I

A Quest for Power and Glory

The Washington clan emerged from the mists of the Pennine Mountains in northern England as thirteenth-century sheep herders who settled along the rich, rolling meadows of Wessyngton, about 120 miles north of London near Chesterfield, in Derbyshire. Lingering Norman custom added the geographic family name of de Wessyngton (from Wessyngton) to distinguish residents—related or not—from those of nearby hamlets. By 1500, Lawrence de Wessington had become a successful wool merchant and moved to the market town of Northhampton, where he acquired considerable property, became mayor in 1532, and assimilated the local accent that corrupted his name to Washington. Three generations later, another Lawrence Washington advanced the family's social status by enrolling in Oxford, getting a master's degree, and entering the church in Essex. Before he could climb the next rung of the Church of England hierarchy, however, Oliver Cromwell's Puritan Revolution sent the Anglican clerical ladder crashing to the ground. Left in spiritual, emotional, and financial despair, Lawrence Washington died a drunk at fifty-four.

In 1657 his two sons, John and Lawrence Washington, sailed to Virginia to escape the harsh puritan regime at home and, in doing so, profit from the British craze for American sweet tobacco. Virginia's

John Rolfe had developed a curing method that cut spoilage on long Atlantic crossings and made tobacco so profitable that Virginians planted it in the streets to use for money.

John Washington's subsequent marriage into the Maryland gentry entailed a dowry of six hundred acres on Virginia's fertile Northern Neck, a two-hundred-mile-long peninsula stretching between the Potomac and Rappahanock rivers into Chesapeake Bay. Like other planters, he quickly learned that tobacco exhausted soil nutrients in about four years and forced farmers to acquire new, more fertile land or face bankruptcy. In partnership with a brother-in-law, Washington exploited a British law that awarded fifty acres of royal land, or "headrights," for each immigrant—each "head"—they brought to America. Owners of property used the tactic to acquire thousands of acres by importing indentured servants or any other souls they could buy, coax, con, or kidnap onto Virginia-bound ships. After collecting headrights, the wiliest landowners sold or traded surplus servants to buy more land and develop huge plantations. As unskilled slaves worked the land, indentured servants—some of them skilled craftsmen—built and maintained ornate mansions for the owners and an array of outbuildings for servants, slaves, livestock, and other purposes.

The result, after several generations, was a near-medieval society of self-sufficient fiefdoms. Lord Fairfax owned more than 1 million acres; his agent, Robert "King" Carter, more than 200,000; the Lee family, more than 150,000. Several dozen lesser families owned "middling" plantations of 5,000 to 10,000 acres, and, by 1668, George Washington's great-grandfather John Washington had joined this group, having accumulated more than 5,000 acres scattered along the Northern Neck.

As heirs divided their fathers' properties, successive generations inherited less. George Washington's father, Augustine—in the third generation of Washingtons in America—inherited only 1,100 acres in upper Westmoreland County, along the south bank of the Potomac, where it widens before emptying into Chesapeake Bay. His wife's dowry raised his holdings to 1,750 acres, but, like other tobacco growers, acquisition of additional, more fertile land became Gus Washington's lifelong obsession. Using self-taught skills as a surveyor

and a gift for shrewd trading, he accumulated scattered tracts totaling 8,000 acres in different parts of eastern Virginia.

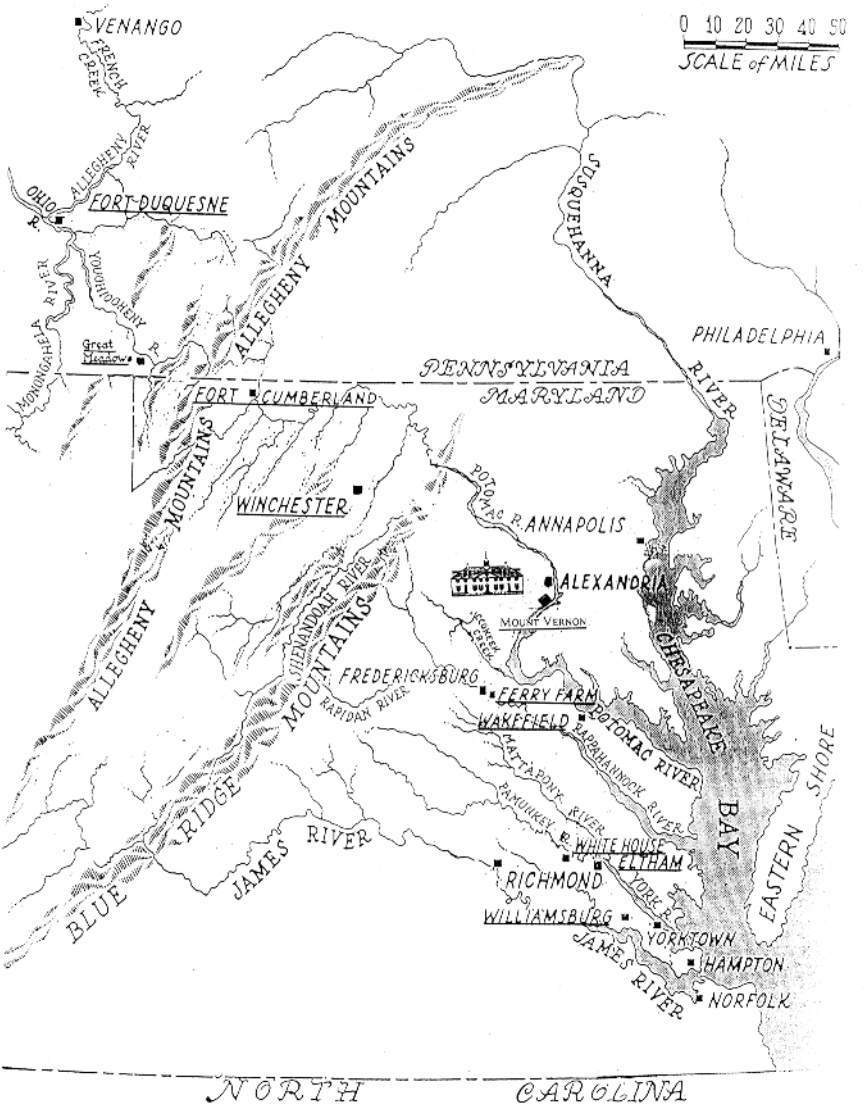
Augustine Washington's first wife died in 1729, leaving the twenty-nine-year-old Virginian with two sons—Lawrence, twelve, and Augustine ("Austin"), eleven—and a nine-year-old daughter. Widowered farmers could spare no time from their fields to care for young children, and, within a year of his wife's death, Gus Washington married Mary Ball, a twenty-one-year-old orphan.

