

Docent Dispatch EXTRA EDITION!

2009 March Extra

Northern Virginia Regional Park Authority 

French Prisoners in John Carlyle's Alexandria by Ted Pulliam

Skirmish in the Glen

At dawn on May 28, 1754, over 20 years before the beginning of the American Revolution, 30 plus French soldiers were camped at the base of a small glen in the woods of western Pennsylvania. One side of the glen was bounded by a roughly 30 foot high outcropping of grey granite. A small stream meandered through its middle, and on the far side of the stream, trees and thick underbrush sloped steeply upward.

The soldiers had slept at the foot of the tall stone outcropping and on the gently sloping ground that led toward the stream. In various stages of undress, they were starting to fix their breakfasts, walking sleepily to the nearby woods to relieve themselves, or just beginning to crawl out of their bark lean-tos they had built for shelter from the rain that had fallen heavily during the night.

Even though these French soldiers knew a larger force of British colonials was somewhere in the vicinity, they were not particularly vigilant. They had little reason to be. Although France and Great Britain were old enemies, now they were at peace.

The British colonials, however, looked at matters differently. To them the French were trespassers on their land, trespassers who meant to spy and report to a French fort not far away in order to summon a larger force to attack them. As a result, around 40 British colonials and friendly Indians under the command of twenty-two-year-old George Washington were not somewhere in the distance but right there at the top of the outcropping of rock and at both ends of the glen. Some of the British colonials, Washington in the lead, began walking slowly from one end of the glen toward the awakening Frenchmen as the night gradually lightened.



A soldier of the Compagnies franches de la Marine dressed for an expedition, mid-18th century

No one, even now, knows who fired the first shot, and there are conflicting reports about precisely what happened next. Shots were fired, however, and within a few short minutes ten to 14 of the French soldiers were killed, including their commander Lieutenant Jumonville. Except for one Frenchman who escaped in his bare feet, the rest, 21 in total, were taken prisoner. Those captured Frenchmen included the second in command of the expedition, Ensign Pierre-Jacques Druillon de Mace; Commissary Officer Michel Pepin, known as La Force; and Cadets du Boucherville and du Sable. The British colonials lost only one killed and three wounded.

There then ensued a series of unusual events that involved John Carlyle and sent almost all those captured Frenchman to jail in Alexandria, after subjecting them to alleged mistreatment, frontier intrigue, and an exhausting 300-mile march from the site of the skirmish ultimately to Williamsburg, Virginia.

The Governor and the Ensign

Young Washington immediately decided to get those 21 prisoners off his hands. The day after the skirmish, he sent them to Winchester, Virginia, under the charge of Lieutenant John West, Jr. (the same John West who surveyed the land and set out the lots for the new town of Alexandria five years earlier and a relative of Sybil West,

CARLYLE HOUSE

*Mary Ruth Coleman, Director
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John Carlyle's second wife) and a guard of twenty men.

In the small frontier town of Winchester at that time was Robert Dinwiddie, Governor of Virginia (although technically the lieutenant governor, he actually had the authority of the governor). Dinwiddie was waiting for a group of friendly Indians to appear for a conference scheduled months earlier. Waiting with him and purchasing supplies for Washington's soldiers was John Carlyle (according to a letter Carlyle later wrote to George Washington), whom Dinwiddie had appointed commissary officer for Washington's troops and British forces coming to Virginia from other colonies.

Governor Dinwiddie was extremely pleased with Washington's victory and with the captured French prisoners. However, he was preoccupied with other matters and soon ordered them to be taken from Winchester down to Williamsburg.

A colonial newspaper reported their arrival at Williamsburg on June 11. Dinwiddie himself returned to Williamsburg a few days later, without meeting the Indians. (With all the turmoil with the French, they had been reluctant to leave their villages.)

