

GEORGE ROGERS CLARK'S FORT JEFFERSON, 1780-1781

Kenneth C. Carstens

This essay is intended to correct several standard historical accounts regarding George Rogers Clark's Fort Jefferson in western Kentucky near where the Ohio River joins the Mississippi River by focusing on four areas of contradictory, faulty, and sometimes fabricated information about the fort that appears frequently in the historical literature: 1) date of founding and length of occupation; 2) location; 3) number of inhabitants (military and civilian); and 4) number of military engagements. Regarding the latter, I shall attempt to determine who attacked the fort and why, as well as the size of the enemy forces and whether or not the attacks ultimately caused the fort to be abandoned.

This article does not represent the last word about Fort Jefferson, but, unlike previous interpretations, this account is based primarily on details contained in approximately four thousand unpublished Fort Jefferson documents that represent some of Clark's hitherto missing vouchers and receipts.¹ As a result, it is now possible to

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An earlier version of this paper was presented at the Seventh Annual George Rogers Clark Trans-Appalachian Frontier History Conference in Vincennes, Indiana, in 1989. Robert J. Holden, former park historian, and Pamela Nolan, park interpreter, of the George Rogers Clark National Historic Park in Vincennes, read and commented on an earlier draft of this paper. In 1992 and again in 1993 anonymous reviewers for *The Filson Club History Quarterly* provided me with many useful suggestions. I sincerely appreciate their evaluations, and although they have improved the quality of this paper, I alone remain responsible for its contents. Lastly, I wish to thank Murray State University and its Committee on Institutional Studies and Research (CISR) for their support of my Fort Jefferson research project since 1984.

1 The collection of the George Rogers Clark Papers is in the Archives Division of the Virginia State Library in Richmond, Virginia (hereafter Clark Papers, Virginia State Library). The entire collection consists of over twenty thousand documents; some five thousand deal with Fort Jefferson. The collection is available in the original and on

reexamine critically much of what has been accepted previously. The new story that emerges appears even more exciting because it derives more from documented evidence than from interpretation or speculation.

VIRGINIA CLAIMS THE WEST

In January 1780, Governor Thomas Jefferson of Virginia authorized the construction of a fort at the confluence of the Mississippi and Ohio rivers to justify, through possession, Virginia's chartered claim to her western boundary, to guard against possible British invasion of Virginia from the west, and to control the arms and munitions England was sending its Indian allies.² Governor Jefferson appointed George Rogers Clark to select the location and to oversee the construction of the new post and its associated settlement for civilians. The fort, named Fort Jefferson, and the civilian community, named Clarksville, were to cooperate in promoting and serving the cause of Virginia.³ The civilian occupants were to farm

microfilm. E. G. Swen was apparently the first to discuss it in "The Lost Vouchers of George Rogers Clarke [sic]," *Virginia Journal of Education* 22 (1927): 424.

2 Most of the following references, which accurately assess the purpose of Clark's Fort Jefferson, draw upon original 1780 documents for support. See C. W. Alvord, *The American West: The Illinois Country 1673-1818* (Chicago: Loyola University Press, 1965; originally printed in 1920), 345-59. Temple Bodley, *History of Kentucky* (Louisville, 1928), 212; Kenneth C. Carstens, *Fort Jefferson, 1780-1781: A Calendar of Events* (forthcoming); *The Personnel of George Rogers Clark's Fort Jefferson, 1780-1781* (forthcoming); *The Quartermaster Books of George Rogers Clark's Fort Jefferson, 1780-1781* (forthcoming); William H. English, *Conquest of the Country Northwest of the River Ohio, 1778-1783 and Life of Gen. George Rogers Clark* (2 vols.; Indianapolis, 1896), II: 666-67; William W. Henry, *Patrick Henry: Life, Correspondence and Speeches* (3 vols.; New York, 1891), I: 602; James Alton James, ed., *George Rogers Clark Papers, 1771-1781* (hereafter James, ed., *Clark Papers*) vols. 2 and 3 of *Collections of the Illinois State Historical Society, Virginia Series* (Springfield, Illinois, 1912); Charles Kerr, W.E. Connelley, and E. M. Coulter, *History of Kentucky* (New York, 1922), 182-83; Reuben Gold Thwaites, *How George Rogers Clark Won the Northwest* (Williamston, MA: Corner House Publishers, 1978; originally published in 1903), 66.

3 Other names used for Fort Jefferson include Camp Jefferson, Fort at the Mouth of the Ohio, Iron Banks, or Fort at the Iron Banks. The "Iron Banks" do not contain iron but instead consist of yellowish and reddish-colored clays that give the appearance

and provide sustenance for themselves and the garrison. In return, the Virginia state line forces (the majority from Clark's Illinois Battalion) and the Clarksville militia would protect them. However, as Jefferson advised Clark, Virginia would not be able to provide the new settlement with supplies or support. The inhabitants of the fort and community would have to be self-sufficient.⁴

Fort Jefferson and the Clarksville community were believed to be as necessary to Virginia's success in the West as Clark's campaigns at Kaskaskia and Vincennes.⁵ Yet few people have heard about Fort Jefferson, and those who have, unfortunately, have often encountered tales that are inaccurate, incomplete, or embellished.⁶ Therefore, this essay, while concentrating on warfare at Fort Jefferson, will also correct other misconceptions about the fort in order to provide a context for the discussion of the military engagements.

DATE OF ESTABLISHMENT AND LENGTH OF OCCUPATION

The establishment and duration of Fort Jefferson can be determined precisely. On 20 April 1780, the day following Clark's

of iron. These clays can be observed in the eastern bank of the Mississippi River from about five miles below the mouth of the Ohio southward for the next fifteen miles. The term "Iron Banks" refers more to a general locality than to a specific location.

4 Jefferson to Clark, 29 January 1780, James, ed., *Clark Papers*, 1: 386-91.

5 See *ibid.*, 1:20-302 for estimates of the importance of the fort.

6 Inaccuracies have been recorded in several popular historical accounts. Most of the inconsistencies and errors appear to stem from the failure to use primary source material. Several of the more inaccurate passages and accounts about Fort Jefferson include: Temple Bodley, *George Rogers Clark: His Life and Public Services* (New York, 1924), 212, 284; Bodley, *History of Kentucky*, 212, 282-85, 294-95; Richard H. Collins, *History of Kentucky* (2 vols.; Frankfort: Kentucky Historical Society, 1966; originally published in 1874), 1: 20; Lewis Henry Collins, Jr., *History of Kentucky* (Frankfort, 1924; originally published in 1874), 39-40; R. S. Cotterill, *Pioneer History of Kentucky* (Cincinnati, 1917), 162-63; M. Juliet Magee, *Old Fort Jefferson* (Wickliffe: The Advance-Yeoman, 1975), 13-31; Humphrey Marshall, *The History of Kentucky* (Frankfort, 1812), 137-39; Frederick Palmer, *Clark of the Ohio* (New York, 1929), 416.; John E.L. Robertson, "West to the Iron Banks" (MA thesis, University of Louisville, 1961), 45-54 and "Fort Jefferson," *Register of the Kentucky Historical Society* 71 (1973): 135-38; Chester R. Young, ed., *Westward into Kentucky: The Narrative of Daniel Trabue* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1981), 144, 194, and notes 45-51.

