

“The Shot Not Heard Around the World:
Trent’s Fort and the Opening of the War for Empire”

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The skirmish between French forces and Virginians under George Washington at Jumonville Glen on May 28, 1754 has been widely regarded as the incident that sparked the Seven Years’ War, but it does have a challenger. No doubt the first shots were fired and troops killed in this skirmish, but the first military action between French and British troops occurred in what is now Pittsburgh on April 17, 1754. On that date, French troops forced the surrender of a fort under construction by troops raised by the government of Virginia acting on behalf of the British Crown. The capitulation of this fort would alter George Washington’s mission, force him into action to support his American Indian allies, and make preparations to attack the French. While this fort was never formally graced with a name, the taking of this structure was the first act of war between the military forces of France and Great Britain after many years of struggles to win control of the region known as the Ohio Country and garner the support of the American Indian nations living there. While the contest for this allegiance was difficult for both European powers, American Indian leaders in the region had begun to formalize their preference for Great Britain, leading the French to counter this sentiment with military action and occupation.

Through the seventeenth century, the Iroquois fought a series of wars to maintain their superiority in the Ohio Country. By the mid-eighteenth century, the powerful Iroquois

Confederacy claimed the region. Their claim lay in the right of conquest over the American Indian nations that had formerly lived there. As European settlement spread from the Atlantic seaboard, many American Indian nations were forced to migrate. The largest groups that made their way into the Upper Ohio River Valley were the Shawnee and Delaware. With permission from the Iroquois, the Shawnee moved into the region around 1730.² Following the infamous “Walking Purchase” of 1737, the Delaware were forced to move from the last land they claimed in Pennsylvania. They, too, were allowed to move to the Upper Ohio by the Iroquois.³ As Jane T. Merritt explains, the Delaware and Shawnee occupation of the Ohio Country provided a buffer between the Iroquois and their southern enemies. To watch over these “tenant” nations, the Iroquois appointed leaders to live with them, providing supervision and protection.⁴

French and British claims to the Ohio Country long pre-dated the conflict that would erupt in the mid-eighteenth century. French claims were based on the explorations of La Salle in 1679 and later that of Longueuil in 1739.⁴ While the French held posts at Niagara, Detroit, the Maumee River, and traders operated in the Ohio Country, no settlements were made east of the Miami River. Despite the absence of a strong presence in the region, the importance of the area was not lost on the French. As British traders infiltrated the area, winning over the Native inhabitants, the Governor-General of New France (France’s colony in Canada), Roland Michel Bassin, Marquis de la Galissoniere, recognized as early as 1748 that French control of the fur trade and transportation between Canada and the other French colonies in the Illinois Country and New Orleans would soon be in jeopardy.⁵

British Claims to the region were based on the 1713 Treaty of Utrecht. In this treaty, both parties agreed to the status of the members of the Iroquois Confederation as subjects of the British Crown. Thus, since the Iroquois claimed the Ohio Country, the British believed the land should fall under British influence. Virginians further claimed that they purchased the region from the Iroquois at the 1744 Lancaster Treaty.⁶ Great Britain began to recognize the danger of losing the Ohio Country during King George’s War. While that conflict raged from 1744 to 1748, and as American Indians from the Delaware and Shawnee nations began moving into the Ohio Country, British trade expanded into the region alongside them.

British traders established posts at Lake Erie, along the Ohio, Miami, Muskingum, and Scioto rivers. While British traders were welcome among the Indian nations, the French were troubled by their presence. British traders could supply cheaper goods, undermining the French influence.⁷ As one British trader noted, “the increase of our trade and the great credit the English were in with the Indians to the westward of the Ohio occasioned by the cheapness of our goods...made the French jealous.”⁸ Due to the lower transportation costs as well as competition between Virginia and Pennsylvania traders, British traders were able to keep prices low, undercutting the French. Utilizing their economic advantage, the British were able to coordinate political alliances with the Ohio Country American Indian nations. While the French could not compete economically, they would gain the upper hand by military force.⁹ The French countered

the expansion of British trading posts by asking their Native allies from the Detroit area to destroy these posts and capture the traders.¹⁰

The British sought to strengthen their claim in the region and one of their approaches was the creation of the Ohio Company. Created in 1748 by men of means from Virginia, Maryland, and London, it was originally conceived to gain control of the fur trade in the Ohio Country. Soon, however, the opportunity to achieve greater success by acquiring land became an equally important goal. The company was granted 200,000 acres of land in the disputed Ohio Country region by Sir William Gooch, Lieutenant-Governor of Virginia with the approval of the Privy Council and the Board of Trade. Following the construction of a fort in the region by the Ohio Company and settlement of two hundred families, the company would receive 300,000 additional acres.¹¹

After the Treaty of Aix la Chapelle ended King George’s War in 1748, the French embarked on an effort to bolster their claims to the Ohio Country. The following year, Galissoniere sent Captain Pierre-Joseph Celoron de Blainville on a mission to reassert the French claim to the Ohio Country. Celoron left LaChine (near Montreal) on June 15, 1749, with 247 men on a four-month journey that would take them through the Ohio Country to the mouth of the Maumee River at Lake Erie. Celoron claimed the area in the name of King Louis XV by posting metal signs on trees and burying lead plates “as a monument of the renewal of possession which we have taken of the...River Ohio and of all those that therein fall, and of all the lands on both sides as far as the sources of the said rivers....”¹²

