

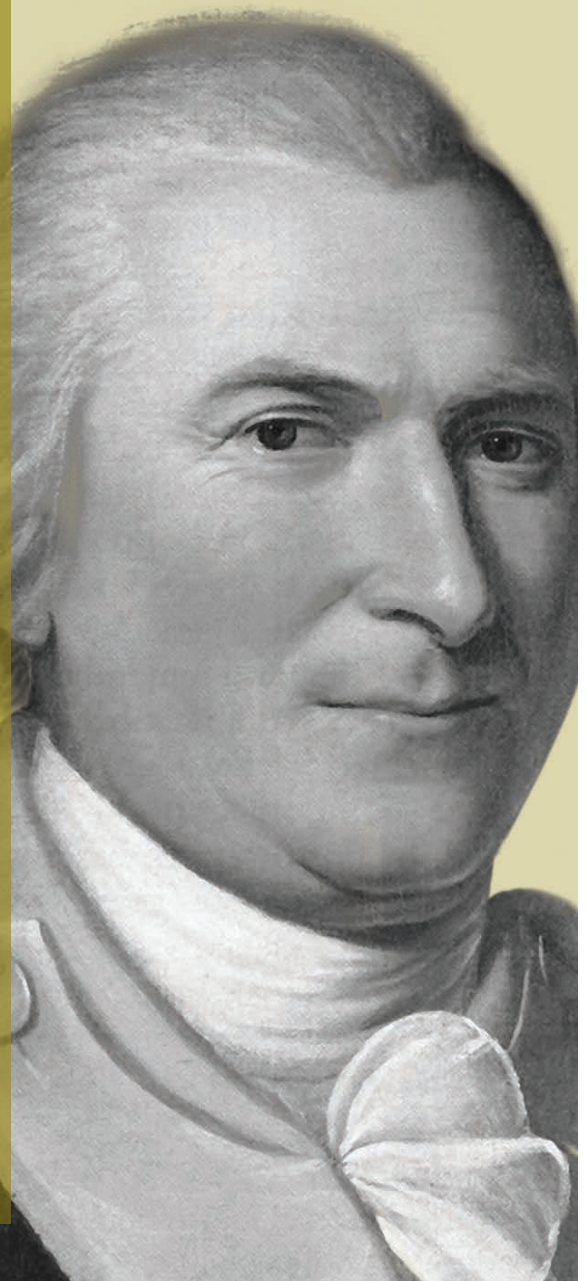


Arthur St. Clair

An Unappreciated Patriot

The career of Arthur St. Clair—American military strategist, a president of the Continental Congress and first governor of the Northwest Territory—began in Pennsylvania, continued in New Jersey, New York and Ohio, and spanned 45 years of military, government and political service. He gave up British position and wealth to help the patriots achieve victory in the Revolutionary War and dedicated himself to a lifelong pursuit of America's freedom and democracy. Still, the choices made in one bloody battle in 1791 haunted him until his death. Because of it, he remains one of the most unappreciated public figures in our nation's history.

By Dick Phillips



St. Clair's warrior roots ran deep. Born in a castle in Thurso, Caithness, Scotland, in 1734 (some historians say 1736 or 1737), his descendents trace a direct lineage to the 16th-century Earl of Caithness. Descended from the Sinclairs of the 12th and 13th centuries, the St. Clairs built Rosslyn Castle and Rosslyn Church featured in the novels by best-selling author Dan Brown. A recent feature on the History Channel revealed evidence of a first exploration of America by a team of Vikings, Templars and Sinclairs in 1306.

After studying medicine at Edinburgh University and completing an internship in London, young Arthur followed in the footsteps of his warrior ancestors and joined the British army. He saw action in the French and Indian War as captain and commandant of Pennsylvania's Fort Mifflin. In 1762, he retired and settled in the Ligonier Valley with his family.

