

Indiana Historical Society

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The death of D. Frank Culbertson, of Vincennes, on October 16, 1942, brought vividly to my mind his visit to the office of the Historical Bureau in the State House in February, 1925. After explaining the probability of a new bridge over the Wabash River at the foot of Vigo Street, Vincennes, just above the site of Fort Sackville, he asked me if the Indiana Historical Society could not be induced to erect a statue of George Rogers Clark on the site of the fort, the surrender of which on February 25, 1779, was the climax of his heroic "Conquest of the Old Northwest." The enlargement of the plan of the proposed memorial and its realization were the center of his activities for the following fifteen years. The story will bear retelling here.

The approach of the one hundred and fiftieth anniversary of the surrender of Colonel Henry Hamilton made the project timely, and the observance of other anniversaries of the War of the American Revolution brought it added enthusiasm. Not long afterwards, Culbertson, Mason J. Niblack, and I went over the ground at Vincennes. It became apparent to us that something more than a statue would be appropriate. A plan, which at first seemed visionary, of acquiring the area between the church of St. Francis Xavier and the river and between the future bridge and DuBois Street, was suggested. At a meeting of the Vincennes Historical Society on August 25, 1925, Culbertson and Niblack secured the passage of rousing resolutions calling for a national celebration of the anniversary of the capture of Vincennes and asking the Indiana Historical Society to "take full charge of this celebration." They presented these resolutions to the executive committee of the society at South Bend during a historical pilgrimage which the society conducted to that city, La Porte, Dune Acres, Gary, Hazleton, and Goodland, August 28-30—it was for them the whole object of the pilgrimage. At the annual meeting of the Indiana Historical Society on December 11 of the same year, at the suggestion of the executive committee, the society adopted a resolution presented by Lew M. O'Bannon, of Corydon, authorizing the executive committee to appoint a committee "to cooperate with similar committees from other

states that were formed from the Northwest Territory for the purpose of planning and putting into execution a program for the adequate celebration of the 150th anniversary of the capture of Vincennes by George Rogers Clark."

The memorial committee, thus named, at its first meeting, on January 26, 1926, added D. Frank Culbertson to its membership and elected William Fortune chairman. The effort to secure cooperation from the other states of the Old Northwest, continued throughout the movement, while it had a far-reaching educational effect, got no financial contributions. I well recall Culbertson's eloquent presentation of the Clark memorial to a committee of the Ohio Legislature—which resulted in bringing to life a bill (all hope of which had been lost) appropriating a considerable sum for the acquisition and marking of sites in Ohio associated with the War of the American Revolution.

The committee operated on an appropriation of nine hundred dollars from the Historical Society, a grant of several hundred dollars from the Society of Indiana Pioneers, contributions secured by Culbertson in Vincennes, and help from the Governor's Contingent Fund.

It was soon decided to ask the city of Vincennes to purchase the old blockhouse square, to have both the city of Vincennes and Knox County issue bonds to the amount of one hundred thousand dollars each for the purchase of additional land, to introduce a bill in the Indiana General Assembly for a tax levy, the proceeds of which would be used for the purchase of land and for the erection of a memorial, and to ask Congress to make an appropriation. The pledge of the city of Vincennes to present the old blockhouse square to the memorial organization was given at a large luncheon at the Gibault Boys' School on May 24, and in due time bond issues of one hundred thousand dollars each by Vincennes and Knox County were authorized by the legislature. Both were subsequently issued and sold. Culbertson proved a consummate master in drafting bills providing for the erection of a memorial by the state of Indiana and for an appropriation by Congress and in promoting their passage. The former created the George Rogers Clark Memorial Commission of Indiana, with fifteen members, and made a tax levy which yielded approximately four hundred thousand dollars. It was passed by unanimous vote in the house, and

with only one dissenting voice in the senate, and was approved by Governor Ed Jackson, February 23, 1927. The bill introduced in Congress about the same time made little progress during that session.

