IN SEARCH OF FORT JEFFERSON:
PAST, PRESENT AND FUTURE STUDIES

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ABSTRACT

Few histories of the Ohio Valley region have mentioned George Rogers Clark's 1780-1781 Fort Jefferson. Indeed, its current obscurity was first foretold by the fort's commandant, Captain Robert George, who referred to it as "this Remote hole". Today, several views hold that this western Kentucky fort has literally been washed away into continued obscurity by the Mississippi River. Our studies at Murray State University suggest otherwise. The fort may still exist and, although geographically a "remote hole" in 1780, it and its inhabitants are of considerable anthropological and historical importance.

I first became acquainted with George Rogers Clark's 1780-1781 Fort Jefferson in January of 1979 when an undergraduate handed me a copy of M. Juliette Magee's book, Old Fort Jefferson (1975). Having been interested in colonial history of the mid-West since my youth, I read Magee's history as a means of renewing my earlier interests, as well as to educate myself about one of the early historical events of Kentucky's Jackson Purchase region. However, Magee's book (ibid.) did not contain everything I wanted to know about the fort or its people. The book was popularistic at best, containing many embellishments, inconsistencies, and inaccuracies. However, from a positive perspective, the anthropological and historical research potential of Fort Jefferson was untapped and unaddressed. My only problem was that I had been trained as an anthropological prehistorian, not as a historian or as an anthropological historian. Being neither familiar with the necessary literature nor versed in either artifact typology or classification of late 18th century culture, I was unaware of the degree to which history could be biased or inaccurate. Yet, the study of anthropology is as "at home" with prehistory as it is with history, and so the scenario begins.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Probably one of the most striking facts about Fort Jefferson is the number of highly recognizable American colonial names associated with its development, consequent fate, and overall significance, e.g., Thomas Jefferson, Patrick Henry, George Rogers Clark, Benjamin Franklin, John Jay, and John Adams, to name but a few. Yet, with the exception of George Rogers Clark, none of these individuals
ever visited Fort Jefferson. From where then, does Fort Jefferson figure in historical importance? Locally, regionally, nationally, or internationally? The following paragraphs answer this question in part and provide a general, historically accurate summary of Fort Jefferson.

As early as 1777, Virginia Governor Patrick Henry advocated the construction of an American outpost at the confluence of the Ohio and Mississippi Rivers (Henry 1969:582-588; James 1972, I:cxii). Henry thought that the placement of such a fort would help guard against Spanish or British encroachment from the West during the time when the struggle for independence was raging along the eastern seaboard (James 1972, I:cxii). Moreover, Henry believed that an outpost, located near the mouth of the Ohio River, would be able to control major inland river traffic; to reduce the amount of arms and munitions being distributed to British Indian allies (e.g., the Chickasaws); and to justify, through "possession", Virginia’s claim to land stretching from the Atlantic seaboard to the Mississippi River (English 1896:666-667).

It was not until January of 1780 that Thomas Jefferson, the new governor of Virginia, authorized the construction of the fort first proposed by Henry. Jefferson selected George Rogers Clark to enact the proposal, which in addition to building a fort, included attracting civilians to settle in the wilderness area through the use of land warrants (James 1972, I:386-391). Although the exact number and composition of Clark’s garrison and civilian followers has yet to be determined (we have documented 299 persons thus far), Clark’s people arrived at the confluence of the Ohio and Mississippi Rivers on April 19, 1780 (James 1972, I:417-418) (Figure 1). Within a few weeks the fort, named Fort Jefferson, and the settlement, named Clarksville, had been completed. By the end of May, 1780, Clark left Fort Jefferson to assist the Spanish at St. Louis (Cahokia) at the request of Cahokia’s citizens (James 1972, I:411-412). Clark returned to Fort Jefferson only briefly one month later. Throughout Clark’s absence, Captain Robert George was left in command at Fort Jefferson from May, 1780 to June 8, 1781.

