



Walkers Ferry

Scale 3 4 5 Miles

Alton

Wood

Bellefontaine

MISSOURI RIVER

MISSISSIPPI RIVER

MISSISSIPPI

MISSOURI

ST. LOUIS

Cahokia R.

To Edwardsville

To Carlyle & Vincennes

Cahokia

Prairie des Indes

Vu de Poche or Carondelet

CAHOKIA *and the* TRANS-APPALACHIAN WEST *in the* American Revolution

BY ANDREW COOPERMAN

The American Revolution is typically viewed as primarily an East Coast affair, fought between Americans and their French allies on the one hand, and the British and their German mercenaries on the other. Certainly, the war fought in the East was critical to the creation and survival of the United States. But it was the war fought in the West that was critical to the growth and development of the new republic. In the trans-Appalachian West, Americans fought alongside the Spanish while the British employed warriors from various tribes of First Nations. These armies were much smaller than their eastern counterparts, and so too were the battles that they fought. Nevertheless, in the West as in the East, Americans acting in conjunction with a major European power fought battles that determined the future of the United States and the American people.

One such battle was fought in St. Louis and Cahokia on May 26, 1780, and while the Battle of Fort San Carlos is little known outside this area, it was tremendously

important. For it was at Cahokia that George Rogers Clark and his mixed force of Anglo-American frontiersmen and Illinois French destroyed British plans for a sweep through the Mississippi Valley. It was American military control of the trans-Appalachian West, tenuous though it was, combined with the skill and perseverance of American negotiators in Paris, which enabled the newborn United States to set its western border on the Mississippi River instead of the Appalachian Mountains.¹

Like the battle itself, the importance of the Village of Cahokia to the Patriot cause and the Allied war effort in the West is little known. But it was at Cahokia that Clark negotiated precious months of peace with regional First Nations. It was Cahokia that served as both a shield for defense and a staging area for offense. It was Cahokia that served as the link between the Americans and their Spanish allies. And it was at Cahokia that a trans-Appalachian America was secured.

This 1818 map by John Melish shows St. Louis in the context of Alton, Carondelet, and Cahokia, suggesting the region as Clark knew it. (Image: *Missouri History Museum*)

Cahokia

Cahokia was founded by the Seminary Priests of the Foreign Mission of Quebec in January of 1699. It was the first permanent French settlement in the Mid-Mississippi Valley, and today it is the oldest town on the Mississippi River. The Seminary Priests came to preach the gospel to the Cahokia and Tamaroa Indians, members of the Illiniwek Confederacy. Over time the priests were joined by fur traders and farmers. Close to the mouths of the Missouri and Illinois rivers, Cahokia was an excellent location for the fur trade, and the fertile valley in which it lay, eventually known as the American Bottoms, made Cahokia ideal for farming. Joining the Illiniwek and the French Canadians were enslaved Africans.²

This mixed community suffered a double blow in the mid-1760s. First, as a result of the French and Indian War, France ceded much of her North American empire, including the Illinois Country, in 1763. Cahokia was now a possession of England, the ancient enemy of the Gallic people. England was also a Protestant nation, often hostile to Catholicism and Catholics. The priests sold their property in Cahokia and crossed the Mississippi River to what had become Spanish Upper Louisiana. They were soon followed by many other residents of Cahokia, all seeking refuge in the territory of Catholic Spain.³

The second blow came when Pierre Leclède and Auguste Chouteau founded a fur trading post almost directly across the Mississippi River from Cahokia in February of 1764. St. Louis almost immediately ended Cahokia's role in the fur trade. No longer an active Catholic mission or a center of the fur trade, Cahokia became primarily an agricultural community. This was the town that Capt. Joseph Bowman and his 30 mounted "Big Knives" entered on July 6, 1778.

