

THE WESTERN PENNSYLVANIA HISTORICAL MAGAZINE

VOL. 32

MARCH-JUNE, 1949

NOS. 1 AND 2

WESTERN PENNSYLVANIA THE MILITARY SCHOOL OF GEORGE WASHINGTON

ALFRED P. JAMES¹

THERE are many biographies of George Washington. One of the latest of these, by John C. Fitzpatrick, is entitled, *George Washington Himself, a Common-Sense Biography Written from His Manuscripts*. As is widely known, Dr. Fitzpatrick was the editor of one publication on the journals of George Washington and another monumental publication on the writings of George Washington.

In the Library of Congress is an enormous collection of material catalogued as the Washington Papers. Fitzpatrick not only had access to these but by means of photostats aimed to publish all the known writings of Washington. A sentence from a foreword of Fitzpatrick's is valuable and enlightening. He says: "The great mass of George Washington manuscripts has been ignored, or given but superficial attention by biographers, under the comforting belief that the two editions of his Writings (one by Jared Sparks of twelve volumes and one by Worthington C. Ford of fourteen volumes) contain all of his important letters." He adds: "The truth of the matter is that both of these publications, taken together, contain less than half of Washington's letters, and that the unpublished material contains as heavy a percentage of important letters as the published."

¹Dr. James, a former editor of this magazine, and a frequent contributor to its pages, is a professor of history at the University of Pittsburgh.—Ed.

As is well known, the papers of an individual include three classes of documents: (1) papers written by him; (2) papers written to him; and (3) papers furnished him or accumulated by him. It is to be hoped that Fitzpatrick published all the papers written by Washington. Of this I am uninformed and uncertain. But I am entirely certain that the other two classes of papers by no means have been printed in full by S. M. Hamilton and Jared Sparks in their editions of such material.

Now, Dr. Fitzpatrick worked first-hand with the entire Washington papers, including photostats of letters widely scattered in public and private hands. His life of Washington should theoretically be of the very highest worth. Unfortunately this does not seem to be the case. A good editor, if he avoids annotation, may be a good editor as such, but he may be a poor biographer and a poor scholar. Dr. Fitzpatrick, however good an editor, is revealed by his life of Washington both as an unsatisfactory biographer and as one of limited and defective general historical scholarship. No well-read person familiar with the period of the French and Indian War can fail to note his inadequacies and inaccuracies. His biography of Washington is not only laudatory but also adulatory and apologetic, with no small degree of sophistry and casuistry. In this respect it is merely the opposite pole from the debunking, muckraking biographies of Rupert Hughes and William E. Woodward. Neither of the two types of biography is highly respectable or will permanently hold the regard of scholars.

As Bernard Fay in his biography of Washington has emphasized, he came from a dominant planter family of tidewater Virginia. His education was scanty, secured partly from servants and clergymen, but partly from his father and from his half-brother, Major Lawrence Washington. As late as 1758, his grammar and rhetoric were faulty, a fact which Fitzpatrick, like Jared Sparks, smooths over when he does not cover it up. But as a lad Washington did study mathematics

with seriousness, and at the age of fifteen he gave considerable attention to surveying problems, geography, and map making, all of which were part of the background of his later military activities and career.

Two things stand out in this pre-military background of Washington. One of these is the colonial Virginia militia system. The laws concerning this are located in Hening's *Statutes at Large of the Colony and State of Virginia*. This militia system is adequately described in William E. Dodd's *Statesmen of the Old South*, p. 104 ff. (New York, 1911). As an old protégé of Dodd, I shall take the liberty, which he would have gladly granted, of quoting him somewhat fully, as follows: "Every man in the colony between the ages of sixteen and sixty, not physically unfit, was required to serve in the militia, some as cavalymen after the appearance of horses in the community, some as footmen. There was a compensation of a shilling-six pence for horsemen and a shilling per day for footmen when engaged in actual frontier service. Over these soldiers there was a captain of the county, who always appeared on horseback and received a hundred pounds of tobacco per day, ten shillings when engaged in actual service; his lieutenant received sixty pounds. These officers tended to become lieutenant-colonels and colonels as the counties increased in size and the number of militiamen increased from a small company to a regiment. . . . Three times a year these officers assembled the men of their county, Easter, Whitsuntide and Christmas, for drill in the use of firearms and the methods of company movements. These drills continued sometimes for two or three days."

Severe punishments were prescribed by law for violation of one's responsibilities or any part of the military law. It may be presumed that George Washington, a strong and healthy young man, served in the Virginia militia from 1749 to 1752. Fitzpatrick overlooks this, probably because there

is no information in the Washington papers, though he does mention the purchase of a military book by Washington as early as 1747. Another military advantage of young George Washington was that he lived from 1748 to 1752 at Mount Vernon with his half-brother, Lawrence Washington, an old soldier who had served in the ill-fated Cartagena campaign of 1741, probably to the permanent injury of his health. It is presumed that young George heard many tales of armed conflict from his benefactor and protector. Major in rank, Lawrence Washington was also, until his death in 1752, adjutant of a district of the Virginia militia. On his death of tuberculosis in 1752, George not only inherited his Mount Vernon estate, but succeeded him as adjutant of a district of Virginia militia.