Celoron’s initial encounters with Native inhabitants of the Ohio Country were peaceful. Upon reaching the Iroquois settlement at Kanouagon, near the junction of Cut Straw Creek and the Allegheny River on July 29, Celoron shared some brandy which he referred to as “the milk of their Father Onontio” (the name used to refer to the Governor-General of New France).¹³ Celoron counseled them and informed them that he wished to “open your ears so that you may hear well what I have to say to you on the part of your father Onontio,” and to “open your eyes to make you see clearly the advantages which your father wishes to procure you.” He also read them a message from Galissoniere in which he informed them that the British had seduced them, corrupted their hearts, and invaded territory that belonged to Onontio. He asked them to “receive [the British] no more in your villages” and “send them home.” Galissoniere also expressed concern over the presence of a British trading post in their village and ordered “if you look upon yourselves as my children you will not continue this work; far from it, you will destroy it and will no longer receive the English at your homes.” He asked them to listen to his advice for “it is the means of always seeing over your villages a beautiful and serene sky.” After receiving presents, the assembled leaders of the settlement promised to prohibit British traders in their village.¹⁴

Celoron repeated his overtures to a Delaware nation village a few days later. He reminded the Delaware that they had once owned Philadelphia and that the “evil intentions of the English in your regard ought always be remembered.” Having been dispossessed of their lands already, Celoron knew this argument would resonate strongly

with the Delaware. He warned that the British first appeared to them with the intention only to trade, but soon began to build forts and once they became strong enough they would once again displace the Delaware to live in another land. “What they did at Philadelphia, they purposed to do today upon the Beautiful [Ohio] River.” He then promised “to give you traders who will supply all your wants and put you in such a state as not to regret those whom I remove from your lands. These lands which you possess you will always be masters of.”¹⁵ The Delaware found Celoron’s message to be persuasive as well.

The warm receptions that Celoron received to this point disappeared as he progressed deeper into the Ohio Country. On August 6, and again the following day, Celoron discovered small parties of British traders near the Forks of the Ohio. He warned them they were trespassing on French land and wrote to the Governor of Pennsylvania, informing him of the traders’ violations, warning that they would be arrested for future transgressions. He also met Queen Aliquippa and noted her devotion to the British. As he approached Logstown (present Ambridge, PA), perhaps the largest and most important settlement in the Ohio Country, Celoron prepared his forces to make a powerful impression and to prepare for a possibly unfavorable welcome. Logstown consisted of a mixture of many Indian nations including Delaware, Shawnee, Wyandot, and Iroquoian peoples. More importantly it was the home of Tannacharison, the “Half King”, appointed by the Iroquois to watch over the Ohio Country’s inhabitants.¹⁶

According to Celoron, upon landing at Logstown, he noticed three French flags flying as well as one British. The customary *feu de joie* salute of firing blank rounds from muskets greeted the French troops which unnerved Celoron, as he had “no confidence in their good intentions,” and he ordered it be stopped or he would return fire directly on the Indian saluters.¹⁷ Celoron then ordered that the British flag be torn down. After setting up a strongly fortified camp near the village, Celoron held a council with the leaders of Logstown during which they claimed to be happy to see the French and apologized for raising the British flag. Celoron replied that he was angered at seeing the British flag as the “mingling of French and British does not become the children of the [French] Governor [for it] would seem to indicate that their hearts are divided.”¹⁸

While Celoron noted that the inhabitants of Logstown were not entirely devoted to the French, he may not have reported everything. William Trent, a British trader working for the Ohio Company, noted that once the French were spotted, “the Indians ran to their arms and hoisted the English Colors, Cawcaw, wi, cha, ke the Shawnese King about 114 years of age set his back against the flag staff with his gun in his hand and desired the young men to kill them all.” He also noted that when the French saluted the inhabitants at Logstown with the blank-firing *feu de joie*, the American Indians returned by firing bullets just over the heads of the Frenchmen, with one bullet passing through the hat of a soldier, grazing his head. As the soldiers landed, “a young Indian went up and discharged a pistol ...through their Colors, upon [which] Messsr[sic.] Celoron asking him what he meant by it, he told him he would shoot through them again if he liked it.”¹⁹

The following day, Celoron was informed that a party of eighty warriors were on their way to attack him. While awaiting the assault, Celoron sent a message to the would-be attackers that if they did not attack soon, he would initiate the conflict. The attackers rethought their plan and arrived at Logstown in peace, firing a *feu de joie*. Celoron reprimanded them harshly for “making maneuvers which at no time were becoming for the children of the [French] Governor,” but then reminded them of his peaceful intentions.²⁰ Trent’s version of this incident does not indicate the French dominance, but rather that of the British traders at Logstown. Instead of the fearful warriors declining to attack and saluting the French, Trent recorded that as the warriors arrived “every man discharged his gun loaded with ball & large shot into the ground between the Frenchmen’s legs which almost blinded them & covered them with dirt. The Indians then came to the English traders and asked them if they should kill them, the English took pity on them, seeing Monsieur Celoron & his people much dejected & trembling with fear as they were sure of certain death should the traders advise them to it.”²¹

Before leaving Logstown, Celoron presented Galissoniere’s message to the assembled leaders. He warned them of “the projects which the English form on your territories” which would “tend to nothing short of your total ruin.” These projects were designed to “take possession of your territories and to succeed in that, they have begun to bias your minds.” While rejecting British claims to the territory, he then asserted the French right to the region. Following his address, Celoron gathered all of the British traders at Logstown, informed that they had no right to be there, and warned them not to return. The power of the British traders was not lost upon him. He reported that Logstown was

“a bad village, which is seduced by the allurements of cheap merchandise furnished by the English, which keeps [the Indians] in a bad disposition towards us.” He elaborated on the two countries’ approaches to trade, noting that the British traders could furnish goods at one fourth that offered by the French because of the difficulty of transporting the goods over such a great distance. He realized that the French could “never regain the [Indian] nations, except by furnishing them merchandise at the same price as the English; the difficulty is to find out the means.”²²

