

GEORGE WASHINGTON'S VENANGO
TO FORT LE BOEUF ROUTE,
DECEMBER 1753—REEXAMINED

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Abstract: Current beliefs about the route George Washington and Christopher Gist took in 1753 from Fort Machault at Venango—where they delivered an ultimatum to a French garrison to evacuate British territory—to Fort Le Boeuf are erroneous. They are based on second-hand testimony, whereas Washington's own map traces the most direct and plausible route based on the ease of using existing Indian trails and paths already established by the French military. A careful examination of the area, as outlined in this article, shows it to be the only sensible way he would have traversed this difficult terrain.

In the summer of 1960 Paul A. W. Wallace of the Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission conducted an exhaustive analysis of what route the George Washington—Christopher Gist party followed upon departing the French fort at Venango (present-day Franklin, Pennsylvania) en route to Fort Le Boeuf (present-day Waterford). However impressive Wallace's article may seem, a number of subsequent suppositions ultimately led to some faulty conclusions. This led him to construct a complicated and unlikely scenario whose logic even he questioned. But in Wallace's defense, with only a few references to the route in the two written records

(Washington's and Gist's journals), this is an extremely complicated topic and it is easy to understand how he could have been led astray.¹

Since the basic narrative and initial setting of Wallace's narrative is correct, rather than writing a repetitive one I will simply follow his narrative as published in *Pennsylvania History*, with my own comments and corrections.²

French Creek is central to the story and I believe that it is first important to have a thorough understanding of this waterway, its topography, and seasonal flow facts. I have canoed the entire length of the creek from Waterford to Franklin numerous times during all four seasons. This also includes a memorable trek in a cedar canoe I built by hand in December of 2003 to commemorate the two-hundred-fiftieth anniversary of Washington's trip, which I began on the same date (December 16) at approximately the same time. During this journey which I completed with my friend Tom Murphy (then mayor of Pittsburgh), we experienced rainstorms, freezing weather, heavy snow, and a flood-level water course. We camped in a tent along the way and were surprised to reach Franklin on our third day of travel.

In addition, in 2005 I purchased a farmhouse with a fifty-acre parcel of land adjacent to the creek, which contains a portion of the land central to Dr. Wallace's analysis. It lies several miles east of Cambridge Springs, bordering both Mohawk and French creeks.

French Creek has three basic topographical characteristics in its course from Waterford to Franklin. The first section, from Waterford to Muddy Creek, is a medium-sized creek about thirty to forty yards wide. At Muddy Creek the waterway makes a dramatic turn to the west where it actually "cuts" its way through the terrain in a somewhat narrower and deeper course, with steep banks and regular flow redirections, which are very apparent from the air (see fig. 1). During the winter months this segment of the creek has a depth ranging from fifteen to twenty-five feet, and at times is even deeper. During the summer months the banks are so steep that few sites would accommodate easy fording. In addition, due to the creek constantly "cutting" into the banks, the banks tend to collapse. Thus for five feet or so adjacent to the banks the streambeds are generally comprised of a greasy thick mud that makes egress out of the creek extremely difficult. West of Cambridge Springs, French Creek merges with the Conneauttee Creek, turns south again, and becomes much wider. By the time it reaches the vicinity of Franklin, it takes on the appearance of a "river" as it flows into the Allegheny.



FIGURE 1: French Creek, at high-water level in the vicinity of Muddy Creek (picture facing to the east). *Source:* Author.

It was this “fording or crossing” dilemma that led to the track followed by the Washington party in 1753 and it is this subject that should first be addressed. It is clear from the journals that after an initial crossing the group of sixteen (which included an official French military escort and a number of Iroquois Indians) proceeded up the eastern bank of French Creek along what would have been a well-worn trail, considering the regular traffic that had to exist between the two French forts. This path led them to another crossing point at a place called “big crossing,” which is known to have existed near the present town of Venango, north of Meadville. I have surveyed this location and in fact the stream here is wide with low banks and a good bottom. The likelihood of a passible ford here conforms to a long-standing tradition that it was used by the French, as shown on Nicolas Bellin’s map of 1755, and based on surveys by Le Mercier and others.

Gist’s journal states that when they reached this point they found the creek to be impassable due the water’s flow and depth. This is not at all surprising given French Creek’s characteristics during the winter months.

Sunday, December 9th. This day we traveled to the big crossing, about fifteen miles, and encamped, our Indians went out to look out logs to make a raft; but as the water was high, and there were other creeks to cross, we concluded to keep up this side of the creek.

Gist seems to be saying that it made more sense to remain on the eastern side of French Creek for the remainder of the journey to the fort. Thus it stands to reason that with regular "traffic" a path along the eastern bank would have existed for use during the winter months, and this is the path that would have been followed.

