



The Collision of Worlds

1700–1755

IN THE FIRST HALF OF THE EIGHTEENTH CENTURY THE DISPARATE worlds of French Canada, the British colonies of Virginia and Pennsylvania, and the Indian villages of the Ohio Valley were drawn into closer contact and eventually dramatic conflict. The conflict, now most commonly termed by historians the Seven Years' War, would devastate Canada, the Ohio Valley, and the backcountry of Virginia and Pennsylvania. This struggle was neither planned nor desired by any of the participants. It grew out of the developing forces of trade and settlement, which pulled all sides together.

Between 1700 and 1755 settlers poured into the region from all directions: Indians and European fur traders migrated into the Ohio Valley; German, Scottish, Irish, and English planters, squatters, farmers, and merchants moved into the backcountry. As these groups migrated they drew larger worlds together. Settlers moving into the backcountry of Virginia and Pennsylvania extended the political boundaries of the colonies: counties were organized, courts established, churches built. However, the settlers did not always fully replicate the political or social structures of the east, and some links remained fragile. The expansion

of the colonies into the backcountry also encouraged settlers to begin to eye land further west across the Appalachians, in the upper Ohio Valley. Some settlers even braved the isolation and threat of Indian attack to cross the Appalachians and establish settlements in the west.¹

Indians, seeking access to European trade goods, encouraged fur traders to come into the region and drew the French and British into increasing rivalry. As competition for the fur trade increased, so did the interest of the imperial governments in Whitehall and Versailles. When fur traders returned east with reports of the fertility of the upper Ohio Valley, increasing numbers of Anglo-American settlers, and more importantly land speculators, began to take an interest in the region. In 1700 the upper Ohio Valley had been a region of little interest to most settlers and imperialists alike. By 1755 it was viewed as a vital region for both the French and the British Empires. Steadily drawn into the region, by 1755 both Britain and France were pulled into a bloody war, a war in which the backcountry of Virginia and Pennsylvania would be a major theater.²

Backcountry Society

Settlers first arrived in what would become the backcountry in the 1720s and 1730s. Over the following years the population grew steadily. As migrants moved into the region they established community and social ties. While many settlers who moved west may have wanted to replicate eastern society, they failed to do so. The social structure of the backcountry remained rather distinct from that of the more established eastern societies. In particular, backcountry society lacked a clearly defined elite. That does not mean, however, that some settlers did not view themselves as members of an elite or believe that they should be part of that elite.

Virginia society east of the Blue Ridge revolved around the world of tobacco, and it was the great planter families, such as the Byrds, Carters, and Lees, who held sway in the Old Dominion.³ Almost from the inception of Virginia the great tobacco planters had discovered that the ownership of land was as much a route to wealth as was the production of tobacco. By the early eighteenth century, as speculation east of the Appalachian Mountains became more difficult, these wealthy planters began to look to the west for new opportunities. By 1740 members of the eastern elite, including the powerful Fairfax family, had acquired grants to 470,000 acres in the lower Shenandoah Valley, in what would become

Frederick County. Further south, in what would become Augusta County, other settlers received equally large grants of land. Most notably, William Beverley received 118,491 acres, and Benjamin Borden received 92,100 acres.⁴

The process of making such large grants of land met only limited opposition. The main reason for this was that the process appeared to facilitate the settlement of the Shenandoah Valley. The recipients of these land grants encouraged settlers to buy their lands, in particular inviting migration from Pennsylvania and New Jersey. These settlers found purchasing land directly from Fairfax, Beverley, or Borden much easier than surveying and patenting for themselves. As Governor Robert Dinwiddie wrote, the whole process allowed the “poor People that come from other Colonies to the North . . . who cannot bear the Expence of coming down . . . [to Williamsburg] to make their Entries, & other Necessaries in taking up Lands.”⁵ However, while land speculation formed the basis of the wealth of many Virginians, by the 1750s few of the eastern elite had ventured west of the Appalachians, and they were not the men who dominated backcountry society.

Pennsylvania society was subtly different. While many Pennsylvania fortunes, most notably that of James Logan, owed much to land speculation, the powerful colonial elite was formed not of tobacco planters but of merchants, often Quakers, who traded out of Philadelphia. In the mid-eighteenth century, Pennsylvania was a highly commercial society dependent upon overseas trade, particularly in grain, which was exported both to the West Indies and to southern Europe. Philadelphia had emerged as a major east coast entrepôt, with trading connections throughout the Atlantic world. Merchant families, such as the Pembertons, Allens, and Norrises, dominated the political life of the colony. This mercantile aspect of Pennsylvania society was reflected in the colony’s growing interest in the west. Whereas Virginia land speculators eyed western lands greedily, Pennsylvania traders viewed the European and Indian inhabitants of the region as a new market that they could tap. However, as in Virginia, while merchants and traders may have had an interest in the backcountry and the Ohio Valley, few Pennsylvania grandees ever settled in the region.⁶

Backcountry society in both Virginia and Pennsylvania was accordingly not dominated by eastern elites but rather by settlers of middling fortunes. While many historians have portrayed the backcountry as a

region of endemic poverty, in the middle of the eighteenth century the most notable feature of backcountry society was not poverty but the vast number of relatively comfortable settlers.⁷ In Paxton Township, in Lancaster County, Pennsylvania, for instance, the average farm size was 130 acres. In Berks County in 1767 the mean farm size was 121 acres, and 40 percent of taxpayers owned between 80 and 150 acres of land. What was extraordinary about backcountry society was thus not the number of poor settlers but the number of middling settlers.⁸

In addition to those settlers who legally held land, in both Virginia and Pennsylvania there were many who illegally squatted upon unoccupied land. Indeed, James T. Lemon has argued that in parts of the backcountry “squatters held most of the land.” Provincial authorities and landholders such as Lord Fairfax made attempts to turn these squatters off the lands they illegally occupied. In Pennsylvania in 1748 and again in 1750 Richard Peters and Conrad Weiser led expeditions of magistrates to evict settlers from their lands. However, no sooner did the magistrates leave the region than the squatters returned. Indeed, in some ways squatters played an important role in the first stages of settlement in the backcountry, for they cleared the first fields and built the first tracks that would later make the region accessible to other settlers. In addition, the majority of backcountry settlers had little sympathy with the great landholders and tended to support their squatting neighbors. Indeed, in both Virginia and Pennsylvania popular methods of claiming ownership had developed and were widely recognized. These included the right of settlement and cultivation as a basis of ownership, and some backcountry settlers even set up “fair play tribunals” that oversaw claims and resolved disputes between squatters.⁹

