

Virginians' quest for western frontier lands

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On the 6th (maybe the 7th) of October 1756, George Washington rode his horse across the Roanoke River — probably within the limits of the present day city of Roanoke. Col. John Buchanan was with him. Buchanan had a few months previously moved to Looney's Ferry on the James River at the place now called Buchanan. Washington had spent the night at the colonel's home, and now they were making their way together to inspect Fort Vause at Shawsville in the future Montgomery County.

1756 was a bad year on the Virginia frontier. On June 25 at Fort Vause, Capt. John Smith with his ammunition exhausted had surrendered the fort and its defenders to a large body of French and Indian attackers. A list records 307 people killed, wounded or captured on the western Virginia frontier between the summer of 1755 and the summer of 1758. Historians call the list the "Preston Register," on the grounds that William Preston perhaps kept it, though its authorship is hazy. The register lists for Fort Vause on 25 June: three persons killed, four wounded and 21 taken prisoner.

Washington had spent the first five days of October at Augusta Court House, in today's Staunton, trying without success to recruit men to go ranging with him against the Indians. Already for two years, the 23-year-old Washington had been the colonel of the Virginia Regiment based in Winchester, where he lived. He knew that no system of frontier forts could repel attack, and that offensive action against Indian raiders on their home turf was the best defense.

Unable to recruit men at Staunton, and hearing that men were available at Looney's Ferry, he traveled there in company with the 27-year-old Preston. Both men were experienced surveyors and frontiersmen. Washington was a fourth-generation, middling gentry, Tidewater-born Virginian. Preston was a Scots-Irish immigrant. Both went on to take full advantage of the opportunities offered to ambitious young

men by the newly opening backcountry with its abundance of rich land ready for the taking.

One imagines that the journey of Washington and Preston might have been idyllic — through near-virgin, climax-growth forest, amid tall, well-spaced trees beginning to take on their fall colors, passing grazing bison on the meadows created by the dams of industrious beavers, and with flocks of countless passenger pigeons overhead.

Washington went on to Halifax County and then returned the length of the frontier to Winchester. History does not record what Preston did next. But it is a good guess that he went prospecting for land.

Preston became the designated surveyor for the short-lived Fincastle County on its creation in 1772, at which time it included all of today's state of Kentucky. In 1773, the faraway Board of Trade in London opened up the western land for claims by officers and soldiers who had given service in the French and Indian War. Provision for awarding such land claims had been specifically written into the 1763 Treaty of Paris that ended the war, but those claims lay dormant until 1773.

The action of the Board of Trade galvanized land acquisition on the frontier. Preston advertised in Maryland and Virginia newspapers asking for soldiers and officers with land claims to meet his deputy surveyors on the Kanawha River for the purpose of marking and selling their land. A brisk market in such land quickly developed, and George Washington was a leading customer.

In 1774-75 at least nine letters (eight of which survive) were exchanged between Washington, living then at Mount Vernon, and Preston, living then at Smithfield in Blacksburg. All the letters are about Washington acquiring land. There is today a historic marker beside the Kanawha River in St. Albans, W.Va., that commemorates land that Preston had surveyed for Washington.

The letters also speak to the hazards of frontier life — in an August 1774 letter, Preston wrote, "I began yesterday to build a Fort about my House for the Defence of my Family" — and they exemplify the leading Virginians' hunger for western land as a motive for the coming American Revolution.