George Washington was appointed to the position of adjutant for the Southern District of Virginia by Lieutenant Governor Dinwiddie on November 6, 1752. This office brought Washington a stipend of one hundred pounds sterling per year, and one year later, in November, 1753, through the support of William Nelson of York County, he was transferred to the adjutancy of the Northern Neck and Eastern Shore, which included the old counties of his widely scattered relatives. The point of all this is that George Washington in late 1753 was already well established in military position and needed the famous trip of 1753 only to give him fame and advancement, and not to start him, for he was already locally established.

The second item in the Virginia background of Washington's military career was his work as a surveyor in the Shenandoah Valley for Lord Fairfax in the years from 1748 to 1751, at first as a young assistant at the age of sixteen but after 1749 as a full-fledged surveyor, holding a certificate as an official county surveyor. The trips and surveys made during this period were almost laboratory applications of the

mathematics, surveying problems, geography, and map-making of the immediately preceding years.

The point of all this is that when, having failed to secure some older person to take a message to the French in North-western Pennsylvania in 1753, Lieutenant Governor Dinwiddie assigned the task to George Washington, he was not calling upon the services of an untrained and inexperienced person, in spite of the few years of age, not yet twenty-two, of the young giant of the tidewater plantation and the Shenandoah Valley wilderness. Washington came to Western Pennsylvania in 1753 with the seeds of a military career already planted in fertile soil. And as Fitzpatrick has brought out from his papers, he also had the seeds of a military career planted in his soul.

The general story of Washington in Western Pennsylvania is a many times told tale. Those who are familiar with his journal, and with the companion journal of Christopher Gist, need no elaboration of this material. What is to the point here is that the young surveyor and militiaman knew how to travel many hundreds of miles in mid-winter, that he clearly observed the significance of land formations and important sites, that he drew a map of the country transversed, learned the importance of Indian relations, came into contact with a competitive military organization, and took notes on the situation facing British-American interests and ambitions to the westward of the old colonial settlements along the Atlantic.

Even before Washington, in January, 1754, carried to Williamsburg the rejection by the French of the demands of Dinwiddie, measures had been taken for the British-American defense of the upper Ohio Valley. Captain William Trent had been commissioned to raise militiamen and proceed to the disputed territory. But now Washington was authorized to call out the western counties militia and prepare for aggres-

sive action against the French. When he arrived at Fort Cumberland he had under him only one hundred and fifty men. His campaign from that point may well be characterized as experience in learning what not to do in warfare. At Cumberland he met the men returning home from the surrender to Contrecoeur on April 17, 1754. He probably was informed of the large force of French and Indians under Contrecoeur. But he marched into a wilderness trap with his force of one hundred and fifty men. Laudatory biographers, such as Fitzpatrick, have viewed this as courage and zeal and have tried to justify it on various grounds, notably the necessity of supporting the Indian enemies of French occupation. Such biographers have also condemned Dinwiddie, Virginia, Maryland, North Carolina, and the whole imperial system for not rushing to him reinforcements and abundant military equipment and supplies. This is all absurd. Actually, Virginia was sending forward another one hundred and fifty men, Maryland was pushing forward two hundred, and three hundred and fifty men from the Carolinas were moving up. A total force of eight hundred and fifty men was being prepared for the campaign. Under the conditions of transportation of that time it was utterly impossible to get this force ready for action in April or May. And it was already too late to anticipate French occupation of the upper Ohio Valley. The campaign should have been delayed until July or August.

But Washington pushed forward with the mouth of Redstone Creek as his goal. In the mountains he had the memorable episode with Jumonville. Later he moved down the steep mountain into the low country at Christopher Gist's plantation on the site of Mount Braddock of the present day. Here with a force now doubled to three hundred men, he learned that an overwhelming French force was marching against him. In a series of military councils it was decided to retreat. His men were greatly exhausted when at last they reached an

earlier encampment in a meadow on the mountain plateau. There, according to his report made at the end of the campaign, a rude stockaded fort was hurriedly constructed barely in time to receive the French attack on July 3. At the end of the day one-third of his three hundred men were casualties and his situation in regard to ordnance and commissary supplies was desperate. He capitulated and returned to Fort Cumberland, leaving the French for the time being in undisputed control of the western country. That any other glory than that of fortitude and heroic effort can be given to this campaign is relatively incomprehensible. But Washington had gained military experience, though of a very uncomfortable and unhappy kind.

In November, 1754, Washington, after a disagreement with Lieutenant Governor Dinwiddie, resigned his commission as Colonel of the Virginia Regiment and retired to private life at Mount Vernon. Here it may be said that it is difficult for the would-be neutral reader of the contemporary documents to be wholly sympathetic with the sensitivity of Washington about his rank and prerogatives at this period. The elaborate defense of this by Fitzpatrick and others borders on the uncritical attitude of Parson Weems.