The existence of these fair play tribunals suggests a strong degree of antipathy between the “common sort” and their betters. While this cannot be clearly defined as class consciousness or class identity, there were clear elements of what might be termed class distinctiveness in society. Certainly members of the elite felt that they were a class above the middling ranks of yeomen farmers. They attempted to distinguish themselves from their neighbors by their deportment, clothing, and housing. At church and in court they attempted to assert their superiority. However, while the elite may have believed that they were a class above the middling ranks, there is little evidence that the middling farmers believed that they were any different from their slightly wealthier neighbors. Indeed,

central to the functioning of backcountry society was a degree of tension between the self-styled elite and those just below them.¹⁰

Unlike the tidewater elite, the backcountry elite could not create a political climate of deference in the west and lacked the means to coerce the “middling sort” to follow their wishes. Many of them lacked previous political experience and the interpersonal skills to persuade neighbors to support them. The elite were also internally divided. During the 1750s, although ties between the elite families of the backcountry were growing, they had still not created a cohesive social network. While some residents, such as William Preston in Augusta County or Edward Shippen in Cumberland County, had strong ties to the eastern elite, many others did not. The elite were further divided by ethnic and religious differences as Scotch-Irish and Germans, Presbyterians and Quakers moved into the region. In Virginia the growth in support for the “New Light” Baptists challenged the traditional influence of the Anglican hierarchy. In Pennsylvania numerous religious groups settled in each county, and it was rare for one group to have an overwhelming predominance. Although in parts of the backcountry the Presbyterian Church had begun to develop the same institutional structures that the Anglican Church possessed in tidewater Virginia, such organizations were still in their infancy during the 1750s.¹¹

Most importantly, the elite lacked substantial wealth with which to impress their neighbors. In Augusta County, on average, justices of the peace owned only 50 percent more land than their neighbors. In Berks County a landowner in the wealthiest tenth of society owned only twice the land of the median landholder. Such an egalitarian society did not automatically produce deference, and the justices’ lack of personal authority made them reluctant to enforce any judicial powers that they held. The predominance of middling farmers in the backcountry, and the lack of a clearly defined elite, meant that during times of crisis there was no natural leadership to which backcountry settlers could look for guidance. Men who believed that they had the right to assume leadership often found they had little support from their neighbors, while men who had support from the local community often met with opposition from those members of the elite who had ties to eastern government. During the Seven Years’ War the lack of leadership in the region, and the bickering between members of the elite, would become major stumbling blocks to the successful prosecution of the war.¹²

If backcountry society lacked a clearly defined elite, it was also a society where community ties were often fragmented. A principal effect of the geographic, economic, and social structure of the backcountry was to undermine any sense of broader community that might have developed in the region. There were several forces that retarded the formation of broader community structures. Backcountry communities were frequently divided along lines of ethnicity, for the settlers who moved into the backcountry were a heterogeneous mix. The backcountry was not populated by Englishmen, Britons, or even Anglo-Americans, but by a myriad of different ethnic groups, each with their own cultural traditions, ethnic dislikes, and political biases. Not surprisingly, such differences made the formation of any sense of community identity difficult. Many backcountry settlers were recent immigrants who tended to associate within their ethnic groups. The largest single group throughout the backcountry of both Virginia and Pennsylvania were the Ulster Scots, or as they are more popularly known, the Scotch-Irish, but there were also substantial minorities of Catholic Irish, Germans, Scots, Welsh, and English, with smaller numbers of French Huguenots, Swedes, and Swiss. In Virginia the entire frontier was a polyglot mix of ethnic communities. In Pennsylvania the Germans dominated the northern frontier of the colony, while the Scotch-Irish dominated the western frontier. Such ethnic divisions frequently divided frontier communities: language tended to isolate the Germans, religion the Catholic Irish, and Scottish Highlanders arriving in the wake of the brutal suppression of the 1745 Jacobite Rebellion had little sympathy for the English.¹⁵

The divisions created by ethnicity were echoed closely by those produced by religion. Religion, which had served a major role in the development of community ties in the east, where community members worshipped in the same parish church or Quaker meeting, in the backcountry served only to further divide communities as Mennonites, Presbyterians, Anglicans, Quakers, Baptists, and Roman Catholics all jostled for preeminence. Members of different denominations frequently vied for influence within a particular county and viewed each other with deep suspicion. Religious divisions were further heightened as the Great Awakening took hold and the Baptist Church began to mount a challenge to the Anglican orthodoxy of Virginia. In the Pennsylvania backcountry “New Light” Presbyterians enlightened by the Great Awakening battled with “Old Light” Presbyterians for control of existing Presbyterian con-

gregations. Religion and ethnicity thus created fundamental community divisions.¹⁴

If religion and ethnicity divided communities, resolving those differences was made more difficult by the very high geographic mobility of frontier settlers. Because the settlement of the backcountry only took place in the first half of the eighteenth century, the inhabitants of the region had fewer social and kinship ties than those in longer-settled regions. In Paxton, Derry, and Donegal Townships, on the frontier of Lancaster County, mobility rates may at times have averaged around 50 percent per annum, half the population either arriving or leaving each year. While many settlers did make permanent homes in the region, and even some squatters remained on the same land for years, many others moved on within a few years or even months.¹⁵

Mobility rates in the Virginia and Pennsylvania backcountry may have been so high because the region was also a major conduit for settlers moving from the port cities of New York and Philadelphia to the south. The major migration route was through Philadelphia, west to the Susquehanna River, then following the Great Valley southwest, through Cumberland County on to Maryland, and then south down the Shenandoah Valley. Between 1740 and 1760 an average of twenty-two hundred settlers a year passed southward through the Shenandoah Valley, and smaller numbers of settlers moved west along the Potomac and James River Valleys. High mobility thus made it difficult for community ties to develop and was one of the major features that differentiated backcountry society from that of the Virginia tidewater and southeastern Pennsylvania.¹⁶

Lacking the social and kinship ties that came with a more settled existence, the residents of the Virginia and Pennsylvania backcountry struggled to build communities. However, the institutions that might have bound backcountry settlements together were also weak. Courthouse and meetinghouse, which served as a focus in other communities, only reflected the divisions in backcountry society. Indeed, the only real place where community ties within the backcountry were developed, where neighbors of different ethnic and religious backgrounds could be found together, were the taverns that dotted the region with amazing frequency. The Berks County tax list of 1767 showed thirty-two tavern and innkeepers in the county.¹⁷ In Winchester in 1756 there were at least seven licensed houses for a town that had fewer than two hundred dwellings. Taverns

played a central role in pulling communities together, in creating a network of social ties that bound neighbor to neighbor. So important was their influence that many settlements developed around the local tavern. However, while building some social ties, taverns were unlikely to produce a society in which deference to one's superiors was a highly valued attribute. In many ways the ubiquity of taverns is indicative of the individualism and disorder of the region.¹⁸

Backcountry society in Virginia and Pennsylvania was thus distinctive. Religion and ethnicity divided backcountry communities. The high geographic mobility of backcountry settlers impeded the development of social and kinship ties that could have drawn these communities together. The distribution of land and wealth made this a society dominated by the "middling sort," lacking a clearly defined elite. Local leadership was further weakened because the institutions that provided a framework for leadership in the east, whether the county court or the parish church, were much weaker in the backcountry.

