

WEB-SITE REVIEW

Timothy Shannon. "The French and Indian War in Pennsylvania" in ExplorePAHistory.com.
www.explorepahistory.com/story.php?storyId=6

Professor Timothy Shannon provides one of the best brief accounts of Pennsylvania's role in the French and Indian War for ExplorePAHistory.com, a website sponsored by the PSEA (Pennsylvania State Education Association). Aimed at a general audience with limited or no knowledge of the war, the four chapter account focuses narrowly on the three way contest for lands along the Ohio and its tributaries from 1754 to the completion of Pontiac's Rebellion in 1763. The essay reads well, holds to the facts, and portrays the aims, gains, and disappointments of the contestants in the saga in a balanced manner.

To his credit, rather than see the war as essentially a contest between Great Britain and France with Native American nations playing the part of distant cousins, Shannon accurately targets the goals of all three parties noting where it plays a significant part, the internal splits within each of the competing groups. France desired the Ohio as a link between its colonies in Canada and Louisiana as well as a source of furs for the European trade.

PENNSYLVANIA HISTORY: A JOURNAL OF MID-ATLANTIC STUDIES, VOL. 74, NO. 3, 2007.
Copyright © 2007 The Pennsylvania Historical Association

The French lacked the settlers or the resources to develop the lands but could rightfully claim them by right of first exploration, assuming, of course, that one ignores the reality that Native Americans explored it first long before French explorers ventured upon the Ohio's waters. Trappers, traders, and priests provided the most common point of contact with the Native American tribes. With furs proving the most common trade item, French intrusion into the lives of the natives was small by comparison to what British interests envisioned.

Britain saw the lands as part of an expanding British empire to be eventually settled by yeomen farmers. In Britain's semi-autonomous colonies, the question proved a little more complex as disagreement existed as to whether Virginia or Pennsylvania would open the new lands to white settlement. Virginia's Ohio Company whose stockholders included one young George Washington as well as the governor of Virginia would be the first to contest French claims to the Ohio. Shannon takes us through the opening days of the conflict with Washington's mission first to the French forts on the Allegheny and later at the head of an ill-fated military expedition to the forks of the Ohio that resulted in the young officer's surrender at Fort Necessity.

Pennsylvania colonial government proved less able to act until Edward Braddock's devastating defeat opened the colony's frontiers to Indian raiding parties. Split by three distinct political elements, the proprietary party consisting of the Penn's family and their agents, the anti-proprietary party consisting of pacifist Quakers, and a third party consisting of Scotch-Irish and German elements living on or close to the frontier, Pennsylvania government operated with anything but efficiency. Politics, money, and religion all provided friction in dealing with the French and Indian threat.

For Native American tribes, the issue of the Ohio lands seemed no clearer. Who spoke for the tribes of the Ohio? The Iroquois claimed the lands by right of conquest although the League possessed little in the way of a means to coerce obedience to their wishes. The Shawnee and Delaware had seen their claims to more eastern lands now within the limits of white settlements extinguished by treaty in which the Iroquois proved complicit in the eviction. Some believed that the Iroquois meant to divert English land pressures into the Ohio valley as a means to defend Iroquoia. None of the Ohio tribes saw the surrender of additional lands in a positive light. All carefully weighted the issue of war and peace noting that getting caught between the two European powers might well prove a lose-lose scenario.

Shannon's account of the Forbes expedition to Fort Duquesne proves one of his strongest chapters. The author notes the difference in Pennsylvania's efforts to support the campaign with particular emphasis on Benjamin Franklin's tireless efforts to support the expedition with supplies. Discussed in more limited terms is Franklin's vision and eventual construction of a series of forts along the Pennsylvania frontier to provide strong points for the defense of settlers during Indian raids. Although situated to interdict Indian paths leading into the settled regions, or as in the case of Fort Augusta in present day Sunbury, PA, located to command the colony's waterways, the forts proved both an exceptional colonial expense and of limited value preventing French and Indian raids.

Pontiac's rebellion finished Shannon's account of the frontier war correctly portraying the Ottawa chief's efforts as an attempt to reverse the effects of the British victory in the French and Indian war. British soldiers in forts as far west as Detroit and as far east as Fort Pitt found themselves surrounded by a sea of warriors from a variety of Ohio tribes bent on turning back the tide of white encroachment. Unable to starve out the garrison at Fort Pitt and eventually defeated at Bushy Run, Pontiac's onslaught fell short of its goal but did provide the pretext for the Proclamation Line of 1763 and for the garrisoning of British regulars on colonial soil. Both of these factors played a part in the coming of the War for American Independence, the subject of the next chapter in this very fine website.

As noted earlier, Shannon's account of the war hits the mark. Designed to assist in the teaching of Pennsylvania history, it includes lesson plans, an excellent bibliography, maps, interactive video, and a compilation of supporting essays on people, places, and battles. It is focused primarily on the colony's southern frontier defined largely as the Juniata River and points south and west to the Ohio leaving the history of anything north of the Blue Ridge largely untouched. That shortcoming noted this is an excellent aid to the understanding of Pennsylvania's place in the French and Indian War.

JOSEPH FISCHER

U.S. Army Command and General Staff College