After leaving Logstown, Celoron discovered the Native nations’ attachment to the British traders was an extremely strong one. After nearly being attacked on the voyage, he arrived at “St. Yotoc” (the Lower Shawnee Town on the Scioto River) on August 23, where his party was welcomed with a large *feu de joie* courtesy of gun powder “gratuitously furnished them by the English.” Fearing an attack, Celoron refused to come to their council house and presented his message at his own heavily armed camp. There, Celoron expressed his surprise and dismay that they once had a “French heart, and today you let it be corrupted by the English...who, under pretext of ministering to your wants, seek only your ruin.” After receiving several promises of peace from the assembled leaders and evicting several more British traders, Celoron continued on his journey.²³

William Trent’s version of the events here, as with his account of Celoron’s time at Logstown, illustrates a similar difference in perspective. According to Trent, when Celoron arrived at the Lower Shawnee Town, he was informed that the French “must not lay on the East of the [Ohio] River because they intended this side for their Brethren, the

English, & they must [not] lay on the West side because they kept that country for themselves, but told them they must lay on the sand where the waters cover when its high and if they wanted wood to have...the drift wood ...& not cut the smallest stick of green wood, if they did they would kill them, everyone.” Trent also recorded that had the British traders asked, the residents of the town would have killed the Frenchmen.²⁴

As Celoron continued on his journey, he mentioned stopping at the village of the Miami leader Demoiselle (called Old Briton by the British who lived at Pickawillany, modern Piqua, Ohio). There he received kind words from Demoiselle but later doubted his sincerity. Following this meeting, Celoron’s party proceeded to the Miami River at Lake Erie for the voyage back Canada.²⁵ Celoron makes no mention of a violent and embarrassing encounter that Trent recorded. According to Trent, as the Frenchmen approached the settlement of the Miami and Twightwees, they were fired upon by warriors of those nations, killing three Frenchmen. A Twightwee leader called the Mad Captain by the British then invited the Frenchmen into a field of battle, but when they refused, the Mad Captain “pulled off his breach clout [the clothing covering his genitals] & slapped Monsieur Celoron across the face and told him he was an old woman.”²⁶

While Trent and Celoron provided dramatically different accounts of some of the same events, it was apparent that both the French and British had focused their attentions on this region and would fight fiercely to maintain control.

The Indian leaders of the Ohio Country were also ready for action. While Celoron’s mission was to claim the Ohio Valley for France, he may have been instrumental in

pushing the Half King and other American Indian leaders further into supporting the British. As Michael N. McConnell explains, Celoron’s force appeared to be more of a hostile invasion than a diplomatic mission.²⁷ However, Celoron’s warnings that the British intended to take their land had the desired effect, leading the Indians to reject the British interpretation of the Lancaster treaty of 1744 that gave the British control of the Ohio Country. While scouting out the best lands in the Ohio Country for the Ohio Company, Christopher Gist stopped at Logstown on November 25, 1750. Gist was a fur trader who was hired by the Ohio Company for his intimate knowledge of the lands west of the Appalachian Mountains.²⁸ At Logstown, Gist wrote the “people in this town began to inquire about my business, and because I did not readily inform them, they began to suspect me, and said, I was come to settle the Indian’s lands and they knew I should never go home again safe.”²⁹

At the same time, Native nations wanted to retain a steady supply of inexpensive British trade goods. As Gary B. Nash indicates, American Indians were aware of British expansion but they were unwilling to give up the immediate desire and need for cheap trade items.³⁰ In addition to this desire for cheap goods, reassuring words from the British were more welcoming than military advances by the French. The British sent diplomats to bargain for the land while the French sent armed troops to enforce their supposed claims. Indian leaders were alarmed by reports of a Frenchman intending to build a fort near Logstown and anticipated a war with the French during the spring of 1751, they told George Croghan, an active, long-time trader in the Ohio Country, in December 1750, that “their Brothers the English ought to have a fort on this River to

Secure the trade.”³¹ Now, the Ohio Company had made solid progress toward one of their goals—setting up a fort in the region.

With the permission and at the pleasure of the region’s American Indian leaders, the Ohio Company moved forward with their plan to establish a post in the Ohio Country. Plans for a council at Logstown in 1751 were made, but the meeting never occurred.³² Again, plans for a council at Logstown the following year were made, and the Ohio Company sent Christopher Gist back to invite the American Indian nations of the Ohio Country to attend. While on this journey, Gist met Oppaymolleah, a Delaware leader, who “desired to know where the Indian’s land lay, for the French claimed all the land on one side the River Ohio & the English on the other side.” This was the second time he asked Gist this question, and, as he had been the first time, Gist was “at a loss to answer him.” After some thought, Gist replied, “We are all one King’s people and the different colors of our skins makes no difference in the King’s subjects; You are his people as well as we, if you will take land & pay the King’s rights, you will have the same privileges as the white people have....” After several days consulting with the other leaders over Gist’s answer, Oppaymolleah returned to Gist, pleased that he “had answered them very true for we were all one King’s people sure enough,” and that Gist “was very safe [to] come live upon that river” where he wished.³³

On May 29, 1752, all parties arrived at Logstown and the council began. George Croghan was present as an unofficial delegate for Pennsylvania, Christopher Gist represented the Ohio Company, and Virginia sent a delegation consisting of Joshua Fry,

Lunsford Lomax and James Patton. Virginia took considerable interest in the affairs of the Ohio Company because its new Lieutenant Governor, Robert Dinwiddie, was also one of the company’s members.³⁴ The Ohio Company had several goals to achieve at the Logstown treaty. They had to reassert the British interpretation of the 1744 Lancaster Treaty and reaffirm that Virginia had purchased the land in the Ohio Country. Further, they strove to reverse the negative attitudes toward their traders and agents engendered by the French and now perpetuated by Pennsylvania traders who feared losing their own business to the Ohio Company.³⁵ Gist preceded his message by delivering presents and asking that they disregard “the wicked stories...raised by idle and wicked people.”³⁶

