

# WILLIAM CLARK “The Youngest Brother”

By Robert C. Barnard, MPS

Most Americans have heard of the great George Rogers Clark. We learn in school that in 1779, his ragged little army marched through bitter winter terrain to capture the British forts at Kaskaskia and Vincennes, bringing back as a prisoner that infamous Colonel Hamilton who purchased scalps from the Indians. It is right that we should know about this man because he is surely one of the great heroes of American History. If it had not been for George Rogers Clark, a large part of our American Heartland might be under another flag.

Events in the life of William, the youngest member of the well known John Clark family, are also in our history books, but are not as familiar to the average person. William Clark was born on August 1, 1770, and was only a small boy when his big brother was becoming a legend of bravery and resourcefulness. He was the sixth son to be born to John and Ann Clark on their plantation near the Rivanna River in Albemarle County, Virginia.

The Clarks farmed 400 fertile acres next to a smaller tract owned by the parents of Thomas Jefferson. This soon to be famous man was 27 years older than William and 18 years older than George Rogers Clark. Thus, Thomas Jefferson had time to live a full and worthy life and to become President of the United States while William was still a young man. The Jeffersons were lifelong friends of the Clark family.

John and Ann Rogers Clark had ten children. When the Revolutionary War began, the five older boys enlisted and all were distinguished officers. The oldest two, Jonathan and George Rogers, became generals, the next a captain and the younger two were lieutenants.

William would have certainly joined his brothers if his tender age permitted it. Since he was deprived of the privilege at that time, he made up for it later by also becoming a general and the first governor of Missouri. But his main distinction, and the only one known to most people, was to be a partner in one of the world's most important explorations; the Lewis and Clark Expedition to the Pacific.

As a boy, William attended the school of a noted Scotch educator, Donald Robertson, who had married Ann Clark's sister. Another pupil was James Madison, afterwards President of the United States.

By the time he was 13 years old, young William was listening to the tales his brothers told about their fighting years. The war was over and the United States was an independent nation. While he liked to hear about all of his brothers, his real hero was, of course, George, whose exploits helped to double the size of the country. William hoped that when he grew up there still might be a possibility of having exciting adventures in the wilderness.

In 1790, Indian attacks became general on the frontier and William enlisted as a soldier. By 1792, he was a lieutenant in the Army of General Anthony Wayne when the Indians were completely defeated at the Battle of Fallen Timbers. Meriwether Lewis was a young private serving in his command. Ten years later, Lewis became private secretary to then President Thomas Jefferson.

William resigned from the Army in 1796 and returned to the new family plantation in Kentucky. But in 1780, George Rogers wrote his old friend, President Thomas Jefferson, that his brother, William, would be a fine explorer in the far West. Jefferson complied handsomely to the request by appointing William a captain in the Army and making him co - commander of exploration to the Pacific with the President's secretary, Meriwether Lewis. The vast Louisiana Territory was being purchased from France and its contents were an unknown quantity to the Americans.

Although President Jefferson regarded Lewis as the expedition leader, Lewis treated Clark as his equal in every way. After all, Clark was an officer experienced in Indian warfare and at the age of 33, his fame was only surpassed by that of his brother, George. When Henry Dearborn, Secretary of War, wanted to build a fort at the mouth of the Ohio River in 1802, he wrote to William for advice.

William was over six feet tall and his hair was red. He was well liked by all who worked with him. Lewis was less outgoing, not as handsome, but a better scholar. (The spelling in William Clark's reports on the expedition is not all correct, but the words are understandable.)

It was decided to obtain provisions for the group for a year and a half, since they would traverse six to eight thousand miles. Jefferson asked only \$2,500 from Congress to pay expenses. The Army furnished most of the equipment, which cost about \$40,000.

While Lewis worked diligently to obtain the supplies, Clark recruited men and set up a training camp at Wood River on the East side of the Mississippi opposite the mouth of the Missouri. Supplying and training took about



six months, from December, 1903 to May, 1904. On May 14, Lewis and Clark, with twenty - two privates and three sergeants, set off in keelboats up the Missouri River.

After five months, they reached the Mandan Indian Country in what is now central North Dakota. They stayed there in a log encampment for the Winter, with the Mandans as their neighbors.

