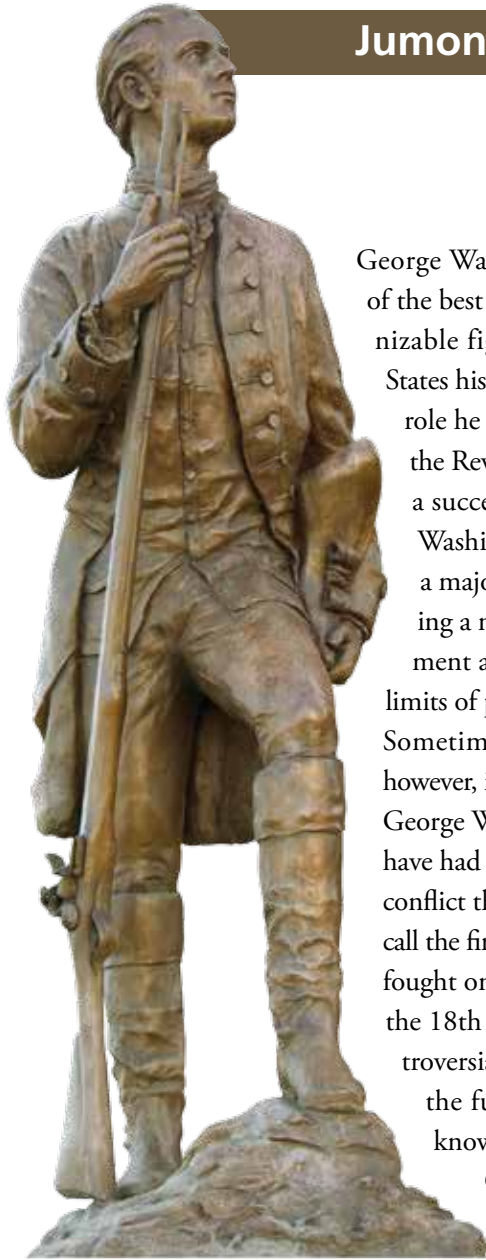


George Washington

and the French & Indian War

Jumonville Glen — Fayette County, Pennsylvania

Written by: **Dan Whetzel**
 Photography by: **Lance C. Bell**



Bronze statue of young George Washington at the site of Fort Cumberland; currently the location of the Allegany County Courthouse at 30 Washington Street, Cumberland, MD.

George Washington is one of the best known and recognizable figures in United States history because of the role he played in bringing the Revolutionary War to a successful conclusion. Washington later played a major part in establishing a new federal government and defining the limits of presidential power. Sometimes overlooked, however, is the responsibility George Washington may have had in starting another conflict that some historians call the first world war, a war fought on five continents in the 18th century. The controversial event involving the future president, known as Jumonville

Glen, includes many elements of regional history, and is directly connected to the start of the

French and Indian War (1756-1763), a major conflict involving Britain, France, and the native population of North America.

George Washington was obviously not responsible for the British-French rivalry that existed for centuries. The

conflict was based on long standing European disputes, including the Hundred Years that placed the two kingdoms at odds and created lingering resentments.

With the exploration of North America in the 17th century, the British-French rivalry once again exploded into armed conflict with what the former called King William's War (1688-1697), a time when settlements were subjected to raids and the native population forced to take sides. King William's War did not settle the colonial disputes in North America, as the two colonial powers confronted each other again on the western frontier.

Britain and France experienced major disagreements over the Ohio Valley by 1750. English settlements had been expanding for decades from the eastern seaboard toward the Ohio Valley, while French settlers were acting similarly as they moved south from Canada. The conflicts over commercial and political interests in the region increased when the two sides clashed over territorial claims.

A key figure in the economic and political intrigue was Robert Dinwiddie, Lt. Governor of Virginia and a primary investor in the Ohio Company, a private land speculation company that today would be called a venture capital enterprise. The Ohio Company received a land grant from the crown to a large part of the Ohio Valley, thereby entwining the British government with colonial authorities and private investors. Additional western land companies were chartered which increased political pressures to ensure that Ohio remained under friendly control.

Native Americans became victims in the territorial disputes since their occupation of the land predated both French and English settlements. By the mid eighteenth century, the three parties drew closer to armed conflict as negotiations continued to fail.



Reenactors portraying the French (left) and the British (right) during the French and Indian War.

Robert Dinwiddie recognized the threat that a French presence would pose to the Ohio Company, so he sought powerful support. After Dinwiddie's plea to the British Privy Council, the government offered assurances by authorizing the building of forts in strategic locations in the Ohio Valley and other measures. The government in London did not, however, provide funding to carry out all that was authorized and Virginia's legislative assembly, called the House of Burgesses, refused to finance the initiatives. Dinwiddie was forced to try a less expensive alternative—sending an emissary to speak with the French. Dinwiddie's decision to include 21-year-old George Washington with the diplomatic mission would have important implications.