Immediately upon his arrival he received two letters from Ensign Druillon, the senior French prisoner. Druillon was a 27-year-old engineer who had arrived in Canada from France only a few years earlier. Since his arrival, he had helped to design and construct the French forts that

stretched south down the Allegheny River from Canada, including Fort Duquesne (at present-day Pittsburgh) from which Druillon and the other Jumonville soldiers had just marched. He also was a relative of a former commandant general of Canada. In his letters Druillon complained that the Williamsburg "prison" where his men were housed consisted of "only one small room" and that all the Frenchmen were short

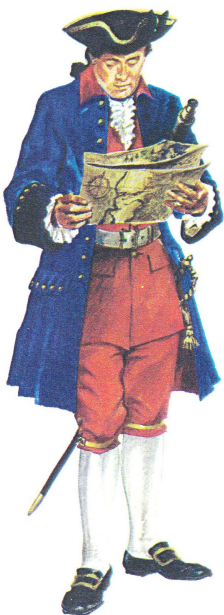
of clothing and other necessities.

After the French soldiers were captured at the glen, the Indians accompanying Washington had rummaged through the few things they brought with them, taking what they pleased. The Frenchmen had left the glen with only what they wore at the time they awoke the morning of the skirmish. Although Washington wrote that he had furnished the officers some of his own clothing, it is likely, as Druillon wrote, that many of the prisoners wore mostly castoff clothes that they were given by "one and another" of the Englishmen they encountered. The officers particularly, Druillon continued, were so badly in need of clothing that they were reluctant to meet with Governor Dinwiddie personally.

Ensign Druillon asked the Governor to "appoint some Merchant to furnish us with the necessaries we want." In support of his request for better treatment, Druillon contended that the Frenchmen at the glen were on a diplomatic mission simply to deliver a letter to the British soldiers (a letter they had produced) and should be treated as ambassadors rather than as spies and prisoners.

Governor Dinwiddie understood that it was to Druillon's advantage to say that his soldiers were on a diplomatic mission. He knew, too, that this account differed from that of Washington's. In addition, Dinwiddie had personally compelling reasons to disregard the Frenchman's characterization of his mission. Washington and his men had been under his overall command when they fired on French soldiers at a time of peace. Governor Dinwiddie would need to report this series of events to his superiors in London, and it clearly was to his advantage to portray the French as aggressors rather than diplomats.

Thus in his reply to the Frenchman written a few days later, Dinwiddie completely denied the French had peaceful intentions. He also pointed out, somewhat disingenuously, that "your dress [now] is the same in which You were found by Colonel Washington, and therefore it was of Your own Choice." Dinwiddie continued that he would "not hinder, but be glad if any of our Merchants are inclinable to give You proper Clothing" and suggested vaguely that if the French ensign would give his parole (word of honor) "for your suitable Behavior," he would be "as easy to You . . . as the nature of it [his confinement as a prisoner] will admit."



French Military Engineer



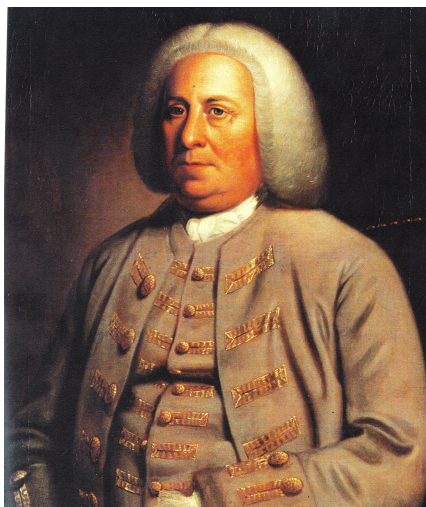
The Situation Changes

Within two weeks of this exchange of letters, however, events forced a significant change in the prisoners' situation. On July 3, Washington was attacked by a superior French force at the Great Meadows not far from the Jumonville glen and was forced to surrender. Part of the surrender agreement required Washington to hand over to the French two hostages, Captains Stobo and Van Braam, who would be returned to the British only when all the French prisoners captured at the Jumonville glen were returned to the French.

The news of Washington's defeat distressed Dinwiddie, and he began working immediately on a military response. It was not until six weeks after Washington's surrender that he began to comply with the part of the surrender agreement concerning returning the French prisoners. On August 22, he ordered all prisoners captured at the Jumonville glen, including Druillon and La Force, taken back to Winchester and from there to the French at Fort Duquesne.

