The retreat of Edward Braddock’s shattered army from the Forks of the Ohio in the Summer of 1755 left Western Pennsylvania in utter panic and disarray. French and Indian raiding parties fanned out from Fort Duquesne and made the frontier run red with blood.

A more resolute successor to General Braddock might have rallied the British retreat from the Monongahela at Fort Cumberland, Maryland, and provided some buffer. But Colonel Thomas Dunbar did not stop until he had led his troops across half of Pennsylvania and declared his intention to go into Winter quarters in Philadelphia even though it was only the end of July.

The result of Dunbar’s flight was that the French and their Indian allies killed British settlers and burned their villages and outposts from the upper Susquehanna to the crest of the Blue Ridge, effectively pushing Great Britain’s frontier eastward some 150 miles. Carlisle, York, and Lancaster became armed camps filled with fleeing refugees.

Rumors of a French advance to the outskirts of Philadelphia proved merely that, but a measure of uncertainty fueled by countless skirmishes continued unabated for the next three years. During this time, there was not so much as a tremor to the supremacy of the French fleur-de-lis flying above Fort Duquesne.

In the Spring of 1758, British Prime Minister William Pitt decreed that this must change. In addition to aggressive campaigns that year against the fortress of Louisbourg and Fort Carillon (known to the British as Ticonderoga), Pitt was determined to reduce Fort Duquesne and plant the Union Jack firmly at the Forks of the Ohio. Little did he know that the choice of route would leave a 26-year-old Virginia colonel named George Washington arguing with his superior almost to the point of insubordination.

To lead the Fort Duquesne prong of his grand 1758 offensive, William Pitt chose a reserved but resolute Scotsman named John Forbes. Born in Fifeshire in 1707, Forbes initially trained as a doctor, but discovered his real passion when he received a commission in the Scots Greys in 1735. He saw military service in Flanders and was at Culloden in Scotland along with just about every other officer of promise in the British army.

By 1750, Forbes was a lieutenant colonel and (like both Jeffery Amherst and James Wolfe) had acquired considerable experience in logistics. In the Spring of 1757, Forbes was posted to America to serve on Lord Loudoun’s staff as his adjutant general. When Loudoun was recalled the following year, Forbes’ good standing with Pitt earned him advancement to brigadier general and command of the campaign against Fort Duquesne.

As his second-in-command, Forbes was to have Henry Bouquet. Born in Switzerland of French Huguenots who had fled France to avoid religious persecution, Bouquet had risen to the rank of lieutenant colonel in the Prince of Orange’s Swiss Guards. In 1756, he was recommended for the Royal American regiment and came to Pennsylvania to recruit for this storied unit of British regulars raised in America from among largely German-speaking immigrants.
Forbes and Bouquet made a good team. Each was every inch a soldier. Already plagued by the poor health that would dog him throughout the campaign, Forbes quickly became the expedition planner and Bouquet the executor of that plan in the field.

Well aware of the hazards that had befallen Braddock’s strung-out command, Bouquet took wilderness warfare to heart and wrote his own recommended tactics for regulars marching through wooded terrain: “In case of an attack,” Bouquet theorized, “the men must fall on their knees; that motion will prevent their running away, and in covering them from the fire, shall give time to reconnoiter and to make the necessary dispositions.”

As General Forbes made his own assessment of the troops under his command, he was determined, of course, that there be no “running away.” Forbes was glad to have a regiment of Highlanders newly arrived from England as well as Bouquet’s battalion of Royal Americans. When a company of artillery was included, these accounted for about 1,400 regulars. The remainder of his troops—5,000 or so—were to be from provincial regiments, including the First Virginia under the command of Lieutenant Colonel George Washington.

Washington had already been at or near the Forks of the Ohio on three separate occasions. In late 1753, he was only 21 when he carried a message to the French from Virginia’s lieutenant governor demanding their withdrawal from outposts on the Allegheny. They flatly refused and were hurriedly building Fort Duquesne at the Forks by the time Washington returned the following year.

