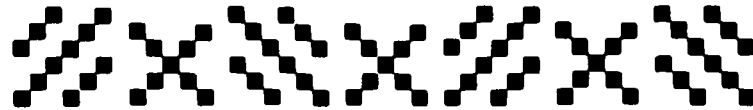


George Rogers Clark and  
the Campaign in the West:  
The Five Major Documents

*Robert M. Sutton\**



To be told that the only American invasion during the Revolutionary War in which enemy territory was captured and retained was George Rogers Clark's foray into the Illinois Country in the late 1770s would surprise most Americans. Nonetheless, this was true. Not nearly so well known in American revolutionary history as the thrilling drama of Lexington and Concord, the gallant defense of Bunker Hill, or the inspired victories at Trenton and Princeton, the western campaign of Clark and his intrepid band of riflemen culminating in the occupation of Kaskaskia in 1778 and the recapture of Vincennes in 1779 is certainly one of the great epics of American history.

Clark had been commissioned by Governor Patrick Henry of Virginia to raise a force of frontier volunteers and had been furnished with two sets of orders. The public orders directed him to use his small army to defend Kentucky (then a county of Virginia) against the attacks of Indians led by British agents, while the secret orders authorized him to carry the war deep into enemy territory. This would mean attacking the English strongholds in the Illinois Country, north of the Ohio River. The interaction of Colonel Clark and his men with the British, French, and Indians of the region constitutes the story of the war in the West. Even though Clark was continually frustrated in his efforts to capture Detroit and completely neutralize the western Indians, he was successful in disrupting British military plans as well as in persuading a number of tribes to cease their attacks on American frontier settlements.

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In spite of disappointments and setbacks the American presence was never completely removed until the vast Northwest became a part of the United States with the signing of the Treaty of Paris in 1783.

The sources upon which Clark historiography rests are extensive and reasonably well known. In attempting to account for the abundance of Clark manuscripts, one must remember that he was a respected Virginia military officer, honored with high rank and bearing enormous responsibilities. In this capacity he had a voluminous official correspondence in addition to a modest private correspondence. Furthermore, he belonged to a large, harmonious, and affectionate family who corresponded extensively and who saved their letters and papers with such enthusiasm and industry that the historian is often torn between admiration and despair.

In preserving these materials the pioneering work of Lyman C. Draper stands out above all others. Draper intended to write a biography of George Rogers Clark and collected material in a most aggressive fashion for several decades with that aim in view. The result is that a great body of information, much of it contemporary in nature, is available in the Draper Collection housed in the State Historical Society of Wisconsin, Madison. In fact, the Clark Papers constitute the largest single collection in the Draper manuscripts. Another sizeable body of Clark-related papers is to be found in The Filson Club of Louisville, Kentucky. Much of it placed there by Temple Bodley, it represents his searches in connection with his Clark biography published in 1926. The Virginia State Archives' collection of Clark documents consists of nearly twenty thousand individual items, including the long-lost financial records and accounts which were discovered in the attic of the Virginia Capitol in 1913.<sup>1</sup> Additional Clark papers are located in the Missouri Historical Society (St. Louis), in the Library of Congress, and in the collected works of such prominent Americans as George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, Patrick Henry, and George Mason.

The most readily available and thus the most useful published collection of Clark documents is the magnificent James Alton James edition which comprises two volumes in the long series of Illinois Historical Collections. *George Rogers Clark Papers, 1771-1781* is Volume VIII of the *Collections of the Illinois State Historical Library*, and those covering the years

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<sup>1</sup> John Bakeless, *Background to Glory: The Life of George Rogers Clark* (Philadelphia, 1957), 329.



LYMAN C. DRAPER, ABOUT 1881

Courtesy State Historical Society of Wisconsin.

1781-1784 make up Volume XIX.<sup>2</sup> There has been no systematic collection and publication of Clark papers covering the period 1785 to the year of his death, 1818.

One of Clark's recent biographers has called attention to the irony inherent in the fact that he is perhaps the most copiously documented American frontier hero, and yet one of the least known.<sup>3</sup> Though the most familiar biographies of Clark were written in the twentieth century, a sizeable body of Clark literature developed during the nineteenth century. Not surprisingly much of this took the form of hero-worshipping homage not always reserved for mythological figures.