arrival at the mouth of the Ohio, he wrote to Captain John Dodge stating, "Yesterday [19 April 1780], I arrived this place."⁷ In a letter on 10 August 1781 to Governor Thomas Nelson, Colonel John Montgomery stated that the evacuation of Fort Jefferson, "took place on the 8th of June last."⁸ Virginia forces held Fort Jefferson from 19 April 1780 until 8 June 1781, a period of thirteen months and twenty days. Yet in spite of this published correspondence, erroneous dates for the founding, major events (such as battles), and the evacuation of the post continue to appear.⁹ A striking example is a roadside historical marker near Wickliffe which states that the 1780 Chickasaw attack occurred in 1781.¹⁰

LOCATION AND POPULATION

Geographers have posited different locations for Fort Jefferson that range from the mouth of the Ohio to twenty miles south on the eastern side of the Mississippi River.¹¹ Although only archeological excavations can determine the exact site, I am confident it will be found in the vicinity of the confluence of Mayfield Creek and the Mississippi River where several eighteenth-century artifacts have already been discovered. It is this location that Lieutenant William

7 Clark to John Dodge, 20 April 1780, James, ed., *Clark Papers*, 1: 417.

8 Montgomery to Nelson, 10 August 1781, *ibid.*, 1: 585.

9 See especially Lewis Collins, *History of Kentucky*, 24; James Alton James, *The Life of George Rogers Clark* (New York, 1928), 215-16; M. Juliette Magee, *Old Fort Jefferson*, 13-31; Robertson, "West to the Iron Banks," 135-38 and "Fort Jefferson," 71.

10 The marker appears to have been erected in the early 1960s. See "Fort Jefferson," vertical files, Pogue Library, Murray State University, Murray, Kentucky.

11 Lyman C. Draper Collection, Wisconsin Historical Society, Madison, Wisconsin (hereafter DC), correspondence with Joseph C. Dupoyster (27J1-6) and B. Hardy Stovall (27J7-29); James Alton James, *Oliver Pollock: The Life and Times of an Unknown Patriot* (New York: Books for Libraries Press, 1970), 205; Kentucky Department of Transportation, Environmental Assessment, Fort Jefferson, Great River Road (Frankfort, 1981), 6; M. Juliet Magee, *Old Fort Jefferson*, 13; J.F. McDermott, ed., *Old Cahokia* (St. Louis, 1949), 251, n.51; T.C. Pease and M.J. Pease, *George Rogers Clark and the Revolution in Illinois, 1763-1787: A Sesquicentennial Memorial* (Springfield, 1929), 61; H. Young, W.T. Poussin, and S. Tuttle, "Reconnaissance of the Mississippi and Ohio Rivers" (Library of Congress: Map Division, 1821).

Clark illustrated on his map of the Fort Jefferson/Clarksville community.¹² The 1780 William Clark map is the only known cartographic evidence prepared by an actual occupant of the fort that shows its location. The details of this map appear to be corroborated by a later map drawn in 1795 by another William Clark (George Rogers Clark's brother) and by information provided to Lyman C. Draper during the mid to late nineteenth century by Joseph C. Dupoyster and B. Hardy Stovall.¹³

Until recently, the number of military and civilian personnel at Fort Jefferson was a matter of conjecture. Estimates for the garrison varied between thirty and two hundred persons with most on the lower end of the scale.¹⁴ No specific figure was ever offered regarding the number of civilians present, although it has been generally believed that they were relatively few.¹⁵

Accurate population estimates could not be given for Fort Jefferson until a few years ago because documents concerning that issue were not known to exist.¹⁶ My research in the George Rogers

12 DC, 1M11-12. William Clark was a cousin of George Rogers Clark. Another map, the 1795 William Clark map of the general area of the fort, supports information in the 1780 map as does Robert Todd's 1795 description of "old Fort Jefferson." See Kenneth C. Carstens, "The William Clark Maps of Fort Jefferson: An Exercise in 18th Century Scaling," *Filson Club History Quarterly* 67(1993): 23-43.; also William Clark Papers, Missouri Historical Society, St. Louis; William Clark 1795 map, National Archives, Washington, D.C., Geography and Map Division, Revolutionary Record Group, item no. 0113.

13 DC, 27J1-29; William Clark 1795 map, National Archives.

14 Richard H. Collins, *History of Kentucky*, 1, 20; James, ed., *Clark Papers*, 1: 422, 456-57, 497; E. Polk Johnson, *History of Kentucky* (3 vols.; Chicago, 1912), 1: 67.

15 Kathryn M. Fraser, "Fort Jefferson: George Rogers Clark's Fort at the Mouth of the Ohio River, 1780-1781," *Register of the Kentucky Historical Society* 81 (1983): 9, n. 30.

16 In 1984 I visited the Virginia State Library and located more than four thousand original, unpublished Fort Jefferson documents (Clark Papers, Virginia State Library, boxes 1-50). These documents were believed by some to have been lost during the American Revolution. They have recently been microfilmed and are available for purchase. Additional Fort Jefferson documents were found in the William Clark Papers at the Missouri Historical Society, Forest Park, St. Louis (hereafter Clark Collection, Missouri Historical Society). This collection consists of documents from the two

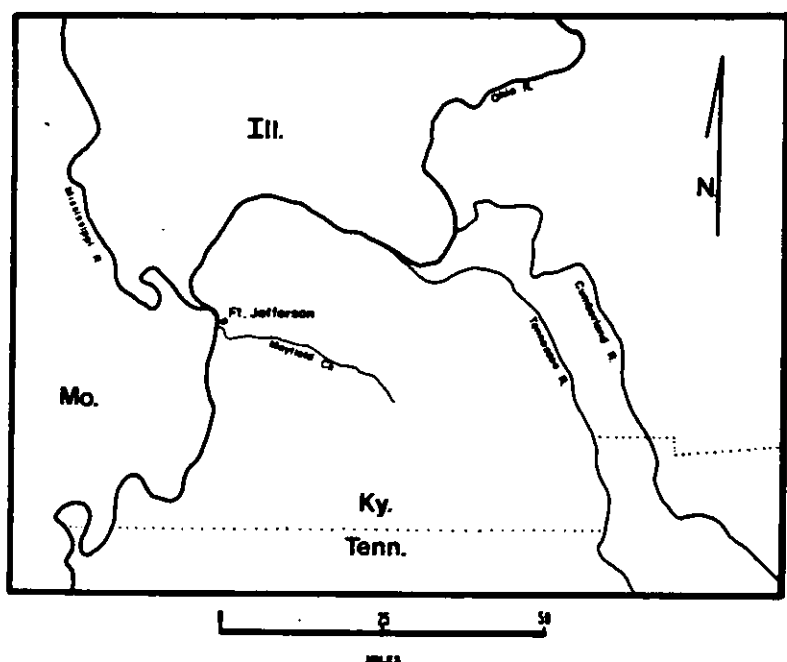
Clark papers during the past twelve years has changed that situation dramatically. I can now determine the names of 551 persons who were at Fort Jefferson on a daily basis, and I also have documentation for 386 of the 416 days the fort was occupied. Sixty-five Kaskaskia Indians were also present at the post on an intermittent basis, hunting and fighting side by side with the Illinois Battalion.¹⁷ Of the 551 persons, 267 were soldiers of the Virginia State Line, and an additional twenty-four persons composed the artificer-commissary-quartermaster corps. The remaining 260 persons included forty-six members of the Clarksville militia. Many of these men were kinsmen who were associated with one of the forty-one families, whose average size was 4.75 persons per family.¹⁸

All of the 551 persons were not present throughout the post's existence, but information about each allows company movements to be traced practically from day to day. It also is possible to know when people were present or absent from the fort and the community. Moreover, the inventory and quartermaster records indicate that a combined military and civilian population of at least one hundred to one hundred and fifty persons was present at all times up to the fort's evacuation. In light of these new numbers, it should be clear that previous references to Fort Jefferson's thirty occupants reflect only a

William Clarks: George's younger brother, for whom the collection was named, and also those of his cousin, William, son of Benjamin Clark. Only the latter was stationed at Fort Jefferson; his papers probably would not have been saved had there not been a mistaken identity between the two Clark cousins.