Unfortunately, the fort seemed ill-fated from the beginning. Chickasaw Indians attacked the post and community on several occasions from June through November of 1780, killing several soldiers and civilians, and causing many others to desert (James 1972, I:472, 496-497, 539). Another reason for the eventual downfall of Fort Jefferson was that it was just too far from support and supplies (Fraser 1983; James 1972, I:clix, Robertson 1973: 136-137). This latter point was
vividly expressed by Fort Commandant Captain George in his letter of January
1781 to Oliver Pollock in New Orleans, in which George referred to Fort Jeff­
erson as "this Remote hole" (James 1972, I:496-497). By the end of June 1781
the fort and community had been completely abandoned, just 14 months after
they had been constructed (ibid. I:585:596).

Throughout its existence, Fort Jefferson was the focus of economic and
logistical support for other American outposts at Kaskaskia (Fort Clark) and
Vincennes (formerly Fort Sackville), forts which had been established through
conquest prior to the establishment of Fort Jefferson. After the abandonment
of Fort Jefferson in June 1781, the American garrisons at Kaskaskia and Vin­
cennes were either withdrawn or substantially weakened. The survivor's of
Fort Jefferson evacuated the fort in three directions. Those that went north­
ward toward Kaskaskia and St. Louis became known as the "setters" of Illinois,
such as James Piggott and his settlement at Grand Rouisseau (Reynolds 1852;
1879). Other Fort Jefferson settlers either returned to the "Falls of the Ohio"
(Louisville) from where they originated, or went southward to Spanish-held Mem­
phis, Natchez, or New Orleans (ibid.).

What was the significance of Fort Jefferson? According to English (1897),
the British and American peace negotiators in France in 1782 still believed that
Forts Jefferson, Clark, and Vincennes were controlled by the Americans. Hence,
it was the American control of both these forts and the lands between the Mis­
issippi and Ohio rivers that led to the relinquishment of the Northwest Terri­
tories by the British in the Treaty of 1783. It is difficult to say whether En­
glish's theory is correct or not. However, according to Robertson, Fort Jeffer­
son's past presence on the Mississippi allowed:

(1) Congress to affirm that the recently confederated
States had succeeded to all the charter rights of the sea­
to-sea colonies, as abridged by the Treaty of 1763...
(2) Fort Jefferson fixed the southern boundary of Virginia
upon the Mississippi... (3) helped thwart the plans of
Spain to aggrandize herself in the Mississippi Valley at
the expense of the new American states; and (4) (it) es­
tablished our claim to the right of navigation upon the
Mississippi that was to play (an) important part in the...

Yet, it would be nearly 40 more years before the extreme western area of Ken­
tucky (Jackson's Purchase) would be legally opened for American settlement.
As a site of colonial forces, Fort Jefferson was a unique failure. It was unique
in that "it was the only settlement in Kentucky made on the explicit orders of
the government of Virginia" (as opposed to the "acts of individuals or projects
of land companies") (Robertson 1973:138). It was a failure only in the sense of
eventual military withdrawal and civilian apathy. Perhaps the unpopularity of
the latter statement is the key to understanding why Fort Jefferson has been
infrequently mentioned in most histories of American development in the Ohio
Valley; that which has been mentioned focuses not on the fort, but on the glori­
fication of several of the fort's inhabitants.
PAST STUDIES: MISCONCEPTIONS AND INCONSISTENCIES  
(HISTORY MADE TO ORDER)

Reading the early histories of Kentucky is akin to a journey into an embellished fantasy land. Studies by Bodley (1928), Butler (1834), Collins (1874), Cotterill (1917), Johnson (1912), Kerr (1922), Otis (1832), and Reynolds (1879) clearly demonstrate that history is recorded for those who want to express their interpretations and impressions of the past, both fanciful and factual, for posterity. Clearly, the reading of these "histories" was a rude awakening about the pains of conducting historical archaeological research that was soon discovered by this prehistorian.

With respect to Fort Jefferson, there were five major areas of documented historical inconsistencies within the above referenced histories: (1) the location, function, structural composition, and subsequent fate of the fort; (2) the population of Fort Jefferson, including the composition of the various garrisons and civilian forces; (3) the population and composition of the Chickasaw Indian attack forces; (4) the role of the fort in the American Revolution; and (5) the glorification and activities of certain inhabitants of the Fort Jefferson—Clarksville communities.

