

West Fork River Men and Clark's Campaign of 1781

Settlers on the headwaters of the Monongahela River knew in 1776 that formal war with Great Britain had ended the lull in Indian harassment which followed Lewis' 1774 victory at Point Pleasant. Early in the spring of 1777 Patrick Henry, governor of Virginia, issued a proclamation advising "the inhabitants of the frontier to retire into the interior as soon as practicable." General Hand sent an express from Fort Pitt to tell frontiersmen in the Monongahela Valley to abandon their settlements and "forthwith seek shelter in some contiguous fortress or retire east of the mountains."¹ In June 1777 British General Henry Hamilton, stationed at Detroit, received word from London to arm the Indians, use them as allies, and encourage their raids on the settlements.

The frontiersmen in the West Fork River area did not follow the instructions to retire east of the mountains. They stayed in their settlements depending on the vigilance of scouting parties and the walls of their forts for protection during the year that would be remembered by them as "the bloody year of the three sevens." They expected no help from the Virginia Assembly other than the customary per diem payment to militiamen in the settlements when on assignment as scouts to watch for incursions by Indian raiders.

The surprise of a military effort having occurred in the West, as well as the news of a victory, caused the great rejoicing everywhere on the Kentucky-Virginia frontier when the people heard that George Rogers Clark had taken Kaskaskia July 4-5, 1778, and that Vincennes had surrendered on July 14, 1778. Clark had traveled to Williamsburg, Virginia, the November before and had suggested the campaign which the governor's council thought so risky that even though the members gave Clark permission for the project, they did not tell the Virginia Assembly of their decision. After returning to Kentucky in the spring of 1778, Clark did not reveal to the members of his 178-man army the nature of the campaign until just before they started into the Illinois country.²

Sometime after July 1778 the people who lived in the bowl-shaped piece of land surrounded by Elk Creek just before it flows into the West Fork of the Monongahela River held a meeting at which Samuel Shinn suggested that the settlement be named "Clarksburg" in honor of the hero of the frontier.³

Frontiersmen continued to "fort up" during the years following Clark's campaign into the Illinois country. They dared not leave their posts in the forts to answer the eight calls by the Virginia Assembly for troops.⁴ Their eyes were turned toward Detroit, the hive from which the Indians swarmed to molest the settlements. There could be no peace on the frontier until Detroit was in the hands of the Americans. When the men in the West Fork and Tygart rivers areas heard late in 1780 that the Virginia Assembly had authorized a preliminary 75,000 pounds⁵ to finance 300 boats⁶ to be built on the Monongahela River and that a supply officer had purchased from Monongahela farmers thousands of pounds of grain to be ground into flour for military forces to march with Clark to Detroit, the men who lived on the upper reaches of the Monongahela River decided to march with their hero.

They may have suspected that Clark had problems when they were notified early in 1781 that the rendezvous with Clark at Fort Pitt had been postponed from spring until summer. Although many provisions could not be supplied until June⁷, Clark's grandiose plans were most seriously threatened by the undependable militia.⁸ Clark was in Winchester, Virginia, February 10 on the road from Richmond to Fort Pitt and "extremely anxious to get to Pittsburg."⁹ He learned by talking to militia officers in two Virginia counties near

1. Alexander Scott Withers, Chronicles of Border Warfare, pp. 216-7.

2. John Bakeless, Background to Glory, pp. 42, 55-60, 121.

3. Clarksburg Telegram, Clarksburg, W. Va., January 8, 1876. Although "Clarksburg" was not officially established as a town by the Virginia Assembly until 1785, the commissioners assigned by the Virginia General Assembly to register land claimed by the settlers stated in April 1781 that they were sitting at John Evans' house in "Clarksburg." The original land records, which were at the home of the county surveyor when the Monongalia County Courthouse burned in 1795, can be examined in 1976 in the Monongalia County Courthouse in Morgantown, West Virginia: Virginia, Land Office, Report of Commissioners on Adjustment of Claims to Unpatented Lands, Monongalia, Yohogania, Ohio Counties, Virginia.

4. Virgil A. Lewis, The Soldierly of West Virginia, pp. 39-42.

5. By January 1781 the quartermaster had spent 500,000 pounds and was asking for 300,000 pounds more in devaluated currency. Bakeless, p. 273.

6. November 27, 1780: "300 boats, each to carry 6 men for a 3-month cruise, wanted at 20 pounds each. Timber and plank reasonable... $\frac{1}{2}$ workmen, 8 or 9 boatwrights, tools and 30 lb. nails can be furnished that side of mountain." Virginia, Calendar of State Papers, 1:391.