17 Also present and assisting the Virginians at Fort Jefferson were Kickapoo, Peoria, Potawatomi, and Delaware Indians; see Clark Papers, Virginia State Library, boxes 1-50, especially boxes 48-50.

18 Clark Collection, Missouri Historical Society, boxes 19-21; Katherine W. Seineke, *The George Rogers Clark Adventure in the Illinois* (New Orleans, Polyanthos, 1981), 432-73; Clark Papers, Virginia State Library, boxes 1-50. See also the Personal Narrative of Ann Jameson, manuscript department, The Filson Club Historical Society, Louisville, Kentucky. While at Fort Jefferson, Ann Jameson's married name was McMeans. She and her husband Andrew had seven children: Mary, John, James, Isaac, Jane, Robert, and Anne. The activities of this family between May and September 1780 seem representative of the civilian life at Fort Jefferson. More than forty families living at Fort Jefferson have been identified in the Clark Papers at the Virginia State Library.



General Location of Fort Jefferson

Kenneth Carstens, photography by Danna Kilby

partial garrison strength (i.e., Virginia State troops).¹⁹ Additional Illinois Battalion troops and members of Captain George Owens's company of militia and their families were also present.²⁰

FORT JEFFERSON MILITARY ENGAGEMENTS

Histories that describe the military engagements at Fort Jefferson usually indicate that only one encounter took place and describe it as happening either during 1780 or 1781.²¹

19 For example, see Richard H. Collins, *History of Kentucky*, 1:20; DC, Patton Narrative, 49J89; Robertson, "West to the Iron Banks," 46.

20 James, ed., *Clark Papers*, 1: 464-65; M. H. Harding, *George Rogers Clark and His Men: Military Records, 1778-1784* (Frankfort: Kentucky Historical Society, 1981), 48-49; *Clark Papers*, Virginia State Library, boxes 1-50.

21 Bodley, *George Rogers Clark*, 170; Richard H. Collins, *History of Kentucky*, 1: 20; DC, Patton Narrative, 49J89; Frederick Palmer, *Clark of the Ohio: A Life of George*

But, in fact, there were six military operations which can be pinpointed with assurance. Two clashes occurred at Fort Jefferson itself in July and August 1780. Four actions began at the fort, including three retaliatory raids—two short forays in September 1780 and January 1781 and one lengthy campaign between July and August 1780 (Clark's Shawnee campaign). In addition, the garrison undertook one primarily defensive action in May 1780 by sending assistance to embattled St. Louis and Cahokia.²²

The details of these military engagements are revealed in the published documents of Fort Jefferson and especially in the unpublished quartermaster and voucher records at the Virginia State Library and the William Clark papers at the Missouri Historical Society. By examining and comparing hundreds of documents in these two collections, the diligent researcher can reconstruct even the small details of these military actions. As an example, for each quartermaster issue, the item being requisitioned is identified, and the date, quantity, and the reason for that issue are given. Thus twenty-two pounds of gunpowder was issued to the artillery on 17 July 1780, "for the defense of this place."²³

Other pieces of information used to identify military engagements associated with Fort Jefferson are located in the muster rolls of each company. In them, a company's captain always entered the death of

Rogers Clark (New York, 1929), 415-16; Hugh F. Rankin, *George Rogers Clark and The Winning of the West* (Richmond: Virginia Independence Bicentennial Commission, 1976), 57. It is interesting to note that in Rankin's version the idea of a single battle is put forth; unfortunately, credibility is lost when he identifies Fort Jefferson as Fort Nelson in Louisville. Source data for the battle at Fort Jefferson used for the historic roadside marker (see footnote 10) appears to have come from Richard H. Collins, *History of Kentucky*, 1: 20, in which a single battle in 1781 is described.

22 Harding, *Clark and His Men*, 46-51; Dodge to Jefferson, 1 August 1780, and Montgomery to Clark, 22 September 1780 in James, ed., *Clark Papers*, 1: 435-38 and 456-57; George to Montgomery, in K.W. Seineke, *Clark Adventure*, 457-59; Clark Papers, Virginia State Library, boxes 1-50.

23 Kenneth C. Carstens, "Issues at Fort Jefferson, 1780-1781: The Quartermaster Books of John Dodge and Martin Carney" in *Selected Papers from the 1987 and 1988 George Rogers Clark Trans-Appalachian Frontier History Conferences* (Vincennes: Vincennes University, 1990), 54-75; Clark Papers, Virginia State Library, box 50.

one of his men as "killed," "died," or "deceased." "Killed" seems to have been used to denote death from combat. "Died" appears to have been used to mean death from illness. "Deceased" apparently encompassed all forms of death. The muster rolls reveal that the greatest number of persons "killed" occurred on the dates of the two Indian assaults.²⁴

In summary, the documents in manuscript and in print, when examined together, indicate that Fort Jefferson's garrison took part in six military engagements. Many of the soldiers assisted Virginians, Frenchmen, and Spaniards in the defense of St. Louis and Cahokia in May 1780. Some of these same soldiers then accompanied Clark on his campaign against the Shawneetowns of Chillicothe and Picqua in Ohio, in August 1780. The Chickasaw attacked Fort Jefferson twice, in July and again in August 1780. Mixed contingents of Virginians and Kaskaskia Indians conducted retaliatory raids against the Chickasaw in September 1780 and January 1781.²⁵

FORT JEFFERSON UNDER ATTACK

Most authors who describe the armed confrontations at Fort Jefferson rely upon two "primary" sources when they identify Chickasaw warriors as the post's assailants and assign motives for their attacks. These two sources, however, were not provided by eyewitnesses. They are the "Patton narrative"²⁶ and a message from the Chickasaw chiefs on 9 July 1782.²⁷ As revealed in the neglected reports of Captain Robert George, the fort's commandant, neither of

24 The dates of the two major engagements occurring at Fort Jefferson are 17 July 1780 and 27-30 August 1780. See James, ed., *Clark Papers*, 1: 435-38; Seineke *Clark Adventure*, 457-59; Harding, *Clark and His Men*, esp. 13-53; *Clark Papers*, Virginia State Library, boxes 12-13 and 48-50.

25 Kenneth C. Carstens, "British Allies and American Enemies: The Chickasaw of the Mississippi River Valley," paper presented at the Fifth Annual Ohio Valley History Conference, Murray, Kentucky (1989), in possession of author.

26 DC, Patton Narrative, 49J89.

27 "Message from the Chickasaw, July 9, 1782" in James, ed., *Clark Papers*, 2: 73-75.

these sources offers a complete or wholly accurate account. Each suffers from the limited, slanted viewpoint of its originator.