There are those who believe that Clark intended to be his own biographer and that the *Memoir* (which will be discussed at greater length later in the article) represented only the

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<sup>2</sup> James Alton James, ed., *George Rogers Clark Papers, 1771-1781* (Springfield, 1912); James Alton James, ed., *George Rogers Clark Papers, 1781-1784* (Springfield, 1926).

<sup>3</sup> Bakeless, *Background to Glory*, 7.

preliminary phase of a much larger work.<sup>4</sup> Unfortunately, Clark's effort carried the story only through 1779, and that portion which he did finish lay in obscurity for many years. As time passed, Clark's fame was confined more and more to his admiring family and to a small group of devoted friends, most of whom lived in the immediate vicinity of Louisville. His death in 1818 seems to have gone unnoticed beyond the borders of his own state.

Interest in a Clark biography persisted, nevertheless, and a younger brother, William (of Lewis and Clark fame) was diligent in collecting and preserving many of the family papers and documents. Dr. John Croghan, a nephew, seriously considered undertaking the biographical task and actually went to the length of recovering a number of Clark's papers which had been previously lent to several prospective biographers.<sup>5</sup> At about the same time, both Jared Sparks and Washington Irving indicated a flicker of interest in the Clark story. Sparks actually made overtures to the heirs in Louisville for material which would have enabled him to include Clark in his series of *American Biographies*, but he did not receive sufficient encouragement to pursue his plan. Irving stopped in Louisville while on a western tour in 1832 and was approached by friends of Clark with the request that he undertake the biography. Engaged at the time with what must have been less noble themes, Irving missed the opportunity to work his magic on the Clark saga.<sup>6</sup> The temptation is strong to speculate on how differently this portion of western history might have been received if either Sparks or Irving had been willing "to bring General Clark forward," as Thomas Jefferson once phrased it.<sup>7</sup>

On at least four other occasions during the first half of the nineteenth century serious beginnings were made to produce an adequate and reliable Clark biography. All of them came to either failure or frustration, however, in a mournful repetition of tragedy and unfavorable circumstance. Two of the would-be authors met violent and untimely deaths, a third soon left the area as a result of a federal appointment in New Orleans, and the fourth seems simply to have lost interest in the project.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Louise Phelps Kellogg, "The Early Biographers of George Rogers Clark," *American Historical Review*, XXXV (January, 1930), 295.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 298.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>7</sup> P. L. Ford, ed., *The Writings of Thomas Jefferson* (10 vols., New York, 1892-1899), V, 295.

<sup>8</sup> Kellogg, "The Early Biographers of George Rogers Clark," 297-300.

Mann Butler's *A History of the Commonwealth of Kentucky* (Louisville, 1834) contained the first lengthy treatment of Clark's Illinois mission, but he, too, failed in his earlier intention to produce a full-length life of Clark.

One figure stands alone among the company of individuals who entertained the hope of writing the definitive biography of George Rogers Clark. That person is Lyman Copeland Draper, and the fact that he, too, failed in his life-long ambition to produce the Clark opus is largely forgotten in the light of his truly prodigious accomplishment. "I am very passionately devoted to the Pioneer history of the romantic West," Draper wrote in 1842. "My tastes and predilections long since led me into the inviting field of Western pioneer history—so much of which has been but partially and imperfectly explored. I have found it a far richer field of epic than I had dared to hope—so much so that I shall doubtless make it . . . the study of my whole life."<sup>9</sup>

For almost fifty years Draper translated that intention into restless action. Though his interest in western history was wide-ranging, he never abandoned his Clark study, and he pursued every possible source of information with a spirit and a relentlessness which can be exhausting even to his readers. His conception was encyclopedic. In the course of his searching he visited both Washington and Richmond and spent weeks copying from the archives there. He had copies of pertinent documents made for him in the British and Spanish archives; he corresponded with the families of the British officers captured by Clark; he visited and interviewed every available relative or descendant of the Clark family; and he sought out as many of those who constituted Clark's army as he could find. He learned all he could about the routes Clark followed and the exact position of every camping place, river, or ford mentioned on the way. He sought information about Clark's personal characteristics and habits; bits and pieces of information, no matter how trivial, found their way into his notes. At the Sanitary Fair in Cincinnati in 1863, he was able to purchase the papers of the Bowman, Logan, and Pogue families—all Kentucky pioneers. Such activity continued for the remainder of his life.<sup>10</sup>

Draper is remembered as the collector par excellence rather than as an author or even an historian in the most

<sup>9</sup> Lyman C. Draper to Col. William Martin, September 29, 1842, Draper Manuscripts (State Historical Society of Wisconsin) 3XX8.

