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The Battle of Lake George

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ABSTRACT

While many people are familiar with the French and Indian War (1754-1763), they associate the war with General Edward Braddock's disastrous expedition to capture Fort Duquesne at the Battle of the Monongahela (July 9, 1755). This battle was only one of four elements in a more extensive British campaign to reduce French forces in North America. Sir William Johnson led one overlooked segment of the campaign during The Battle of Lake George (September 8, 1755), which is significant for two reasons. The first is that it was fought exclusively with an amateur army of American provincials (only one British regular officer was present). The second is that it served as vindication for the fighting abilities of American provincial forces who were defeated during Braddock's failed battle. If Johnson had lost at Fort Edward, it would have rolled New York and New England defenses back to Albany and ceded the region to the French. Fortunately, Johnson and his men won that day. The Battle of Lake George left a mark on the fabric of the American militia, which would serve as a badge of honor as Americans rallied the colonists almost two decades later during the American Revolution.

Keywords: The Battle of Lake George, The French and Indian War, French, British, General Edward Braddock, William Johnson, Chief Hendrick, General Baron de Dieskau, Fort Saint-Frédéric

La batalla del lago George

RESUMEN

Si bien muchas personas están familiarizadas con la guerra francesa e india (1754-1763), asocian la guerra con la desastrosa expedición del general Edward Braddock para capturar Fort Duquesne en la batalla de Monongahela (9 de julio de 1755). Esta batalla fue solo uno de los cuatro elementos de una campaña británica más extensa para reducir las fuerzas francesas en América del Norte. Sir William Johnson dirigió un segmento de la campaña que se pasó por alto durante la batalla del lago George (8 de septiembre de 1755), lo cual es significativo por dos razones. La primera es que se luchó exclusivamente con un ejército aficionado de provinciales estadounidenses (solo estaba presente un oficial regular británico). La segunda es que sirvió como reivindicación de las habilidades de combate de las fuerzas provinciales estadounidenses que fueron derrotadas durante la fallida batalla de Braddock. Si Johnson hubiera perdido en Fort Edward, habría devuelto las defensas de Nueva York y Nueva Inglaterra a Albany y habría cedido la región a los franceses. Afortunadamente, Johnson y sus hombres ganaron ese día. La batalla del lago George dejó una marca en el tejido de la milicia estadounidense, que serviría como insignia de honor cuando los estadounidenses reunieran a los colonos casi dos décadas después durante la Revolución Americana.

Palabras clave: La batalla del lago George, la guerra francesa e india, franceses, británicos, general Edward Braddock, William Johnson, jefe Hendrick, general barón de Dieskau, fuerte Saint-Frédéric

乔治湖战役

摘要

尽管许多人熟悉法国印第安人战争（1754-1763），但他们联想到的是莫农加希拉之战（1755年7月9日）中英国将军爱德华·布拉多克为夺取杜肯堡而发起的损失惨重的远征战。此战仅仅是英国为减少法国在北美的势力而发动的大规模战役的四个部分之一。威廉·约翰逊爵士领导了该大规模战役中被忽视的一部分——乔治湖战役（1755年9月8日），后者的重要性体现于两个原因。第一，作战的只有美国民兵组成的军

队和一名英国正规军官。第二，乔治湖战役证明了布拉多克领导的失败战役中美国农民军的作战能力。如果约翰逊输掉了爱德华堡，纽约州和新英格兰的防御则将退回奥尔巴尼，并且该区域将让给法国。幸运的是，约翰逊及其士兵赢得了胜利。乔治湖战役给美国民兵组织结构留下了印记，这将在近20年后的美国大革命期间鼓舞美国人召集殖民者。

关键词：乔治湖战役，法国印第安人战争，法国人，英国人，将军爱德华·布拉多克，威廉·约翰逊，酋长亨德里克（Chief Hendrick），男爵Dieskau，圣弗雷德里克堡（Fort Saint-Frédéric）

In the annals of American history, many historians who specialize in the American Revolution gloss over the circumstances and events that led up to it during the French and Indian/Seven Years' War (1754-1763). Many Americans are familiar with General Edward Braddock's failed campaign to capture Fort Duquesne largely because another American, George Washington, was an active participant. Less well known is the Battle of Lake George that followed (September 8, 1755), perhaps because it was fought exclusively with an amateur army of American provincials (only one British regular officer was present). These men engaged a professional French army, which served to vindicate the abilities of provincials who were earlier denigrated and slaughtered during General Edward Braddock's expedition to capture Fort Duquesne at the Battle of the Monongahela (July 9, 1755). The Battle of Lake George was a series of three smaller skirmishes: an initial ambush along the road to Lake George, an attack at Fort