By 1755, Washington was familiar with military organization and with campaigning in the wilderness of western Virginia, western Maryland, and western Pennsylvania. None but Indians and old fur traders were more acquainted with the region. It is no surprise that Major General Edward Braddock offered Washington, then in retirement, a place on his staff as a member of his official military family. It is possible to agree with Fitzpatrick that Braddock's campaign of 1755 was vital in the military schooling of the twenty-three year old colonel of colonial militia. "In the Braddock campaign the plastic character of George Washington was first molded, with

rough pressure, into the general shape of its final form," is the statement of Fitzpatrick.

In the long drawn-out march from Frederick, Maryland, where Washington joined Braddock, to the banks of the Monongahela, the alert man of destiny learned much about military administration both good and bad. Unfortunately he was seriously ill much of the time. The writer was much amused to read in his contemporary writing his high praise of the benefit he received from Dr. James' fever pills, the leading patent medicine of that time.

It is well known that Washington in private correspondence was highly critical of the conduct of Braddock's campaign. In the light of the campaigns of 1755 and 1758 it is possible to disagree with much of his criticism. It is not necessary to agree that Washington was always right and Braddock, Bouquet, Forbes, and others generally wrong. One is reminded of backseat driving. A campaign can no more be managed by two people with different ideas than an automobile be driven by a man behind the wheel and another on the back seat.

The Braddock campaign remains as yet somewhat unknown, for he lost on the battlefield his official papers, only four of which have survived. Of probably a hundred of his papers, nothing is known. But nearly three hundred copies of originals sent to Braddock and originals of office copies by Braddock have survived.

From the contemporary documentary material now accessible it is fairly clear that there were two possibilities in 1755. One was to make a dash over the mountains as Washington did in 1754 and strongly advocated in 1755, with the aim of arriving at Fort Duquesne before the usual summer reinforcements could arrive from Canada. The other was to move forward in overwhelming force and overcome any possible resistance. Military strategy from earliest times has

faced this alternative. Success has frequently been secured by pursuing well either of the alternatives. But it never is likely to be attained by mixing and confusing them. It would seem, in the light of transportation and subsistence difficulties in 1755, that the alternative of overwhelming mass advance, even if late in the season, was correct at that time. A bad blunder was made, when in accordance with the alternative advocated by Washington, one-half of Braddock's force containing his heavier battalions was left on the mountain top and the other half in light formations sent hurriedly forward against Fort Duquesne. Divided counsel and divided force were in some degree responsible for the disaster at the Battle of the Monongahela on July 9.

Of the fortitude and ability with which Washington conducted himself on this battlefield there is much evidence and little question. Of tactics on the battlefield he certainly gained experience, even if distressing and dangerous. Fitzpatrick says of Washington's military schooling in the campaign of 1755: "For all of Braddock's blistering wrath there was an honest worth in the man and Washington learned many things of value to himself in the association with Braddock."

Washington's military career as commander-in-chief of the Virginia forces in the frontier defense of his native colony, 1755 to 1758, is no part of our interest here save in a very indirect way. Possibly his resistance to Indian raids against Virginia saved eastern Pennsylvania from more severe attacks, but that is about all that can be said.

With the coming of Forbes in 1758, the situation changed from a prolonged defensive to an aggressive offensive. As Forbes moved west, slowly but methodically, from Carlisle to Bedford, the two Virginia regiments under Colonel George Washington and Colonel William Byrd III moved west to Fort Cumberland, Maryland. There in the late summer and early autumn came the famous disagreement between Washington

and Bouquet, in which the latter was backed by Forbes, about the route to be followed in the campaign. This most certainly was not a dispute in which Washington was wholly right and his opponents wholly wrong. Fitzpatrick sensed this in his examination of the evidence and here indulges in apologetic explanation. However, Washington, though he might protest and play a beautiful game of bluffing and calling, after the manner of a poker game, with Colonel Bouquet, did not refuse to obey the military orders of his recognized superiors and joined forces with the British and Pennsylvania troops at Bedford and Ligonier in the late autumn of 1758. Here again he had the opportunity in Western Pennsylvania to observe the organization and administration of a relatively large body of troops by old and experienced European military commanders. Also his somewhat impetuous demand for action must have been gratified by the last days of the campaign, when, having learned from a prisoner of the weakness of the depleted garrison at Fort Duquesne, General Forbes moved forward the battalions of British regulars and American provincials in a well co-ordinated dash through the roadless wilderness up to the smouldering ruins of Fort Duquesne. For the fourth time in five years Washington was on the banks of the Monongahela River. After two futile attempts in 1754 and 1755 he finally reached Fort Duquesne in the victory of 1758.

Washington in later years, as was shown in an article in a historical magazine, made a study of the foremost contemporary books on military matters and doubtless profited greatly therefrom. But there is little reason for doubt that in Western Pennsylvania, 1753 to 1758, was formed by experience a large part of what skill and art in warfare he demonstrated as commander-in-chief in the War of Independence of the American colonies.