



# NEWS AND NOTES

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*The Fauquier Historical Society*

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*Frontier legend, Revolutionary War hero, friend of George Rogers Clark*

## Witness to history: Captain Leonard Helm

BY BRIG. GEN. LEWIS MARSHALL HELM,  
AUS (RETIRED)

Military leaders seek to make history by protecting their country and bringing freedom to others. George Rogers Clark believed it was an art to fight the British and Indians on the American frontier.

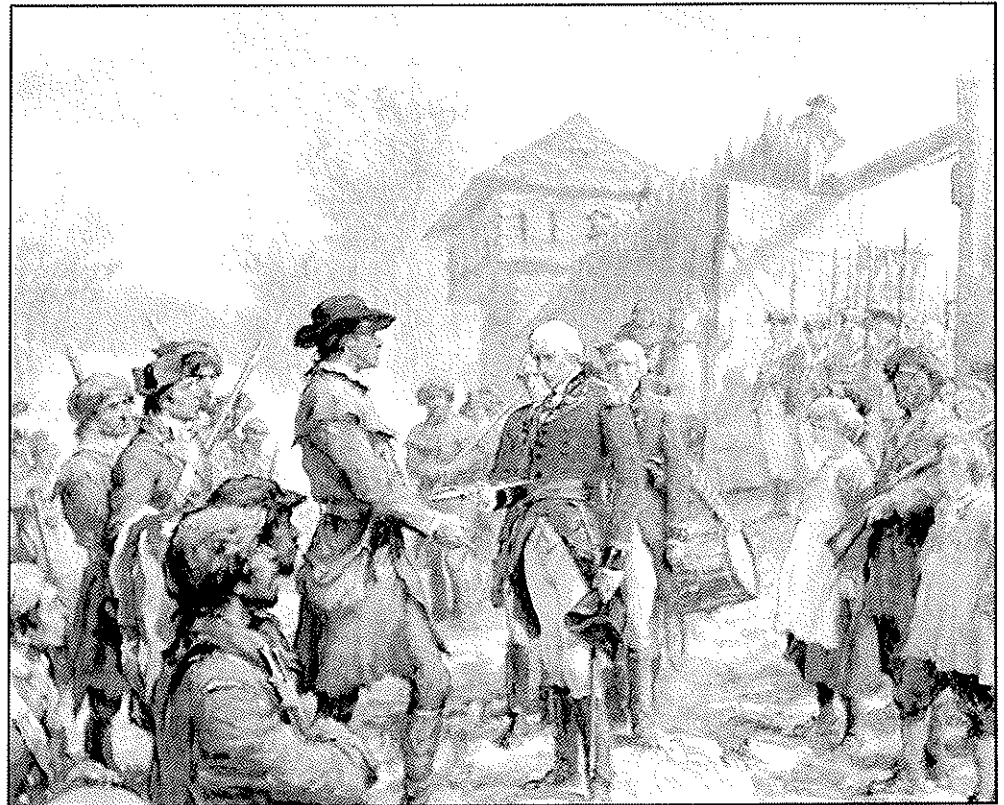
To Captain Leonard Helm, who left his lands in Fauquier and Stafford counties as a young man, life was a game, not an art. The thrill of surging adrenaline in combat or facing death in wildernesses was what he sought.

During several decades leading up to the American Revolution, Helm had become a frontier legend, a hard-drinking, jovial explorer and Indian fighter.

During the American Revolution, he was a loyal officer under Lieutenant Colonel Clark, fighting the British and protecting Virginians who had moved west to claim pristine Indian lands in Kentucky and Ohio.

At the age of 60, Helm was more than twice Clark's 26 years. But they became

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Surrender of Fort Sackville by Col. Henry Hamilton to Col. George Rogers Clark. Captain Leonard Helm was being held there by the British as a prisoner of war.

## Society hears of efforts to preserve village of Buckland

In March, year, members of the Fauquier Historical Society were given a presentation at the John Barton Payne Building about the preservation efforts going on in Buckland, a village just across the county line in Prince William.

David Blake, owner of Buckland Farm (in both Fauquier and Prince William counties) and president of the Buckland Preservation Society explained the great historical value of Buckland, which was established by the General Assembly in 1798.

For many years a thriving commercial village, Buckland was the site of the Civil War



David Blake

battle often referred to as "The Buckland Races," which took place on Oct. 19, 1863.

