



FATHER *of the* MIDWEST

George Rogers Clark's daring attacks helped America expand even as it fought for freedom

By Jeff Walter

IN HIS PRIME, George Rogers Clark stood tall as a paragon of the rugged American frontiersman: a fearless and imposing warrior with red hair and a silver tongue.

While the Colonies fought for independence along the Atlantic Seaboard, farther west Clark and his “Long Knives” (a nickname for Virginians) boldly confronted the British and the American Indians. Their efforts made life safer for settlers and nearly doubled the size of the original 13 Colonies, adding what would eventually become the states of Ohio, Kentucky, Indiana, Illinois and Michigan.

THE WILD SIDE

Clark was born November 19, 1752, on a 410-acre farm in Albemarle County, Va., near present-day Charlottesville. He was the second of 10 children born to John and Ann Rogers Clark. A young Thomas Jefferson and his family lived at nearby Shadwell plantation.

In 1754, fighting erupted in Virginia as a precursor to the French and Indian War. The skirmishes brought the threat of American Indian attacks, so the family decided to move away from the dangerous frontier to a 170-acre farm on the Rappahannock River left to them by John Clark's uncle.

When George was 11, he and older brother Jonathan went to live with maternal grandfather John Rogers and attend school. George—unruly and “not very apt at learning,” the schoolmaster said—lasted less than a year at school. But he became a voracious reader of history and geography, and a keen student of human psychology, writes William R. Nester in *George Rogers Clark: 'I Glory in War'* (University of Oklahoma Press, 2012).

Clark learned surveying from his grandfather and by age 19 was ready to explore. Wild, beautiful Kentucky was a coveted land, and in 1772 Clark made his first excursion there. For six weeks, he and two companions fished, hunted, canoed, explored and camped. Over the next couple of years Clark made money and amassed influence by surveying land for would-be settlers.

FIGHTING AMERICAN INDIANS

Lord Dunmore, Virginia's royal governor, was striving to extend Virginia's holdings from the Appalachian Mountains

to the Mississippi River. But American Indians, angered by encroachment on their hunting grounds, were stepping up their attacks on isolated white settlements.

In 1774, Lord Dunmore's War broke out between the Virginia Colony and the Shawnee and Mingo American Indians. That May, Clark became a captain in the Virginia Militia. He participated in clashes with American Indians before a truce was declared in October.

After that war, Clark continued surveying land in Kentucky.

CONQUERING THE MIDWEST

By spring 1775, with the Revolutionary War intensifying in the East, friction was growing in Kentucky over an illegal treaty between North Carolina land speculator Richard Henderson and the Cherokee. In June 1776, Clark and John Gabriel Jones were chosen to deliver a petition from Kentucky's Harrodsburg settlement via the perilous Wilderness Road to the Virginia legislature in Williamsburg asking that the colony extend its boundaries to include Kentucky. Patrick Henry, Virginia's first post-Colonial governor, created Kentucky County and gave Clark 500 pounds of gunpowder to defend it.