Charged with establishing a similar fort, Washington was nonetheless forced to withdraw to Virginia after he suffered the humiliation of surrendering Fort Necessity. Barely had his year of parole elapsed when he caught up with Braddock’s column in time for the debacle on the Monongahela. But Washington was Virginia’s rising star and in the wake of Braddock’s defeat, he was given command of Virginia’s first line of defense.

The First Virginia and a few other provincial units had been in existence long enough to have acquired some measure of military discipline, but even Washington found plenty of frustration. Given the accustomed flow of liquor and rum, the young colonel declared in despair that it was difficult to maintain military discipline because of “the villainous behavior of those tipping housekeepers.”

Forbes was more blunt. Observing the new troops, the general complained bitterly to Pitt that “a few of their principle officers excepted, all the rest are an extremely bad collection of broken innkeepers, horse jockeys, and Indian traders, and that the men under them, are a direct copy of their officers.”

But by what route would they march? Braddock’s road of 1755 from Fort Cumberland was choked with new growth and scented with the smell of defeat, but it still led to Fort Duquesne. Forbes seems to have initially assumed that this would be his corridor. It was certainly the obvious one. But Sir John St. Clair, who was serving as Forbes’ quartermaster general and who had performed the same service under General Braddock three years before, came up with a different idea.

Whether it was the result of persuasive lobbying by Pennsylvania merchants, a true eye to tactical military advantages, or simply a desire to avoid revisiting the grim path of 1755 is debatable. The result, however, was that as St. Clair scurried about the Susquehanna Valley arranging teamsters and supplies for Forbes’ advance, he suggested foregoing Braddock’s route and carving a new road to Fort Duquesne straight west through central Pennsylvania.

Confessing to Henry Bouquet that he was not certain why St. Clair “has altered his sentiments,” Forbes nonetheless agreed with him and made plans for a methodical advance, not from Fort Cumberland along Braddock’s old road, but directly west from tiny Raystown on the upper Juniata River. Regardless the ease with which this decision of “which road?” appears to have been made, it would have major ramifications far beyond the present military tactics.

John Forbes was not the only officer to have assumed an advance via Braddock’s road. The commander of the First Virginia regiment had also long planned that any return to Fort Duquesne would be over the general route that he knew so well from his earlier campaigns.

As late as July 24, 1758, George Washington wrote Colonel Bouquet from Fort Cumberland and urged him to dispatch Washington’s Virginians in force along Braddock’s road at least as far as the crossing of the Youghiogheny River, “opening the road and constructing posts at proper places as they go.” Washington even requested that those units of his regiment currently at Raystown be returned to him at Fort Cumberland.

But on that very same day, Bouquet was writing Washington with far different orders. Rather than securing Braddock’s road, Washington was ordered to cut a 30-mile
road north from Fort Cumberland to Raystown and stand ready to support the route through central Pennsylvania.

When Colonel Washington received this news, he could not believe it. How much of Washington's dismay sprang from military concerns and how much was the result of whispers in his ear from Virginia's own commercial interests, has long been debated—particularly by those who cannot imagine Washington acting with anything but the most noble of purposes.

Virginia, however, had long claimed Ohio lands, and Washington had been in the forefront. Both Virginia and Pennsylvania were only too aware that once the present conflict was resolved, a new wave of settlers would flow westward via whichever route had been taken. This would not only boost the economy of the colony of the road's origin, but also benefit it defensively and commercially with the new string of outposts to be built along the route.

Now, Forbes was determined to do just that through Pennsylvania—not Virginia. Washington dashed off a reply to Bouquet that he "would march wherever he was ordered," but avowed that he knew the central Pennsylvania route "to be impracticable," even though he had never traversed it.