In the meantime, however, one of the British hostages in French hands at Fort Duquesne, Captain Stobo, with the aid of two Indians, had managed to smuggle out a letter and a detailed map of the fort itself. In late August this letter reached Dinwiddie. In his letter Stobo stressed the value that the French placed on one of the prisoners, the commissary officer La Force. According to Stobo "La Force is greatly wanted here, no scouting now, he certainly must have been an extraordinary man amongst them -- he's so much regretted and wished for."

Actually Dinwiddie had some indication earlier that there was more to La Force than being a simple supply officer. When Washington wrote Dinwiddie in Winchester that he was sending the prisoners to him, he singled out La Force. Washington had met La Force six months earlier on a diplomatic journey to a French fort far up the Allegheny River and had heard more about him since then. Washington now described him to Dinwiddie as "a bold Enterprising Man, and a person of great subtlety and cunning" who was as valuable to the French as "50 other Men." Also, after the prisoners reached Winchester, John Carlyle, who was there with Dinwiddie, sought out his fellow commissary officer and later described him in a letter to his brother, and probably also to Dinwiddie himself, as "A man of Great Consequence." In fact, as Washington and Carlyle perceived, La Force was much more than just a supply officer; he was also a valuable Indian interpreter, negotiator, and leader.



Robert Dinwiddie, Governor of Virginia

Stobo's final commendation taken from the mouths of the French themselves persuaded Dinwiddie to change his mind about the prisoners. He immediately sent an express rider to stop them. According to a report in a colonial newspaper, the prisoners already were beyond

Winchester on their way to Fort Duquesne when they were halted and sent back to Winchester. There the 17 privates were placed in the jail while Druillon, La Force, and the two cadets were placed in other quarters more suitable for officers.

La Force, however, did not stay with them long. Dinwiddie ordered him taken back to the jail in Williamsburg guarded by a trustworthy officer who was instructed to take "double Care" and be "very careful and diligent that he may not make his Escape."

Dinwiddie's New Offer

Governor Dinwiddie then sent a messenger to the commander at Fort Duquesne offering to trade Druillon and the two cadets (but not the prized La Force and the 17 privates) to the French for the two hostages. In support of this change in Washington's surrender agreement, Dinwiddie made the very legalistic argument that the agreement was null and void regarding the prisoners because at the time Washington made it, the prisoners were not under his control but under Dinwiddie's.

The messenger reached Fort Duquesne on September 20 and presented the offer. Unsurprisingly, the French commander Claude Pierre Pecaudy de Contrecoeur flatly rejected it.

On the return trip to Dinwiddie in Williamsburg, the British messenger stopped at Winchester and passed a letter from Contrecoeur to the French prisoner Druillon informing him that Contrecoeur turned down the exchange offer. Druillon was distressed – he would not soon be rejoining his comrades,



Apparently John Carlyle was in Winchester at the time attending to commissary business and talked with Druillon. According to the Frenchman, Carlyle promised “that he would lend me any money I need as soon as I have a letter from our general [Contrecoeur] assuring him that Mr. Stobo [one of the British hostages with the French] will receive to his account all the money which he needs.” (Probably Carlyle was planning for Governor Dinwiddie to reimburse him.)

Druillon immediately wrote a letter to Contrecoeur at Fort Duquesne informing him of Carlyle’s promise and asking for both a letter of credit and assurances that Stobo would receive the money he needed. Unfortunately for Druillon, the colonials did not get around to sending the letter to Fort Duquesne for four months.

Druillon Complains Again

Part of Druillon’s distress was due to his dissatisfaction with the treatment of the French while in Winchester. Shortly after being returned there, Druillon complained to Governor Dinwiddie again, saying this time that the jail in Winchester also was much too small “and very incommodious” for the 17 prisoners in it. (It seems that although his concern may have been justified, Druillon was something of a habitual complainer. Several months before his capture, he was helping to build one of the French forts up the Allegheny River and complained to his overall superior officer that his immediate superior was not giving him the proper support. It was an assertion that his immediate superior, who later proved to be a competent officer, politely denied.)

