



History in the Painting – “Crossing the Allegheny” by Daniel Huntington, 1842

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George Washington is aptly called the “Father of His Country,” and it is his service as Commander-in-Chief of the Continental Army during the American Revolution, or as the first President of the United States that we tend to think of. However, in his youth, Washington played a critical role in essentially igniting the French and Indian War, a war that became a pyrrhic victory for the British Empire, and which agitated the divisions that led to the American Revolution. Washington’s exploits in the opening salvos of the French and Indian War also established a continent-wide reputation for Washington, making him one of the few men known and respected across the colonies. The experiences and reputation earned in these overlooked early years were vital factors in Washington’s later rise to “Father of His Country.”

The fortunes of a semi-obscure, middling colonist changed when Virginia’s royal governor, Robert Dinwiddie, tasked young Major George Washington of the Virginia militia with delivery of a royal order demanding France vacate the Ohio River Valley. Hoping to build a military reputation that could catapult him from the backwater colony of Virginia to a commissioned officer position in the British Army, Washington readily undertook the mission. Having cut his teeth as a woodsman through years as a surveyor, Washington sought out the assistance of equally skilled men who could navigate the dangers of the frontier. One such man was Christopher Gist, himself an accomplished surveyor and a colonist with considerable experience interacting with the various tribes that lived within and between Virginia and the Ohio River Valley.

Washington set out with his small team and gathered a council of leading tribal chiefs at the well-established trading post calls Logstown northwest of present-day Pittsburgh. Despite lacking any formal training in diplomacy, Washington gained the confidence and support of several tribes, including the important support of Seneca chief Tanacharison (Half-King). Washington, his team, and his allies made their way north to the French outpost of Fort Le Boeuf, near present-day Erie, Pennsylvania, to make the

demands of the British king, George II, known to the French. The French commander at Fort Le Boeuf, Jacques Le Gardeur, refused to acknowledge the British claims to the Ohio River Valley and attempted to peel away Washington's tribal allies with promises of French trade and support.

Having completely failed in his mission, Washington turned back for Virginia. With conditions rapidly deteriorating as harsh winter weather rolled into the hill country of present-day western Pennsylvania, and as members of his team and tribal allies fell ill, Washington decided to forge ahead without them to give notice to Governor Dinwiddie. After providing money and instructions to his men for a slower return when weather permitted, Washington set out on foot accompanied only by Christopher Gist. During this return journey, Washington and Gist were attacked by a French-allied Indian warrior, but spared his life. Fearing another attack, the two men traveled as hard as they could through the wooded hills before reaching the semi-frozen Allegheny River. With only a single hatchet between them, the hunted men labored furiously to cut enough trees down to make a simple log raft to cross the ice-filled river. Daniel Huntington's famous 1841 painting, *George Washington and Christopher Gist Crossing the Allegheny River*, captures this perilous moment in Washington's life. The crossing itself was fraught with danger as Washington took a spill from the raft into the icy water and both men were forced to abandon it after it became entangled in ice. Wading to a small island in the midst of the river, Washington and Gist spent a harrowing night in the winter storm. To their relief, the river had frozen completely overnight and the men were able to walk to the eastern side of the Allegheny River and continue without incident.

Washington's return with the French refusal to vacate northwestern Pennsylvania or the Ohio River Valley prompted Governor Dinwiddie to organize a small military expedition against the French. Washington, having been promoted to Lt. Colonel of the Virginia militia undertook this expedition as commander and enlisted the aid of Christopher Gist again. Tales of Washington's original journey with Gist through hostile territory began to spread, and though Washington's military expedition ended in defeat for the Virginia militia, Washington's profile as a leader willing to engage the French and their Indian allies continued to grow. However, his failure did prompt the British authorities to recognize the considerable threat the French posed at the gateway to the Ohio River Valley and this prompted the dispatch of Maj. General Edward Braddock and his two regiments of British troops to the American colonies. Braddock's annihilation at the Battle of the Monongahela near present-day Pittsburgh and Washington's valiant effort to save as many survivors as possible in a retreat to Virginia solidified Washington's reputation in the colonies and touched off the French and Indian War. The French and Indian War was a brutal affair unlike anything experienced in the colonies before. It resulted in the defeat of France in North America, near bankruptcy for the British Empire, and growing animosity between American colonists and the British government that would culminate in the American Revolution with Washington playing a leading role.