

George Washington's French and Indian War

by Theodore J. Crackel

By the 1580s the French were ahead of the British in reaching into the interior of North America. They had established trading companies there, and their ships regularly brought furs back to France. Early in the seventeenth century they had two successful permanent settlements—Acadia (1604) and Quebec (1608)—but any advantage they accrued from all this was soon lost. Although the European population of New France grew steadily—from 3,200 in 1666 to some 10,000 in 1700, and roughly 70,000 by 1750—it was far outpaced by the English colonies to the south where during this period the population grew to more than a million.

Despite this, however, the French remained convinced that their presence in North America had real strategic value. They believed that, if they could link New France, via the Ohio River, to their settlements in Louisiana and along the Mississippi, they could establish an effective military barrier to English expansion. If not, they feared, it would only be a matter of time before the British dominated all of North America and its vast resources. By the middle of the eighteenth century both the British and the French believed that a military contest in North America was inevitable as an element of their global rivalry.

In 1749, Jacques-Pierre de Taffanel de la Jonquiere, the governor of New France began dispatching military units and friendly American Indians to attack English settlers in lands the French claimed, threaten tribes loyal to the English, arrest or kill British traders, and construct fortifications at key points. He also sent a small force to put into place, along the Ohio River, a set of lead plates that proclaimed that France owned the waterway and all the land whose waters emptied into it—in effect, all of the Ohio country. When this detachment came upon some British traders, they sent them back to Philadelphia with a letter to Governor James Hamilton warning him that such “foreign” intruders would no longer be tolerated.

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A clash was inevitable. British traders sought the fur trade, and speculators eyed land in the Ohio country. In 1747 Virginia investors, including Lawrence and Augustine Washington, George Washington's two older half brothers, had organized the Ohio Company of Virginia and sought a grant of 200,000 acres to settle. Although both Virginia and Pennsylvania had claims on this land, Virginia pursued its claims more aggressively. The Crown approved the Company's request and in July 1749, the governor and council of Virginia made a grant of land near the Forks of the Ohio (present-day Pittsburgh, where the Allegheny and Monongahela Rivers merge to form the Ohio). The grant required that the company had to settle at least one hundred families and build a fort for their protection within seven years.

In 1750 the Ohio Company ordered a trail blazed from Wills Creek (now Cumberland, Maryland) over the mountains to the Monongahela River. They then built a fortified storehouse where the Redstone Creek



Detail from map showing George Washington's route to the French fort in 1754, published in *Journal of Major George Washington (1754)*. (Gilder Lehrman Collection)

emptied into the Monongahela and hired Christopher Gist, a veteran woodsman and surveyor, to identify the lands most suited to settlement. They then ordered the widening of the trail for pack trains to accommodate settlers.

By mid-1752 all this activity was well known to the French in Quebec, and a newly arrived governor general, Michel-Ange Duquesne de Menneville, took a hard line in response. He ordered four forts built to establish a strong French presence in the Ohio country. The first was Fort Presque Isle on the south shore of Lake Erie. The second, linked to the first by a portage road, was Fort Le Boeuf at the head of French Creek. The third, where French Creek emptied into the Allegheny River, was Fort Machault. The last, at Forks of the Ohio, was to be named Fort Duquesne. By the spring of 1753 the first two were already underway.

Meanwhile, Governor Robert Dinwiddie of Virginia and other colonial governors were in constant correspondence concerning this French threat. In June Dinwiddie reported their concerns to the Board of Trade in London and, in mid-November, he received their reply. Verify the rumors, the board instructed, and if confirmed “you are to require of Them peaceably to depart,” and if they do not do so “we do hereby strictly charge & command You, to drive them off by Force of Arms.”[1] Dinwiddie, however, had anticipated the first of these instructions by sending Major George Washington, his newly appointed militia adjutant of the southern district of Virginia, to confront the French.

In preparation Washington hired a translator, Jacob Van Braam, a Dutchman then teaching French; purchased horses and supplies; and headed west for Wills Creek. There he engaged Gist and four others, completing the party. Rain and heavy snow slowed their progress, but, when they finally reached the Forks, Washington quickly saw its military and economic importance in controlling the region. Here the young major met with Indians friendly to the British—particularly Half King, a Seneca chief, who was believed to be influential among the tribes in the region. After meeting with him and other chiefs for a few days, Washington’s party, with Half King and a few other Indians, left to meet with the French.