Our research project has as its focus four inter-connected areas of study which will help clarify and correct previously recorded histories of Fort Jefferson and the colonial experience of which it was a part. The four foci include: locating the fort; environmental reconstruction of the fort region; genealogical and archival population studies; and the formation of testable hypotheses that will: (1) answer questions specific to the anthropology and history of Fort Jefferson and the community of Clarksville, and (2) address more generalized questions relevant to the settlement and cultural adaptation of the colonial American period. For the purposes of this paper, the following discussion will focus only on the problem of the fort's location.

PRESENT AND FUTURE STUDIES

Preliminary to an historic-archaeologic study of Fort Jefferson, the location of the fort needed to be determined. The purported location and subsequent fate of Fort Jefferson's structural remains has varied considerably within the context of 19th and 20th century Ohio and Mississippi valley histories.

Four years of archival research, beginning in 1979, produced six different locations for Fort Jefferson. James (1970) states that the fort was constructed 12 miles (19.31 kilometers) below the confluence of the Mississippi and Ohio rivers at the "Iron Banks", the locale now known as Columbus, Kentucky. Stovall (1883) stated that construction of the fort first began at what is now the Wickliffe Mounds Research Center in Wickliffe, Kentucky, but that the fort was later moved 1.5 miles (2.41 kilometers) south of Wickliffe, just north of Mayfield Creek (Figure 2). Young, Poussin, and Tuttle (1821) placed the location of Fort Jefferson 5 miles (8.05 kilometers) south of Wickliffe and south of Mayfield Creek. Magee (1975) placed Fort Jefferson 1 mile (1.61 kilometers) south of Wickliffe on what is locally known as "Fort Jefferson Hill". The presence of a
State of Kentucky historical roadside marker on top of that hill and the nearby location of the "Fort Jefferson Truckstop" do much to visually reinforce local opinion of the fort's location. And, lastly, others (KYDOT 1981) have stated that the site's location is now within the current channel of the Mississippi River, about 2 miles (3.22 kilometers) south of Wickliffe. (This last purported location is based largely on the various investigators' inability to locate surface artifacts, thereby erroneously concluding that the fort is in the Mississippi River.)

How does one locate a fort when there is little to no agreement on its location? Usually, the archaeological approach would be through surface survey and field testing. However, I felt that field survey was premature at that time. That which would be helpful was information pertaining to the structural composition of the fort, its layout, and environmental setting. Such information, although necessitating more archival research, should yield clues that would narrow the area to be surface surveyed and tested, and would yield definitive clues regarding site identification.

Supposedly, George Rogers Clark was to construct the fort in accordance with directives sent by Thomas Jefferson (James 1973:1, 386-391) and as decided by Clark's November 16, 1779, Council of War (ibid.:375-377) in which it was determined that the fort would be:

...one hundred feet square in the clear within the walls, to be built of earth dug out of an entrenchment ten feet deep, with earth thrown upon the inside of said entrenchment...(forming) a wall ten feet high and eight feet thick, which with the entrenchment...will form a wall of twenty feet perpendicular,...the top of which...should be a wooden wall of sawed or hewn timber ten feet high, twelve inches thick, with bastions at each corner so proportioned that one shall clear another.

FIGURE 2
A PORTION OF THE B. HARDY STOVALL
1883 MAP
Fortuitously, Magee's (1975:14-15) publication included a schematic drawing of Fort Jefferson stating that it was provided to her through the courtesy of the Virginia State Archives. Not that I was skeptical, but because several embellishments were present in Magee's book, I decided to verify Magee's schematic drawing of Fort Jefferson. Accordingly, I sent the Virginia State Archives a copy of Magee's drawing. Their response included the following statement:

The map reproduced in M. Juliette McGee's (sic) Old Fort Jefferson depicts the "new Fort" at Lexington, Kentucky, erected in the spring of 1781, and not Fort Jefferson on the Mississippi" (Chestnut to Carstens, October 12, 1982).