On September 10, the Governor wrote Lord Fairfax that it would be better to move the Frenchmen to Alexandria and requested Fairfax, who lived near Winchester, to arrange for the sheriff there to deliver the prisoners to the Fairfax County sheriff for transport to Alexandria. Dinwiddie probably thought the move to a different jail would quiet Druillon and Alexandria would be more secure – further from the frontier and further from other Frenchmen.

Apparently, however, Lord Fairfax did not act on Dinwiddie’s suggestion. In late September, Dinwiddie himself ordered the authorities in Winchester to send Druillon and the other prisoners to Alexandria. In his letter reporting this order, Dinwiddie made his opinion of Druillon clear -- he was “a mean Spirited Fellow; or, more properly, a Petit Matre [little boss].”

Signatures of Contrecoeur and Druillon
Papiers Contrecoeur

Yet in early December, more than two months later, the Governor of Maryland visited a British fort in western Maryland and reported to Dinwiddie that he understood the prisoners, still in Winchester, were “in a distressful situation especially the Officer

[Druillon] who is almost naked.” The Maryland governor suggested they be sent to Alexandria and Druillon be given “Leave to walk the Town on His parole of honor.”

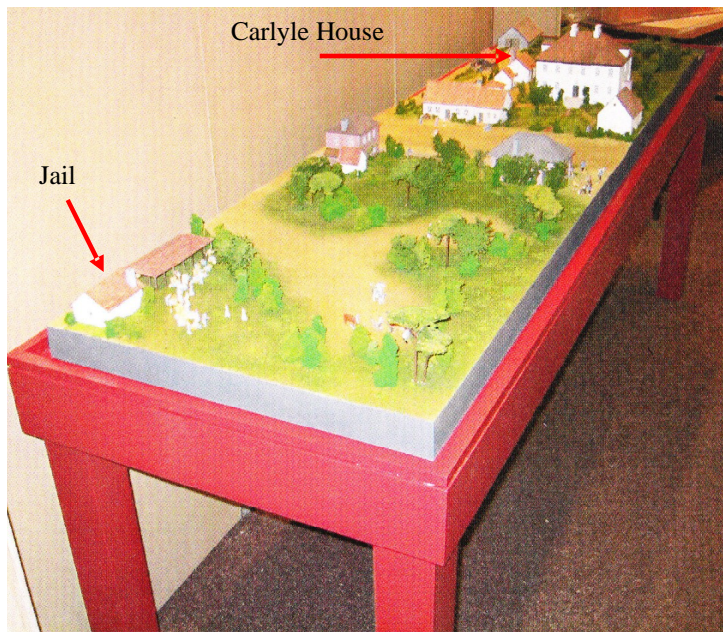
About the same time, John Carlyle again had contact with Druillon and wrote Dinwiddie that Druillon had complained again of his men not having sufficient clothing. This time Dinwiddie responded grudgingly that “if they are provided with some coarse Cloth to keep them from the inclemency of the Weather . . . I will see you paid.”

Perhaps due to the Maryland governor’s concern, someone finally found Druillon’s letter to Contrecoeur from four months earlier asking for financial help and in mid-January, 1755, according to the *Maryland Gazette*, sent it with two Indians to Contrecoeur at Fort Duquesne.

However, Contrecoeur’s cool response brought back by the Indians in mid-February did not improve the French prisoners’ situation. Contrecoeur seemed offended that Druillon had asked for a letter of credit for the French prisoners -- after all, the British hostages were being treated courteously without one. If Druillon needed anything special, he could always borrow on the worth of his commission (officers’ commissions issued in France were then bought and sold so had some value), which was for service to his king and should be considered sufficient security by any honorable person.

The Frenchmen to Alexandria

Druillon’s complaints to the colonials, however, apparently resulted in another change for the French prisoners. Sometime during the period mid-December to early February, the prisoners finally arrived in Alexandria. Here the privates were placed in the newly constructed Fairfax County jail while Dinwiddie reluctantly allowed



In late February General Braddock arrived in Williamsburg and learned to his consternation that Frenchmen were wandering around the town where he proposed to land his troops for the march west to attack the French. This he thought highly improper and immediately wrote Commodore Keppel, commander of the naval forces that had brought the general and his army to Virginia, urging him to take the prisoners on board one of His Majesty's warships. Keppel, however, who on water was not subject to General Braddock's commands, demurred, saying he had no instructions about prisoners.