James Patton was not a participant in the actions at Fort Jefferson. His subsequent, undated narrative combines stories reported to him by several other persons. Consequently, he relates many specific episodes without giving their context or distinguishing the sequence of events. To the confusion of historians, for example, he depicts as a single Chickasaw attack the two Indian assaults on the fort on 17 July and 27-30 August 1780. The Chickasaw chiefs themselves contributed to later misunderstandings with the speech they sent to the commandants of several Kentucky forts in July 1782 in which they contended that they had attacked because "you Settled A Fort in Our Hunting ground without Our Leave." They also implied that their young men attacked because they were goaded on and led by warriors from the Cherokee, Delaware, and other hostile tribes. Chickasaw leaders prepared this message as a peace feeler as the Revolutionary War drew to a close, however, and they therefore mitigated the exact nature of their involvement in the fighting.²⁸

Why then did the Chickasaw attack Fort Jefferson? Historians most frequently have laid the blame on Clark for failing to heed a directive from Jefferson on 29 January 1780 to obtain permission from the Cherokee for building the proposed fort by first purchasing land from them around the mouth of the Ohio. (A minority faction of this otherwise hostile tribe was allied to the Americans at the time.)²⁹ Clark did not treat with any of the Cherokee, however, because they did not own the land. Rather, those lands were exploited by the Chickasaw, then active allies of Great Britain. Later writers gloss over the Chickasaw-British alliance and do not discriminate between the rights of the friendly Cherokee and the hostile Chickasaw as did Clark. Instead they accept at face value the Chickasaw assertion of 1782 that

28 DC, Patton Narrative, 49J89; "Message from the Chickasaw, July 9, 1782," in James, ed., *Clark Papers*, 2: 73-75.

29 Jefferson to Clark, 29 January 1780 and to Joseph Martin, 24 January 1780 in James, ed., *Clark Papers*, 1: 386-91, 385-86.

they had attacked the post solely in reaction to an unwarranted intrusion into their lands. In fact, Clark had once, late in 1778, attempted to have talks with the Chickasaw through an intermediary, the friendly Kaskaskia headman Jean Baptiste, but nothing had come of this initiative because the chiefs were very wary toward Americans in general. Perhaps the Chickasaw—and other tribesmen—attacked the fort as much to support the cause of their British friends and trading partners as to oppose a few white settlers on the edge of their territory.³⁰

HOW MANY PERSONS ATTACKED FORT JEFFERSON?

Some chroniclers of the events at Fort Jefferson assert confidently that the British contributed neither direction nor manpower to the Chickasaw attacks of 1780. Instead they emphasize the leadership of the mixed Scottish-Chickasaw Colbert family, one of whose many members (usually identified as James, sometimes as Alexander) supposedly commanded the war parties. They never mention involvement by the British Southern Indian Department or the British military in the Chickasaw campaign. Yet Captain George's report of 2 September 1780, printed below, clearly indicates that a British officer—perhaps with a small detachment—had been sent from Pensacola to participate in the second, most intense assault.³¹

The numbers for the Chickasaw who attacked the fort in July and August 1780 are also inaccurate. Without identifying their sources, some authors have stated that the Chickasaw attacking force

30 Ibid., 1: 260-61.

31 J.H. Battle, et al., *Kentucky: A History of the State* (Louisville, 1885), 178; Bodley, *George Rogers Clark*, 170-71; Bodley, *History of Kentucky*, 284-85; G.B. Braden, "The Colberts and the Chickasaw Nation," *Tennessee Historical Quarterly* 17 (1958): 222-24; Mann Butler, *A History of the Commonwealth of Kentucky* (Berea, 1968; originally published in 1834), 119; D.C. Corbitt, "James Colbert and the Spanish Claims to the East Bank of the Mississippi," in *Mississippi Historical Review* 24 (1938): 457-58; A.M. Gibson, *The Chickasaws* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1976), 57-59, 72-73; M.J. Magee, *Old Fort Jefferson*, 24-29; James H. O'Donnell III, *Southern Indians in the American Revolution* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1973), 74.

numbered between five hundred and twelve hundred warriors.³² Yet the best ethnographic sources estimate that the total number of Chickasaw warriors throughout the southeast was less than five hundred during those years. The fragmented clan structure of Chickasaw society placed severe limitations on its fighting strength. In 1780 Chickasaw clans were scattered among settlements in Alabama, Florida, Mississippi, and Tennessee. Moreover, a considerable number of Chickasaw warriors were assisting the British in their battles against the Spanish during 1780 and 1781 at Mobile and Pensacola. The largest force the Chickasaw could assemble in the north during 1780 and 1781 probably consisted of no more than two hundred warriors because they had been compelled to disperse their five hundred men widely in order to support their British allies throughout the southeast.³³

LETTERS DESCRIBING MILITARY OPERATIONS

We will probably never be able to reconstruct every engagement of Fort Jefferson's brief existence. We can, however, obtain a more complete and accurate understanding of what happened by using the letters, musters, payrolls, and invoices prepared by actual residents of the fort rather than by relying upon the recollections of aged veterans and the suppositions of modern commentators. Edited versions of two infrequently cited letters that report the two Indian attacks on the fort are provided below. The first, written by Captain Robert George to Clark, describes the engagement on 17 July 1780.³⁴

32 Richard H. Collins, *History of Kentucky*, 1:20; Kerr, *History of Kentucky*, 182-83; Robertson, "West to the Iron Banks," 45 and "Fort Jefferson," 135.

33 Gibson, *Chickasaws*, 63-65; C. Hudson, *The Southeastern Indians* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1982), 211; J.R. Swanton, *The Indians of the Southeastern United States* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1979), 118-19.

34 George to Clark, 2 September 1780 and Captain John Rogers to Clark, 2 August 1780, Clark Collection, Missouri Historical Society, box 1, folders 20 and 21. George's letter has also been published in Seineke, *Clark Adventure*, 448-49.

The second letter, also written by Captain George, was sent to Colonel John Montgomery; it describes the second assault.³⁵

Attack of 17 July 1780

Fort Jefferson, 31 July 1780

Sir

On Monday morning, the 17th inst., a little before daybreak, we were alarmed with the firing of a gun in the lower end of the town, which proved to be done by an Indian apparently with intention to decoy us out into an ambush [which was] laid around the town. They killed one man who lay at a fire opposite his cabin and in their flight tomahawked another, who is like to do well. Immediately at the upper end of the town, the militia sentinel, who was posted there, was fired on by three other savages and dangerously wounded (who is since dead of his wound);³⁶ and in a little time a general attack took place in that quarter. The savages appeared to be very numerous and kept up a constant and brisk fire on a house at the upper end of the street adjacent to the woods and also on the blockhouse; from both of which they received several very galling shot. At length the attack on the village became general, and the few men that occupied the blockhouse and the other house behaved gallantly. The firing continued about two and one half hours of which 'twas kept up very hot without any intermission. Finding they could make no impression, and having several of their men killed and wounded, which we are assured of, they thought proper to retreat, after killing and maiming most of the stock.³⁷ During the engagement, one of the soldiers (of which I had

35 George to Montgomery, Clark Collection, Missouri Historical Society, box 1, folder 21. This letter was also published in Seineke, *Clark Adventure*, 457-59. Instead of copying Seineke's version of George's letter, I have reproduced my reading of the letter, while correcting spelling, capitalization, and punctuation errors. Incorrect verb usage remains.

