

Washington's Western Lands

[George Washington](#) was a great landowner, and the first lands he acquired were in present West Virginia, received in partial payment for his work as a teenage surveyor on the vast holdings of [Lord Thomas Fairfax](#). These first lands included property in present Jefferson County and 240 acres in Morgan County. In later years, Washington was a frequent visitor at [Harewood](#) and [Happy Retreat](#), the Jefferson County estates of [Samuel](#) and [Charles Washington](#). These younger brothers occupied lands that Washington had surveyed for Lord Fairfax and whose purchase he had recommended to his half-brother Lawrence. At his early death, Lawrence Washington had left them to Samuel and Charles.

George Washington soon owned more than 1,000 acres in Jefferson County and eventually much more in other parts of Western Virginia. Probably most of the more than 60,000 acres he owned at his death in 1799 lay in the western parts of present West Virginia, primarily on the Ohio and Great Kanawha rivers in present Wood, Jackson, Mason, Putnam and Kanawha counties. Washington's ownership of these lands had to do with the patronage of Robert Dinwiddie, a Scot who became governor of colonial Virginia in 1751. Like Lord Fairfax, Dinwiddie took an interest in young George Washington and in 1752 made him at age 20 a Virginia adjutant with the title of major.

The next year, Dinwiddie sent Major Washington on a mission to warn the French out of the Ohio region. The message was delivered to the French and politely declined. Dinwiddie then decided to raise an army and to build a fort at the forks of the Ohio River, the site of present Pittsburgh. To encourage enlistment he offered 200,000 acres of bounty lands west of the Allegheny mountains, to be apportioned according to rank among those who served. Washington's portion of these bounty lands comprise the nucleus of his western holdings.

At Washington's suggestion he was made lieutenant colonel of the Virginia forces, becoming overall commander when Colonel Joshua Fry died as a result of a fall from a horse. Washington's disastrous first battle, at Fort Necessity in July 1754, began the [French and Indian War](#), part of a worldwide conflict between Britain and France. The French lost, ceding their North American holdings to Britain in the 1763 Treaty of Paris, but implementation of Governor Dinwiddie's promise of bounty lands did not immediately follow. The Indians, unhappy with having been abandoned by the French, rose up in what was known as [Pontiac's Rebellion](#). Although the rebellion was suppressed, George III in his Proclamation of 1763 forbade settlement west of the Alleghenies, including all of present West Virginia except the Eastern Panhandle. The King did promise warrants for lands to military veterans, but these warrants could not be exercised in the west.

In 1768, however, the English Secretary of State for the Colonies authorized the renegotiation of the colonies' western boundary with the Indians. In the resulting first Treaty of Fort Stanwix all Indian lands south and east of the Ohio River were ceded to the Crown, down to the mouth of the Tennessee River. Washington seized the occasion to submit a petition to the new Virginia governor, Lord Botetourt, for implementation of Dinwiddie's 1754 promise.

It was determined that Washington and his fellow officers might locate a total of 200,000 acres in the vicinity of the Great Kanawha River and on the Ohio River south of the mouth of the Little Kanawha River, present Parkersburg. After consultation with his officers in August 1770 Washington and associates proceeded overland to the Ohio River, then downriver to the mouth of the Great Kanawha, which they explored upriver for about 15 miles. Upon his return Washington again consulted with his officers, and they authorized Captain William Crawford, the surveyor of Augusta County who had accompanied Washington on the western trip, to do the necessary surveying. He began the work in 1771.

There was a lapse of time caused by Governor Botetourt's death and his replacement by the Earl of Dunmore. On

December 15, 1772, the new governor executed patents granting lands to a number of officers and men of the First Virginia Regiment, citing Dinwiddie's Proclamation of 1754. Approximately 9,000 acres on the Ohio River in present Wood and Jackson counties were conveyed to Washington, who also received 7,276 acres on the south side of the Kanawha in present Mason County.

Washington's own bounty allotment was probably 15,000 acres, but it is evident that he purchased shares of other officers as well. Thus a tract of 7,276 acres on the north side of the Great Kanawha in present Putnam County was apparently allotted originally to Washington and Lieutenant Colonel George Muse but owned solely by Washington after he acquired Muse's interest.

Washington was also entitled to 5,000 acres under the King's 1763 Proclamation and commissioned surveys up the Great Kanawha in order to exercise those warrants. Deteriorating relations between the colonies and the mother country resulted in instructions to Governor Dunmore to make no further grants, but in 1779 Revolutionary Virginia essentially re-validated the proclamations of 1754 and 1763. In 1784, after the Revolutionary War, Governor Benjamin Harrison made grants to Washington of 2,950 acres on the north side of the Kanawha embracing present Dunbar, and of 2,000 acres on the south side embracing present St. Albans, both in Kanawha County. These made good on warrants under the 1763 Proclamation although the south side grant seems pursuant to a warrant Washington had purchased from another veteran.

That same year Governor Harrison made a grant to Washington of 587 acres in present Marshall County, evidently on the basis of another purchased military warrant. A grant in 1780 from Governor Thomas Jefferson, jointly to Washington and Andrew Lewis of 250 acres at Burning Springs in Kanawha County, rounded out Washington's Western Virginia lands. Washington also owned acreages in Ohio and Kentucky, apparently the result of warrants purchased from Revolutionary War veterans. Washington himself had declined payment for his services in the Revolution.

In time, Washington's lands on the Kanawha and the Ohio passed on to his nephews and nieces, or to their children, many of whom eventually came west and took up possession of their allotments. The properties have been subdivided numerous times in intervening years, and today many West Virginia families occupy land once owned by the Father of our Country.

Written by [William B. Maxwell](#)

Citations

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4. Eugene E. Prussing. *The Estate of George Washington, Deceased*. Boston: 1927.