They followed the Allegheny River to French Creek where they found a small French detachment wintering near the partially completed Fort Machault. That evening, plentiful “Wine . . . gave license to their Tongues to reveal their Sentiments more freely,” noted Washington. “They told me it was their absolute Design to take Possession of the Ohio” and “prevent our Settling on the River or Waters of it.”[2] Inclement weather continued to hamper their progress, but on December 11 they reached Fort Le Boeuf, where Washington presented Governor Dinwiddie’s letter to Captain Jacques Legardeur, who commanded French forces in the Ohio country. A few days later Washington received a response. He would, Legardeur wrote, forward the governor’s letter to Duquesne in Quebec, but “as to the summons you sent me to retire,” he wrote, “I do not think myself obliged to obey it.”[3]

Washington’s party, along with Half King’s Indians, departed Le Boeuf on December 16, but progress was so slow that the major and Gist soon left Van Braam with the packs and horses and struck out on their own to deliver the French response. Hostile Indians and ice-swollen rivers nearly cost them their lives, but they reached Wills Creek on January 6, 1754. From there Washington continued alone and arrived at Williamsburg on the 16th.

Upon hearing his report Dinwiddie instructed Washington to prepare a written version for the Governor’s Council. The young officer worked through the night and submitted it the next day. The governor had it printed and distributed. In the late winter and early spring it was serialized in a number of colonial newspapers and was published in England later in the year. The young Washington was beginning to be noticed.

In the meantime the Ohio Company was moving ahead with plans to settle the region. As he was making his way back to Virginia, Washington had passed a Company train of “17 Horses loaded with Materials & Stores for a Fort at the Forks” followed a day later by “a Family or two going out to settle.” Dinwiddie had already begun sending supplies and arms to the Forks; he now sent military commissions to the Ohio Company agents building the fort, giving their work the mark of official sanction. At the same time the governor ordered Washington to begin raising two companies (some 100 men) that he could quickly take west to aid in completing the fort and protecting the fledgling settlement. When no recruits were forthcoming the governor issued a proclamation promising a grant of 200,000 acres on the east side of the Ohio to those who volunteered. Shortly thereafter he ordered the raising of a six-company regiment and promoted Washington to lieutenant colonel, placing him second in command under Joshua Fry, a militia colonel and a member of the Governor’s Council.

On April 2, 1754, Washington, with the first two companies, some 165 officers and men, left Alexandria, Virginia, for the wilderness. On the 19th, at Wills Creek, he received an urgent message requesting reinforcements at the Forks. The next day, however, he learned that the French had arrived with a substantial force and that the carpenters who had just finished the fort had relinquished it. On April 23, Washington called a council of war. His January orders from Dinwiddie were explicit: If “any attempts are made to obstruct the works or interrupt our Settlements by any Persons whatsoever, You are to restrain all such Offenders, & in Case of resistance to make Prisoners of or kill & destroy them.”[4] At the council it was decided to move forward to the mouth of the Redstone at the Monongahela River, where the Ohio Company had already stockpiled stores and where they might await reinforcements. The Virginians moved forward slowly, widening the road as they went to accommodate their wagons.

On May 24, as they moved forward, a message from Half King warned them that the French had sent out a party to engage them. Soon thereafter they arrived at Great Meadows (near present-day Farmington, Pennsylvania) where a British trader confirmed Half King’s report. At this Washington ordered his men to prepare defensive positions and, the next day, began to send out small patrols to locate the French. On the 27th Gist arrived and reported that signs of the French had been seen as close as five miles from Great Meadows. That evening another message from Half King said that he had located the French. Washington, who could not call back a large reconnaissance force he had ordered out earlier in the day, took forty men and left to join the chief. The two men conferred briefly, and then the English and Indians headed toward the French encampment. In the early morning hours they approached the French camp, Washington’s force on one side, the Indians on the other. A brief firefight ensued and, in the action, the French lost as many as a dozen men killed and twenty-one taken prisoner. The English lost one killed and three wounded. The Indians, it seems, did not participate in the fight but did prevent the French from escaping in their direction. After the action the Indians scalped the dead and may have killed a few who had been wounded. Among those was Ensign Joseph Coulon de Villiers Jumonville, who was killed by Half King himself, an act that had unfortunate repercussions.

As soon as Washington returned to Great Meadows he put the men to work improving their defensive works and awaited the inevitable French response. He then composed reports to Colonel Fry and Governor Dinwiddie. To Fry he wrote, “Yesterday I engaged a party of French whereof 11 were kill’d and 20 taken with the loss of only 1 of mine and 2 or 3 wounded.” Now, he reported, they expected to be attacked by “large” detachments and needed reinforcements “immediately.” His still-small force clearly was no match for the French and their Indian allies at the Forks.

