
The Fall of Fort Duquesne and the Rise of Fort Pitt

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Introduction

The Ohio Country played an important role to both the British and French during the American colonial period. Its significance was clearly displayed at the confluence of three rivers—the Ohio, the Allegheny, and the Monongahela—where two important forts were constructed. From the early French explorations of Samuel de Champlain, to the settlement of Jamestown by the English, the British and French both saw the North American continent as a way to expand their respective empires. The Ohio Country would be the focal point of friction between France, Britain, and the British colonists. It would also serve as the critical region of overlap between French influence from Upper Canada, and the British influence from Virginia and Pennsylvania. It is important to note that while Britain sought control of the Ohio Country, it was the British colonists who wanted to expand colonial settlements into the frontier. The French built fortifications from Presque Isle, near present-day Erie, Pennsylvania to the Ohio Valley.

In 1754, the French constructed the first fort at the location and named it Fort Duquesne in honor of Ange Duquesne de Menneville, Marquis de Duquesne, the Governor General of New France from 1752 until 1755. By 1761, the British completed construction on Fort Pitt, named after William Pitt, Secretary of State for the Southern Department from 1757 until his resignation in 1761. The British and French battled to gain control of this critical site, which resulted in the loss of French control of the area and the rise of a British fortification. French influence in the Ohio Country was closely tied to New France's alliance with the local Native American tribes. French influence in the Ohio Country and Fort Duquesne were lost because of inadequate forces and supplies, the increasing unreliability of the local native allies of the French, and the abandonment of Fort Duquesne, which led to British control of the region and the construction of Fort Pitt.



Figure 1. Nicolas de Fer, “Le Canada, ou Nouvelle France, la Floride, la Virginie, Pensilvanie, Caroline,” Paris 1702 From: “L’Atlas curieux, ou la Monde..., quatrième partie,” 1703.

French Presence in the Ohio Country and Construction of Ft. Duquesne

To appreciate how the French lost influence in the Ohio Country, it is important to understand how the French presence began in the region. The power struggle between Britain and France in the Ohio Country began with competing claims by both empires throughout what is now the western part of Pennsylvania. In 1753, as British fur traders encroached on French-claimed lands, Governor Duquesne increased French military presence from Lake Erie to the Allegheny River. Duquesne ordered “[f]ifteen hundred *troupes de la marine* and Canadian militia [to build] Fort Presqu’île and two more forts between it and the Allegheny River.”¹ He intended this act to show the British that the region belonged to the King of France, not to the King of England. The French also enlisted the aid of the local native tribes in their fort building campaign including the Seneca, whose “hunters . . . gave some Six Nation support to the venture.”² For the French, establishing

fortifications and securing native support bolstered their land claims, which in turn aided in their efforts to prevent the British from establishing a stronger foothold throughout the Ohio Country. However, France was not the only empire interacting with local tribes and seeking alliances in the region.

While the French were building forts south of what is today Erie, Pennsylvania, the Mingo tribe sought to establish a relationship with the British. Mingo, a term used by the British to refer to the Iroquois, came from the word *Minqua* in the Delaware language, which means stealthy. From the outset, Europeans settling in the Delaware region forced the natives further into what is now central and western Pennsylvania. Due to the growing presence of Europeans, the “Mingos set up permanent residence in the area between Lake Erie and the Allegheny River.”³ After the Mingo sent tribe members to negotiate with the British in Virginia, “the Mingo ‘half-king’ Scarouady privately agreed to allow the Virginians to establish a fort at the forks of the Ohio.”⁴ While the French worked their way down from the north, the British—now with the support of the Mingo—moved up from the south. Men of both empires headed to the forks of the Ohio to establish their territorial claims and win control of the Ohio Country. In this race to the Ohio, the British were the first to start construction of a fort at the juncture of the three rivers, though that fort would be short lived.

To counter the growing French influence in the Ohio River Valley, and with the blessing of the Mingo; Robert Dinwiddie, governor of Virginia from 1751 to 1758, sent a small militia detachment under the leadership of Captain William Trent to establish a fort on the Ohio River. Dinwiddie ordered Trent “to keep Possession of His Majesty’s Lands on the Ohio; & the Waters thereof.”⁵ As Captain Trent and his men constructed the fort, it became clear that they needed more provisions. Trent realized that the Delaware Indians accompanying his venture would not aid the British with food, so Trent departed the construction site to acquire supplies. He left Ensign Edward Ward in command.