Wallace maintains that the party continued north looking for a crossing site east of Cambridge Springs, where I question any could have existed. Furthermore, considering that the party was being led by a French military escort (including a general) familiar with the route, the thought that this group was feeling its way through the terrain blindly is highly unlikely, if not unthinkable. Regular routes along both sides of the creek would have existed, again certainly to accommodate the regular military traffic between the French forts. French Creek flooded on a regular basis, making upstream crossings perilous or extremely difficult. Thus two routes would have been required. (Additionally, early historical records state that a road was cut through by the French military along this eastern side of French Creek and its overgrown trace was discovered by the subsequent English settlers in the early 1800s.)³

The next entry in Gist's journal does not indicate that there were any extraordinary issues with the route or traveling:

Monday, December 10th, set out, traveled about eight miles, and encamped. Our Indians killed a bear. Here we had a creek to cross, very deep; we got over on a tree, and got our goods over.

Washington simply describes that part of the journey as follows: "bad traveling through many mires and swamps; these we were obliged to pass to avoid crossing the creek, which was impossible, either by fording or rafting, the water was so high and rapid." But what Washington did record was the trace of the trail with a map, which depicts the trail leaving French Creek at the "big crossing" site and traveling in a northeasterly direction, in essence cutting off the right angles formed by French Creek in its east to west route from Muddy Creek to Conneauttee Creek. This obviously is the shorter route as opposed to keeping to the creek's bank, and certainly had to have been laid

out by those who were familiar with the country and the right angles formed by French Creek (see figs. 2 and 3).

It is this map drawn by Washington and a subsequent hand-copied version by James A. Burt that led me to investigate the route in greater detail, as I could plainly see that it would have passed at some point over the rear section of my property. With this in mind, in the late fall of 2012, as the



FIGURE 2: Washington's map. Source: Martin Lawrence, ed., *The George Washington Atlas* (Washington, DC: George Washington Bicentennial Commission, 1932).

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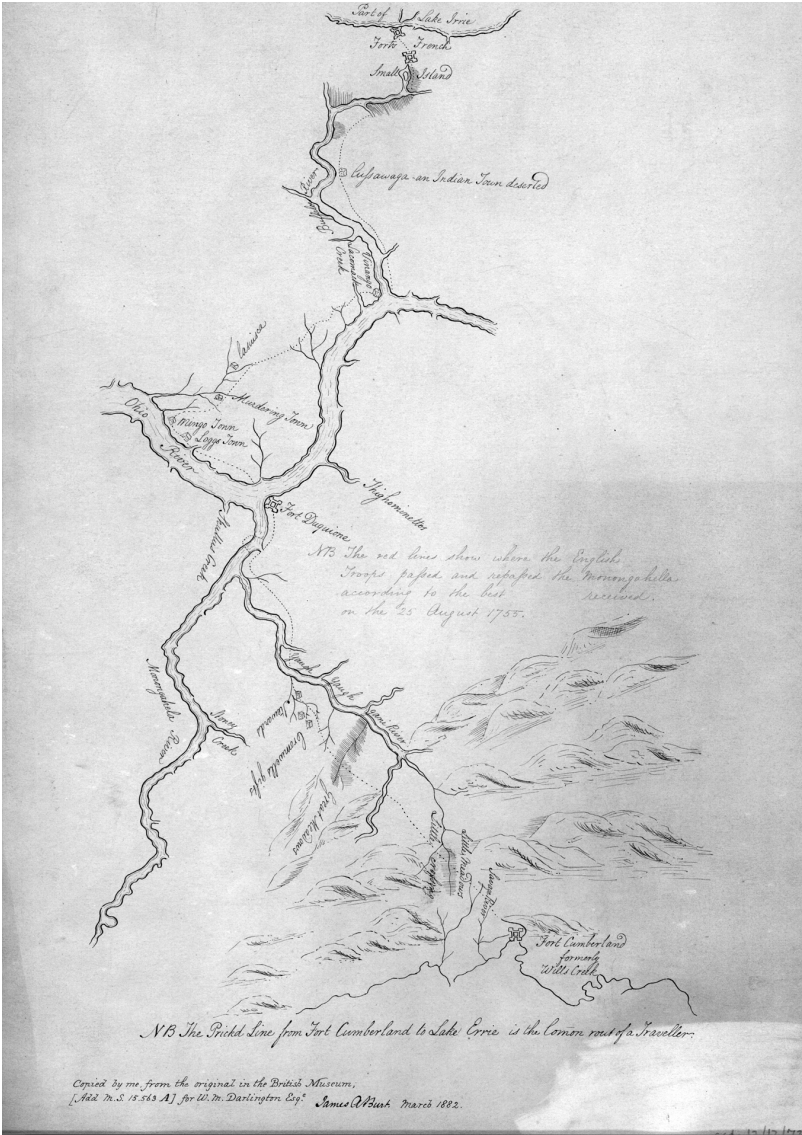