Commercialism and Individualism

The geography and economy of the backcountry were also important in heightening the individualism of settlers. The eastern settlements of both Virginia and Pennsylvania were located mainly on fertile, low-lying alluvial soils. Rivers such as the Schuylkill and Delaware in Pennsylvania, and the James, York, Rappahannock, and Potomac in Virginia, gave settlers in the east relatively direct access to overseas markets. The topography of the backcountry was very different. Although the same rivers penetrated into the backcountry, they were not navigable. The Susquehanna River, for instance, rolled through the backcountry of Pennsylvania. Yet the rapids and shoals that dotted its course meant that it was only navigable by bateaux upstream from Harris's Ferry and that produce could not be shipped to the Chesapeake Bay. The mountains that crisscrossed the region made overland transport even more difficult. In the Virginia backcountry, the Blue Ridge formed a major barrier to movement of settlers and goods. Rising over two thousand feet, breached by only a few high passes and the James River in southern Virginia, and stretching almost unbroken from the Potomac River through what is now North Carolina, it held few passes where a wagon could safely cross. To the north of the Potomac River the chain was more broken, but the

Blue Ridge continued through Cumberland County as the South Mountain and east of the Susquehanna as the Blue Mountain. Beyond the Blue Ridge lay the Great Valley. Composed of several interlinking river valleys, the largest of which was the Shenandoah Valley, and stretching from Harris's Ferry—modern Harrisburg, on the Susquehanna River—to the Cumberland Gap, the Great Valley formed a natural channel for movement and tended to channel settlers in a southwesterly direction.¹⁹

By the middle of the eighteenth century dense settlement had not penetrated much further than the Great Valley. The region immediately to the west seemed inhospitable and, as British commanders would discover in the 1750s, was extremely difficult to traverse. To the west of the Great Valley lay the Allegheny Plateau or Mountains, a region of narrow valleys separated by flat-topped ridges, such as Laurel Ridge in southwestern Pennsylvania, rising five hundred to one thousand feet above the valley floors. Several large rivers pierced the Allegheny Mountains, and their valleys provided the main arteries of communication. In northern Pennsylvania the Delaware and the east and west branches of the Susquehanna River provided accessible valleys. It was into the lower reaches of these valleys that, in the 1720s, large numbers of Pennsylvanians began to move. By the 1730s settlers were even beginning to cross west of the Susquehanna River north of Harris's Ferry to occupy the Cumberland Valley, and by the 1750s were moving into the Juniata Valley.²⁰

Further south, the Potomac River, with two main valleys—the northern and southern branches—penetrated deep into the Allegheny Mountains and provided the easiest access route from the Ohio Valley into northern Virginia and Maryland. This would prove the major approach route for Indian raiding parties during the 1750s. To the south and west of the Potomac the rivers drained not into the Atlantic but into the Ohio River and thus the Mississippi and Gulf of Mexico. In the south the plateau was pierced by the Holston, Clinch, and New River Valleys, which again ran northeast to southwest. By the late 1740s, several parties of Virginians had crossed the Appalachians and settled along the upper reaches of the Monongahela River and as far west as the Holston River Valley, a tributary of the Tennessee in what is now southwestern Virginia. Topography dictated that these settlements on the Allegheny Plateau were very isolated. While they were only a few miles from each other, travel between settlements was often difficult. Strung out along stream courses, from the Potomac River to the James River, settlements did not form a

continual line west of the Shenandoah Valley but instead isolated pockets. Indeed, Governor Thomas Pownall wrote of frontier settlers they “are so settled that they have no Connection nor Union amongst each other, scarce of Communion much less of Defence. Their Settlements are vague without design scattered independent.”²¹

Even within the Shenandoah Valley settlers tended to congregate in small communities, or “open-country neighborhoods,” with farmsteads scattered along rivers and streams about half a mile apart. In both Virginia and Pennsylvania farms and plantations tended to be large, located at approximately half-mile intervals. Low population density alone meant that many settlements were relatively isolated from each other. In Cumberland County the population density averaged fewer than ten people per square mile, and east of the Susquehanna, Berks and Northampton Counties averaged fewer than twenty people per square mile. In addition, rather than settling evenly across the landscape, settlers tended to congregate in small “subcommunities.” Paxton, in Lancaster County, for instance, had several small communities: clustered around taverns in the township; around the ferry at Harris’s; around local churches and small clusters of artisans such as at Middletown, on Paxton Township’s southern border. These subcommunities tended to further isolate settlers from the broader backcountry community.²²

The isolation of the settlements was also reflected in the relative remoteness of both provincial and local government. Physically the Pennsylvania and Virginia backcountry was far removed from the colonial capitals in Williamsburg and Philadelphia. For a settler in Frederick County, Virginia, or Cumberland County, Pennsylvania, a return journey to the provincial capital could take the better part of three weeks. For many settlers Philadelphia and Williamsburg were thus far removed from their day-to-day lives. In theory local government was a more direct point of contact for these settlers. As the settled area of the colonies expanded into this region, the colonies responded by expanding the political organization of the colonies and establishing new counties to the west. Politically the Shenandoah Valley was divided between Augusta and Frederick Counties, with Hampshire comprising the Cacapon Valley and the branches of the Potomac. North of the Potomac River lay a sliver of Maryland, Frederick County, only a few miles wide, bounded to the north by an uncertain boundary with Pennsylvania. In Pennsylvania the backcountry west of the Susquehanna was contained in York and Cum-

berland Counties. East of the Susquehanna stretched Lancaster County, while the colony's northern frontier comprised Berks and Northampton Counties.²³

In both colonies the backcountry counties faced problems older counties in more settled parts of the colony did not. Backcountry counties tended to be much larger than their eastern counterparts. Augusta County, Virginia, at one time included in theory the present-day states of Kentucky, West Virginia, Ohio, Indiana, and Illinois. While Augusta is the most extreme example, all backcountry counties in Pennsylvania and Virginia were larger than their eastern counterparts. Lancaster County in the 1750s stretched from the Maryland line up the east bank of the Susquehanna River for over seventy miles. Distance alone meant that many backcountry settlers were relatively isolated from local community authority. The county court met solely at the courthouse, also the sole location for voting in elections, but this was sometimes many miles from a settler's residence. In the east, county court meetings were not just legal proceedings but great social events for the entire county. Hundreds of residents would gather at the courthouse to watch proceedings and converse with their neighbors.²⁴ In the backcountry, by contrast, court days were far less important. Most settlers had little contact with the county court, and even many of the justices only attended sporadically. In Augusta County in 1762 only two of the twenty-two justices were present for half or more of the court's sessions, and ten came to less than one-quarter. More isolated from these proceedings, it is little wonder then that backcountry communities were slower to develop.²⁵