The Virginia Commissioners spoke next, confirming the 1744 Treaty of Lancaster, and reminding all parties that the Iroquois recognized the sale of the land to Virginia. They then informed the assembled leaders of their intent to settle the land southeast of the Ohio River and advised them of the advantages (trade goods) that Indian nations would receive by allowing such a settlement. The commissioners reminded them that they had purchased the lands peacefully and vilified the French for sending Celoron “with an armed force to take possession of your country.”³⁷

After hearing the messages from the British parties, the Half King agreed to abide by the 1744 Treaty of Lancaster. He recognized that the French were not their friends and asked that “our brethren of Virginia may build a strong house, at the Fork of the [Monongahela River].”³⁸ The Virginia commissioners argued for permission to have a settlement at the site of this fortification, to which the Half King agreed. After achieving all of their goals,

the Virginia commissioners drew up “an instrument of writing for confirming the Deed made at Lancaster & containing a promise that the Indians would not molest our settlements on the southeast of the Ohio” which the Indian leaders “were willing to sign and seal the writing, which was done.”³⁹ With these promises, the Ohio Company could now act to achieve greater prosperity and strengthen its hold on the region.

The French had not been idle during these proceedings. With the intelligence gathered by Celoron, Galissoniere was certain that the defense of the Ohio Country was an “absolute necessity.” He believed that this region was part of a “chain, [that] once broken, would leave an opening of which the English would take advantage.” In regard to British traders, he noted that “they have been summoned since the peace to retire and if they do not do so, there is no doubt but the Governor of Canada will constrain them thereto force.”⁴⁰ The French implemented this policy of arresting British traders, which would last through the commencement of war. French soldiers and their Indian allies repeatedly captured British traders in the Ohio Country and sent them to Canada where many were sent back to France.⁴¹

French action in the region was not limited to arresting British traders, as they also sought to punish any Indian nations who welcomed them into their settlements. In June 1752, French soldiers and their Indian allies from the Detroit area destroyed Pickawillany, the home of Old Briton (Demoiselle) and many Miami and Twightwee inhabitants loyal to the British. Not content to simply destroy the village, Old Briton was boiled and eaten.⁴² While French military forces and their Native allies had spilled the blood of Indian

nations that supported the British, no British military troops had been present. Following the attack, American Indian supporters expected British retaliation. When none came, support for the British quickly began to falter.⁴³

French aspirations in the Ohio Country accelerated in 1752 as the Marquis DuQuesne, sieur de Menneville, took over as Governor General of New France. DuQuesne immediately embarked on fortifying the Ohio Country by sending military troops and building a chain of forts to protect key junctions along the water transportation routes.⁴⁴ Construction of this chain of forts in the region began in May 1753 with Fort Presque Isle (modern Erie, PA) as an anchor along Lake Erie.⁴⁵ By July, the French advanced further south and began construction of Fort Le Boeuf along “le Boeuf” Creek (French Creek at modern Waterford, PA).⁴⁶ In August, they reached the trading post established by British trader John Fraser at the junction of French Creek and the Allegheny River called Venango (modern Franklin, PA). They began to convert the structures there into Fort Machault.⁴⁷

The French occupation of the Ohio did not go unnoticed. The Iroquois sent a party of women to inquire of the commander at the new French posts, Chevalier Pierre Paul Marin, “whether he was marching with the hatchet uplifted or to establish peace.” Marin explained that he would only use force “in case he encountered opposition [to his] will” and that he was there to help the Indian nations and “drive away the evil spirits that encompassed them and disturbed the earth.”⁴⁸ The Half King at Logstown also became aware of the French establishment of forts in the region. In September, he and other

leaders arrived at Fort Presque Isle and warned the French to leave, informing them that he had also told the British to leave and that he would “strike whoever does not listen to us.” The French commander heartily refused the Half King’s demands, insulting him and denying his authority over the land. The Half King left Presque Isle firmly opposed to the French.⁴⁹ Ignoring the warning of the Half King, the French proceeded further south as they continued to build fortifications.

The French were not the only ones to actively expand their occupation of the Ohio Country. Aroused by the advance of the French, Robert Dinwiddie, Lieutenant Governor of Virginia, wished to meet with the Ohio Country Indian leaders and prepare for the region’s defense. Invitations were sent out for a meeting to be held in Winchester, Virginia in September 1753. At the meeting, Indian leaders again stressed their willingness to cooperate with the British and asked for help in driving out the French. They claimed that after the French were driven out, they would talk about granting the Ohio Company lands in the region. They also repeated their request that a fort be built along the Ohio and they be given supplies to fight the French.⁵⁰

In the final months of 1753, authorities in London issued instructions to colonial governors authorizing the use of force to repel French encroachments.⁵¹ Dinwiddie also received “his majesty’s orders” to erect a fort along the Ohio and, should he encounter resistance from the French, he was authorized to “repel force by force.”⁵² Dinwiddie had now received official sanction from the King to use force in the Ohio Country, a development which furthered his own plans for the region. Following the Logstown

Treaty of 1752, the Ohio Company began construction of a road from Will’s Creek (Cumberland, MD) to the Monongahela River where they built a storehouse at the junction of that river and Redstone Creek (modern Brownsville, PA).⁵³ In accordance with their grant, they planned to build a fort at the junction of the Ohio River and Chartier’s Creek (modern McKee’s Rocks, PA). With plans for a fort underway, the Ohio Company turned its attention to the other major stipulation of their grant: establishing a settlement with at least two hundred families. Christopher Gist was appointed surveyor for the Company and within two years, he persuaded eleven families to accompany him in creating a settlement near the storehouse at Redstone Creek.⁵⁴

As the Ohio Company had been working its way westward and the French fortifications advanced towards them, Dinwiddie had decided to warn the French of their encroachment on British-claimed land. To this task, he assigned a young George Washington. Washington eagerly accepted the mission to deliver the message and left Williamsburg, Virginia on October 31, 1753. On his journey, Washington stopped at the confluence of the Allegheny and Monongahela rivers (modern Pittsburgh, PA). As he watched the Ohio River flow he noticed that “the land in the fork, which I think extremely well situated for a fort...has the absolute command of both rivers.”⁵⁵