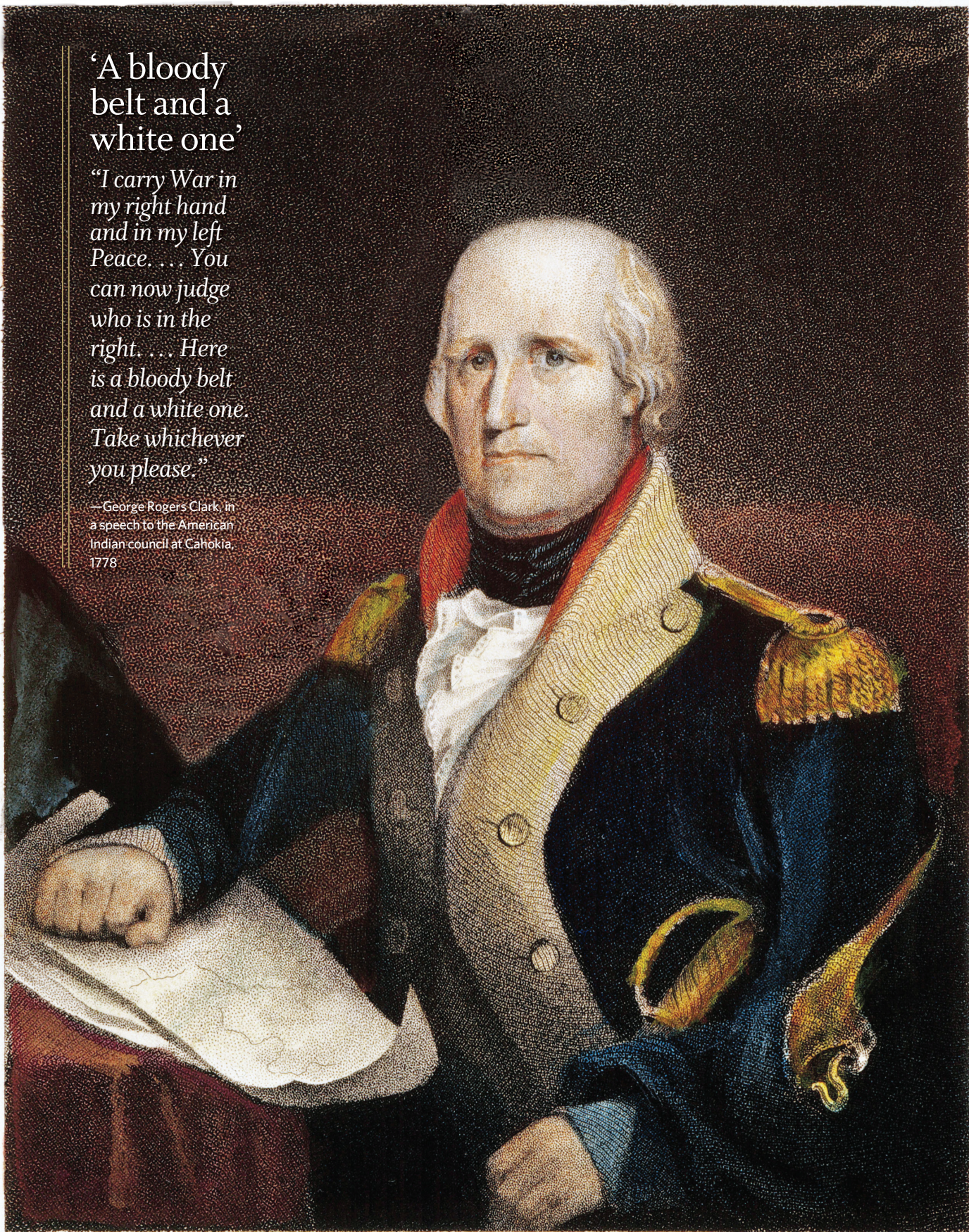
In Clark's own account, written from 1789 to 1791 (*The Conquest of the Illinois*, originally published by the Lakeside Press as *The Memoirs*, 1920; Shawnee Classics edition published by Southern Illinois University Press, 2001), he reasoned that what was good for Kentucky was good for the United States. With the British stirring up the American Indians and arming them to attack white settlements, the best strategy would be to go on the offensive and cut them off from the British.

In October 1777, he returned to Williamsburg to sell Henry on his plan, which was too risky to share with the Virginia General Assembly. Clark returned to Kentucky with both a stated mission—defending the territory—and far more daring secret orders: He was told to capture the British command centers in the Illinois country—Kaskaskia on the Mississippi River, Vincennes on the Wabash, and Cahokia up the Mississippi near the mouth of the Missouri. The ultimate goal was to capture Fort Detroit, commanded by the notorious British general Henry Hamilton, known as “the Hair-Buyer”

‘A bloody
belt and a
white one’

“I carry War in
my right hand
and in my left
Peace. . . . You
can now judge
who is in the
right. . . . Here
is a bloody belt
and a white one.
Take whichever
you please.”