It was not only distance that tended to retard the growth of community but also the centralized nature of the government of both Virginia and Pennsylvania. Unlike New England, where many government functions were decentralized to town meetings and to the town's selectmen, in Virginia there was no local structure below the county. In the smaller, more densely populated eastern counties this posed little problem; in the backcountry it promoted a sense of isolation. In Pennsylvania there was a government structure below the county: the township. However, the township had negligible autonomy and was merely a convenient subdivision of the county for administrative and tax purposes. Indeed, the only elected officer was the pound keeper, who managed the pound for stray horses.²⁶

While the geography and political structure of the backcountry may

have led to a sense of isolation, the backcountry's economy promoted a sense of individualism that ultimately stressed the importance of the individual over the community. Backcountry settlers are frequently portrayed as self-sufficient and economically independent farmers who had little contact with outside markets. However, with a few exceptions this was far from being the case. Commercialism was as strong in the backcountry as in the more settled regions of the east. Indeed, the very reason that settlers moved to the backcountry was to seek economic opportunity. Migration was driven by a quest for economic advantage, and once settlers arrived in the backcountry they did not abandon their desire for improvement. The region into which they had moved was one of aggressive commercialism and an emphasis on economic opportunity; by the 1750s it was already tied into the Atlantic market.²⁷

While there can be no doubt that the region's economy was commercially driven, it revolved around small-scale agriculture rather than the production of cash crops for export. Most settlers produced small surpluses of wheat that they sold to local merchants, who in turn sold to merchants in Philadelphia for sale overseas. In the Shenandoah Valley some settlers successfully grew tobacco, which they sold to tidewater merchants. However, the cost of transportation meant that profits from wheat and tobacco were reduced. Cattle and hogs were much easier to transport. Many settlers raised cattle. In Berks County in 1767 over four-fifths of families owned cattle, although the majority had only enough for household consumption. Cattle raising was even more important in Virginia. Here many households sold cattle to cattle drovers, who sold to eastern markets. In the Opequon community in the Shenandoah Valley, for instance, the average household owned ten cattle. Indeed, by the 1750s there were frequent cattle drives from the Carolina Piedmont through the Great Valley to Philadelphia.²⁸

Cattle were not the only animals that could be raised for sale in more distant markets. Many settlers also kept flocks of sheep. While sheep were less widely held than cattle in the backcountry, more households were likely to raise them for commercial ventures rather than purely for home consumption, selling either the animals or their wool in eastern markets. In Berks County over one thousand residents owned sheep, some possessing substantial flocks.²⁹ However, in the backcountry economy the most important animals were neither cattle nor sheep but lowly hogs.

Hogs could be allowed to run wild in the woods of the backcountry and required little day-to-day attention, unlike cattle or sheep. All their meat was usable, and they multiplied faster than cattle. They could fend for themselves in the woods and were even known to kill predators who might think them easy prey. They could be butchered easily; their carcasses were smaller and could easily be dried or salted and preserved over the winter.³⁰

While agriculture and the raising of livestock and crops were central to the economy of the backcountry, many settlers also practiced a range of crafts. Backcountry settlers engaged in many occupations; they were blacksmiths and gunsmiths, weavers and hatters. Backcountry settlers were thus anything but self-sufficient farmers; they participated in a much broader economy. While most were not deeply engaged in the wider Atlantic economy, they were involved in the provincial economy and in a local exchange economy. The economic structure of the backcountry thus produced a commercial society. Settlers sought economic gain wherever possible. The competitive spirit generated was not, however, balanced by a broader sense of community. Indeed, the nature of backcountry community served only to heighten divisions in backcountry society.³¹

There was one other important economic activity for many backcountry households, namely the fur and skin trade. Many backcountry families in both Virginia and Pennsylvania participated in this trade. The participation of some households might involve merely the exchange of provisions for furs with passing Indians. Other households participated in a more direct way. Many settlers distilled part of their crops into whiskey, which they then transported to Indian communities on the Susquehanna River or across the Appalachians. Indeed, by 1750 the fur trade in much of the region was becoming dominated by hoards of unregulated whiskey traders and small-scale peddlers. Almost any settler who had a few pounds to invest could enter the trade.³² The Pennsylvania authorities made several attempts to regulate traders. In Cumberland County, Andrew Montour led efforts to halt the illegal trade. Several unlicensed traders were brought before the county court and prosecuted. Yet in nearly every case the grand juries found them not guilty, “tho’ the Facts be ever so clearly proved.” This outcome was hardly surprising, considering that one of the largest illegal traders, John Smith, was also

one of the county's justices.³³ It was the fur trade that would begin to draw the communities of the backcountry and the upper Ohio Valley into conflict.

The Struggle for the Fur Trade

The Anglo-American communities of the backcountry and the Indian communities of the upper Ohio Valley had been relatively isolated from the outside and from each other. European wars and imperial conflicts seemed far away from the region. The growth of the fur trade, however, would bring the region's communities into contact with a wider world. In the late seventeenth century, French coureurs de bois had penetrated into the upper Great Lakes region—encompassing principally the modern states of Indiana, Illinois, and parts of Michigan and Wisconsin—which they called the *pays d'en haut* and which the British would later call the “Upper Country.” However, they had little reason to travel to the upper Ohio Valley, for it lay largely devoid of human habitation. The original inhabitants of the region had left their homes in the mid-seventeenth century, possibly driven out by Iroquois raids. Because of the lack of human habitation, the woods still teemed with deer and game birds, while the rivers and lakes provided abundant fish and, most importantly, beaver.³⁴ The comparative wealth of wildlife in the region meant that there were tempting opportunities for the development of the fur trade, as most other regions of eastern North America had by the 1740s been denuded of their fur-bearing animals through overhunting. For the French the fur trade had become a central element of their imperial presence in North America, allowing them to exercise an influence over the native peoples without having a substantial physical presence.³⁵

By the mid-eighteenth century, however, not only the French participated in the fur trade. Many hundreds of Anglo-American backcountry settlers supplemented their incomes through trade, although largely in deerskins rather than beaver skins. Pennsylvania fur traders, such as George Croghan, held places of influence in the colony. Many of these traders had amassed considerable fortunes. When the French captured Pennsylvania trader John Patton in 1750, he had in his possession over 750 pounds worth of trade goods. In Virginia the fur trade was less organized. However, many settlers in southwestern Virginia, particularly Augusta County, frequently welcomed Indians passing along

the Shenandoah Valley into their homes, exchanging skins and furs for ammunition, cloth, knives, and alcohol.³⁶

