

Henry Hamilton and West Florida

*Edited by Robert R. Rea**

While British armies dressed their ranks with parade-ground deliberation and the Revolutionary forces of Washington haltingly parodied the European pattern or reverted to their native woods and fences, on the periphery of the British American empire there sputtered and flared a war of less heroic stature but of far greater dimensions. Essentially, the war in the West was a struggle between men and distances, a war in which logistics dominated strategy, and meetings of combatants seemed almost incidental to final victory. It was, in one sense, George Rogers Clark's ability to traverse a battlefield measured in hundreds of miles and Bernardo de Galvez's success in overcoming the problems of combined land and sea operations that secured the Old Northwest to the United States and the Gulf of Mexico for Spain.

Military historians agree that distance was one of the chief factors in the British defeat, but they should not fail to observe the efforts of King George's field commanders to overcome those miles which were measured at Whitehall with a compass and in the woods and swamps of America in days and weeks of heartbreaking toil. At the northern and southern poles of the western theatre of action men like Henry Hamilton and John Campbell were painfully conscious that Vincennes and Pensacola were as far in time and distance from New York as was that city from London itself. In their isolation from the centers of British strength, the two commanders might well look to one another. Between them lay the great valley of America, the Mississippi, a link between the horns of British settlement, but a highroad beset with many difficulties. To Henry Hamilton at Vincennes in the winter of 1778-1779, it opened a route for friendly communication and military co-operation. To Brigadier General John Campbell at Pensacola, the Mississippi seemed an open door for Rebel invasion and Spanish intervention. The memory of James Willing's raid was very sharp in West Florida, and with Spanish power building on his flank at New Orleans, Campbell could only feel concern for his ex-

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posed position. The expedition which Hamilton led to the Illinois country might well have contributed to the security of West Florida by re-establishing British control of the Mississippi River and strengthening British influence with the southern Indians.¹

On December 17, 1778, the Lieutenant Governor of Detroit occupied the "miserable picketted work called a fort" at Vincennes.² Having no illusions about the trustworthiness of the French *habitants*, Hamilton set to work to win over the Indians of the locality and, by establishing contact with the British forces in West Florida, to inspire a general rising of the southern tribes in conjunction with those of the Ohio valley. Couriers were to be sent to Natchez, the northernmost British post on the Mississippi, bearing letters for John Stuart, the southern Indian Superintendent, and belts for the Cherokee and Choctaw tribes.

As the first of two messengers, Hamilton selected the Indian Kissingua who had joined the governor's expedition at Ouiatenon late in November.³ Kissingua had distinguished himself during the march to Vincennes and added to proven zeal a considerable knowledge of Indian languages. Moreover, he was under obligation to Hamilton for the British commander's support of his dubious claim upon the valuable American prisoner Captain Leonard Helm.⁴ Kissingua was flattered at being singled out for an important service; he knew the country between Vincennes and Natchez and was acquainted with Superintendent Stuart. Hamilton avoided committing himself upon specific compensation for the Indian's assignment, but he did promise to "pay him well."⁵ Edward Hazle, a white man, was chosen to complete the mission.

Hamilton broached his plan on December 23, and Kissingua and Hazle left Vincennes on Christmas Day. The Indian carried the belts, the white man a letter to Stuart. "These were two daring enterprizing fellows," wrote the

¹ James A. James, "Spanish Influence in the West during the American Revolution," *Mississippi Valley Historical Review*, IV, (1917), 208; Helen L. Shaw, *British Administration of the Southern Indians, 1756-1783* (Lancaster, Pa., 1931), 15, 144-145.

² John D. Barnhart, *Henry Hamilton and George Rogers Clark in the American Revolution* (Crawfordsville, 1951), 134.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ *Ibid.*, 151-152.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 154.

governor in his Journal, but he feared for Hazle's safety during the long and arduous trip.⁶ News of his messengers' progress reached Hamilton late in January by way of a Shawnee warrior who had encountered Kissingua and Hazle in the Creek country.⁷ In due course Hazle delivered his letter to Stuart, and some time probably between March 2 and 21, it was forwarded to General Campbell at Pensacola.

In the second week of January, 1779, Hamilton renewed his efforts to establish communication with West Florida. Spurred, perhaps, by Indian reports of strong British sympathies in the Natchez area,⁸ he released the trader Guillaume LeComte to travel southward as the bearer of letters to Captain John Blommart at Natchez and to the Spanish Governor Bernardo de Galvez at New Orleans. Uncertain, though sanguine, about affairs on the lower Mississippi, Hamilton confided in his Journal that his second letter to Natchez "was designed by its contents to keep the different parties who might become acquainted with them, at their several posts."⁹ Hence he adopted an optimistic tone, painted the situation at Vincennes in far brighter colors than actual circumstances warranted, and attempted to intimidate Galvez by epistolary vigor in lieu of military strength.¹⁰ As with the first message, this too found its way to Pensacola.