7. Will Harrison, commissioned to supply foodstuffs, wrote Governor Jefferson from near Fort Pitt on February 6, 1781, that he could not be ready June 1. Jefferson had ordered pickled or dried beef which was scarce. Harrison hoped to have beef "ready to drive when vegetation will permit," but he would be short salt, for Jefferson ordered only flour and beef." Ibid., p. 493.

8. "It is vain to trust the militia...Many have returned home in three or four days' time." American Archives, 9:1065. "These, among 10,000 other instances, might be adduced to show the disadvantages of short enlistments and little dependence upon militia in times of real danger." George Washington in Ibid., p. 1083.

9. Bakeless, p. 273.

Winchester that recruiting would not be easy even though Governor Jefferson had sent orders for the officers to mobilize the militia in the two counties and to march with Clark. Berkeley and Hampshire counties refused to send the 700 men requested. The Berkeley County colonel complained that the "Falls of the Ohio were too far away", that the men would suffer any punishment rather than go. Colonel Joseph Crockett wrote Governor Jefferson from Shepherdstown, Virginia, that he was equipping the regiment which was naked for want of linen; that Colonel Clark had informed him linen would be at Winchester but Crockett did not know where to apply for shoes which his men were "entirely without."¹⁰

The names of just nine of the more than one hundred volunteers who reported at Nutter's Fort near Clarksburg on June 20, 1781, have been found.¹¹ William Lowther was in command as major; George Jackson was captain; William White, 1st lieutenant; Jacob Westfall, 2d lieutenant; Hezekiah Davisson, ensign¹²; John Maughan, adjutant¹³; Christopher Nutter¹⁴, Jacob Bush, and Alexander West, militiamen.¹⁵ The men descended the West Fork River to Morgantown, where they came under the command of Zachariah Morgan and on to the New Store¹⁶, where they came under the command of Colonel Crockett. "The object of this expedition as this applicant [for pension] was informed by General Clark was to march to Detroit which was in the possession of the British, and if possible to take that place. The two regiments took water on board of boats at the New Store the 20th of July and descended the river and landed four miles below Fort Pitt and continued there for some days collecting provisions."¹⁷

Clark had suffered a severe blow when Colonel David Broadhead, commandant at Fort Pitt, refused to assign him Colonel George Gibson and a regiment as had been requested by Governor Jefferson and General Washington.¹⁸ Clark had failed to heal the split into factions by the militia's petty local rivalries, the envy their leaders felt of Clark himself, and the never-ending jealousies and bickerings between the Virginians and the Pennsylvanians.¹⁹ Worst of all, Clark learned that Patrick Henry had pushed through the Virginia Assembly a resolution authorizing Governor Jefferson "to put a stop to the Expedition lately ordered against Detroit, and to take all necessary steps for disposing of, or applying to other uses, the stores and provisions laid in for that purpose." Jefferson did not act on the authorization, but the damage was done. Henry, who harbored personal hostility for Jefferson, had let the military secret slip and had given the Greenbrier County militia an excuse to leave Fort Pitt and start home.²⁰ Clark left for Wheeling, on the Ohio River, where he expected to find 1,000 troops from beyond the mountains. They did not arrive.²¹ On August 4 Clark wrote Governor Jefferson from Wheeling: "I have relinquished my expectation relative to the plans heretofore and shall drop down the river with the men I have, amounting to about 400 consisting of Crockett's regiment, Craig's artillery, volunteers, etc...If I find it out of my power to do anything of greatest importance, I shall dispose of public stores to the greatest advantage. I feel for the dreadful consequences that will ensue throughout the frontier if nothing is done. This country already begins to suspect it and to invite me to execute some plans of their own, but I shall no longer trust them."²² Men were deserting so fast that Clark knew he could not wait for Archibald Lochry, the one Pennsylvanian who had agreed to go with the 107 men he had raised in Westmoreland County, Pennsylvania, at his own expense.²³ Clark left word for Lochry to follow downstream.

10. Virginia, Calendar of State Papers, 1:461, 572.

11. Eight of the nine names were in records of applications for pensions from the federal government for which militia veterans were not eligible until 1832. After a period of fifty-one years, it is probable that most of the militiamen involved never applied for pensions.