36 The two men killed were John Aldar and Daniel Merredith, both members of Captain George Owens's company of Clarksville militia. See DC, 26J28; Harding, *Clark and His Men*, 48-49; James, ed., *Clark Papers*, 1: 464-65. Both Collins and Robertson claim that a family named Music was murdered by the Chickasaw except Mr. Music. None of the records, however, indicate the presence of a Music family at the fort. See Richard H. Collins, *History of Kentucky*, 2: 40; Robertson, "Fort Jefferson," 135.

five in the blockhouse, besides about as many of the militia) received a wound through his shoulders. The swivel was of great service, and I was well prepared to receive them in the fort had they thought proper to shift their object[ive]. Various are the opinions of people with regard to the number of savages, but the most moderate calculate them at one hundred and fifty, and some even to five hundred. The tracks every where being numerous and deep, and the yells which accompanied the firing seemed to re-echo [*sic*] from every quarter. The swivel I am assured kept off numbers from coming into actual engagement, and though it was very ill-manned, did execution.³⁸ The inhabitants are in high spirits and determined almost to a man to stand their ground, but numbers of them are becoming daily sick, and to add to that misfortune, are almost all quite out of provision. As I am aware of the great value government sets on this settlement, I am constrained to divide the mouthful of provision[s] I have with them, well knowing should they evacuate this place, I can not maintain my post with the handful of sick men I have in garrison. Besides the few inhabitants that are able to go out to hunt dare not, as we are not certain that the enemy are entirely gone off, having been seen skulking about since the attack, and tracks discovered but a few days ago.

The troops are victualed with bread to the 2nd of August inclusive, only two days, and not one bushel of corn in store. Between 50 and 60 of the inhabitants drew the last [food, last] week, but [I] have not one mouthful at present to give them. Their dependence is altogether on their gardens which is really a poor shift. They have lost almost all their stock, and every horse fit for use.

I just received a few lines from Colo [John] Montgomery. He promises me a small supply [of] provisions, but it must be paid for

37 The killing of the livestock may have been the most damaging effect of the attack.

38 Captain George, in addition to being the fort commandant, was in charge of a company of artillery. He had an excellent reputation for his uncanny accuracy with cannon; this is probably the reason for his critical statement regarding how the swivel was manned, as well as his being "well prepared to receive them in the fort." For a description of Captain George, see English, *Conquest*, 1: 366.

out of this store. I was also forced to purchase on the same fund about twenty-eight barrels of corn, which is quite exhausted as the vast number of women and children of our own and the great many destitute inhabitants have drained me considerably.³⁹

Colo Montgomery sent me down a part of the Kaskaskia Indians. They are here, about 3 days. Tomorrow or next day, [they will] go out to hunt for us. He promises to send us a company of men for our defense which we expect daily with what provision[s] can be collected. We have given over all hopes of Colo [Joseph] Crockett's [Company] arrival.⁴⁰

Colo Montgomery writes his having received news of [Charles] Langlades coming with a stronger party than before; that his men [Montgomery's], are in good spirits and are uneasy for their appearance as they think themselves a match for them.⁴¹ I have only to inform you further that the men in the garrison are all sick, not having above three effective men. I shall, however, do better I hope when the reinforcement comes.

Augt 1st This day Capt [John] Bailey and Lieut William] Clark arrived with about 1400lbs of flour, 50 bushl of corn, and 28 men. A small supply indeed, having about two hundred mouths to feed daily.

I am Sir

Your most Obedt and very hl Servt

Robt George

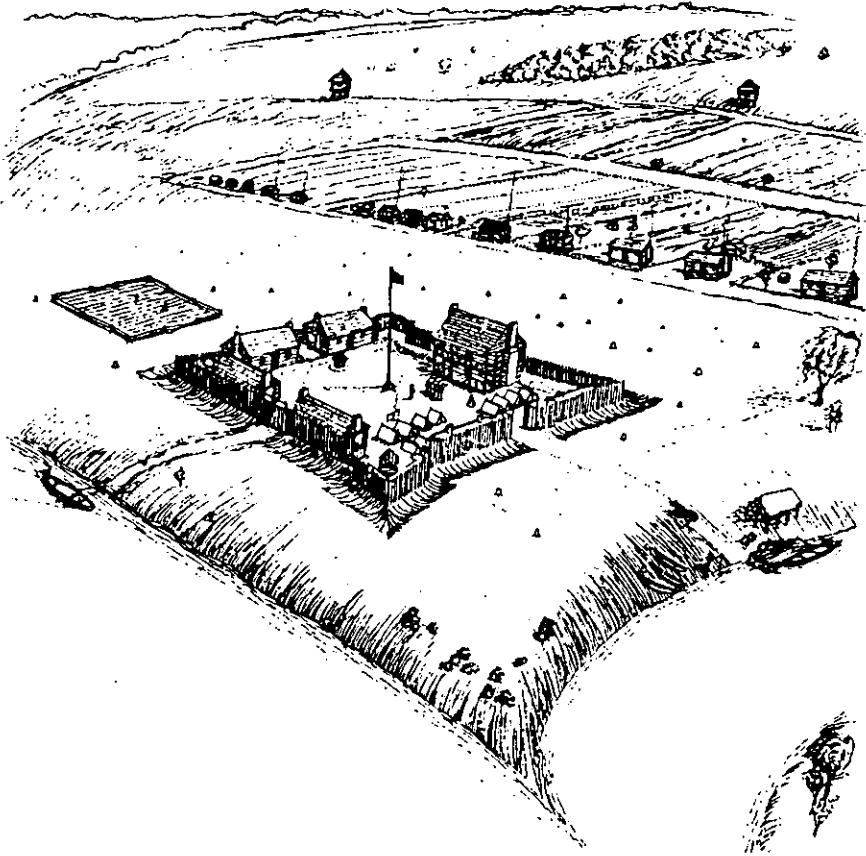
According to John Dodge's letter to Jefferson on 1 August 1780, the Chickasaw attack force numbered three hundred warriors.⁴² If

39 Captain George made a necessary distinction between the women and children of the garrison and the males of the civilian population.

40 There is no indication in the primary sources that Joseph Crockett's company ever arrived at Fort Jefferson, though it was ordered to proceed there.

41 Captain George is referring to the earlier British-Indian attack on St. Louis (Pancore) and Cahokia, which was led in part by Captain Charles Langlade. See James, ed., *Clark Papers*, 1: lxxxix; J.A. James, "Significance of Attack on St. Louis, 1780," *Proceedings of the Mississippi Valley Historical Association* II (1915): 206.

