

OPINION

Remembering the attack on Fort Vause

Today, America seems inevitable and it is difficult to imagine a world not dominated by the English-speaking peoples of North America. However, it was not always so.

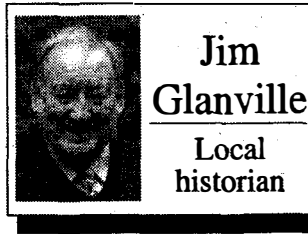
In the 1750s, European powers were engaged in an epic struggle for North America. Britain and France were pouring money, men and military equipment into the French and Indian War. Thirteen English-speaking colonies were strung along the Atlantic coast from New England to Georgia. In the interior of the continent, the French, traveling the St. Lawrence seaway and the lower Great Lakes, had created New France and Quebec, and forged a channel of influence all the way down the Mississippi River. The French names Detroit, Illinois, St. Louis and New Orleans remain to remind us of that long gone, far-flung French empire.

By 1756, the Ohio country, more-or-less today's state of Ohio, had become

the focus of the war. French and Indian war parties made the long journey through the Ohio country to attack the British. The western Virginia frontier was the front line of the British defense — where seventeen forts, out of long line of forts that stretched from Pennsylvania to the Carolinas, were planned to halt the French and Indian advance.

François-Marie Picoté de Belestre was the Frenchman most involved in leading the Virginia and Carolina campaigns. Just a few days ago, Eddie Goode (the Fort Vause historian) called my attention to a newspaper account of a speech given by Belestre to his Shawnee Indian allies on their return to Ohio from the Virginia frontier. It is an amazing account that apparently has never been quoted in any Virginia history book.

The interpreter and Shawnee captive John Wotton recorded that Belestre, in a July 10, 1756 speech to his Shawnee allies,



said: "I am now returned from war against the English, and have not completed my Design so far as I intended. When I went away I thought to have gone down so far as the Place where the English Ships comes up that River, called James's River, by the English [modern-day Richmond]. My spies gave me great encouragement and told me that I could go down to that place undiscovered, and plunder their Store, for there is, no Men down there, but some Tobacco-Carriers."

However, Belestre's plan was blocked "by a small Company of Men, ten or eleven, which kept me the best Part of a Day very hot engaged, and killed me near 40 Men ... you told me Virginia Men could not

fight; but I did not find it so; for these few Men that I found, fought more like Devils than Men; if all Virginia is like them, we cannot get that Country."

Wotton's account was published in newspapers in Boston, New York and Philadelphia in February 1758. Surprisingly, I can find no record that it was ever published in Virginia.

The attack on Fort Vause is well documented as occurring on June 26, 1756. So there's a good chance that these men who fought like devils were shouting in the voices of early citizens of eastern Montgomery County. If that's true, and it may be provable, it is an amazing business. One leading French fighting man was forced by Virginians at Shawsville to contemplate that his side might not be able to win the war for North America.

In 1759, a massive British invasion fleet supported a large army that captured Quebec from the French.

Fort Vause discussion

When: 1 p.m. Saturday
Where: Meadowbrook Public Library, 267 Alleghany Spring Road, Shawsville
What: Free talk by Jim Glanville on the June 1756 attack on Fort Vause.

Montréal fell a year later. In the 1763 Paris treaty negotiations, that involved territory all around the world, the French ceded everything in North America east of the Mississippi to the British.

That year signaled the beginning of what the writer Kevin Phillips has labeled "The triumph of Anglo-America," and gave birth to the society and nation we know.

Jim Glanville is a retired chemist living in Blacksburg. He has been publishing and lecturing for a decade about the history of Southwest Virginia.