—George Rogers Clark, in
a speech to the American
Indian council at Cahokia,
1778



because he paid American Indians for American scalps.

On June 1, 1778, Clark and about 200 soldiers arrived at the Falls of the Ohio, across from present-day Louisville. Though they were to have been met by four additional companies, they found only part of a company from Tennessee and a small group from Kentucky. Yet Clark resolved to continue. After revealing the secret plan, Clark stripped his force down to the 175 toughest men. They began training exercises on nearby Corn Island.

Spies returned with news: Kaskaskia, occupied primarily by French settlers dissatisfied with British rule, could not withstand an attack.

On June 24, 1778, Clark and his men loaded into flatboats and descended the rapids of the Ohio. On July 4 they reached Kaskaskia and entered undetected. After barging into the home of the governor, Philippe de Rastel Rocheblave, the troops spent the night whooping and banging on doors, terrorizing the town into submission without firing a shot.

Unaware that France had become an open U.S. ally, the French townspeople expected the worst from the feared Long Knives. But Clark debriefed them and soon won the trust of the town priest, Father Pierre Gibault. Battle would not be necessary to take Cahokia, 60 miles away. Captain John Bowman, Gibault and a group of French inhabitants rode into Cahokia, whose townspeople swore their loyalty to the Americans.

Clark won American Indians' loyalty through diplomacy as well as threats of violence. He built relationships with French and Spanish officials. Reconnaissance gleaned information on Vincennes. In July 1778, French residents there took control of the vacant Fort Sackville, which American general Leonard Helm was sent to command. But the Hair-Buyer easily captured the fort that December.

Clark's subsequent recapture of Fort Sackville won him his greatest glory. In early February 1779, he left Kaskaskia with about 170 Kentucky militiamen and French volunteers, who undertook an 18-day march through the chilling waters of the Mississippi and nearly 200 miles of flooded land to Vincennes.

On February 23, 1779, Clark's troops arrived near Fort Sackville, where they fooled those inside the fort into thinking their numbers were three times greater. After two days of gunfire volleys, proposals and counterproposals, the violence escalated. When an American Indian party returned from a hunting trip, the Americans shot and killed six of them and captured several others. They then executed six captives within sight of the fort, horrifying Hamilton into surrendering.



This line engraving based on Frederick C. Yohn's painting shows Clark's men marching through flooded land to Vincennes in February 1779.

No American was lost, and the Hair-Buyer was imprisoned for two years in Williamsburg.

LATER YEARS

Clark never captured Detroit. The Treaty of Paris of 1783 ended the Revolutionary War, and in 1784 the Clark family moved to a farm outside Louisville. Around this time, Clark turned down an offer from Thomas Jefferson to lead a round-trip expedition to the Pacific Ocean and back. Two decades later, his younger brother William instead would team up with Meriwether Lewis for that historic journey.

In the early days of the Northwest Indian War, which began in 1785, Clark was forced to resign from his militia leadership after being accused of drunkenness on duty. Having borrowed to finance most of his military campaigns, he felt insufficiently repaid. After Clark tried to hire himself out to fight for the French army against Spain, President John Adams ordered his arrest on sedition charges. Clark lived his last years in increasing poverty and obscurity, bitter at the government and, after a stroke and the loss of a leg, crippled.

In 1809 he moved to Locust Grove, his sister Lucy and brother-in-law Major William Croghan's home outside Louisville. (See page 22 for more on the historic home.) According to the Indiana Historical Bureau, after more than 20 years of petitions to the Virginia General Assembly for funds he expended during the Illinois campaign, Clark was finally recognized for his Revolutionary service in 1812 when Virginia awarded him a ceremonial sword and a lifetime annual pension of \$400. After another stroke, Clark died at Locust Grove on February 13, 1818. 🗿