



" GEORGE WASHINGTON'S NEAREST APPROACH TO CHAUTAUQUA COUNTY "

* * * * *

As Prepared and Read by C. B. Sampson,
at the Annual Meeting of the Chautauqua County Historical
Society, held at Mayville, N. Y., October 24, 1932.

* * * * *

COPYRIGHT CHAUTAUQUA COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY WESTFIELD, NY 2012

GEORGE WASHINGTON'S NEAREST APPROACH TO CHAUTAUQUA COUNTY.

The object of this paper is to give a true relation of the cause, purpose, and result, of what is at present believed to have been George Washington's nearest approach to this territory now known as Chautauqua County.

The story of French discovery and colonization in America and the up-building and downfall of this dominion, is so interwoven with the early history of the Great American Republic and the life and labors of George Washington, that we tell it here in all the detail befitting one of the grandest and most romantic eras in all history.

* * * * *

Regardless of who discovered the Western Continent, the honor of making it effectively known to the inhabitants of the Old World unquestionably belongs to Columbus. As soon as the news of Columbus' first voyage became known in Europe, several nations became ardently desirous to share the advantages of this discovery. France eagerly entered upon the new field of adventure and England soon laid the foundation of her Western empire.

Five years after Columbus had opened a New World to European conquest and exploitation, the Venetian-reared navigator, John Cabot, sailed from Bristol bearing the patent given by Henry VII. of England granting him and his three sons permission to go in search of new Lands, and to conquer and settle them. Crossing the Atlantic, he explored the coast of Labrador, finding no inhabitants he went on shore according to the terms of his commission, planted the flag of England, and took possession in the name of the English King. Historians tell us this was the actual discovery of the North American Continent and on John Cabot's act in planting the standard of England on the Labrador shore rested the claim of Great Britain to America.

In the year 1524, John Verrazano, a Florentine in the French service, was dispatched by Francis I. on a voyage of discovery. Reaching the shores of North Carolina he coasted north, visited the harbors of New York and Newport and explored the mouth of the St. Lawrence, giving the name of New France to the whole country whose sea-coast he had traced. Upon the declaration of Verrazano rested the first claim of France to American dominion.

The early discovery of the St. Lawrence River by the adventurous navigator, Jacques (James) Cartier, was of vast importance to France. Not only did the river and the connecting Great Lakes form a navigable waterway to the very center of the great American Continent, but it also ranked high in strategic importance.

During the seventy-five years between 1525 and 1600 both England and France sent various men upon voyages of discovery, and several unsuccessful attempts were made at colonization in America. Early in the seventeenth century Samuel Champlain, one of the most eminent and soldierly men of his times, was commissioned by a company of French merchants to explore the Country of the St. Lawrence and establish a trading-post. The traders saw that a traffic in the furs which those regions so abundantly supplied, was a surer road to riches than rambling about in search of gold and diamonds.

Champlain sailed down the St. Lawrence and with remarkable prudence and good judgment selected the spot on which Quebec now stands as the site for a fort, and in 1608 the foundations of the city were laid, - this was just one year after the founding of Jamestown, Virginia, by the English. In 1620 --- the very year the Pilgrim Fathers landed on the Rock of Plymouth, --- Champlain began to build the strong fortress of St. Louis at Quebec.

When the heavy bastions of this fort appeared on the high cliffs above the town and river, the permanence of the French settlement in the Valley of the St. Lawrence was no longer doubtful.

Much of the success of the early colonies of France in North America must be attributed to Samuel Champlain. Yet, it was he who, in 1609, on the Lake that bears his name, was so imprudent as to join the Hurons in their war against the Iroquois, thereby kindling a fire of hatred towards the French, on the part of the Iroquois tribes, which the French nation was never able to overcome, and had abundant reason to regret. Had it not been for the Iroquois territory, which covered most of the present State of New York; the northern half of Pennsylvania; and the eastern half of Ohio, - the French would doubtless have preceded the English upon the Atlantic Plain. The presence of this Iroquois Wall caused the founders of New France to explore and settle along the line of least resistance, -- to the North and West.

