

## This Day in History... November 19, 1752

### Happy Birthday George Rogers Clark

On November 19, 1752, George Rogers Clark was born in Albemarle County, Virginia. A hero of the American Revolution, he's most famous for his captures of Kaskaskia, Vincennes, and Fort Sackville.

Rogers was the second of ten children, five of whom would go on to become officers in the Revolutionary War. His youngest brother William was too young to fight in the war, but would gain fame as a leader of the Lewis and Clark Expedition.

When Clark was young, he lived with his grandfather in King and Queen County, Virginia. There, he went to Donald Robertson's school and met James Madison and John Taylor. Robertson taught them geography, mathematics, and several languages, including Latin. Clark left home when he was 19 to go on his first surveying trip to western Virginia. He spent two years surveying the Kanawha River and became acquainted with the Native Americans there.

After the French and Indian War, the British occupied the majority of the trans-Appalachian frontier. They soon passed the Proclamation of 1763, making the settlement of land west of the Appalachian Mountains illegal for colonists. The British responded harshly to settlers who ignored this decree, sending Native American war parties after trespassers.

In Kentucky, George Rogers Clark led a militia to defend the people against these attacks. However, Clark soon decided he would rather cut the attacks off at their British source. Clark developed a plan of action and brought it to the governor of Virginia, Patrick Henry, who quickly approved it. By the summer of 1778, Clark and his army of militiamen were on their way down the Ohio River.



*Henry stamp from the Liberty Series*

The men traveled over 120 miles before they reached and captured the British outposts at Kaskaskia and Cahokia. During this time, the population of these settlements was primarily French, and they were not very fond of the British after the French and Indian War. Most were happy to join forces with Clark to take on their common enemy. With the help of Father Pierre Gibault and Dr. Jean Baptiste Laffont, Clark soon gained support from the outpost at Vincennes as well. The only French settlements Clark could not sway were Detroit and a few other northern posts.

By late summer, British Lieutenant Governor Henry Hamilton had heard of Clark's successes at Kaskaskia, Cahokia, and Vincennes. His determination to reclaim these outposts caused him to leave Detroit with a mixed army of British soldiers, French volunteer militiamen, and Native American warriors. Clark's second-in-command, Captain Leonard Helm, held Vincennes, known as Fort Sackville, at the time of Hamilton's attack. Helm's men were few in number and were quickly forced to turn over Fort Sackville to Hamilton's army on December 17. The French settlers, who had previously supported Clark, quickly abandoned him when they saw the strength of Hamilton's army.

It was often a custom in 18th century warfare for armies to send their soldiers home during the winter. British Lieutenant Governor Henry Hamilton followed this custom, which sealed the fate of Fort Sackville.

The British forces at Fort Sackville captured merchant and American sympathizer Francis Vigo when he didn't realize the Americans no longer controlled Vincennes. Luckily, he was



*Stamp pictures Frederick C. Yohn's Surrender of Fort Sackville.*

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soon released and was able to provide valuable intelligence to Clark about the state of Fort Sackville – including their small numbers.

Armed with this new information, Clark decided to make the 18-day journey from Kaskaskia to Vincennes. He and his 170-man army trudged through the freezing weather of the Illinois countryside before arriving at Fort Sackville on February 23, 1779. French occupants who had previously helped Clark were happy to join him once again. They provided his army with food and dry gunpowder upon their arrival.

Clark and his forces soon began their assault on the British troops at Fort Sackville. The Americans surrounded the fort with many battle flags, giving Hamilton the impression they had far greater numbers than they did. They employed several more tactics that were designed to confuse, frighten, and disorient the British and force them to surrender. Finally, on February 25, 1779, Clark was victorious. Henry Hamilton surrendered Fort Sackville, and he and his army laid down their weapons in front of the Americans. After their victory, Clark's army raised an American flag above Fort Sackville and fired 13 celebratory cannon shots. Clark renamed the fort for Virginia Governor Patrick Henry, who had been the one to approve his plan of attack.

The following year, Clark sought to capture Detroit from the British. Despite multiple attempts, his attacks failed and he was reprimanded. Trying to preserve his reputation, Clark led a group of men into Ohio and destroyed the Native American villages along the Great Miami River – this was the last major expedition during the Revolutionary War.

By war's end, Clark became the highest-ranking military officer in the northwest. Many historians say that the reason the British gave the entire Northwest Territory to the United States in the 1783 Treaty of Paris was thanks to Clark's victories there – this earned him the nickname "Conqueror of the Old Northwest," and the title of American hero. Clark accomplished all of this by the time he was 30 years old.

In 1783, Thomas Jefferson began thinking about exploring the West. In a letter to George Rogers Clark, Jefferson discussed his ideas and asked Clark if he would consider leading an expedition. Clark said no, but offered Jefferson advice on interacting with local Native American tribes. In later correspondences, Clark recommended his youngest brother, William, to lead the expedition as he was equally knowledgeable in Native American politics – Clark said that William was "well qualified almost for any business." After the war, Clark worked as superintendent-surveyor for Virginia war veterans. He then helped negotiate a pair of treaties with Native Americans, but raids on American settlements continued. Clark then led a 1,200-man expedition to end the raids. The expedition failed and one soldier accused Clark of being drunk on duty. This one event tarnished his reputation and Clark would never lead men into battle again.

Clark moved to Indiana where he received 150,000 acres of land for his wartime service, but he didn't have the money to develop it. Over time, he sold, gave away, or lost most of this land to debtors and worked a gristmill on a small plot.

In 1809, Clark had a serious stroke and was forced to move in with his sister and brother-in-law near Louisville, Kentucky. Upon his death on February 13, 1818, he was buried in a local cemetery.



*Stamp pictures a Gutzon Borglum statue titled Colonization of the West.*



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