<sup>10</sup> Draper MSS. 17J124; 17J125; Gen. Benjamin Logan to Joseph Lindsay, February 18, 1782, Draper MSS. 32J5.

limited sense of the word. Disappointed in his own failure to leave behind published works of timeless value, he has placed later generations in his debt by his indefatigable efforts to preserve the warp and woof of history. But for Draper's protecting care, who can estimate how many valuable sources might have been lost to later generations? And instead of leaving a life of Clark, magnificent as that might have been, his efforts and achievements have made possible not one but many Clark biographies. Thanks to Draper, Clark's exploits do not require romantic exaggeration; the man and his character are fascinating without the addition of myth and legend.

This one fact stands out: quite apart from the availability of evidence and the manner in which that evidence is handled, all studies of George Rogers Clark and the Revolutionary War in the West rest on five major historical sources, all of which arose directly out of the frontier campaign.<sup>11</sup> Truth is often said to be stranger than fiction. The contemporary records which describe Clark's mission to Illinois in 1778 and 1779, having stood the test of time, have a ring of verisimilitude about them. Needing no apology and requiring no embellishment, they have emerged after nearly two centuries of scrutiny as trustworthy accounts of an incredible series of events. The leading American sources for the history of the West between 1777 and 1779 are Clark's diary, which records scattered events between December 25, 1776, and March 30, 1778; his journal, which gives the earliest known account of events, after February 23, 1779, connected with the capture of Vincennes; and Joseph Bowman's journal, which contains entries from January 29 to March 20, 1779, and which describes the Vincennes expedition in somewhat more detail and often in very human terms.<sup>12</sup> Much of the information concerning the hardships and suffering endured on the Vincennes march comes from the Bowman Journal. All three of these accounts are brief—both in terms of space and time. Two additional sources, each longer and much more detailed than those mentioned above, round out the contemporary (and not so contemporary) information on Clark and his Illinois venture.

The first of these is the so-called Mason letter. This remarkable document, forty printed pages in length, was addressed to George Mason, the noted Virginian and longtime

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<sup>11</sup> James Alton James, *The Life of George Rogers Clark* (Chicago, 1928), 113.

<sup>12</sup> All of these documents are printed in the James edition of the Clark Papers cited above.

friend of Clark and his family. It was dated November 19, 1779, which means that it was written almost nine months after the recapture of Vincennes. James believed that one of Clark's companions, more literate than the general, acted as his secretary in writing the letter and may have helped with its composition. The signature, clearly, is in Clark's own hand.<sup>13</sup> The location of the Mason letter was unknown for a number of years. Correspondence reveals that Clark, while composing his memoir, sought unsuccessfully to ascertain its whereabouts.<sup>14</sup> Some years later Draper discovered it in the possession of Mason's grandson, Colonel John Mason. The younger Mason refused to give the document to Draper but assured him of his intention to deposit it in a public institution for safekeeping. Colonel Mason subsequently placed it in the Kentucky Historical Society, where it remained until that organization was dissolved at a later date. Soon after the close of the Civil War the narrative was in the possession of Henry Pirtle, former president of the society, who permitted it to be published, perhaps for the first time, in 1869.<sup>15</sup> At the time James completed the first volume of the *Clark Papers* (1912) the original letter was still in the hands of the Pirtle family, in the possession of Judge James S. Pirtle of Louisville. Following his death the Mason letter was purchased by the president of The Filson Club, Rogers Clark Ballard Thruston, who presented it to the library of that eminent society. It is certainly one of the most valuable existing documents of American history and the only major Clark paper from that period which did not become part of the Draper Collection.