Hamilton's letters had little effect upon their recipients in West Florida and Louisiana. John Stuart, suffering a lingering and debilitating illness which culminated fatally on March 21, 1779, could do little to further Hamilton's schemes for combined Indian action against the American frontier. Brigadier General John Campbell, who only reached Pensacola from New York on January 17, had more than sufficient local problems to engage his full attention. His troops were sickly and prone to desertion. He lacked adequate funds or credit, tools, boats, or provisions with which to consolidate even the defenses of West Florida.¹¹ In fact, he had no

⁶ *Ibid.*, 156.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 169.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 163.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 164.

¹⁰ Hamilton's letter to Galvez is summarized in John W. Caughey, *Bernardo de Galvez in Louisiana, 1776-1783* (Berkeley, Calif., 1934), 96.

¹¹ *Mississippi Provincial Archives, English Dominion*, Manuscript Vol. IX, pp. 13-14, 16, 35-38, 55.

real opportunity to pursue the strategy suggested by Hamilton, for even as Campbell received word of the governor's momentary success, there came also the ominous news of George Rogers Clark's counterattack.¹² American victory at Vincennes necessarily prevented the return of Hamilton's messenger, Edward Hazle. On June 24, 1779, Campbell appointed him a Leader of Indians; he remained on the list of West Florida supernumerary officers as late as October 31, 1780.¹³ Before the end of the year Galvez, undaunted by Hamilton's bluff or Campbell's meager force, struck the British position on the Mississippi. As the Northwest had passed into American hands, so the Gulf Coast fell before the power of Spain.

The hope of effective co-operation between Hamilton and Campbell was chimerical at best. It is to Hamilton's credit that he envisioned the possibility; Campbell apparently satisfied his conscience by transmitting the messages from Fort Sackville to his superiors in America and England. On March 21, 1779, the commanding officer at Pensacola forwarded copies of Hamilton's letters to General Sir Henry Clinton and to Lord George Germain, Secretary of State for the Colonies. The original letters dispatched from Vincennes do not appear to have survived the vicissitudes of the American Revolution, but Campbell's copies remain and provide the source from which the correspondence is now published.¹⁴

¹² Information was forwarded from Manchac to Pensacola on March 12 by Lt. Col. Alexander Dickson. Historical Manuscripts Commission, *Report on American Manuscripts in the Royal Institution*, I, 397, 471.

¹³ Shaw, *British Administration of the Southern Indians*, 191.

¹⁴ The editor has attempted to reproduce this correspondence as accurately as possible and has made no changes in wording, spelling, or punctuation.

Campbell's covering letter to Germain and his copies of Hamilton's letters are located in the Public Record Office (London), C.O. 5:597, pp. 17-22, and were transcribed by Dunbar Rowland for his *Mississippi Provincial Archives, English Dominion*, Manuscript Vol. IX, pp. 71-76. The Library of Congress also holds photostatic copies of this correspondence. A copy of the letter of December 25, 1778, was made by Charles Stuart and is located in the P.R.O., C.O. 5:80, p. 327. A transcript of this copy in the Library of Congress Manuscripts Division shows only minor discrepancies attributable to repeated copying.

Campbell's letter to Clinton reached New York about May 1, 1779, and the enclosed copy of Hamilton's second letter was apparently forwarded to Germain on May 3. A copy of Clinton's letter of transmittal is to be found among the Clinton Papers in the William L. Clements Library, University of Michigan, but the enclosure is missing.

Henry Hamilton to John Stuart, Vincennes, December 25, 1778:

Sir

The Bearer Mr. Edward Hazle is a young Man who has shewn great Activity and zeal for His Majesty's service, he can inform you of several particulars which my hurry will not Allow me to enter into.

Upon hearing of the irruption of the Rebels into this Country and the Illinois, I wrote to the Commander in Chief Communicating my sentiments upon the steps necessary to be taken for their repulse— He has sent a reinforcement to Detroit of Sailors as well as Soldiers, which has enabled me to come thus far to keep Post with some regular Troops and Volunteer Companies— The Lake Indians have accompanied me and behaved extremely well. The Ouabach Indians met me on the way and some of each Nation from the Miamis to this Place have joined.

The Shawnese Mingo's Hurons and some of the Delawares secure the Passes from the upper part of the Ohio— The Poutconattanises [i.e. Potawatomi] of St Joseph are engaged to act by the Commanding Officer at Michillimakinac but what their direction is I do not know— I have sent out parties in every direction from this Place to bar any intercourse between the Falls of the Ohio and the Illinois.