On December 4, he reached Venango where the French were busy converting John Fraser’s trading post into a fortification. The French referred him to Fort Le Boeuf to speak with their commanding officer. Before leaving, Washington had dinner with the officers who informed him that “it was their design to take possession of the Ohio and by

God they would do it.”⁵⁶ Washington delivered his message at Fort Le Boeuf to Legardeur de St. Pierre. The message from Dinwiddie proclaimed British possession of the region and asked for the withdrawal of French troops. Washington departed with St. Pierre’s response in which he rejected this claim and refused to leave.⁵⁷

In early January 1754 near Will’s Creek, while Washington was on his way back to Williamsburg, he met “17 horses loaded with Materials and stores for a fort at the Forks of the Ohio, and the day after some families going out to settle.”⁵⁸ The Ohio Company was on the move. While they originally planned on building the fort at the junction of Chartier’s Creek and the Ohio River, for unknown reasons they decided to locate the fort at the same site Washington had suggested at the Forks of the Ohio. The Forks of the Ohio was an excellent spot to build the fort. The strategic location would secure access to the Ohio River for the British as they descended the Monongahela River.

William Trent was selected to supervise the construction of this fort. Trent, like Gist, was a fur trader acquainted with lands west of the Appalachian Mountains.⁵⁹ On January 26, Dinwiddie issued a captain’s commission in the Virginia militia to Trent and orders to raise one hundred men who, with the assistance of the Iroquois, would “keep possession of his Majesty’s land on the Ohio, and waters thereof, and to dislodge and drive away, and in case of refusal and resistance, to kill and destroy, or take prisoners, all and every person and persons whatsoever, not subjects of the King of Great Britain, who now are, or shall hereafter come to settle, and take possession of any lands on the said river Ohio.”⁶⁰

Accompanying this commission, was a letter from Dinwiddie informing Trent that he was in the pay of Virginia and that he should proceed to the Ohio River to assist in the building of a fort there and defend it against any French actions. While Dinwiddie worked to raise more troops, he issued a major’s commission to Washington with orders to raise one hundred men who would later join Trent at the fort on the Ohio.⁶¹ Trent immediately enlisted a number of fur traders and marched to another one of John Frasier’s trading posts at the junction of Turtle Creek and the Monongahela River (modern Braddock, PA) where he distributed weapons and ammunition to the Indians of the region who requested them. Trent issued Fraser a commission as lieutenant, which Fraser only accepted on the condition that he be allowed to conduct his business first and tend to the projected fort at his leisure.⁶² The leaders of those warriors, probably including the Half King, then asked that Trent start construction of the fort.

While Trent maintains that he set out to from Fraser’s to begin construction on March 7, the work actually began on February 17.⁶³ At the Forks of the Ohio, Trent met Gist and held a small treaty with the Half King and his followers. After clearing the ground, the Half King “laid the first log and said that the fort belonged to the English & them and whoever offered to prevent the building of it, they, the Indians, would make war against them.”⁶⁴

The actual structure that was built differed from what was originally intended. The year earlier, the Ohio Company had provided specific instructions for the construction of the

fort, but at that time it was suggested that it be built instead at the junction of the Ohio River and Chartier’s Creek. The building they specified was supposed to house seventy to eighty men inside walls that were to be “twelve feet high to be built of sawed or hewn logs and to include a piece of ground ninety feet square, besides the four bastions at the corners of sixteen feet square, with houses in the middle for stores, magazines, etc.”⁶⁵

By March 7, the work was moving quickly as on that day a French spy, watching from an island nearby, noted “a building well along in construction” but he could not tell more about the fort because the remainder was only marked out on the ground.⁶⁶ The men employed in building the fort lived on the flour and Indian corn that Trent had brought with him but the food was quickly running out. Trent traded goods for fresh meat with the Delaware Indians who lived nearby, but it was not enough. Trent and his men had received word that Washington and his men were on the way to join them at the fort but they would not last until Washington’s arrival. Trent’s men were not the only ones dismayed at the delay of Washington’s men. To the Half King it “seemed as if the English did not intend to assist them else they would have had their men out before this” and he insisted that Trent set off to hurry Washington to their aid.⁶⁷

On March 17, Trent set out for Will’s Creek to obtain more supplies, leaving Ensign Edward Ward in command as his lieutenant, as John Fraser, was away tending to his own business.⁶⁸ Ward and the men continued to work on the fort at the Forks of the Ohio in Trent’s absence. While they worked, Christopher Gist arrived informing them of provisions at Redstone and asked for men to assist him in bringing them up to the fort.

Ward dispatched a portion of his already meager force and awaited their arrival. On April 13, Ward was informed that a large French force was descending the Allegheny River and could be expected in a few days.⁶⁹ With Trent away, Ward traveled the next day to the next in command, Lieutenant John Fraser, at his trading post eight miles up the Monongahela River. Fraser admitted that the French probably would arrive but questioned whether there was anything they could do to improve the situation. Ward asked him to come to the fort, but Fraser answered that he had “a shilling to lose for a penny he should gain by his commission” and that he had “business which he could not settle under six days.”⁷⁰

Ward left Fraser and started preparations for the defense of his post by raising a stockade wall around the storehouse at the suggestion of the Half King, finishing the gate on April 16. Ward resolved to “hold out to the last extremity before it should be said that the English had retreated like cowards before the French forces appeared” to forestall the “bad consequences of his leaving it as the rest had done [which] would give the Indians a very indifferent opinion of the English ever after.”⁷¹ Later that day, 600 French soldiers under Captain Claude-Pierre Pecaudy Contrecoeur landed a short distance up the Allegheny River. On April 17, the French troops moved down the river and landed just out of musket range of Ward and his men. Contrecoeur sent an officer, Francois Le Mercier, an interpreter, and two drummers to summon Ward to a council. Le Mercier delivered a summons to Ward and to the Half King, instructing Ward that he had one hour to answer the summons.⁷² It commanded Ward to “retreat peaceably with your troops” and “not to return, otherwise” Contrecoeur would remove him by force.⁷³

Ward conferred with the Half King who advised him to ask the French to wait for an answer from a higher ranking officer. They presented their request to Contrecoeur who refused and demanded their immediate surrender or he would take the fort by force.

