Fort Necessity

National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior

Fort Necessity
National Battlefield

Jumonville Glen

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.

G. Washington

A few days after the incident, this is how George Washington described his first experience under fire. The shots at Jumonville Glen were the first in the Fort Necessity campaign, ultimately leading the world to war. But the story of Jumonville Glen has the intrigue of a mystery thriller and contains controversy and unanswered questions.

Prelude

The Half-King

In 1753, French soldiers began building forts from Lake Erie southwards toward the forks of the Ohio River. George Washington was sent to the Ohio country as a British emissary in the winter of 1753-54 to tell the French to leave. French officers politely told Washington that they were not obliged to obey his summons, and they were going to stay. Washington returned to Virginia and informed Governor Robert Dinwiddie of their refusal to leave.

The governor immediately assembled a force of men to go to the forks of the Ohio River and construct a fort. Washington, as the lieutenant colonel of the Virginia Regiment, was to gather men and supplies and build a road to the forks, reinforcing the men who were there.

By late May, Washington had reached Great Meadows, a large natural clearing. He made this his base camp as grass there could provide food for his animals, and water was also readily available.

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. They traveled through woods so dark that the men sometimes spent nearly a half hour just trying to find the trail.

The Skirmish

About dawn, Washington met with an allied Indian chief, 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 sulphurous smell of powder. The skirmish lasted about 15 minutes. When it was over, 13 Frenchmen were dead, and 21 captured. One escaped and made it back to Fort Duquesne, at the forks of the Ohio. Washington's casualties were one man killed and two or three men wounded.

Washington now knew he was discovered. He sent his prisoners to Williamsburg, while he returned to Great Meadows. There he started construction of a small fortification to protect from a probable attack. About five weeks later, the attack came, as a larger force of French and Indians attacked Washington's force of 400, at his "Fort of Necessity."

Controversy surrounds the events that took place at Jumonville Glen, named for the dead leader of the French detachment.

Soon after the smoke had cleared, French survivors claimed they had been attacked without cause by Washington. They claimed that they were on the same sort of mission that Washington himself had been on the winter before. That explained, they said, why they had been surprised so easily and why they had not posted sentries. Washington asked why, if the French were on a diplomatic mission, were they hidden in a ravine, off the trail, and present in the area for perhaps a couple of days without approaching him.

Aftermath

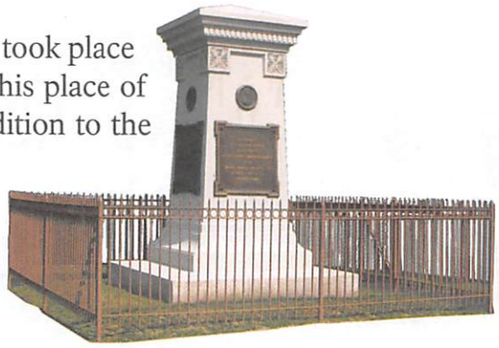
The skirmish at Jumonville returned to haunt Washington sooner than he thought. After an all-day battle at Fort Necessity on July 3, 1754, Washington surrendered his command to the French. That night he signed a multi-part document, one clause of which stated that he was guilty of the assassination of a French officer, Jumonville. Washington denied this. He said that the translation he had been given was not "assassination", but "death of" or "killing." In any event, the French used this propaganda to great advantage, in efforts to discredit the English.

The following quote, attributed to British statesman Horace Walpole, captures the importance of the May 28th event. "The volley fired by a young Virginian in the backwoods of America set the world on fire." The result of that volley, the French and Indian War, would have great impact on global affairs. France lost most of her influence in North America. Meanwhile, the English colonies in America began to pay taxes levied upon them to support and defend the large British Empire. Some people began to dream of independence.

Today the glen is a quiet reminder of things that happened over 250 years ago. It is the spot where two giant political forces started down a road neither wanted to follow. All this began with shots exchanged in the woods before you – a sound which an eager, ambitious 22-year-old found "charming."

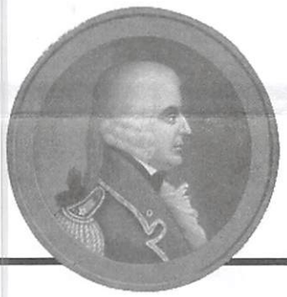
Braddock Grave

Quietly it stands, a single marker, a reminder of a quest for empire that took place more than 200 years ago. The marker memorializes the final resting this place of British Major General Edward Braddock, leader of an ill-fated expedition to the forks of the Ohio River to try to capture French-held Fort Duquesne.



