

George Washington – His Early Life

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We will examine Washington's early life and the experiences that shaped him into the leader the country needed. Little is known about his childhood before age eleven, and almost nothing is written about his father, Augustine Washington. The family patriarch, John Washington, came from England in 1657 and established the Washingtons as respectable, though not prominent. Indigenous people reportedly nicknamed him "Town Taker" because he used the law to swindle them out of their land.

Washington's father died in 1743 at age 48, when Washington was 16 and had played only a small role in his upbringing. He left behind a widow, seven children and an estate that included 10,000 acres and 49 enslaved people. A major influence in Washington's early life was his half-brother Lawrence, fourteen years his senior. His brother became a surrogate father well before his father died.

Washington was the younger son and would not inherit the family fortune. In 1746 Lawrence proposed that George enlist in the British Navy as a midshipman. His mother opposed the idea. In 1751 George accompanied his brother to Barbados where he sought a cure for his tuberculosis. George contracted smallpox while he was there and he successfully recovered from this dread disease with no ill effects. The positive effect was that he became permanently immune to smallpox.

George needed to learn a trade as his older half-brother would inherit the family estate as was the custom in this century. His brother Lawrence taught him trigonometry and surveying. A family friend William Fairfax arranged for him to survey Fairfax lands in the Shenandoah Valley with Fairfax's son, George Fairfax. Washington's first diary entries come from this period. It was wild country with a few German settlers and many Indigenous people. He conducted more than 190 surveys in this area, and the money he earned allowed him to make his first land purchase a 1,459-acre plot on Bullskin Creek. There would have been few roads, only trails through the forest, and he likely camped primitively under the stars.

Even when Washington stayed overnight with a settler, conditions remained primitive. In one diary entry, he wrote that he "Went into the bed, as they called it, only to find nothing but a little straw matted together, without sheets or anything else but one threadbare

blanket, weighed down by vermin such as lice, fleas, and etc.” He became accomplished as a surveyor and was appointed the official surveyor of Culpepper County.

As a young man, Washington was naturally interested in women. In one diary entry, he wrote, “*Poor restless heart, pierced by Cupid’s feathered dart.*” The comment is believed to refer to Betsy Fauntleroy, a 16-year-old coquette who did not return his affection. Later women would swoon at his appearance but at this early stage he struck them as awkward, and paralyzingly shy.

He was a tall young man of at least 6 feet 2 inches which made him a head taller than other men of this time. He was around 175 pounds with an athlete’s body. He had disproportionately large hands and feet. When George was 20 years old in 1752 his half brother Lawrence was dying and decided to take up another career. He knew that a career as a surveyor was a difficult profession.

Washington petitioned Governor Dinwiddie for an Adjutant General post in the Virginia militia, despite having no military experience or qualifications. After his brother’s death created a vacancy in the adjutancy corps, William Fairfax, George’s champion, used his influence to secure the position for him. Dinwiddie then became Washington’s new mentor and patron. An adjutant is a military staff officer who assists a commanding officer with administrative duties, personnel management and communication.

Washington had about two years to learn military life. In 1754, Virginia funded a 300-man regiment to protect settlers in the Ohio Country from the growing French threat. France controlled most of present-day Canada and sought control of the Ohio River Valley.

Washington served in the French and Indian War, which lasted from 1754 to 1763. It was a brutal conflict, with atrocities committed by Indigenous allies on both sides. The war became global in 1756, when France and Britain formally declared war in what became known as the Seven Years’ War.

In 1754, Washington was appointed second in command and given the rank of lieutenant colonel. He led 160 men to secure the strategic junction of the Allegheny and Monongahela rivers, where a fort was already under construction. Along the way, Washington and his men built a road to move the army more easily and to open the wilderness to future settlers and soldiers.

Before he arrived, the French captured the half-built fort and began extending their influence among Indigenous tribes in the region. Washington camped about 40 miles away, hoping to gain additional Indigenous allies before attempting to take the fort. Tanacharison, a Mingo chief fluent in both English and French, brought a delegation of warriors to Great Meadows, Pennsylvania.

On May 28 Washington's men and his Indian allies found an encampment of 32 French and their Indian Allies. After a brief skirmish the French surrendered after 9 Frenchmen were killed and most of the others injured. The French Commander Joseph Coulon de Villiers was trying to explain in French that he was acting as an envoy on a peace mission on behalf of his monarch Louis the XV. Chief Tanacharison who spoke and understood French said to de Villiers; "*Thou art not yet dead my father*" and immediately tomahawked the French commander in the head splitting his skull open and scalped him. The term "*my father*" was a common form of address when the Indians addressed Europeans.

Historians disagree about what happened to the remaining prisoners. My main source was *His Excellency George Washington* by Joseph Ellis, author of 15 books on the Revolutionary War era. Ellis has received two major national honors: the National Book Award and the Pulitzer Prize for separate historical works. Ellis quotes one witness's account of the battle's aftermath: "*His warriors then fell upon the wounded French, scalped them and decapitated one and put his head on a stake.*" Other historians state that 18 to 21 prisoners were captured.