Self-centered and demanding, Mary Washington lacked the cultural and social skills of her husband's first wife, and Gus sent his sons away to boarding school in England. On February 22, 1732, Mary Washington gave birth to the first of six children in seven years. She named her firstborn for her former guardian, lawyer George Eskridge. George Washington was born on a property later known as Wakefield, on Pope's Creek, less than a mile from where it empties into the Potomac, in Westmoreland County (see map on page 12).

From the first, George's father was absent most of the time, either working his fields or away for days on end searching for more land. Alone at home, Mary Washington turned more unpleasant with each pregnancy. George learned to tolerate his mother's ill temper silently, obediently, stoically. He would never express love for his mother; even fifty years later, he would grumble that his mother "still continues to give me pain."[1]

Washington's first home was typical of second-tier Virginia farms—a twenty-four-foot-square, one-story structure topped by a half-story attic. A narrow central hallway that served as a dining room bisected the ground floor. Two small rooms lay on either side, one of them a kitchen, the others bedrooms. Whitewashed, with only a framed mirror for wall decor, the hallway eating area offered little joy, and Mary Washington's immutable scowl discouraged the type of merriment that light many memories of childhood.

By 1735, when George turned three, two more babies had joined the tiny household, and Gus moved them to a larger, though no grander farmhouse on another Potomac property he owned farther upstream. By 1738, however, the family again outgrew its quarters. Twenty-year-old Lawrence had returned from England, and Mary had borne two more children and was pregnant with a sixth.



Washington's Virginia: The sites most closely associated with Washington in his native state were Mount Vernon, Ferry Farm (one of his childhood homes), Wakefield (his birthplace), White House (Martha Custis's home and site of her wedding to George), Eltham (homes of many Custis relatives), Williamsburg (colonial capital), Richmond (state capital), Winchester (site of three GW farms and seat of Frederick County, which GW represented as a burgess), Fort Cumberland (haven for GW troops after Braddock massacre), Great Meadows (site of GW humiliation at Fort Necessity), and Fort Du Quesne (target of British attacks and future site of Fort Pitt and Pittsburgh).

Gus left Lawrence to run the Potomac River property and moved six-year-old George and the rest of his family to a third, still larger farmhouse on "Ferry Farm," the site of a profitable iron-ore mine near the ferry at Fredericksburg.

Washington says nothing about ever having attended school. In fact, the sparsely populated South had few schools. The wealthy hired tutors for their youngest and sent their older boys to board with ministers until they were old enough to attend boarding academies in the more heavily populated North or in England. Like sons of "middling" planters, Washington acquired much of his basic reading, writing, and calculating skills by endless copying, motivated at times by an itinerant tutor's or his father's whipping stick.

When George turned eight, Britain went to war with Spain, and Lawrence joined the Virginia expeditionary force as a captain under Admiral Edward Vernon, who sent nine thousand men to slaughter on the beach at Cartagena. Lawrence Washington never left his ship, but he and other survivors returned as heroes, and he won appointment as Virginia's adjutant general. As tall as his father, Lawrence Washington's "grace, bearing and manners" transfixed young George. In a world of coarse, mud-stained linen and woolen homespuns—and nagging mothers—an officer's brilliant uniform and sparkling scabbard and sword seemed a certain escape to glory—and independence.

George elevated Lawrence to heroic heights, marching behind him, standing as straight and tall as he could in what he imagined was military attention. For Lawrence, the boy's attentions were endearing, often in sharp contrast to his stepmother's cold indignation at his intrusion into her crowded household. Lawrence drew closer to his wide-eyed little half brother, tutored him, and took him on hikes and horseback rides that converted ten-year-old George's affection into veneration and a resolve to become a soldier.

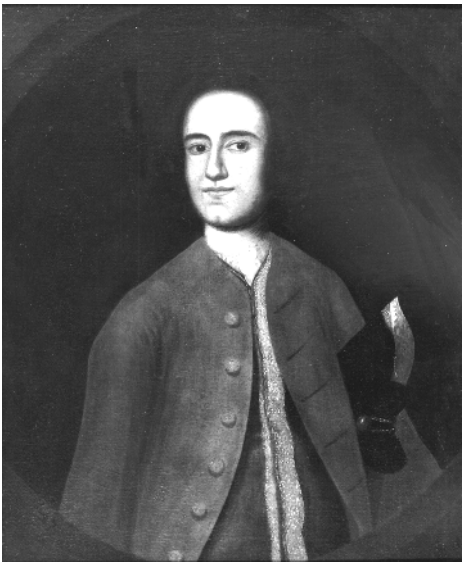
When George was eleven, Gus Washington died suddenly, ending all prospects for George's further education. As executor of his father's estate, Lawrence assumed a paternal role in his younger brother's upbringing, but had no resources for sending George to an academy. Their father's will left the 260-acre Ferry Farm and its ten slaves to George when he reached age twenty-one, with tenancy

granted to George's mother, Mary, until then. Lawrence inherited the 2,500-acre upcountry Potomac River farm and replaced the austere, one-story farmhouse with a proper Virginia manor of more than twice the size—almost thirteen hundred square feet on the ground floor, topped by a half-story attic and more bedrooms. Set on a bluff overlooking the Potomac River Valley, it was typically Virginian, with a rectangular ground floor bisected by a wide central passage that opened at both ends for breezes and light to flow through in summer and cool the interior. Two rooms on both sides of the hall served as parlors or bedrooms, while a staircase along one wall of the hall led to the attic. Lawrence Washington named the estate for his commander in the Cartagena campaign, Vice Admiral Edward Vernon.