42 John Dodge to Thomas Jefferson, 1 August 1780, in James, ed., *Clark Papers*, 1: 435-38.

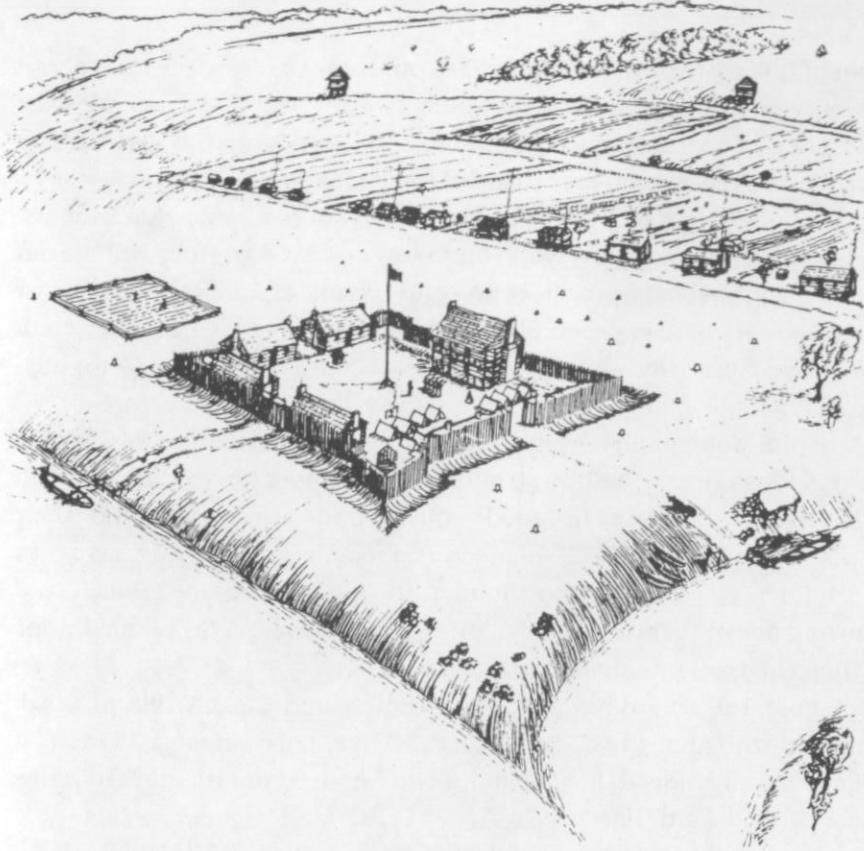


Artist's Conception of Fort Jefferson and Clarksville

Richard Day

Dodge's estimate of the Chickasaw force was accurate, the Chickasaw inflicted relatively minor damage, killing only two sentinels and wounding one other.⁴³ It would seem, then, that the more conservative

43 It should be noted that John Dodge, the post quartermaster, did not maintain a good reputation for truthfulness. See Kenneth C. Carstens, "Issues at Fort Jefferson, 1780-1781: The Quartermaster Books of John Dodge and Martin Carney," 54-75. For additional character references about Dodge, see James, ed., *Clark Papers*, 1: cii note 1, 202-203, 338 note 1; also C.W. Alvord, *Collections of the Illinois State Historical Library*, II, *Cahokia Records* (Springfield, 1907), xcv and V, *Kaskaskia Records* (Springfield, 1909), 104, n. 1.



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estimate mentioned by Captain George, about one hundred fifty Chickasaw, would be closer to the actual number that attacked Fort Jefferson. This smaller number also is corroborated by Captain George's letter, which describes the second fight at the post.

Attack of 27-31 August 1780⁴⁴

Fort Jefferson, 2nd Septemr, 1780

Sir

I wrote you by express the 28th past,⁴⁵ to whom I referred you for a particular acct of our investiture by the enemy savages. I thought it then more prudent to trust the acct to their relation, than to risk the whole of our circumstances in a letter, however, as things were somewhat of a better appearance at present, I shall venture to give you a sketch of what has happened.

On Sunday morning the 27th about sunrise, a few of Captain [Henry] Smith's negroes having gone on the outside of the lots toward the cornfields,⁴⁶ were chased into the village by a party of the savages, who finding they were likely to escape, fired on and killed a wench within gunshot of the houses. Contrary to my expectation, they made no particular attack at that time, except some shots fired at times by small parties at the houses in the villages and at the fort.

About ten o'clock they made a pretty smart fire for a while at the fort from [a] point over the creek, and some from up the creek.⁴⁷ When it was dark, they hailed the houses in the lower end of the town [and] desired to know the name of the commanding officer. Was

44 Captain Robert George to Colonel John Montgomery, August-September 1780. William Clark Collection, Missouri Historical Society, box 1, folder 21. This has also been published in Seineke, *Clark Adventure*, 457-59.

45 This letter has not been found.

46 These are the cornfields east of the Clarksville village, which was probably an area of about thirty acres of the total forty-six acres farmed. The remaining sixteen acres were collectively farmed on the island west of the fort by nine settlers: James Young, Daniel Graffen, Jacob Groats, Charles and James King, Daniel Merrideth, Daniel Miller, Mrs. Rion, and Jacob Shilling. See DC 1M8-11.

47 Mayfield Creek, which according to the 1780 Clark map, also was called Liberty Creek. See DC, 1M11).

answered, Col. Clark. The person who spoke said he came from Pensacola, his name Jas or Wm Whitehead, and commanded the party.⁴⁸ His errand was to prevent the savages from massacring the women and children; that he expected to be reinforced by a large party with cannon the next day or day after; that he would come the next morning and speak with us in the same place, which he accordingly did (or rather another in his stead, who was known to some of our people by the name of Colbert). He mentioned much the same as before, adding that his people had killed four and taken one prisoner the day before;⁴⁹ that the prisoner had informed him of our distressed situation in every respect; of our expectation of a boat with provision from Illinois; that they had sent fifty men to intercept the boat; and that as they were no strangers to our miserable condition they were determined to starve us out; that in the Spring, some of their people had discovered us, but took us for a travelling party; that on their return, a stronger party had been sent to examine, who found we had settled and accordingly attacked us;⁵⁰ that now they were come with a full determination to drive and destroy us which they would certainly effect before they left us; that his principal errand was in order to protect the women and children (whom he pitied) from being massacred. Capt [Leonard] Helm, whom I sent out, informed him by my orders that he was sent out to know his demands. He answered, he was come with a strong body of Indians, who was very much displeased at our settling on their land; they had been here before,⁵¹

48 Contrary to popular belief, James Colbert was not in charge of the attack at Fort Jefferson, although he was present. The Whitehead mentioned was John Whitehead, not James or William as Captain George reported. Whitehead was a senior lieutenant in Lieutenant Colonel John McGillivray's Provincial West Florida Regiment in the Crown's Service, Robert R. Rea to Kenneth Carstens, 18 November 1985; also Provincial Records Office, Kew, England, Treasury Papers, T1/540:75.

49 Privates Christopher Hatton, John Hutsill, Thomas Laney, and John Sworden were ambushed and killed; James Jarrell was taken prisoner. See Harding, *Clark and His Men*, 30, 32, 46, 49.

50 This is the battle of 17 July 1780 described previously.

51 It is possible that Colbert may have led the attacking force or been a member of it during the battle.

but was now come with a full determination to have the place; that their main body was not yet come up, but expected it that day or next at furthest, which consisted on Chickasaws, Chocktaws, Cherokees, and some Delawares, who was determined to surround the place and starve us out if they did not take it by storm; and as he pitted our circumstance which he knew very well he would be fond of having the lives of so many women and children,⁵² which undoubtedly must fall a sacrifice, provided we did not surrender. Capt Helms then replied that they had not come any ways unexpected; we were well assured of their coming and was prepared for their reception; as for their land, they had committed hostilities on our frontier long before we came to this place; that we looked upon ourselves, together with the French and Spaniards to be proprietors of North America, but took no lands from our friends and allies without purchasing; if they had a mind to become such, there was a commissioner appointed to settle such matters,⁵³ but we intended shortly to fortify ourselves on other parts of the river, and protect the navigation and frontiers against them,⁵⁴ and any others of our enemies and as that was his errand, it was unnecessary saying anymore on the subject, but tell his savages we stood in defiance of them or any other of our enemies. The gentlemen with the flag said if we wanted to speak any further again, we would

52 One could make several interpretations of this passage, reportedly made by Colbert. Colbert probably was a "Beloved Man" among the Chickasaw; he also owned a considerable number of slaves, black, white, and red. It can be argued that Colbert, as second in command, might have received his pick of the prisoners for slaves. See Gibson, *Chickasaws*, 61, 65.

