

1754-55 Braddock's Defeat

The struggle between Britain and France for control of North America began in the American back-country years before official war was declared in Europe. The British and French had been jockeying for position far beyond the lines of settlement-- in the Ohio Valley, the Great Lakes, and ultimately, the Mississippi Valley. In 1753 an army of one thousand French headed down the Allegheny River from Canada to build a line of forts to support their claim to the Ohio Valley.

To support Virginia's claim to the disputed territory, Governor Dinwiddie of Virginia ordered a fort built at the Forks of the Ohio, where the Monongahela and Allegheny Rivers meet to form the Ohio River (today's Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania). In the spring of 1754, the French ousted the Virginians and rebuilt the fort as an impressive citadel which they named Fort Duquesne. This furthest incursion yet into the Ohio Valley threatened the interests of the Virginians, the British, and their Native allies.



While George Washington, an ambitious 22-year-old Lieutenant Colonel in the Virginia militia, was enroute with a force to help protect the construction of the Virginians' fort, he learned of the loss of the fort to the French. Soon thereafter, on the morning of May 28, 1754, Washington and his Native allies encountered and surrounded a small French force encamped at Jumonville Glen east of Fort Duquesne. A military action ensued in which Washington's forces killed or wounded some 14 French soldiers, to include the commander of the French force. This was the start of the French & Indian War.

Following the battle, Washington returned to the nearby Great Meadows and completed the construction of a makeshift wooden palisade fort, called Fort Necessity. On July 3, a retaliatory force of 600 French, French Canadian, and Indian soldiers captured Fort Necessity and forced Washington to surrender. The capitulation



document that Washington signed, which he could not read as it was in French, included an acknowledgment that the French soldiers had been “assassinated.” This ultimately caused a diplomatic row which reverberated through the highest levels in Britain and France and had major international ramifications.



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The British determined to strike back, and in early 1755 Major General Edward Braddock arrived in Virginia with two regiments of British regulars. The complex and ambitious strategy was for Braddock to lead his two regiments of regulars augmented by provincial militia against Fort Duquesne on a route via Fort Cumberland. A separate provincial army was to go up the Mohawk valley to take French forts on Lake Ontario, while another was to move up the Hudson River and Lake George to attack Crown Point on Lake Champlain, and a fourth army from Boston was to reestablish British authority in Acadia where French troops from Louisbourg were building fortifications.

Braddock’s campaign was plagued by logistical difficulties from the start. However, in a remarkable feat of military engineering and determination his force cut a road through the wilderness and hauled heavy cannon over seven large mountains to get within eight miles of Fort Duquesne, where, after crossing the Monongahela River on July 9 they were attacked by a combined French, Canadian and Indian force sent out from Fort Duquesne to intercept them (in fact the Indians had been tracking Braddock’s lumbering column for weeks). The French commander was killed in the first few minutes of the battle, and the brunt of the fighting was carried on by the Indians, who, firing from concealed positions, deliberately targeted the British

and American officers. With the loss of their leaders and with fire coming in from all directions many of the British regulars panicked. The ensuing slaughter was horrific. Almost all the officers and more than 900 of the approximately 1400 British troops present were killed or wounded, including General Braddock. Washington, who was serving as an aide to Braddock, was remarkably unscathed and directed the retreat. This was one of the worst losses British arms had ever faced and resulted in the immediate opening of the frontier to murderous French and Indian raids on Anglo-American settlements up and down the East Coast to within 100 miles of Philadelphia. Known to the Anglo-Americans as "the Outrages," the coordinated attacks depopulated large swathes of the western parts of colonial America. The attacks continued for three years until the British eventually took Fort Duquesne. Years later the road that Braddock cut, and in which he was buried, became the National Pike over which thousands of people emigrated to Ohio and points west.

The other separate prongs of Braddock's campaign largely failed to achieve their objectives, although the combined British and New England force directed at Nova Scotia retook the province and, in an early run at "ethnic cleansing," deported the French population to Louisiana, thus giving America the "Cajuns."