St. Clair's career as a government official began in Bedford, Pa., as a surveyor for the Penn family. He served as Governor Penn's assistant, and Penn then named him a Westmoreland County justice. In 1774, he became county magistrate. While serving as magistrate, he heard that Virginia Governor Lord Dunmore was seeking to expand his lands by claiming Fort Pitt (now part of Pittsburgh) and its surrounding lands for Virginia. The governor sent out agents, whom St. Clair tracked down, brought to his court and jailed. Dunmore demanded that Governor Penn dismiss St. Clair, but he refused. As a result of the courage he showed in dealing with lawlessness, St. Clair's influence in western Pennsylvania grew.

LIFE-CHANGING DECISION

After a decade as a Pennsylvania country squire, St. Clair became increasingly outspoken about the king's excessive taxes and the brutal treatment of the colonists by British officials like Dunmore, who was raiding towns and brutalizing the families of colonists away at war. In 1775, John Hancock, president of the Continental Congress, offered St. Clair a commission as colonel in the Continental Army. St. Clair immediately said yes, making a life-changing decision to take up his adopted country's cause for freedom.

Said St. Clair in a letter to a close friend, "I hold that no man has a right to withhold his services when his country needs them. Be the sacrifice ever so great, it must be yielded on the altar of patriotism." This decision committed the next 30 years of St. Clair's life in service to America. Ironically, the choice also eventually cost St. Clair, one of the wealthiest and most influential men in Pennsylvania, his entire fortune.

SOLDIER AND PATRIOT

Colonel St. Clair's first assignment for the Continental Army was to raise a regiment of six companies to cover the retreat of the Americans, who were being overrun by the British near Quebec. He accomplished this goal in two months. Hancock then sent St. Clair, newly promoted to brigadier general, to organize the New Jersey militia and join General Washington's troops. Upon arrival in November 1776, he found the army starving and facing freezing conditions. Retention, let alone recruitment, had become impossible, especially with the men's enlistments about to run out. Washington appealed to St. Clair, who used his own personal funds to feed and clothe the men.

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St. Clair is also credited with planning a three-pronged strategy in New Jersey, which included the famous crossing of the Delaware on Christmas night, 1776. Capturing the Hessians and British prior to the successful battles of Trenton and Princeton helped turn the tide of the war. The victory startled the British high command, which had been routinely defeating Washington in battle. This victory showed Washington to be a crafty strategist, and he swiftly promoted St. Clair to major general. (St. Clair remained a close friend of Washington for more than 20 years, and he was among nine Freemasons invited to stand with him at his inauguration.)

Next dispatched to Fort Mifflin in New York, St. Clair faced another challenge when he found the fort in disrepair and his men suffering from poor health. Outnumbered by the British 5-to-1 and with neither supplies nor munitions, St. Clair ordered the troops to make a strategic retreat under cover of darkness. Although he was court-martialed for the retreat, his action saved most of the 1,000 men. He was eventually exonerated and

commended when his decision proved fortuitous. By leaving Fort Ticonderoga when they did, the Americans compelled General Burgoyne to commit one-third of his force, around 7,800 troops, to rebuilding and defending the fort at a crucial time in the war when they were needed elsewhere. The Continental Army eventually returned to retake Fort Ticonderoga with a larger force.

STATESMAN

After the Revolutionary War, St. Clair served in the Continental Congress from 1785 to 1787 as a delegate from his home state of Pennsylvania. In February 1787, he was elected the body's ninth president. Also that year, Congress enacted the Northwest Ordinance, and on October 5, 1787, St. Clair left the presidency to begin a 15-year career as the first governor of the Northwest Territory. With his appointment recommended by Washington and approved by Congress, St. Clair took on the huge responsibility of overseeing

an area that was to become the states of Ohio, Indiana, Illinois and Michigan, along with parts of Wisconsin and Minnesota.

St. Clair's work was an example for later territorial governors. In July 1788 he published the new territory's compact, or governing covenant, and commissioned three judges. The first of the 10 Ohio counties he established was named for his friend Washington, and by September he had created his first territorial court. While governor, St. Clair made his headquarters in Cincinnati, a city he named after the Society of the Cincinnati, a fraternal organization of Revolutionary War officers.