Mr. Blake spoke of the challenges faced by Buckland today. Although much of the land in and around the village has been bought by members of the foundation, one huge threat — the expansion of U.S. 29, which cuts through the original village — would destroy the core of what is left there.

The efforts made by the Buckland Preservation Society are noble — and deserve our support. For more information, visit [www.bucklandva.org](http://www.bucklandva.org)

# Scholarships winners introduced at 2005 Annual Meeting

At the Fauquier Historical Society's Annual meeting on June 9, 2005, two talented and accomplished high school graduates were recognized as the 2005 recipients of our annual scholarship award.

Receiving the \$1,000 scholarships were Justin Ermler, a 2005 graduate of Fauquier High School, and Katelin Childers, a 2005 graduate of Liberty High School.

The scholarships originated as part of the Society's 2000 initiative, the Salute to Lafayette, which commemorated the 175th anniversary of Lafayette's last visit to America.

The importance of teaching history — and recognizing students in our schools who share our love of history — was borne of that effort.

In her introductory remarks, Katy Myers, chairman of the Education Committee, praised the students for their hard work.

"Katelin and Justin, strong history students that you are, you may know that Lafayette was about your age — 19 years — when he first set sail for America," remarked Ms. Myers. "Many years later, when remembering his part in our War of Independence, he said: 'For me the days



Justin Ermler



Katelin Childers

when I could serve the United States of America will be the happiest of my life in all times and in all places."

Ms. Myers went on to explain the mutually beneficial relationship that has grown from the work done by the Society and the schools that started with the Salute to Lafayette.

"Having worked in the field of foreign languages for many years and having been privileged to work with colleagues across the state of Virginia, I can safely say that there has been no other educational collaboration as unique or comprehensive as that partnership which developed between the Fauquier Historical Society, Fauquier County public and private schools, museums, libraries and numerous other community organizations," she said.

"What evolved was an extraordinary three-day festival of History Alive, wherein students across Fauquier County who had studied the time period came together to perform and to demonstrate what they had learned."

Highlights of student participation prior to and during the festival were filmed and presented to the State Board of Education, at their request, at their official recognition and acceptance of the Foreign Language of Virginia Standards of Learning in 2000.

Fauquier County Schools later received further recognition in the form of an official commendation from the

State Board.

"Justin and Katelin, who knows what you will remember as the happiest times of your lives?" asked Ms. Myers. "But whatever those times may be, you are certainly off to a good start."

Justin's winning essay was on the history of the Old Jail, and Katelin's essay was a history of the Virginia Gold Cup.

"Reading these essays, I learned much more than I knew before about either topic," remarked Ms. Myers.

Accompanying the essays were recommendations from the scholars' teachers and members of the community.

"It's interesting that both of you are involved in drama, that you have worked with the Fauquier County Community Theatre, and that you both possess musical talent," observed Ms. Myers.

This fall, Katelin — who has already received college credit from — started her studies at the New College of Florida in Sarasota. Justin has matriculated at the recently re-named University of Mary Washington in Fredericksburg.

## NEWS and NOTES

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## Coming in 2006

"The Three Little Cloptons in Casanova," a young girl's account of life in the village of Casanova in the early 20th century.

"Fauquier County Commerce in 1928," a list of all county businesses before the Great Depression.

# Captain Helm

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Sackville, and there was no resistance. Helm tore down the Union Jack, wrapped it around a rock, and threw it into the Wabash River. He immediately began to negotiate treaties with area Indian tribes along the Wabash.

## The British react

Meanwhile, in Detroit, Col. Hamilton was making his own plans to attack Fort Pitt (now Pittsburgh), which he believed was the key to controlling the Ohio River.

But faced with Clark's attacks in Illinois, he knew he must recapture the towns and push the Americans across the Appalachian Mountains. Before leaving Detroit, he wrote about his Indians' successes: "Since last May they have taken 34 prisoners, along with 81 scalps." Hamilton departed Detroit on October 6, 1778, recapturing Vincennes on Dec. 14.

One Indian tribal leader, the Piankaskaw chief Tobacco's Son, had become so loyal to Helm that Clark wrote a memoir entry, "This brave proved to have such an inviolable attachment to Helm that on finding him a prisoner (after the fort's capture) he declared himself a prisoner too, and joined his Brother, as he called him, and continually kept with him."