Anxious that he and Washington "might all center in one and the same opinion," Bouquet summoned Washington to meet him halfway between Fort Cumberland and Raystown, where Fort Bedford was being built. In the meantime, Bouquet directed Washington to "order back your parties advanced upon Braddock's road, to prevent any accident."

Washington met with Bouquet on July 29, and strongly protested this order and the choice of routes. Bouquet, the proper Swiss officer, was not used to having his orders questioned, particularly by a 26-year-old provincial officer whose military record to date had been largely one of defeat.

Even so, Bouquet appears to have been initially inclined to hear Washington out, even suggesting to Forbes beforehand that the general himself might meet with Washington and—assuming reports from west of Raystown indicated a reasonable passage over Laurel Hill—"persuade him to yield to the evidence."

But Washington clearly riled Bouquet's Swiss blood with his stubborn insistence on Braddock's road. After their visit, Bouquet again reported to Forbes and huffed that he had "learned nothing satisfactory" from Washington about how the Virginian, despite his zeal, intended to overcome the acknowledged difficulties of Braddock's road.

"Most of these gentlemen do not know
Meanwhile, Colonel John Armstrong of Pennsylvania wryly observed: “The Virginians are much chagrined at the opening of the road through this government [Pennsylvania], and Colonel Washington has been a good deal sanguine [red-faced], and obstinate upon the occasion.”

Bouquet replied to Washington the following day. Acknowledging that Washington’s arguments were clear and “delivered with that openness and candor that become a gentleman and a soldier,” Bouquet asked that Washington “give me leave, my dear sir, to answer you in the same style.”

General Forbes had given him express orders to build west from Raystown, Bouquet told Washington, and “as I shall always oblige the directions of a superior officer with readiness”—something Bouquet clearly felt Washington was not doing—“there was no room left to hesitate.”

Noting that Sir John St. Clair had just assured him that “a very good wagon road may be made with ease and speed through the gap that we have lately discovered” in Laurel Hill, Bouquet considered the matter closed. But he could not refrain from twisting the barb just a little.

“I cannot therefore entertain the least doubt,” wrote Bouquet to Washington, “that we shall now all go on hand in hand and that the same zeal for the service that has hitherto been so distinguishing a part of your character will carry you by Raystown over the Allegheny Mountains and on to Fort Duquesne.”

So it was that by early August 1758, Bouquet had 600 Pennsylvanians, who were guarded by another 600 Virginians, hacking their way westward from Raystown up the
main spine of the Alleghenies. Hardly beyond the smoke of Fort Bedford, St. Clair urged Forbes to "send me as many men as you can with digging tools, this is a most diabolical work, and whiskey must be had."

While a still disgruntled Washington continued work on the Cumberland to Raystown road, Bouquet pushed the main line across Laurel Hill and a total of 40 miles farther west to Loyalhannon Creek. Here, his troops paused to build Fort Ligonier and await Forbes with the remainder of his command and St. Clair's snaking supply trains.

Plagued by what was probably dysentery, Forbes did not arrive in Raystown until September 15, and then only on a litter strapped between two horses. Meanwhile, St. Clair had managed to antagonize much of Pennsylvania, but supplies were finally moving. His efforts were aided when the Pennsylvania Assembly, as late as September 20, authorized a bonus for anyone who would furnish four good horses and a wagon and haul at least 1,400 pounds of supplies, plus subsistence for the team, from Lancaster to Raystown.

Fort Ligonier was within 40 miles of Fort Duquesne, but Bouquet was caught between pressing onward and waiting for Forbes. Part of his quandary was in knowing the strength of Fort Duquesne's defenses. Major James Grant of the Highlanders offered to lead a reconnaissance in force and perhaps even put the fort under siege.

By September 13, 1758, Grant's detachment of 400 regulars and 350 provincials were within sight of Fort Duquesne. Captain William MacDonald and 100 Highlanders were given the unenviable task of marching toward the gates with drums beating to act as bait to lure the French into the open field. Grant and his remaining troops waited in ambush on the nearby hills.