Despite St. Clair's embrace of America, he couldn't entirely escape his Scottish birth and British military training. Some complained about his aristocratic bearing, and he resisted attempts by members of Congress to interfere with his work. His uncompromising nature came off as arrogance, a quality that caused him enemies, especially in Congress.

Do you have a Revolutionary Patriot in your family tree?



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FAMILY LIFE

In the midst of such a busy career, St. Clair leaned heavily on his wife, Phoebe. St. Clair had met Phoebe Bayard, the niece of Massachusetts Governor James Bowdoin, in 1758 in Boston. Married in 1760, they used her dowry and his British army retirement stipend to acquire thousands of acres for their estate in the Ligonier Valley. They had seven children, six of whom survived to adulthood. During the decade that St. Clair was building his wealth and judicial career in Westmoreland County, Phoebe, who had grown up in Boston's social circles, tried to adjust to life in the wilderness. It became even more difficult after her husband took up America's cause of freedom.

Though less visible, Phoebe's sacrifice was no less patriotic than her husband's. The Phoebe Bayard DAR Chapter, Greensburg, Pa., proudly bears her name. Not only did she run their large estate amid the constant demands of managing estate business and satisfying creditors, but she also was responsible for raising their family. Although St. Clair wrote Phoebe often and sent her everything he earned, his personal visits were infrequent. A trip on horseback from his Cincinnati headquarters to Philadelphia, with a stop at his Ligonier home, took more than a month, so he was barely able to return twice a year. Some historians suggest that loneliness caused Phoebe serious mental distress. Eventually, when St. Clair became governor of the Northwest Territory, he established their western residence in Marietta, Ohio, and their family life improved.

DISAPPOINTED BUT DIGNIFIED

Being named the first governor of a territory the size of the original 13 Colonies appeared at first to be a great honor. But St. Clair lacked the resources to do his job properly. Legislators seldom matched funds with their orders to St. Clair, so he would use his own funds or write IOUs on behalf of his country to complete each task.

In 1791, several hundred of American General Josiah Harmer's troops died at the hands of the British-trained army of Confederated Indian Tribes of the Maumee Valley, part of the Northwest Territory. Congress was incensed that any Indian force could defeat the American army, and officials demanded quick retaliation and victory. The 57-year-

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old Arthur St. Clair, ailing from gout and considered an old man for the time, was immersed in his job as territorial governor. Yet Congress ordered him back to military service, forcing him to rebuild a defeated and demoralized army in very little time.

He went on to lose twice as many troops as Harmer within the same year. Despite the inevitable failure of its ill-formed plan, Congress made

St. Clair the scapegoat and allowed Major General Anthony Wayne three years to prepare troops for victory. St. Clair resigned from the army at the request of President Washington, but he served as the Northwest Territory governor until 1802. He was left to carry the heavy burden of reliving this tragedy for the rest of his life.

Many historians agree that St. Clair's lifetime of exemplary statesmanship and military leadership should not be overshadowed by this one battle. St. Clair had to have known that coming out of retirement too quickly with unprepared, ill-equipped soldiers was a formula for disaster. It didn't help that Congress ordered him to cut a trail through the forest and build several forts along the 100 miles to battle. And according to Richard Battin in "Early America's Bloodiest Battle," a 1994 story in the Fort Wayne, Ind., *News-Sentinel*, Secretary of War Henry Knox had appointed his friend, New York financier William Duer, to supply the troops. The unscrupulous Duer lost the money on land speculation.

Upon his return home, St. Clair found his wealth eroded. He had run up personal debts to carry out 14 years of unfunded assignments as governor, and Congress would not vote for reimbursement of those expenses. His debtors won a personal court judgment, and his land and holdings were sold, forcing him into poverty until his death on August 31, 1818. Phoebe died 18 days later. Both are buried at St. Clair Park in Greensburg, Pa.

Those who knew St. Clair during his last years said he never lost his dignity. Fifty years later, Congress finally voted a "substantial sum" to reimburse St. Clair's heirs. 🍷

A former national press agent, Dick Phillips now writes and speaks about 18th- and 19th-century historical figures from his home in St. Clairsville, Ohio. Reach him at phillphx@aol.com.