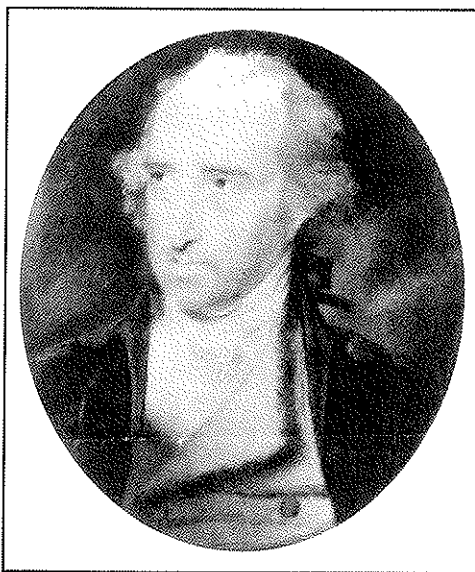
Two years later, Tobacco's Son died, and was buried by the Virginians with "honors of war."

Back in Illinois, Clark felt that his greatly outnumbered force could not defend against Hamilton who would move on him in the spring. He wrote Governor Henry: "I am Resolved to take advantage of this present situation and Risque the whole on a Single Battle — No time is to be lost — Who knows what Fortune will do for us? Great things have been effected by a few men well conducted."

On February 5, 1779, Clark's force pushed forward 150 miles toward Vincennes through vast stretches of frozen swamp, downed forests, and sweeping torrents of rain and snow. They stumbled through ice, wading chest deep in freezing water, with swamp grass up to their necks.

Then on Feb. 13 they arrived at the Little Wabash River, which was a massive frozen lake, mixed among fallen trees and brush.

They pushed through freezing muck. Their only cheer came from the 14-year-



Col. Henry Hamilton

old youth from Cahokia who accompanied them. He was dubbed as "Antick Drummer" for floating on top of his drum and singing comic songs.

Then they captured two canoes from Indian women, one of which carried buffalo meat. After eating soup and drying their clothes, they paddled across the deepest part of the flood.

Nearing the fort, they camouflaged their faces by blackening them with gunpowder, waiting quietly in the woods, eating some nuts and a few animals they killed. Clark gave a brief speech emphasizing how important this battle would be.

Two miles from Vincennes, Clark told a captured French prisoner that he was leading a force of 1,000 formed into 20 companies. The Frenchman was sent to tell the townspeople to stay inside unless they wanted to join in fighting the British.

In the forest on three sides of Fort Sackville, the Virginians worked to reinforce the impression about the size of their unit. They cut tree limbs and hung 20 bright red and green flags onto them. Fluttering at the edge of the woods, they would appear to be the banners of a major army.

Helm heard about Clark's arrival, but no one told Hamilton. That evening, Helm kept Hamilton playing cards and drinking whiskey until the first shot was fired.

Capt. Joseph Bowman of Clark's command wrote in his journal, "Smart firing all night on both sides — not one of our men wounded, seven men in the fort

badly wounded; fine sport for the sons of Liberty, and lasted through the night."

Historian Bessie Taul Conkwright wrote that Hamilton, some of his officers and Helm were playing "picquet" and enjoying hot toddy, prepared by Helm, "who had won their favor by his genial bearing and skill in compounding his favorite drink."

## Attack, surrender

The first volley was fired by Clark's men at the chimney of his quarters with the purpose of throwing dirt into the toddy, which they knew would be on his hearth. When Helm heard the splash, he jumped up with an oath and exclaimed, "Gentlemen, that is Clark's soldiers and they will take your fort, but damn them, they ought not to have spoiled this apple toddy."

Hamilton's Lt. William McIntosh, wrote, "Capt. Helm, a prisoner, was in the fort, & in the second story, playing a game of whist with Gov. Hamilton and other British officers," when Clark's men fired a volley into the portholes. "Helm sprang upon his feet, and swore most violently, declaring it was Clark," McIntosh continued. "The very name of Clark had struck terror on the Indians and now had its effect on the garrison."

Helm cautioned the British to keep away from the portholes "or Clark's men will shoot your eyes out — which is what happened to some. Outside, Clark's men moved about, waving the banners and firing first from one location and then another.

Helm served as the intermediary between Clark and Hamilton. After several failed negotiations, Clark put five captured Indians in full view of the fort. Then he hacked into their skulls with a tomahawk, coolly washing his bloody hands in the river.

Hamilton surrendered on February 25. The British were amazed to see that Clark did not have a force of 1,000. He had only slightly more than 100 men — only a quarter of Hamilton's strength.

"Amidst loud hurrahs, while all Vincennes looked on, Old Captain Helm hoisted the American flag he had formerly refused to pull down," historian Temple Bodley wrote in his book, *George Rogers Clark*.

