The colonial interests of the French and British in North America collided in early 1754 at the Forks of the Ohio River, the strategic spot where the Monongahela and Allegheny Rivers join to form the Ohio River. Robert Dinwiddie (1693–1770; see box in chapter 2), the lieutenant governor of the British colony of Virginia who held land claims in the disputed Ohio Country, sent a group of workers to build a British fort at the Forks in February of that year. (Dinwiddie was always considered the head of the colony since the two men who held the ceremonial title of governor never set foot in Virginia.) Dinwiddie also told George Washington (1732–1799; see entry) to raise an army to defend the fort, which would be called Fort Prince George. But Ange Duquesne de Menneville, marquis de Duquesne (1700–1778), the governor-general of New France, also planned to construct a fort at the same spot. He began preparing French troops to march southward and claim the area.
The French take the Forks while Washington struggles

Lieutenant Governor Dinwiddie promoted Washington to lieutenant colonel of the Virginia regiment and charged him with raising an army of two hundred men to defend Fort Prince George. Washington faced a difficult task in gathering and equipping an army to take into the Ohio Country, as the American colonists were not eager to support a war in the distant wilderness. Few men were willing to volunteer to serve in the army, and many farmers refused to provide food, horses, and wagons to supply the troops. Even after a month, Washington was only able to collect 150 men, eight subordinate officers, a few cannons, and some unsteady horses and wagons. When they left Alexandria, Virginia, on April 2, Washington’s men did not have uniforms to wear or tents to protect them from the spring rains.

Washington’s army made slow progress on their journey to the Forks. They chopped their way through the woods in order to clear the first road for wheeled vehicles through the Allegheny Mountains. It took them fifteen days to go just twenty miles.

In the meantime, one thousand French soldiers marched southward from New France. They reached the Forks (site of modern-day Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania) on April 17, while Washington was still crossing the Alleghenies. The commander of the French forces was Claude-Pierre Pecaudy, seigneur de Contrecoeur (1706–1775), a tough old veteran of the frontier service. Contrecoeur sent a messenger to the partially finished British fort at the Forks. He told the forty British soldiers and carpenters working there that they could either leave at once or be wiped out. The British abandoned...
Fort Prince George, and the French proceeded to build their own fort, called Fort Duquesne.

A few days later, the small band of soldiers who had fled the unfinished British fort ran into Washington’s advancing army. Washington was upset to hear that the French had captured Fort Prince George, but he soon began planning to reclaim the Forks. The retreating soldiers, who had seen the strength of the French forces with their own eyes, refused to join Washington and instead returned to Virginia. Washington continued on to an Ohio Company warehouse on the Monongahela River, about forty miles from the spot where the French were building Fort Duquesne. His men started building defenses in the area, which they called Red Stone Fort.

The assassination of Jumonville

From his position at the Forks, Contrecoeur followed Washington’s progress closely through reports from Indian scouts. The French commander wanted to make sure that the British forces did not approach Fort Duquesne before it was finished. Since France and Great Britain had not declared war, however, Contrecoeur did not have the authority to launch an attack on Washington. Contrecoeur decided to send a messenger to meet with the British leader. He chose Joseph Coulon de Villiers de Jumonville (1718–1754), a young officer from a proud military family. Jumonville’s mission was to

People to Know

**Benjamin Franklin** (1706–1790): Wealthy and influential Philadelphia printer who unsuccessfully put forth a plan to unite the British colonies at the Albany Congress; later, he played important roles in the American Revolution and the drafting of the U.S. Constitution.

**Claude-Pierre Pecaudy, seigneur de Contrecoeur** (1706–1775): French military leader who captured the partially finished British fort at the Forks of the Ohio and established Fort Duquesne on the site.

**Joseph Coulon de Villiers de Jumonville** (1718–1754): French military leader who carried a message to Lieutenant Colonel George Washington, was attacked by Washington’s forces, and murdered by Seneca tribe civil chief Tanaghrisson.

**Tanaghrisson** (?–1754): Seneca civil chief who murdered French diplomat Joseph Coulon de Villiers de Jumonville during Lieutenant Colonel George Washington’s 1754 attack on French forces that started the French and Indian War.

