

Sowing the Seeds of War

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If you've ever picked up a history book, you'll know the American Revolutionary War started when the first shots were fired in Lexington on April 19th, 1775. But, was it the actual start? Although not well known, the Battle of Point Pleasant, WV occurred over a year before the

conflict in Lexington. Chronologically shouldn't that be the actual start of the war? In a simplified answer, yes.

The battle of Point Pleasant should be considered the first battle of the American Revolutionary War. According to Britannica, the Battle of Point Pleasant took place at two converging rivers where General Andrew Lewis and Virginian Frontiersmen fought and defeated Native Americans allied under Shawnee leader Chief Cornstalk. The main argument of those who believe this was the first battle of the Revolution is that the Natives were enticed by the British to fight the Americans. To support this theory, we first need to look into John Murray, the 4th Earl of Dunmore. Murray was a British officer, who raised and led an army of 2,700 militia men to drive out the Natives in Point Pleasant that he saw as a threat. This was the Battle of Point Pleasant, the single major battle of Lord Dunmore's War. This battle was an attack on Shawnee Natives who wanted to protect their families and tribes. The result of this battle was the

Treaty of Camp Charlotte, in which Shawnee Chiefs relinquished their hunting grounds to the white settlers. On the surface, the battle of Point Pleasant was fought because of land, but digging deeper you'll find rich waters of conspiracies and cover-ups. Historians claim that Dunmore started the conflict with natives to divert Virginians from differences they may have had with the royal administration of the colony.

Few records remain from this time not only because it was so long ago, but also because

it wasn't seen as an issue for papers to write about. One of the only known published accounts of

the conflict is from the Virginia Gazette, with only a few preserved copies. One bound record

was examined by Dr. John P. Hale, and as one of the only people to see this record, he fully believes it was the start of the Revolution. If we trust the minuscule information or few and far second-hand accounts, this seems to remain true.

Dunmore villainized the natives in order to get the Virginians to fight them, a distraction from the rising conflict and issues with the British government. Dunmore supposedly had met with the Shawnee chiefs before and after the battle of Point Pleasant, a highly suspicious fact. According to Dr. Hale, there were “not only suspicious but grave charges that Governor Dunmore acted a double part and that he was untrue and treacherous to the interest of the colony

he governed”. But Lord Dunmore didn’t work alone. Of course, he would have been doing this for the British government, but he had allies in America who shared the same ulterior motives. The main figure was John Connally, an American lieutenant born in PA. He was Dunmore’s right-hand man since meeting him during Dunmore’s “pleasure trip” to Fort Pitt. We know the two had a close relationship due to a letter Connally wrote to George Washington detailing how Dunmore had promised to grant him 2,000 acres of land. Now, there’s two ways Connally has been perceived by historians. Either he is a babbling buffoon who is incompetent enough to start conflicts or the more likely and less preferable option; Connally was malicious and calculated. Connally went around starting the conflict between settlers, sowing “trouble and ill feeling between the colonies” and even being arrested for it. What would be stopping him from doing this same thing with Natives, especially if he’s bigoted towards them? This isn’t unheard of, in 1883 Virgil A. Lewis stated, “It is a well-known fact that emissaries of Great Britain were then inciting the Indians to hostilities against the frontier for the purpose of distracting attention”. Connally has been recorded claiming land for Lord Dunmore and even remaining from Fort Pitt to Fort Dunmore. Connally also wrote letters claiming the Shawnee tribe was on a war path, enticing fear. However, the most condemning piece of evidence of Connally’s malicious actions is the Natives’ reactions to his imprisonment. After his arrest, it was stated that the tribes were “highly excited and united in a strong confederacy and threatening war”. If Connally had been unjustly starting conflict with these Native Americans of course they would be overjoyed once he was arrested. If we really think about it, this battle wasn’t from land. At the time boundary

lines were not well defined. Settlers, natives, and even the royals in Britain all had different perceptions of their land boundaries. Even the settlers in Virginia and Pennsylvania had different ideas of their own boundaries, which caused conflict. Taking this into account, this militia had no reason to fight and take land from the Natives they thought they already owned. Furthermore, if we look at the members of Dunmore's militia there's substantial evidence that they were racist towards Natives. Colonel Andrew Lewis's brother, Charles, was a member of the militia. He was well known for his experience fighting Native Americans, even cited as having "pursued, overtook, and defeated" a Native raiding party. Not only are these men likely bigoted and ready to fight any Native they see, but also they weren't a group of random men. This militia that Dunmore gathered consisted of sons and fathers, friends of friends, likely sharing the same ideologies.

Getting back to Lord Dunmore, there is a lot of evidence further suggesting Dunmore's malicious intentions. Dunmore had undoubtedly met up with the Natives before and after the battle. Andrew Lewis's son stated that it was a "well-known fact" that Blue Jacket, a Shawnee chief had visited Dunmore's camp on the day before the battle. On his way to the battle, Andrew Lewis was sent a messenger twice in one day from Dunmore, ordering him to stop and retrace his steps. It was clear that Dunmore didn't want Lewis at this negotiation. He refused to allow his participation. This is highly suspicious. After the battle, when the Natives had surrendered and retreated, Dunmore and the Natives once again had negotiation talks. Some of the natives went "to confer with Dunmore immediately after the battle". But, once again Lewis was not allowed to attend. Dunmore clearly had malicious intentions to hide facts of the negotiation from Lewis, even being quoted saying "Lewis is probably having a hot work about this time". In retrospect, it is clear that Dunmore did not reveal his true intentions. It was well known that Lord Dunmore was an enemy of the colonists. Historians go as far as saying, "Lord Dunmore having no doubt planned the attack by the Indians to discourage the Americans from further agitation of the then pending demand for fair treatment of the American Colonies at the hands of Great Britain". The little evidence that remains only suggests this. Assuming this theory is the truth, it gives clear reason that the Battle of Point Pleasant was the first in the Revolution. This was the first battle fought due to British attempts to control American settlers. To take the heat off of the

issues and rising conflict, the British targeted the mostly innocent Native Americans. Ultimately it comes down to what we define as the cause of the Revolutionary War. Nonetheless, the Battle of Point Pleasant was undeniably the first hidden spark that would lead to the eruption of the Revolution.