During this time, the French moved a sizable force down the Allegheny River towards the forks of the Ohio. On 17 April 1753, the same day that the small British expedition erected the gate of the fort, the French landed at the forks. Ward weighed his options and concluded that “the odds [of] forty English volunteers and carpenters with next to no food in a hastily completed palisade, against a force of professional soldiers that looked to him at least a thousand strong” were dim; his enemies “wield[ed] enough firepower to blow his fort to matchsticks,” thus he “chose the better part of valor.”⁶ His decision was rather easy. Ward and his men

were able to leave without any harassment, indignity, or repercussion from the French. Now the French were in control of the Ohio and intended to build a fort, which would bear the name of the Governor General of New France, Marquis de Duquesne.

After Trent’s men under Ensign Ward capitulated, the French destroyed the British fortification, and constructed a new fort at the forks of the Ohio. Designed by Captain Francois Le Mercier, a trained engineer, the fort consisted of 10-20 foot thick earth and log walls to protect the inhabitants from direct cannon and musket fire.⁷ An impressive structure for its time, Fort Duquesne measured about 160 feet on each side. It contained four triangular bastions, from which artillery could be fired.⁸ In addition to the engineer work of the structure itself, what the fort contained inside also made this fortification unique in the Ohio Country. The intent of the French to control the forks of the Ohio is represented by the interior of the fort, which consisted of “a small central parade ground, a guardhouse, officers’ quarters, supply and powder magazines, a hospital, a blacksmith’s shop, and a bakery.”⁹

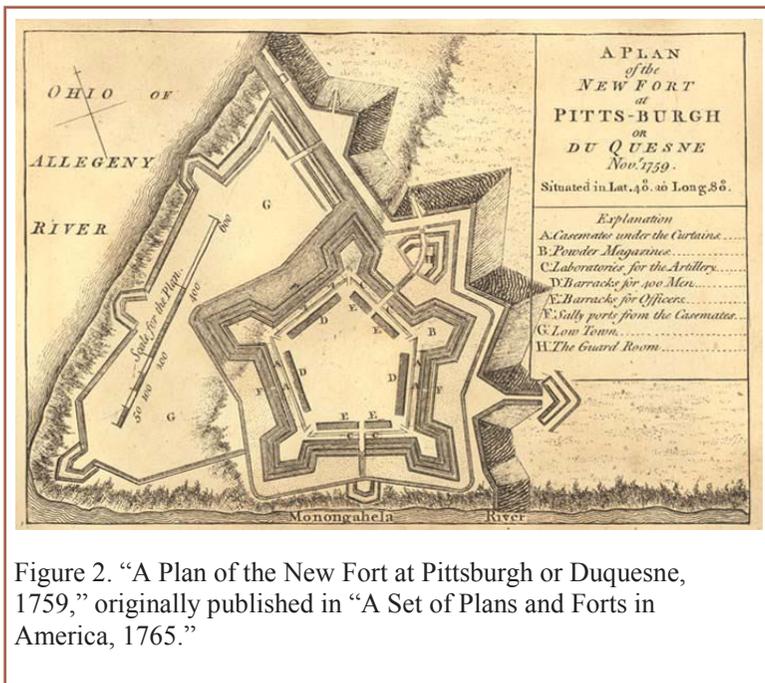


Figure 2. “A Plan of the New Fort at Pittsburgh or Duquesne, 1759,” originally published in “A Set of Plans and Forts in America, 1765.”

A private with the French forces, Charles Bonin, was present for the construction. In April 1754 he wrote, “construction was started on this fort which we named Fort

Duquesne,” and “the fort was built of squared timbers twelve feet thick on the land side; its thickness filled with earth; with a strong parapet; and three bastions each mounting four cannon.”¹⁰ The construction quality of this new fort far exceeded that of the one hastily constructed by the British.

As construction of the new fort was underway, some of the Delaware peoples that lived around the Ohio Country visited the fort. For the French, this provided a chance to gain some local help from one of the Indian tribes, key to securing their influence in the Ohio Country. Bonin commented that the Delaware “came to Fort Duquesne, were well received, and became attached to the French,” and that “they were rewarded by presents and good treatment which, when continued, aroused the jealousy among their neighbors, the Shawnees.”¹¹

French and Indian Success against the British

Just before the completion of the fort, the French received word of a British force from Virginia moving towards the forks of the Ohio. This launched a series of defenses that the French made to protect not only Fort Duquesne, but also their influence in the Ohio Country.