Braddock and Dinwiddie then worked out an alternative solution. Once one of the 15 commercial transport ships had disembarked her troops and supplies in Alexandria, she would take on board two of the French privates and return them to England. This procedure would continue until all the privates had left Alexandria. As for Druillon and the two cadets, Dinwiddie sent them and a servant to

Ensign Druillon and the two cadets to live "in Private Lodgings," provided money for each of them, and allowed Druillon to walk the town freely once he had given his parole.

The jail at Alexandria then was located on market square at the southeast corner of Cameron and Royal Streets, according to research done for the Alexandria Black History Museum. Alexandria was then only five years old and comprised of a few dirt streets lined mostly with small wooden houses. It had become the county seat of Fairfax County less than three years earlier, and there was little on market square other than the jail, a market house, a small courthouse, and a few trees.



*An artist's model of Alexandria's jail.
Courtesy Alexandria Black History Museum*

The jail itself was a one-story building about 18 months old. Though new, it was not particularly well constructed. The county sheriff already had complained of its insufficiency and had to hire workmen to fix it. Two of the Frenchmen held there later complained that they were only "fed on Indian corn with two pounds of meat" for the 17 of them.

Druillon, however, must have been glad to be free at least to roam the town, step into its shops, and walk along its dirt streets down to the waterfront. However, Governor Dinwiddie later reported that he had "many complaints against him, while here, of his bad behavior and impudent speeches." Regardless, Dinwiddie claimed, he himself generously had "winked at many of his Irregularities."

General Braddock Arrives

Hampton where they sailed to England at Virginia's expense.

Freed to France

By mid-April, all the prisoners had left Alexandria for England, undoubtedly much to Dinwiddie's relief. However, for at least two of the privates, Jean Baptiste Berger and Joachim Parent, their difficulties were not yet over. During their 40-day voyage to England, as they reported later, they had only one blanket between them and were served only one biscuit and one herring a day. Once reaching London, they were detained on board ship there for three additional months. During that time they received the same rations as the ships' crew, except for a four-day period immediately after word reached London of Braddock's defeat. Then they received nothing to eat at



all, except for food a sympathetic fellow Catholic smuggled in to them at night. Finally, on September 27, they were given clothing and placed on board the Calais packet for France.

Druillon arrived in England on June 10, 1755, and immediately made his way to the French ambassador in London, who soon lodged a complaint with the British government about the “ill usage” afforded Druillon and the cadets (but not the privates). Druillon then crossed to France, while his latest complaint was duly sent to Governor Dinwiddie for response.

Dinwiddie wrote back indignantly to London that Druillon was “guilty of Ingratitude” and had given him a “very bad return for all my Civilities to him.” Dinwiddie then proceeded to justify his actions as proper treatment of a prisoner. He ended his letter: “If I have been irregular in my Conduct [which he clearly believed he had not] I shall be glad to be set right, in Case any such Affair should hereafter occur.”

Apparently, he succeeded in justifying his conduct, or at least his superiors in London were too busy with other matters to attend further, for it seems no further correspondence concerning the prisoners appears in the record. Dinwiddie continued as governor until January 1758.

Druillon, in the meantime, returned to Canada in 1756 and served in several posts and battles in the French and Indian War. He then returned to France in 1760, received a pension, and retired to the provinces where he remained until his death in 1780. There is no record of his ever returning to Alexandria.

About him the Dictionary of Canadian Biography reports that “despite good references and repeated requests from 1761 to 1775, he was unable to obtain the Cross of Saint-Louis [France’s most coveted military award] and the additional pension he desired.” It seems that even in retirement, Druillon continued to contend he should be treated better.

Sources:

The author would like to thank Diane Riker for her skillful translation from the French of letters in the Contrecoeur Papers used in preparing this article. Thanks also to Audrey Davis, Assistant Director of the Black History Museum, for her help with information on the Alexandria jail.

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Curator’s Note:

A huge debt of gratitude goes to Ted Pulliam for researching and writing this excellent paper.

A version of this article with full endnotes is available at the Carlyle House and at the Alexandria Archaeology Museum.