Two months later, Lawrence married Ann Fairfax of the storied Fairfax family, whose titular head—Lord Fairfax—owned the 4.5-million-acre royal land grant stretching along Virginia's Northern Neck up and over the Blue Ridge Mountains. It was a marriage that elevated Lawrence, and with him young George, to the pinnacle of Virginia society. George was determined to remain there.

Ann was the daughter of William Fairfax, a cousin of Lord Fairfax and superintendent of His Lordship's vast Virginia properties. A colonel in the Virginia militia and a burgess, Colonel Fairfax lived four miles downriver from Mount Vernon, at "Belvoir," a palatial, two-story brick mansion on a bluff overlooking the Potomac.[2]

Enthralled by the luxurious elegance of Virginia's high society, George rode off with increasing frequency to Mount Vernon, where bright silks and gilded fixtures shone in sharp contrast with the dull gray whitewash of Ferry Farm—and where the solace of Lawrence and Ann were welcome relief from his mother's snarls. Eager for their love, yet unobtrusive and ingratiating, he grew ever closer to them as they lost their own newborns—a girl in 1744, a boy in 1747, and a girl in 1748. For Lawrence, George became the only "son" he would ever have, and he outfitted him with fashionable clothes and tutored him, while Ann taught him music and dance and drew him into the bosom of the Fairfax family at Belvoir. In contrast with the silence at Ferry Farm, music, song, and gaiety filled the air at Belvoir. Young and old danced to popular minuets and gavottes on festive



Lawrence Washington, George Washington's older half brother and surrogate father, died of tuberculosis at thirty-four and bequeathed his Mount Vernon property to George.

holiday evenings and staged droll plays of their own devising. Washington would always recall that "the happiest moments of my life were spent there. . . . I could not trace a room in the house that did not bring to mind the recollection of pleasing scenes." Reproducing those scenes in his own home would become one of his life's driving ambitions.[3]

Ann's father, Colonel Fairfax, gave George the run of his huge library and taught him about the art and fine furnishings that filled the mansion. Washington absorbed it all. When Fairfax's son George William returned from school in England, he and George began what would be a long-lasting friendship—despite a seven-year age gap.

By the time George Washington was fifteen, he had grown into a tall, handsome, pleasing young man with more than adequate manners in the salon and grace on the dance floor. At the hunt, his horsemanship amazed fellow riders as he left their mounts staggering in his dust. Like a centaur, at one with the horse, he guided the giant animal with imperceptible impulses from the sinews of his powerful legs; he had only to glance ahead to send his horse flying right, left—or over obstacles so tall that other horses veered to the side or staggered to a stop.

Like his father and forefathers, George dreamed of acquiring land and expanding the modest farm he had inherited into a vast estate like Mount Vernon or Belvoir. With help from a tutor, he mastered the mathematics of surveying and took up his father's surveying instruments to practice the craft on his family's farm. In October 1747 he coaxed a local surveyor to hire him as a helper and earned a tidy £3 2s., or about $235 in today's currency,[4] in a single month. Exulted, he recorded not only every inch of land he surveyed, but every penny he earned, spent, loaned, or borrowed—a habit he would retain the rest of his life.

When Washington turned sixteen, the sixth Lord Fairfax arrived at Belvoir from England, intent on having his hundreds of thousands of acres surveyed and divided into profitable leaseholds. Colonel Fairfax hired the region's most prominent surveyor to lead the expedition and sent his son George William, twenty-three, as agent for Lord Fairfax, with power of attorney to sell leaseholds. The younger Fairfax asked George to accompany him, and, on March 11, 1748, Washington set out on his first adventure into the wilderness. That evening he began a diary he would maintain for much of his life: "A Journal of my Journey over the Mountains" began "Fryday the 11th. of March 1747/1748." (The two dates refer to "New Style" [Gregorian calendar] and "Old Style" [Julian calendar] dating, both of which were then in use. Old-style dating set the beginning of the new year on March 25. England ended the confusion in 1752 by adopting the New Style Gregorian calendar.) His first day's entry, though, was less than revealing: "Began my Journey in Company with George Fairfax, Esqr.; we travell'd this day 40 Miles to Mr. George Neavels in Prince William County."[5]

. . . and the future father of his country fell asleep.

Four days later, he discovered the realities of frontier life. Instead of the hardworking, God-fearing pioneers he had expected, he found "a parcel of barbarians . . . an uncouth set of people . . . man, wife and children, like a parcel of dogs or cats, and happy's he that gets the berth nearest the fire."[6] After supper at one frontier cabin, he "went in to the Bed as they call'd it when to my Surprize I found it to be nothing but a Little Straw—Matted together without sheets or any thing else but only one Thread Bear [sic] blanket with double its

Weight of Vermin such as Lice Fleas &c. I made a Promise . . . from that time forward . . . to sleep in the Open Air before a fire as will Appear hereafter." After incessant scratching the next day, he and his friends reached an inn and "cleaned ourselves (to get Rid of the Game we had catched the Night before) & . . . had a good Dinner prepar'd for us Wine & Rum & a good Feather Bed with clean Sheets which was a very agreeable regale."[7]

Although Washington started his journey an immature, apprentice surveyor, he returned to Mount Vernon a professional, with a profound knowledge of the frontier, its people, and its vegetation—and a deft hand at cards acquired at the campfire. His journey also transformed him from an adolescent farm boy to a confident, self-sufficient frontiersman, as his diary reveals: "swum our Horses over [the creek] got over ourselves in a Canoe . . . shot two Wild Turkeys . . . a much more blostering night . . . had our Tent Carried Quite of[f] with the Wind and was obliged to Lie the Latter part of the Night without covering . . . Killed a Wild Turkey that weight 20 Pounds . . . Every[one] was his own Cook. Our Spits was Forked Sticks our Plates was a Large Chip as for Dishes we had none . . . travelld over Hills and Mountains . . . about 40 miles."