The first confrontation between the British and the French came in an almost accidental way. After the French refused to vacate the Ohio Country, and discontinue their fort building within the region, Governor Dinwiddie “ordered the raising of two hundred men, who would proceed under Washington . . . to the Forks of the Ohio and defend Virginia’s interests against further French encroachments.”¹² The advancement of the Virginians caused the French to respond by sending troops from the garrison at Fort Duquesne to establish contact with the colonists. A small French and Indian force under the command of Ensign Joseph Coulon de Villiers de Jumonville and a second group, Virginia militia under Lt. Col. George Washington, headed towards each other with the goal of explaining what each kingdom wanted. In an attempt to explain French intentions in the region, “Jumonville ventured out from Fort Duquesne to reply to the chosen representative of Virginia’s Ohio land claims, George Washington, who was heading west to announce Britain’s intentions.”¹³ This encounter would not be a cordial, friendly, or even diplomatic meeting. Nor would it prove to be beneficial to Jumonville or to Virginia volunteers under the command of Washington.

The engagement between the British and French would have dire consequences. Of the twenty-one French who were taken prisoner, and ten killed,

one of the fatalities was Jumonville.¹⁴ Upon hearing this news the commander of Fort Duquesne, Captain Claude-Pierre Pécaudy, seigneur de Contrecoeur, dispatched a force to find the British. Led by the older brother of Ensign Jumonville, the French surrounded Washington and his Virginia militia at Washington's hastily built Fort Necessity, forcing the British colonial troops to surrender. This marked the first victory for the French in the Ohio Country, but it would not be the last. By the following year, the French and their Indian allies claimed a much greater victory against a much larger force.

By 1755, the British and French were on a collision course in North America. After sending word back to Great Britain about the events that had transpired in the Ohio Country, Governor Dinwiddie sought to gain approval from King George II to have troops sent to North America. One man in position to heavily influence George II was Thomas Pelham-Holles, Duke of Newcastle and the Prime Minister of Great Britain from 1754 to 1756. Another was the king's son, Prince William Augustus, Duke of Cumberland and captain-general of the army. Both dukes were successful in gaining the support of the king, who agreed "to send two regiments of Irish infantry to America under the command of Major General Edward Braddock."¹⁵ The original plan for Braddock was less aggressive than the one he brought to America. Built upon stages, a strategy based on an incremental progression gave Great Britain the option to continue an open dialogue with the French. But the influence of the Duke of Cumberland would modulate the plan into a less moderate one. The finalized plan resulted in multiple simultaneous attacks across North America, and gave Braddock "command over all existing regular forces in America."¹⁶ Once Braddock succeeded in capturing Fort Duquesne, the plan called for him to join the northern army, and head towards the fortress at Niagara.¹⁷ This was one of three separate armies to attack the French at different locations. Yet, this was not to happen because of the French and their Indian allies.

The composition of the French force sent to engage Braddock's troops had much to do with the success that they had, with 637 Amerindians, 146 Canadian militia and 108 *troupes de la marine* leaving Fort Duquesne to ambush the English and Virginian militia.¹⁸ The French relied heavily on their native allies to achieve success at the Battle of the Monongahela. Since the majority of this force was comprised of Indians, it was possible to use unorthodox tactics against the British that were in contrast to conventional European warfare. In addition to the tactics, the mixture of tribes also aided the French in this battle against the British; these included the Ottawa, Potawatomi, mission Huron and Abenaki, along with Shawnee,

Delaware and Mingo warriors who were previously British and colonial allies.¹⁹ Although this battle kept the British from gaining control along the Ohio Country, it would not be long before the French would start to lose support from the Indians.

Lack of Supplies, Soldiers, and Indian Allies to Protect Fort Duquesne

After Braddock's defeat at the Battle of the Monongahela, the French presence in the Ohio Country remained strong; yet the lack of provisions, minimal reinforcements, and the loss of Indian support would change this. In 1758, previous Indian allies of the French left and began to side with the British. The first action that precipitated this chain of events happened when "on March 4, 1758 Colonel John Forbes . . . was promoted to brigadier general and given the responsibility to capture the same Fort Duquesne at the Forks of the Ohio that had stymied General Braddock three years earlier."²⁰

At 55 years of age, of Scottish origin, and trained as a physician, Forbes was "an officer of great experience and capacity."²¹ However, he suffered from an inflammatory disease that affected his skin to the point that at times, he could barely move. After years of trying to take control of the Ohio Country, the British gained control of the region in 1758 through Forbes's expedition. With his promotion and new mission, Forbes had set out to take control of the Ohio Country. He did not want to suffer the same fate or make the same mistakes that his predecessor had. "Throughout the spring and early summer, Brigadier-General Forbes had assembled an army of about 6,000 regulars and provincials."²² With this force, Forbes set out to take control of Fort Duquesne.