George Rogers Clark & The Western Campaign

Bowman and his men were part of the small army raised by George Rogers Clark in 1778 to fight the British and their Indian allies primarily in the Mississippi, Wabash, and Ohio River Valleys. Their mission was to seize control of strategic locations and thereby thwart raids into Kentucky. Clark firmly believed that the very survival of the Kentucky settlements depended on offensive rather than defensive action. The war had to be taken to the enemy. But the authority and resources to raise such a force and conduct such a campaign required the consent and assistance of Virginia, of which Kentucky was then a county.⁴

Clark left Kentucky in October of 1777 to appeal to Virginia's government to authorize and support his plan. Clark was persuasive in large measure due to his extensive cache of intelligence and his ability to connect Kentucky's interests with those of the rest of Virginia. Clark had sent spies to the Illinois Country to ascertain British strength, French sentiment, Indian intentions, and Spanish



George Rogers Clark (1752–1818) was the second-oldest brother of explorer and Missouri territorial governor William Clark. As a Brigadier General in the Virginia militia, he was the highest-ranking American officer in the Ohio Valley during the War of Independence. Debts he incurred during the war to supply his troops left his personal finances in ruins for the rest of his life. George Catlin painted this miniature portrait on ivory from an earlier portrait. (Image: Missouri History Museum)

sympathies. What they learned and what Clark reported to the Virginia government was encouraging. British strength was based at Detroit, far to the north of Clark's immediate objectives in the Mississippi and Wabash River Valleys. Further, they "had but little expectation of a visit from us. . . ."⁵ The Illinois French in those areas were at best lukewarm to the British and would likely support the Patriot cause. The Indians were indeed intent on attacking Kentucky. Lastly, the Spanish in St. Louis appeared sympathetic to the Americans despite Spain's official neutrality.⁶

In addition to presenting actionable intelligence, Clark also described how Virginia's more easterly settlements would be exposed to Indian attacks if the Kentucky settlements were destroyed or abandoned. British-sponsored Indian attacks on Kentucky had increased sharply during 1777, and the Virginia county simply did not have the resources to provide for its own defense. If assistance from Williamsburg was not forthcoming, then these western settlements would either be destroyed or abandoned, leaving more easterly settlements open to attack. It was therefore in Virginia's interests to support her most western county in its hour of need.

Clark presented his plan to Governor Patrick Henry

on December 10, 1777. Henry approved the plan, as did Virginia's Council, on January 2, 1778, while the General Assembly authorized the creation of a force "to march against and attack any of our western enemies." Clark was commissioned a lieutenant colonel in the Virginia regular army (as opposed to militia) and given wide-ranging discretion to conduct the campaign as he saw fit.⁷

Clark's first objective was to actually raise an army. Recruiting was somewhat less than successful, and Clark eventually had to settle for a force of only 175 men instead of the 350 to 500 he had originally envisioned. Clark compensated for this by instilling a bit of military discipline and rigorously training what troops he did have. The small army, referred to as the "Big Knives" by the First Nations and the Illinois French, left Corn Island, future site of Louisville, on June 24, 1778. Its first objective was the de facto capitol of the British Illinois Country: Kaskaskia.

Clark captured Kaskaskia on the evening of July 4, 1778. Lacking a sizable army, Clark used speed, surprise, and psychology to subdue the Illinois French residents of the village. Clark's use of psychology to first instill fear of his men and then support for the Patriot cause was masterful. The residents of Kaskaskia quickly and eagerly joined Clark, Virginia, and the United States, taking a loyalty oath on July 5. With Kaskaskia secure, Clark ordered Capt. Bowman and a company of 30 mounted men to ride north and take control of Prairie du Rocher, St. Philippe, and Cahokia.⁸

Bowman and his men, joined by local Illinois French, rode out of Kaskaskia on July 5. Both Prairie du Rocher and St. Philippe fell quickly. Like Clark, Bowman used speed and surprise to good effect. But he also had several residents of Kaskaskia to vouch for his good intentions and the Patriot cause. The residents of both Prairie du Rocher and St. Philippe surrendered quickly and as Bowman wrote, "were willing to comply with any terms I should propose."⁹

