

George Washington's Early Battles (Before the American Revolution)  
compiled and spoken by Robby Roden

Robby Roden has loved and studied history all of his life. His interests are primarily with Texas history; however, other parts of history lure him into study of other time periods and places. Today he will share some little know items about George Washington and the early part of the American Revolution

George Washington was born February 22, 1732 to Augustine Washington and Mary Ball Washington. His had a half-brother, Lawrence, by a previous marriage to Jane Butler and Augustine.

George started his surveyor business at the early age of 15 in August of 1747. Two years later on July 1749, he was appointed official surveyor of Culpepper County, VA. When he was 19 years old, he traveled to Barbados with Lawrence. George also contracted small pox but survived and from that was immune to the disease for the rest of his life. Lawrence returned to Mount Vernon, in 1752 where he died. George became the executor of the Mount Vernon estate.

In October 1753 when George was 21, the governor of Virginia sent him to Fort Le Boeuf to ask the French why they built this fort in British Territory. Along the way, George and Christopher Gist fell in with a party of Indians that eventually turned out to be French supporters. "They laid wait for us, one of them fired at us not 15 paces away, but fortunately missed." (Ref.: Allen Axelrod, Blooding at Great Meadows, 2007). At that point all of the Indians scattered except one. He called Gist by name and said he knew him. He then agreed to lead them to the safety of his cabin that was close by. After reaching a meadow, he suddenly wheeled about and raised his rifle and fired at them, once again at very close range, missing both Washington and Gist. After another narrow escape from the hand of Death, Washington and Gist spent a large part of one day building a raft to cross the Allegheny. The river, already partially iced over and being a fast-moving river, a large piece of ice hit the raft and flipped them into the icy river. Miraculously, both managed to swim to a nearby island and spent a bitterly cold night there. The next morning, finding the river completely frozen, they walked across to the opposite bank to continue home.

A year and a half after reporting to the Governor, Washington was sent to evict the French from Fort Duquesne where he found French soldiers in the woods and attacked, near Great Meadow, PA as some of you will recognize this as the Battle of the Bower, May 31, 1754. In Washington's journal, he wrote, "Though I was exposed, I fortunately escaped without a wound, though to

the right of where I stood was exposed and received all of the enemy's fire killing two men standing next to me."

After the Battle of the Bower, Washington received word that 1,000 French soldiers were approaching, with only 300 of his own battle-ready soldiers; Washington ordered a small wooden stockade fortification be built on the edge of Great Meadow and near the timber line which was surrounded by natural gulleys for protection. The structure being built with haste and necessity, he named the structure - Fort Necessity. Because of the constant rain both sides fought to a stalemate. The French wanted to parley and because of the superior number of the French and the poor conditions, wet powder, no food and constant rain and the loss of men, Washington decided to agree to the terms of surrender. July 4, 1754, Washington and his Virginia Regiment marched out of Fort Necessity.

Washington learned 2 life-long lessons from this humiliating loss at his first battles as a commander:

- a. Feeling confident that he had extensive knowledge of the terrain in this area, having surveyed here years before, he ignored Chief Half-King, chief of the Iroquois Nation and his warning not to build his fortification near the tree line because it would give the enemy cover behind the trees to fire upon the fort. He was naive in that he thought the Indians would fight like gentlemen when in fact they were "cowards and scoundrels" hiding behind trees and bushes.
  
- b. He missed a fatal opportunity that most likely cost him the battle when the French exposed their right flank and he failed to fire upon them because it was not gentlemanly to take such an advantage.

On July 9, 1755, General Edward Braddock and Washington fought in the Battle of the Wilderness. There the British were on the road to assault Fort Duquesne at that time occupied by the French. Along the heavily wooded road, they were ambushed by the forces from Fort Duquesne of French, Canadians and Indians. Braddock and his mounted officers were easy marks from the enemy firing from the trees. All being shot down in minutes. General Braddock was wounded by, as Washington said in his journal, "a ball having penetrated his shoulder and lodged in his breast, had 4 horses shot from under him." Days later he died from his wounds. (Ref.: Allen Axelrod, Blooding at Great Meadows, 2007 p.255). A total of 1,459 men were originally in the British group. Two thirds of them (977) were either killed or wounded in this battle. Washington rode with Braddock to the front line where he had two horses shot from under him and later found one bullet had penetrated his hat and three through his coat. He

later said, “he survived only by the miraculous care of providence that protected me beyond all human expectations...” (Ref.: J. A. Parry, The Real George Washington, 2010 p. 47).

Pawnee sub Chief Redhawk recognized George Washington. He took a bead on Washington, fired and was amazed when he missed. Angry at himself, he reloaded and fired again, with the same result. A third effort was no different. Now it became a matter of honor and pride to bring the officer down with his shot. He followed Washington shooting whenever possible. Eleven times he shot and missed. At that point, believing Washington to be under the protection of the Great Spirit, he ceased his attempts and lost sight of him. Later he found his gun barrel was bent.

After leaving Fort Cumberland on Will’s Creek, Washington became gravely ill with the Bloody Flux, a form of dysentery and high fever, to the point of becoming delirious. A doctor ordered him to remain housed until he was better. Soon he joined his troops riding in the back of a wagon and later used two pillows to help him ride upright on his horse and join the troops. (Ref.: J. A. Parry, The Real George Washington, 2010 p. 44)

Later, an old Indian Chief in an Indian prophecy and a story from his past experience with Washington, declared, “I am a chief, and the ruler over many tribes. My influence extends to the waters of the great lakes, and the far blue mountains. I have traveled a long and weary path that I might see the young warrior of the great battle. It was on the day when the white man’s blood mixed with the streams of our forest that I first beheld this chief. I called to my young men and said, Mark yon tall and daring warrior? He is not of the red-coat tribe – he hath the Indian’s wisdom, his soldiers fight as we do – himself is alone exposed. Quick! Let your aim be certain, and he dies. Our rifles were levelled, rifles which but for him, knew not how to miss – ‘twas all in vain; a power mightier far than we shielded him from harm. He cannot die in battle. I am old, and soon shall be gathered to the great council fire of my fathers in the land of shades, but ere I go there is something bids me speak in the voice of prophecy. Listen! *The Great Spirit protects that man, and guides his destinies – he will become the chief of nations, and a people yet unborn will hail him as the founder of a mighty empire.*” (Ref.: A. Parry, The Real George Washington, 2010 p. 49).

I would like to conclude with a quote from Washington’s own words to William Fitzhugh, a friend of his half-brother Lawrence, “I have the consolation itself of knowing that I have opened the way when the smallness of our numbers exposed to us the attacks of a superior enemy that I have hitherto stood the heat and brunt of the day and escaped untouched in time of extreme danger and that I have the thanks of my country for the services I have rendered it. (Ref.: Allen Axelrod, Blooding at Great Meadows, 2007, p. 245).

As I have taken you through this journey of Washington's early years and his brushes with Death, have you kept a general account of them? Have you come to make conjectures based on circumstances? Was George Washington blessed?