

Washington's First Command: The Ohio Valley, 1754

US History - Unit 2: Colonial America

Learning Targets

- ★ Explain why Britain and France both claimed the Ohio Valley in the 1750s.
- ★ Describe what happened at Jumonville Glen and at Fort Necessity in 1754.
- ★ Explain how Native nations chose sides to serve their own goals.
- ★ Use Washington's own 1754 letter to judge how he explained the fight.
- ★ Trace how one small clash grew into a war between empires by 1763.

Two Empires, One Valley

Britain's Claim

- Virginia's royal charter stretched its western border into the Ohio Valley.
- Land companies like the Ohio Company wanted to sell that land to settlers.

France's Claim

- French explorers had linked Canada to Louisiana along the Ohio River.
- France built forts across the region to hold its claim to this land.

Key Concept: A frontier is the outer edge of colonial settlement, where colonial claims met Native homelands.

The Ohio Nations Had Their Own Plan

Alliance

An agreement between nations to support each other, usually in war or trade

Neutrality

A policy of refusing to take either side in a conflict between other powers

Remember: Ohio Country nations picked whichever path served their own interests.

Britain, France, or Neither?

Support Britain

- British traders offered goods but wanted land opened to settlers.
- British help could mean support against nearby French forts.
- Tanaghrisson, a Mingo leader, pushed for closer ties to the British.

Support France

- French traders wanted furs, not permanent farms on Native land.
- French forts sat closer to many Ohio Country towns already.
- Some Shawnee and Delaware leaders leaned French because French posts sat closer.

Commit to Neither

- Staying uncommitted kept both empires competing for favor.
- An uncommitted town could trade with whichever side offered more.
- Leaders often changed course as the situation on the ground changed.

Did You Know: Different Ohio Country towns made different choices at the same time.

Who Was George Washington in 1754?

Militia

A group of citizens called up for short military service, not trained professional soldiers

Envoy

An officer sent by one government to carry an official message or demand to another

Key Concept: Washington was 22, with almost no combat experience, in 1753-54.

Washington, Colonel of the Virginia Regiment



Painted by Charles Willson Peale in 1772, eighteen years after these events.

The Night March, May 27-28, 1754

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|  | Evening, May 27 | Washington's force left camp, marching in heavy rain. |
|  | Overnight | Guides lost the trail more than once in the dark, wet terrain. |
|  | Near Dawn, May 28 | The column reached Tanaghrisson's camp. |
|  | Tanaghrisson Agrees | He agrees to lead the men to a nearby French party. |
|  | Before First Light | The combined group moves out to surround the French camp. |

Tip: A night march in rain with no clear trail set up everything that followed.

Jumonville Glen: Fifteen Minutes

- At dawn, May 28, Washington's men surrounded a French party in a hollow.
- Firing broke out almost immediately; who fired first is disputed.
- It lasted about fifteen minutes and ten French soldiers died.
- Their commander, Joseph Coulon de Jumonville, was among the dead.
- Twenty-one French soldiers were captured; one escaped to warn a fort.

Did You Know: This was a skirmish, a short fight between small groups rather than a full battle.

Was It a Battle or an Ambush?

What the British Side Said

- The British side said Jumonville's party was scouting an attack.
- British accounts said Tanaghrisson, not Washington's men, killed Jumonville.

What the French Side Said

- France said Jumonville's message was meant to be delivered peacefully.
- France called the killing an assassination under a flag of truce.

Warning: Jumonville carried a summons - a written order demanding someone leave or answer a claim.

A Fort in a Bad Place

Entrenchment

A ditch and earth wall dug by soldiers to protect a position

Garrison

The troops stationed at a fort to hold and defend it

Note: Great Meadows was low, open ground ringed by higher wooded ridges.

July 3, 1754

- Jumonville's brother led 600-900 troops from New France and Native allies.
- Fighting continued all day in a heavy downpour.
- Defenders' gunpowder and weapons were soaked; casualties mounted.
- By nightfall Washington's men were surrounded with little dry powder.
- Washington agreed to discuss terms after dark on July 3.

Key Concept: A full day of rain-soaked fighting left Washington no good options.

The Papers Washington Signed

What the Document Said

- Washington signed papers letting his men march out with their weapons.
- The document was written in French, a language he read only haltingly.

The Word That Caused Trouble

- The French text used a word later translated as assassination.
- By signing, he appeared to admit to a killing he always denied.

Warning: A capitulation sets the terms on which a surrendering force may leave.

From One Clash to a World War

Theater	What Happened There
Europe	Britain and Prussia fought France, Austria, and Russia starting in 1756.
The Caribbean	British and French fleets and armies fought over sugar-rich islands.
West Africa	Britain seized French trading posts along the coast.
India	British and French trading companies fought for territory and trade.
The Philippines	British forces captured Manila from Spain, France's ally, in 1762.

Did You Know: Historians call this global conflict the Seven Years' War.

1763: What Changed

France

- France lost nearly all its mainland North American territory.
- France gave up claims east of the Mississippi to Britain.
- France kept only a few Caribbean sugar islands and Newfoundland fishing rights.

Britain

- Britain gained Canada and all French land east of the Mississippi.
- Britain took on a massive war debt from years of fighting.
- Britain now had to govern and defend a much larger territory.

Native Nations

- Native nations lost France as a counterweight against British power.
- Native nations faced British limits on settlement west of the Appalachians.
- Some nations rose up against British forts within the year.

Remember: Every winner and loser here paid a price of some kind.

Why This Matters Next

- Britain now controlled an enormous new territory to govern and defend.
- Paying off war debt became an urgent problem for the British government.
- Colonial soldiers who fought beside British regulars formed their own views.
- Britain would soon look to the colonies to help cover the cost of empire.
- None of that had been decided yet in 1763 - it was still an open question.

Tip: Every empire that wins a war still has to pay for it.

Key Takeaways

- ★ Britain and France both claimed the Ohio Valley without asking its nations.
- ★ Ohio Country nations weighed sides, or neither, to serve their own goals.
- ★ A short fight at Jumonville Glen and a July surrender started the war.
- ★ Washington's own signed and written words are disputed evidence, not fact.
- ★ By 1763 the local clash had grown into a war reshaping North America.