Considerably more controversy has swirled about the Clark memoir, which is the last and longest of the five major sources of information on the Illinois campaign.<sup>16</sup> Theodore Roosevelt, historian, was one of Clark's severest critics, and it was toward the memoir that Roosevelt directed much of his fire. The document consists of 128 manuscript pages, and the original is in the State Historical Society of Wisconsin. It provides by far the

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<sup>13</sup> James, *Clark Papers, 1771-1781*, pp. 114-54; Temple Bodley, "Clark's 'Mason Letter' and 'Memoir,'" *History Quarterly of The Filson Club*, III (July, 1929), 164.

<sup>14</sup> James, *Clark Papers, 1771-1781*, pp. 622-23; Kellogg, "The Early Biographers of George Rogers Clark," 295.

<sup>15</sup> Bodley, "Clark's 'Mason Letter' and 'Memoir,'" 170; Henry Pirtle, ed., *Colonel George Rogers Clark's Sketch of his Campaign in the Illinois in 1778-79* (Cincinnati, 1869).

<sup>16</sup> James, *Clark Papers, 1771-1781*, pp. 208-302; Draper MSS. 47J1 ff.

most detailed account of affairs occurring in the West between 1775 and 1779.

Undoubtedly, Clark had been importuned from time to time to provide more information concerning events with which he had been connected during the war years. There began, during the summer of 1789, an interesting exchange of correspondence between Clark and John Brown, Kentucky's territorial delegate to the new federal Congress. Brown pointed out that "posterity will regret the loss of what would constitute the most interesting Pages in the Annals of the Western World & would be an ornament to the History of the American Revolution," adding that "All wish to know it & you alone are in possession of this Information . . ."<sup>17</sup>

Clark, already entered upon that dreadful treadmill of loneliness and despair which was to shadow the remainder of his life, replied somewhat bitterly that to comply with Brown's request would result in "destroying a resolution that I have long concluded on, that of burying the rise and progress of the War in this quarter in oblivion; which is in my power, as all light cast on it by another person, must be faint indeed." At several points in the letter Clark's animus boils over. For him, the victorious leader, the war in the West had brought only sorrow and ruin. He could not, he said, "be void of some affection for the people I had suffered so much for," and for that reason he had destroyed many of the papers that aroused his sense of injustice and "tend to aggravate the crime of the people." By removing himself from the reminders of the indignities which he had suffered, it was his hope that "I might again reconcile myself to live in a country that I was always fond of, and with people whose prosperity I have, until lately, studied with delight."<sup>18</sup>

Eventually, Clark settled down to writing his memoir after apparently considering at first trying to provide the documents and having it "ghostwritten." In his initial letter Brown had indicated that James Madison was very much interested in the project and was willing, if Clark would furnish the material, to provide it with an "arrangement & Style so as to usher it into the world in a Dress suitable to the importance of the Subject."<sup>19</sup> Clark seems to have composed the bulk of the memoir in 1789 and 1790 and to have completed it in 1791. Once

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<sup>17</sup> James, *Clark Papers, 1771-1781*, pp. 619-24.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid*; Clark to John Brown, January 20, 1789, Draper MSS. 27CC29.

<sup>19</sup> James, *Clark Papers, 1771-1781*, p. 620; Bodley, "Clark's 'Mason Letter' and 'Memoir'," 166.



finished, nothing in particular seems to have been done with it. Neither Jefferson nor Madison mention it in their correspondence, and Brown seems to have forgotten that he ever asked its author to write it. That it was preserved at all may be due to the concern which William Clark had for family records and documents.<sup>20</sup> Attention was first called to the memoir in Butler's *History of the Commonwealth of Kentucky*, published in 1834; John B. Dillon, who apparently owned a copy, made extensive use of it in his *Historical Notes of the Discovery and Settlement of the Territory of the United States Northwest of the River Ohio*, which appeared in 1843. Dillon subsequently published the memoir in a slightly abridged form in his *History of Indiana* (Indianapolis, 1859). How Draper came into possession of the original is not known, but he did, and, as mentioned earlier, this priceless document has rested in the responsible care of the State Historical Society of Wisconsin for nearly a century.