Washington was likely included in the mission because of his previous experience as a surveyor in western lands and connections to the influential Fairfax family of Virginia. Armed with a letter from Dinwiddie and a new title, Major in the Virginia militia, Washington departed Williamsburg, Virginia, at the end of October 1753. After arriving several weeks later at the Ohio Company storehouse in present day Ridgeley, West Virginia, he hired Christopher Gist as a guide to lead the small party into Pennsylvania.

The French commander at Fort LeBoeuf (present day Waterford, PA) was unimpressed by Dinwiddie's letter demanding that he vacate the region. Although treated with respect due a diplomat, the young major was invited to depart Fort LeBoeuf and return to Williamsburg.

Upon return to Virginia, Dinwiddie requested that Washington prepare a written report of the expedition that was later published and widely read, thereby thrusting the young military leader into the public spotlight for the first time.

Washington's report on the mission not only included the rejection of British demands, but also a survey of French forces and allies that he observed in the region. Dinwiddie and the colonial legislature interpreted the French presence in the Ohio Valley and the more recent rejection of demands as unfriendly acts. Dinwiddie subsequently promoted George Washington to the rank of Lt. Colonel and ordered a militia force be raised with orders to destroy or make prisoners of anyone who was obstructing British interests in the Ohio Valley.

As hostilities grew closer, the colonial powers increased their efforts to curry favor with Native Americans. Unfortunately



Some Native Americans viewed the French as the lesser threat while others became British allies.

for the native population, Britain and France usually considered Indian interests only within the context of European concerns. Bargains were forged and broken depending on circumstances and misunderstandings. Like their European counterparts, native peoples were diverse and exploiting the differences was typically practiced by both colonial powers.

Britain's primary allies among Native Americans belonged to the Iroquois confederation and a leader named Tanacharison, but commonly called by the title "Half King." Not all groups within the confederation trusted the British or Half King; Indians continued to see their lands encroached upon despite the presence of their leader. Many Indians, therefore, rejected Half King's authority, opposed the British, and viewed the French as a lesser threat.

Washington became part of the newly formed Virginia Regiment under the leadership of Colonel Joshua Fry that was dispatched with specific orders to hold the land at the confluence of the Allegheny and Monongahela Rivers, the same area claimed by the French. After arriving at Fort

Cumberland in April 1754, Washington learned that 1,000 French forces had already begun work on a fort where Dinwiddie had ordered that a British stronghold be constructed.

Not waiting for the arrival of Colonel Fry, Washington ordered his men to depart Fort Cumberland and make their way into Pennsylvania where French forces and their allies awaited. Although Britain and France were not technically at war, tensions continued to mount after word was received that the French had attempted to burn the plantation of Christopher Gist, a member of Washington's party.

Washington was aware that French forces would be present in southwest Pennsylvania, but on May 27, 1754, Indian allies presented him with specific information about a camp 15 miles from his position. Following consultations with Half King, Washington selected approximately 40 militiamen to meet the French. Walking single file through darkness, the small group located the encampment on the morning of May 28th in a glen not far from the main trail.



Reenactors portraying the British during the French and Indian War (1756 – 1763).

It is at this point in time the encounter became a controversial issue with international consequences.

Washington's Indian allies circled behind the French while Washington and the colonials walked straight into the glen. No one is sure which side fired first, but it is uncontested that a volley of gun fire occurred that morning. The fighting continued for about 15 minutes and took the lives of 13 Frenchmen and one militiaman. Importantly, one Frenchman escaped the glen and made his way back to Fort Duquesne (present day Pittsburgh, PA) where news of the encounter quickly became known and disseminated.

If the attack was not controversial enough, subsequent events further escalated tensions and tarnished Washington's reputation as a military leader.

The controversial and tragic incident allegedly occurred after the French surrendered and when Washington was trying to communicate with an officer, Ensign de Villiers, Sieur de Jumonville, who had been dispatched to warn the British about occupying French claimed territory. As Jumonville and Washington conversed while attempting

to overcome the language barrier, Half King stepped into their presence. Without warning, he tomahawked Jumonville's head and reportedly washed his hands in the dead man's brains. Half King's motivation was based in previous war experiences involving the French. This personal act of revenge against an unarmed and in-custody officer elevated what had been a backwoods skirmish into a brutal murder event.

The historical accuracy of the encounter was later disputed by several accounts that did not include Half King's violent act. Other undisputed behavior involved the scalping of French casualties by Half King's men. Regardless of differing accounts, the French who fought at what became known as the Battle of Jumonville Glen believed the British and their allies had acted inappropriately on the morning of May 28th.

