

An unsung pioneer of Western Pa.

By Jamie Kelly Eagle Correspondent

© December 12, 2023 Last Updated: December 11, 2023 03:10 PM 📄 America 250



An oil painting shows a young George Washington, left, with frontiersman and guide Christopher Gist. Photo Courtesy of Mount Vernon

Christopher Gist is one of those early American characters whose life sounds like a tall tale at first.

American history is filled with characters like that, including one who Gist would eventually live near and share a career with: Daniel Boone. Like the much better known Boone, Gist was an explorer, surveyor, and frontiersman.

He's credited with providing the first description of the Ohio Country – the present day states of Ohio, eastern Indiana, Western Pennsylvania, and northwestern West Virginia – to colonists in the 13 colonies.

Gist was also present for the very beginning of the French and Indian War, and was the person who told George Washington about a French-led scouting party in May 1754, leading to first the Battle of Jumonville Glen and then the Battle of Fort Necessity.

And that wasn't his first encounter with the future father of the nation. In 1753, when Washington was a 20-something militia officer, Gist twice saved his life while working as a scout on a mission to tell the French to leave the Ohio Country.

Early Life and Family

Gist, born in 175 or 1706 in Baltimore, Md., probably didn't have much formal education, but as his journals, published nearly 150 years after his death, attest, he was intelligent, observant and literate. Gist was probably trained as a surveyor, possibly by his father, Richard, who had helped plot the city of Baltimore.

Gist married Sarah Howard, and the couple had three sons, Richard, who was killed at the Revolutionary War Battle of King's Mountain; Nathaniel, who served with his father during the French and Indian War and went on to command a regiment of the Continental Army; and Thomas. They also had two daughters, Amy and Violet.

In 1741, Gist's father died and he inherited much of his father's estate, including business interests. Over the coming years he would become a fur trader, traveling into the Ohio Country. At some point before 1750, a storehouse he owned that was filled with furs burned down, leaving him both penniless and liable for the cost of the destroyed furs.



This map shows French occupation in what are now parts of Pennsylvania and Ohio. It's based on the survey work done by Christopher Gist. Library of Congress