**George Washington** (1732–1799): American military and political leader who took part in the early battles of the French and Indian War and went on to lead the American Revolution and serve as the first president of the United States.
gather information about Washington’s plans and deliver a message warning him to leave the Ohio Country. Jumonville took along a small force of only about thirty-five men for his journey. He kept his groups small because he did not want to alarm Washington and provoke an attack.

As Jumonville’s troops made their way toward Red Stone Fort, however, Washington learned from Indian scouts that there were French soldiers nearby. Fearing a sneak attack, Washington left the fort with a force of forty-seven men. This small army followed the Indian scout through the woods during a blinding rainstorm in order to meet with his chief, Tanaghrisson (?–1754; see box). Tanaghrisson, sometimes known as Half King, was a Seneca chief who represented the interests of the powerful Iroquois Confederacy in the Ohio Country. He supported the British because he hoped to stop the French from moving into the Ohio Country.

A 1758 map of the Ohio Valley and the surrounding area. Reproduced by permission of the Corbis Corporation.
Tanaghrisson knew where the French troops under Jumonville had camped for the night. Washington moved his men, along with Tanaghrisson and a dozen of his warriors, into a circle surrounding the wooded hollow where the French were camped. In the early morning hours of May 28, Washington’s forces attacked the French camp. The fighting lasted only about ten minutes before the French surrendered. Jumonville, who had been wounded along with several of his men, told Washington that he had come in peace to deliver a message. Several French and British soldiers gathered together and struggled to translate the message that Jumonville had been carrying.

According to Washington, Tanaghrisson suddenly stepped forward and murdered Jumonville by cracking his skull with a hatchet. Then Tanaghrisson’s warriors joined in to kill and scalp the remaining French wounded. It took Washington a few moments to realize what was happening. By the time he regained control of the situation, ten French soldiers were dead. Washington quickly ordered his own troops to collect the remaining twenty-two French soldiers as prisoners and return to Red Stone Fort.

Historians have tried to explain this bloody event, which is regarded as the start of the French and Indian War (known in Europe as the Seven Years’ War). They have pieced together evidence from several different eyewitness accounts. One account came from a French soldier named Monceau, who was part of Jumonville’s army. Monceau escaped into the woods as Jumonville surrendered. He made his way to Fort Duquesne, where he told his commanders that Washington had launched a surprise attack and that the Indians did not take part in the fighting. A short time later, one of Tanaghrisson’s warriors arrived at the French fort. He told the French commander that Washington’s forces had murdered Jumonville and his men before their message had been translated. The warrior claimed that the British would have killed more French soldiers if Tanaghrisson had not stopped them.

But several other accounts support Washington’s version of events. He claimed that his men had surprised the French forces in camp and began firing when the French went for their weapons. After the French surrendered, Wash-
Tanaghrisson, the Seneca Nation’s “Half King”

Tanaghrisson is one of the more mysterious figures associated with the French and Indian War. The first historical mentions of this Indian leader date back to 1748, when the Iroquois Confederacy named him the leader of the Seneca and Delaware tribes that lived in the upper regions of the Ohio River Valley. Most leaders of the Iroquois Confederacy were known to their people as “king,” but Tanaghrisson and the other Iroquois chiefs of the Ohio Country had only limited powers. They could negotiate with the French, the British, or other Indian leaders, and they were permitted to accept gifts on behalf of the Confederacy. But they were not allowed to make binding treaties or agreements without first obtaining the approval of the Confederacy’s Grand Council leadership. As a result, Tanaghrisson became widely known as “Half King.”

In the early 1750s, British traders ventured deep into the Ohio River Valley. Eager to make friends with Tanaghrisson, they gave him all sorts of gifts. Tanaghrisson was flattered by the presents, which he distributed to local village chiefs to ensure their continued loyalty to him. But Half King’s relations with the British placed him out of step with other Indians. Many tribes in the region were leaning towards support of the French, who were also trying to establish themselves as the dominant European presence in the region.