As word of the skirmish became known, so did questions about it. Were the French secretly stalking the militia and waiting for an opportunity to ambush them? Did Washington open fire on sleeping men who were engaged in a



Reenactors with their muskets, portraying the French during the French and Indian War.

diplomatic mission? Was the young Washington influenced by Half King to commit a reckless act? These and other questions continued to be debated by those interested in the French and Indian War and what became known as the “Battle of Jumonville Glen” or simply “Jumonville.”

Washington consistently stated that members of the French party were going for their weapons when he fired in self defense. The French, however, maintained most of them learned of Washington’s presence only after he opened fire. The French also argued that the violent encounter constituted an act of war on a diplomatic mission and that armed retaliation was justified.

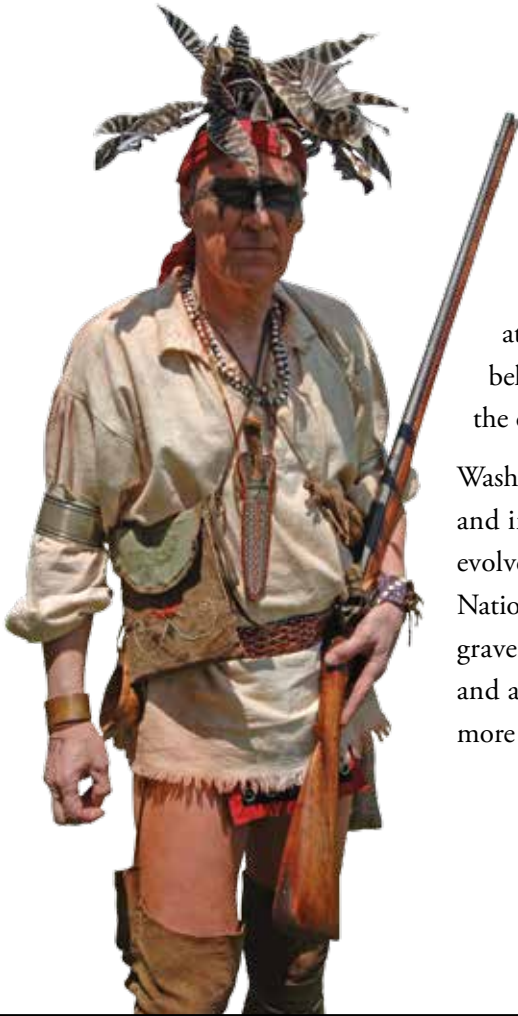
Washington expected French retaliation, so he retreated a short distance to a position known as Great Meadows. A hastily constructed wooden enclosure that was begun shortly before the incident, known as Fort Necessity, provided the best defense the militia could muster in a short time. Despite preparations, French and Indian forces

caused Washington to surrender on July 3rd. The surrender negotiations must have been tense for Washington because Jumonville’s half-brother was involved in the talks.

The surrender document proved to be generous because it allowed the militiamen to depart the temporary garrison and return to Virginia. Not having many options, Washington signed a surrender document written in French stating that he had “assassinated” Jumonville, a term Washington later complained was not translated correctly at the time.

The consequences of Jumonville Glen were significant. Horace Walpole, Member of Parliament and historian, summarized the incident succinctly when he wrote, “A volley fired by a young Virginian in the backwoods of America...set the world on fire.”

Walpole’s statement is supported by the rapid fire events following Jumonville Glen: Fort Necessity and Washington’s surrender, British General Edward Braddock’s defeat



in 1755, and the beginning of the French and Indian War which became the American theatre of the Seven Years War (1756-1763). The Seven Years War involved all the great European Wars and was fought on five continents, causing some historians to argue it could be called the first world war.

On a personal level, Washington did not seem to fear the armed conflict at Jumonville Glen. His famous statement, “I heard the bullets whistle, and, believe me there is something charming in the sound,” does not conflict with the courage he demonstrated during the Revolutionary War.

Washington’s actions at Jumonville Glen proved to be controversial at the time and into the future. While historical interpretations of the event continue to evolve, the location where it occurred has been acquired and enhanced by the National Park Service. A visit to Jumonville Glen, Fort Necessity, and Braddock’s grave is an easy journey for Mountain Maryland and Pennsylvania residents, and a way for everyone to experience the sites that made international news more than two and a half centuries ago.

Jumonville is not a town but refers to the general area where the event took place. The glen appears much the same as it did in 1754 and is operated by the National Park Service, as a sub-unit of the Fort Necessity National Battlefield. Fort Necessity, Jumonville Glen, and General Braddock’s grave are located in close proximity to each other in Fayette County, Pennsylvania. The park headquarters is located at 1 Washington Parkway, Farmington, PA 15437.

Another resource for those interested in the subject is the Braddock Road Preservation Society, an organization that researches, interprets, and promotes the French and Indian War history at Jumonville and related sites.