53 This statement supports Clark's position of not seeking permission from the Chickasaw to build Fort Jefferson. Permission was sought from allies and friends only, not from enemies.

54 At one time, Clark had proposed building a chain of forts along the Mississippi and Ohio rivers north of the Carolina-Virginia border to protect Virginia's interests and to protect the eastern settlements from a possible British invasion. See James, ed., *Clark Papers*, 1: cxxiii-cxxiv. It has been suggested that Clark's motives were more directed toward control of the Indian trade and land speculation. See G.M. Waller, "Target Detroit: Overview of the American Revolution West of the Appalachians" in *The French, the Indians, and George Rogers Clark in the Illinois Country* (Proceedings of an Indiana American Revolution Bicentennial Symposium; Indianapolis: Indiana Historical Society, 1977), 53.

fire a gun; and if he wanted to speak, he would appear as he then did, with a white flag; but Capt Helm again informed him, he thought it unnecessary to speak any further on that subject; they then withdrew—just at their parting (unknown to me) some of the Indians who had ran out, and had been prevented from taking him prisoner, having got into one of the houses, fired, as did some others; he [Colbert] reeled, and we are sure he is killed, by the blood having been found in great quantity behind a tree which he retired to; his retreat being made in such a confused manner assures us he is dead. I must confess I can not be much displeased at it considering what errand he came on, though it was positively contrary to my orders. It has had one good effect, however, all that day we had scarce a shot, but just at dark they made a very warm attack on Ford's⁵⁵ [Robert, Joseph, or John], and [John] Donne's⁵⁶ houses at the lower end of the town, and also on the garrison. They fired several rounds very briskley, but did no damage. Our people in the village and fort behaved with great gallantry and killed several, however; the firing ceased and no further attack of any consequence commenced until the next evening when they fired pretty warmly on the upper end of the town and the blockhouse; next morning decamped, after killing what few sheep and cows were left from their former violence,⁵⁷ and destroying almost all of a very beautiful and large crop of corn and other truck.⁵⁸ The last evening, far from our expectation, Capt Bailey

55 There were three Fords at Fort Jefferson: John, Joseph, and Robert. All were privates in Captain George Owen's company of [Clarksville] militia and all subsequently moved from Fort Jefferson on 12 September 1780. See Harding, *Clark and His Men*, 48-49; DC, 1M8; Clark Papers, Virginia State Library, boxes 13, 48, 50.

56 John Donne was deputy commissary for Clark. He lived with his wife and son, John, Jr., in the Clarksville village adjacent to the fort. See James, ed., *Clark Papers*, 1: 374-75; Clark Papers, Virginia State Library, especially boxes 48-50.

57 This is a reference to the battle of 17 July 1780.

58 Captain Leonard Helm and Lieutenant William Clark were instructed by Captain Robert George to assess the amount of damage done to the crops by the Indians and to determine the amount which might have been produced had the Indians not destroyed them. Their inventory lists twenty-one persons who had crops ruined and also tabulates the number of bushels destroyed (1,125 bushels) for each farmer. See DC, 1M8.

came in, who had been out hunting with a party of his boys, of whom four were killed and one taken.⁵⁹ He remained hid in the Island, though they came continually in parties, some within a rod of him, but Providentially got in undiscovered. The Capt says he seen four of the Savages whom he well knew, one was a Piankeshaw [sic], and three Pottawatomies. All the Indians were well clad in new fine ruffled shirts. Although the enemy appears to be gone off, I cannot certainly determine whether or no. The corn being chiefly destroyed has determined the inhabitants almost to a man to evacuate the place.⁶⁰ They are now making preparation for the purpose of going down the river being too weak to go up.⁶¹

You, Sir, can now be the best judge, whether it will be possible, or admitting it to be [im]possible, whether it would be most expedient to hold our Post or not. If you think it best to continue, some mode of supplying us with provision must be adapted, a reinforcement of men in lieu of the inhabitants to guard the redoubts around the fort must be sent, and as many swivels as can be had. If you think it impossible, or rather inexpedient to hold our post longer, a reinforcement of men, will be necessary to convey us away, as also crafts for transporting us up stream. For my part, I am determined to hold out to the last so long as one ounce of provision and ammunition can be had. But as we have not only dangerous, but numerous enemies to expect from every quarter, it becomes necessary

59 See footnote 49; only private James Jarrell was a member of Captain John Bailey's company.

60 A considerable number of civilians moved from Fort Jefferson between September and November 1780. Military desertion of state troops also occurred. As an example, twenty-one of forty-five members of Captain George Owen's company of Clarksville militia "moved" from Fort Jefferson; ten of Robert George's company of artillery deserted their posts between September and December 1780. See Harding, *Clark and His Men*, 29-33, 48-49.

61 For a personal perspective from one of the settlers, see the Ann Jamison narrative, manuscript department, Filson Club Historical Society. A descendant of Jamison has published a popular, fictional account of her ancestor's heroic plight; see M.B. Barrett, *God's Country* (New York: Bantam Books, 1987).

we should make such preparations for their reception as will convince them how little their efforts will avail against us.

All the loss we have sustained during the whole is only two of the militia slightly wounded and one soldier, except the few unfortunate fellows of Bailey's [Company], who fell into the enemies hands as they returned with the boat from hunting.⁶² I can not do too much justice to the gallantry of the few troops under the command of Lieut [William] Clark who were stationed in the blockhouse, and also of the militia. No men could behave with greater bravery nor with more spirit and courage. They killed several who fell on the spot, the bloody marks of whom we have since discovered in many places.

I hope this will reach you safe[ly] to convince you of our distressed situation and how much,

I am sir Your Obedt Servt
Robt George Capt

To
Lieut Colo John Montgomery
Commanding at Illinois

Based on these letters, it appears that both Chickasaw attack forces had relatively few warriors and inflicted few casualties considering the numbers involved and the duration of the fighting, especially the second engagement. Indeed, Captain George's estimate of one hundred and fifty Chickasaw for the first attack might have been too high; this figure seems to fit the second assault better. It is also important to emphasize that Captain George's estimate is substantially less—and more realistic—than the estimate of five hundred to twelve hundred used by later chroniclers.

The Chickasaw were able to achieve their goals in their campaign against Fort Jefferson, although this was not immediately apparent.

62 Six persons died during this attack; five were associated with Captain John Bailey's hunting party and one was a female slave.

In particular, the warriors disrupted both soldiers and civilians by threatening their security. They created insecurity by simply making their presence known through the destruction of the crops and animals. At the time, the Chickasaw might have "skulked" away, feeling they had failed. Whether they knew it or not, however, they had prevailed, because Virginia could not send supplies to maintain the post.⁶³ The fort was not abandoned immediately. But the beleaguered post eventually proved to be too difficult for the distant state government to support effectively.⁶⁴

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

When the results of the military engagements at Fort Jefferson are assessed, it is important to note that prior treatments concluded that the severity of the attacks, the destruction of the corn crop, and the killing of the livestock forced the evacuation. In concluding this paper, I will explore additional factors in the evacuation.