In May 1754, Virginia’s colonial leaders sent several hundred troops under the command of a young adventurer named George Washington (who would later become the first president of the United States) deep into the Ohio Country. When French forces at Fort Duquesne

ington said that Tanaghrisson attacked and killed Jumonville. Historians give several possible reasons for Tanaghrisson’s murder of Jumonville. The Seneca chief had lost power with his people and was living as a refugee near the Forks with a small group of relatives and followers. Historians believe that Tanaghrisson may have felt that the only way to regain his position as a leader was by getting the British to help him move the French out of the Ohio Country. He murdered Jumonville—and then sent a messenger to the French claiming that Washington was responsible—in order to provoke the French and force them to retaliate against the British. According to this theory, the desperate chief started a war between the two European powers in a misguided attempt to protect his land and his people.
learned of Washington’s approach, they sent a small force under the command of a young officer named Joseph Coulon de Viliers de Jumonville to warn him away.

When Tanaghrisson’s warriors discovered that Jumonville’s party was approaching, Half King led Washington to the site of their overnight camp. Encouraged by Tanaghrisson, Washington’s men attacked the camp in the early hours of May 28. Jumonville surrendered after a short struggle. But when the French officer tried to explain to Washington that he had only been sent to deliver a message, Tanaghrisson stepped forward and buried a hatchet in Jumonville’s skull. Tanaghrisson’s warriors then massacred most of the remaining prisoners, to the stunned amazement of Washington. Today, Half King’s murderous act is regarded as the opening chapter of the French and Indian War.

Tanaghrisson had hoped that Jumonville’s death would further strengthen his relationship with the British and their colonial allies. But as the months passed, he decided that continuing relations with the British would be a mistake. Most other Indians in the Ohio Country preferred the French to the British, who were seen as a much greater threat to their villages and hunting grounds. With this in mind, Half King gathered his family and left for a frontier trading post at Aughwick (now Shirleysburg, Pennsylvania). Shortly after his arrival, he was struck down by a terrible sickness. His family and followers blamed his illness on witchcraft. Tanaghrisson died of this mysterious sickness on October 4, 1754.

Washington defeated at Fort Necessity

The French and British viewpoints differed on the battle that had taken place on May 28. The French believed Jumonville’s death was the murder of a diplomat, and they planned to take revenge on the British. But the British thought Jumonville was a spy, and said Washington was justified in attacking him. Shortly after word of the battle reached the British colonies, Washington was promoted to colonel of the Virginia regiment and received two hundred reinforcements (fresh troops). He decided to collect some Indian allies and launch an attack upon Fort Duquesne. He started out by marching his troops toward Red Stone Fort in preparation for the attack.
Meanwhile, French leaders at the Forks sent a force of eight hundred soldiers and four hundred Indian allies to attack Washington. The commander of the French troops was Captain Louis Coulon de Villiers (1710–1757), the older brother of Jumonville. When an Indian scout told Washington that the French were approaching his position, the young colonel decided to retreat and meet the French at Fort Necessity. Fort Necessity was a small circular fort made of split logs. It was located in a grassy meadow surrounded by wooded hills. By the time Washington’s troops reached the fort, they were tired and ill from carrying their supplies back and forth to Red Stone Fort. In fact, only three hundred of his four hundred men were healthy enough to fight. Sensing defeat, his Indian allies abandoned their posts and slipped away into the woods. Washington only had time to dig a shallow trench around the fort before the French arrived.

The battle began on July 3, 1754. The French forces had the advantage from the start. They were able to hide be-
hind trees and angle their musket fire downhill into the fort and the trench that surrounded it. Washington’s troops were hit badly. To make matters worse for the British, a heavy rainstorm ruined the ammunition and gunpowder that was stored in the fort. By that evening, one hundred of Washington’s men had been killed or wounded.

The French asked Washington to send a messenger out of the fort to discuss terms of surrender. Washington sent his old friend Jacob van Braam, a Dutchman who had served as a translator on an earlier mission. To Washington’s surprise, the French conditions for his surrender seemed quite generous. The French offered to allow his men to march out of the fort and return to Virginia, taking their guns and all the possessions they could carry on their backs. In exchange, he only had to sign a paper admitting his responsibility in the death of Jumonville.

But the French forces had good reasons for setting Washington and his men free. Washington did not know that the French troops were running low on ammunition and supplies at that time. They were also worried that the British would soon receive reinforcements. Finally, the French commander was not sure whether he was allowed to take prisoners since France and Great Britain had not yet declared war.