I expect a Reinforcement in the spring— We took this place without firing a shot, the French Militia in Pay of the Congress as well as the others laid down their Arms to the Number of two Hundred and twenty Men— We found only two Pieces of Cannon in the Fort and little or no Stores or Provisions— I am about strengthening it as I look upon it as a Centrical Post very proper to keep a good intelligence among all the Indian Nations— If you should see Eguskawey an Ottawa Chief whom I sent down the River on a scout Consider him as a sensible Indian, a Considerate Man Cooly brave, but cautious of creating Jealousy among the other Nations the Ottawas not being Numerous. He is more attended to than any of the Lake Indians— I had the News of there being a Number of well Affected Indians at the Cherokee River but yesterday, otherways you should have heard sooner from me— I concluded you might possibly be there, or at least that my Messenger might hear of you there and find

means to convey this to you— I shall be glad to hear from you, and to know how the Indians in your part of the world are to be disposed of next year—I have told the Nations here that I should send a Belt to the Chickisaws and Cherokees &c. requesting that they would press the Virginians on their part while we acted against them to the Northward— That there is a perfect harmony among all the Nations— That the six Nations have been very successful in their Quarters and have distressed a large Tract of Country—The last Advices from Niagara mention the German Flats being entirely laid Waste— General Haldimand arrived at Quebec with a Reinforcement of six thousand Men— All the upper Posts to be reinforced.

I shall be happy to have certain Accounts of the state of the Interests of the People to the southwest of you— How the Navigation of the Mississippi may be most distressed— Whether all is as quiet in the southern Provinces of Europe as our Papers would have us believe

Please to give good Caution with respect to secrecy and let me know how we may carry on a Correspondence best— I should think if you send a Man from you with Ours, when he returns, one from us may accompany him so we shall have guides and the freshest intelligence possible.

Kissingua the Indian who accompanies Mr. Hazle is half Ottawa half Miamis, speaks most Languages— is acute resolute and artful— requires to be managed, but if kept in temper is capable of being extremely useful— I have always judged it best to engage such sort of men by good Treatment.

I beg you to excuse has[t]e and believe Sir
Your very obedient and most humble Servant

Henry Hamilton
Lt. Govr. & Superintendant

It is scarce necessary to request you to make such presents to the Indian as may induce to undertake on a like Occasion

Fort Sackville
at Post Vincennes
Decr. 25th. 1778

John Stuart Esqr
superintendant for the southern Department

*Henry Hamilton to John Stuart, Vincennes, January 13,
1779:*

Sir

I take Opportunity of Mr. LeComte going to New Orleans to acquaint you, that as early as possible in the spring there will be an expedition against the Virginians undertaken by the Chickisaws Cherokees Shawanese Delawares &c. from the southward. By the Mingoes Miamis Wyndatts and Senecas from the Northward, and from the Poutconattamies Ottawas Chippawas and Hurons of the Lakes toward Kaskaskias. As I am to have a Considerable reinforcement from the Commander in Chief I shall remain here till I receive them when I shall either proceed to attack the Forts of Kentucke or Conhawa or if Necessary look towards the Illinois first leaving a sufficient Garrison at this place with Cannon and Ammunition for its defence— We have Already Accounts of a Considerable Number of Southern Indians being assembled on the Cherokee River who are designed to come this way, but as this Post is already secured I suppose they will Naturally take their Course towards Kaskaskias, where there are yet a few of the Rebels, perhaps the Lake Indians from Michillimakinac may have saved them the trouble by this time, as a Considerable Body of them was to Act in Conjunction with some Whites, and left their Castles a little after my leaving Detroit to come into this Country— We have strong parties Out on the discovery towards the falls of the Ohio, a few towards Kaskaskias, and send down this River Parties relieving each other to intercept any Boats that may venture up the Ohio with supplies for the Rebels.

I suppose there will next year be the greatest Number of Savages on the Frontier that has ever been known as the six Nations have sent Belts round to encourage their Allies, who have made a general Alliance— I brought but a few to this Place, not exceeding three Hundred and Fifty but they were Men Picked by the Chiefs who accompanied me, and are from thirteen different Nations or Districts rather— I hope the Undertaking against New Orleans of which no doubt you have before this had intelligence will draw the Attention of the Spaniards and oblige them to keep for their Own Use the Powder and Cloathing they design for the upper Posts,

but if they send any, I have the greatest dependence on your
Vigilance and Activity for intercepting— I am with hearty
wishes for your health and success—

Sir

Your most obedient and
very humble Servant
Henry Hamilton

St. Vincennes

Jany. 13th. 1779

For the Commandant at the Natchez