Along the way, too, his conversations with young Fairfax added gentlemanly polish to his speech and manners, and when he returned to the salons of the Northern Neck for the winter social season, he easily won over Virginia's aristocracy. At six feet, three inches, he towered over them, commanding attention by forcing them to look up at him. But what they saw was a gentle, endearing face that spoke softly and listened intently to what they had to say and won their favor.

In December 1748 Lawrence developed a serious respiratory illness. George was so devoted to Lawrence that he left Ferry Farm to winter at Mount Vernon and help care for his brother. He arrived in time to attend some of the holiday festivities at nearby Belvoir, using money from the sale of a small property he had inherited to buy a fashionable wardrobe that included nine shirts, seven waistcoats, and other accoutrements—and his first razor. He paid a dancing master for lessons before attending a series of Christmas balls, where he fell in love with two young ladies—his first conquest a "Low Land

Beauty" and his second, simply, "Very Agreeable." One of the two—or perhaps a third—inspired one of the future president's few ventures in poetry:

> Oh Ye Gods why should my Poor Resistless Heart
> Stand to oppose thy might and Power
> At Last surrender to cupids feather'd Dart
> and now lays Bleeding every Hour
> For her that's Pityless of my grief and Woes
> And will not on me Pity take.

He was fortunate to have learned surveying as a means of earning his living.

In the fall of 1749, Lord Fairfax appointed George to survey more properties on the great Fairfax land grant. Speed was essential for surveying the wilderness, where thick foliage blocked sight lines for all but a month each in spring and fall and deep snows barred access in winter. George left immediately for the Shenandoah Valley, and within a month he had run more than fifteen surveys. He was efficient, swift, and, above all, shrewd in his work, collecting a maximum of fees in the least amount of time by surveying contiguous properties when possible, to permit one survey on as many common boundaries as possible. In this way he could survey three, sometimes four or five properties a day. From 1749 to 1752 he conducted about a hundred surveys, working only a few months a year, and became financially self-sufficient.

He accumulated enough money and confidence in his knowledge of land and land values to buy three farms, two of which he leased to tenant farmers to create a steady flow of rental income to add to his surveying revenues. Within four years he accumulated seven income-producing farms totaling more than twenty-three hundred acres in the Shenandoah Valley near Winchester, thus matching the acreage if not the opulence of Lawrence's property at Mount Vernon.

When he returned from surveying in the spring of 1750, Lawrence was suffering from severe respiratory problems, and by the fall of 1751, doctors warned that another Virginia winter would kill him. They urged him to winter in Barbados, where the climate had become a haven for patients with lung disease. With Ann needed at home to care for her babies, George sacrificed his successful surveying busi-

ness and all but carried his ailing older brother onto a ship bound for the Caribbean and sailed to Barbados. Within days of their arrival, however, George developed a high fever, searing pains throughout his body, and the telltale red spots of smallpox on his skin. After three weeks of agony, he gradually recovered. Although pitlike scars would dot his face and entire body the rest of his life, he acquired a valuable immunity to a disease that claimed tens of thousands of lives in the New World each year.

As George regained his health, Lawrence grew worse and insisted that his younger brother return home. Lawrence wrote to Colonel Fairfax, asking that he see to George's future. Six months later, in June 1652, Lawrence returned to Virginia—to die. With no sons to inherit his estate, he left Mount Vernon to his two-year-old daughter and ultimately to her male issue. In the event she died childless, Mount Vernon would go to George—"in consideration of the Natural Love & affection which he hath and Doth bear unto his Loving Brother George Washington."[8]

George struggled to hide his grief over the loss of his brother and instinctively turned to Lawrence's father-in-law, Colonel Fairfax, who reached out to him generously. He asked Virginia governor Dinwiddie to appoint George to succeed Lawrence as the colony's adjutant general, with responsibility for recruiting and training the state's militia. The governor thought George too young, but divided the colony into four districts and appointed George adjutant for one of them with the rank of major. Fairfax gave him Lawrence's military training manuals—and his sword—and guided him into the Freemasons, whose members included Virginia's most powerful men. George also resumed surveying and assumed some of Lawrence's responsibilities as a director of the Ohio Company, a speculative land venture with the Lees and other prominent Virginians. Together with his brother Austin, Lawrence Washington had owned 6 percent of the two-hundred-thousand-acre Ohio Company land grant—twelve thousand acres, near the confluence of the Allegheny, Monongahela, and Ohio rivers.

Although Ohio Company lands were an English royal grant, France claimed sovereignty over the same territory, and in the summer of 1752, fifteen hundred French troops attacked a British trading

post in what would mark the beginning of a brutal seven-year war for global economic and military supremacy across four continents. Governor Dinwiddie prepared a warning to the French to leave Ohio or face military retaliation. With Colonel Fairfax's approval, Washington volunteered to carry the warning to the French, reasoning that he would be protecting the Fairfax and Washington investments in Ohio while gaining influence in Virginia's political establishment by winning the governor's patronage. Convinced that Washington's wilderness experiences made him the perfect (and perhaps *only*) candidate for the mission, Governor Dinwiddie sent twenty-one-year-old Major George Washington west on October 30, 1753, to deliver an ultimatum to the French.

Washington's first steps into public life proved a harrowing, two-and-a-half-month ordeal that took him through uncharted wilderness across northern Virginia into Pennsylvania to the southern shores of Lake Erie, where the French commander greeted him with a brusque rejection and ordered him to return to Virginia.