William Henry, and an engagement at the original ambush site. This battle was part of a larger British four-prong thrust into North America designed to force France to abandon its forts and settlements in the American north. The campaign centered on seizing four key French possessions: Fort Duquesne, Fort Frontenac, Fort Niagara, and Fort Saint-Frédéric, the latter led by General Sir William Johnson.¹ Together these four engagements were vital to the tide turning in Britain's favor in the War. This essay highlights the battles under Johnson that took place near Lake George and Fort Saint-Frédéric.

After the peace agreement of Aix-la-Chapelle in 1748, marking the cessation of hostilities during the War of Austrian Succession, English and French leaders worked through occasional disputes between French and British settlers in North America.² Many European leaders anticipated another war between the two rivals, though nobody suspected the conflict would begin in North America. Historically, French fur

traders monopolized the relationships with the Native Americans on the continent, though Indians began to prefer the superior quality of English smuggled goods from Montreal. The Natives were more accustomed to working with the French because many came over as single men, adopted Indian ways, often learned the language, lived among them and took Indian wives. In contrast, Englishman would settle with families, staking off vast tracts of land for farming. They were generally less receptive to adopting Indian mannerisms and ways of life. Many Indians took this as a sign that the English, rather than the French, threatened their land.

William Johnson was born in Ireland, coming to the Mohawk River Valley to manage a store for his uncle, Peter Warren, a Royal Navy officer.³ Johnson was amiable and became friendly with local Mohawk Indians, gradually adopting some of their culture and customs. Due to his familiarity with the Mohawks, he received a position as commissary of New York for Indian affairs in 1746.⁴ Johnson became very close to Chief Hendrick, also known as King Hendrick, who would ultimately become his father-in-law. When Johnson's mistress, Catherine Weisenberg, passed away, he married Hendrick's daughter.⁵ Johnson's Mohawk family gave him the name *Warraghiyagey*, meaning "he who undertakes great things."⁶ In 1754, Johnson was appointed Superintendent of Indian Affairs in the Northern Colonies; shortly after, he was commissioned a Major General to lead a campaign against the French Fort Saint-Frédéric.⁷ In 1755, the British established an al-

liance with the Mohawks, the easternmost tribe of the Iroquois Confederacy. In preparation for the upcoming campaign, Johnson held a week-long conference at his home in June to supply Indians' gifts while enlisting Iroquois support against the French.⁸ Johnson spoke eloquently, drawing a large group of Indians, though only a small force committed to the upcoming campaign against Fort Saint-Frédéric.

General Edward Braddock led an army of over 2,100 men to capture the French Fort Duquesne near modern-day Pittsburgh. At the Battle of the Monongahela (July 9, 1755), a combined French and Indian force of 637 Indians and a few hundred militias and French regulars under Captain Daniel Liénard de Beaujeu ambushed Braddock, killing him and routing his army. The British suffered a staggering 1,000 casualties.⁹ Many provincials fled without firing a shot; surprisingly, the French lost less than 100 soldiers. The event still represents one of England's worst defeats of the eighteenth century. Even more problematic, the French located Braddock's papers on the battlefield referencing British plans for attacks at Fort Frontenac in Ontario, Fort Niagara, and Fort Saint-Frédéric, near modern-day Crown Point, New York.¹⁰

Shortly after receiving Braddock's plans, French Governor-General Marquis de Vaudreuil-Cavagnial heard about Johnson's actions to raise Indian support to attack the French fort. Vaudreuil knew that Fort Saint-Frédéric was twenty years old and in a state of disrepair. Even though the fortress had



Braddocks' Retreat

Gen. Edward Braddock was dying on a caisson during his army's hasty retreat after a surprise attack by French and Indians, July 9, 1755, Pennsylvania. Engraving after Alonzo Chappel. Library of Congress.