Then Washington wrote Dinwiddie a rather odd letter that began with a long dissertation on officer pay—a topic that had dominated their recent exchanges. Then he wrote, “Now sir, as I have answer’d your Honour’s Letter I shall beg leave to acqt you with what has happen’d since I wrote” last. He reported on

the morning's action and then spoke of the prisoners being sent back, warning that they would "pretend they were coming on" to instruct him to leave the Ohio country—much, it seems, as he had done the year before to the French. "But," he continued, "the absurdity of this pretext is too glaring." He enclosed their instructions which would show, he wrote, that the French were "to get intelligence" and then prepare a force that would then "fall on us immediately after." In a postscript he added, "we have already began a Palisadod Fort and hope to have it up tomorrow." Two days later he sent a note to his younger brother, John Augustine, describing the action. "I heard Bullets whistle," he wrote, "and believe me there was something charming in the sound." [5]

In the days that followed at Great Meadows, Washington constructed a circular log fort, about fifty feet in diameter, with a small hut in the middle for storage. Around the whole he had a shallow trench dug. It was christened Fort Necessity. On June 10 he received the balance of the Virginia regiment, about two hundred men and nine small cannons, but very few rations. That same day he pleaded with Dinwiddie for supplies saying, "We have been six days without flour, and there is none upon the road for our relief that we know of." Shortly thereafter, an independent company from South Carolina (British regulars) of about hundred men under Captain James Mckay arrived. This was a mixed blessing. Although Mckay had brought a small herd of cattle, his men would very soon be drawing on Washington's small stock of rations—particularly flour. But when his supply agent promised that a substantial shipment would arrive shortly, Washington optimistically began to consider further offensive action and recommenced the march toward the Monongahela River—moving his force closer to the Forks. He might, he thought, erect another fort at the storehouse the Ohio Company had built where Redstone Creek emptied into the Monongahela, if he was obliged to wait there for additional reinforcements and supplies.

On June 15 Washington left Mckay and his regulars at Fort Necessity (Mckay refused to take orders from Washington and would not have his men do any road construction) and marched his regiment toward the Monongahela nearly thirty miles away. They followed the trail blazed by the Ohio Company three or four years earlier, clearing and widening it as they went, but their progress was slow because of the steep hills and rocky, densely forested terrain. On the 27th they had reached Gist's settlement (near present-day Unionville, Pennsylvania) near the headwaters of Redstone Creek. Washington sent one detachment ahead "to endeavor to clear a Road" to the mouth of the Redstone and a second to a small Dunkard settlement farther up the Monongahela in the desperate hope of getting corn. Later that same day he received reliable information that the French at Fort Duquesne had been reinforced by about one thousand men. With that news all detachments were recalled and a council of war was scheduled for next day (Friday, June 28). At the same time Washington asked Mckay and his company to come forward.

At the council, the officers, including Mckay, quickly agreed that they should withdraw to Fort Necessity. That move would put more distance between them and the advancing French, including the road they had just cleared, which one officer described as the "roughest and most hilly Road of any on the Allegany Mountains." [6] The move would also make their resupply easier. They were desperately short of rations, and had been without meat or bread for several days. Having earlier lost their wagons to the rough terrain they had just crossed, they loaded what ammunition and other materials they could on the available horses, including the officers' mounts, and began the trek back to Great Meadows. Some elements arrived late the next day, but some—probably the unfortunate men who had to drag the nine light cannon back—did not close on Fort Necessity until July 1.

Washington then put his men to work improving the fort and the trenches around it. Late on the morning of July 3, a force of about 600 French and 100 American Indians appeared and Washington formed up his men to meet them. When the French took up positions in the woods, however, he withdrew his men

into the fort and its entrenchments. The French and Indians, firing from behind trees and fallen timbers, extracted a heavy toll, but rain fell throughout the day and into the night, flooding the marshy ground and the trenches, and ultimately making it almost impossible for either side to keep their weapons and powder dry. As night approached, Capt. Louis Coulon de Villiers, commander of the French force and brother of the dead Jumonville, requested a parley. With his men exhausted and starving, and therefore no longer an effective fighting force, Washington had no real alternative but surrender. Mckay concurred. Near midnight terms were agreed upon and written out by Villiers. Washington and Mckay huddled together in the candle-lit hut while Van Braam attempted to translate the water-smudged document. In the process the Dutchman, whose English was poor, translated the French term for "assassinate" as "killed" in connection with the death of young Jumonville. The terms allowed the British to withdraw, retaining their baggage and weapons, but not their cannon. Washington and Mckay signed the document. Although Washington and his officers adamantly denied the charge of "assassination" when Van Braam's mistake became known, the French used the "admission" in their effort to discredit the British. Although these actions occurred nearly two years before war was declared between Britain and France, they are often cited as the first engagements in the French and Indian War in North America, and in a global conflict historians have dubbed the Seven Years' War.