Over the next two days, Washington and his guide floated downstream, traveling nearly thirty miles until ice blocked their passage. "I took my necessary papers," Washington noted in his diary, "pull'd off my Cloths; tied My Self up in a Match Coat [a long cloak of fur skins used by Indians]; and with my Pack at my back, with my Papers & Provisions in it, & a Gun, set out [on foot] on Wednesday the 26th [December]."[9] After traveling eighteen miles, "a Party of French Indians . . . laid in wait for us, one of them fired . . . not 15 steps, but fortunately missed. . . . [We] walked all the remaining Part of the Night . . . that we might . . . be out of the reach of their Pursuit next Day. . . ."[10] Exhausted at sunrise, Washington nonetheless pushed on through the snow, reaching the west bank of the Allegheny River after dark that evening.[11]

"The Ice was driving in vast Quantities," Washington recalled. "There was no way for us to get over but upon a raft, which we set about with but one poor hatchet. We got it launch'd . . . & sett off; but before we got half over, we were jamed in the Ice in such a Manner, that we expected every Moment our Raft wou'd sink, & we perish; I put out my seting Pole to try to stop the Raft, that the Ice might pass by, when the Rapidity of the Stream through [sic] it with

so much Violence against the Pole, that it Jirk'd me into 10 Feet Water, but I fortunately saved my Self by catching hold of one of the Raft Logs."[12]

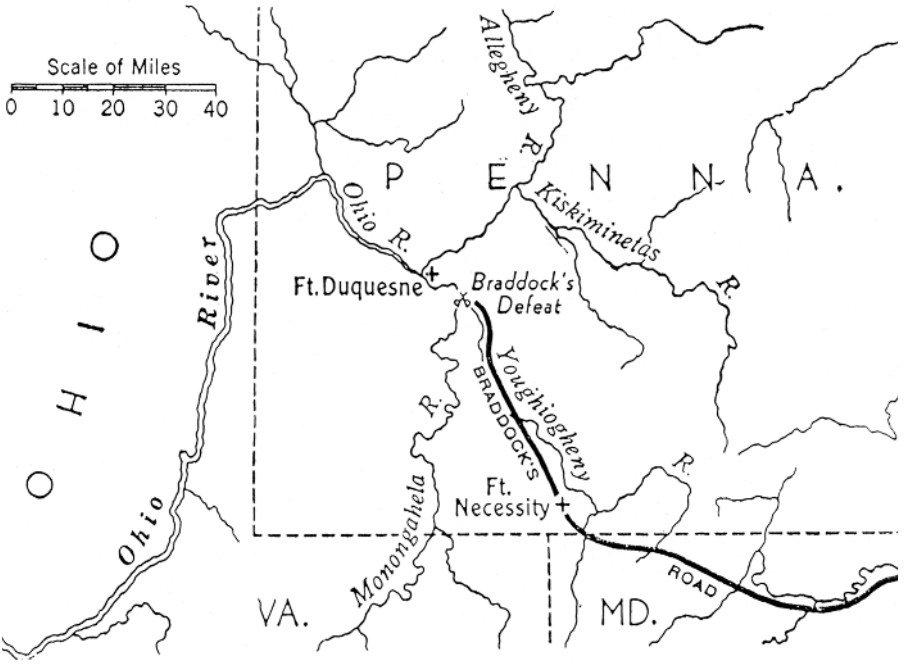
Far from both shores, and spinning uncontrollably downstream, Washington and his guide swam to an island, where they huddled together through the bitter night. "The cold was so severe," Washington lamented, "that Mr. Gist got all his fingers & some of his Toes Froze."[13] By morning the river froze enough for them to cross on foot and continue their trek home to Virginia. On January 11, 1754, Washington reached Belvoir, and, after resting a day, he went to Williamsburg to report to the governor, presenting a terse, self-effacing account of his mission. His guide, however, sent the governor a detailed description of Washington's resourcefulness and courage, for which Washington earned a promotion to lieutenant colonel and the full confidence of the governor.

As reports of further French incursions in the Ohio Valley reached Williamsburg, Governor Dinwiddie ordered each of his adjutants to recruit a company of a hundred volunteers to go "to the Fork of the Ohio . . . to finish and compleat . . . the Fort w'ch I expect is there already begun" and "to make prisoners of or kill and destroy . . . any Persons [who] obstruct the Works or interrupt our Settlem'ts."[14]

Washington managed to recruit only seventy-five men, but with French troops on the move, Dinwiddie ordered him "to march what Soldiers You have enlisted immediately to the Ohio." He promised to send additional recruits and aid. Dinwiddie signed his letter with a warm, personal wish: "Pray God preserve You & grant Success to our just Designs. I am most Sincerely Sr Yr Friend & hble Servt."[15]

In mid-May, Washington and his undermanned, underequipped force reached the Youghiogheny River, sixty miles south of the French fortification at the Fork of the Ohio (see map on page 12). He made camp at Great Meadows, an all-but-suicidal position he called "Fort Necessity," a hollow between two ridges, on the edge of a marsh (see maps on pages 12 and 22). On May 27, a scout reported fifty French troops only six miles away, and Washington set out to attack with forty troops and a contingent of friendly Indians.

"We were advanced pretty near to them . . . when they discovered us; whereupon I ordered my Company to fire . . . [we] received the



Sites of Washington's early battles, first, at Fort Necessity, where he surrendered to the French, then with Braddock's force, which the French all but annihilated in the Battle of the Wilderness, July 9, 1755.

whole Fire of the *French*, during the greatest Part of the Action, which only lasted a Quarter of an Hour, before the Enemy was routed. We killed . . . the Commander of the Party, as also nine others. . . . The Indians *scalped* the dead and took away Part of their Arms."[16]

He embellished his triumph for his adoring eighteen-year-old brother John Augustine. Without mentioning that he had lost his first tooth, he adopted a matter-of-fact tone that he thought appropriate for a hero-warrior:

D[ea]r John

> Since my last . . . 3 days agoe we had an engagement with the French that is, between a party of theirs & Ours; Most of our men were out upon other detachments, so that I had scarcely 40 men under my Command, and about 10 or a doz. Indians, nevertheless

> we obtained a most signal Victory. . . . We had but one man killed, 2 or 3 wounded and a great many more within an Inch of being shott.
>
> I fortunately escaped without a wound, tho' the right Wing where I stood was exposed to & received all the Enemy's fire and was the part where the man was killed & the rest wounded. I can with truth assure you, I heard Bulletts whistle and believe me there was something charming in the sound. [Often misinterpreted, "charming" here connotes bewitching or supernatural rather than pleasant.]
>
> We expect every Hour to be attacked by a superior Force, but . . . some reinforcements . . . will enable us to exert our Noble Courage with Spirit. I am Yr affe[ctionate] Bro[the]r.
>
> Geo. Washington[17]