FIGURE 3: This map was hand-copied by James A. Burt in 1882 from the original 1756 map located in London at the British Museum. *Source:* Courtesy of Darlington Digital Library, Special Collections, University of Pittsburgh.

foliage was thinning, I discovered the possible remains of a level trace and a discernible path coming from Mohawk Creek where I also discovered what appeared to be the remains of an old fording site with low banks (see fig. 4). Wallace makes an unsubstantiated statement that indicates to me that he did not have the same access to the ground in this area as I currently do. He states:

Admitting that Washington and his party were forced to keep to the east of French creek, some authorities would have them cross Muddy Creek near its mouth—forgetting that the sixteen men with their horses would have had to plow their way through miles of marshes. As if to add to the confusion, Washington’s map of the journey, whatever version be used, fails to show accurately where they went at this stage. . . . Washington and his party, unable to use the normal crossing of French Creek, had to make a long detour to avoid the marshes that guarded the lower course of Muddy Creek. The first good crossing was where the town of Little Cooley stands today.



FIGURE 4: Mohawk Creek Ford “along possible trace of old French path followed by Washington’s party.” *Source:* Author.

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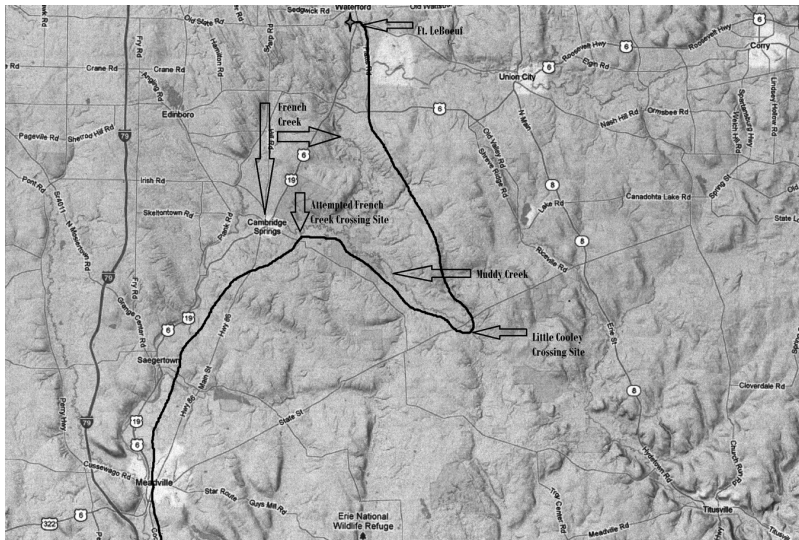


FIGURE 5: Wallace-proposed “Little Cooley” route. *Source:* Created by the author with Google Maps.

Wallace bases this theory solely upon the words of a nineteen-year-old, Vernon Landers, who accurately described a swamp that is several miles away from my property and the mouth of Muddy Creek. He boldly proclaimed with the bravado of a teenager that "I could take you through places now, where no one else could come through alive." There are in fact some swamp areas further to the east and southeast, but the lowland in question is nothing more than marshy. The problem with Landers's statement as referenced by Wallace is that it is not at all in keeping with either the journals of Washington or Gist, and certainly not borne out by Washington's map, a fact that Wallace freely admits.

Early historical writings refer to this land in 1799 being considered “wasteland” (not tillable) due to its marshes, but that it was also covered with hemlock, pine, black ash, beech, and maple trees. Subsequently, in 1815 a sawmill was erected at the mouth of Muddy Creek where the timber was sawed and rafted in flat-boats down French Creek to Meadville.⁴ There are no signs of the land ever having been farmed but it easily would have been timbered. A survey map from the late 1800s shows multiple land plots.

In 1959 the land was purchased by the federal government in the creation of the Erie National Wildlife Refuge. Many of the indigenous tree

species were then naturally or artificially reintroduced, along with a large pine-hemlock forest, as I was told by Thomas P. Roster, the wildlife refuge manager. Due to this unobstructed growth over the past fifty years the land should now resemble its original 1753 appearance (see fig. 6).

To substantiate my thoughts that Washington's party could have traversed this land and crossed Muddy Creek I decided to retrace their path. In early April of 2013, after several days of heavy rain and with French Creek at flood stage, I set out from the Mohawk Creek ford headed toward Muddy Creek. With a light rain falling I kept up a leisurely pace through the woods. At several points I did in fact encounter some marshy areas (fig. 7) but none that slowed my pace significantly and all easily could have been traversed by man or beast. Within forty-five minutes I was standing on the banks of Muddy Creek at what would have been a nice campsite. In addition, this heavily wooded marshy area is the preferred habitat of the Pennsylvania black bear, so the entry that states that the Indians killed a bear at this spot is in keeping with the terrain. By maintaining an "easterly" path I came upon Muddy Creek at a spot that was deep but only about twenty yards wide



FIGURE 6: Proceeding to Muddy Creek from the west through the forest. *Source:* Author.