The French did come out of the fort, but not with the result Grant had intended. Perhaps as many as a thousand French and Indian warriors swarmed to the attack. By the time the fight was over, Grant, along with a large number of his troops, had been forced to surrender. Only Captain Thomas Bullitt's Virginia unit of some hundred men held the line and "sustained the battle with all their forces." Without them, there may have been a complete rout.

As it was, Grant's battered force limped back to Fort Ligonier without him after losing almost 300 killed or captured. French losses were eight killed and eight wounded. In many respects, it was as one-sided a victory as the French had achieved over General Braddock three years before. The difference was that instead of turning tail and running across Pennsylvania, the British were able to fall back only 40 miles to Fort Ligonier and regroup. Forbes's strategy of advancing in force with heavily armed bases of support was paying off.
As Forbes gathered the bulk of his forces at Fort Ligonier, time was running out. The other campaigns of 1758 had long since come to a close. With the skies of November darkening and some 5,000 troops assembled, it was time for one final effort against the French thorn at the Forks of the Ohio.

In the British assemblage was once again the First Virginia regiment. Its young colonel was still grousing about the state of the Pennsylvania road, calling it “indescribably bad” and voicing his views that the campaign would grind to an end at Fort Ligonier.

Forbes thought differently, however, and on November 12 dispatched Washington and about 500 Virginians west in pursuit of a French raiding party that had stolen cattle and horses from near the fort. Perhaps thinking of Grant’s misfortune, Forbes quickly sent another Virginia unit under Colonel George Mercer on Washington’s heels to aid in surrounding the enemy.

Washington was successful in capturing three prisoners, an Indian couple and an Englishman, who claimed he had been recently kidnapped from Lancaster. But just as Washington was interrogating them around a campfire, Mercer’s troops appeared on the scene and surmised Washington’s command to be an enemy encampment. In the darkness, a furious exchange of friendly fire ensued that left two officers and 38 enlisted men dead.

Washington made no contemporary report of the unfortunate incident. But almost 30 years later reminisced that his life had then been “in as much jeopardy as it had ever been before or since” and that he had tried to stop the firefight by “knocking up with his sword the presented pieces.”

Another account was not so charitable. It claimed that “Colonel Washington did not discover his usual activity and presence of mind upon this occasion” and that only the intervention of Captain Thomas Bullitt, hero of Grant’s last stand, frantically waving his hat in the midst of the melee, prevented further carnage.

Forbes reported the encounter to his superior without assigning any blame either to Washington or Mercer and merely noted that “unfortunately our parties fired upon each other in the dark.” The only good thing to come out of the matter was that the captured Englishman proved of dubious loyalty and was in fact serving the French out of Fort Duquesne. It didn’t take much persuasion to convince him to give a full accounting of the current condition of its garrison.

For their part, Fort Duquesne’s French defenders were glum. Even if they could hold against Forbes’ advance and recruit the approach of winter as their ally, they couldn’t survive a siege. There simply was no food or supplies to permit them the time, no matter how gallant their intent. What succor might have been en route had gone up in flames after a British raid against Fort Frontenac on Lake Ontario a few months before. “I am in the saddest situation one could imagine,” the French commandant lamented.

Forbes sent Washington’s Virginia regiment and John Armstrong’s Pennsylvanians west from Fort Ligonier to hack out the remainder of his road. Washington fretted about an adequate supply of provisions, but seems to have reluctantly embraced the road building. By November 19, the units were on the upper reaches of Turtle Creek, only about a dozen miles from Fort Duquesne. There, they waited for the arrival of General Forbes with the remainder of his little army.

According to an eyewitness account in the Pennsylvania Gazette, the following evening, “a heavy firing was heard from thence [Fort Duquesne] ... and that afterwards a rumbling noise was also heard, like that of great guns at a distance.”