Nor did he forget the adoring ladies at Belvoir's festive balls. Washington's letter to Sarah Carlyle provoked her tender concerns about "the many Risques you run" and fervent prayers that "your good Constitution and a kind protector will bring you out of them all as it has in the last Ingagement preserved you from harm."[18]

Washington's triumph earned him accolades: "Your victory over the French," wrote the master of his Masonic lodge, "gave me & your other friends such satisfaction as is only felt by those who have hearts full of Mutual affections & friendship. . . . I hope this is only a prelude to your future Conquests."[19]

Dinwiddie was ecstatic and sent Washington a medal and a generous portion "of my private Store [of] rum . . . Pray God preserve You in all Yr proceedings & grant Success to our Arms."[20]

Instead of retreating to the safety of Fort Cumberland to await reinforcements and supplies, Washington allowed bravado to govern his intellect by remaining at Fort Necessity—knowing that the French had eleven hundred men at Fort Du Quesne. "If the whole detach't of French behave with no more Resolution than this chosen Party did," he boasted to Dinwiddie, "I flatter myself we shall have no g't trouble in driving them to . . . Montreal."[21] Although his conceit knew no bounds, his knowledge of military fortifications did. He envisioned the ridges at Fort Necessity as protection for his troops instead of perches for attackers; he saw the marsh as a barrier to

attack from the rear rather than as a barrier to his own retreat; he called the gullies on the fourth side of the meadow "natural entrenchments" from which his men could fire at oncoming enemy troops rather than the muddy traps they would become. Washington pulled out his surveying instruments and ordered his men to build a circular stockade that proved attractive fencing, but useless as fortification.

At dawn on July 3, the crack of a musket shot pierced the chatter of heavy rain, followed by the cry of a wounded sentry. As echoes of shot and cry resounded across the encampment, Washington's troops grabbed their arms and raced to the trenches, only to stare into an opaque screen of rainfall. By morning's end, the deluge had engulfed the trenches and transformed the ill-chosen ground into a mire that sucked soldiers' legs so deep they could only extricate themselves by surrendering shoes and boots to the mud. As noon approached, Indian war whoops heralded the emergence of three columns of French troops on the ridges—"from every little rising, tree, stump, Stone and bush . . . [they] kept up a constant galding [galling] fire upon us."[22] They raked the entire camp with musket fire, slaughtering livestock as well as troops. By the end of the day the French had stripped the Virginians of sustenance and transport: every horse, cow, and other animal in camp lay dead, and what Washington called "the most tremendous rain that [could] be conceived" had soaked his men's cartridge boxes and powder and rendered them impotent. With 30 men dead and 70 wounded, Washington's force had shrunk to 165 mud-encrusted caricatures of soldiers, clinging to useless weapons without ammunition. Washington had little choice but to accept French demands that he surrender all his arms in exchange for safe passage home for him and his troops.

After his return east, Washington resigned and resumed life as a private citizen, smarting from his humiliation at Fort Necessity but still craving wealth, influence, and position among Virginia's landed aristocracy. He would acquire all three far sooner than he anticipated. Lawrence's infant daughter had died, and his widow, Ann, had remarried and was now living with her new husband in Westmoreland County. Although Ann had inherited lifetime tenancy rights to Mount Vernon, George would now inherit the property, and, with the house vacant and deteriorating, Ann and her new

husband sold George her life tenancy. On December 17, 1754, only two months shy of his twenty-third birthday, George Washington became master of Mount Vernon, a twenty-three-hundred-acre plantation with its lovely thirteen-hundred-square-foot house and five-bedroom attic—and contingent of slaves and servants.

When, however, a British convoy sailed into Chesapeake Bay with troops to drive the French from the Ohio Valley, Washington could not resist writing to British commanding general Edward Braddock, offering "to serve my King & Country . . . as a Volunteer."[23] Despite British contempt for Washington's military skills, they could not ignore his experience in the wilderness, and Braddock's chief aide replied: "The General . . . has orderd me to acquaint you that he will be very glad of your Company in his Family . . . [and] I shall think myself very happy to form an acquaintance with a person so universally esteem'd."[24]

From the first, however, everything that could go wrong for Braddock did. Maryland failed to send wagons to carry supplies; Pennsylvania failed to send horses; and Maryland, Pennsylvania, and Virginia all failed to raise their complements of troops to supplement British regulars. Even the Indians who had pledged to support the English failed to appear.

"I am almost in despair," Braddock lamented, "from the . . . sloth and ignorance . . . of the people and the disunion of the several Colonies."[25]

Nonetheless, he set off to war against the French and Indians in the West, and Washington pledged to follow as soon as he trained his brother Jack to oversee Mount Vernon and protect his private interests. He also took care to further his political ambitions by informing the state's most influential men of his bold resolve to serve Virginia.

"I am now preparing for, and shall in a few days sett off, to serve in the ensueing Campaigne," he wrote to one burgess. "If I can gain any credit . . . it must be from service to my Country with out fee or rewd, for I can truely say I have no expectation of either."[26] To another he penned: "I am just ready to embark a 2d time in the Service of my country, to merit whose approbation & esteem is the sole motive that enduces me to make this Campaign; for I can truly say

I have no views of profitting by it or rising in the Service I go as a Volunteer without Pay."[27] And to the House Speaker and treasurer he wrote disingenuously that "the sole motive wch envites me to the Field, is, the laudable desire of servg my Country; & not for the gratification of any ambitious or lucrative plans; this, I flatter myself, will manifestly appear by my going as a Volunteer, without expectation of reward, or prospect of attaining a Command. . . . I have been importuned to make this Campaigne by Gnl Braddock, conceiving, I suppose, that the small knowledge I have of the Country, Indians &ca was worthy of his notice and I might be useful to him in the progress of this Expedition."[28]