During the entire existence of French occupation in America, the objects which inspired both lay and clerical powers were the extension of French influence and the Catholic religion, - as well as to induce the savages to patronize French commerce, - for, from first to last, the prosperity of New France was based on the fur trade. The trader of these times was not a letter writer or a diarist; hence we owe our intimate knowledge of New France, - particularly in the seventeenth century, - chiefly to the missionaries of the Society of Jesus - the Jesuits. The zealous Jesuits and the traders set out fearlessly from the older settlements of the St. Lawrence to explore the unknown West, and to convert and trade with the savages. They conducted their explorations with prodigious activity and numerous missions and trading-posts were soon established.

For many years lakes Erie and Ontario, and the portage at Niagara were a portion of a great French and Indian thoroughfare which crossed the divide south of Lake Erie and had, as its main objective, the settlements of the Ohio Valley, the Illinois Country and communication with Louisiana. It must be borne in mind that when the French spoke of the Ohio, they meant also the Alleghany and its tributaries, therefore French Creek, down which they voyaged from present Waterford, in Pennsylvania, and the Conewango, fed by Chautauqua Lake, brought the Ohio within a very few miles of Lake Erie.

France was not slow to occupy the vast country revealed to her by the activity of the Jesuits and traders. If the French colonies had been limited to the St. Lawrence and its tributaries, there would have been little danger of a conflict about territorial dominion, but in the latter half of the seventeenth century the French began to push their way westward and southward. Eventually permanent settlements were made by the French at Niagara, Detroit, Vincennes, on the Mississippi, and on the Gulf of Mexico, and all that vast territory from the Mississippi to the Alleghany mountains, bordered by the Great Lakes on the north, had been explored, and to a certain extent, occupied by them. It was apparent that they would shortly extend their occupancy to the most extreme tributaries of the Ohio which they claimed by virtue of prior discovery -- and thus attempt to confine the provinces of Great Britain to the country east of the Alleghanies.

It was impossible that a conflict between the advancing settlements of the two nations could be much longer averted. The year 1749 witnessed the beginning of serious difficulties. For some time the strolling traders of Virginia and Pennsylvania had frequented the Indian towns on the upper tributaries of the Ohio. Now the traders of Canada began to visit the same villages, and to compete with the English in the purchase of furs.

Virginia, under her ancient charters, claimed the whole country lying between her western border and the southern shores of Lake Erie. The French fur-gatherers in this district were regarded as intruders not to be tolerated. In order to prevent further encroachment, a number of prominent Virginians joined themselves together in a body called the Ohio Company, with a view to the immediate occupation of the disputed territory. Robert Dinwiddie, governor of the State, Lawrence and Augustus Washington, and Thomas Lee, - president of the Virginia Council, - were the leading members of the corporation. In March of 1749 the Company received from George II. an extensive land grant covering a tract of five hundred thousand acres, to be located on the northern bank of the Ohio. The conditions of the grant were, that the lands should be held free from rent for ten years, and that within seven years a colony of one hundred families should be established in the district. Thus, while the English, by their fur-traders and agents, and now by the active cooperation of the Virginia colonists under the auspices of this Company, sought to gain a permanent occupancy of the Ohio Valley, - the French began actively to assert their claims to the same region.

The Governor-General of Canada, the Marquis de la Galissoniere, sent Celoron down the Alleghany and Ohio Rivers to take possession of the country in the name of the King of France. Celoron's command consisted of about three hundred men. The object of this expedition was to show both the British and the Indians that the region of the Ohio River, --- and by the Ohio was also meant the Alleghany and its tributaries, --- belonged to France. England and France now being at peace, warlike methods might not be used; the traders from Virginia or Pennsylvania might not be captured or killed; they could just be told to get out; and the whole vast watershed of the Ohio was to be claimed anew for France by the singularly peaceful method of burying, at convenient spots, leaden plates inscribed with the proclamation that France, by means of this expedition and bits of

buried lead, had re-possessed herself of her own.

