

Just as Capt. Philippe-Thomas de Joncaire, the French commander at Venango, sat down to dinner on the evening of December 4, 1753, word was brought to him that a party of Englishmen had arrived. The leader was demanding to see the commandant.

What, Captain Joncaire might have wondered, could have fetched these idiots over the mountains in the dead of winter? Into the heart of hostile country, to boot, for France and England were on terms little short of war on the Ohio River. Curious, perhaps, to learn what could be back of such insanity, he ordered the leader of the party brought in to him.

The leader turned out to be a powerfully-built young man, well over six feet tall, and not much more than twenty years of age. He introduced himself as Maj. George Washington, of the Virginia Militia. He was accompanied by half a dozen white men: Christopher Gist, a famous scout, who had guided the party to Venango; Jacob van Braam, a Dutchman who knew some French, and had come along as interpreter; and four frontiersmen, two of whom were well-known fur traders. With him, also, was a band of Indians, led by the famous Seneca chief, Half King.

After presenting himself and his companions, young Washington asked where he could find the commander of the French forces on the Ohio. He carried an important letter for the commander from His Excellency, Robert Dinwiddie, Governor of the Province of Virginia.

As Captain Joncaire sized up Governor Dinwiddie's envoy, standing stiffly in his blue-and-buff regimentals, he must have wondered at the English governor's having sent so youthful a man on such an important mission. For who could doubt that a message brought more than three hundred miles, through the most difficult kind of country, contained something of great weight? Joncaire, indeed, could almost guess what it was. A protest, no doubt, against the presence of himself and all other Frenchmen on the Beautiful River;<sup>1</sup> for the English had somehow got hold of the absurd idea that the whole Ohio country belonged exclusively to them. Possibly it was something stronger than a protest: a warning, or even a threat of force.

He, Joncaire, was not the proper person, at any rate, to accept such a letter. He explained that the ranking officer in those parts was Captain Legardeur de Saint-Pierre. The major would have to take his letter to M. Saint-Pierre, whose headquarters were at Fort Le Boeuf, almost a hundred miles upriver. And now, wouldn't the major and his friends join him and his fellow officers at dinner—such as it was?

Captain Joncaire had little, indeed, to offer his unexpected guests. He had been on short rations for a long time, subsisting on little else than Indian corn and meat without salt. And the brandy supply was so low at Venango that the neighborhood Indians were boiling the old casks and inhaling the vapor. But of wine, at least, there seems to have been an ample supply; and a few bottles served to break down the reserve that naturally marked the opening exchanges of two such essentially antagonistic parties. In his journal of the expedition, Washington wrote:

The wine, as they dosed themselves plentifully with it, soon banished the restraint which at first appeared in their conversation; and gave a license to their tongues to reveal their sentiments more freely.

It may be doubted, however, that so experienced a backwoods diplomat as Captain Joncaire said any more than he intended to the purposeful young Virginian. The Joncaires—father and three

<sup>1</sup> La Belle Rivière was the usual French name for the Ohio, including the Allegheny.

sons—were all famous for their skill in dealing with the Indians; and Washington’s host at the moment had scored some especially fine successes for the French side. Just that same year, indeed, he had won over the powerful Miami—a great blow to the English in the contest for Indian allies. Wine or no wine, therefore, it is highly unlikely that Captain Joncaire failed to say precisely what he wished to say—and with calculated effect on his Indian listeners—when he genially assured Washington:

“It is our absolute design to take possession of the Ohio—and, by God, we will do it!”

He even explained just how they would do it. The English, he said, were too slow-moving for the French. They could never agree among themselves on anything, every colony at odds with all the others. They had twice as many men in the field as the French, to be sure; but the French, with only one master to obey, could act swiftly, hit hard.

The Ohio country, Joncaire informed his guests over the *vin ordinaire*, was French by right of discovery and occupation. Two thousand Frenchmen—troops with artillery and fort-building equipment—had entered the country the previous summer and would return in the spring. The Beautiful River was French, and it was going to remain French.

These forthright remarks aside, Captain Joncaire treated his visitors “with the greatest complaisance.” But his Gallic courtesy did not deter him from trying hard to subvert Washington’s Indians. Half King, a staunch friend of the English, had come to Venango for the express purpose of returning a French “speech belt”—sign of an open diplomatic break. Joncaire skillfully evaded accepting it. He went to work on Half King and his followers with gifts, liquor, and persuasive promises. And such was his skill that, when Washington was ready to leave Venango, the Indians were not at all sure they wanted to go with him.