Scalping was a common practice during the French and Indian Wars, and both the English and French gave bounties for scalps until it was discovered that fraud was occurring. This war was one of the most brutal wars ever fought on this continent. Both sides needed their Indian allies, and the Indians knew this and therefore took advantage of this by frequently scalping and dispatching prisoners. The Indians knew from previous practice that their French or British Allies would not stop them from committing these atrocities. Both sides needed Indian assistance, and the Indians viewed these acts as trophies of war and not anything out of the ordinary as it had been part of their heritage and culture for centuries.

Washington witnessed this atrocity and was shocked and distressed but felt there was nothing he could do. He did not tell this story to Dinwiddie, his superior, and in effect was trying to rationalize this massacre to himself. In a letter home to his brother, he glossed over the killings by focusing on his own personal response to the sense of danger. He said, "*I heard bullets whistle and believe me there was something charming in the sound*". This comment made it into the Virginia newspapers prompting a flurry of stories depicting Washington as America's first war hero. This bravado remark made the rounds in London also.

Later he advised Dinwiddie that his small palisaded fort was finished and told his superior that he felt he would not fear the attack of the fort by 500 men. He called his new fort- *Fort Necessity*. On June 18, 1754, Tanacharison called a council of Indians in which he

questioned Washington about his intentions toward the Ohio country. Washington advised the Indians that the English military effort was to “*maintain their rights*”.

The chiefs found Washington either unpersuasive or that the size of the advancing French force made Washington’s force a bad gamble. Tanacharison led all the Indians away leaving Washington to his fate. In early July after the additional manpower arrived under the command of Lt. Colonel McKay the commanders learned that a French force of 1100 French and Indians led by the brother of the slain Jumonville, Louis Coulon de Villiers were on their way to Fort Necessity.

The French had a two to one advantage. When the French arrived at Fort Necessity there was only about 60 yards of cleared wood outside the palisaded fort. This was not nearly enough as the effective range of a Revolutionary War musket was 50 to 100 yards. A musket ball could travel further but with little accuracy and less force. This fort was a crudely constructed small fort with gaps between the logs.

The French and their Indigenous allies took cover in the woods and opened heavy fire on the fort. By nightfall, about one-third of the defenders had been killed or wounded, and some survivors had broken into the rum supply. French Captain de Villiers called a truce and offered generous terms: if the British left Fort Necessity and promised to stay out of the Ohio Country for one year, the French would allow them to keep their arms, colors, and honor.

Washington accepted those terms and his men left the fort with their arms reversed on July 4th. Washington tried to avoid any criticism by claiming that both parties had conducted themselves with gallantry and composure. The fact was that Washington’s army suffered one hundred casualties with only 5 deaths on the opposite side.

French General Duquesne identified Washington as the epitome of dishonor for the previous incident – the massacre of French soldiers on May 28. Duquesne called Washington a liar and unworthy. Washington signed the document of surrender which was written in French. In those terms of surrender was an admission in French about the assassination of Joseph Coulon de Villiers. France used this incident of the massacre for propaganda purposes and an epic poem published in France designed to demonstrate the evil character of the enemy.

This of course made him a hero in the eyes of English North America and Fairfax and Dinwiddie issued an order in the House of Burgesses recognizing Washington as a hero of Fort Necessity. Washington acknowledged that he had lost the battle at Fort Necessity when the Virginia legislature declined to approve new taxes for a major expedition against

the French. The Virginia Regiment was then disbanded into several independent companies, leaving Washington to serve at a lower rank.

Dissatisfied by what he saw as a serious insult, Washington resigned his commission in November 1754. Because military rank was an important sign of social status in Virginia, the demotion was especially damaging to him. He later observed publicly:

“After putting myself to considerable expense in equipment and providing necessaries for the campaign, I went out, was soundly beaten, lost it all, came in, and had my commission taken from me”

He then returned to Mount Vernon, which he had inherited from his half-brother after Lawrence’s death.

In 1755 another expedition was mounted to take Fort Duquesne and was led by General Braddock. Washington wrote Braddock’s chief of staff asking to be part of that expedition. He also realized that serving under a well-known general would give him the possibility of patronage from him. Washington was accepted as an aide-de-camp, placing him within Braddock’s inner circle of advisors. The expedition was substantial, consisting of more than 2,000 men, 2500 horses and numerous camp followers. Camp followers were a usual part of military campaigns for centuries and were a mixture of wives, sutlers, tradesmen and others who were useful to these campaigns.

They advanced through trackless wilderness; a challenge Washington knew would slow their progress and strain their supplies. By June, Braddock’s column had nearly stalled in the Alleghenies. Stragglers were routinely killed and scalped, showing that the French knew of Braddock’s approach. Anticipating disaster, Washington persuaded Braddock to form a “flying column” of 1,200 men—an agile force with minimal equipment. At the time, Washington was ill with dysentery and remained with the wagons, but he secured Braddock’s promise to summon him to the front once they were within striking distance of Fort Duquesne.