So it was that the Americans rode into Cahokia on July 6. According to Bowman, "We rode up to the commander's house and demanded a surrender. He accordingly surrendered himself, likewise all the inhabitants of the place." But whereas the residents of Kaskaskia, Prairie du Rocher, and St. Philippe had surrendered immediately and unconditionally, the people of Cahokia were a bit more difficult for the Big Knives to bend to their will. Bowman continues: "I then demanded of them to take the oath of fidelity to the states, otherwise I should treat them as enemies. They told me they would give me an answer next morning." Adding to Bowman's worries that first night, "there was a man in the town who would call in one hundred and fifty Indians to his assistance and cut me off. This fellow I took care to secure; but we lay upon our arms the whole of the night. . . ." Fortunately, Bowman and his men "took possession of a strong stone house, well fortified for war," and thus had a secure place to lay upon their arms.¹⁰

The next morning, the villagers agreed to take the oath of allegiance to Virginia and the United States, having

made their point by waiting some 12 hours to do so. Even so, according to Clark, "some Individuals said that the Town was given up too tamely. . . ." This was the first, but by no means the last, time that the people of Cahokia demonstrated an independent streak.

As commanding officer in Cahokia, Bowman was responsible for both military and civilian affairs. His first priority was to provide for the defense of the village. The old ramshackle French fort that once stood where Village Hall is today had been quickly replaced by the British in 1765 by the stone rectory which stood in what is now called the Cahokia Wedge. Like his British predecessors, Bowman decided to use this "strong stone house" as a fort. Repairs were made, and the building was christened Fort Bowman, the Revolution's westernmost American fort. In addition, the local militia was mustered into American service.¹² Having settled military matters, Bowman turned to civil affairs. He organized a local court, and he was elected its first president. This court met in the home of Francois Saucier; the building was later purchased by St. Clair County to serve as the first county courthouse in the first county of what became the State of Illinois. The building still stands, and it is open to the public as the Cahokia Courthouse State Historic Site.¹³

Most of the Illinois French had indeed swung to the Patriot cause. Now Clark had to come to terms with the various First Nations of the Mid-Mississippi Valley and surrounding areas. Many of these tribes began to gather at Cahokia to treat with Clark and his Big Knives. A conference between Clark and the Indians at Cahokia was organized in August. The location of these discussions was more than likely near Fort Bowman. Indeed, we know that many Indians were camped at the eastern end of the Cahokia Wedge before and during their meetings with Clark.¹⁴

Regardless of the exact location, the "amazing number" of assembled Indians significantly outnumbered Clark and his small force.¹⁵ Clark once again used psychology to compensate for a lack of troops. The American commander stressed that he was seeking neither peace nor war, but instead desired to know which of the two the Indians intended. He emphasized that he respected them as men and as warriors, and as such expected them to speak truthfully and live by whichever decision they made. But he also emphasized that the British had misled the Indians regarding both the Americans' and London's true intentions. Clark maintained that Americans only wanted the freedom to govern themselves, while the British were using the various tribes to fight their war for them. Clark's credibility was supported by the Spanish. "The friendly correspondence between the Spaniards and ourselves was also much to our advantage, since everything the Indians heard from them was favorable to us," Clark wrote in his memoir.¹⁶

This combination of bluff, bravado, respect, appeal to self interest, and Spanish support worked. Despite a failed attempt by some Indians to kidnap him, Clark's conference was a great success. During the five weeks he spent at Cahokia, the American commander negotiated peace with



The Revolutionary War in the trans-Appalachian West was marked by skirmishes between smaller forces and Native Americans whom the British convinced to side with them against the Americans, as this map suggests. (Image: Albert Bushnell, *The American Nation*, vol. 14, 1906)

at least ten of the First Nations that were represented there. These peace agreements neutralized a large number of potential British recruits.¹⁷ The local Illinois French largely supported the Patriot cause, and now many Indians swore peace and neutrality. Clark's success with these two groups was mirrored by his success with a third important player in the Mid-Mississippi Valley: Spain.