Provided with a number of these leaden plates, Celoron's expedition left La Chine, above Montreal, in June 1749, and ascending the St. Lawrence to Lake Ontario, they coasted along its shore until they reached Fort Niagara. Pursuing their course they arrived at a point on the southern shore of Lake Erie, now known as Barcelona, where they disembarked. By way of Chautauqua Creek and a road cleared laboriously by Celoron's men, a portage was made to the head of Chautauqua Lake. Passing down the Lake, the Chadakoin and Conewango, they came to the Alleghany River near the point now occupied by the town of Warren, Pennsylvania. The first of the leaden plates was buried at this point. Celoron made his way down the Alleghany and the Ohio as far as the mouth of the Great Miami. Six of the lead plates were buried. The plates were about eleven inches long, seven and one-half inches wide, and one-eighth inch thick. The inscriptions were identical except as to the place and date of burial. Two of the plates have been found. In reality, Celoron's expedition accomplished nothing substantial.

This expedition was followed by still more vigorous movements on the part of the French, who began to carry out their plan of a chain of forts to connect their more recent settlements on the Mississippi and Ohio with their earlier ones on the St. Lawrence. In 1753 the Governor-General of Canada, the Marquis Duquesne, sent an expedition in defense and occupation of the Lakes and the Ohio Valley, placing in command the Chevalier Marin. A much larger detachment followed later under Michael Jean Hughes Pean, who was second in command. The purpose of the expedition was to cross from Lake Erie to the headwaters of the Ohio, build forts and storehouses, gain the friendship of the native tribes, and warn off, or arrest, any English traders who might be encountered.

Duquesne had proposed that a fort be built at the Chautauqua Portage, (Barcelona), and in April a fort was begun at this place, but Marin, arriving, after "a warm debate", the engineer LeMercier was sent further along the shore in quest of a better place. In three days he returned, reporting the discovery of what Duquesne later called, "the finest spot in nature", the harbor of Presque Isle, --- the present site of the city of Erie.

Here, on the high banks overlooking the Lake, between the foot of the present Parade Street and the outlet of Mill Creek, was built a fort of chestnut logs. This stronghold was termed Presque Isle. Before it was finished, LeMercier had explored the shortest route to a navigable source of the Ohio, which he believed he had found on Le Boeuf Creek, (French Creek), at the site of the present town of Waterford, Pennsylvania. Here, fifteen miles inland from Lake Erie, a second log fort was built, and at the junction of LeBoeuf Creek and the Alleghany River, - which spot the French called Anjou -- later known as Old Venango, and now as Franklin, Pennsylvania, -- a third fort was proposed.

When, in the Spring of 1753, the news was borne to the Council Fires on the Ohio that Duquesne had despatched a company of twelve hundred men to descend the Alleghany and colonize the country, the jealousy of the Indians was kindled into open resistance, a great council was held and the chief of the Indian confederacy went to Presque Isle to remonstrate with the French commandant against a further invasion of the Indian Country. Received with derision and contempt, the insulted chief returned to his nation to lift the hatchet against the enemies of his people.

Virginia was now thoroughly aroused. But, before proceeding to actual hostilities, Governor Dinwiddie determined to try the effect of a final remonstrance with the French.

A paper was accordingly drawn up, setting forth the nature and the extent of the English claim to the Valley of the Ohio, and solemnly warning the authorities of France against further intrusion in that region. It was necessary that this paper should be carried to General St. Pierre, now stationed at Presque Isle as commander of the French forts in the West. Who should be chosen to bear the important parchment to its far-off destination? It was the most serious mission ever yet undertaken in America.