over 60 cannons, its masonry walls were propped with wooden supports.¹¹ If the French lost the fort, the British would control Lake Champlain. This threat prompted Vaudreuil to deploy General Baron de Dieskau to intercept Johnson.¹² Dieskau is a complex figure, and the fact that he was a professional German officer serving King Louis XV of France in the War for America is an interesting story in itself (beyond the scope of this essay).¹³ Dieskau trained under a well-regarded general in French history, Maréchal de Saxe. In Europe, Dieskau also fought for France, commanding a cavalry unit in Belgium. He rose rapidly through the ranks, establishing a repu-

tation as a master strategist. Dieskau's tactics embraced irregular forces while focusing on a doctrine of rapid advance. He arrived in Canada in March 1755, quickly concluding that his adversaries were unprofessional, nothing more than provincial farmers.¹⁴ Dieskau enlisted 600 Kahnawakes and Kanesatakes Indian warriors to assist him in conducting his irregular campaign.

Unaware that the French knew of the British summer campaign, the gregarious Johnson led an army of 1,500 men up the Hudson River valley towards Lake George in August 1755. Johnson struggled to get many of the

Mohawks to join because they knew the French were allied with Kahnawakes and Kanesatakes, who were considered their relatives.¹⁵ Nevertheless, Johnson's father-in-law, Hendrick, convinced 400 Mohawk warriors to join them.¹⁶

Johnson's army moved slowly as they constructed a road through the dense forest. They stopped 50 miles north of Albany to build Fort Edward. As they completed construction, a Mohawk scouting party reported to Johnson that a large force of 8,000 French soldiers was moving to bolster the defenses of Crown Point. However, the

scouts overestimated the size of the French force under Dieskau, who only had 3,000, half of whom were highly trained French regulars.¹⁷ This overestimation caused Johnson to avoid a direct engagement and continue his mission. A few days later, Dieskau's scouts discovered Johnson's men as they completed the construction of another fort dubbed Fort Edward. The French allies continued to observe and report on the actions of the English Provincial construction crew as they began building Fort William Henry along the southern shores of Lake George. Dieskau's intelligence report was superb and thorough,



Sir William Johnson, (1715-1774) Major General of the English forces in America.
Mezzotints. T. Adams, delin.; Spooner, fecit. Library of Congress

The British devised several preemptive strikes against the French in the summer of 1755.



Theyanoguin, Hendrick Peters, 1692-1755. Print shows Hendrick Peters Theyanoguin (King Hendrick), the great Mohawk sachem, half-length portrait, facing left, wearing European style military uniform and holding a hatchet in his right hand and a wampum belt in his left. Impressions of this engraving were offered for sale in the November 1755 issue of *Gentlemen's Magazine* within months of Hendrick's death. Hendrick negotiated peace between the Six Nations and Great Britain at the Albany Conference of 1754. He was killed during the Battle of Lake George on September 8, 1755. Intaglio print. Library of Congress.

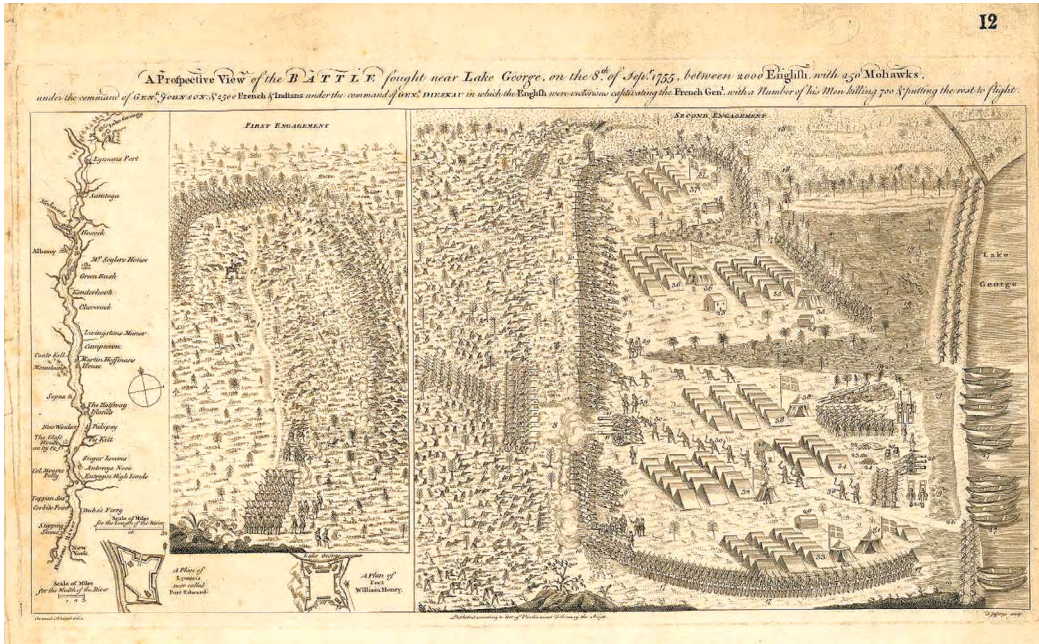
revealing that Edward, one of the first string of forts, was the most vulnerable. It lacked cannons and only partially completed protective works—an easy target. Dieskau began to organize an attack on Fort Edward to isolate Johnson's army and source of supplies.