Spanish-American Contacts & Relations

Clark's intelligence from St. Louis proved accurate. Local Spanish officials were indeed sympathetic to Clark and his army. "Our friends, the Spaniards, [did] everything in their power to convince me of their friendship," Clark wrote to a friend.¹⁸ This was especially true of the Spanish Lt. Gov. Fernando de Leyba. Immediately following Bowman's successful occupation of Cahokia, de Leyba sent him a message of congratulations and welcome. He also wrote a similar letter to Clark in Kaskaskia. Clark responded to de Leyba with a July 13 letter in which he expressed his thanks and hope for continued friendship between Americans and Spaniards: "Dear Sir, I received your letter of the 8th Instant and with pleasure read the contents wherein you expressed the deepest sentiments of your real Friendship to me and the American Cause a Friendship that is valuable to us. We have already

Clark was known as the "Hannibal of the West" by the end of the Revolutionary War, and he remained a heroic figure, as is seen by his commemoration on this stamp marking the 150th anniversary of his victory at Vincennes. (Image: U.S. Bureau of Engraving and Printing)





In this 1804 scene of St. Louis as it appeared from Illinois, Fort San Carlos can be seen in the center. (Image: Missouri History Museum)

experienced it and hope to Merit a Continuation thereof.” He was especially grateful for de Leyba’s “treatment to Captain Bowman and Speaches to the Savages in favour of us.”¹⁹

These letters were the beginning of an important working relationship between the Americans and Spanish in the Mid-Mississippi Valley. This relationship was described in an April 23, 1779, letter from de Leyba to Patrick Henry: “From the time that my friend Colonel Clark arrived in this place, fraternal harmony has reigned between the people from the United States and the vassals of his Catholic Majesty.”²⁰ And as Clark wrote in his memoir, “Friendly correspondence which at once commenced between the Spanish officers and ourselves added much to the general tranquility and happiness.”²¹ This friendship was especially true of Clark and de Leyba themselves. Clark was a frequent guest of de Leyba in St. Louis, and a close working relationship between the two was forged by these visits and a continuous correspondence.

Spanish friendship though was also very much based on Spanish interests. Even before Clark and his army arrived in the Illinois Country, the Spanish were considering their options vis-à-vis the British Empire. The British had held Gibraltar since 1713, and they had taken Majorca in the Mediterranean and Florida in North America as a result of the late French and Indian War. Spanish calculations in the Mississippi Valley were but one part of a much larger Spanish strategy. The goal of that strategy was to return those lost lands to Spain and to expand Spain’s position in the Mississippi Valley.²² During the late 1770s and early 1780s, this goal meshed reasonably well with the American goal of independence. Bernardo de Galvez, Spanish Governor of Louisiana, instructed de Leyba to assist Clark as much as possible, but in secret. He also allowed Oliver Pollock, purchasing agent for both the Continental Congress and Virginia in New Orleans, to conduct his operations in Spanish territory freely. Of course, neither act was in keeping with

Spain’s official position of neutrality.²³

Clark’s ultimate goal was to take Detroit. It was the most important British post in the West, and it served as a garrison town, supply depot, and meeting place for British officers and their Indian allies. Clark believed that if he could take Detroit, he could largely neutralize British efforts in the western theater of the war. However, Clark’s plans for a strike at Detroit were subordinated to the need to expel the British from Fort Sackville, which the British had retaken in December of 1778. Clark’s expedition to Vincennes included many Cahokia residents who were eager to remove the British from Fort Sackville, and thus remove a major threat to their community.