On July 4 the British force left Fort Necessity and began the march for Wills Creek and on to Virginia. The French stayed only long enough to burn Fort Necessity, then retraced their steps to Fort Duquesne, burning Gist's trading post and the storehouse at the mouth of the Redstone River as they went.

Washington and Mckay made their formal report to Dinwiddie on July 19, putting the circumstances in the very best possible light. It was, they reported, an "unequal Fight, with an Enemy sheltered behind the Trees, ourselves without Shelter, in Trenches full of Water, in a settled Rain, and the Enemy galling us on all Sides incessantly from the Woods, till 8 o'Clock at Night when the French called a Parley. . . . About Midnight we agreed that each Side would retire without Molestation, they back to their Fort at Monongahela, and we to Will's Creek." There was no mention of "capitulation" or "assassination," but Dinwiddie knew the fuller details and was satisfied, for the moment, with this, and so it was reported in the *Virginia Gazette*.

Dinwiddie was inclined to try again, but the other colonies evidenced no interest. Instead, to protect his frontier, he reorganized his militia into ten independent companies. With no regimental command Washington resigned his commission. In England, however, this defeat stirred the Cabinet to action. As Horace Walpole, the English chronicler, put it, "The volley fired by a young Virginian in the backwoods of America set the world on fire." In mid-January 1755, Major General Edward Braddock and two under-strength Irish regiments set sail for North America to displace the French in the Ohio country.

EPILOGUE

When Braddock arrived, Washington volunteered to be an aide-de-camp. In July 1755, the British column was ambushed as it approached Fort Duquesne and badly mauled. General Braddock was mortally wounded in the action. Washington, however, had been instrumental in preventing a complete rout. His bravery and acumen were celebrated at home and abroad. One British wag allowed that he had "acquitted himself nobly," and just weeks after the action a Virginia minister opined in his sermon that the "heroic young Col. Washington" must have been preserved "by Providence" for "some important service to his country."

The English did not give up and in 1758 sent Brigadier John Forbes to capture Fort Duquesne as but one element of a campaign that ultimately won Canada for the British and ended French ambitions in that part

of North America. Forbes recognized that Washington, who had returned to command the Virginia regiment in 1756, could be of useful service to him. Although the Virginian sometimes rankled, Forbes made good use of the young colonel. Washington in turn learned invaluable lessons in how an army should be organized, supplied, and fought in North America.

In February 1763, the Treaty of Paris ended the Seven Years' War and the French ceded Canada to the British. In October, the British restricted settlement west of the Allegheny Mountains and the next year adopted a hugely unpopular policy of taxing the American colonies to help defray the war debt. The French and Indian War, it seems, not only sowed the seeds of unrest that would eventually lead to the American Revolution, but it also marked a soldier, now oft hailed a hero, who would lead the nascent nation to victory in that conflict.

[1] Earl of Holderness to Dinwiddie, May 22, 1753, quoted in "Editorial Note," *The Papers of George Washington Digital Edition*, ed. Theodore J. Crackel. Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, Rotunda, 2008. Hereafter cited as PGWDE.

[2] Entry, Nov. 30, 1753, "Journey to the French Commandant: Narrative," PGWDE.

[3] Legardeur to Dinwiddie, Oct. 31, 1753, quoted (in translation) in "Journey to the French Commandant: Narrative," note 59, PGWDE.

[4] Dinwiddie to Washington, [Jan 1754], "Instructs, to be observ'd by Majr Geo. Washington on the Expedittn to the Ohio," PGWDE.

[5] Washington to Dinwiddie, May 29, 1754 [third of that date], PGWDE; Washington to John Augustine Washington, [May 31, 1754], PGWDE.

[6] Adam Stephen, *Maryland Gazette* (Annapolis), Aug. 29, 1754, quoted in "Editorial Note," PGWDE.

Theodore J. Crackel spent eighteen years as a historical documentary editor after a twenty-one-year career in the US Army. In 1993, he launched and headed the "Papers of the War Department, 1784–1800"—an effort to reconstitute, and make available digitally, records that had been destroyed in a fire in 1800. He recently retired from his position as professor and editor-in-chief of the *Papers of George Washington at the University of Virginia*.

SUGGESTED RESOURCES FROM THE ARCHIVIST ON THIS TOPIC
