

Clash of Empires: The Fight for North America

The British and French clashed over control of the North American interior during the 1700s. Few realized that possession of this huge territory would determine much about the fate of their empires and the legal and political institutions that would govern America.

Starting in 1607, the English established 13 colonies along the Atlantic coastline of North America. As the population of these colonies increased, colonists pushed westward seeking more land. French explorers claimed Canada and almost everything else west of the Appalachian Mountains to the Mississippi River and beyond. By the 1700s, the British and French were clashing over their claims for North America.

On the night of February 29, 1704, several hundred French Canadians and their Native American allies [attacked](#) the tiny English settlement of Deerfield on the western frontier of the Massachusetts Bay Colony. Commanded by a French army officer, the raiders killed 38 Deerfield inhabitants and burned most of their houses. The raiders forced more than a hundred men, women, and children to march back to Montreal, Canada, a distance of 300 miles. During the march, the raiders killed 16 of their captives and two more starved to death. Eventually, Massachusetts ransomed most of the Deerfield survivors, and they returned home.

Attacks like the one against Deerfield occurred repeatedly in North America during a [series of wars](#) between the French and English that lasted about 60 years. Throughout this period, France and England fought each other in many parts of the world seeking to create their colonial empires.

In 1754, when war erupted between Britain and France in North America for the fourth time, the clash soon led to the first world-wide war in history.

Three Peoples in Conflict

In addition to the English and French, a third group of people fought for possession of the North America in the 1700s. This group was made up of Native American tribes, which had occupied North America for thousands of years.

After the Europeans began to arrive, six tribes in what is now mostly the state of New York joined into the powerful [Iroquois Confederacy](#). The Iroquois tribes sometimes sided with the French, sometimes with the English, and sometimes with neither. Because the Iroquois relied on trading with the English for manufactured goods, including firearms, the six tribes generally became English allies in wartime.

In 1744, the Iroquois signed a treaty with several English colonies, including Virginia. In exchange for gifts and money, the Iroquois gave up rights to any lands claimed by Virginia. What the Indians did not know was that the colonial charter of Virginia claimed that its western boundary extended to the Pacific Ocean.

Westward beyond the Iroquois territory, in what became known as the Ohio Country, many other tribes traded with and became allies of the French. Unlike the English colonists, who were mainly farmers, French fur trappers and traders did not desire Indian land.

In 1663, the French created the royal province of [New France](#). It eventually extended in a great arc from the St. Lawrence River down the Mississippi Valley to New Orleans. Except for widely separated Indian tribes and French fur traders, this region was vast and underpopulated, a tempting prize for land-hungry American settlers.

The French in Full Command

In 1748, the [Ohio Company](#) began building trading posts on the Virginia frontier. Established the previous year by Virginia planters, the company's goal was to sell land to American settlers in the Ohio Valley, which Virginia claimed. The Ohio Valley, however, was part of New France, and Native American tribes allied with the French lived there.

In 1753, the governor of New France, the Marquis de Duquesne, sent an expedition into the Ohio Valley to block English trespassing. Duquesne was following orders from the French government "to make every possible effort to drive the English from our lands."

Governor Duquesne ordered the construction of several forts in the Ohio Valley, including one at the forks of the Ohio and Monongahela rivers (present-day Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania). When the French arrived, however, Ohio Company workers were already building their own fortified trading post. The French quickly drove the workers away, destroyed their buildings, and erected a strong bastion that they named Fort Duquesne.

In the meantime, the British government instructed the governors of the 13 colonies "to prevent by Force" any attempts by the French or their Indian allies to occupy British lands. Robert Dinwiddie was the royal governor of Virginia and also a shareholder in the Ohio Company. In the spring of 1754, Dinwiddie ordered a colonial force to march into the Ohio Valley to defend Virginia's interests. He commissioned 22-year-old [George Washington](#) to command this expedition.

Washington led about 160 poorly trained colonial soldiers into the Ohio Country. He was not aware, however, that the French had built Fort Duquesne and manned it with a large force of regular French soldiers. Along the way, a small band of Iroquois warriors joined Washington's force. Finally, they made contact with a French scouting party and defeated it in a brief battle.

After the battle, the wounded French commanding officer insisted on reading an order for Washington to leave French territory. Suddenly, the Iroquois leader attacked the French officer and split his head open with a war hatchet. In the chaos that followed, other Iroquois warriors scalped the French dead and wounded in full view of the appalled young Washington.

When the French at Fort Duquesne heard about the defeat, they sent a large number of soldiers and Indians to attack Washington. Washington had retreated and hastily built a crude fort called [Fort Necessity](#). The French surrounded the fort and attacked with muskets and cannon until about a third of Washington's men had been killed or wounded. Washington then surrendered and was allowed by the French to march with his men back to Virginia.

The following year, the British army sent 2,500 redcoats to force the French out of the Ohio Valley. Commanded by [Major General Edward Braddock](#), the British fought in the traditional European style while the French and their Indian allies picked off their enemy one at a time from the cover of the woods. After taking heavy losses, the wounded Braddock ordered a retreat. Shortly afterward he died.

