Frenchmen and Indians

In North America the French and Indian War changed the future of the continent. It was a war to answer this question: which would be the stronger power in North America—England or France? France, the French colonists, and France's Indian allies fought against England, the English colonists, and England's Indian allies.

The war began with conflicts about land. France and England had real arguments over the same pieces of land. French explorers—Marquette, Joliet, La Salle, and others—had been the first Europeans in the region around the Great Lakes and also in the lands drained by the Ohio and Mississippi rivers. France had sent traders and trappers to those territories, and had set up trading posts as well.

England claimed the same land. In the original English charters, the king granted land from coast to coast—even though no one had any idea where the West Coast was. Now that the land along the East Coast was filling up, English-speaking settlers had begun pushing west. Indian hunting grounds were disappearing as the whites moved in. The Indians were alarmed. They were willing to fight to preserve their land.

The English had signed treaties and bought land from many of the Indian nations. But sometimes the treaties were signed without the Indians understanding the details. Indians thought the earth belonged to everyone. One Indian said selling land was like selling the sea, or the sky. And yet, though Indians never owned land individually, Indian tribes did claim the right to use an area of land. It was those rights they signed over to the English.

French traders were at Lake Huron in 1612, eight years before the Pilgrims landed at Plymouth.

The rain, melted snow, and other water that falls on a region flows out of it through streams, rivers, and bigger rivers to the sea. The rivers catching the flow drain that area.
When George Washington was asked to be a member of Brad-dock’s staff, he replied that he hoped to serve king and country and added, “I wish for nothing more than to attain a small degree of knowledge in the military art.”

When the English colonists signed treaties with the Indians, the people who signed the treaties usually meant to honor them. The trouble was that the people who actually signed the treaties weren’t the ones who lived on the frontier near the Indians. Those frontier people were often rough and rowdy. They wanted land, and sometimes they didn’t mind killing for it.

If the Indians had united, perhaps they might have been able to resist the frontier people. But old feuds kept the Indian tribes apart. So when England and France started fighting each other, some Indians sided with the English. Others helped the French. They kept picking at each other—the English, the French, and the Indians—raiding and scalping and killing. Soon the hatred was intense.

New France (Canada) was different from English America, and that made for conflict, too. There was no religious freedom there. The French insisted that all settlers in their territories be Catholic and French. So when 200,000 Huguenots (HUE-guh-nots—though the French said hue-guh-nos), who were Protestants, fled from France, many settled in the British colonies. If France had let them settle in Canada, that country would have been stronger. It is easy for us to see that now, but it wasn’t so easy then.

France was more interested in the fur trade—and the money it brought—than in settling people on the land. So when English traders began buying furs from the Native Americans and paying high prices for those furs, it made France angry. It hurt their fur business.

Beaver pelts fetched a lot of money in Europe, where they were usually made into hats. French fur traders such as these were ready to fight anyone—Indians or British—trying to take over the trade.
The French were the best friends the Indians had in North America. Mostly they were trappers, traders, and fishermen—like the Native Americans. They understood and respected the land in a way the English never learned. But the Iroquois didn’t care. They didn’t like them. The Iroquois had been enemies of the French ever since Samuel de Champlain sided against them in their battle with a Huron tribe back in 1609. That was too bad for the French, for the Iroquois led a strong league of six Indian nations. They were the most powerful Indians in Eastern America.

Remember, France and England were both claiming the same territory—especially the lands watered by the Ohio River and its tributaries. The French built forts in that area. One fort was built where Pittsburgh stands today. The French called it Fort Duquesne (dew-CANE). The English said that the fort was in Virginia and the land belonged to them. The governor of Virginia sent a 21-year-old surveyor to tell the French to move on and out.

A surveyor is a person who measures and maps land. This surveyor’s name was George Washington. The French told George Washington they were at Fort Duquesne to stay.

Washington and 150 men tried to make them go. They attacked a General Braddock’s army took 32 days to cover 110 miles of forest from Virginia to Fort Duquesne—even with 300 men with axes cutting down trees ahead of them. How many miles a day is that?

Braddock was gloomy about the adventure in America. The night before he left England, he told a young woman friend that he never expected to see her again, and then gave her his will. “We are sent like lambs to the slaughter,” he said.
French scouting party and killed 10 Frenchmen. An English writer, Horace Walpole, said of that small battle, “The volley fired by a young Virginian in the backwoods of America set the world on fire.” It was 1754; the French and Indian War had begun.

Washington built a small fort called Fort Necessity. He built it on low ground. When the French attacked, Washington and his men were outnumbered, but they held out until it started raining. Heavy rain flooded the fort, soaked all their gunpowder, and left them defenseless. The French captured the fort, but Washington escaped and learned a lesson he would remember when he became a great general: don’t build a camp on low ground.

He learned even more important lessons when he fought with England’s famous Major General Edward Braddock. Braddock arrived in America in 1755. He was expected to push the French out of the Ohio Territory. Braddock decided to begin by capturing Fort Duquesne, and he thought he knew just how to do that. The general had been trained in Europe, on great open battlefields, where armies lined up facing each other and shot long, clumsy guns called “muskets.” Those European armies seemed awesome. Braddock assumed that European methods would work in America.