With the exception of Clark's directives by Jefferson (op. cit.) and the proposal set forth by Clark's Council of War, no other primary documentation of the fort's layout or composition was known to exist other than several descriptive references contained within a couple of letters from inhabitants who were stationed at the fort. Although it was still unclear where the fort was located exactly, Clark's 1779 Council of War directives gave us a notion of what the fort may have looked like and how it may have been constructed. Furthermore, we were able to locate several primary documents that gave clues to the fort's environmental setting (Clark 1795; James 1972; Todd 1795). In particular, the 1798 general vicinity map of William Clark (brother of George Rogers Clark), the 1795 area description by Robert Todd, the 1888 Dupoyster map, and the 1883 Stovall map provided the first consistent clues upon which the summer 1980 field reconnaissance and testing were based.

The Dupoyster map provided a very important, tangible clue: the approximate location of an eight pound brass cannon that Dupoyster found in 1861, believed to have been one of two cannon reportedly left at Fort Jefferson. The Stovall map, which Stovall had drawn from his earlier observations of Fort Jefferson, included landmarks that are still present today. The first of these was the location of the Illinois Central Railroad track that had been built in 1873 but which had been removed prior to 1950. The second was a small creek crossed by the railroad track. If we had interpreted the Stovall map correctly, Fort Jefferson should be located a few meters northeast of the creek/railbed intersection. Also present on the Stovall map, and which reinforced the accuracy of the Dupoyster map, were the relative locations of Mayfield Creek and the high bluffs north of Mayfield Creek.

In the summer of 1980, we placed a test pit about 24 meters (78.74 feet) north of the railbed and about 20 meters (65.62 feet) east of the creek. The pit measured one meter (3.28 feet) east-west by 1.25 meters (4.10 feet) north-south. Between 41 and 91 centimeters (1.35 to 2.99 feet) below ground level, we encountered the tops of two, vertically-standing, 15-20 centimeter (0.49 to 0.66 feet) diameter posts, the tops of which appeared to be hand-hewn. The "twin" posts were spaced about 25 centimeters (0.82 foot) apart and were oriented on a north-south axis.
At about 1.3 meters (4.27 feet) below ground level, the two "posts" merged together forming a single, forked "post". Shovel testing continued to a maximum depth of 1.5 meters (4.92 feet) below ground level. To allow deeper testing, we had to extend our test cut 0.5 meter (1.64 feet) to the south. At 30 centimeters (0.98 foot) below ground level in the extension unit, and an equal distance south of the posts, a third post was uncovered that was in alignment with the previously located forked post. Unfortunately, due to limited time and to the wetness of the deeper deposits, testing had to be halted at about 2 meters (6.56 feet) below ground level. The post feature was tentatively labeled as part of the fort's stockade and was given the state site number 15BA104, yet no cultural associations with the "posts", other than the possible chop-marks on their uppermost portions, had been found. Further testing was needed to demonstrate whether the feature was of natural or cultural origin.

In the fall of 1982, a donation of funds from Mr. William Young and Mr. George Crounse of the Crounse Corporation (Paducah, Kentucky) enabled a continuation of the search for Fort Jefferson. The first step in the project was to define the nature of the previously discovered standing-post feature and recover any evidence of cultural association.

The backfill of the 1981 pit was removed and the pit was expanded into a 2.0 by 2.0 meter (6.56 by 6.56 feet) unit by Kit Wesler, Ken Toy, and Pat Kindred. An additional unit of the same size was begun north of the 2.0 by 2.0 meter unit. The squares were excavated using shovels and, because no cultural material had been found previously, the soil was not screened.

A second 2.0 by 2.0 meter square was excavated to a depth of approximately 1.0 meter in hopes of discovering additional posts. Although the top of a post was discovered in this unit, it was more than a meter from the original posts and was not in line with them. Meanwhile, excavations continued to a depth of 2.65 meters (8.69 feet) in the first 2.0 by 2.0 meter unit. At that depth, numerous grapevines and roots were exposed throughout the clayey, wet floor of the excavation. In addition, it was observed that the now exposed "trunk" of the originally-discovered "posts" had taken an abrupt turn to the east. The shape of that "post" was such that it could not have been placed within a post hole; the attached roots further demonstrated that the "posts" were a natural phenomenon, i.e., tree trunks.