In the mid-1740s growing British interest in the upper Ohio Valley began to cause concern among French officials. The speed with which Pennsylvania traders penetrated into the Ohio Valley in the late 1740s, and the extent to which they were welcomed by the Indian peoples, were remarkable. Within a few years they had established a string of major trading posts at Pickawillany, Lower Shawnee Town, and Logstown. There were several reasons for this success. While the French had a better understanding of the types of goods most valued by the Indian peoples, British manufactured goods were often of a superior quality as Britain underwent the first throes of the industrial revolution. Metal tools, guns, and ammunition were all in high demand, as was cloth, in particular duffels (coarse woolen cloth, typically red, white, or blue, sometimes striped) and strouds (cheaper cloth made from woolen rags). In the production of all these items the British possessed a significant advantage. In 1749 the intendant of New France, François Bigot, complained to Paris about the poor quality of trade goods sent to Canada. The cloth, he reported, was “frightful; the red cloth is brown and unpressed; the blue of a very inferior quality to that of the English.” Bigot predicted that “as long as such ventures are sent, they will not become favourites with the Indians.”³⁷ Not only were British goods of a superior quality, but they were also cheaper because of profiteering by suppliers in France and by the leaseholders of the western posts. Consequently, the Pennsylvania trade boomed. By 1748 there were over twenty Pennsylvanian traders in Logstown alone and a similar number at Pickawillany, the skin and fur trade providing the colony with over one-third of its exports.³⁸

The conclusion of King George’s War in 1748 intensified competition between the Pennsylvanians and the French. From their trading posts Pennsylvania trade goods spread westward. Soon posts such as Pickawillany were thronging with Algonquian and Iroquoian peoples from across the Ohio Valley—Delawares, Shawnees, Hurons, Potawatomis, and Miamis.³⁹ The French commander at Fort Miami complained that “the English spare nothing to keep them and to draw away the remainder of those who are here.” He was quite clear as to the reason: “The excessive price of French goods in this post, the great bargains which the English give, as well as the large presents which they make to the tribes, have entirely disposed those tribes in their favor. . . . We have made peace with the

English, but in this country they do not cease working to make war on us by means of the Indians and to bring them into a general revolt against the French.”⁴⁰

The development of British trade posed such a threat to the French presence because trade goods played a crucial role in Indian diplomacy. Prestige in Indian society was gained not by a conspicuous display of possessions but by the ability to give gifts. Gifts were especially important in the upper Ohio Valley because the traditional ties of kinship and family that buttressed Indian leadership had been shattered by disease and migration. Epidemics had eradicated many traditional leadership patterns. As the survivors of these epidemics moved into the Susquehanna and Ohio Valleys, they moved as individuals, families, or at most village fragments, rather than intact village and tribal groups. Traditional kinship and leadership networks were thus severely disrupted, and by the mid-eighteenth century there was a leadership vacuum in the Ohio Valley.⁴¹ Across the Ohio Valley the ability to provide one’s supporters with more prized gifts provided a major route to power. The reciprocal giving of gifts created a sense of obligation and alliance and became an integral part of the Ohio Indians’ diplomacy, both among the Ohio Indians themselves and between Indians and Europeans. It also created the basis for a split into those who had access to French goods and traditional kinship ties to the French and those who had developed new ties with Pennsylvania traders. The growth of the Pennsylvania fur trade struck at the heart of the French relationship with the Ohio Indians. The expansion of the fur trade thus proved a major catalyst in promoting Anglo-French tension in the Ohio Valley.⁴²

The Ohio Company

While the activities of British fur traders began to raise French concerns in the region, the activities of land speculators began to raise Indian concerns. The British thirst for Indian land was to become the central issue that would alienate the Ohio Indians from the British. The Ohio Indians already had plenty of opportunity to hear for themselves about the perfidy of their Anglo-American neighbors from the Delaware migrants who had moved to the Ohio Valley from Pennsylvania. The expansion of Pennsylvania settlements into the backcountry had steadily pushed the Delawares from their homes. Initially, the Pennsylvanians

had sought to establish a trusting relationship with their Indian neighbors. However, in the early eighteenth century Indian relations came increasingly under the influence of less scrupulous men such as James Logan who schemed to acquire lands beyond the agreed purchase lines. By the early 1730s the Delawares had been driven out of their original homelands on the lower reaches of the Delaware River and had moved farther north into the upper Delaware Valley and west into the Susquehanna Valley, into territory that the Iroquois claimed but did not occupy.⁴³

The Delawares' settlement on Iroquois-claimed land gave Logan and the Penns an opportunity they could not resist. The Penns were desperately short of funds. Their "fortune" lay in their grant of Pennsylvania, but only a small part had been made available for settlement. The remainder of the land was claimed and occupied by Indians, principally the Delawares, and it was necessary to get a quitclaim before the Penns could sell it. It was far easier for the Penns to recognize the Iroquois as the sole owners of Pennsylvania than to have to deal with the many smaller groups, including the Delawares.⁴⁴

The most notorious fraud began in 1735 when the Penns produced some rough notes of what they claimed was an old Delaware land cession to lands bordering the Delaware River, made in the seventeenth century. A day and a half's walk would determine the boundary of the grant. In 1737, under intense Iroquois pressure, the Delawares agreed to allow the "Walking Purchase." When they agreed to this, the Delawares believed that any walk to determine the bounds of the grant would be done at a normal pace, the walkers stopping "to eat their dinner, [and] after that smook a pipe." With horror they now discovered that the Penns intended to use trained runners to cover as much ground as possible. The land the Penns thus acquired included a large area along the Delaware River, the heart of Delaware territory. The Delawares protested, but the Iroquois quickly moved to silence them and declared that they were "women" who had settled on Iroquois land and thus had no power to treat directly with the Pennsylvanians. Faced with the combined power of the Iroquois and the British, the Delawares had little choice but to bide their time.⁴⁵

After the Walking Purchase many Delawares relocated to the east branch of the Susquehanna. Then these lands also came under white scrutiny. At the Albany Congress of 1754 Pennsylvania obtained from the Iroquois a cession of these lands. The Iroquois now encouraged the Delawares to move further up the Susquehanna to the Wyoming Valley.