Ward judged the French force to be 1,000 men compared to his forty-one, of whom only thirty-three were trained soldiers, and he surrendered.⁷⁴ The fort did not even last long enough to be formally named. In September 1754, Robert Dinwiddie referred to it as Fort Prince George, supposedly in honor of the future King George III, but it was also called Fort St. George in 1767, which is how it was listed in the Ohio Company books.⁷⁵ Historians have referred to it as both Fort Prince George and Trent’s Fort.⁷⁶

Without a shot being fired, the first military action among sanctioned troops between Great Britain and France had occurred as the French seized control of the Forks of the Ohio River. Now in possession of this strategic location, the French would cripple the British network of traders that penetrated the Ohio Country for the next four years, destroying their influence over the American Indian nations that resided there.⁷⁷

Ward was allowed one hour to remove his men and equipment from the fort following the surrender. As Ward’s men exited, “the French entered, but behaved with great civility [and] said it might be their fate ere long to surrender it again so they would set [us] a good example. They however immediately went to work removing some of the logs as they complained the fort was not to their liking, and by break of day next morning 50 men went off with axes to hew logs to enlarge it.”⁷⁸ Another French soldier recalled

that the fort was “no more than an enclosure of upright stakes” which they destroyed.⁷⁹ As the French took possession of the fort, “the Half King stormed greatly at the French” and told them it was he who “ordered that fort and laid the first log himself, but the French paid no regard to what he said.”⁸⁰ As part of the surrender agreement, Ward was allowed to remain until noon the following day. He set up camp with the Half King and his followers 300 yards from his former post. That evening, Contrecoeur invited Ward to dinner where he asked to purchase their carpentry tools. Ward declined because he “loved his King and Country too well to part with any of them.”⁸¹ Ward departed the Forks of the Ohio the following day. When DuQuesne received the news of the capture of the post, he congratulated himself for choosing Contrecoeur “to perform the most important mission that has ever been assigned in this colony.” However, DuQuesne also felt that this mission was accomplished without approaching “an act of hostility.”⁸²

While DuQuesne felt that Contrecoeur’s actions were not hostile, the Half King felt quite the opposite. When he declared war on anyone who would come against the fort, he meant it. The Half King sent a message with Edward Ward to George Washington. The Half King informed Washington that he had expected a French attack for a long time and now it had come. He was “ready to fight them as you are yourselves.” He also indicated dire consequences if Washington did not come to fight, ending his message “if you do not come to our aid soon, it is all over with us, and I think that we shall never be able to meet together again.”⁸³

The fall of Trent’s fort made fulfillment of Washington’s original orders of occupying the fort impossible. Washington also regarded Contrecoeur’s actions as an act of war.⁸⁴ He hurriedly held a council of war on April 20 and drafted a letter to the Half King. He thanked him for his loyalty and informed him that he was on his way to help as his “cause is as dear to us as our lives. We know the character of the perfidious French and our conduct will plainly show how much we take it to heart.” He also decided to advance towards Redstone Creek “to be within reach of the enemy” and later wrote to Dinwiddie, asking for artillery so he could “attack the French.”⁸⁵ Washington remained on guard as his army marched toward the French forces and kept in contact with the Half King. On May 24, Washington received a message from the Half King “that the French army is going to meet Mr. George Washington” and they “are resolved to strike the first English they meet.”⁸⁶ Believing that an act of war had already occurred at Trent’s fort over a month earlier, both Washington and the Half King would retaliate four days later, as they descended upon French forces under Joseph Coulon de Jumonville.

The contest for Indian loyalty following King George’s War had been won by the British with the advantage of their low-cost trade items. Leveraging this loyalty, the British had cemented a union with the Ohio Country’s inhabitants to allow the development of settlement in the region and construction of a fort for defense against the French. This union was formalized at the treaties of Logstown and Winchester. Realizing they were losing control of the region and aware of the likelihood that such a loss would sever an important tie to its other colonies, the French responded with force. The destruction of

Pickawillany and the killing of American Indian peoples who openly supported the British were followed by the erection of forts at strategic locations in the Ohio Country. To counter French advances in the region, troops were authorized to be raised by the British Crown and ordered to construct their own fortification to defend British territorial claims and American Indian supporters. The forcible seizure of this fort would be the first hostile act between French and British forces of the Seven Years’ War and place George Washington in a position where he had to support his American Indian allies with action or risk losing them. The fall of Trent’s fort would also convince Washington that war had begun and he would retaliate with violence and set the stage for bloodshed at Jumonville Glen. The rhetoric of possession of the territory had become action and the hostile takeover of a small fort on the future site of Pittsburgh was just the beginning of a global struggle that would change the world. If this war can be interpreted as the “War That Made America,” as Fred Anderson suggests, can it not be interpreted that America began at Pittsburgh?⁸⁷

Notes

¹ The author would like to thank the editors of *Pennsylvania History*, the anonymous reviewers, Fred Threlfal, and Karen MacGregor for all of their help with this article.

² Paul A.W. Wallace, *Indians in Pennsylvania*, 2nd ed. (Harrisburg, PA: Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission, 1993), 126.

³ *Ibid.*, 136.

