

## Washington and the Beginnings of the French and Indian War



In 1745, the Virginia House of Burgesses began granting western land to Virginia-based land companies. The French saw this as a threat to their territorial claims, which were based on early exploration and settlement. In 1752 France sent the Marquis de Duquesne to be the governor-general of Canada and to command French forces in North America.

Throughout the rest of 1752 and early 1753, the French built strategically located forts throughout the Ohio River Valley to protect their claims. One of those forts which was built on the banks of the Ohio River in modern-day Pittsburgh was named Fort Duquesne after the Marquis.

The Lieutenant Governor of Virginia, Robert Dinwiddie, was particularly vocal in calling upon the British government to stop French incursions into the Ohio Valley. The British government agreed to give the colonial governors the power to resist French incursions in America. King George II's



instructions stated that the governor was to erect forts, protect English claims and remove any Indians or Europeans from English territory.

In October 1753, Washington traveled to Williamsburg to present himself to Dinwiddie and to volunteer to be Britain's emissary to the French. Dinwiddie accepted Washington's services, instructed Washington to travel to proceed to the French forts in the Ohio River Valley. Once he arrived at the French fort, Washington was to present his letter from the governor, wait for a reply, and request a French escort back to the Virginia settlements. While waiting at the fort, he was to note troop strength, armaments, defenses, communications, and learn all he could about the French plans.

In December of 1753 Washington meets with Captain Jacques Legardeur de Saint-Pierre at Fort LeBoeuf and presents Governor Dinwiddie's letter ordering the French to leave the region.

Washington returned to Williamsburg, Virginia in January of 1754 and gave his report to Dinwiddie. Dinwiddie was convinced that the French fort-building activity was an act of aggression against Great Britain. Furthermore, he determined that the actions were egregious enough to warrant a military response. Washington was promoted to Lieutenant Colonel as ordered to raise a company of men to build a fort on the forks of the Monongahela river to defend against further French encroachment.

Washington began marching his troops toward the frontier on April 18, 1754. He had only 159 men, few supplies, and fewer wagons. His destination was the British fort under construction on the forks of the Monongahela. Washington made camp in Great Meadows on May 24 and prepared to erect a small fort. He found the location favorable because there was a small stream for water, ample forage, gullies that could serve as natural trenches, and an open field for battle. He pushed his men to complete the small, palisaded fort called Fort Necessity and deepen the trenches that radiated out from the fort with plans form this position to attack the French Fort Duquesne.

Washington still assumed that Fort Necessity was well-located in Great Meadows. The ground was very marshy from the rain earlier that morning; the fort was located so that only one side had ground firm enough to support an attack. He assumed that the French would meet on the field in the traditional, European way of battle. The French troops appeared about 11 that morning and advanced in three columns. Washington ordered his men out of the fort and lined up to fight. The French fired from about 600 yards and the British took their positions in trenches, now full of rainwater, to defend the fort. When they had advanced to within about 60 yards, the French scattered to the surrounding hillsides. The French began an eight-hour bombardment of the little fort and the exposed British soldiers. The French broke off the attack at 8 pm that night and called for a parley (a meeting to sign a truce). He took stock of his resources. All of his horses and livestock had been killed. The powder was wet, and most of the men's guns were jammed with no hope of repair. One third of his men were dead or wounded. Some of the men had broken into the rum supply and were rapidly getting drunk. Washington then agreed to the parley and signed the truce agreement

to leave their fort unmolested as long as they returned the French prisoners, left the area, agreed not to return for at least a year. On July 4, 1754 Washington and all the British troops left Fort Necessity headed for the frontier town of Winchester, Virginia to regroup. Washington resigned his Virginia command to Dinwiddie in October 1754 and returned to private life to concentrate on his farm.

Washington returned to military life in March 1755. The British sent Brigadier General Edward Braddock to Virginia with British regular soldiers to take the main French stronghold of Fort Duquesne (near Pittsburgh, PA). General Braddock offered Washington a place in his “family” on this expedition. This was Washington’s first opportunity to serve in a military campaign led by an experienced, professional officer. The mission was not a success; the British were badly defeated at the Monongahela River.

The British regulars broke and ran under the bombardment of French and Indian bullets. Washington helped to organize the retreat. Braddock died of his wounds, and Washington ordered him buried under the road he had cut.

Eventually the British frontier strategy changed. The army in America was reorganized with a new British leader, General John Forbes and George Washington was under his command. In November of 1755 as the British moved closer, the French commander grew more concerned about his ability to defend his post. He had few men and resources because his supply lines had been cut off a few months before. He elected to abandon his post, and on November 23<sup>rd</sup> he ordered the magazines blown up and the fort burned down. Leading an advance group, Washington reached the smoking remains of the fort on November 24, 1758. Ironically the British took possession of the fort without firing a single shot. The fort was renamed Fort Pitt in honor of British Parliamentarian William Pitt hence the name of the city where these events took place, Pittsburgh.

#### Reference

“French & Indian War.” George Washington's Mount Vernon. *Mount Vernon Ladies' Association*, [www.mountvernon.org/george-washington/french-indian-war](http://www.mountvernon.org/george-washington/french-indian-war) September 24, 2020.