These five personal and (except for the memoir) very nearly contemporary records furnish the foundation for our knowledge of the Revolutionary War in the West. Taken together they provide a valid and dependable narrative of events in Illinois during 1778 and 1779. It is an exciting and rewarding experience to compare the documents and to note the points and places at which they depend on each other. While it is possible in most cases to check salient events from the vantage point of two or more of the original documents, each document has an independence and an integrity of its own which contributes to its credibility.

For example, when Clark was getting down to serious work on the memoir (in 1790), he tried unsuccessfully to recover the long letter (or a copy thereof) which he had written to Mason more than a decade earlier. Consequently, the Mason letter is not a possible source or point of origin for the memoir, nor is the memoir merely an enlarged version of the Mason letter. Granting the influence of memory (and Clark possessed a remarkably sharp and active one), the two documents were written independent of one another and yet are in basic agreement; the points of difference are remarkably few and relatively insignificant. The memoir is more than twice as long as the Mason letter, much more detailed, and covers a longer span of time.

On the other hand, it is entirely possible that Clark still had the original of his diary in his possession while he was

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<sup>20</sup> Bakeless, *Background to Glory*, 7, 350.

writing the memoir. The diary provides a sketchy record of events between Christmas Day, 1776, and the spring prior to his departure for the Illinois country.<sup>21</sup> In both documents the facts are related in much the same order, and there is often only slight variation in the statements, although the memoir is far more complete. Clark must have felt himself fortunate at that point, for all who reconstruct a narrative of past events recognize the value of a log or even a sketchy diary.

Ironically, Clark was not able to use the journal, which he seems to have prepared just prior to the surrender of Fort Sackville and subsequent to that event.<sup>22</sup> This more or less official message was being carried to Governor Patrick Henry by one of Clark's trusted messengers, William Myers, when the latter was ambushed and killed by Indians near the falls of the Ohio.<sup>23</sup> As a result of this unhappy occurrence the fragmentary journal found its way into British hands and rests today in the British Museum in London where it can be viewed by interested persons. Three weeks after the death of Myers, Clark prepared another account of the fall of Vincennes; guarding against a similar mishap, he made more than one copy. The official dispatch was again directed to Governor Henry with a copy going to Thomas Jefferson,<sup>24</sup> who succeeded Henry as governor of Virginia on June 1, 1779.

Most of the controversy which has arisen concerning the historicity of the Clark-related documents has focused on the memoir, and much of that was generated by Roosevelt. Throughout most of the nineteenth century those authors who touched on the war in the West or who brought Clark into their state histories accepted (though perhaps uncritically) the reliability of the memoir.<sup>25</sup> Not only historians, but novelists also, such as Winston Churchill in *The Crossing* (1904) and Maurice Thompson in *Alice of Old Vincennes* (1900), drew heavily upon it and accepted the statements found there seemingly without hesitation.<sup>26</sup>

It remained for Roosevelt to first question the memoir as an historical source. In volume two of his *The Winning of the West*, he wrote: "It was written at the desire of Presidents

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<sup>21</sup> It is printed in James, *Clark Papers, 1771-1781*, pp. 20-28.

<sup>22</sup> See *ibid.*, 164-68.

<sup>23</sup> Dale Van Every, *A Company of Heroes: The American Frontier, 1775-1783* (New York, 1962), 194; James, *Clark Papers, 1771-1781*, pp. 169, 309.

<sup>24</sup> Clark to Patrick Henry, April 29, 1779, in James, *Clark Papers, 1771-1781*, pp. 169-74.

<sup>25</sup> James, *George Rogers Clark*, 474-75.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*

Jefferson and Madison; and therefore some thirty or forty years after the events of which it speaks."<sup>27</sup> Of course, Roosevelt was both ill informed and in error on this point.<sup>28</sup> Still, he believed the manuscript contained "some rather serious errors" and described it as "written by an old man who had squandered his energies and sunk into deserved obscurity."<sup>29</sup> Clark was, in fact, about thirty-eight years old when the memoir was composed, though, of course, Roosevelt had miscalculated its time of preparation. While indulging in an almost savage indictment of Clark, Roosevelt also revealed an early flicker of what is sometimes described as the prejudice of the eastern literary establishment when he wrote: "Unfortunately, most of the small western historians who have written about Clark have really damaged his reputation by the absurd inflation of their language . . . . Moreover, they base his claims to greatness not on his really great deeds, but on the half-imaginary feats of childish cunning he related in his old age."<sup>30</sup> One cannot but wonder whether in Roosevelt's view the mid-winter march to Vincennes, which occupied more than twenty pages in the memoir, would come under the heading of "really great deeds" or "half-imaginary feats of childish cunning!"

