark’s original plan had called for a force of 500 men; in the summer of 1778 he found his force reduced to 178 fighting men. Clark descended the Ohio to Fort Massac, where he and his men landed and hid their canoes. With this small force they then struck out overland through the uncharted wilderness and arrived on the banks of the Kaskaskia River on July 4, 1778. That same night, they moved into the village, caught it by total surprise and captured Kaskaskia without firing a shot. Clark then urged the village inhabitants to declare their loyalty to the fight for liberty. The majority of the villagers agreed to take an oath of allegiance to the new American government. Clark then moved on to Cahokia, which he captured almost as easily.

### **The Capture of Vincennes**

The raid had been an astounding success, but if Illinois was to be held, he still had to capture Vincennes, an important trade center connecting Detroit and the Mississippi. The British had been completely unprepared for an American attack, and Clark believed that Vincennes would fall as easily. Before attacking, however, he sent an officer accompanied by a priest to Vincennes, urging that the populace declare their loyalty to the American cause. When they agreed, Clark was on the verge of a magnificent victory.

Now Clark had to face the Indians. His small force was further reduced when some of the Kentuckians, still fearful for the safety of their fami-

lies, returned home. The purpose of his raid had been to provide such a show of force that the Indians would lose faith in their British allies. The Indians had been astounded that the American forces could penetrate so far into their territory without meeting any resistance. Clark now used a bold bluff—he convinced both the French and the Indians that his was only an advance party of a large force that was camped at the Falls of the Ohio River merely awaiting his instructions to attack. His bluff worked: the Indians capitulated, but the victory in Illinois was not yet complete.

### **The British Retake Vincennes**

Clark received word of American defeats in the East. Any hope he had of getting additional men from Virginia vanished. Soon the British in Detroit launched a counter-offensive, Vincennes was recaptured and the enemy seemed ready to overwhelm Clark's small force. It was in such a situation, when all appeared lost, that Clark's greatness came through. He would not defend Kaskaskia; instead, he would attack Vincennes. Adding a few French volunteers to his little group of raiders, he started the march from Kaskaskia to Vincennes. Clark's journey was an ordeal, even for the hearty backwoodsmen. Heavy rains and melting snow flooded the trails, making them all but impassable. The men had chosen to live off the land rather than carry heavy provisions, but game was scarce.

Clark's forces arrived at the outskirts of Vincennes hungry and exhausted. They had eaten only one full meal in five days, but they were determined to avenge the Indian attacks on their settlements, which the British had encouraged.

### **The "Hairbuyer" Lieutenant-Governor Hamilton**

The commander of the British forces in Fort Sackville, which defended Vincennes, was Lieutenant-Governor Henry Hamilton from Detroit. He was nicknamed the "Hairbuyer" because it was said that he paid Indians for the scalps of white settlers which they brought in. No British officer was more hated by Westerners than was Hamilton.

Hamilton was a careful and cautious man. He had brought only a small force of British regulars with him, but he also had a large body of Indian allies, perhaps as many as six or seven hundred braves. Since it was already December, Hamilton decided it was too late for any further campaigning. He sent his Indian warriors home and prepared to spend the winter in Fort Sackville. The Indians were to return in the early spring, and Hamilton

would attack Clark at that time. In the meantime, he was ripe for an American attack.

Clark realized that if the French residents of Vincennes joined the British regulars, his attack would be a failure. But Clark, the master, sent a secret messenger to the villagers warning them either to go to the British fort and fight, or keep out of his way. His reputation was so great that the villagers not only did not go to the fort, they did not even tell the British that Clark had arrived.

At dusk on February 23, 1779, the British commander heard gunfire. Thinking it was one of his Indian raiding parties returning, he paid little heed, but he did order his men to their posts. Then one of his men fell with a bullet in the chest. The siege of Fort Sackville had begun. Clark and his men kept up continual gunfire for eighteen hours, though they still had neither rested nor eaten after their long hard journey from Kaskaskia.

### **Clark Conquers Fort Sackville**

On the morning of February 24, Clark dispatched a flag of truce to the fort. This lull in the fighting gave Clark's men their first chance for a meal in nearly a week, but Hamilton, the "Hairbuyer," was not yet ready to surrender. He hoped that if he could hold out long enough, reinforcements would surely arrive. Just then a returning party of the hated Indian raiders was captured by Clark and his men on the edge of town. To impress the British with the hopelessness of the situation, the Indians, who carried the scalps of their white victims, were tomahawked to death at the very gates of the fort, in full view of its British occupants. It was a bloody affair, but the act had the desired effect. The British had had enough. At 10:00 a.m. on the morning of the 25th, Hamilton and his men marched out of the fort as prisoners of war.

Clark had triumphed in a seemingly impossible situation. His victory was made even sweeter when he surprised British reinforcements who were making their way to Fort Sackville with additional supplies. He captured the entire relief party and all of its valuable supplies. The British hold on Illinois had been broken.

### **The Indians Declare a Truce**

When Clark recaptured Vincennes, he not only defeated the British, but he also won over the remainder of the Illinois Indian tribes. He had accomplished his mission; the Indians would, at least for the time being, no longer raid the Kentucky settlements. Still Clark believed that if the Illinois

Country was to be made truly safe, he would have to capture Fort Detroit.

To take Detroit, Clark needed a striking force of at least 300 men. While he busily tried to gather the necessary troops and supplies, the British began their preparations for the defense. If Clark had had enough men and had been able to attack immediately, he might have won another great victory. Time, however, was on the side of the British. Every delay on the part of Clark allowed the British to prepare for his coming. For the first time

since leaving Kentucky, Clark had to content himself with defending his position instead of attacking.

Throughout the rest of the Revolutionary War, Clark urged an attack upon Detroit, but politics, a lack of soldiers, and insufficient funds prevented this. In spite of his later setbacks, Clark's contribution to the Revolutionary War was vital. He saved the Illinois Country for the United States, and without him Illinois might now be part of Canada.