Excavations were halted at a final depth of 2.65 meters below ground level upon the identification of the feature as a pair of trees. On December 2, 1982, the units were recorded, photographed, and covered with plastic until Julie Stein, a geoarchaeologist, and her assistant (Dr. Patty Jo Watson) could be brought to the site to direct sampling of the complex stratigraphy for the purpose of reconstructing the past environmental-geomorphological characteristics of the area.

The results of the geoarchaeological/environmental studies (Stein, Carstens, and Wesler 1983), demonstrated three things. First, the area in which we placed our original and subsequent excavation tests would have been a swamp in 1780; such, however, is not the case today. The interpretation of the past environmental conditions based on present-day characteristics, as we had done, can be
very misleading, even when dealing with relatively recent historic sites (cf. Deetz 1977:22). Secondly (and with hindsight), the swamp we located tied into the written descriptions of the area by the fort's inhabitants who clearly made a distinction between the more lowly-elevated "sickly" bottomlands ("swamps") and the more highly-elevated "second bottoms" ("colluvial fans"). Thirdly, if the fort was in the vicinity of our current study area, it should be located north of our original test units. In that area, our geological corings revealed the presence of a buried paleosol B horizon (Buol et al. 1973) which would have been a more logical spot to build the fort.

Continued archival research since our original and subsequent test excavations and geoarcheological studies has paid dividends that we hope will be realized within next month's (April, 1984) final field testing. Late in 1983, Carstens located the only map of Fort Jefferson known to be drawn by an inhabitant of the fort (Clark n.d.). That map clearly depicts the location and spatial relationship between Fort Jefferson and the community of Clarksville (Figure 3). More importantly, this map was drawn by William J. Clark (cousin to George Rogers Clark) between the months of August, 1780, and January, 1781, after the fort and community had been established but prior to their abandonment. Although we do not know at this time how many of the Clarksville community plots were occupied or had structures on them, the map depicts features that coincide with Clark's 1779 Council of War fort construction directives, Jefferson's suggested town layout, attributes that correlate with parts of the Dupoyster and Stovall maps, descriptions of the area by the fort's inhabitants, and our geoarcheological reconstruction of the environmental setting of Fort Jefferson's probably location.

**FIGURE 3**
WILLIAM J. CLARK MAP
(Scale from Council of War Objectives)
SUMMARY

At this point in time, we remain confident that we will locate remnants of Fort Jefferson and the community of Clarksville. Although we have yet to find physical evidence of either the fort or community, we can say with confidence where they are not located and where they may be located. Based on our archival and field research studies, we know that Fort Jefferson was not constructed 12 miles (19.25 kilometers) below the confluence of the Ohio and Mississippi Rivers; neither was it constructed south of Mayfield Creek nor on top of "Fort Jefferson Hill". Furthermore, it is extremely doubtful that the fort was washed away by the Mississippi River.

Remnants of the fort and community should exist in that area which is south of, but adjacent to, the base of Fort Jefferson Hill, north and east of the final bend of Mayfield Creek, north of our "buried" swamp, and west of the Westvaco road bypass. Somewhere within that limited area (which is now covered with several feet of colluvium), George Rogers Clark probably built Fort Jefferson in April of 1780. If Clark followed the 1779 Council of War directives, the fort area alone would have included more than 10,000 square feet (929.03 square meters). Based on the William J. Clark map, it would appear that George Rogers Clark did follow the spirit of those directives. Furthermore, the W. J. Clark map suggests that the fort's bastions were constructed in the northeast and southwest corners, such that firepower from each bastion could clear two of the fort's walls as recommended by the 1779 Council of War. Northeast of the fort was at least one blockhouse, constructed on the nearest, most highly-elevated bluff terminus. The blockhouse overlooked the valley below and thus rendered added strength to the valley location of fort and community.

The consistency of evidence shared among the various personal narratives, letters written by the fort's inhabitants, and the collaborating features of the William J. Clark map, all suggest that the fort and community should still be present. Finally, our geoarcheological data strongly supports the primary archival data and offers additional evidences regarding the location of the site. Hopefully, the real location of Fort Jefferson will soon be discovered.

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