

County marks 270 years since fateful shot

George Washington's close call

Austin Uram Eagle Staff Writer

December 27, 2023 Last Updated: December 26, 2023 09:04 PM Local News



Re-enactors portray the near-shooting of young George Washington while with guide Christopher Gist on Dec. 27, 1753 in Forward Township. Butler Eagle file photo

Just 270 years ago — to the day, Wednesday, Dec. 26 — the fate of the United States hung in the balance here in Butler County.

On Dec. 26, 1753, a near-miss in present-day Forward Township saved the life of a 21-year-old George Washington.

Today, a monument and placard stand outside the township building — in recognition of his brush with death.

Martin O'Brien, chairman of Washington's Trail 1753, said the incident and Washington's legacy in the county represent a "gigantic step in American history."

"It's the 270th anniversary of the attempted assassination of George Washington," he said. "We have a great piece of history, which is overlooked by almost everybody."

O'Brien founded the iconic Washington's Trail 1753 to commemorate Washington's fateful journey that year to the former French Fort Le Boeuf — in present-day Waterford, Erie County — before the French and Indian War began.

"Washington was on a mission from the governor of Virginia, which was British territory," he said. "And the British, when they settled Virginia, thought their claim went to the ends of the Earth."

But the French, exploring from their settlements in present-day Canada, laid claim to regions in Pennsylvania, according to O'Brien.

"So there was a dispute between England and France as to whose territory that was," he said. "And of course, the Native Americans felt it was theirs, and they resented having the French and/or British there, claiming the property."

Rodney Gasch, a volunteer for the trail and president of Historic Harmony, said Washington was then sent through Western Pennsylvania to Fort Le Boeuf — to assert the British claim.

"Making his way back, really the last part of his mission is that he needs to deliver this letter that the French general has given him at Fort Le Boeuf," he said. "Essentially the French are saying, 'This is our land, and England needs to stay out of New France.'"

A 'shortcut'

Hurrying back to Virginia on foot alongside surveyor and frontiersman Christopher Gist, Gasch said Washington was met by a Native American guide who offered to carry their supplies and lead them on a "shortcut."

“Initially they’re happy to have the assistance, but they get suspicious that the guy is not leading them in the direct way,” he said.

Near present-day Forward Township, O’Brien said Washington soon recognized they were going in the wrong direction.

“He got very suspicious at that point, as did Gist,” he said. “And when they got to this nice opening in the field, the Native American suddenly just turned at about 15 paces and took a shot at Washington and Gist.

“And fortunately missed them.”

Subduing the shooter, Gasch said the assumption was that he was a French sympathizer — but Washington let him go free.

“Washington — part of his goal on the mission was to retain good relations with the natives in the area — decided to release the Native American after taking his gun,” he said.

With the help of local and federal historians, the Daughters of the American Revolution pinpointed the site of the shooting and erected a monument in 1926, according to O’Brien.

The monument and its anniversary mark a pivotal — if overlooked — moment in American history, according to O’Brien, right here in Butler County.

“I think without Washington, we would not have been a democratic republic,” he said. “And I think the whole world would have been a very different place.”

And with a recent bill proposing the entire trail as a “national historic trail,” O’Brien said he was hopeful the monument and the county’s rich history would get the recognition it deserved.

“I think that will bring a lot more attention to the events that happened here in Butler,” he said, “and all through Western Pennsylvania on Washington’s trip.”



Wednesday, Dec. 26, marks the 270th anniversary of “the attempted assassination of George Washington” in Butler County, according to Martin O’Brien, chairman of Washington’s Trail 1753. Today, a monument to the incident rests in Forward Township along the trail. A painting illustrating the moment, titled “The First Shot,” also hangs in the Butler County Courthouse. Submitted image