Here they thought they would be safe. However, almost immediately, these lands would become the focus of a group of Connecticut speculators who had formed themselves into the Susquehannah Company.⁴⁶

As numbers of Delawares headed west to new homes on the Allegheny and Muskingum Rivers they took tales of their repeated eviction with them. These tales caused increasing concern among the Ohio Indians as the British began to show a growing interest in their lands. Before the late 1740s British settlers had demonstrated little interest in settling the upper Ohio Valley. The region was too remote to be of any interest. However, as traders and explorers such as Peter Salley, a German immigrant from Augusta County, returned to the backcountry they described the Ohio Valley in glowing terms: it was “well Water’d, there are plenty of Rivulets clear fountains and running Streams and very fertile Soil.” Soon the region drew the attention of speculators, who by the 1740s began to consider the possibility of establishing settlements to the west of the Appalachians. Over four years in the late 1740s the Virginia Council issued grants for over two million acres of land in the west to several different land companies.⁴⁷

Initially, the government was willing to make these grants because many Virginia burgesses and councilors, who made the decisions, were themselves involved in land speculation. However, by the 1740s Governor William Gooch was becoming increasingly concerned that these grants in the west “might possibly give Umbrage to the French.” In November 1747 and again in the summer of 1748, he wrote to London requesting advice on making any future grants.⁴⁸ Nevertheless, while Gooch’s reservations increased, so did the power and influence of by far the most important and influential of all the land companies, the Ohio Company of Virginia, established in 1747. With members and supporters—including the Earl of Halifax, the president of the Board of Trade—espousing the company’s case at the highest levels of government, the Board of Trade proclaimed that the settlement of the Ohio Valley in this manner was in “His Majesty’s Interest, and the Advantage and Security of that and the Neighbouring Provinces.”⁴⁹ At the same time, the departure of Gooch from Virginia and his replacement first by Thomas Lee, as acting governor, and then by Robert Dinwiddie aided the cause of the company. Both Lee and Dinwiddie were active members of the company and could be relied upon to further its cause. Dinwiddie himself divulged that he had “the Success and Prosperity of the Ohio Company much at Heart.” In the early 1750s

the activities of the Ohio Company would play a major role in determining Virginia's policy toward the Ohio Valley.⁵⁰

In January 1749 John Hanbury, a wealthy London merchant and leading member of the Ohio Company, presented the Crown with the company's petition for land on the Ohio River. Unlike the other Virginia land companies, the Ohio Company was to receive its grant directly from the Crown, not from the governor and council, for this would give it substantially more power. In February the petition received royal assent, and the company acquired the right to half a million acres on the Ohio, on condition of it "seating at their proper Expence a hundred Familys upon the Lands in Seven Years" and "Erecting a Fort and maintaining a Garrison for the protection of the Settlement."⁵¹ The Ohio Company thus acted as more than just a holder of land for sale to potential settlers. It was actively to be involved in the development of their lands and envisioned settling German Protestants from the Rhineland. This meant that it was essential to negotiate with the Ohio Indians to secure their assent to settlement of the region.⁵²

As soon as the company heard of the grant it began to make preparations to exploit it. There were only two obstacles: the attitude of the Ohio Indians and the opposition of the French. In the company's eyes neither seemed a major barrier. Company agents could foresee few reasons why the Ohio Indians would oppose their settlement. They maintained that at a conference in Lancaster, Pennsylvania, in 1748, the Iroquois had agreed to surrender all their claims to land west of the Appalachians. The treaty specified that the Iroquois surrendered to Virginia "the Right and Title of our Sovereign the King of Great Britain to all the lands within the said Colony, as it is now or hereafter may be peopled and bounded by his said Majesty."⁵³ As Virginia's charter gave the colony a claim to most of North America from the Atlantic to the Pacific, the Iroquois had unwittingly given up any claim of theirs to North America outside Iroquoia. The Iroquois, however, believed that they had ceded no more than a strip of land along the Appalachians, most notably the Shenandoah Valley, to prevent disputes caused by their warriors traveling south along the valley. Amazingly, Ohio Company officials saw no reason to be concerned at this misconception. Nor did they see any reason for concern that the lands they sought were settled not by Iroquois but by Shawnees and Delawares. Equally amazingly, they failed to perceive why the French might oppose their settlement of these lands. As far as the Ohio Company was

concerned, the French had shown no previous interest in these lands, and under the terms of the 1713 Treaty of Utrecht they were “rightly” British.⁵⁴

The Ohio Company arranged a conference with the Ohio Indians to attain their assent to the company’s proposed settlement. No request could have been more calculated to arouse Indian suspicions. The conference convened at the Indian town of Logstown, ten miles downstream from the forks of the Ohio, at the end of May 1752. Initially, the Ohio Indians believed that the Ohio Company sought permission merely to establish a fortified trading settlement, another Pickawillany. Such a settlement would probably have been acceptable, perhaps even desirable. However, they were soon disabused of this idea. Andrew Montour, speaking for the Virginians, came straight to the point. He informed the Ohio Indians that under the terms of the Lancaster treaty, the lands on the Ohio were part of Virginia. He further informed them that the Virginians now wished “to make a Settlement of British Subjects on the South East side of the Ohio.”⁵⁵

The Ohio Indians were worried. The Iroquois headmen who were present floundered in the face of British claims that they had themselves ceded the Ohio Valley without informing its inhabitants. The Iroquois headmen protested bitterly, claiming that they had “never understood . . . that the Lands then sold were to extend further to the Sun Setting, than the Hill, on the other Side of the Alligany Hill.” All the Iroquois agreed they would have to consult with the Onondaga Council “so that we can’t give you any further Answer now.” Referring the matter to the Iroquois Council was not acceptable to the Ohio Company. They could not wait. Consequently, they persuaded métis Andrew Montour “to converse with his brethren the other Sachems in private on the subject to urge the necessity of such a settlement and the great advantage it would be to them as to their trade.” Several Iroquois headmen “retir’d for half an Hour” with Montour. In the end they were persuaded to agree to the Ohio Company’s plans. Montour may simply have tried to convince them that all that would result was a settlement little different from Pickawillany, from whence seemed to come so much benefit, or he may have applied more pressure, possibly even offering some form of bribe. Certainly over one thousand pounds worth of gifts were distributed at the conference. Whatever happened, the Iroquois, but not the Shawnees or Delawares, emerged from their meeting consenting to the Ohio Company’s settlement and guaranteeing its protection.⁵⁶

The Ohio Company now had the deeds they wanted, even though they came without the blessing of the Shawnees or Delawares. While the company's indifference reflected the British position that the Iroquois possessed the Ohio, in practical terms this exclusion of the Ohio Indians was a huge mistake. The Logstown conference merely served to increase Indian doubts about British intentions in the Ohio Valley. By the spring of 1753 villages across the Ohio Valley buzzed with the news that "the Iroquois have sold the Ohio River to the English and that the latter have set about making settlements." This made it easy for French officials to convince the Ohio Indians that their interests would be best looked after by supporting the French and driving out the British.⁵⁷

The Struggle for Control of the Ohio Valley

French officials knew that they had to act quickly to prevent the loss of their influence among the Ohio Indians. However, their early attempts to halt the spread of British influence were feeble and halfhearted. In the summer of 1749 Governor Roland Michel, Marquis de la Galissonnière sent a small military expedition, headed by Pierre-Joseph Céloron de Blainville, down the Ohio River to bury lead plates claiming the region for the French. Shortly afterwards a new governor, Pierre-Jacques de Taffanel, Marquis de La Jonquière, arrived in the colony. Initially he had determined to send a large expedition to the Ohio. However, he soon abandoned the project and limited French actions to small expeditions to seize British traders and establish trading posts.⁵⁸