⁴ Jane T. Merritt, *At the Crossroads: Indians and Empires on a Mid-Atlantic Frontier, 1700-1763* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2003), 201. For more on the internal politics of American Indian control of the Ohio Country, see Francis Jennings, *Empire of Fortune: Crowns, Colonies & Tribes in the Seven Years War in America* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1988); Richard White, *The Middle Ground: Indians, Empires, and Republics in the Great Lakes Region, 1650-1815* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 238-248; Jon W. Parmenter, “The Iroquois and the Native American Struggle for the Ohio Valley, 1754-1794,” in David Curtis Skaggs and Larry L. Nelson, eds., *The Sixty Years’ War for the Great Lakes, 1754-1814* (East Lansing, MI: Michigan State University Press, 2001), 105-124; and Daniel P. Barr, “‘This Land is Ours and Not Yours’: The Western Delawares and the Seven Years’ War in the Upper Ohio Valley, 1755-1758,” in Daniel P. Barr, ed., *The Boundaries Between Us: Natives and Newcomers along the Frontiers of the Old Northwest Territory, 1750-1850* (Kent, OH: Kent State University Press, 2006), 25-43.

⁴ Donald H. Kent, *The French Invasion of Western Pennsylvania* (Harrisburg, PA: Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission, 1981), 3-4.

⁵ Kenneth P. Bailey, *The Ohio Company of Virginia and the Westward Movement, 1748-1792* (Glendale, CA: Arthur H. Clark Co., 1939), 163-166; Mason Wade, “The French in Western Pennsylvania,” *The Catholic Historical Review* 43 (1958), 430-431.

⁶ Bailey, *The Ohio Company of Virginia*, 165-170.

⁷ Wilbur R. Jacobs, *Diplomacy and Indian Gifts: The French-English Rivalry for Indian Loyalties During the French and Indian War Years, 1748-1763* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1950), 91. For more on British dominance over the French in the Ohio Country prior to the Seven Years’ War, see Eric Hinderaker, *Elusive Empires: Constructing Colonialism in the Ohio Valley, 1673-1800* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 40-45.

⁸ [William Trent, “Critique”, c.1757], William L. Clements Library, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, MI, 1.

⁹ R. Douglas Hurt, *The Ohio Frontier: Crucible of the Old Northwest, 1720-1830* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1996), 37, 40.

¹⁰ “The Marquis de Beauharnois to the Minister,” October 8, 1744 and October 28, 1745 and “Detail of Indian Affairs,” [n.d.], in Sylvester K. Stevens and Donald H. Kent, eds., *Wilderness Chronicles of Northwestern Pennsylvania* (Harrisburg, PA: Pennsylvania Historical Commission, 1941), 23-24, 29-31.

¹¹ Bailey, *The Ohio Company*, 17-31. For more on the Ohio Company also see Kenneth P. Bailey, *The Ohio Company Papers, 1753-1817: Being Primarily the Papers of the “Suffering Trader’s” of Pennsylvania* (Ann Arbor, MI.: Edwards Brothers, Inc., 1947), Alfred P. James, *The Ohio Company: Its Inner History* (Pittsburgh, PA: University of

Pittsburgh, 1959), and Lois Mulkearn, ed., *George Mercer Papers Relating to the Ohio Company of Virginia* (Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh, 1954).

¹² Andrew Gallup, ed., *The Celoron Expedition to the Ohio Country 1749: The Reports of Pierre Joseph Celoron and Father Bonnecamps* (Bowie, MD: Heritage Books, 1997), 30.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid., 32-34.

¹⁵ Ibid., 34-36.

¹⁶ Ibid., 39-40; George P. Donehoo, *Indian Villages and Place Names in Pennsylvania* (Harrisburg, PA: Telegraph Press, 1928), 93.

¹⁷ Gallup, ed., *Celoron Expedition*, 40.

¹⁸ Ibid., 42.

¹⁹ [William Trent, “Critique”, c.1757], William L. Clements Library, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, MI, 2. This document acquired by the Clements Library in 2004, has been attributed to William Trent. This work counters the French claims of British hostility and firmly states the British opinion of the events in the Ohio Country during this crucial period. For more on Trent see Sewell E. Slick, *William Trent and the West* (Harrisburg, PA: Archives Publishing Company of Pennsylvania, Inc., 1947).

²⁰ Gallup, ed., *Celoron Expedition*, 42-43.

²¹ [Trent, Critique], 2.

²² Gallup, ed., *Celoron Expedition*, 44-46.

²³ Ibid., 51-57.

²⁴ [Trent, Critique], 2.

²⁵ Gallup, ed., *Celoron Expedition*, 57-64.

²⁶ [Trent, Critique], 3.

²⁷ Michael N. McConnell, *A Country Between: The Upper Ohio Valley and its Peoples, 1724-1774* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1992), 87-88.

²⁸ For more on Christopher Gist see Allan M. Powell, *Christopher Gist: Frontier Scout* (Shippensburg, PA: Burd Street Press, 1992) and William M. Darlington, ed., *Christopher Gist’s Journals with Historical, Geographical and Ethnological Notes and Biographies of his Contemporaries*, Reprint ed. (Salem, NH: Ayers Company Publishers, Inc., 1991).

²⁹ Darlington, ed., *Gist’s Journals*, 34.

³⁰ Gary B. Nash, *Red, White and Black: The Peoples of Early America* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1982), 249.

³¹ “George Croghan to the Governor of Pennsylvania,” December 16, 1750, *Pennsylvania Colonial Records* (Harrisburg, PA: Theo. Fenn & Co., 1851) 5: 496-497. As James H. Merrell points out, there was controversy as to whether Croghan actually received permission to build a fort. Andrew Montour, a fellow trader who was with Croghan, initially refuted Croghan’s statement, but later changed his story after being persuaded by Croghan. James H. Merrell, *Into the American Woods: Negotiators on the Pennsylvania Frontier* (New York: W.W. Norton Company, 1999), 208-209.

