

Docent Dispatch

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In This Issue

- *Professor: Gen. Broddock should be known for more than losing important battle*
- Calendar of Events
- Happy Hour

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Professor: Gen. Braddock should be known for more than losing important battle

By Adrian J. O'Connor | The Winchester Star

WINCHESTER — As a collegian at what is now University of Mary Washington and then as a graduate student at the College of William & Mary, David L. Preston frequently passed through Winchester en route to and from his hometown of Pittsburgh.

The symmetry is not to be overlooked, as Preston, now a history professor at The Citadel in Charleston, S.C., is a student of the man whose army, in 1775, carved out the first true road between Frederick County (north of Winchester) and the Monongahela crossing just 12 miles shy of the Forks of the Ohio, which became Pittsburgh.

Notice this man was not introduced in the ignominious possessive — i.e., Braddock's Defeat — as so often is the case, as Preston's perspective of British Gen. Edward Braddock in his most recent book ("Braddock's Defeat: The Battle of the Monongahela and the Road to Revolution") is not so much as a loser but as a leader who did many things correctly before losing a battle that consigned him to infamy.

In his Fort Loudoun Day Lecture, co-sponsored Friday night by the local French & Indian War Foundation and the Community History Project at Shenandoah University, Preston not only presented that perspective of Braddock to an audience of 50, but also this one: The French and their Indian allies had

something to do with making the four-hour battle along the Monongahela a "pivotal moment" in history. Too often, in the rush to condemn Braddock, historians amazingly overlook the odd-lot or pot-luck army that dispatched the British and colonials to crushing defeat on July 9, 1755.

In Preston's opinion, Braddock merits not condemnation but credit for defying the logistical odds — hacking his way over steep mountains and dense wilderness — and reaching the Monongahela on schedule.

That achievement in and of itself, Preston said, dispels — or should dispel — the notion of Braddock the Bumbler, an officer too arrogant to adapt his European ways to the realities of the frontier. For example, Preston noted, Braddock used a third of his soldiers as flankers to guard against the very type of attack to which his army fell prey. He also allowed his men to shed their heavy coats and waistcoats for lighter linen garments to lend some cool in the early-summer heat. And he defied the French's expectations that he would not be able to ferry his siege artillery across the Alleghenies.

So while defeat would be his ultimate destiny, Braddock did fashion a critical though largely unnoticed "victory" through his construction of a road that would be an early pathway for settlers, rather than just soldiers, to the West.

This success certainly begs the question: What happened on July 9? Well, that is covered in the second half of Preston's thesis. The French and Indians happened.

There's an old saying, as Preston reminded his audience: "The enemy gets a vote." The French and Indians got a lot of them.

For starters, though their force was smaller — they deployed less than 1,000 combatants, of which between 600 and 700 were Indians, while Braddock brought nearly 1,500 soldiers with him to the Monongahela — the French officer corps, led by field commander Daniel Liénard de Beaujeu, was far superior. Not only were many of them combat veterans — which so many of the British were not, including Braddock — but they were also well-versed in communicating and thereby negotiating with their Indian allies.

"They were," says Preston, "an incredibly talented group."

Moreover, in causing nary a stir as the British crossed the Monongahela and commenced scaling a ridge in what is now Braddock, Pa., the French and Indian had timing — and, needless to say, surprise — on their side. Not only were Braddock and his army confident, but they were also unsuspecting. So vulnerable were they that when the French marines and militia attacked head-on and the Indians pinched in all along the red-clad flanks, Braddock's column collapsed within 20 minutes.

The battle would last three more hours, but with the British immobile, the withering Indian fire reduced Braddock's force to "a single red column through the woods." And when Braddock himself fell to a bullet through his lungs late in the battle, only the cool heroism of colonials such as George Washington (himself recovering from a stomach ailment) and Adam Stephen allowed the British to escape their predicament. Nonetheless, of the 1,496 men who made it to the Monongahela, 976

were either killed or wounded.

The battle did prove "pivotal" as the "pendulum of power" swung to the French and the war widened to a global conflict — a war that would change history because it would change the dynamics between Great Britain and her colonies.

Fort Loudoun Day continued Saturday at the French & Indian War Foundation's site atop North Loudoun Street, where Virginia soldiers commanded by George Washington began building Fort Loudoun some 262 years ago this month.

The fort no longer exists, but tours were given of the site amidst an atmosphere of living history, which has become the calling card of the foundation, founded in 2002.

Links of Interest

Some online sources have been brought to our attention that we thought might be of interest to everyone.

Encyclopedia Virginia entry on JC: https://www.encyclopediavirginia.org/Carlyle_John_1720-1780

Encyclopedia Virginia virtual tour of CH: https://www.encyclopediavirginia.org/media_player?mets_filename=evr12779mets.xml

John Ramsay's ledger, which includes mentions of Carlyle and gives us an idea as to what an Alexandria merchant carried: <https://ramsay.arthistory.wisc.edu/about/>