About a year previous to this, a young surveyor named George Washington had stopped at Williamsburg and paid his respects to Governor Dinwiddie, with whom he later dined. Twenty years of age,, straight as an arrow, unusually well built, six feet and two inches in height, blue-eyed, and with a healthy, ruddy complexion, Washington had deeply impressed the Governor with his bearing and character. Summoning Washington from his home on the Potomac, Governor Dinwiddie commissioned him as ambassador, and committed to him the message which was to be borne from Williamsburg on the York River, through four hundred miles of untrodden wilderness, to Presque Isle on the shore of Lake Erie.

Washington's knowledge of the rugged, hazardous life of the pioneers beyond the settlements, and the extreme hardships and dangers to be met and combated in transportation, afoot, on horseback, or by canoe, had fitted him extremely well for this duty. It was a mission of greatest difficulty and danger, and of utmost importance, not only that the letter be gotten to the French Commandant, but that a full report of the situation, the location of the forts, etc., be brought back.

The alacrity with which the boy responded is shown in his report on his return. He had set out on the same day he received the commission, -- the last day of October, 1753. Going from Williamsburg to Fredericksburg, he engaged Jacob Van Braam as his French interpreter; he then went to Alexandria, where he bought the necessary supplies; and then to Winchester, where he got his horses and baggage. Arriving fourteen days later at Wills Creek, he engaged Christopher Gist as guide; two white servants and two Indian traders, to go with him.

With snow four inches deep, they left Wills Creek, which was the last important tributary of the Potomac on the north, and proceeded through the mountains to the headwaters of the Youghiogheny, and thence along that stream to the present site of Pittsburgh. The immense importance of this place, lying at the confluence of the two great tributaries of the Ohio, and commanding them both, was at once perceived by the young ambassador, who noted the spot as the site of a fortress.

Crossing the Alleghany, they proceeded along the north bank of the Ohio twenty miles to Logstown -- (now Legionville, Pennsylvania,) arriving there at sunset, the twenty-fifth day after leaving Williamsburg. Here, the next day, a council was held at the Long House with Half-King, a Seneca chief, so known because he owed allegiance to the Six Nations and could be overruled by them. Washington found the Half-King very bitter against the French, charging them with the violation of a solemn treaty and also with receiving him rudely when he visited them. At this council the Indians renewed their pledges of friendship and fidelity to the English.

Early in December, Washington and his party, accompanied by three Indian chiefs, moved northward to the French post at Venango, - now known as Franklin, Pennsylvania.

The three chiefs accompanied Washington from Logstown as they had been directed by Governor Dinwiddie, as well as for the purpose of returning to the French Commander the wampum war-belts they had received from him. This implied that they wished to dissolve all friendly relations with the French. Venango was an old Indian town, situated at the junction of French Creek and the Alleghany, about sixty miles north from Logstown. Here, Washington's party found the French colors hoisted at a house from which the French had driven John Frazier, an English trader. Washington immediately went to this house to inquire where the commander resided and was met by Captain Joncaire, who advised him that, while he was in command on the Ohio, there was a general at Fort Le Boeuf, about sixty miles up French Creek, to whom Dinwiddie's message should be presented.

Joncaire invited Washington to supper. The French dosed themselves pretty plentifully with wine, which soon banished the restraint which at first appeared in their conversation, and gave a license to their tongues which freely revealed their sentiments, telling Washington it was their absolute design to take possession of the Ohio, and they would do it.

Here, Washington had trouble with his Indians. When Joncaire found that Half-King was there, he sent for him and professed indignation at not having been advised of his arrival, but expressed pleasure at seeing him. The Frenchman plied the Indians with cheap presents and much liquor, and it required all the astuteness of Washington and Gist together to get the Indians away from Joncaire.

Leaving Venango, Washington's party traveled along French Creek, through what are now Meadville and Cambridge Springs, to Fort Le Boeuf - now Waterfore, Pennsylvania.