Clark next sent Helm 150 miles up the Wabash with 40 to 50 French troops. They surprised and captured 40 British, seven boats and stores totaling \$50,000.

Clark shipped the spoils to

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# Captain Helm

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Williamsburg. He then made Helm the civil commandant and in charge of Indian affairs at the fort. When the Delaware Indians raided, killed and plundered a party of traders, Helm was dispatched with orders to make ruthless war on the tribe, "to use every means to destroy them," sparing only women and children.

He carried out the order thoroughly. Many Indian captives were taken to Vincennes and put to death.

Helm's intemperance increased, but he and Clark continued exchanges of letters. Helm was at Vincennes in the fall of 1779. A number of battles ensued, but no information was written as to his missions and location.

He was at Fort Jefferson on February 24, 1781, and signed the receipt of a document. On May 22, 1782, he made his will at the Falls in Jefferson County.

## Death in the wilderness

That summer, frantic appeals were sent to the governor for help because British and Indians were coming together for an attack. Relief was not sent.

In June 1782, people at the Falls knew Helm was on a trail in Kentucky in connection with the raids, but no one knew where. He just vanished, and was never found. They believed he was killed on some lonely trail by one of the Indian raiding parties.

That's the way Helm would chosen to end his life's game — an old man, still fighting, killed in battle, alone.

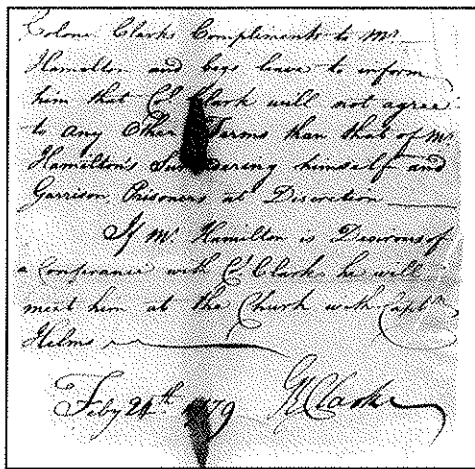
The Virginia government never paid its debts to Helm for funding his commands.

Officers and men of the Illinois regiment filed petitions, reciting Helm's service from April, 1778, to the end of 1781. On behalf of his family members, Helm's executor's petition that "humbly prays that the services of Leonard Helm may be paid for, and also an account with vouchers accompanying this prayer."

When Helm died, he left two coats, one waistcoat, five pounds, one hat, one pair of shoes, and a blanket. His lands had been defrauded from him while he served in the military. Helm's heirs finally received bounty due to him 52 years later, but his lands were never returned.

Virginia also failed to pay the salary or debts Clark incurred to finance his regiment. He turned to the bottle, seeking memories of his role in the art of history.

Three times Virginia tried to honor Clark with ceremonial swords. He refused



Surrender document served to Hamilton included a meeting with Capt. Helm present.

each time, declaring, "When Virginia needed a sword, I found her one. Now I need bread."

He was a bachelor, lived in a log cabin with three slaves in Clarksville, and oversaw the disposition a 10,500-acre land grant in Indiana to the regiment's members. He had three-quarters of a leg removed after it became infected when he fell into fire while drunk. Clark had a stroke in 1813, and died in 1818.

Finally, the federal government commissioned a memorial to him in Vincennes in 1931, and President Franklin D. Roosevelt participated in the ceremony.

## Aftermath

Inexcusably, many of Virginia's gallant soldiers and sailors suffered the same fate as Clark and Helm.

Capt. William Helm, who served under George Washington in a Virginia regiment, drowned in the Ohio River in 1806.

It took 30 years for the lands due to him or his now-impooverished family to finally be approved.

Hamilton was imprisoned after his capture, but he refused paroles under conditions offered by George Washington. He was quietly exchanged to the British for an American prisoner. He returned to England in 1781, became governor of Quebec in 1782, then Canada two years later.

Finally he became governor of Bermuda and Antigua before he died in 1796. The capital of Bermuda was named after him.

*Brig. Gen. Lew Helm is an honorary life member of the Fauquier Historical Society. He is a direct descendent of Leonard Helm, the immigrant, and former Chief Justice John Marshall. As author of Black Horse Cavalry Defend Our Beloved Country, he donated income from all sales of the first edition of the book to the Society. The book can be obtained at the Fauquier Times-Democrat, Old Jail Museum or at the web site, [www.hakenson.net](http://www.hakenson.net).*

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