Mistakes threaten Washington’s career

As it turned out, the terms of surrender were more complicated than Washington realized. The rain-soaked paper that he signed said that he was responsible for the “assassination” of Jumonville. Van Braam had mistakenly translated the French word “assassination” as “death.” This misunderstanding damaged the young colonel’s reputation. Washington had been willing to admit that Jumonville had been killed in his presence by Indians who were supposed to be under his command, but he was horrified to discover that he had signed a confession of murder. French newspapers published the document and used it to create feelings of anger and resentment toward the British.

Washington and his troops began their march back to Virginia on July 4. As they left Fort Necessity, they were
shocked to see that some of the Indians who had been fighting alongside the French were former British allies. In fact, many of the tribes in the Ohio Country felt that Washington had used poor judgment in the battle. His defeat convinced them to support the French. They recognized that they were caught in the middle of the fight between France and Great Britain, so they wanted to support whichever side was more likely to emerge the winner.

As soon as Washington’s forces moved out of the area, the French burned down Fort Necessity and Red Stone Fort, thereby removing all traces of British military presence from the Ohio Country. When Washington arrived back in Virginia, some supporters claimed that he was a hero for standing up to the French when he was outnumbered. Others claimed that Washington’s mistakes had allowed the French to take control of the Ohio Country.

By this time, it had become clear that France and Great Britain were going to enter into a war over their North American territories. Washington thought his Virginia regiment would become part of the regular British Army and that he would be promoted to colonel. But British leaders felt Washington and his colonial army had embarrassed them. They refused to offer Washington a commission in the British Army, so he resigned from the military.

The Albany Congress

At the same time as Washington was fighting at Fort Necessity, colonial leaders were holding an important meeting in Albany, New York. This meeting, known as the Albany Congress, had two main goals. One goal was to improve relations between the colonies and the Iroquois Confederacy, a powerful alliance of six Indian (Native American) nations. The second was to establish a unified approach for defending the frontier against French advances.

At this point in time, the thirteen British colonies in North America were largely independent. They competed with one another for land and power, but were unified in their loyalty to Great Britain. The distrust and lack of cooperation between the colonies helps explain why Washington
had trouble raising an army to fight in the Ohio Country. Dinwiddie asked other colonies to send troops, but they thought that by helping Washington they would be helping Virginia expand its territory. The colony of New York had a similar experience at the Albany Congress. New York, which shared its northern border with New France, asked the other colonies to contribute money and troops to help it build forts to protect this border. But the other colonies were interested only in protecting their own borders.

The Albany Congress brought together a group of colonial leaders, including the wealthy and influential Philadelphia printer Benjamin Franklin (1706–1790), to address the lack of cooperation between colonies. Franklin argued that the colonies could be a powerful part of the British empire if they worked together. But if they remained separate, he claimed that they were weak and could be conquered by France, one by one. He came up with a Plan of Union, known as the Albany Plan, that would have created a single government for all the British colonies in America. Each colony would send representatives to this government, which would be led by a British governor-general. The colonial government would take charge of issues that affected all the colonies, such as Indian relations, westward expansion, and defense.

The individual colonies wanted to remain independent, though, so none of them approved the Albany Plan. Historians doubt that the British government would have accepted the plan anyway, because British leaders did not want the colonies to gain too much power. But the Albany Congress did help British leaders understand that the colonies were not willing to band together to defend themselves against France. Instead, Great Britain would be forced to send its own armies and military leaders to North America. The government sent two British Army regiments to the colonies and appointed a
British general, Edward Braddock (1695–1755; see entry), as commander in chief. Braddock would take charge of all British and colonial forces during the war against France.

The Albany Congress also convinced the British government to intervene in the relations between the colonies and the Iroquois Confederacy. Although the meeting was supposed to help improve relations between the colonies and the Indians, it actually created more hard feelings and distrust. Representatives from the Connecticut and Pennsylvania colonies spent much of the time bribing or tricking the Indians into giving up their land. The Iroquois representatives expressed anger at both the French and the British for trying to claim their rightful territory, but they finally agreed to renew their alliance with the British. After the meeting ended, British leaders appointed William Johnson (1715–1774; see entry) as their Indian representative and gave him sole authority to negotiate future military alliances and land treaties with the tribes.