On September 6, 1755, Dieskau left Fort Carillon with 2,000 regulars, 500 Canadians, and over 1,000 Indians making his way to Fort Edward.¹⁸ Due to the vast influence of the French, Dieskau raised a staggering number of Indians. Among his allies, histori-

an Richard Berleth noted, were “displaced Abenakis from New England, Caughnawaga Mohawks from St. Lawrence, Hurons, Ottawas, Potawatomes from the west, [and] Micmacs from the far north.”¹⁹ As the army began to move, trouble was brewing, and Dieskau noted how difficult the Indians were to control. Not far from Fort Edward, native allies demurred with Dieskau's proposal to attack the fort during a war council. The Indians thought the general's strategy was reckless. Even though Edward's defenses were not as complete

as the others, the natives did not think highly of attacking defensive positions. They preferred to raid against an unsuspecting foe, not a frontal attack against the fort's hardened earth and wooden walls. Dieskau was forced to call off his attack and revise his plans to shadow

Johnson's men and find an opportunity to ambush the traveling column. Although the Baron needed the Indians, he wrestled with deploying them because he struggled to maintain control. He expressed his frustration in a letter to Vaudreuil:



Map depicting an aerial view of the battle fought near Lake George on September 8, 1755, between 2000 English with 250 Mohawks. An English impression after an impression published in Boston six weeks earlier. Samuel Blodget, an eyewitness, depicts Sir William Johnson's victory over the French at Lake George on September 8, 1755, during the French and Indian War. William Johnson led a contingent of New Englanders, New Yorkers, and Mohawks against the French army coming south from Lake Champlain, led by Baron de Dieskau. London publisher Thomas Jefferys copied the engraving Blodget commissioned from Boston printer Richard Draper. The sheet is divided into three parts. On the left, Blodget provides a map of the Hudson River from New York to Lake George, identifying the principal communities, along with inset plans of Fort Edward and Fort William Henry, which was on Lake George. In the center is a map identified as "First Engagement," depicting the battle which took place the morning of September 8, when Johnson's forces were ambushed by the French and suffered heavy losses. On the right is a map identified as "Second Engagement," showing Johnson's victory over the French. Numbers in the image correspond to a pamphlet issued with the map, "A prospective plan of the battle near Lake George." Samuel Blodget delin; T. Jefferys sculp. Source: Library of Congress

They drive us crazy from morning till night. There is no end to their demands. They have already eaten five oxen and many hogs, without counting the kegs of brandy they have drunk. In short, one needs the patience of an angel to get on with these devils; and yet one must always force himself to seem pleased with them.²⁰

Dieskau grew increasingly frustrated with his Indian allies and their undisciplined nature.

Dieskau devised a plan to attack Fort Lyman. His objective was to cut off potential reinforcements for Johnson that might approach from Albany while trapping him along the lake.²¹ The need for a rapid advance dictated the French leave their artillery at Ticonderoga. Because of numerous Indian attacks along the 14-mile portage road between the fort and the lake, Johnson was concerned about the location being too vulnerable. He ultimately assigned 500 men to defend Lyman.²² Dieskau's Abenakis scouts provided a detailed assessment of Fort Lyman. They told the general of high walls and signs of artillery. When the other Indians learned of this, they refused to attack, insisting that the French and Canadians reduce the barriers before participating.²³ At the war council, Dieskau became incensed, struggling to suppress his fury. Shortly after this council disbanded, Caughnawagas scouts returned, telling a story that they became lost amid the dense woods and did not locate Johnson's army. Finally, Dieskau had

enough. He walked away and "swore violently in German ... he was becoming accustomed to his Indians allies and saw through their ruse."²⁴ The truth was, the scouts had located Johnson's camp, and they were intimidated by their defenses. Dieskau suspected it, though he did not have proof. Ultimately, he realized that he would be unable to shape the battle and must conduct an ambush if he was going to utilize his native allies. He concluded that he was at the mercy of his Indian allies, who were determined to dictate when and how the battle would be fought.²⁵

