

French and Indian War

“The volley fired by a young Virginian in the backwoods of America set the world on fire.”
(Horace Walpole)

In late-May of 1754, 21-year old George Washington was a newly commissioned British lieutenant colonel. He and other British troops had started westward from Alexandria with part of a newly recruited regiment of Virginians.

They were to build a road to the Monongahela River at Redstone Creek, present day Brownsville, Pennsylvania. He was then to help defend the English fort on the Ohio.

Soon after he arrived, he received word that a party of French soldiers was camped in a ravine not far from his position. On the stormy night of May 27, 1754, Washington and about 40 men began an all-night march to confront the French and learn their intentions.

About dawn, Washington met with a friendly Seneca chief, the Half King, and made plans to contact the French Camp. As the French commander had not posted sentries, Washington and his men easily surrounded the unsuspecting French.

A shot was fired, no one really knows by whom, and soon the peaceful glen was filled with the crash of musketry and the smell of powder. The skirmish lasted about 15 minutes. When it was over, 13 Frenchmen were dead and 21 captured. One escaped and made his way back to Fort Duquesne at the forks of the Ohio. Washington's casualties were one man killed and two or three wounded.

"I fortunately escaped without any wound, for the right wing, where I stood, was exposed to and received all the enemy's fire, and it was the part where the man was killed, and the rest wounded. I heard the bullets whistle, and, believe me there is something charming in the sound." (George Washington)

The battle in the summer of 1754 was the opening action of the French and Indian War. This war was a clash of British, French and American Indian cultures. It ended with the removal of French power from North America. The stage was set for the American Revolution. (NPS)

The French and Indian War started as a struggle for control of the land west of the Allegheny Mountains in the Ohio River Valley. As the conflict spread, European powers began to fight in their colonies throughout the world. It became a war fought on four continents: North America, Europe, Asia, and Africa. (The European portion of the broader war was referred to as the Seven Years War.)

Let's look back ...

In the 1750s, the area west of the Allegheny Mountains was a vast forest. American Indians primarily from three nations – the Seneca, the Lenape or Delaware, and the Shawnee – inhabited the upper Ohio River Valley.

About 3,000 to 4,000 American Indians were living there. The population of all the Indian nations in northeastern North America was about 175,000.

A few French and British traders traveled through the area.

New France

New France had three colonies: Canada (along the St. Lawrence River), the Illinois country (the mid-Mississippi Valley), and Louisiana (New Orleans and west of the Mississippi).

There were about 70,000 colonists throughout the French settlements. Their economy was based on trade with the American Indians. It was a weak economic system, and the colonies were not self-sustaining.

To the east of the Allegheny Mountains lived more than 1 million colonists in the 13 British colonies. They had a strong economy based on farming. Their population was expanding rapidly, both through immigration and population growth.

Although they had no settlers in the Ohio River Valley in 1750, the British colonies claimed the land.

The border between French and British possessions was not well defined, and one disputed territory was the upper Ohio River valley. The French had constructed a number of forts in this region in an attempt to strengthen their claim on the territory.



What They Were Fighting For

The Ohio River Valley Indians wanted to maintain their land, their lifestyle, and control of their future. They sought to trade with the Europeans but prevent settlement.

As the British colonists settled that land, the Indians moved west. The Shawnee and Delaware in the Ohio River Valley were under the political influence of the Iroquois Confederacy. They didn't like this and

wanted to speak for themselves. The Iroquois Confederacy wanted to maintain control of the Ohio River Valley to improve its negotiating position with the French and British.

The French depended on the Indian trade as the basis of their economy. They were upset when Pennsylvania and Virginia started trading with the Ohio River Valley Indians. This area was on the eastern edge of their main trading routes, and they did not want to lose control of any of the trade.

Also, they used the Ohio River Valley and its river systems as a transportation route. They wanted their traders, priests, and soldiers to be able to travel freely through the region. The French were not interested in settling the area. However, they were determined to maintain authority over it. By the 1750s British colonial settlement had reached the eastern base of the Allegheny Mountains.

How Did the Fighting Begin?

In 1749 the French were becoming concerned with the Pennsylvania and Virginia traders in the Ohio River Valley. That summer they sent an expedition of 247 men under the command of Captain Pierre-Joseph C eloron de Blainville down the Ohio River. C eloron buried lead plates in the ground stating the French claim to the land.

When he returned to Canada he had a bleak report. The Ohio River Valley Indians “are very badly disposed towards the French.” In order to keep the valley he recommended that the French build a fortified military route through the area.



In 1752, the Marquis Duquesne was named Governor of Canada. His instructions were “to make every possible effort to drive the English from our lands ... and to prevent their coming there to trade.”

The next year he began building a series of forts along the waterways in the Ohio River Valley. The first two forts were at Presque Isle, on the south shore of Lake Erie, and Fort LeBoeuf on French Creek, a tributary of the Allegheny River.

Meanwhile, Robert Dinwiddie, the Governor of Virginia, was granting land in the Ohio River Valley to citizens of his colony. In 1753, he received instructions from the King of England “for erecting forts within the king’s own territory.”

Dinwiddie was very upset about all the French activity in the Ohio River Valley. He sent a young volunteer, George Washington, to deliver a letter to the French demanding that they leave the region.

Later, in 1754, Washington was sent to the Ohio River Valley with the Virginia militia. He and his troops were told to take the “Lands on the Ohio; & the Waters thereof.” While at Will’s Creek (what is today Cumberland, Maryland), Washington learned that the French were in control of the Forks of the Ohio and the fort the British had built there. Washington proceeded forward with the construction of a road across the mountains.