Before leaving, Washington asked his brother "to sound the pulses" of influential figures in Fairfax County to determine "if they were inclinable to promote my Interest." Although eager for a seat among the colony's political and social elite in the House of Burgesses, he did not want to risk the humiliation of failure. "If . . . you find them more inclind to favour some other," he told his brother, "I wd have the Affair entirely dropped."[29]

When Washington reached Braddock's camp at Fort Cumberland, Braddock's army set off for Great Meadows—the site of Washington's disastrous encounter with the French the previous year. Washington warned "the gen'l and principal Officers . . . to the mode of attack which, more than probably, he would experience from the *Canadian* French, and their Indians . . . but so prepossessed were they in favr. of *regularity* and *discipline* and in such absolute contempt were *these people held*, that the admonition was suggested in vain."[30]

On July 9, Braddock's troops crossed the Monongahela River (see maps on pages 12 and 22) and advanced on Fort Du Quesne, "confident they would never be attacked."[31] Suddenly, crackling shots and blood-curdling whoops engulfed the woods. A mob of half-naked French and Indians materialized among the trees above the British right column, fired a staccato of shots, then disappeared into the forest. Dozens of British troops fell dead and wounded. Before stunned survivors could re-form their lines to return fire, the French and Indians had vanished. The British fired at trees, only to hear war whoops build to a deafening crescendo at the rear. Before they could turn, another band of savages had emerged, fired, and vanished.

In and out they sprang, left, right, front, rear . . . appearing, disappearing, reappearing. They were everywhere, nowhere, never forming lines to fight by European rules of linear warfare.

Confusion and terror gripped the British ranks. Officers on horseback charged back and forth, their mounts shifting to the right, the left, whinnying in blood-curdling dissonance with Indian war cries. All-too-easy targets on the open ground, troops, officers, and horses toppled like toys. Conspicuously tall in his saddle, Washington felt musket balls slice through his hat and uniform as he tried in vain to rally troops; shots felled two of his horses but left him uninjured, and he remounted horses of dead riders. Braddock was less fortunate. A ball shattered his arm, smashed through his rib cage, and lodged in one of his lungs. One by one other officers fell onto the blood-soaked ground as they tried to rally troops. The slaughter lasted three hours; 977 of the 1,459 British troops lay dead or wounded; 26 of the 86 officers were killed; 37 others lay wounded. French casualties amounted to 17 dead or wounded; the Indians lost about 100 warriors.

As they ran out of ammunition, British survivors dropped their weapons, ran to the river, and thrashed their way to safety on the opposite bank. Instead of pursuing, the Indians remained on the battleground, hopping about the dead and wounded like vultures, plundering wagons and bodies, methodically scalping, ignoring shrieks of the wounded as they sliced and ripped hides off living heads as well as dead.[32]

"The dead, the dying, the groans, lamentation, and cryes . . . of the wounded for help," Washington recalled, "were enough to pierce the heart of adamant."[33]

British general Edward Braddock died four days later, near Great Meadows. Washington ordered the general's body buried in an unmarked grave in the middle of the road at the head of the column. Then, after a brief ceremony, the column began the march eastward, trampling over the grave to erase all traces that might allow Indians to find and desecrate the general's body.

Astonished that he had survived the slaughter, Washington managed to find a germ of humor to relieve his despair. "Dear Jack," he wrote his younger brother. "As I have heard . . . a circumstantial acct of my death and dying Speech, I take this early oppertunity of

contradicting the first and of assuring you that I have not as yet composed the latter. But by the all powerful dispensation of Providence, I have been protected beyond all human probability & expectation for I had 4 bullets through my Coat, and 2 Horses shot under me yet escaped unhurt, although death was leveling my companions on every side of me."[34]

On July 26, Washington rode into Mount Vernon and collapsed into his brother's arms. He sent servants with the joyful news of his arrival to the Fairfaxes at Belvoir and invited them to Mount Vernon the following day. The servants returned with letters from the entire family. "Your safe Return," wrote Colonel Fairfax, "gives an uncommon Joy to Us and will no Doubt be sympathiz'd by all true Lovers of Heroick Virtue. From our first inexpressible affecting Intelligence . . . of the total Defeat of our Forces . . . We have been in torturing Suspence, Each One for their best belovd. Now You are by a kind Providence preserv'd and return'd to Us, We can say the Catastrophy might have been worse."[35]

The colonel's daughter-in-law—George William Fairfax's wife, Sally—and the other young ladies at Belvoir decided that a bit of flirting might lift young Washington's spirits, and she wrote this note for inclusion with her father-in-law's letter:

> Dear Sir—After thanking Heaven for your safe return I must accuse you of great unkindness in refusing us the pleasure of seeing you this night I do assure you nothing but our being satisfied that our company would be disagreeable should prevent us from trying if our Legs would not carry us to Mount Virnon [sic] this Night but if you will not come to us tomorrow Morning very early we shall be at Mount Virnon.
>
> S. Fairfax
> Ann Spearing
> Elizth Dent[36]

After a week's rest, Washington regained his strength, but seethed at what he considered "our shameful defeat," which, he realized, stemmed from failure to adapt to unconventional, "Indian-style" warfare. It was clear to him that a handful of individuals firing from behind trees and rocks had a clear advantage in the wilderness over

large columns of troops firing from upright positions in traditional, European, linear-style warfare. He also learned the dangers of relying on even the most well-meaning promises of civilian political leaders. Washington reported Braddock's every blunder to Colonel Fairfax during the campaign, and Fairfax, in turn, had circulated Washington's analyses to every burgess and made him the only logical choice to command the Virginia regiment.