No one was quite sure what to make of it, but an investigation the next day revealed the source of the huge explosion. “Monsieurs did not stay for the approach of our army,” an express messenger reported, “but blew up the fort” and carried off with them “everything there [that] was valuable, except the spot of ground where the fort stood.”

Indeed, Commandant François Marie Le Marchand de Ligernis had followed his orders and destroyed the principal works rather than let them fall into British hands. The British return to Fort Duquesne was complete.

As Forbes and his troops assembled at the Forks, a large part of their success was due to Forbes’ choice of direct route and the construction of heavily defended outposts along it. But there had also been his negotiation of the Treaty of Easton a few weeks earlier. This document neutralized the Ohio Indians, who had previously been on the side of the French, with a promise to respect their territory at the Forks.

Now, as their representatives gathered to confer with the British, they were assured that the structures being quickly rebuilt would be small and geared only to re-establishing trade. But the cork was out of the bottle. Give up British claims to the Ohio Country? That was unthinkable. If Pennsylvanians and Virginians could argue over the choice of a road, they would fight over the spoils of its destination: they certainly would not abandon them.
The Pennsylvania Gazette of December 28, 1758, was quite blunt about the matter. At stake in the recent campaign had been "a vast country, exceeding in extent and good land, all the European dominions of Great Britain, France, and Spain." A correspondent on the scene at the ruins of Fort Duquesne was no less sure of the result: "Blessed be God, the long looked for day is arrived that has now fixed us on the banks of the Ohio." The letter was dated November 28, from "Pittsburgh."

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Leaving a small garrison of Pennsylvanians to guard the hard-won Forks through the Winter, General John Forbes retraced his road and arrived back in Philadelphia on January 17, 1759. Shortly after his arrival, while in excruciating pain, he penned several letters to General Jeffery Amherst, who had just become the British commander in chief in North America, imploring him not to take the Indian alliances lightly and bluntly recognized "the jealousy subsisting between the Virginians and Pennsylvanians" over future trade and lands stemming from his choice of roads.

Six weeks later, Forbes was dead at 51. It could quite rightly be said that he had given his life to complete Edward Braddock's campaign against Fort Duquesne even if he had done it via a different road. As for Henry Bouquet, he would continue to serve Great Britain on the Pennsylvania frontier and play a major role in a punitive expedition against the Ohio Indians after Pontiac's uprising in 1763.

Young Colonel Washington, of course, would remain Virginia’s rising star, having gained considerable confidence and maturity from his experiences in the French and Indian War. In time, Washington would come to know his own share of subordinate junior officers as he grappled with achieving independence for a portion of the empire he had once helped Great Britain win.


5 James, Writings of Forbes, p. 129 (Forbes to Bouquet, July 6, 1758).
10 James, Writings of Forbes, p. 199 (Forbes to Bouquet, September 4, 1758).
13 "The Virginians are ..." Gipson, The Victorious Years, p. 264n.
15 "Send me ..." O'Meara, Guns at the Forks, p. 195.
16 Gipson, The Victorious Years, p. 267.
19 "Knocking up with his sword ..." and "Colonel Washington did not ..." Abbot, Papers of George Washington, Colonial Series, Volume 6, pp. 122-123 notes; "Unfortunately our parties ..." James, The Writings of Forbes, p. 255; (Forbes to Abercromby, November 17, 1758).
21 For examples of Washington’s worrying about provisions see Abbot, Papers of George Washington, Colonial Series, Volume 6, pp. 115-116 (Washington to Bouquet, November 6, 1758) and Ibid. pp. 141-143 (Washington to Forbes, November 18, 1758); "A heavy firing ..." Pennsylvania Gazette, December 7, 1758; "Monsieurs did not stay ..." New York Gazette, December 18, 1758.
22 "A vast country ..." Pennsylvania Gazette, December 28, 1758; "Blessed be God ..." Pennsylvania Gazette, December 14, 1758.
23 James, Writings of Forbes, p. 283 (Forbes to Amherst, January 26, 1759).