12. Virginia (W. Va.), Harrison County, Court, Order Book 1832-1837, pp. 158-9.

13. Lucullus Virgil McWhorter, The Border Settlers of Northwestern Virginia, p. 113.

14. Virginia (W. Va.), Harrison County, Court, Order Book 1832-1837, pp. 158-9.

15. McWhorter, p. 144.

16. Present-day Elizabeth, Pennsylvania.

17. Jacob Westfall in McWhorter, p. 113.

18. William Hayden English, Conquest of the Country Northwest of the River Ohio, 1778-1783, 2:712.

19. George Croghan stated: "The reason so few went with him [Clark] from this place [Fort Pitt] is owing to the dispute that subsists here between the Virginians and the Pennsylvanians respecting the true bounds of the latter. Being a Virginian, the General was opposed by most noted men here." English, 2:731.

20. Bakeless, p. 275.

21. "...at Fort Henry...he expected to be joined by one thousand militia from east of the mountains. Only two hundred of this troop materialized, and half of these deserted after drawing a supply of guns, blankets, and clothing." McWhorter, p. 143.

22. English, 2:718-21. Major William Croghan to Colonel William Davies August 18, 1781: "Clarke set out with 400 men a few days ago. He expected 1500; disappointed. He had provisions and boats for 2000 men. People this side of mountains are not sensible of the advantage they could reap [from the campaign]. Few days pass without the Indians doing mischief. I fear general will be disappointed in getting men down the river. If so, the State has been thrown into expense without advantage. The few men the general has is not more than necessary to guard the boats and stores he has with him." Virginia, Calendar of State Papers, 2:345.

23. Bakeless, p. 276.

Clark stopped for a few days on an island below the mouth of the Little Kanawha River²⁴ to wait for Lochry. "Several men deserted and a council was held and the idea of marching to Detroit was abandoned as the force was considered by us to be insufficient. It was then determined by the general and officers to continue down the river to Kentucky and raise an additional force of Kentucky militia and march out against some of the Indian towns."²⁵

Not all the officers agreed with Clark, who had chosen a poor place to stop because the frontiersmen from the West Fork River area could follow the trail up the Little Kanawha River to its headwaters and be home in a few hours. "During their march down the Ohio River many of the volunteers run off. Major Lowther, finding his company very much weakened--- they had fallen below his expectation---and in consequence of which Major Lowther threw up his commission and Clark accepted of it and he [Lowther] returned home."²⁶ Clark was forced to leave the island immediately to get his men farther from their homes.²⁷ He fastened on a limb overhanging the river orders for Lochry to follow and moved downstream.

Clark, expecting Lochry soon to join him, arrived with the men who stayed with him at the falls of the Ohio near Louisville, Kentucky, on August 19, 1781. Poor Lochry! The British, with full knowledge of Clark's plans²⁸, had Indians watching the flotilla. When British Intelligence learned that Clark and Lochry were separated, Indians attacked Lochry on August 24 while he and his men pastured horses along the Ohio side of the stream. The attack wiped out Lochry and more than one half of the men from Westmoreland County, Pennsylvania. It finished Clark's campaign.²⁹

Accepting that the onset of winter and a shortage of troops---even with the offer of 500 of the 760-man strength of the militia of three newly organized Kentucky counties³⁰--- would prevent the long trek to Detroit, Clark wanted to carry a counteroffensive into the Indian country while he had boats, supplies, and a fairly large force. No doubt it was during deliberations over the wisdom of the foray that Clark asked for a volunteer to visit Vincennes "to ascertain the temper of the French and Indians. Col. [George] Jackson alone volunteered, and with two Indian guides passed through a wilderness of some considerable extent to that place, where by the assistance of a guide, he learned that it would be unsafe to show himself, which was exemplified in the death of Maj. Hardin sent on a similar mission afterwards."³¹ The militia officers met with Clark, decided against an expedition into the Indian country, and recommended another attempt on Detroit in the spring of 1782.

The company of 104 men from the headwaters of the Monongahela River commanded by Captain George Jackson was discharged by Clark late in 1781. Except for the sick, who stayed in Louisville until spring, the men marched under the command of Jackson from the falls of the Ohio River to Nutter's Fort, where they had volunteered.³²

In December 1781 the Virginia Assembly passed a resolution which forbade the state to support a march to Detroit. Bitterly did Brigadier General Clark reflect that, with only five hundred more men, he would have taken Detroit long before that, thereby providing complete security for most of the western frontier.³³

The effort of the men from the headwaters of the Monongahela River contributed more to the American Revolution than has been generally recognized. The campaign of 1781 did more than postpone for that year a decisive British movement against the frontier. Historians believe that Clark's most important service during the years 1777-1783 was helping to force Great Britain into financial exhaustion. The enormous outlays to the Indians in the West for arms, powder, lead, food, and liquor---required to hold Clark's forces in abeyance---was a great burden on the British treasury. Diplomatic correspondence leading to the peace following the conflict show that Great Britain lost the war by sheer lack of money, a shortage caused chiefly by expensive Indian warfare in the West.³⁴

24. Present-day Parkersburg, West Virginia.

25. Jacob Westfall in McWhorter, p. 114.

26. Elias F. Lowther in McWhorter, p. 248.

27. At the time a high percentage of Clark's men must have been from the Upper Monongahela River Valley because "When the troops reached the falls [of the Ohio near Louisville, Ky.], the company commanded by Captain Jackson numbered one hundred and four rank and file." Virginia (W. Va.), Harrison County, Court, Order Book, 1832-1837, pp. 158-9.