FIGURE 7: Marshy areas encountered, as referred to by Washington in approaching Muddy Creek. *Source:* Author.

and where the banks are sand, not mud. A large tree could have been easily felled anywhere in this area to provide a crossing, while a horse could also swim the stream. I returned through the woods and made it back in forty minutes.

Because I walked directly to the east, the possible crossing site is exactly where Washington's map shows it to have been, while a subsequent walk also proved that the land on the opposite bank is dry and provides an easy route back to the banks of French Creek and the path to Fort Le Boeuf following the eastern bank of French Creek (figs. 8–9). The ominous swamp that Wallace refers to exists to the east and southeast of this crossing point. Therefore there is no reference to the terrain issues (in the journals) that would have caused the extraordinary detour to the Little Cooley site because I am confident that such issues were not encountered. Gist states that they “got over Muddy Creek on a tree,” and in fact trees falling naturally across Muddy Creek is a common event as I saw two within a short distance, crossing Muddy Creek from bank to bank. This could have been the case in 1753 or one could have easily been cut down with an axe (fig. 10).



FIGURE 8: Muddy Creek crossing vicinity as depicted on Washington's map. *Source:* Author.



FIGURE 9: Eastern bank of Muddy Creek at Washington's depicted crossing area. *Source:* Author.



FIGURE 10: Fallen tree crossing Muddy Creek, similar one described by Washington, which author used to cross Muddy Creek. *Source:* Author.

The following day I traveled to the Little Cooley site described by Wallace. I can attest that it does not fit the Gist journal. It would have been a detour of great significance and could not have been ignored on Washington's map. In addition, Muddy Creek at this point is so far removed from the flooding of French Creek that no "tree" would have been required to cross it. In fact, the day I was there the site was filled with trout fisherman. The Little Cooley route would *not* have been a detour that escaped mention in the Gist and Washington journals, let alone not being depicted on Washington's accurate map.

There is every reason to believe, based on my exploration of this land, that Washington's map is nothing but completely accurate in every detail, as it shows the party crossing Muddy Creek near its mouth (fig. 11) As well, the "strokes" Washington used to represent the marshy (but not impassible) land still exists today, but it is in no way "impenetrable," as described by Dr. Wallace.



FIGURE 11: Trail turning north along French Creek to Fort Le Boeuf, exiting the marshy area of Muddy Creek. *Source:* Author.

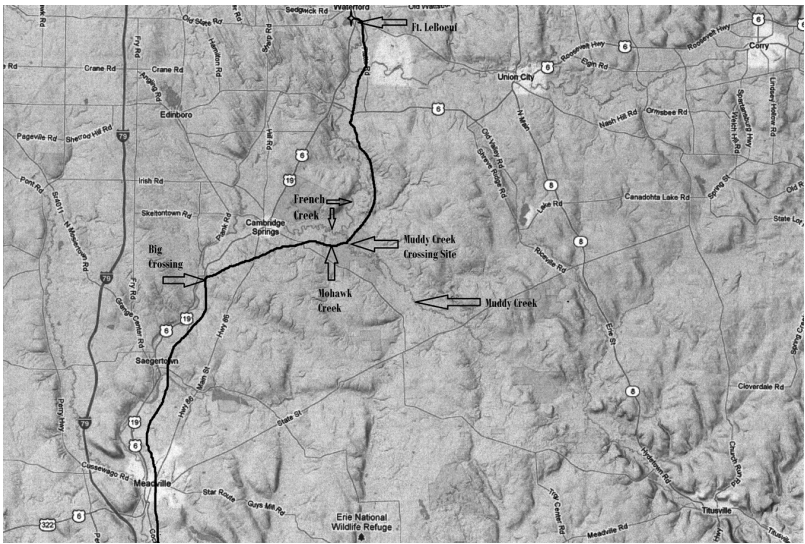


FIGURE 12: Cranmer-proposed route following Washington's map. *Source:* Created by the author with Google Maps.

NOTES

1. Kevin Patrick Kopper, ed., *The Journals of George Washington and Christopher Gist: Mission to Fort Le Boeuf, 1753-1754* (Slippery Rock, PA: Friends of the Old Stone House, Slippery Rock University, 2003).
2. Paul A. Wallace, "George Washington's Route from Venango to Fort Le Boeuf, 1753," *Pennsylvania History* 28, no. 4 (October 1961): 325-34.
3. See Samuel Penniman Bates, Robert C. Brown, and John Brandt Mansfield, *History of Crawford County, Pennsylvania* (Chicago: Warner, Beers and Co., 1885), 605.
4. *Ibid.*, 610.