Once Vincennes was back in American hands, Clark again planned an expedition against Detroit. As he did before his move into the Illinois Country, Clark sought to gather intelligence on the lands he intended to enter. To that end, he ordered Capt. Godefroy Linctot to take his company of Cahokia volunteers north and scout the Illinois River Valley and beyond. In a June 1779 letter to Linctot, Clark ordered him “to take Charge of a Volunteer Company raised at Cahos and march by way of the Illinois River to the British post Called Ome (on the Miami River) which I make no doubt but that you can easily get possession of by which Means you probably may be safe while you have an opportunity of treating with the Indians in that Quarter. . . .”²⁴ Unfortunately for Clark, the British were planning offensive operations of their own.

Battle of Ft. San Carlos

Spain’s entry into the war in 1779 added another factor to British strategic planning in the trans-Appalachian West. While still a major European power, Spain’s resources in this particular theater of the war were quite limited. Very few troops from the Louisiana Regiment were stationed in Upper Louisiana, leaving defense primarily to local militia, and the Spanish fort at the mouth of the Missouri River was literally falling down.

Further, the Spanish had been assisting Clark and his men since their arrival in 1778, but the official peace between Great Britain and Spain had limited the British response. Now, with war officially declared, the British could reduce if not eliminate Spanish assistance to the rebels, as well as force open the rich fur trade of the Missouri River Valley, long closed to British traders by Spanish regulations.²⁵ The attack on St. Louis and Cahokia was thus part of a multipronged offensive planned to sweep through the Mississippi Valley. The timing could not have been better for the British or worse for the Allies. The British had spent considerable time courting various First Nations, and as a result they could recruit hundreds of warriors to their colors. Conversely, Spanish and American forces in the Mississippi Valley were weak and spread thinly among various forts and settlements. Further, Clark was preoccupied with building Fort Jefferson. Located on the Mississippi River south of the Ohio, Clark planned to concentrate what troops he did have at the new post once it was complete. Both Spanish forces in St. Louis and American forces in Cahokia would have to rely on local Illinois French militia to flesh out their thin ranks.²⁶

Further, the “Hard Winter” of 1779–1780 was the most severe in years. Ice and snow covered much of the country from the Great Lakes to Virginia. Game became scarce, livestock died, and food stores dwindled. Both civilians and soldiers suffered during these bitterly cold months. The only benefit of this severe weather was that it curtailed the military activities of the British and their Indian allies.²⁷

But while the British were relatively quiet in the West, they were shifting their primary focus of the war in the East to the southern states, including Virginia. This meant that the Old Dominion had even fewer resources to send west as it faced British troops in the east. In New Orleans, Oliver Pollock had gone bankrupt trying to supply Clark, and he could no longer support the small American force in the Mississippi Valley. Clark’s army was cold and short of supplies, and desertion was becoming a problem.²⁸

Unhappily for the British, these advantages were negated by one major disadvantage: the loss of the element of surprise. Word of the impending attack reached St. Louis and Cahokia long before the British attack force arrived. This gave the Allies time to prepare their defenses. Col. John Montgomery, American military commander in the Illinois Country, responded to the situation as best he could. In a May 15, 1780, letter to Clark, Montgomery stated that “the Bad nues . . . Compelled Me to March with out loss of Time to the asistance of the inhabetents of Kaho. . . .” Luckily for Montgomery, his small force included many “inhabetents of Kaho [w]ho have Digtinguished them Selves More like Vetrons than ondesiplened men and are Redy to turn out to a man to Go Any Where the[y] are Requested.”²⁹ Despite the skill and reliability of his Cahokia militia, if Montgomery stood a chance of successfully defending the village he would have to be reinforced before the hammer fell. Some help did come in early May when Capt. John Rogers arrived with a company of mounted Virginians. Rogers and his



