Two Roads

The Race for the Forks of the Ohio & the Future of America

By Burton K. Kummerow
The scene was breathtaking. Two broad rivers—one rapid and swift, the other deep and plodding—swelled with recent rains and flowed together in a mighty crescendo. A ring of striking ridges and forests framed the birth of this new, even greater river flowing toward the heart of the continent.

On a crisp fall day in 1753, Major George Washington waited for a borrowed canoe that floated his baggage down the Monongahela River. Reflecting on the dramatic landscape and perhaps skipping stones as he paced along the shore, the 21-year-old envoy pulled these lonely Forks of the Ohio into some strategic thinking. With the French swooping down from Canada to claim this land, why not make a stand here for Virginia and the British Empire?

The young Major, three weeks into a daring frontier mission, carried a British ultimatum that demanded French soldiers leave disputed western lands. Delivering that message proved to be a difficult and dangerous task, but, two months later, a bold and lucky Washington returned from his winter trek carrying a written response, a journal, and a hand-drawn map. The first proved the French willing to fight for their New World colonies. The second chronicled a heart-stopping trek through uncharted land. The third placed the Forks of the Ohio at the center of this far country’s unique geography.

George Washington began his remarkable career by stepping onto a high rung. Virginia officials printed the Major’s documents and sent them to London. Within a few months, the whole British nation, including King George himself, paid attention as Major Washington ushered in a decade of high drama called the French and Indian War. It would be a race in Western Pennsylvania to capture and control the Forks of the Ohio, one of the strategic keys to the control of North America.¹

Suddenly, the remote Forks were a bull’s-eye on everyone’s map. In the midst of a worldwide hundred year war for empire, France and England would fight their latest round in the vast, dimly understood interior of North America.

The contest became a tale of two roads, both laid down during dramatic military campaigns through a formidable wilderness. Both struck directly into the Appalachian Mountains, a long backbone in the east of America. Both early routes aimed at westward expansion and served as metaphors for the indelible and restless energy of the American spirit. One, Braddock Road, is remembered for defeat and despair. The other, Forbes Road, carried the redcoats to victory.

The Appalachian backcountry was an unforgiving world that split watersheds between east and west in waves of forested peaks and valleys. One height, the awesome Allegheny Front, was a several-hundred-mile-long hurdle. An ancient forest, carpeting the mountains and blocking out the sun, could easily swallow up souls brave or foolhardy enough to enter. The dangers and hardships were so great the Iroquois created a “Woods’ Edge Ceremony,” elaborately cleansing travelers of the forest’s evil spirits after a successful journey. With good reason, Indian nations called the highlands “The Endless Mountains.”

Hardy pioneers confronted this wild territory. These millions of acres lured land hungry European immigrants and colonial
After a hard-fought victory over the French in 1758, the British secured the success of Pittsburgh by building Fort Pitt, one of the largest strongholds in North America. Courtesy of the French and Indian War 250, Inc., and Pennsylvania’s Forbes Trail: Gateways and Getaways on the Legendary Route from Philadelphia to Pittsburgh.

Above: George Washington led provincial troops during every major French and Indian War campaign in Pennsylvania. He took away important military experience and a strong belief that the west was the key to America’s future success. Courtesy of the French and Indian War 250, Inc., and Pennsylvania’s Forbes Trail: Gateways and Getaways on the Legendary Route from Philadelphia to Pittsburgh.
speculators alike. Many, like George Washington, saw a future worth the risk in these untamed and limitless tracts of land.

At the beginning, the French had the upper hand. The legendary French Canadian “Runners of the Woods” or Coureurs des Bois paddled their canoes and batteaux through a river and lake system stretching from New Orleans to Quebec. This flourishing fur trade with Native American allies served as a strong defense line, calling in regulars, homegrown militia, Indian warriors, and supplies to battle from the farthest reaches of the network.

Only months after Washington’s first trip to Ohio Country, the French launched a large river-borne strike force, rolling over a small band already claiming the Forks of the Ohio for Virginia. French soldiers chopped out logs for Fort Duquesne at the Forks. After they soundly defeated George Washington leading his first command defending hastily-built Fort Necessity in the nearby mountains, the British government took up the challenge. A daunting task: chopping, hauling, scraping, clearing and filling a 20-foot wide swath, which followed narrow Indian trails through hundreds of miles of virgin terrain. The frontier road had to support and transport an army, thousands of hungry soldiers, heavy siege guns, and hundreds of four-horse wagons and pack trains brought to bear on the determined French enemy. The deep forest and steep mountains bore silent witness to the spectacle, absorbing the vanquished as if they never existed.

Sixty–year-old Major General Edward Braddock was first to take up the task. After decades on parade in London, his final promotion was an opportunity to become a newly-celebrated hero, retiring with the fruits of some patronage in America. Braddock’s assignment was to be a quick 2,000 man strike, a “flying column,” capturing the Forks of the Ohio before war was even declared on the French. He entered North America filled with all the arrogance of his British civilization. His American adventure was an education that turned supreme confidence into disbelief, anger, and finally stoic resolve in the face of the incomprehensible.

After marching his army through Maryland and Virginia to Fort Cumberland—the British Army’s Maryland base camp in the spring of 1755—Braddock still hoped the Forks of the Ohio flowed a few days march to the west. His maps were as fanciful and hopeless as all the contemporary European guides to the American frontier. The general planned to overpower Fort Duquesne, march his army to Fort Niagara and, after victory there, lead his regiments back to Philadelphia in time for Christmas. With the army facing arduous challenges just getting to the Forks of the Ohio, Braddock’s Cumberland base camp might as well have been at the foot of Mount Everest. Yet, in spite of this potentially fatal ignorance of American geography, the British invasion force still managed, in six weeks, to hack a hundred-
mile-long, 12-foot-wide path through a pitiless landscape.