Relatively few deaths at Fort Jefferson resulted from the Chickasaw attacks—only eight of forty-eight deaths. Illness caused twenty-eight of the forty-eight deaths between 1780 and 1781. Casualties did not compel the inhabitants or the garrison to leave.⁶⁵

Although most of the post's corn crop was destroyed and most of its livestock was killed during the big raid in August, the officers almost certainly salvaged everything they could. To assess the impact

63 The quartermaster records from Fort Jefferson clearly demonstrate that there were no shortages of any supplies other than food. However food was extremely scarce. See Carstens, "Issues at Fort Jefferson, 1780-1781: the Quartermaster Books of John Dodge and Martin Carney," 54-75.

64 Fort Jefferson was abandoned on 8 June 1781. Colonel Montgomery to Governor Thomas Nelson, 10 August 1781, in James, ed., *Clark Papers*, 1, 585-86.

65 The Fort Jefferson coffin-maker made thirty-eight coffins for men, women, and children during 1780 and 1781. See *Clark Papers*, Virginia State Library, box 20. Therefore, most of the deaths probably resulted from disease (malaria) as suggested by Captain George in his letter to Clark on 28 October 1780, reporting, "numbers daily dying." See James, ed., *Clark Papers*, 1: 461-62 and Setneke, *Clark Adventure*, 465-66. Efforts were made to procure "Jesuit Bark," which contained quinine that helped combat the symptoms of malaria. See Carstens, *Quartermaster Books* (forthcoming).

of the damage, Captain George had his two most trusted assistants, William Clark and Leonard Helm, inventory the community's remaining food supplies. Moreover, desperately needed supplies and men, such as Captain Richard McCarty's company, arrived within a few days from Kaskaskia and elsewhere.⁶⁶ The garrison did not, in fact, suffer emergency shortages of rations, but neither did it ever again enjoy a surplus. The attackers did indeed manage to destroy much of the fort's subsistence base, but I believe these losses were insufficient alone to force the evacuation.

Neither did the Chickasaw attacks cause a manpower shortage sufficient to force abandonment. Certainly civilians did leave the settlement and soldiers did desert the fort in the months following the second assault. Colonel Montgomery reported that a majority of the settlers, discouraged by the destruction of their crops and livestock and by rampant disease, left during September and October 1780.⁶⁷ Yet this was seven months before the soldiers abandoned the fort. Surviving muster rolls and vouchers indicate, moreover, that despite a number of desertions, Captain George continued to command between one hundred and one hundred and fifty troops throughout the period between the attacks and the evacuation. He even felt confident enough of his strength to send out retaliatory raids against the Chickasaw on 10 September 1780 and on 1 January 1781.⁶⁸

66 Patrick Kennedy, commissary at Kaskaskia, received 307 pounds of fresh beef from Monsieur Charleville, and orders from Colonel Montgomery to purchase \$1,000 worth of supplies for Fort Jefferson. On 9 September 1780, the officer's mess at Fort Jefferson purchased fifty-seven pounds of beef from Robert Ford, a civilian. McCarty's company, along with sixty-five Kaskaskia Indians, left Kaskaskia for Fort Jefferson on 4 September 1780 with supplies and assistance. On 19 September Colonel Montgomery ordered Quartermaster Dodge to purchase \$10,000 worth of supplies for the troops at the fort, including salt, flour, and corn. On 25 September Dodge procured 2,820 weight (pounds) flour and 327 12/40 bushels of corn. Clark Papers, Virginia State Library, box 13.

67 Montgomery to Clark, 22 September 1780 and George to Clark, 28 October 1780 in James, ed., *Clark Papers* 1: 456-57, 461-62.

68 The avenging party sent in January returned with two scalps. Clark Papers, Virginia State Library, boxes 13 and 16.

Clearly, George believed that his garrison was strong enough to defend the post.

Nevertheless, the post and community were abandoned on very short notice. An examination of the quartermaster books and various vouchers from the fort reveals a normal routine until 5 June 1781.⁶⁹ Between 5 June and 7 June, however, a significant quantity of supplies was issued to civilians and soldiers, and the entire garrison pulled out on 8 June 1781.⁷⁰ It would appear that the immediate cause of the withdrawal was not Indian depredations, food shortages, military desertions, or civilian flight. Collectively, however, these factors had surely taken their toll on the resolve of the Fort Jefferson and Clarksville populations.

If these troubles singly or together did not prompt the evacuation, might something else have contributed to Captain George's decision? Perhaps the decision rested with George Rogers Clark, recently promoted to brigadier general. Writing from Pittsburgh on 20 and 21 May 1781, Clark sent two important letters to George Washington.⁷¹ Both letters referred indirectly to Clark's plans to attack Detroit that summer and represented his efforts to extract troops and supplies from Washington, who had already requested the Board of War to help outfit his expedition.⁷² At the Falls of the Ohio, also on 21 May 1781, Commissary William Shannon wrote Clark that he had prepared a large shipment of foodstuffs for dispatch to Fort Jefferson.⁷³ Obviously, he would not have done this if he had known of plans to abandon that post. But neither would have Clark informed a commissary of every aspect of his design to assemble every soldier available in the western theater for a final push against Detroit.

69 Ibid., boxes 20, 48-50.

70 Colonel Montgomery to Governor Nelson, 10 August 1781, James, ed., *Clark Papers*, 1: 585-86.

71 Clark to Washington, 20 May 1781, *ibid.*, 1: 551-54.

72 Washington to the Board of War, 20 April 1781, *ibid.*, 1: 535.

73 Shannon to Clark, 21 May 1781, *ibid.*, 1: 554-55.

Would the commandant of Fort Jefferson have abandoned his post without orders from Clark? We know that Clark's appointee, *Captain Robert George*, once refused to turn over his command to a *major* assigned by Colonel Montgomery unless he received specific orders from Clark.⁷⁴ Conscious of his responsibility, George also understood well the importance his superiors attached to maintaining a garrison at Fort Jefferson, as revealed in his letter to Montgomery on 2 September 1780.⁷⁵ He would not have decided lightly to leave the banks of the Mississippi to Virginia's Chickasaw and British enemies.

Did Captain George actually quit Fort Jefferson so abruptly in order to add the strength of his garrison to one of Clark's thrusts into the Ohio country? It is appealing to offer the possibility of a missing document or verbal order to justify the evacuation, especially in light of Clark's expected expedition against Detroit later that year. The absence of documentation supporting this hypothesis, however, makes a better case that a distant Clark sent no such order. It may be only circumstantial that the abandonment of the fort took place at about the same time Clark was preparing for Detroit, especially because of Fort Jefferson's many logistical problems. We may never know the actual reasons for the post's evacuation. Was it because of the Indian depredations, desertions, deaths due to disease, a lack of supplies and sustenance, or, possibly, a secret order?⁷⁶ Whatever the cause or combination of causes, the remnants of the Illinois Battalion at Fort Jefferson, by quickly withdrawing to Fort Nelson at Louisville, placed themselves once again in the central Kentucky region where they could more effectively protect the center of Kentucky's growing population by whatever military measures Clark might devise.

74 George to Clark, 28 October 1780 and Williams to Clark, 28 October 1780, *ibid.*, 1: 461-62, 463.

75 George to Montgomery, 2 September 1780, see Seineke, *Clark Adventure*, 457-59.

76 Montgomery to Nelson, in James, ed., *Clark Papers*, 1: 585-86.