A meeting that resulted in the loss of Indian support for the French and a gain for the British took place along the Ohio River as five hundred representatives of fifteen tribes gathered in October 1758 to meet with Pennsylvania Governor William Denny, New Jersey Governor Francis Bernard, and Colonel Henry Bouquet, who represented the ill Forbes.²³ Support from the local tribes had been key for the French to maintain control in the Ohio Country. At the conclusion of the meeting, "the Amerindians agreed to withdraw support from the French."²⁴ This became a major problem for the garrison at Fort Duquesne. Much as the French were able to sway the local Indians to side with them in 1755, the British had convinced the Indians to switch their allegiance. The biggest loss of allies for the French came from two tribes that lived along the Ohio River. The French could not hold Fort Duquesne, near the site area where the French and Indian War began, without the help of the

Delawares and the Shawnees.²⁵ The loss of these two tribes as allies would play a crucial role in the fate of the French in the Ohio Country. But it was not just the loss of allies that put Fort Duquesne in jeopardy. Dwindling supplies also led to the demise of the fort.

For any fortification on the edge of the frontier, supplies were a necessity for keeping a garrison functional. Supplies were even more important for Fort Duquesne, since it was the most distant French fortification in the Ohio Country. The garrison at Fort Duquesne was low on provisions, since the supplies intended for it were destroyed by the British capture of Fort Frontenac in August 1758.²⁶ Since the logistical lifeline of Fort Duquesne was through Fort Frontenac, the destruction of that fort put the garrison at Duquesne under a terrible strain. Important food, medicine, clothing, weapons, and ammunition never reached their destination. Another important factor that led to the fall of Fort Duquesne was the lack of reinforcements to the Ohio Country.

One major change that occurred between the British and the French in the 1750s was the strategy of sending soldiers across the Atlantic to North America. While the British believed a larger force was necessary and supporting the colonies was a large priority; the French did not share the same view. The reason for this can be seen in how Canada, “received little reinforcement since 1756”, and in how the French and Canadians witnessed a “severe loss of Amerindian support.”²⁷ The loss of the Indian support, coupled with no additional forces arriving from France was a certain disaster. The numerical advantage was leaning heavily in favor of the British, and though superior numbers do not necessarily mean victory, it can put an opponent at a distinct disadvantage. And the alternatives to additional forces were not reassuring.

One solution that the French had in mind was simple, but ineffective. Since it was impossible to transport troops to North America, “the ministry could only advise that women and old men of New France work the fields while all able bodied males were mobilized.”²⁸ The idea of conscripting all the capable men in New France to supplement regular forces would not help in maintaining the French presence in the Ohio Country. This would become apparent when Forbes began his march toward the forks of the Ohio to capture Fort Duquesne.

Success of the Forbes Expedition to Fort Duquesne

The outcome of Forbes’s expedition differed from that of Braddock’s,

especially in combat with the French and Indians. Before the main army had reached Fort Duquesne, Forbes dispatched a small number of troops towards the confluence of the three rivers. The French and their allies bloodily repulsed Major James Grant's misguided attempt to surprise the fort on 14 September, marking the last success that the French had in both keeping the British out of the Ohio River Valley and retaining their presence in the region.²⁹

Due to their lack of provisions, allies, and forces at Fort Duquesne, the French abandoned the fort. All that the French could do was leave the fort and head back up the Allegheny River, and "the remaining three hundred Canadian troops, aware that Forbes's army was advancing detonated Fort Duquesne and took salvaged cannon and supplies to reinforce Fort Machault (Venango) for the winter."³⁰ The destruction of Fort Duquesne would be the end of the French presence in the Ohio Country. For Forbes and his expedition, by the time they reached the fort expecting to take it by force, the charred remains of the French fort were all that they found. The fort was destroyed and laid in ruins at the forks of the Ohio.

In a letter to Pennsylvania Governor William Denny, Forbes wrote, "having obliged them to Burn and abandon their Fort, Duquesne, which they effectuated upon the 24th . . . I took Possession with my little Army the next Day."³¹ After this victory, the British built another fort at the forks, one that bore the name of the man back in England who helped to change the course of the French and Indian War. William Pitt and his impact on the war came from his "close connection to the heir apparent, the teenage boy who would one day become George III."³² Although he was not highly regarded by the king or Newcastle, Pitt would compromise with his rival Newcastle; together they formed a ministry that would guide the course of the war. Strategically, Pitt and his views of how to defeat the French were able to be applied to the war effort. Pitt intended for the British to "hold the line against France where it was strongest, in Europe, and while striking at its weakest point, North America."³³ Unlike his predecessors, Pitt valued the use of both soldiers and resources from North America in his plan.