George Washington wrote of the British troops in their bright red coats, and the Virginia troops in their handsome blue coats, all marching through the green forest. He said it was one of the most beautiful sights he had ever seen. But he realized those colorful coats were great targets. Braddock didn’t. The French and their Indian allies wouldn’t fight the kind of war Braddock wanted to fight. They wouldn’t stand in a straight line and let the English shoot them. They hid in the woods. They wore skins to camouflage themselves. The Indians screamed blood-chilling war whoops. They shot at the British troops from the woods. The British panicked. They “broke and ran as sheep pursued by dogs,” wrote Washington.

The French and Indians were outnumbered almost two to one, but they destroyed the English forces. General Braddock was killed. George Washington escaped with four bullet holes in his coat; two horses were shot from under him. But he learned lessons from Braddock’s mistakes.

A young man named Daniel Boone, who drove a wagon in Braddock’s army, also noted the way the Indians fought. He had grown up on the frontier, and he could fight and hunt like an Indian. At night Boone sat around the campfire and heard tales of the western lands. He wanted some of that land for himself. He believed the Indians would have to go before he could have it; many others believed as Boone did.
A religious movement, called the Great Awakening, began about 1739, when a spellbinding evangelical English preacher named George Whitefield arrived in America. Thousands of people were converted by Whitefield and by those who followed him. American Protestantism became split between the sedate older sects, the “Old Lights” (Quakers, Anglicans, Congregationalists), and those begun by the new revival preachers, the “New Lights” (Methodists, Presbyterians, Baptists). New Lights reached out to slaves, too; by the end of the century most were Christians.

Dr. Johnson said, “I am willing to love all mankind, except an American.”

England now had a big responsibility. She had to manage almost 2 million people in the 13 colonies, she had to take control of 60,000 French-speaking people in Canada and around the Great Lakes, and she had to keep the English colonists and the Native Americans from killing each other.

The king of England had a great idea for settling the Indian problem. Draw a line right down the crest of the Appalachian Mountains, said the king. Everything to the east of that line would be colonists’ territory. Everything to the west would be Indian territory. (Settlers already in the West would have to leave.) And that was what the king ordered in his Proclamation of 1763. If the colonists could be kept east of the Appalachians there would be no more fighting between the settlers and the Native Americans.

That land to the west of the Appalachians wasn’t good for much anyway, said most people in England. The learned Dr. Samuel Johnson (who knew a lot about words and wrote the first English-language dictionary) said that the western land that England had gotten as a result of the French and Indian War was “only the barren parts of the continent, the refuse…which the French, who came last, had taken only as better than nothing.”

Dr. Johnson should have stuck to his dictionaries. And the king’s idea? It sounded wonderful, but it didn’t work.

That western land looked mighty good to settlers who wanted farms of their own. The eastern lands were mostly taken. It also looked good to speculators—people who wanted to make money selling land. Benjamin Franklin and George Washington were two of
those who speculated in western lands. Now that the French were gone, the English settlers thought the land should be theirs. A proclamation written in England wasn't going to stop people hungry for land. They kept moving west.

Soon another line was drawn, on the other side of the Appalachians. That was in 1768, in a treaty signed by Sir William Johnson and 14 Iroquois leaders. Johnson hoped to please both sides. The Iroquois got cash and promises; the English-speaking settlers got land over the mountains—especially land west of Albany. But it was just another Indian treaty that would soon be broken. The settlers were on their way west; the Indians who lived west of the Appalachians were doomed to see their way of life destroyed.

Fort Pitt—which had been Fort Duquesne and, before that, the Indian town of Shannopin—became Pittsburgh. At Pittsburgh, two rivers come together and form the mighty Ohio River. From there you can glide to the heart of the continent. It was a gateway to the West.

By 1770 some 5,000 colonists were said to have climbed the mountains to Pittsburgh and then headed on west. They were pioneers, and the first of a river of people who began filling the Ohio River Valley. (Check your map to see where the Ohio River Valley is.) Mostly, these people were

George III said the lands west of the Proclamation Line (on the map, the row of X's running down the Appalachians) belonged to the Indians. But the English settlers kept moving west and taking the land anyway.
In 1769 Daniel Boone made his first exploring trip to Kentucky. In 1775 he led a group of settlers to that Indian hunting ground. In 1779 Kentucky became a county of Virginia.

There was constant conflict in western Pennsylvania between Indians and settlers. This 1764 cartoon laughed at Benjamin Franklin (left), who tried to help the Indians.

ordinary farm folk who just wanted to make homes for themselves. Daniel Boone may have helped build the road to Fort Pitt; we know for sure he went to Kentucky:

It was on the first of May 1769, that I resigned my domestic happiness, and left my family and peaceable habitation on the Yadkin River, in North Carolina, to wander through the wilderness of America, in quest of the country of Kentucke.

Thousands followed after Boone cut a path, the Wilderness Road, through the Cumberland Gap. It was a southern route to the other side of the mountains.

Those who went west were a lot like those who had come on the Mayflower. They were tough enough to build homes in a strange, raw world. They were able to make their own laws. They were survivors. They were independent-minded. Men and women like that were not likely to take orders from a faraway nation.