The French, however, soon increased their activity. Over the winter of 1751–52, moving south from Detroit, parties of French regulars and Canadian militia killed several Anglophile Miami warriors. The Miamis appealed to Pennsylvania for arms and ammunition. For years they had presumed that the Pennsylvanians would be only too happy to provide them with weapons with which to fight the French, but the reality could not have been more different. Their request placed Governor James Hamilton in a quandary. He could hardly refuse such an appeal when it was the Miamis' support of the British that had exposed them to the wrath of the French. On the other hand, he realized that the Quaker-dominated assembly would never approve sending arms directly to the Indians. Hamilton therefore instructed Croghan to tell the Miamis that he could not supply them but that he was sure the Virginians would.⁵⁹

However, the French had only just begun their assault on the Anglo-

phile Indians. On June 21, 1752, a party of twenty Frenchmen and over two hundred Ottawas and Chippewas descended on the town of Pickawillany. The party had specific orders “to kill all such Indians as are in amity with the English, and to take the Persons and Effects of all such English Traders as they could meet with.” They killed one trader, captured six more, and killed many more Indians. Any Indians who survived the attack soon fled. When traders Thomas Burney and William Trent arrived in the town two weeks after the attack, they found it completely deserted. Over the next few months the French sent an additional four hundred troops to Fort Miami and prepared an even larger expedition to descend the Ohio in the spring of 1753. The French show of force succeeded. Across the Ohio Valley British traders decamped and headed east.⁶⁰

The Ohio Indians expected swift British retaliation for the destruction of Pickawillany, but none came. At Governor Hamilton’s suggestion, the Miamis now appealed frantically to Virginia for aid. Instead of ammunition, Governor Robert Dinwiddie sent William Trent to the Ohio with an invitation to a planned conference in Winchester the following spring. To the Miamis this invitation seemed ludicrous. They sought action, not words. Trent himself reported that the Miamis were in a “miserable Condition.” All the traders had either been killed, captured, or had fled the region. Those Ohio Indians who would not join the French were left to starve.⁶¹ The following spring the newly arrived governor of Canada, Ange Duquesne de Menenville, marquis de Duquesne, established French forts at Presque Isle on Lake Erie and at Rivière au Boeuf and Fort Machault, or Venago, on tributaries of the Allegheny. These would secure the portage to the upper Ohio River, in preparation for the establishment of a fort at the forks. This “invasion” of the Ohio Country still did not provoke an immediate British response. Preoccupied with their own internal bickering, neither Virginia nor Pennsylvania sent aid to their Indian allies.⁶²

The years 1752–53 would prove to be a pivotal point in the history of the Ohio Valley. At Logstown and Pickawillany the British demonstrated that they had no interest in the welfare of the Ohio Indians; they cared only for themselves. The British sought land but would offer no protection to their allies. Almost overnight the Ohio Indians came to view the British in a very different light. It was not long before the former “Anglo-philés” began to flood back to the French fold. In the autumn of 1752,

for instance, Le Gros Bled, formerly one of the most Anglophile headmen, traveled to the French post at Fort Vincennes “to ask pardon” from the French. The son of another rebel leader, La Mouche Noire, abandoned his father to seek French forgiveness. Other Miamis turned on their former allies, killing two British traders and presenting their scalps to the French as evidence of their newfound loyalty. By winter most of the Miamis and Illinois had renewed their allegiance to the French.⁶³ The sudden change of loyalty in 1752–53, however, does not solely reflect the actions of individual chiefs. Rather, within the villages and clans of the Ohio Valley the balance of power shifted rapidly away from Anglophile chiefs. Unable to supply their supporters with trade goods and weapons, and unable to provide any protection against increasingly aggressive French actions, Anglophile leaders found their power daily eroded. Many cut their losses, swallowed their pride, and returned to the French. Even Tanaghrisson, one of the most Anglophile of all the headmen, approached the French, but he was “received in a very contemptuous manner.”⁶⁴

As they saw their influence in the upper Ohio Valley evaporate, both Virginia and Pennsylvania appealed to Whitehall for assistance, claiming that the French presence in the Ohio undermined the security of the colonial frontier. From their new bases on the upper Ohio the French could launch raids on the backcountry of Virginia and Pennsylvania, as they had done for the previous century on New England. The French forts thus posed a threat to the security of the British Empire in North America. Before 1754 neither Britain nor France had exercised substantial military power in the Ohio Valley. In 1754 both sides would resort to the use of arms. French and British officials began to play a game of brinkmanship, each side gambling that the other would not risk a general war over control of the region. They were wrong. By the end of 1755 the largest of the colonial wars had broken out in the “backwoods” of America, a war that would soon become global.

As conflict loomed, Pennsylvania looked to Virginia for military leadership. Of the two colonies only Virginia possessed any military organization that could respond to the French threat; Pennsylvania could provide little more than financial support. In early 1754 Virginia’s governor, Robert Dinwiddie, determined that the best course of action would be to construct a fort at the forks of the Ohio. For Dinwiddie this was a desperate action. Indeed, he argued that even if the military significance of

the fort was limited, “if we can only erect a Fort or Two as a mark of our Possession, it will be doing something.”⁶⁵ Dinwiddie also determined that before he could take action he needed to issue a final warning to the French. To deliver this message he needed someone with both western experience and sufficient gentry status so that the warning would carry weight. To send a trader such as George Croghan would have undervalued the weight of the message. To send a wealthy planter such as Lord Fairfax would have exposed Fairfax to the dangers of an arduous journey in the early winter. There was one person who had both gentry status and experience on the frontier as a provincial surveyor, a young man named George Washington. In November 1753 Dinwiddie sent Washington to the newly constructed French forts in the upper Ohio Valley to parlay with the French commanders and demand their withdrawal.⁶⁶

Washington returned with the news that the French had no intention of withdrawing from the region. Dinwiddie presented his report to the House of Burgesses and convinced them to provide ten thousand pounds to fund an expedition. However, the burgesses had concerns about the involvement of the Ohio Company in the growing conflict in the west. Instead of giving Dinwiddie power to dispose of the funds as he saw fit, the burgesses established a committee to oversee disbursement of the funds. This was a highly unusual step, which angered Dinwiddie. At first he would not consent to the bill, complaining that “the People here are too much of a republican Spirit. The Ho. of B. making resolves in dispos’g of the King’s Money without the Concurrence of the other Branches of the Legislature, is without Precedent.” However, if Dinwiddie wanted to construct a fort at the forks he knew that he had to act quickly. Grudgingly he approved the bill.⁶⁷