This attempt ended in an absolute disaster. Near the Monongahela River they ran into a large reconnaissance detachment from Fort Duquesne of 900 men – two thirds of them Indians. Braddock made a strategic mistake, not understanding the European rules of war could not be imposed on America. When the French and Indians stumbled across Braddock’s Army at a clearing in the forest, they formed a semicircle around the British vanguard and began firing their muskets.

The British regulars obedient to their training formed themselves into concentrated rows in the open field. Within the first ten minutes the British ranks were decimated and panic set in. The regulars broke. Washington described the slaughter as *“they behaved like Men and*

died like soldiers". "Friendly fire" also contributed to this disaster. Braddock himself rode into the center of the fight to rally his men and was immediately cut down. Washington took command and rode back and forth attempting to rally his men. He had two horses shot out underneath him and four musket balls pierced his coat, but he miraculously escaped without a scratch. The defeat was catastrophic.

Of the 1300, British and American troops, more than 900 were killed or wounded, while the French reported only 23 killed and 16 wounded. Braddock died three days into the retreat. Washington buried Braddock in the road and had wagons pass over the grave to keep the body from being discovered and desecrated. For the rest of his life, Washington remembered the screams of the wounded men being scalped. He recognized that European battlefield tactics were ineffective against Indigenous fighters in forested terrain.

By then, most Indigenous tribes had allied with the French, making a conventional European campaign almost certain to fail. Braddock became the obvious scapegoat for the defeat. Washington, however, came to be known as the "*hero of the Monongahela*" for helping rally the survivors into an orderly retreat. As one newspaper reported, "*he earned a high Reputation for Military Skill, Integrity and Valor; Tho Success has not always attended his Undertakings.*"

In August 1755, although he was only 23, Washington's rising reputation made him the obvious choice to command the Virginia Regiment. No further battles occurred in Virginia or the Ohio Valley, as the war had shifted north to the Great Lakes, New England, and Canada. He spent the next three and one half years recruiting and training an elite unit of over 1000 men. He tried to persuade Dinwiddie to recruit Indians but by this time the Indian population were resolutely pro French and his mission become building multiple forts strung out on the west side of the Blue Ridge and garrisoned by detachments called the "*The Virginia Blues*".

Washington viewed this as an impossible task – a string of isolated forts on the frontier to protect settlers. After Braddock's defeat the Shawnees and the Delaware saw this as a mandate to maraud and plunder all the English settlement west of the Blue Ridge. His opinion about the fighting skills of the Indians was as follows: "*No troops in the universe can guard against the cunning and wiles of Indians. No one can tell where they will fall, till the mischief is done, and then tis vain to pursue...*"

Washington designed uniforms: blue coats with scarlet trim and matching scarlet waistcoats. His meticulous attention to detail showed in the thousands of orders he drafted, each beginning, "*You are hereby ordered to,*" followed by specific instructions. For

example, in his orders for constructing stockades, he directed that trees and brush be cleared beyond musket range.

Discipline was harsh. Those found guilty of drunkenness or lewd behavior sometimes received up to one thousand lashes. Deserters faced death by hanging. A surge in desertions in 1757 produced a string of public executions. He suffered no sleepless nights after endorsing the executions. There were clear lines in his mind and if you crossed them, there was no forgiveness. He did not like militias. He felt they were undisciplined and would desert at the slightest excuse which one militia did when there was information that the enemy may be nearby. This was one of his youthful convictions that he never abandoned. He had a low estimate of militias though the Revolutionary War.

In 1758, Washington learned that General John Forbes, an officer with 30 years of British Army experience, had been appointed overall commander in Virginia. Washington and Forbes initially got along, but their relationship deteriorated when Forbes chose to attack Fort Duquesne by cutting a new route directly across Pennsylvania. Washington favored using Braddock's Road and argued his case, but Henry Bouquet, Forbes's second in command, overruled him. Washington had political reasons for preferring Braddock's route, while his opponents had strong logistical reasons for supporting Forbes's plan.

The new route was built which is the route that the Pennsylvania Turnpike is on today. Forbes led his troops and Washington led his Americans. As the army neared the fort they ran into a reconnaissance patrol from the fort. Since there were two armies separately commanded the vanguards got into a friendly fire incident. Washington stepped between the two sets of troops and using his sword knocked up the muskets of his detachment. He stated later he never felt more threatened with injury than in this incident.

By the time they got to the fort they found it deserted and burning. The French troops knowing that they were outnumbered had left the day before. It was an empty, anticlimactic victory. Critical of General Forbes Washington complained that not enough troops were left behind to rebuild the half-burned fort and to garrison the fort. There was no glorious victory for Washington in this campaign.

This concludes part 1 of Washington's early life. We will learn about his marriage and his life on his plantation of Mount Vernon in Part I.

Reference Materials

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