

# Allegheny Expedition -1753



WASHINGTON CROSSING THE ALLEGHANY.

In 1753, France and Britain both claimed the vast territory beyond the Allegheny Mountains known as the Ohio River Valley. Alarmed by the aggressive actions of the French, Governor Robert Dinwiddie received Crown approval to demand French withdrawal from the western lands claimed by Virginia. Pending refusal, Dinwiddie also had permission to drive the French out by force of arms.

Twenty-one-year-old Major George Washington, newly appointed adjutant of the colony's southern district, immediately volunteered to be Dinwiddie's emissary to the French. Although he had no prior military service, spoke no French or Native languages, and was inexperienced in

matters of diplomacy, Washington did have some factors in his favor. Washington was the half-brother of the late Lawrence Washington, a former adjutant of the militia and half-pay British officer. In addition, Washington was closely aligned with the powerful Fairfax family. Further, he was no stranger to the hardships of frontier travel having worked as a surveyor. Washington was also aided by his eagerness to gain a commission in the British Army.

On October 31, 1753, Washington received his commission and departed Williamsburg. He enlisted the assistance of a French-speaking interpreter, four experienced woodsmen, and well-known surveyor Christopher Gist who was knowledgeable in the customs and, to some degree, the language of native peoples in the region. Gist served as guide, translator, and assistant.

By the close of November, the small party reached the trading village of Logstown on the Ohio River. There Washington met in council with sachems from the area, reminding them of their alliances with the British and explaining the purpose of his mission. Washington and his party finally reached the French post at Fort Le Boeuf on the evening of December 11, escorted by Seneca chief Tanacharison (Half-King), two Iroquois chiefs, and a chief from the Delaware Nation.

The next day Washington met with the French commander, Jacques Le Gardeur and delivered Dinwiddie's letter. Two days later, Washington had his reply, a polite but firm refusal to vacate. During this time span the weather turned significantly for

the worse. Cold temperatures and continual snow made roads difficult to traverse. Washington, uneasy to get back too quickly to deliver a negative report to Governor Dinwiddie, decided to navigate through the woods by foot. After dangerous encounters with native tribes and deep snows, Washington reached the Allegheny with Gist early on the morning of Saturday, December 29.

Unfortunately, the river was not fully frozen as anticipated, and the rushing water contained large chunks of ice in vast quantities. To cross the river the pair built a raft of logs using just one hatchet—the only tool they possessed—laboring all day until they finally finished after sunset. Using setting poles, Washington and Gist tried to maneuver through the ice-clogged water but the raft jammed against an ice pack before they were halfway across. Washington attempted to thrust the ice away, but the strong current pushed the ice blocks leading him to fall into the icy waters. Washington pulled himself back on the raft with the aid of Gist.

Struggling against the ice and water, numb and exhausted, the two were unable to successfully reach either shore. They decided to abandon the raft and wade through the freezing water to a nearby island, where they spent a miserable night in the severe weather. By morning, the river was frozen solid, and the two battered survivors walked their way to the far shore and to safety.

Washington finally reached Williamsburg by mid-January 1754 and delivered the French reply as well as his journal of the expedition to Dinwiddie. While the journey itself did not produce the desired results, it stands as an important development in the early stages of George Washington's career and notoriety as a result of the eventual publication of his journal.