

## GEORGE ROGERS CLARK AND CLARKSVILLE

*The Falls of the Ohio roared undisturbed in 1784 as the raging water plunged and foamed over the ledges and rocks. Far in the future was the time when the dangerous stretch of rapids would be bypassed with a canal and harnessed to drive a hydro-electric power plant. And as the water roared, three men looked on from the Indiana shore and decided the latent power in the falls made this the ideal location for a town. One of the men was General George Rogers Clark. He and his companions had picked the site for Clarksville . . .*

George Rogers Clark was at the height of his fame in 1784. It had been only six years earlier that he had conceived and carried to success one of the most daring exploits of the American Revolution . . . leading 150 poorly-equipped Virginia soldiers deep into British territory all the way to the Mississippi River.

The capture of Kaskaskia, followed by the capture of Vincennes, gave the infant United States a claim to the entire vast Northwest Territory at the time the peace treaty was signed. Today the territory includes the states of Ohio, Indiana, Illinois, Michigan, Wisconsin and Minnesota.

To reward the soldiers who took part in this hazardous campaign, Virginia in 1783 set aside 150,000 acres to be divided among them. Thus the Clark Grant came into being – an area embracing all of Clark County and parts of Floyd, Washington and Scott counties. The western line of the Grant in Floyd County extended along the present Grant Line Road.

At the same time the Virginia Legislature decreed that 1,000 acres of the Grant be reserved for a town. The law even stipulated that the town be named Clarksville in honor of General Clark. So it was that on a spring day in 1784 Clark and two other commissioners of the new town picked the location of Clarksville.

The town they founded has a checkered career. It started with bright prospects, then slowed down, then practically vanished, then picked up slowly in the early years of the century, and during the past 15 years has grown so rapidly that the Town Board has been hard-pressed to keep up with necessary streets, school and other improvements.

The founding of Clarksville in 1784 marked the first advance of the restless tide of emigration that flowed across the Ohio River, filled the entire Northwest Territory, and then pushed on to the shores of the Pacific. Before the year was out some 20 or 30 families were in the town, the first permanent American settlers in Indiana. And during that same year of 1784 General Clark built a grist and saw mill on a creek flowing through the town . . . a stream still called Mill Creek.

Other settlers soon followed and soon about 1780 a stockade was built for protection against marauding Indians. Clark himself built a 2-story cabin on the eastern outskirts of the town named for him. The cabin was there until about 1850, but today the exact site is no longer known, although a historical marker on Harrison Avenue locates the approximate site.

The early promise of Clarksville soon faded. When Clark County was formed in 1801 the hamlet of Springville was chosen as county seat, probably because it was closer to the center of the county than Clarksville. Then the founding of Jeffersonville on the east and New Albany on the west overshadowed the old pioneer settlement.

As early as 1805 a visitor called it a “deserted village” and an 1819 report put the entire population at not over 100. Though some hardy souls continued to make Clarksville their home, they were so scattered and so few in number that finally the Town Board itself ceased to meet and no local government of any kind existed during many years of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century.

Even the mill that George Rogers Clark built was no longer used and in 1847 it collapsed from old age and neglect. Today only waving fields of corn mark the site of this early log-cabin Clarksville. The original settlement was west of the end of present Harrison Avenue, in the area between Mill Creek and Silver Creek, circled on the north and east by modern-day Clarksville.

But though all local government in Clarksville had ceased, the town itself, with its charter from the Virginia legislature, continued a legal existence. This was the decision of the Indiana Supreme Court in an unusual case decided at the end of the last century. The story of that decision, and the rebirth of Clarksville into the growing, prosperous community of today, will be next week’s program.

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