Col. John Montgomery (c. 1750–1794) served with George Rogers Clark in the Illinois Country in the War of American Independence. Montgomery came by his revolutionary credentials honestly; he was one of the 13 signers of the Fincastle Resolutions, in which the elected representatives of Fincastle County, Virginia Colony, told Virginia’s delegation to the First Continental Congress of their support of breaking with the British Crown in January 1775. (Image: Nashville CivicScope)

men made repairs to Fort Bowman and “Put it in Some Poster of Defence.”³⁰

As the situation worsened, Cahokia appealed to Clark, now a full colonel, for assistance. The Board of Magistrates sent Charles Gratiot, a Swiss-born Cahokia resident and prominent merchant, to present Clark with a letter dated April 11 in which the magistrates explained the village’s desperate situation: “We are on the eve of being attacked in our village by considerable parties of savages and will not be able to work at the cultivation of our fields, if we do not have prompt succor. . . .” Their letter also reflected the “Hard Winter” as they went on to write, “but what afflicts us the most is this, that in case you send us many men, we should not have the provisions which would be necessary for them. . . .”³¹ One of the signatories of this letter was Pierre Martin, whose house still stands in Prairie du Pont just south of Cahokia. In a May 11, 1780, letter to Oliver Pollock, Clark reflected on the gravity of the situation: “The Illenois Settlement are much threatened by the British Gentlemen at Detroit. . . .”³²

On May 15, Montgomery and Rogers crossed the

Mississippi from Cahokia to St. Louis to confer with de Leyba on how to respond to the threat with a combined and coherent strategy. Perhaps reflecting Clark's tactical thinking, Montgomery suggested that the Allies strike first. De Leyba agreed, promising Spanish support for such a campaign. However, the American delay in obtaining boats and provisions for the expedition resulted in the attack on St. Louis and Cahokia occurring before Montgomery was able to move.³³

The British force that attacked Cahokia and St. Louis on May 26, 1780, was composed primarily of warriors from various First Nations and commanded by Emmanuel Hesse. In a February 17, 1780, letter to his superiors, Michilimackinac Lt. Gov. Patrick Sinclair described Hesse as "a Trader and a man of character (formerly in the 60th Regt). . . ."³⁴ Thus Hesse was familiar with Britain's Indian allies and frontier warfare, and he was deemed reliable. The Indians he commanded largely came from the Sauk and Fox, Menominee, Winnebago, and Ojibwe nations. Hesse and his force left Michilimackinac on March 10 and moved south to Prairie du Chien. There Hesse recruited more men. On May 2, Hesse and his force of approximately 1,000 left Prairie du Chien and headed south toward St. Louis and Cahokia.³⁵

Both Montgomery and de Leyba sent dispatches to Clark requesting that he leave Fort Jefferson and march north to aid in the defense of Cahokia and St. Louis. Clark arrived in Cahokia on May 25, and he immediately crossed the Mississippi River to confer with de Leyba in St. Louis. Afterwards, he returned to Cahokia to supervise its defense against approximately 300 warriors led by Jean Marie Ducharme.³⁶

There is precious little in the primary sources which describes the fighting at Cahokia. One such document is a letter from Montgomery to the Honorable Board of Commissioners for the Settlement of Western Accounts dated February 22, 1783. In it, Montgomery gives a brief description of events:

In the Spring of 1780, we were threatened with an Invasion. Genl: Clark [promoted in 1781] being informed of it Hurreyed his departure with a small body of troops to the Falls of the mouth of the Ohio, when he received other expresses from the Spanish Comm'dts and myself, luckily joined me at Cohos, time enough to save the country from Impending ruin, as the Enimy appeared in great force within twenty-four hours after his arrival. Finding that they were likely to be disappointed in their Design, they retired after doing some mischief on the Span'h shore, . . .³⁷

In a September 1780 letter, the Cahokians themselves described how the Indians' "slack manner of making war" resulted in little "carnage in our country."³⁸

While Clark's force and the residents of Cahokia did not suffer the losses that St. Louis did, there were losses nonetheless. According to a July 8, 1780, letter by Sinclair, "The Rebels lost an officer and three men killed at the

Cahokias & five Prisoners."³⁹ With the fighting at Cahokia and St. Louis over, the Indian force retreated north. The Mississippi Valley component of the British offensive collapsed. Soon, the entire offensive ground to a halt. Once it had, Clark again turned his attention to Detroit. Included in his calculations was the possible inclusion of Spanish troops in such a campaign.