This was the last stage of the journey. It was still fifteen miles to Presque Isle, but St. Pierre, the French commander, had come down from that place to superintend the fortifications at Fort Le Boeuf. Here, the young Virginian delivered the letter from Governor Dinwiddie, insisting that the French leave the entire Area, and received a letter in which the French commander, St. Pierre, replied that he would forward it to the Marquis Duquesne, Governor-General of Canada, but that, in the meantime, his orders were to hold possession of the country, and this he should do to the best of his ability.

While the French were framing their answer, Washington busily studied their fort and had his men count the canoes being made ready for the following Spring's advance to the forks of the Ohio. He attended to every phase of his business with utmost care and then prepared to return.

But St. Pierre was crafty. He was excessively courteous while, as Washington wrote, he was "exerting every artifice which he could invent to set our own Indians at variance with us to prevent their going until after our departure. Presents, rewards, every strategem which the most fruitful brain could invent, was practiced, to win the Half-King to their interest." No wonder the daring Virginian later said that never in his life had he suffered so much anxiety.

At last patience ceased to be a virtue. Washington protested to St. Pierre against this double dealing. Night came and still the Indians delayed, for they had been promised a present of guns if they would do so. The next day, the influence of presents having passed, fire-water was resorted to, and Washington later wrote that he had no doubt that this would have succeeded if he had not urged and insisted with the Half-King, until the old chief finally kept his agreement.

The return journey was also full of hardship and danger. The French followed them down French Creek, still trying to entice the Indians away from them, and Gist writes that, "we had the pleasure of seeing the French overset, and the brandy and wine floating in the creek."

Eager to report promptly to Governor Dinwiddie, Washington and Gist, dressed as Indians, marched on afoot, leaving the remainder of the party to follow. On Saturday, December 29th they came to the Alleghany River. Expecting to find the river frozen over, they were disappointed. Ice extended out fifty yards from either shore, but in mid-stream was a moving mass of broken cakes. There was no way of crossing but on a raft, which was laboriously constructed with a hatchet, requiring a whole day's work. They set off, but before they were half way over, Washington was thrown from the raft into ten feet of water. Fortunately, he saved himself by catching hold of one of the raft logs. They finally reached an island in mid-stream where they camped. The night was so cold that the next morning the channel was frozen and they crossed safely on the ice.

Plunging again into the forest; struggling through interminable snows; sleeping with frozen clothes, on a bed of pine brush; guided by day by a pocket compass, and at night by the North Star -- seen at intervals through the leafless trees, they finally reached Gist's Settlement, where Washington bought a horse and saddle, and proceeded to Williamsburg, arriving there on January 16th, having been absent about two and one-half months, during which time he had traveled more than a thousand miles, most of the way through an unbroken wilderness.

Washington immediately reported to Governor Dinwiddie, presenting the letter which he had brought from St. Pierre, and gave an account containing the most remarkable occurrences which happened on his journey. The Governor was so pleased with Washington's recital of his trip that he asked for a written report, which he had printed.

Thus was accomplished the first of many public services which won for George Washington the love of the American people, and the enduring title, "The Father of His Country."

France and England had been rivals and enemies for centuries. A conflict between their colonies in America was inevitable. The printed account of Washington's journey, -- extensively read in both England and her American Colonies, -- and St. Pierre's impertinent reply to Governor Dinwiddie's message, were decidedly instrumental in precipitating the terrible French and Indian War. This war was a genuine colonial struggle which not only resulted in the conquest of Canada, but changed the political aspect of the continent and prepared the way for the Revolution and the Independence of the British colonies in America.

* * * * *

And so, it would seem that George Washington's nearest approach to Chautauqua County, was during those anxious and trying days which he spent at Fort Le Boeuf, -- now the little town of Waterford, Pennsylvania, only eighteen miles from the southwestern corner of our County.