Meanwhile, from the very beginning, an extensive educational program was carried out by the committee of the Indiana Historical Society and by the state commission when it took over. The *Indiana History Bulletin* devoted part of each issue to the memorial movement. Many newspapers carried full accounts of the meetings and of events of the Revolution in the West. A pilgrimage was made to the birthplace of George Rogers Clark near Monticello, Virginia, on the one hundred and seventy-fifth anniversary of his birth, November 19, 1752; the one hundred and fiftieth anniversary of each significant event in Clark's campaign in Kentucky, Illinois, and Indiana was successfully and appropriately observed. The John Hancock Life Insurance Company made Clark the subject of one of its illustrated historical pamphlets and circulated hundreds of thousands of copies. Milo M. Quaife's edition of Clark's account of his campaigns and Colonel Henry Hamilton's report (both with corrected spelling and grammar) was reprinted; and a copy was presented to President Coolidge and to each member of Congress, with his name in gilt letters on the front cover. It became apparent afterward that many, probably the majority, of these read the book. Several biographies of Clark and accounts of the conquest of the Old Northwest were issued by commercial publishers. George Rogers Clark was the theme of innumerable public addresses before historical societies, clubs, teachers' meetings, and hereditary patriotic organizations. The Italians of Indianapolis organized a Francis Vigo Memorial Association to memorialize Clark's friend and financial backer.

At the hearing before the Joint Committee on the Library at the 69th Congress, January 18, 1927, the significance of the taking of Fort Sackville was presented by speakers from Indiana and other states, including the late Dr. J. Franklin Jameson. A favorable committee report was obtained after weeks of personal interviews by Mr. Culbertson with nearly all of the leaders of the United States Senate and House of Representatives. A bill strongly supported by Senator Simeon D. Fess of Ohio, Senator James E. Watson of Indiana, and others passed the Senate on February 24, 1928. Supported by Representatives Will R. Wood, Robert

Luce of Massachusetts, chairman of the House Committee on the Library, Ralph Gilbert of Kentucky, and others, the bill passed the House of Representatives on May 7, 1928. As passed, the bill created the George Rogers Clark Sesqui-centennial Commission of the United States and appropriated a million dollars for the construction of a memorial at Vincennes by that commission. Thus the movement, begun as a historical society memorial project, promoted as an interstate celebration, and changed by Indiana statute to a state project, assumed the form of a national memorial to be erected by a United States commission on land provided by the city of Vincennes, the county of Knox, and the state of Indiana.

Plans for the memorial developed apace with the scope of the movement. The committee of the Indiana Historical Society engaged H. Van Buren Magonigle, an architect of New York City, to make a study of the whole situation and draft a general plan for the memorial. He insisted upon the enlargement of the grounds, proposed a monumental structure, and urged the changing of the proposed Wabash River bridge from a steel truss type to a concrete structure. The federal commission engaged William E. Parsons, of Chicago, as architectural advisor and the firm of Bennett, Parsons, and Frost as architect of the grounds. In a competition arranged by Parsons, the plans submitted by Frederic C. Hirons, of New York City, were selected for the memorial building. It took three years, numerous meetings in Indiana, two formal visits of the commission to Governor Len Small, of Illinois—the last time with Governor Ed Jackson in the company—and the cooperation with Illinois in building a bridge at Mount Carmel to get the present beautiful concrete bridge instead of the proposed steel truss bridge over the Wabash. A veritable fight was necessary to have the memorial building of suitable granite, in the face of the opposition of Indiana limestone interests. An additional appropriation was made by the state of Indiana. Culbertson, by this time well acquainted with most of the members of Congress, secured three additional appropriations from the United States government. The greatest disappointment of the whole movement was the failure to secure the removal of the railroad track from the memorial grounds. The final success of the movement was reached in the dedication of the memorial by the President of the United States on June 14, 1936.