It was eleven o’clock before a start was finally made—very late for wilderness travelers, who were usually on the road by three in the morning. And then it was with an unwelcome escort of four French Indians headed by a mysterious M. La Force. Four days later, having been hampered all the way by snow, rain, and heavy going through swamps and mud, the little party rode wearily into the headquarters of the French forces on the Ohio.

Fort Le Boeuf gave Washington his first glimpse of just how serious the French were about seizing and holding the Ohio country. Venango, after all, had been nothing but a stockaded cabin—the former house of John Fraser, a Scotch gunsmith and trader. Joncaire, a friend of Fraser’s had good-naturedly ousted him, run up the French flag, and moved in with a few half-starved troops. Washington had not been much impressed by the place.

But Le Boeuf was something quite different. Here was a proper fort, designed by military engineers, built of stout materials, and—the ultimate symbol of territorial possession in the wilderness—armed with brass cannon. It was hard, tangible evidence of military occupation; and Washington made some notes that—who could tell?—might have a future usefulness:

Four houses compose the sides. The bastions are made of piles driven into the ground, standing more than 12 feet above it, and sharp at the top: with portholes cut for cannon and loopholes for small arms to fire through. There are eight 6-pound pieces mounted, two in each bastion; and one piece of 4-pound before the gate. In the bastions are the guardhouse, chapel, doctor’s lodging, and the commandant’s private store: around which are laid platforms for the cannon and men to stand on.

In a clearing around the stockade huddled some log barracks, stables, and the usual dog-ridden Indian village of bark huts. On every side rose the forest—dark, restless, interminable, silently awaiting the turn of great events.

The weary Virginians were cordially welcomed to Fort Le Boeuf by its commander. With a faint hint of youthful condescension, Washington described him as “an elderly gentleman with much the air of a soldier.” Legardeur de Saint-Pierre was that—and much more. An able, resourceful, courageous man, he had traveled far and suffered much in the service of France. Only the previous year he had wintered on the Canadian prairie, a good two thousand miles from Montreal. In search of the Western Sea, he had ascended the Assiniboine and sent his canoes up the Saskatchewan to within sight of the Rockies. And now, having just completed a hard, fast journey from Montreal, it was Legardeur de Saint-Pierre who faced George Washington

in perhaps the most fateful confrontation yet to take place on the North American continent.

Washington was twenty-one years old at this time, full of personal ambition, determination, and lofty moral sentiments. That he was a youth of unusual qualities must have been plain to Saint-Pierre; but he was a youth, nevertheless, and a rather emotional and unpredictable one, at that. Saint-Pierre might have forgiven a dry comment on British effrontery in sending so raw and inexperienced an envoy to treat with His Majesty Louis XV's Commandant on the Ohio. But if he had any reservations, he was too much “the elderly gentleman” to express them for history.

The meeting was conducted in an atmosphere of impeccable courtesy. Washington presented his credentials and was graciously received. After the preliminary amenities, a translator was sent for. Saint-Pierre then asked to be excused, and retired with his interpreter to study Governor Dinwiddie's letter.

It is not recorded what his private reactions to this document were, but they might well have been apoplectic. For this, word for word, is what his translator spelled out to him:

Sir:

The lands upon the Ohio in the western parts of the colony of Virginia are so notoriously known to be the property of the Crown of Great Britain that it is a matter of equal concern and surprise to me to hear that a body of French forces are erecting a fortress and making settlements upon that river in H.M.'s Dominions . . .

If these facts are true and you shall think fit to justify your proceedings, I must desire you to acquaint me by whose authority and instructions you have lately marched from Canada with an armed force and invaded the King of Great Britain's territories . . . that according to the purport and resolution of your answer I may act agreeably to the commission I am honored with from the King my Master . . .

Following these vague threats, Governor Dinwiddie came to the point with a direct demand for the “peaceful departure” of all the French from the Ohio. Legardeur de Saint-Pierre listened impassively; and as he listened, the cold war that had been waged between the empires of France and Great Britain ever

since the sham treaty of Aix-la-Chapelle, suddenly reached the ignition point. This was no longer the pseudo-friendly language of diplomacy. This was nothing less than a rude and insolent ultimatum.