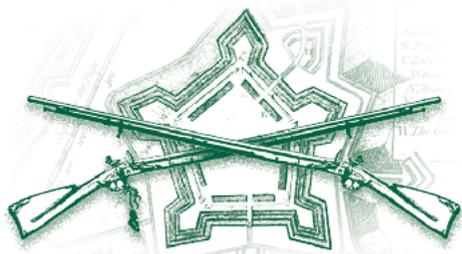


UP FRONT



FORT PITT

By Alan Gutches, Director

Pittsburgh, Virginia?

The year 1774 brought important changes to Fort Pitt, Pittsburgh, and southwestern Pennsylvania. Throughout the region, American Indians and Euro-Americans were coming closer to open warfare as natives sought to hold the encroaching colonists at bay. Against that tense background, another conflict was about to bubble over, not between the races, but between the British colonies of Pennsylvania and Virginia over exactly who owned what land.

Major oversights by the British government laid the foundations for future tension between these colonies. The documents that established Pennsylvania and Virginia were vague enough to be interpreted as placing what is now a large part of Western Pennsylvania in both colonies. Frustrations over the unresolved claims were compounded by the fact that much of the disputed territory had never even been officially surveyed, making true boundaries even more difficult to determine.

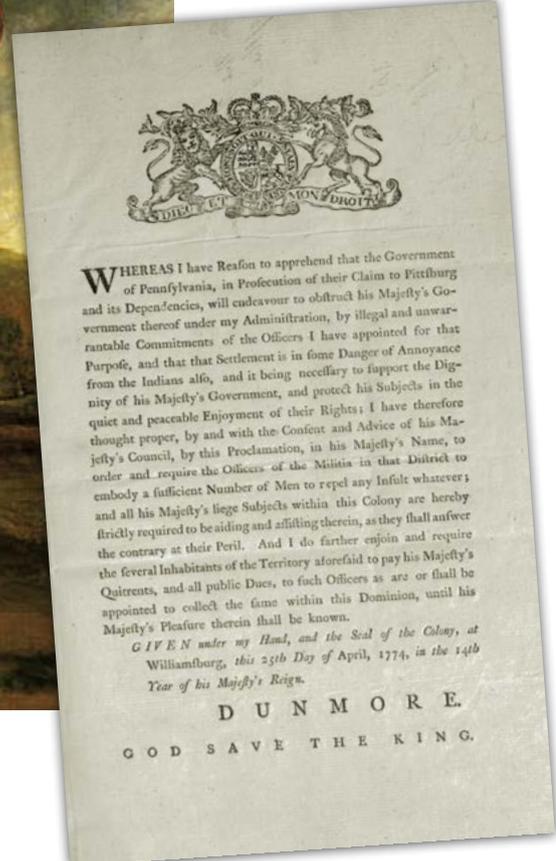
The year 1773 brought Virginia's Royal Governor, Lord Dunmore, for a visit to Pittsburgh to view the land and its potential. He then began planning a move that his colony had contemplated for decades: the physical annexing of a large part of these western lands into the legal boundaries of Virginia. The following January he authorized



Portrait of Pittsburgh, Virginia's Royal Governor John Murray, the 4th Earl of Dunmore, painted by Joshua Reynolds in 1765. Scottish National Portrait Gallery.

Dr. John Connolly to organize a local militia and establish Virginia courts by replacing those of Pennsylvania. Over the course of the next few months, loyal representatives of Pennsylvanians and Virginians arrested and rearrested each other as the pendulum of power swung back and forth.

When the dust settled in 1774, it was Virginia that prevailed. The entire region was now the West Augusta District. Virginia officials controlled the militia, and in honor of their governor, the aging Fort Pitt was occupied and renamed "Fort Dunmore." Pittsburgh was now officially and wholly within the Old Dominion. The region was divided into three new counties, with Monongalia County making up most of the south and east, Ohio County along most of the west, and Yohogania County, which



1774 proclamation by Lord Dunmore calling on the militia in the district of West Augusta to defend "Pittsburg and its Dependencies" from incursions by both Pennsylvanians and hostile Indians. Library of Congress.

included Pittsburgh, capping the others to the north.

Pennsylvania did not abandon its claim to the region, but attempts at retaking the area by force were given up for a possible diplomatic answer to the conflict. Other events, however, delayed any hope of a quick resolution. In May of 1774, frontier ruffians massacred a band of Mingo Indians near where Yellow Creek enters the Ohio River. This act finally brought open warfare to the entire region as both whites

and Indians made reprisals along the frontier. Lord Dunmore returned, this time with an army of backwoodsmen and plans to suppress the Shawnee and Mingo tribes. On October 10, a battle was fought at what is now Point Pleasant, West Virginia, where the Kanawha River joins the Ohio River. There was not a decisive victory on the battlefield, but with no hopes to resupply with gunpowder and lead, the Indians were forced to retreat. Peace negotiations began with the Shawnee, who shortly after signed a treaty with Lord Dunmore.

Before Pennsylvania and Virginia could expect a final ruling from Great Britain for their land issues, the first shots of the American Revolution were fired at Lexington and Concord in the spring of 1775. The inter-colonial dispute was set aside for their mutual conflict with the Crown. Fort Pitt reclaimed her original name, as Lord Dunmore was now despised by the rebelling Americans. Pittsburgh and the rest of the West Augusta District, however, became part of the new state of Virginia. Some settlers in the region were unhappy with the prospect of being the western edge of either state in the conflict. In 1776, a group from the disputed region petitioned the Continental Congress for the creation of a 14th state to be named “Westsylvania.” Its proposal was ignored.

Pennsylvania continued to press for the return of the western lands even as it remained bound with Virginia as part the new United States. As the Revolution wore on, and with the urging of the Continental Congress, the states reached a mutually acceptable solution in 1779. An agreement was ratified a year later that returned most of the disputed lands to Pennsylvania, though it would be several more years until the exact legal boundaries were completely surveyed and agreed upon. After several years of absence, Pittsburgh was safely back in Penn’s woods. 

Recommended Reading:

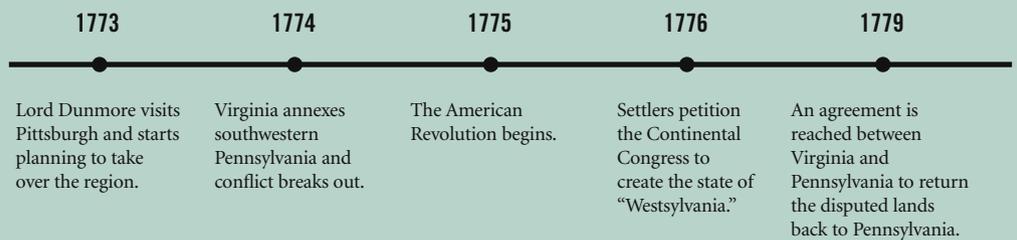
Boyd Crumrine, *The Boundary Controversy Between Pennsylvania and Virginia: 1748–1785*, Annals of the Carnegie Museum, Vol. 1 (Pittsburgh: Carnegie Museum, 1902).

James David Corbett, *Dunmore’s New World* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2013).

Harold Frederic and William C. Frederick, III, *The Westsylvania Pioneers, 1774–1776* (Chicora, Pa.: Mechling Bookbindery, 1991).

Learn More Online
 Read Lord Dunmore’s proclamation and other primary source documents.

TIMELINE



Map showing the location and boundaries of the counties of Ohio, Yohogania, and Monongalia, in the district of West Augusta, Virginia.
 Fort Pitt Museum.

