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Western Pennsylvania and the Birth of a Nation: Part 1

By PETER A. KUHS For The Leader Times
Feb 27, 2026



In 2011, historian Gary B. Nash affirmed in his essay for the Encyclopedia of Greater Philadelphia project that the city of brotherly love was “the cradle of liberty,” a point hard to refute with the two great American documents — the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution — debated, ratified, and signed at Independence Hall in 1776 and 1790, respectively.

Submitted



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Declaration of Independence and the Constitution – debated, ratified, and signed at Independence Hall in 1776 and 1790, respectively.

However, if Philadelphia is the cradle of liberty due to its late 18th century history, then Pennsylvania west of the Blue Mountains in the middle of the 18th century is the incubator.

Western Pennsylvania's importance to the birth of our nation cannot be understated.



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In May 1754, a young provincial colonel named George Washington rode on patrol along the frontier. He was tasked to drive any French presence out of the Ohio River Valley, of which the area was then considered.

South of present-day Uniontown, in a small clearing under a cliff in the middle of the woods, he and his men came upon a French patrol under the command of Ensign Joseph Coulon de Jumonville and ambushed them. Most of the

French were killed or captured, including Jumonville, who was tomahawked by the Mingo Indian Chief Tanaghrisson.

Today, we call that clearing Jumonville Glen, and his death began the French and Indian War.

Known now by historians as the War for Empire, the French and Indian War constituted the North American front of the first ever global war, the Seven Years' War.

Britain and France, along with their allies, fought for control of colonial expansion on five continents, including Europe, Africa, India, and most importantly, in the Caribbean Sea.

Where British regulars did fight on all fronts, American colonists provided the lions share of soldiers in the west.

Provincial soldiers filled levies issued by their colonies and the Crown to fight along the North American frontier, and even participated in the capture of Martinique, an island in the Caribbean.

Their service at home and abroad would come into far greater significance in the future.

By 1755, things quieted down into a lull.

Washington's accidental instigation of World War Zero and his later defeat at Ft. Necessity, both the previous year, did little to affect the western Pennsylvania frontier. France and Great Britain had yet to declare war, and viewed the French and Indian War as mere skirmishes.

That all changed on 9 July when a combined French and Indian force routed the British under General James Braddock at the Battle of Monongahela.

The night before, Braddock listened to Shawnee and Lenape dignitaries, including Captain Jacobs and Shingas, inquire about what land they would receive if they helped drive the French and their current Indian allies out of the Ohio Valley.

The general responded that "No savage shall inherit the land."

That single sentence broke the alliance between the Shawnee and Lenape, and the British.

Warriors from both tribes fought with the French the following day, with some speculation that Captain Jacobs fired the shot that gave Braddock his mortal wound.

With the destruction of the only British army between the French and Indians and Philadelphia, the frontier laid ripe for the taking.

France and her Amerindian allies made Pennsylvania a focal point of the war for a couple reasons.

First, the French wanted the province knocked out of the war because the fertile farmland of the Conococheague Settlement – the area between the Blue Ridge and South Mountain stretching from Maryland to Carlisle known today as the Cumberland Valley – was the breadbasket of the British colonies.

Eliminating Pennsylvania would not only hinder food production, but also cripple the colonial pocketbook by taking away its wheat revenue.

Secondly, the Shawnee and Lenape, once allied with the British, looked to drive the white settlers from land that was once their own that the Iroquois, claiming dominion over their Algonquin brethren, sold to William Penn's sons in overtly nefarious real estate deals.

The future Keystone State had a target on its back.

For the next two and a half years, Pennsylvania reeled.

The French, Shawnee, and Lenape raided all along the mountains.

From the Moravian Missions near present-day Stroudsburg to the Maryland border at Greencastle, more than 300 raids killed and captured settlers.

The Quaker government in Philadelphia did nothing to help, refusing to raise the militia or munitions of any kind.

The settlers relied on themselves for defense, using courtyards and churches as makeshift forts until proper ones could not be built.

Their prowess with the Pennsylvania Rifle helped deter enemy forces whenever they could be effectively applied, but it was not enough.

Even after the campaign led by Colonel John Armstrong destroyed Kittanning — killing Captain Jacobs — and the completion of the first government sanctioned fort, Ft Loudon in what is today Franklin County, the raids continued.

Peace came in October 1758 when the Indians, half starved after nearly three years of raiding and little harvest, signed the Treaty of Easton.

One month later, Ft Duquesne blew up.

Pennsylvania, and later the rest of the colonies, survived the French and Indian War, but not without consequence.

Peter A. Kuhs is the Collections Manager at Armstrong County Historical Society and holds a Master's in Public History from Duquesne University.

Kieran Woynicz

Staff Reporter

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