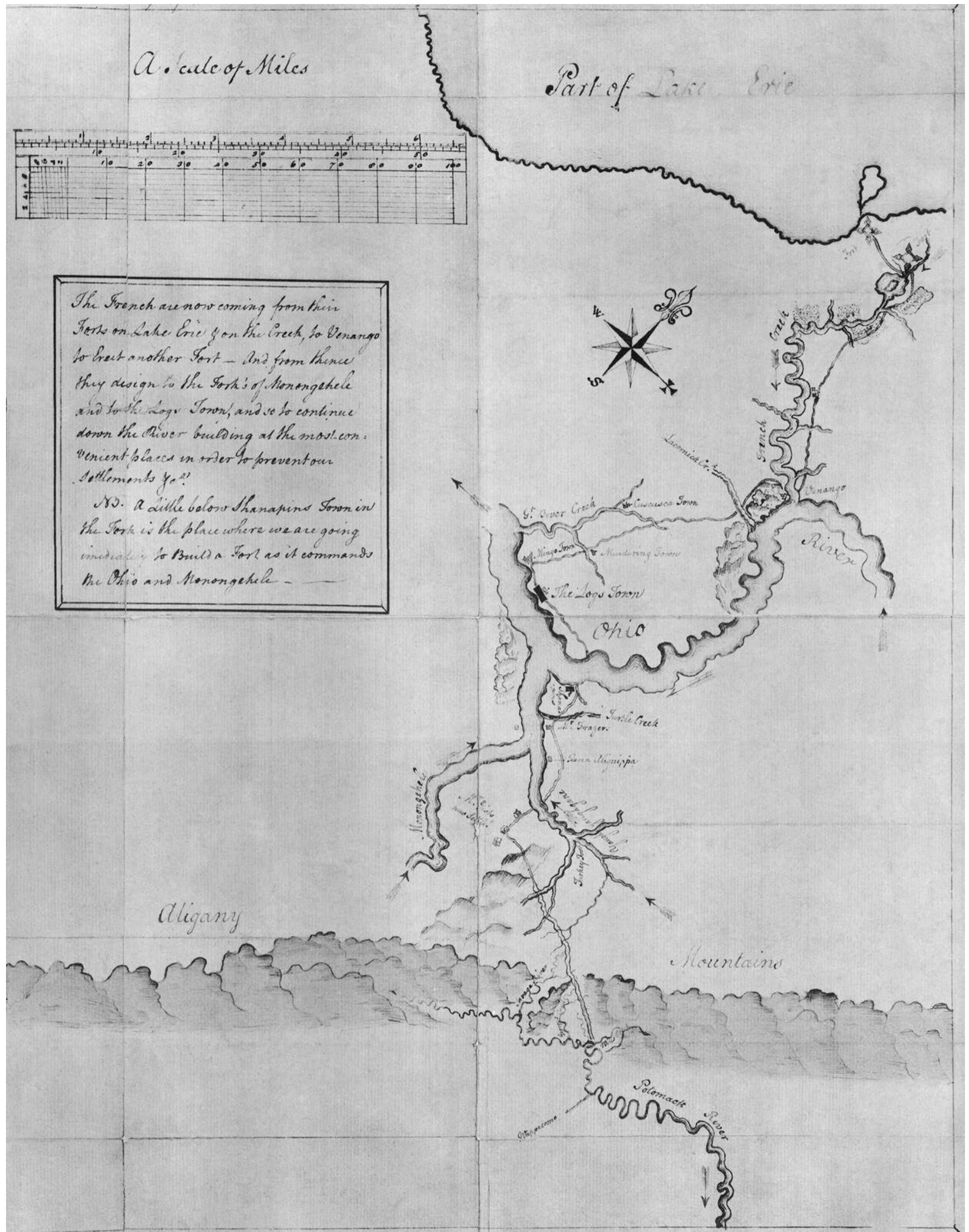
Frontiersman

It's here that Gist's prowess as an explorer saved him. In 1750, the Ohio Company hired Gist to explore the area of the Ohio River from Cumberland, Md., to the present day city of Louisville, Ky., by way of Pittsburgh, and to create maps for future traders and settlers. He was also to establish friendly relations with the Native Americans along the way.

During the winter of 1750 to 1751, Gist mapped between what's now Pittsburgh, to the Great Miami River.

Gist thought the site of what's now Cincinnati would be a good location for a settlement, but the distance from other cities made it too great a risk for Ohio Company investors.

The next year, Gist would return to Western Pennsylvania and what's now West Virginia. He found a piece of land near what's now Uniontown and started to build a plantation.



Hand-drawn map by George Washington, accompanying a printing of the journal he kept of his 1753 expedition into the Ohio Country. Library of Congress

Gist meets Maj. George Washington

While Gist creating his plantation, tensions increased between the French, who claimed much of the Ohio Country, and the British, who made similar claims.

That was the backdrop in 1753, when Gist helped Maj. George Washington reach Fort LeBoeuf in modern Erie County. Virginia's lieutenant governor, Robert Dinwiddie, sent a 21-year-old Washington to Fort LeBoeuf to deliver a message to the French, demanding they leave the Ohio Country.

Gist led Washington on the Venango Path through the Ohio Country, making stops at Logstown, now Economy; Venango, now Franklin; and, eventually, Fort LeBoeuf.

When the French ignored the message, Gist also led Washington back to Virginia to inform Dinwiddie.

According to multiple accounts, Gist twice saved Washington's life on the trip. In the first instance, which happened near modern Evans City, a Native American tried to shoot Washington, but his musket misfired and Gist helped restrain him. In the second instance, Gist pulled Washington from the freezing Allegheny River near present day Pittsburgh, after the major fell off a makeshift raft during their crossing.

The two would have to wait until the river froze over to cross.

French and Indian War

After the 1753 expedition, Gist returned to his land in Western Pennsylvania, while others had been sent to build a fort at what is now Pittsburgh.

Those men were stopped by the French, who in turn build Fort Duquesne on the site. The next year, Washington returned with orders to build a fort, and in May 1754 began what would become known as Fort Necessity.

Gist, who lived in the area, told Washington about a detachment of fewer than 50 men commanded by Joseph Coulon de Villiers de Jumonville.

Washington, Gist and soldiers from the Virginia Regiment found the French camp and a skirmish ensued. Jumonville was killed, as were nine other from the French side, with one of Washington's men killed.

At Fort Necessity near Uniontown, on July 3, 1754, the French army routed the Virginia militia. Gist was present for that battle, as well, and in the aftermath, the French would destroy the plantation he'd built.

The battles marked the beginning of the French and Indian War, and Gist would continue to participate.

Gist, along with Washington, was a member of the Gen. Edward Braddock Expedition in 1755, which tried to drive the French out of Fort Duquesne near downtown Pittsburgh.

Later Life and Death

After Braddock's defeat and death in 1755, Gist continued to serve the colonies.

In 1756, Gist, after being recommended for the role by Washington, started a series of missions that would take up the last few years of his life. He went to the modern states of South Carolina and Georgia, where he negotiated with Native American groups for support for the British colonists against the French and their native allies.

In 1757, he was appointed deputy agent of Indian Affairs and continued that mission.

On July 25, 1759, while still seeking more Native allies, Gist died after contracting smallpox.

The fact Gist did much of his work for a private company meant he wasn't as well known a figure as contemporaries like Boone, who also owned land in North Carolina in the 1740s and 1750s.

But Gist was as essential to the story of frontier America as Boone or many other famous frontiersman, and has deep ties to Western Pennsylvania, also.

Ken Cherry, of Oakland Township, a local colonial re-enactor and history enthusiast, contributed to this report.

Share this article: [f](#) [t](#) [in](#) [✉](#) [🖨](#) Order Photo Reprints: [🖼](#)

MORE IN AMERICA 250



USO has supported troops since WWII