George Rogers Clark

National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior

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National Historical Park

Patriot Priest

Father Pierre Gibault has earned a place in history as the" Patriot Priest" for his great contributions to the American cause during the Revolutionary War in the West. He also ministered to the spiritual needs of his widely scattered parishioners on this wild and far-flung frontier for more than three decades.

Father Pierre Gibault

Father Gibault was born in Montreal, Quebec, in 1737. His early years are unknown, but it is probable that he attended the Jesuit College at Quebec and perhaps briefly worked in the fur trade before being ordained into the priesthood at the age of 31. He immediately was sent to the Illinois country as the only active missionary priest serving an area which extended from the Appalachian Mountains to the Mississippi River and from the Great Lakes to New Orleans.

Selecting Kaskaskia, near the Mississippi River, as his headquarters, Gibault traveled by foot, horseback, and canoe through much of this vast region to serve his scattered congregation. He also took an active part in the social life of Kaskaskia, including sports and games. According to one observer, he enjoyed proving his "skill, agility and strength," physical traits that served him well in his strenuous life on the frontier.

During these early years of Gibault's apostolate, there existed an atmosphere of relative peace and stability; the British controlled Canada and most of the area east of the Mississippi River as a result of their victory over France in the contest for North America.
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The American Revolution

Beginning in 1775, the onset of the American Revolution would bring significant changes to this region. British Lieutenant Governor Henry Hamilton at Detroit began sending Indian war parties against the new Kentucky country settlements whose scanty population overwhelmingly supported the patriot cause. In an attempt to end these Indian attacks, George Rogers Clark and his small force of frontiersmen captured British-controlled, but French-populated, Kaskaskia and Cahokia in the Illinois country in July 1778. At first fearful of their fate, Gibault and the French inhabitants quickly were won over to the American cause by Clark's assurance of religious and political freedom.

Another influential factor was the news that France recently had become an ally of the colonists. As a result, Gibault lent his prestige

to help Clark solidify the American hold on the Illinois country. Following his success along the Mississippi River, Clark's thoughts turned toward the Wabash River country. He wrote in his memoir: "Post Vincenes never being out of my mind and from some things that I had learnt [I] had some Reason to suspect that Mr Jebault [Gibault] the Priest was inclined to the American Interest previous to our arrival in the Cuntrey . . . [he had] great Influance over the people at this period St Vincent also being under his Jurisdiction[.] I made no doubt of his Integrity to us[.]"

Father Gibault volunteered to travel to Vincennes where he quickly convinced the town's inhabitants to embrace the American cause. After remaining a few days at Vincennes, he returned to Kaskaskia.

Meanwhile, Lieutenant Governor Hamilton learned of Clark's success in the Illinois country. In response, he led a force of British soldiers and Indians, plus loyal French militia and volunteers, from Detroit to Vincennes. The town was taken without a fight on December 17, 1778. Hamilton became incensed at Gibault when he learned of the priest's role in Clark's conquests.

Hamilton now made the fateful decision to remain for the winter at Fort Sackville in Vincennes. He retained his British soldiers, but allowed most of the French troops and the Indians to depart for their homes.

However, it was understood that they would return in the spring to join in an attack against Clark in the Illinois country.

Francis Vigo, a St. Louis trader who had been aiding the Americans, reported to Clark that Hamilton had recaptured Vincennes. Clark quickly decided to risk all in a daring midwinter campaign. He recruited about 75 French citizens of Kaskaskia and Cahokia, adding them to his original force of about 100 Virginians and Kentuckians. After this mixed force received a sermon and absolution from Gibault, they set out from Kaskaskia on February 5. They marched nearly 200 miles across the flooded Illinois country. Clark surprised the British and received the surrender of Hamilton and Fort Sackville on February 25, 1779.

After the War

After the Revolution, Father Gibault lived for a time in Vincennes. Later he moved across the Mississippi River to New Madrid in the present state of Missouri and continued his labors for his church and his God. He died at the age of 65 in 1802.

During his lifetime, Father Gibault never received appropriate recognition for his crucial aid to George Rogers Clark and to the American cause in the West. In an effort to remedy this oversight, a bronze statue of Gibault by Albin Polasek was erected in 1935 on the park grounds in front of the Old Cathedral.