Spanish-American Combined Operations

After successfully defending Cahokia, Clark returned to Fort Jefferson. Before leaving, he issued orders to Montgomery to counterattack the Indians who had just attacked Cahokia. Specifically, Montgomery was to pursue the retreating Indians, degrade that force when and where possible, and destroy the primary Sauk and Fox towns. Montgomery's force of approximately 350 men contained Cahokia militia as well as 100 Spanish troops, making this an Allied offensive. The resulting Rock River Expedition illustrated that Spanish and American commanders could cooperate on offensive as well as on defensive operations.⁴⁰

Describing the expedition in a September 21, 1780, letter to Augustin Mottin de la Balme, a former French officer who claimed to act on behalf of the King of France, the "Inhabitants of Cahokia" recounted the beginning of the campaign: "Oh, Colonel Clark, affecting always to desire our public welfare and under pretext of avenging us, soon formed with us conjointly with the Spaniards a party of more than three hundred men to go and attack in their own village the savages who had come to our homes to harass us, and after substituting Colonel Montgomery to command in his place, he soon left us."⁴¹

Montgomery wrote that after receiving his instructions from Clark, he "immediately proceeded to the Business I was order'd and march'd three hundred and fifty men to the Lake open on the Illinois River, and from thence to the Rock River, Destroying the Towns and crops proposed, the Enimy not daring to fight. . . ."⁴²

While Montgomery seemed satisfied with the campaign's outcome, the Cahokians' experience in the Rock River Expedition must have left something to be desired. In the same letter to Mottin de la Balme quoted above, the "Inhabitants of Cahokia" described in detail the shortcomings of the Anglo-American forces: "It is then, well to explain to you, sir, that the Virginians, who never employed any principle of economy, have been the cause by their lack of management and bad conduct, of the non-success of the expedition and that our glorious projects have failed through their fault: for the savages abandoned their nearest villages, where we have been, and we were forced to stop and not push on further, since we had almost no more provisions, powder, balls, which the Virginians had undertaken to furnish us."⁴³ This letter again illustrates the independence of thought and opinion that characterized the residents of Cahokia.

But the unsatisfactory experience with the Rock River campaign, organized and commanded by Americans, did

not deter Cahokians from cooperating with their neighbors to the west. Spanish troops and Cahokia militia cooperated in patrolling the areas north of Cahokia and St. Louis. In August 1780, these patrols repulsed an Indian probe into their area of operations.⁴⁴

Cahokians also joined an expedition led by Mottin de la Balme. The goal of his expedition north was to attack Detroit. If Clark and his Virginians could not achieve this, then perhaps this representative of the former mother country could. Mottin de la Balme and his mixed force of Illinois French and Indians got as far as the headwaters of the Maumee River where the Frenchman and most of his troops were killed by Miami warriors. Before his death, Mottin de la Balme had detached a small force of Cahokia French to attack the British post at St. Joseph, modern-day Niles, Michigan. Their attack was successful, and the post was destroyed. But the Cahokians themselves were then attacked by a party of British traders and Potawatomi. Only three of them returned home.⁴⁵ This defeat moved the residents of Cahokia to strike at St. Joseph once again. However, the new expedition would include their allies from across the river.