In January 1754 a small party of volunteers, mainly former Indian traders, commanded by William Trent, began construction of the post. The Ohio Company had already chosen a defensible site a few miles downstream from the forks of the Ohio. To reinforce Trent, Dinwiddie drafted three hundred men from the militia and formed them into the Virginia Regiment. Joshua Fry, commander of the expedition, was to assemble the main body of the force in northern Virginia awaiting the arrival of three independent companies that Dinwiddie had persuaded Whitehall to send. Fry’s second in command, Washington, was to march a forward detachment to Wills Creek, where he would prepare for the march to the Ohio.⁶⁸

Numerous problems beset Fry and Washington. There were few skilled officers and an abundance of petty disputes over their respective authority, particularly between officers of the independent companies, who had royal commissions, and those of the Virginia Regiment, who had commissions from Dinwiddie. The troops were slow to assemble, for there were few volunteers, and several of the county justices refused to draft men from the militia into the regiment. In addition, the independent companies took much longer than expected to arrive, leaving Fry dawdling in northern Virginia. Finally, a shortage of horses and wagons slowed Washington's progress toward the Ohio.⁶⁹

Trent wrote to Fry and Washington at the beginning of March, pleading with them to hurry their men to the Ohio before the French arrived. Since there was no chance that Trent could complete his fortifications before the French arrived, Washington took the initiative to march a detachment to the forks to reinforce Trent. However, at the forks the Virginian force was growing desperately short of supplies. When the local Delawares refused to supply the force, even though the Virginians offered to pay well for any produce, Trent was forced to return to Wills Creek, leaving behind only a small detachment of forty-one men commanded by Ens. Edward Ward. On April 17 French forces under the command of Capt. Claude-Pierre Pécaudy de Contrecoeur appeared outside the uncompleted post. When Contrecoeur offered Ward the chance to surrender the post, he had little choice but to accept and march his men back to Wills Creek. The French then proceeded to utilize the supplies of lumber Trent had amassed to construct their own fort a few miles upstream at the forks themselves, naming it Fort Duquesne in honor of their governor.⁷⁰

The surrender of the fort threatened to shut the British out of the entire Ohio Valley. Washington, who was now in command of the expedition following the death of Fry, determined to proceed toward the fort to see if there was any chance of taking it by surprise. However, the French had scouting parties out. For several days Tanaghrisson and Scarouady, two Iroquois headmen who accompanied Washington, reported that there were French parties in the vicinity. Finally, on the evening of May 27, they informed him that there was a party shadowing him. Whether this was a diplomatic party sent out to parlay with Washington or a military force sent to intercept him is unclear. However, Washington determined to send out a detachment to ambush the French. In the ensuing skirmish

the French commander, Joseph Coulon de Villiers, sieur de Jumonville, and ten other French troops were killed. Who fired the first shot is uncertain. Possibly Jumonville was not even killed in the fighting but was clubbed to death immediately after the skirmish by Tanaghrisson. Whatever the details were, the French reacted quickly. Almost immediately a much larger party, under the command of Jumonville's brother, Louis Coulon de Villiers, set out from Fort Duquesne to intercept Washington.⁷¹

Surely aware that the French would react, but unaware that the French had sent out a much larger party, Washington continued his advance toward Fort Duquesne. Why he did this is unclear; he must have known that he was outnumbered and could not take the fort. Worrying about what his young commander might do, Dinwiddie sent Washington a message warning him not to be too rash or to "make any hazardous Attempts agst a too numerous Enemy."⁷² Washington did not heed Dinwiddie's warnings. On June 28 he halted at Gist's Plantation, a few miles south of Fort Duquesne. Only now did Washington's scouts discover that the French had sent out a much larger force against him. Washington had around four hundred men with him, many of them ill and unfit for duty. Instead of continuing, he chose to retreat, but his troops, weary from their march over the rough terrain, made slow progress. Informed that the French were quickly closing on him, Washington determined to halt his retreat at a spot already prepared for defense, Fort Necessity. The Indians accompanying Washington were disgusted at his temerity and at his refusal to accept their advice despite their knowledge of the terrain. Many felt that throughout the expedition he had treated them with contempt and would later complain that "he took upon him to command the Indians as his Slaves." Consequently, shortly after the arrival at Fort Necessity, Washington's Indian allies abandoned the expedition.⁷³

On the morning of July 3, 1754, the French arrived at Washington's camp with about six hundred French and Canadian soldiers and one hundred Indians. They quickly besieged Washington's force. The earthworks surrounding the camp proved little protection from the continual fire of French snipers. The wooden palisade was only seven feet high, and the fort could only shelter sixty of Washington's men. The rest took what shelter they could in hastily made entrenchments outside the fort. One by one, the French picked off Washington's forces. By dusk Washington had lost one hundred men, his soldiers finding that a fierce storm prevented their muskets from firing. With his force surrounded and

demoralized, and abandoned by his Indian allies, Washington asked for terms. Unable to read the French in which the surrender document was written, Washington admitted responsibility for the “murder” of Jumonville, acknowledged that the Ohio was French territory—“les Terres du Domain du Roy”—and agreed that the British would evacuate the region. Washington, of course, repudiated the agreement as soon as he was back in Virginia, claiming that he had been unable to read the surrender document clearly in the flickering candlelight of the sodden evening. The French, however, viewed their victory as decisive. Governor Duquesne described it as “a brilliant action . . . such as any soldier will scarcely believe possible in a country where only wars of ambush are known.” French officials hoped that the defeat would mark the end of the dispute in North America and that the British would now lose interest in the Ohio Valley. However, Washington’s defeat merely encouraged the British to make bolder attempts to recover the region.⁷⁴

NEITHER Britain nor France intended to start a war over the Ohio Country. However, pressures within the region steadily brought both sides to a crisis. The movement of settlers into the backcountry began a process of westward expansion. By 1750 those settlers were beginning to spill over the Appalachians and were eyeing the fertile lands of the Ohio Valley. In the Ohio Valley itself French and British fur traders, who had moved into the region following their Indian customers, were drawn into increasing conflict. As British trade expanded, the only way in which the French could halt the advance of British influence was to use military force to expel British traders. The British could not accept their expulsion from the Ohio Valley, not only because the Ohio Company had so many influential supporters but also because the French presence posed a threat to the security of Virginia and Pennsylvania. Provincial forces proved unable to dislodge the French. Consequently, the British resorted to the use of the regular army. This decision effectively declared war upon the French in North America. The escalation to war thus had little to do with diplomacy and politics within Europe, but was rather the result of developments in the Ohio Valley and on the frontier of Virginia and Pennsylvania. Over the next seven years a global war would rage. The backcountry of Virginia and Pennsylvania would be a central theater of that war.