The Construction of Fort Pitt

The ashes of the French fort gave birth to a new British fort along the Ohio River. This new fort would be larger than Fort Duquesne because, "instead of four bastions, Fort Pitt had five; and its shape, therefore, was pentagonal rather than square."³⁴ Constructed in the style European forts of the time; the main difference in

Fort Pitt was that it was larger than others in North America were. This allowed the British to conduct fur trading, house soldiers that could be deployed to attack other French fortifications along the Great Lakes; in addition, “no other fort on the British frontier, indeed, was quite as impressive as Fort Pitt, although Crown Point was as large, and Oswego only slightly smaller.”³⁵

With the establishment of Fort Pitt, the French influence in the Ohio Country was effectively lost. The British now held control of the Ohio River and were able to establish a garrison that could serve in expanding towards other French garrisons throughout the Great Lakes. It would not take much longer for New France to fall to the British and by September 8, 1760, Chevalier de Lévis destroyed his battle flags to prevent the humiliation of his troops surrendering, and Vaudreuil yielded New France to the British Crown.³⁶ This officially ended the French presence in the Ohio Country and led to the end of the French presence on the North American continent.

Conclusion

Control of Ohio Country depended on control of the Ohio River. Between the British and the French, a struggle for supremacy led to the creation and destruction of the French Fort Duquesne. One reason for this, the French lost the support of their native allies to the British. In addition, the failure to resupply and reinforce their fortifications throughout New France added to the demise of the French fort along the Ohio River. In the shadow of the French fortification and influence along the Ohio River, the British were able to gain control and construct a fort of their own, Fort Pitt. This was made possible because of the influence of William Pitt. Under his guidance and the implementation of his strategy, the British were ultimately able to remove the French from the Ohio Country. Fort Duquesne and French influence in the Ohio Country was lost because of inadequate forces and supplies, the increasing unreliability of the local natives for the French, and the abandonment of Fort Duquesne, which led to British control of the region and the construction of Fort Pitt.

Notes

1. Ian K. Steele, *Warpaths: Invasions of North America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 183.

2. *Ibid.*

3. Fred Anderson, *Crucible of War: The Fate of Empire in British North America, 1754-1766* (New York: Vintage Books, 2000), 18.
4. Steele, *Warpaths*, 183.
5. Anderson, *Crucible of War*, 45.
6. Ibid., 49.
7. "Capture of Fort Duquesne" <http://exploringofthebeatenpath.com/Battlefields/FortDuquesne/index.html> (accessed on July 13, 2016).
8. Anderson, *Crucible of War*, 49.
9. Ibid.
10. Charles Bonin, *Memoir of a French and Indian War Soldier*, ed. Andrew Gallup (Westminster, Maryland: Heritage Books, 1993), 93.
11. Ibid., 93-94.
12. Anderson, *Crucible of War*, 45.
13. Christian Ayne Crouch, *Nobility Lost: French and Canadian Martial Cultures, Indians, and the End of New France* (New York: Cornell University Press, 2014), 47.
14. Steele, *Warpaths*, 183-185.
15. Anderson, *Crucible of War*, 68.
16. Ibid., 70.
17. Stephen Brumwell, *Redcoats: The British Soldier and War in the Americas* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 15.
18. Steele, *Warpaths*, 189.
19. Ibid.
20. Douglas Cubbison, *On Campaign Against Fort Duquesne: The Braddock and Forbes Expeditions, 1755-1758, Through the Experiences of Quartermaster Sir John St. Clair* (Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland and Company, 2015), 113.
21. Anderson, *Crucible of War*, 233.
22. Brumwell, *Redcoats*, 28.
23. Steele, *Warpaths*, 215.
24. Ibid.
25. Crouch, *Nobility Lost*, 118.
26. Steele, *Warpaths*, 215.

27. Ibid.

28. Ibid.

29. Brumwell, *Redcoats*, 28.

30. Steele, *Warpaths*, 215.

31. John Forbes, *Writings of General John Forbes Relating to his Service in North America*, ed. Alfred Procter James (New York: Arno Press, 1971), 264.

32. Anderson, *Crucible of War*, 125.

33. Ibid., 212.

34. Walter O'Meara, *Guns at the Forks*, (Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania: University of Pittsburgh, 2005), accessed March 17, 2016, <http://site.ebrary.com/lib/apus/Doc?id=10853158>.

35. Ibid.

36. Ibid., 223-224.

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