Washington learned from Tanaghrisson that a band of French soldiers were camped only a few miles away. (Tanaghrisson was a Seneca sent by the Iroquois Confederacy to govern the Delaware and Iroquois in the Ohio River Valley (he was given the title “the Half King” and he sided with the British.))

On the night of May 27, 1754, Washington and 40 soldiers began a dark and wet overnight march. It was morning before they arrived at the Half King’s camp. Together they decided to surround the French.

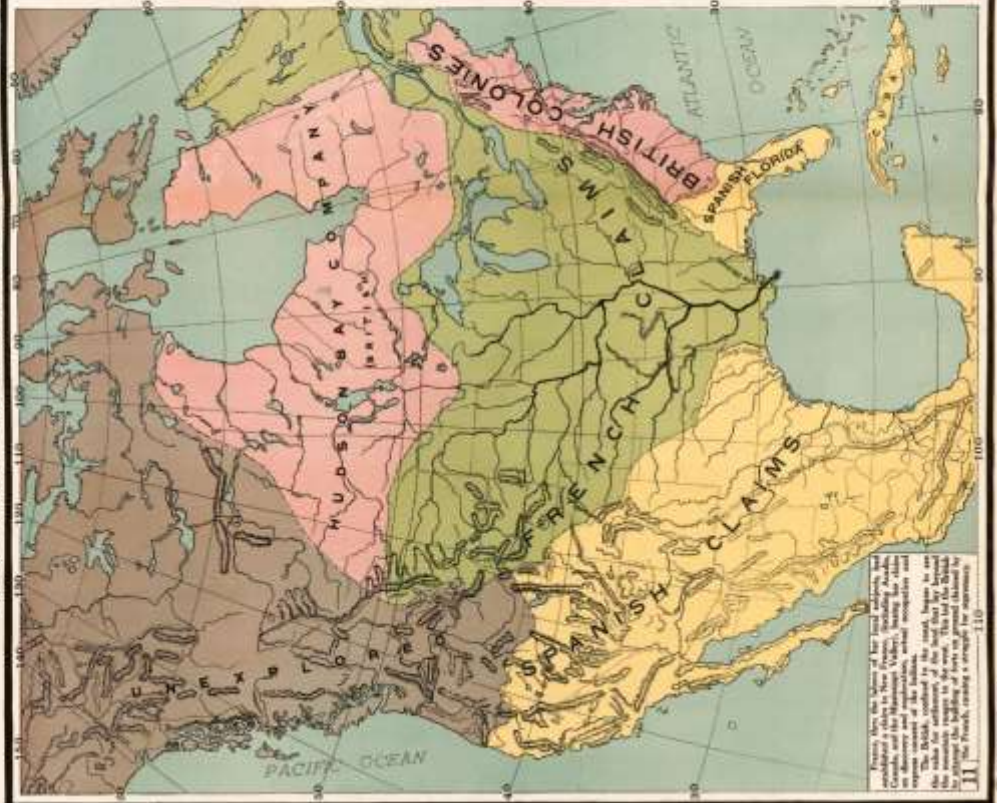
Then, the shot was fired. This skirmish invited retaliation from the French and their American Indian allies. Although officially not at war, both France and Britain supported the fighting by sending troops and supplies.

The war in North America settled into a stalemate for the next several years, while in Europe the French scored an important naval victory and captured the British possession of Minorca in the Mediterranean in 1756. However, after 1757 the war began to turn in favor of Great Britain. British forces defeated French forces in India, and in 1759 British armies invaded and conquered Canada.

Facing defeat in North America and a tenuous position in Europe, the French Government attempted to engage the British in peace negotiations. After these negotiations failed, Spanish King Charles III offered to come to the aid of his cousin, French King Louis XV, and their representatives signed an alliance known as the Family Compact on August 15, 1761.

The terms of the agreement stated that Spain would declare war on Great Britain if the war did not end before May 1, 1762. Originally intended to pressure the British into a peace agreement, the Family Compact ultimately reinvigorated the French will to continue the war, and caused the British Government to declare war on Spain on January 4, 1762, after bitter infighting among King George III’s ministers.

CLAIMS BEFORE AND AFTER FRENCH AND INDIAN WARS



Despite facing such a formidable alliance, British naval strength and Spanish ineffectiveness led to British success. British forces seized French Caribbean islands, Spanish Cuba, and the Philippines. Fighting in Europe ended after a failed Spanish invasion of British ally Portugal.

By 1763, French and Spanish diplomats began to seek peace. In the resulting Treaty of Paris (1763), Great Britain secured significant territorial gains in North America, including all French territory east of the Mississippi river, as well as Spanish Florida, although the treaty returned Cuba to Spain.

Post-War Aftermath

Unfortunately for the British, the fruits of victory brought seeds of trouble with Great Britain's American colonies.

The war had been enormously expensive, and the British government's attempts to impose taxes on colonists to help cover these expenses resulted in increasing colonial resentment of British attempts to expand imperial authority in the colonies.

British attempts to limit western expansion by colonists and inadvertent provocation of a major Indian war further angered the British subjects living in the American colonies. These disputes ultimately spurred colonial rebellion, which eventually developed into a full-scale war for independence.

Information here is primarily from the US State Department; Britannica; Ohio History Central; Michigan State University; National Park Service

In an effort to provide a brief, informal background summary of various people, places and events related to the American Revolution, I made this informal compilation from a variety of sources. This is not intended to be a technical reference document, nor an exhaustive review of the subject. Rather, it is an assemblage of information and images from various sources on basic background information. For ease in informal reading, in many cases, specific quotations and citations and attributions are often not included – however, sources are noted in the summary. The images and text are from various sources and are presented for personal, noncommercial and/or educational purposes. Thanks, Peter T. Young