On the evening of September 7, Mohawk scouts told Johnson the exact location and size of the French force, moving from Fort Saint-Frédéric to attack Fort Edward. Johnson planned to dispatch a courier to warn the fort, along with 500 men as reinforcements.²⁶ Later that night at a war council, Hendrick, disagreed with Johnson about sending such a small force.²⁷ According to accounts after the battle,

He [Hendrick] picked up several arrows, and handing one of them to General Johnson, asked him to break it. This he did readily. Hendrick then put three arrows together and handed them to General Johnson, saying, 'Put them together, and you can't break them; take them one by one and you will break them easily.'²⁸

This prompted Johnson to reconsider his plan, ultimately doubling the size of his relief party. On the morning of September 8, the Fort Edward relief party led by Colonel Ephraim Williams and

Hendrick left with 1,000 Massachusetts militia and 200 Mohawk scouts.²⁹ At the same time, Dieskau's army began moving north towards Lake George. Williams did not deploy advance scouts, or skirmishers, as they moved along the road. Surprisingly, Hendrick did not advise him to do so. At 66 years old, Hendrick was a seasoned warrior with extensive experience fighting in North America. This mistake would prove costly. Dieskau's advance scouts detected the British force moving up the road miles ahead of the French. Dieskau, realizing that his Indians would only fight if they were attacking a nearly defenseless foe, set up an ambush. He made up his mind to accommodate them, though he was going to deploy his French regulars across the road, forming a U-shaped ambush.

Late in the morning, about four miles south of Lake George, Williams and his men fell into the French trap. As the men entered the kill zone, a Caughnawaga, fighting for the French, attempted to warn his fellow Mohawk to leave.³⁰ The warrior spoke out, indicating that he did not want to spill the blood of their kinsman. As they exchanged words, a shot rang out from the other side of the road. Musket fire came from each side of the road. In the ensuing mayhem, many New England men and Mohawks were killed instantly. Fortunately, most of the column was outside the kill zone because it stretched for almost a mile. Only the lead element was caught in the cross-fire. As King Hendrick and Williams were at the front of the column, they fell very early when the first shots rang out.

Within minutes, 120 men were killed or wounded; fewer than ten percent of the 1,200 men returned fire.³¹ Many retreated towards the camp. New Englanders would later call this skirmish "Bloody Morning Scout."

The provincials quickly organized a retreat towards the incomplete Fort William Henry. The men working at the fort heard the gunfire in the distance and quickened their pace as they continued to improve the defenses. Men were deployed on a hill beside the fort in anticipation of the attack. The 1,200 survivors flooded into the fort and adjacent hill. Captain William Eyre, of the Royal Engineers, the only British regular on the expedition, positioned the four cannons with grapeshot, eagerly waiting for the French and Indian assault.³² Johnson took charge, focusing on improving the earthworks of logs and dirt to protect his men.

Dieskau regained control of the Indians and attacked Fort William Henry a few hours later. The French regulars formed up in traditional European style in their stark white uniforms, approaching the fort. The men made easy targets for the cannon crews. French uniforms were spattered with blood as the cannons decimated their ranks with grapeshot. This hail of lead prompted many of the Indians and Canadians to retreat. French regulars, realizing that attacking the fort was a lost cause, shifted their attention to the militia on the hill. However, in the fort, Johnson was wounded when a musket ball struck his hip, very close to his spine, though he directed fire until

his aide, Peter Wraxall, took him into his tent.³³

Connecticut militia General Phineas Lyman took charge, directing troops for Johnson. Through the smoke, he could see the Indians and Canadians withdrawing. While organizing the regulars for a counter charge, Dieskau was shot twice in the leg. A Canadian soldier attempting to assist the general to safety was instantly killed, leaving Dieskau helpless. A British provincial soldier captured Dieskau, though he shot him in the stomach, enraging the general who was a stickler for battlefield etiquette, particularly with Dieskau's defenseless state.³⁴