³² James, *Ohio Company*, 52-53.

³³ Darlington, ed., *Gist’s Journals*, 78.

³⁴ Bailey, *The Ohio Company of Virginia*, 127, 148-151; “The Treaty of Logstown, 1752,” *Virginia Magazine of History and Biography* (VMHB) 13 (1906), 154-155.

³⁵ Bailey, *The Ohio Company of Virginia*, 127-129.

³⁶ “The Treaty of Logstown, 1752,” *VMHB*, 156-157.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 160-161.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 167-168.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 171-172.

⁴⁰ “Memoir of the French Colonies in North America by the Marquis de la Galissioniere,”

December 1750, Stevens and Kent, eds., *Wilderness Chronicles*, 27-28.

⁴¹ “Detail of Indian Affairs,” Stevens and Kent, eds., *Wilderness Chronicles*, 30-32, 37;

Mulkearn, ed., *George Mercer Papers*, 13-14, 66, 103-104, 241-244, 255.

⁴² *The Pennsylvania Gazette*, November 23, 1752.

⁴³ Matthew C. Ward, *Breaking the Backcountry: The Seven Years’ War in Virginia and Pennsylvania, 1754-1765* (Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2003), 30-31.

⁴⁴ “Francois Bigot to the Minister,” October 26, 1752, Stevens and Kent, eds., *Wilderness Chronicles*, 41-42. For more on the French occupation of the Ohio Country, see Donald H. Kent, *The French Invasion of Western Pennsylvania*.

⁴⁵ Charles M. Stotz, *Outposts of the War for Empire*, (Pittsburgh, PA: Historical Society of Western Pennsylvania, 1985), 73.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 75.

⁴⁷ Stotz, *Outposts*, 77.

⁴⁸ “The Marquis DuQuesne to the Minister,” August 20, 1753, Stevens and Kent, eds., *Wilderness Chronicles*, 50-51.

⁴⁹ Kent, *The French Invasion*, 49-50.

⁵⁰ Bailey, *The Ohio Company of Virginia*, 138-143.

⁵¹ Mulkearn, ed., *George Mercer Papers*, 434, 593.

⁵² Bailey, *The Ohio Company of Virginia*, 202-203.

⁵³ James, *The Ohio Company*, 98.

⁵⁴ Bailey, *The Ohio Company of Virginia*, 155-157.

⁵⁵ Hugh Cleland, ed., *George Washington in the Ohio Valley* (Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1955), 6.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 17.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 29-32.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 27.

⁵⁹ For more on Trent, see Sewell E. Slick, *William Trent and the West*.

⁶⁰ “The Case of the Ohio Company Extracted from Original Papers,” reproduced in Mulkearn, ed. *George Mercer Papers*, part 2 (facsimile pages), 14-15.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 15.

⁶² William A. Hunter, *Forts on the Pennsylvania Frontier, 1753-1758*, (Harrisburg, PA: Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission, 1960), 47.

⁶³ [Trent, Critique], 4; Mulkearn, ed. *George Mercer Papers*, 84; *Pennsylvania Gazette*, April 4, 1754.

⁶⁴ “Deposition of Ensign Edward Ward,” June 30, 1754, Bailey, ed., *The Ohio Company Papers*, 28; “Ensign Ward’s Deposition,” May 7, 1754, Darlington, ed., *Gist’s Journals*, 278.

⁶⁵ *Pennsylvania Gazette*, April 4, 1754; Mulkearn, ed., *George Mercer Papers*, 439.

⁶⁶ Hunter, *Forts on the Pennsylvania Frontier*, 47.

⁶⁷ [Trent, Critique], 4.

⁶⁸ [Trent, Critique], 9.

⁶⁹ "Ensign Ward's Deposition," Darlington, ed., *Gist's Journals*, 277.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 277.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*

⁷² Hunter, *Forts on the Pennsylvania Frontier*, 49-50.

⁷³ Mulkearn, ed., *George Mercer Papers*, 86-87.

⁷⁴ "Ensign Ward's Deposition," Darlington, ed., *Gist's Journals*, 275-276.

⁷⁵ Mulkearn, ed., *George Mercer Papers*, 623.

⁷⁶ Hunter, *Forts on the Pennsylvania Frontier*, 42, 51; Stotz, *Outposts*, 91.

⁷⁷ Barr, "This Land is Ours," 28; Fred Anderson, *Crucible of War: The Seven Years' War and the Fate of Empire in British North America, 1754-1766* (New York: Vintage Books, 2000), 32.

⁷⁸ Mulkearn, ed., *George Mercer Papers*, 88.

⁷⁹ Sylvester K. Stevens, Donald H. Kent and Emma Edith Woods, eds., *Travels in New France by J.C.B.* (Harrisburg, PA.: Pennsylvania Historical Commission, 1941), 56.

⁸⁰ "Ensign Ward's Deposition," Darlington, ed., *Gist's Journals*, 278.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 276.

⁸² Stotz, *Outposts*, 17.

⁸³ Donald H. Kent, ed., *Contrecoeur's Copy of George Washington's Journal for 1754* (Eastern National Park & Monument Association, 1989), 9, 12.

⁸⁴ Fred Anderson, *The War That Made America: A Short History of the French and Indian War* (New York: Viking, 2005), 46.

⁸⁵ Ibid., 12; "George Washington to Robert Dinwiddie," April 25, 1754, W.W. Abbot, ed., *The Papers of George Washington: Colonial Series* (Charlottesville, VA: University Press of Virginia, 1983), 1: 89.

⁸⁶ Kent, ed., *Contrecoeur's Copy of Washington's Journal*, 15.

⁸⁷ Anderson, *The War That Made America*, viii; Anderson, *Crucible of War*, xviii-xxv, 745-746.