"Dear Washington," wrote a burgess from Williamsburg, "I most heartily congratulate your safe return from so many Dangers & Fatigues & by this Time I hope you are well enough recovered to give us the pleasure of seeing you here which all your Friends are extremely desirous of. In Conversation with the Govr . . . I said . . . I suppose his Honour would give the Command . . . to Col. Washington for I thought he deserved every thing his Country cou'd do for him. The Govr made a reply much in yr Favour."[37]

"I am just come from Wmsburgh," another burgess assured him, "every one of my acquaintance profess a fondness for your having the command."[38]

Virginia governor Dinwiddie agreed and, in early September 1755, appointed twenty-three-year-old George Washington "Colonel of the Virginia Regiment and Commander in Chief of all the Forces . . . for the Defence of H[is] Majesty's Colony; & for repellg the unjust & hostile Invasions of the Fr. & their Ind Allies—And You are hereby charg'd with full Power and Authority to act defensively & Offensively as You shall think for the good & Wellfare of the Service."[39]

Washington tried to convert the humiliation of Braddock's army into a personal triumph by imposing his authority with pomp and ceremony on a grand tour of regimental installations. "I think it my duty, Gentlemen," he warned his officers, "to give this friendly admonition . . . I am determined . . . to observe the strictest discipline . . . you may as certainly depend upon having the strictest justice administered to all: and that I shall make it the most agreeable part of my duty, to study merit, and reward the brave, and deserving. I assure you, Gentlemen, that partiality shall never biass my conduct."[40]

His declaration fell on deaf ears, however—indeed, on almost no ears. Only ten officers and twenty recruits appeared on the parade

Colonel George Washington, commander in chief of the Virginia regiment that defended his colony's wilderness areas west of the Blue Ridge Mountains against attacks by French and Indian forces. Portrait by Charles Willson Peale.

ground in Alexandria, where Washington was to review the Virginia regiment. It was evident that he was commander in chief of nothing and almost no one. Making matters worse, the ever-present friction between colonies all but sparked open warfare when Maryland militiamen seized Fort Cumberland, which Virginia had long claimed as its own. Recognizing the absurdity of intercolonial warfare in the face of common Indian and French enemies, Washington responded diplomatically and went to Boston to appeal to Massachusetts governor William Shirley, who was acting commander in chief of His Majesty's forces in America.

The trip worked wonders for Washington's career, extending his renown into the centers of power in the North and broadening his knowledge of political and social thinking in areas he had never before visited. He spent nearly five days in Philadelphia, meeting the city's notables, shopping for fashionable clothes at the city's fine clothiers and hatters, and attending society dinners and dances. From Philadelphia they rode to Perth Amboy, boarded the boat for Flat Bush, then New York City, where "the curiosity to see a person

so renowned for his bravery and miraculous escape at Braddock's defeat, procured for him much notice."[41] As in Philadelphia, he could not resist the city's fashionable clothing stores—or the social life. Introduced into the salons of the city's elite, he attended several gatherings, where he lost a few shillings at cards, but met the city's most eligible young ladies and escorted two of them to "entertaining exhibitions—twice."

After visits to New London and Newport, he reached Boston on February 27. The *Boston Gazette* characterized him in mixed terms as "a gentleman who has deservedly a high reputation for military skill and valor, though success has not always attended his undertakings."[42] Washington met with Shirley, then went to enjoy himself while awaiting the governor's decision on the territorial dispute. He lost £4 at cards and spent £200 for gloves, hats, and shirts at the tailor's and hatter's, carefully recording every pound, shilling, and ha'penny spent in his little diary. He attended receptions with the city's social and political celebrities, including one at Governor's House.

On March 5, 1756, Governor Shirley ordered Maryland to restore sovereignty over Fort Cumberland to Virginia, and he reasserted Washington's full authority as commander in chief in the West, thus ensuring the young Virginian's celebrity across the colonies.

With the French and Indians threatening to overrun her North American colonies, Britain declared war against France on May 17, 1756, and ordered an expeditionary force to sail to North America. In September, the French and Indians renewed their raids in the Shenandoah, and the *Virginia Gazette* blamed Washington. "When raw Novices . . . who have never been used to command . . . are honored with Commissions in the Army," the editorial asked, "how wretchedly helpless must a Nation be?"[43]

Infuriated by the attack, Washington threatened to resign. "I only want to make the country sensible how ardently I have studied to promote her cause," he protested to Dinwiddie, "and wish very sincerely my successor may fill my place more to their satisfaction. . . . I flatter myself the country will . . . be convinced I have no sinister views, no vain motives of commanding."[44] His threat to resign provoked the House of Burgesses to rally about him, and in the

end, even those who resented his swift accession to power recognized that he had made himself indispensable. He had mastered the art of acquiring power by feigning disdain for public life and threatening to shed powers he already held. The House of Burgesses—friends and enemies alike—pleaded with him to remain at his post. At Colonel Fairfax's urging, Washington's half brother Augustine—"Austin," a burgess—pleaded that "your country never stood more in need of yr assistance. . . . [If] you resign, what will be the consequences, all the officers . . . will follow your example, & the common soldiers will all desert, our Country then left defenceless to a barbarous & savage Enemy & . . . I am sensible you will be blamed by your Country more for that than every other action of yr life."[45]

Washington returned to Winchester at the end of May and found his troops deserting. He responded with uncharacteristic fury: "I have a gallows near forty foot high erected," he railed. "I am determined . . . to hang two or three on it, as an example to others."[46] On July 29 he sentenced fourteen deserters to death, five others to fifteen hundred lashes, and two to a thousand lashes. An unbearable silence gripped the town as the day of reckoning approached.

In the end, he couldn't go through with all of it. He pardoned all but two: one had deserted twice before, and the other he called "one of the greatest villains upon the continent." He ordered them hanged in particularly gruesome fashion—raised by the neck to strangle slowly and convulse instead of dropping to their deaths quickly. He ordered the lashings carried out. "Your honor will, I hope," he wrote to Governor Dinwiddie, who had sent him sixteen blank death warrants, "excuse my hanging instead of shooting them. It conveyed much more terror to others; and it was for example sake we did it."[47]

In early September, Washington's longtime benefactor Colonel Fairfax died. Washington attended the funeral at Belvoir, then returned to his post at Winchester, where he suffered an attack of "bloody flux," as dysentery was called. After writhing in pain for a week, he collapsed, and his physicians warned him to return home on indefinite leave to rest—or face death.