

FRENCH INVADE BRITISH TERRITORY, WAR LOOMS

January 16, 1754, Williamsburg, Virginia

Maj. George Washington, special envoy to Virginia Governor Robert Dinwiddie, has just returned from a perilous journey to the western frontier in a failed attempt to convince the French to depart from territory claimed by Great Britain. Sources close to the governor now believe that war between the two empires is certain.



Washington-Custis-Lee Collection, Washington and Lee University. Clash of Empires: The British, French & Indian War, 1754-1763

The present dispute started when French troops from Canada entered the upper Ohio River Valley and began to construct a chain of military outposts. The French claim that they own all of the land drained by the Mississippi River. This claim stems from Rene-Robert Cavelier, sieur de LaSalle's discovery of the mouth of the river in 1682. The Virginians, on the other hand, believe that the Ohio River Valley belongs to them by right of the charter granted to the Virginia Company by King James I in 1606. Interestingly, this same land is also claimed by the province of Pennsylvania as a result of the charter granted to William Penn in 1682.

When Governor Dinwiddie learned that the French had begun to build forts on land claimed by Virginia, he took action by sending Major Washington into the region as a special envoy. The governor directed Washington to deliver a summons to the French commander ordering him and his troops to immediately depart. The major's mission was particularly hazardous due to the season of the year, the rugged terrain and the likelihood of encountering hostile Indians who are allied with the French. Nonetheless, Washington was particularly suited for the challenge due to his youth and robust physical stamina. He departed from this city nearly three months ago accompanied by an interpreter and a small entourage of Indian traders and frontiersmen. His guide throughout the journey was Christopher Gist, who has spent many years among the Indians of the area.

Traveling northwest, Washington reached the Forks of the Ohio on November 23rd. He recorded in his journal that the land is "extremely well-suited for a fort as it has the absolute command of both rivers." Sources close to Governor Dinwiddie have confirmed that the Virginians intend to build an outpost at this location, based upon Major Washington's recommendations.

After viewing the confluence, Washington and his party continued down the Ohio River to the Indian village of Loggstown. There the major met the Indian leader Tanaghrisson, a Seneca chief who supervises the Delawares living in the Ohio Country. Washington asked the chief to guide him to the French forts. Tanaghrisson informed young Washington that he had already visited the French leader, Pierre Paul Sieur de Marin, in an attempt to convince him to depart the Ohio Valley with all haste. The Seneca leader told the French commander, "Father, both you and the English are white, we live in a country between; therefore the land belongs to neither

one nor the other." In speaking for all the Indians in the area, the chief went on to say, "The great Being above allowed it to be a place of residence for us; so, father, I desire you to withdraw." Unfortunately, Captain Marin refused to evacuate the region.

After a grueling journey through rain and snow, Washington, Tanaghrisson and their entourage reached the French outpost known as Fort Le Boeuf. The compound is square-shaped and composed of a curtain wall made of horizontal logs with bastions in each corner. A small number of cabins inside the fort serve as a hospital, headquarters and storehouses. Barracks for the garrison of 85 soldiers are located outside the walls of the outpost.

Major Washington met with the new French commander, Legardeur de Saint-Pierre, and delivered his summons calling upon the French to depart. Captain Saint-Pierre politely informed the major that he did not feel obliged to obey Governor Dinwiddie's command. After several day's rest, Washington and his men began the return trip to Virginia.

Wishing to report back to the governor as soon as possible, Major Washington and Christopher Gist set out alone and on foot through deep snow and bone-chilling temperatures. At one point, they encountered an Indian who offered to guide them by the shortest route to the Forks of the Ohio. While leading the way, the Indian suddenly turned about and fired his musket at Washington and Gist. Although the warrior stood only 15 paces away, the shot missed. The major and Gist quickly apprehended the Indian before he could reload his weapon. Gist wanted to kill the man, but Major Washington insisted upon setting him free. Fearful that other hostile Indians may be lurking about, the two men briskly continued on their journey, traveling throughout the night, until they reached the Allegheny River.

Having but one dull hatchet between them, the two men spent an entire day constructing a raft to cross the river. Shortly after launching their makeshift craft, Major Washington was plunged into the icy water when a chunk of ice struck the raft. He managed to grab onto the raft and the two men made it to a small island in the middle of the river. They spent the night drying out near a campfire. The next morning, the major and Gist were surprised to find that the river had frozen over during the night and they resumed their trek. After such harrowing escapes from death, it is fortunate that the rest of their journey was uneventful.

Since the French have refused to evacuate the Ohio Valley, it is all but certain that Governor Dinwiddie will begin to make military preparations to counter this invasion. He plans on convening the House of Burgesses next month to request an appropriation in order to raise a provincial regiment. No doubt, the bold Major Washington will be placed at the head of any military force raised. With the coming of spring, it is likely that the major will march his men to occupy the Forks of the Ohio and from there mount an offensive against the French.