News of Braddock's defeat panicked Virginia and the other British colonies. Their frontiers lay open to French and Indian attacks, and the French controlled the Ohio Valley.

British Victory

The year following Braddock's defeat, disagreements in Europe coupled with the fighting already taking place in North America brought on another war between the European powers. Called the "[Seven Years' War](#)" in Europe and the "French and Indian War" in North America, this conflict proved to be the first world-wide war. Fighting took place not only in Europe and North America, but also in India, West Africa, the Philippines, and the West Indies.

Prime Minister [William Pitt](#) led the British government during most of the conflict. He devised a strategy of spending enormous sums of money to finance British and colonial troops to drive France out of North America, thus crippling its empire.

Unlike previous British leaders, Pitt treated the American colonists as allies rather than servants. As a result, American troops fought alongside British redcoats in almost every battle of the war in North America.

At first, the French and their Indian allies dominated the fighting. But by 1758, British generals and admirals were planning a major invasion of Canada. Fort Duquesne fell in November 1758. The next year, the French surrendered or abandoned more forts. Also, the Iroquois changed from being neutral to becoming allies of the British.

In June 1759, 5,000 British troops and 49 warships assaulted Quebec City on the St. Lawrence River. After a fierce battle, the British forces led by [General James Wolfe](#), defeated the French army and went on to attack Montreal a few months later. The French, lacking food and supplies because of a British blockade, finally surrendered not only Montreal but all of New France.

The Debate Over Canada

The fighting for North America stopped with the conquest of Canada in 1759. But as the war lingered on in Europe, negotiations for a peace treaty began. Previous peace treaties that ended European wars had sometimes returned conquered territories to a defeated nation. Thus, it was not unthinkable that France would keep Canada or all of New France.

Canada made up the northern part of New France, controlling the valuable Indian fur trade as well as water transportation into the heart of North America. But many businessmen in London opposed annexing Canada to the British Empire. They were much more interested in holding onto Guadeloupe, a major French sugar-producing island that had been captured in the war. Guadeloupe, they argued, was more valuable than Canada with its harsh climate, lack of agriculture, and seeming lack of resources except for furs.

The London businessmen saw a danger in driving the French entirely out of North America. This would end the need for British protection of the American colonies. No longer fearing a French threat, the colonies might break away from the mother country.

Others in Britain argued in favor of annexing Canada. Among them was Benjamin Franklin. He was in London in 1760 during the debate over Canada. He published a pamphlet spelling out reasons why taking Canada into the empire was in Britain's best economic interest. Franklin downplayed any revolt of the American colonies from the empire, unless Britain developed a "hostile attitude toward her children in the New World." He also expressed the fear that more wars and massacres would occur if the French remained in Canada.

The Seven Years' War finally ended in 1763 with the [Treaty of Paris](#). France held on to Guadeloupe, two tiny islands in the St. Lawrence Gulf, some trading posts in India, and a slave port in West Africa. Curiously, the French made little effort in the treaty negotiations to keep New France. Thus, the British acquired Canada and all the land from the Appalachians to the Mississippi River, an area 12 times the size of England. The British also took Florida from Spain, which had been an ally of France in the war.

The Fate of Empires

In the end, the British commanded the greatest empire in the world, at least until the American Revolution. France never really recognized North America's rich resources or its potential for settlement. After handing over North America to Britain, France and its empire began a long decline as a world power.

Some Native American tribes, especially those that had been allies of the French, revolted for a short time against British rule. To quell the danger of warfare between Indians and white settlers, the British drew the so-called [Proclamation Line of 1763](#). No whites were permitted to settle west of this line, which ran from Canada to Florida along the crest of the Appalachians.

The Proclamation Line proved to be a failure as thousands of American settlers seeking land poured into the territory. The flood of American immigration to the West had begun. This doomed the great inland empire of Native American tribes as America expanded west.

For Discussion and Writing

1. What was the basic cause of the French and Indian War in North America?
2. What role did the Native American tribes play in the fight for North America?
3. Do you think the French and Indian War and its outcome speeded up or held back the American Revolution? Why?

For Further Information

[Seven Years War Website](#)

[Web Index of the French and Indian War](#)

A C T I V I T Y

Who Should Own North America?

In this activity, students will role play five groups that had a stake in North America just before the outbreak of the French and Indian War in 1754.

1. Form five small groups to each role play one of the following:
 - a. The government of King George II of Great Britain
 - b. The government of King Louis XV of France
 - c. French Canadian fur trappers and traders
 - d. American settlers
 - e. Native American leaders
2. Each group should research the article and the textbook to develop an answer along with supporting arguments to this question: **Who Should Own North America?**
3. Each role group will then report to the rest of the class. At the end of each group report, the other groups may ask questions or present counter-arguments.

4. After all groups have finished reporting, every student should write an essay that answers the activity question.

Links to Additional Lessons

[Attack on Deerfield 1704](#) By Kathleen Klaes, Charlene Galenski, and Victoria Getis.

[Indian Treaty Negotiations](#) By Nicolas W. Proctor.