Johnson and his men were exhausted. He allowed the French to retreat uncontested. Johnson's Mohawk allies were enraged at Hendrick's death. They circled Johnson's tent, determined to kill Dieskau, who was held as a prisoner inside. An officer had to intervene to stop the Indians several times as they attempted to gain access to the tent to kill Dieskau. Johnson was forced to post several guards to protect the general, ultimately escorting him back to French territory with a captain and 50 heavily-armed men.³⁵

As the Canadians and Indians retreated, they returned to the site of the earlier ambush to collect prisoners and trophies. Roughly an hour after main engagement and the French force retreated, a provincial Colonel Blanchard sent two captains, McGinnis and Folsom, with two hundred men to search the area for survivors. At roughly five in the afternoon, the men came upon the

combined Canadian and Indian group at the first ambush site. The Canadians and Indians were distracted taking scalps and war prizes.³⁶ The provincial force opened fire, killing many Indians and Canadians, though McGinnis was killed, and Folsom was injured, leading the attack. Surprisingly, many of the French casualties during the Battle of Lake George occurred during this final phase of the battle. The series of three skirmishes lasted at least eight hours; Johnson's army suffered 330 casualties, while Dieskau lost 250 men, along with all his regular officers and half of his prized grenadiers.³⁷

News of the victory at Lake George spread around the colonies quickly, serving as retribution after the dark shadow of Braddock's defeat that had suggested provincial soldiers were incapable of fighting. The fact that Johnson led a group of part-time soldiers and defeated the highly-trained French army in the wilderness was cause for celebration.³⁸ While the reality was that the French, under Dieskau, were more highly trained, his reluctant Indian allies constrained the French military operation, even though Dieskau being one of the most capable irregular tacticians in North America. Although he improvised well, allowing the Indians to fight on their terms. Dieskau realized that although the Indians could be coopted to support campaigns, it would always be on their terms and might not support European plans and methods of attack, let alone military discipline.³⁹ Dieskau was remiss because his initial victory during the ambush deceived him into a false sense of confidence. Despite the

fog of war on the battlefield and amidst the chaos, Dieskau wanted to follow up his victory by conducting a siege of a fort, a move that he knew his native allies would not support. However, had the circumstances been different and the bulk of his army a standard a European army, Dieskau might have easily won decisively. The series of Battles at Lake George was the defining moment for American provincial officers who were disparaged in Europe and France in particular.

The French were eager to depict American provincial officers and soldiers as unsophisticated and raw cowards. Johnson's victory and meticulous care of Dieskau meant that the Frenchman had only positive experiences to report, much to the chagrin of the politicians in Versailles. Despite British letters requesting Johnson continue the campaign to conquer Ticonderoga before the severe northern winter to follow up the victory and seize momentum against the French, he was reluctant to do so, citing his constant pain from his injury and inflammation of this head. As historian Fred Anderson wrote, "even if Johnson and his officers had been eager to resume the expedition against Crown Point, they could not prudently have done so."⁴⁰ By then, the French fortifications at Ticonderoga and Crown Point were formidable. Rather, Johnson opted to move Fort William Henry to higher ground, focusing on building more robust defenses.⁴¹

The Battle of Lake George marked the inception of the British alliance with Native Americans in North America and the beginning of the end

of large-scale Indian support for the French, which would reach its nadir in 1757 at the "Massacre at Fort William Henry," where French General Louis-Joseph de Montcalm's efforts to retrieve British captives from the Indians, eroded his trust and undermined Indian support for future French operations.⁴² The short-term benefit was securing the Hudson valley for the British, though the long-term significance was more profound. The Battle served as a proving ground for the abilities of men who were not formally trained as soldiers in the European method of warfare. It also marked the waning influence of the French and Native American alliance. If Dieskau had defeated Johnson at Fort Edward, it would have rolled New York and New England defenses back to Albany, ceding the region to the French. As Anderson pointed out, by the following spring, the French defenses were anchored at the north end of Lake George by Fort Carillon while the English held the south via Fort William Henry.⁴³ The French and Indian war lasted until 1763, though most of the fighting in North America ended by 1760, though it continued in Europe. After September 1959 with the infamous French defeat in the battle at the Plains of Abraham in Quebec by Major General James Wolfe, the scales tipped in favor of the British. While Wolfe's actions overshadowed the significance of the battle that took place several years earlier, the Battle of Lake George left a mark on the fabric of the American militia, which would serve as a badge of honor as Americans rallied the colonists almost two decades later.

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