While it would be futile to attempt to prove that the memoir is trustworthy in every detail, it receives generally high marks for accuracy and authenticity when compared with the other documents of the period. History is clearly on the side of "the small western historians who have written about Clark." The Rooseveltian disservice to Clark's memory (as well as to his veracity) was a momentary thing, now largely forgotten.<sup>31</sup> There are literally dozens of events described in the memoir which can be compared with one or more of the contemporary documents. The conclusion is certainly warranted that the memoir is not made up of the recollections and reminiscences of an old man seeking to be dramatic even as he sought public recognition and approval. To grant that the memoir may not be

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<sup>27</sup> Theodore Roosevelt, *The Winning of the West* (4 vols., New York, 1889), II, 36.

<sup>28</sup> Roosevelt carelessly accepted John Dillon's statement in his *History of Indiana* (Indianapolis, 1859), that the memoir had been written at the request of Presidents Jefferson and Madison. Actually the request mentioned Mr. Madison; Jefferson was not mentioned in the initial correspondence.

<sup>29</sup> Roosevelt, *Winning of the West*, II, 36, 55.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 82.

<sup>31</sup> Temple Bodley refers to Roosevelt as the "ever brilliant but superficial and reckless Roosevelt" and suggests that except for what he found in books, he knew little of western history or of Clark. Bodley, "Clark's 'Mason Letter' and 'Memoir,'" 166.

as authoritative on a particular point as are some of the other contemporary documents detracts little from its overall worth and historical value. At the very least the memoir must be accepted as a trustworthy supplement to all of them.<sup>32</sup>

Perhaps a final observation is in order concerning the journal kept by Captain (later Major) Joseph Bowman, one of Clark's most valuable commanders. Of the five original documents examined here, this is the only one not authored by Clark. There is clear evidence that Clark had access to a copy of it or was thoroughly familiar with it when he was working on the memoir.<sup>33</sup> Prepared under the most trying of circumstances, one can only marvel at the discipline and fortitude of leaders who managed to keep an almost daily record of events in the face of nearly indescribable obstacles. The remarkable thing is that any of the contemporary diaries and journals actually composed in the field ever survived. Bowman's journal did not.<sup>34</sup> Though the original has never been located, copies exist in the George Washington Papers in the Library of Congress and in the Draper Collection. A copy was published in the Louisville *Literary News*, for November 24, 1840, and Henry Pirtle included it in his *Colonel George Rogers Clark's Sketch of his Campaign in the Illinois in 1778-79* (Cincinnati, 1869). Clearly one of the key sources of primary evidence in reconstructing the Clark record, its account of the hardships which drove Clark's men to the limits of physical endurance on their march to Vincennes has taxed the credulity of readers from that day to this.

The unknown author (apparently one of his own men) who later revised Bowman's journal has left a most fitting and thoughtful epitaph for Clark and his gallant band. "Although a handful in comparison to other armies, they have done themselves and the cause they were fighting for, credit and honor, and deserve a place in History for future ages; that their posterity may know the difficulty their forefathers had gone through for their liberty and freedom."<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> These matters are dealt with in a most complete and impressive fashion in Appendix I of James, *George Rogers Clark*, 474-94.

<sup>33</sup> James, *Clark Papers, 1771-1781*, p. 628; Kellogg, "The Early Biographers of George Rogers Clark," 295.

<sup>34</sup> Draper tells about paying a New York dealer twelve dollars for a mutilated page of what purported to be an original Clark letter. It was, in fact, a page from the missing Bowman journal. Apparently this is all that remains of that priceless document. Draper MSS. 47J165.

<sup>35</sup> James, *Clark Papers, 1771-1781*, p. 611; Pirtle, *Colonel George Rogers Clark's Sketch*, 94.