The Braddock Road was the first over the Allegheny Mountains. It is easy to forget how close General Braddock and his redcoats came to an overwhelming victory. Fate, instead, intervened and it became the road to disaster, a collision with French and Indians that sent redcoats and settlers scurrying east in defeat. Hundreds of dead were left unburied in the forest. The unfortunate general, buried anonymously during the frantic retreat, still lies in the mountains near the road that bears his name. For decades, horses and riders passed through the battlefield spooked by the mile-long path of destruction called the "Bullet Field."

A half century later, portions of the Braddock Road were absorbed into the National Road, one of America’s first federal projects. The greater part of General Braddock’s ill-fated road, blazed close to a cannon shot from the Forks of the Ohio, is an abandoned and nearly-forgotten historical footnote.3

It was three years, filled with the terror of French and Indian attacks on frontier settlements, before British General John Forbes again took up the challenge. The 50-year-old Scotsman, as patient and open-minded as General Braddock had been arrogant and ignorant, started in Philadelphia in 1758. Forbes assembled, supplied, and methodically marched 6,000 army soldiers across central Pennsylvania. Frontier forts, several spawning new communities, were raised along the road to protect the advance. The general embraced Quaker peace efforts with Indian nations and supported a brave and successful mission to lure Native Americans from their French allies. A dying man, Forbes shared much of his command’s burden with his capable Swiss-born deputy Lieutenant Colonel Henry Bouquet. Perhaps the greatest gift of the brave and decent general was his sense of duty and honor in the face of terrible suffering. Always afraid of ambush, confronting similar merciless terrain as his unlucky predecessor, Forbes endured many disheartening reverses but, in the end, captured the prize.

The redcoat commander and his army left behind an amazing achievement: Forbes Road, Ohio “Pittsburgh.” It would take almost 50 years before all the sweat, toil, treasure, and blood of conquest paid the expected dividends. For most of those years, Pittsburgh was a lonely place, linked to struggles with Native Americans trying to hold on to their hunting lands and their way of life. Through a succession of ferocious Indian wars that stretched into Ohio, the settlers and their armies became a relentless tide.

By 1800, Pittsburgh was the linchpin of westward expansion into the Ohio Valley and the Old Northwest Territory. Tens of thousands passed through, headed to settle the continent’s heartland. Later, as mills filled up the river valleys of Western Pennsylvania, the Steel City helped make the United States an industrial giant. Today, Pittsburgh continues to lead in the development of new green technology, advanced manufacturing, life sciences, and information technologies for the 21st century.

George Washington, who led the way west through his long career, never forgot his discovery of the Forks of the Ohio in 1753. Standing in that far-flung place, he saw the future of America. The Braddock and Forbes

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The redcoat commander and his army left behind an amazing achievement: Forbes Road, a marvel of grit and hard work. Armed only with axes, picks, and shovels, thousands carved out switch backs over the peaks and filled the swamps and bogs with corduroy logs for hundreds of miles.

roads that Washington helped create ushered in an American phenomenon that has persistently powered our civilization through times of depression and prosperity. We have been a restless people constantly traveling somewhere else. Our enduring passion has been a ceaseless quest for convenient access to work, play, home, marketplace, family, friends and, ultimately, happiness in success.

That quest puzzled the great 19th-century observer of America, Alexis de Tocqueville:

“In the United States a man builds a house to spend his later years in it, and he sells it before the roof is on ... He set-

The Forbes Trail across Pennsylvania provides rich history and modern travel adventures. Courtesy of the French and Indian War 250, Inc.
Tocqueville was trying to answer the question: “Why are the Americans so restless in the midst of their prosperity?” The quest draws on a deep-seated belief that frontiers, real and imagined, always offer a better place to go. The young United States built a seductive ideology that drew waves of settlers west across the entire continent. The Appalachian frontier had a big piece of that ideology until the “Wild West,” beyond the Mississippi River, eclipsed the “Wild East.” Even as he marked the end of the tide of settlement in the 1890s, historian Frederick Jackson Turner repeated the siren song of the uncharted wilderness: “The frontier is the outer edge of the wave—the meeting point between savagery and civilization … the line of most rapid and effective Americanization.”

In the 20th century, the country searched for different frontiers. The wilderness disappeared and the old myths passed into song and story. Many among us lament the loss of that time when “civilized man was brought face to face with nature and taught mainly to rely on himself.” New frontiers have become the stuff of business, science, technology, and government programs. Still, hearkening back to the days of the Braddock and Forbes roads, our busy modern turnpikes and interstates epitomize the freedom to go somewhere else, searching for “that complete felicity which is forever on the wing.”

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1 George Washington was suddenly in important company when his “notes” were printed after his risky 1753-54 trip. The publisher was no less than Lieutenant Governor and land speculator Robert Dinwiddie who was eager, along with his Ohio Company partners, to claim millions of acres on the American frontier. Dinwiddie also wanted to prove that the French were determined to claim that same Ohio Valley. Eight copies of The Journal of Major George Washington, (Williamsburg, VA, 1754) survive. A facsimile copy of the Journal with an introduction and notes was released by the Colonial Williamsburg Foundation in 1959. The original Washington map from the mission is now in the Public Records Office in London. A good reproduction of the map is at http://www.mapsofpva/18thcentury/1754washington.jpg

2 Modern Americans can hardly imagine the challenges of traveling in the Allegheny Mountains’ Great Woods. The trials and tribulations of colonial travelers, taking on this hostile environment, are covered in great and colorful detail by James H. Merrell, Into the American Woods, Negotiators on the Pennsylvania Frontier, (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1999).