They were fortunate to meet and hire a French Canadian trapper, Charbonneau, and his Indian wife, Sacajawea, to serve as their guides. In the Spring, the expedition journeyed West to the Shoshoni Country and were well treated because Sacajawea was the sister of the chief. She had been kidnapped away from the Shoshoni when she was a little girl.

When dealing with the Indians, it soon became apparent that Clark had made an unexpected contribution to success by bringing his manservant, York, with him. York was the only black man in the group and was extremely popular. He was "a great curiosity. The children would follow after him." When trading with any of the tribes, York was always present to aid in the transactions.

It is to Clark's credit that he realized the valuable characteristics of this young man which had gone unappreciated before. At the end of the expedition, York, who was a slave, was given his freedom by Clark. York then formed a partnership with a young white trader and engaged in successful business with the Indians.

When the company got as close as possible to the Rocky Mountains by water, they left their boats and crossed the Great Divide on foot, with Shoshoni horses as pack animals. Reaching a Western flowing stream, they built boats and followed it into the larger Columbia and on to the Pacific Coast. On November 17, 1805, they saw the Pacific Ocean.

The soldiers built Fort Clatsop near present day Seaside, Oregon and spent the Winter there. During the Spring and Summer of 1806, the explorers made their journey home by way of the Columbia and Missouri rivers.

The party divided and explored new ground in the region of the Continental Divide before meeting again on the Missouri. On September 23, 1806, the expedition came to an end in St. Louis.

The Lewis and Clark Expedition was a tremendous success. Both leaders kept complete records and collected needed information about terrain, Indian Tribes, and the flora and fauna of the region.

All members were rewarded by a grateful government with double pay and land grants and they were rightfully treated as heroes. Now, other Americans had the necessary information to begin their grand trek West which did not end until the Pacific was reached by thousands and the United States of America stretched from sea to sea.

Passing through the territory of the many Indian tribes without hostility took great tact and know - how. Clark was the leader here. Lewis brought back the best scientific records.

Since the two men were extremely different in personality, it seems wonderful that they got along so well. Clark was strong, easy - going and imperturbable. Lewis was often moody, temperamental and subject to depressions. However, they seemed to truly respect each other's capabilities.

There is no reason to imagine sexual overtones in the close bonds of friendship between them. Clark was specially virile among the Indian maidens of the tribes they visited.

After the expedition, Meriwether Lewis became governor of Louisiana Territory. In 1809, he started for Washington, D.C., from St. Louis and stopped for the night at a lonely inn in central Tennessee. He was found dead the next morning.

The way that Lewis died did not seem to surprise Jefferson or Clark. "He was much affected by hypochondria," said Jefferson. "I fear, Oh! I fear that the weight of his mind has overcome him," said Clark. Seemingly, Lewis did commit suicide. He was greatly lamented.

William Clark became Superintendent of Indian Affairs and a brigadier general. In 1813, he became the first governor of the Missouri Territory.

Thus, the "little brother" of George Rogers Clark also gave life - long service to his country. Brethren may be proud that in that service, he was a Mason, as were his older brother, George, and his partner, Meriwether Lewis.

William Clark was a member of St. Louis Lodge #111, A.F. & A.M. He died in 1838 and was buried in Bellefontaine Cemetery. A large square and compass is carved on the grave stone.

#### Bibliography

1. *American Heritage*. New York: American Heritage Publishing Company. "A Most Satisfactory Council." Oct. '65, pp. 28, 73  
"This Nation Never Saw a Black Man Before", Feb. '71, pp. 8 - 9.  
"Men of the Revolution, XI, Dec. '73, pp. 32 - 33, 78.  
"I Gave Him Barks and Saltpeter", Dec. '63, pp. 58 - 60, 94 - 101.
2. *Bakeless, John. Background to Glory*. Philadelphia: Lippincott Company, 1957.
3. *Bodley, Temple. George Rogers Clark*. Boston: Houghton - Mifflin Company, 1926.
4. *Denslow, William R. Ten Thousand Freemasons*. Vol. 1. A - D, p. 218. St. Louis: Missouri Lodge of Research, 1957.
5. *Derleth, August. Vincennes Portal to the West*. Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall, Inc., 1968.
6. *Duncan, Dayton. Out West: An American Journey*. New York: Viking Press, 1987.
7. *Hawke, David. Those Tremendous Mountains*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1980.