28. "Joseph Brant---otherwise the Mohawk chief, Thayandanagea---was sent west to lead Indians against Clark's fleet, on its way to Kentucky. With a white man's civilian and military education, plus all the wiles of the wilderness, Brant was a formidable opponent. Aiding him were the veteran partisan leaders, Alexander McKee, A. Thompson, George Girty, and probably Simon Girty." Bakeless, p. 277.

29. English, 2:725, 730. "At a Harrison County Court held on the 22d day of September 1784: 'This day John Stackhouse, a Militia Soldier came into court and proved to the satisfaction of the same that he was captivated at Col. Archibald Lockrees [Lochry's] defeat on the Ohio River in the year 1781, and that he was captivated on the first day of August in said year, and returned to the mouth of Grave Creek on the east side of the Ohio on the 16th day of July 1784.'" Henry Haymond, History of Harrison County, p. 152. Stackhouse must have been mistaken as to the date of Lochry's defeat which occurred August 24, 1781.

30. Theodore Calvin Pease and Marguerite Jenison Pease, George Rogers Clark and the Revolution in Illinois 1763-1787, p. 69.

31. Obituary of George Jackson. Hunter Bennett Papers, Clarksburg, West Virginia.

32. Virginia (W. Va.), Harrison County, Court, Order Book 1832-1837, pp. 158-9.

33. Bakeless, p. 280.

34. Temple Bodley, George Rogers Clark, p. 188.

Bibliography

- American Archives...prepared and published under authority of an Act of Congress.
[Washington, D. C.: 1837-1853].
- Bakeless, John. Background to Glory; the Life of George Rogers Clark. New York: J. B. Lippincott, 1957.
- Bodley, Temple. George Rogers Clark. New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1926.
- Clarksburg Telegram, Clarksburg, West Virginia.
- English, William Hayden. Conquest of the Country Northwest of the River Ohio, 1778-1783, and Life of Gen. George Rogers Clark. 2 vols. Indianapolis, Indiana: Bowen-Merrill, 1896.
- Harrison County, Virginia (West Virginia). Court, Clarksburg, West Virginia. Order Book 1832-1837.
- Haymond, Henry. History of Harrison County [West Virginia]...from the Early Days of Northwestern Virginia to the Present. Morgantown, West Virginia: Acme Publishing Company [c1910].
- [Jackson, George]. "Obituary". Hunter Bennett Papers, Clarksburg, West Virginia.
- Lewis, Virgil A. The Soldiery of West Virginia. Charleston, West Virginia: Department of Archives and History, State of West Virginia, 1911. (Reprinted Baltimore Maryland: Genealogical Publishing Co., Inc., 1972).
- McWhorter, Lucullus Virgil. The Border Settlers of Northwestern Virginia from 1768 to 1795. Hamilton, Ohio: Republican Publishing Co., 1915. (Reprinted Richwood, West Virginia: Jim Comstock, 1973).
- Pease, Theodore Calvin, and Pease, Marguerite Jenison. George Rogers Clark and the Revolution in Illinois, 1763-1787. Published by the Illinois State Historical Society. Springfield, Illinois: Jefferson Printing and Stationery Company, 1929.
- Virginia. Calendar of Virginia State Papers and Other Manuscripts, 1652-1781, Preserved in the Capitol at Richmond. Arranged and edited by Wm. P. Palmer...11 vols. Richmond, Virginia: R. F. Walker, Superintendent of Public Printing [W. H. Wade, Printer] 1875-1893.
- Virginia. Land Office. Report of Commissioners on Adjustment of Claims to Unpatented Lands, Monongalia, Yohogania, Ohio Counties, Virginia. Original in Monongalia County Courthouse, Morgantown, West Virginia.
- Withers, Alexander Scott. Chronicles of Border Warfare, or a History of the Settlement by the Whites of North-Western Virginia, and of the Indian Wars and Massacres in that Section of the State with Reflections, Anecdotes, Etc. A new edition edited and annotated by Reuben Gold Thwaites...Cincinnati: Stewart & Kidd Company, c1895.