After George Washington's defeat at Fort Necessity, his British force retreated to Williamsburg. The French used British retreat to their advantage, and soon French- inspired Indian attacks occurred throughout the frontier. Terrorized settlers streamed eastward.

General Braddock



After appeals from colonial governors, the British decided to take matters more seriously and sent Major General Braddock to North America with two regiments of infantry.

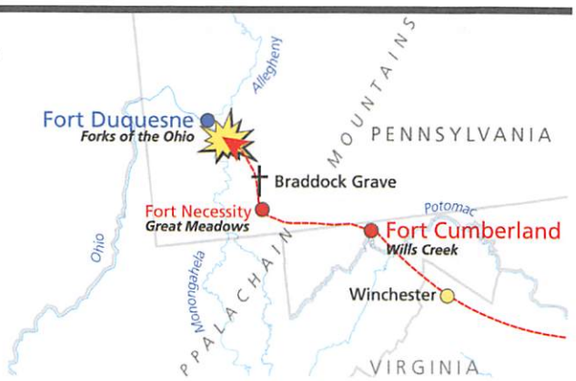
Braddock, a career soldier, had risen through the ranks, and after 45 years of military service he became commander-in-chief of all British forces in North America.

The overall British plan for 1755 was to simultaneously attack many French forts in North America. Braddock would lead the expedition against Fort Duquesne personally. That spring, he disembarked his army at Alexandria, Virginia. After augmenting his force with colonial militia and a few Indians, Braddock had about 2,400 men. Among the men was George Washington, a volunteer aide to the general.

Braddock Road

The army assembled at Wills Creek, known today as Cumberland, Maryland. Braddock decided to follow the road Washington had blazed over the mountains on his way to Fort Necessity the previous year. Because the trail was inadequate for the army's large wagons and artillery, it was widened to 12 feet, but only at great effort and expenditure of time.

The force seemed to move at a snail's pace. Finally the army was split in two with Braddock moving ahead with the bulk of the men and a few pieces of artillery. The remainder would follow under the command of Colonel Dunbar.



Battle of the Monongahela

Sword believed to have been carried by Washington on the Braddock campaign.

In early July, the advance group was approaching the forks of the Ohio. On July 9, a second crossing of the Monongahela River was made. From that point, it was a short march to Fort Duquesne.

Soon after the river crossing, the woods in front of the British column exploded with musket fire and the whooping of French soldiers and their Indian allies as they collided head-on with the British. Advance British units fell back upon the main body, while rear units continued advancing, adding to the confusion. Disorganization and fear quickly seized the British. In the smoke of battle, fighting an unseen enemy, and with many British officers killed early on, discipline all but ended.

The battle lasted several hours. Finally, as Braddock was carried from the field severely wounded, the surviving British fled. British losses had been horrendous: more than 900 casualties out of the 1,400 men engaged. The British were completely beaten by a force they could not see in a wilderness where they did not want to be. They now were trailed by what they must have imagined to be a horde of Indians who would kill them all if they stopped.

The General is Buried

The British camped near here on July 13, and in the evening Braddock died. Washington officiated at the ceremony the next day, and the general was buried in the road his men had built. The army then marched over the grave to obliterate any traces of it and continued to eastern Pennsylvania.

One can only imagine what went through the general's mind after the battle. He commanded what some considered an invincible army. They were not ambushed, but rather surprised, and discipline broke down. The rout was a disgrace. Doctors later reported that the general died more from anxiety than from his wounds. Washington later wrote, "... thus died a man, whose good and bad qualities were intimately blended. He was brave even to a fault and in regular Service would have done honor to his profession. His attachments were warm, his enmities were strong, and having no disguise about him, both appeared in full forces."

After the French and Indian War the Braddock Road remained a main road in this area. In 1804, some workmen discovered human remains in the road near where Braddock was supposed to have been buried. The remains were reinterred on a small knoll adjacent to the road. In 1913 the marker was placed where it is today, keeping its silent watch.

Re-enactment of burial service for General Braddock during the 250th anniversary commemoration.

Ask at the book store for suggestions for further readings. Please help maintain the historical integrity of your National Parks. While visiting Braddock Grave and Jumonville Glen, please park in designated ares and remain on the existing trails.