In St. Louis, Lt. Gov. Francisco Cruzat, who had replaced the deceased de Leyba in September 1780, authorized a Spanish expedition against St. Joseph. He appointed Capt. Eugenio Pierra (Eugene Pourré) to organize and command this campaign. Pierra raised a mixed force of 65 Spanish militia, 60 Indians, and 20 Cahokia French. Pierra and his men left St. Louis on January 2, 1781, and arrived at St. Joseph on the 12th. Only a few British traders and Indians were present, and the Spanish-led force had no difficulty taking the post. Pierra and his men wasted little time in destroying St. Joseph and returning to St. Louis.⁴⁶ Ominously for the future of Spanish-American relations, Pierra raised the Spanish flag over the post and claimed the region for Spain.

Conclusion

Pierra's action at St. Joseph foreshadowed over a century of Spanish-American rivalry that stretched from the Mississippi Valley to South America.⁴⁷ However, Spanish-American cooperation during the Revolutionary War, especially at the Battle of Fort San Carlos, secured the Northwest Territory and a Mississippi River boundary for the new nation when peace finally came in 1783.

Clark's successful campaign in the trans-Appalachian West was in large part made possible by Spanish assistance and cooperation. Like the French in the East, the Spanish in the West were of critical importance in securing American victory. Spanish supplies, Spanish troops, and Spanish diplomatic support with the Indians not only enabled Clark and his small army to successfully occupy and defend the old French villages of Cahokia, Vincennes, and Kaskaskia, but also to use them as staging areas to strike at the British and their First Nation allies further north.

Of particular importance to Clark was the financing of his army and its operations. This was largely done by

Oliver Pollock in New Orleans. Pollock used his personal wealth as collateral for purchases of Spanish goods made by Virginia and the United States. But it was Pollock's personal connections to Spanish officials, including governors, which made these purchases possible. In an April 22, 1788, letter to Pollock, William Heth stated: "There is no circumstance of which I am more convinced than that the conquest of the Illinois country could not have been maintained by Virginia and that consequently that it would not now form part of the United States if it had not been for your assistance and very liberal advances."⁴⁸ Heth was one of three commissioners appointed to sort out the debts owed to New Orleans merchants contracted by Pollock on behalf of Virginia and Congress. Pollock's personal wealth and connections served Clark and the Patriot cause in the West extremely well.

The role of Cahokia and its people in the western theater of the Revolutionary War was also important. Cahokia was the site of Clark's Indian conference that bought precious months of peace which enabled the Americans to secure their position in the Illinois County. The village's location near St. Louis enabled American commanders to maintain regular contact with their Spanish allies. Officers stationed at Fort Bowman in Cahokia were often in St. Louis conferring with their Spanish counterparts. Cahokia's location also made it an ideal spot from which to launch operations to the north, and to act as a shield for the villages further south. The people of Cahokia themselves gave valuable service to the Patriot cause and the Allied war effort by fighting in several engagements and under a variety of commanders: the American Clark, the Frenchman Mottin de la Balme, and the Spaniard Pierra.

It was also at Cahokia, and St. Louis, that the Americans, Spanish, and the Illinois French broke the grand British offensive of 1780. The Battle of Fort San Carlos left British operations in the West in shambles. The war wound down and ended before another attempt could be made to drive the Americans and the Spanish from the Mississippi Valley. This in turn left Virginia and the United States in possession of the lands between the Appalachian Mountains and the Mississippi River. Though their actual control of these lands was tenuous, Clark's western campaign and his defense of Cahokia on May 26, 1780, gave the United States the ability to successfully press its claims to this territory during peace negotiations with the British. Virginia governor Benjamin Harrison testified to this in a July 2, 1783, letter to Clark: "[M]y thanks and those of my Council for the very great and singular services you have rendered your Country, in wresting so great and valuable a territory out of the hands of the British Enemy, repelling the attacks of their savage allies, and carrying on successful war in the heart of their country."⁴⁹ Thus, in conjunction with his Spanish allies and with the aid of the village and people of Cahokia, George Rogers Clark and his army of "Big Knives" secured an America not bound to the Atlantic seaboard.

ENDNOTES

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