



Episode 2: The Lead Plate that Started a World War

Ren Hollis: Welcome to the Virginia Museum of History & Culture Podcast featuring an exploration of the Treasures of Virginia exhibition. I am your host, Ren Hollis.

Ren Hollis: The Treasures of Virginia Exhibition is a 400-square-foot space located on the second floor of the Virginia Museum of History & Culture, the VMHC. It features a rotating display of artifacts that are fundamental to Virginia's story.

For today's episode, we will be learning about an artifact that was one of the catalysts for a world war... the Céloron Plate!

Speaking with us today is Andy Talkov.

Andy Talkov: I'm Andy Talkov, and I'm Senior Director for Curatorial Affairs at the Virginia Museum of History & Culture.

Ren Hollis: Andy has been working at the Virginia Museum of History & Culture for 16 years and counting. He is responsible for overseeing the museum's curatorial staff, who work to create exhibitions based on the museum's collection of approximately 9 million artifacts. For this episode, we will be focusing on one of these artifacts: the Céloron plate.

Andy Talkov: Well, so if you were to look at it, it's a dark gray color made of lead. It's about the size of a regular piece of paper, about eight and a half by 11 [inches]. It's specifically 7.75 inches high by 11.5 inches wide by about one-eighth of an inch thick. It's generally a rectangle, but the edges have been rounded and are not perfectly straight because lead is pretty soft. So, it doesn't take much to damage something like that.

Ren Hollis: And although the plate is relatively small, it weighs roughly 4 pounds! There is an inscription on the front in French, with each letter of the script stamped deep into the surface. In English, the inscription reads:

"In the year of 1749, of the reign of Louis the 15th, King of France, we Céloron, commander of a detachment sent by Monsieur the Marquis de la Gallissonier, Governor General of New France, to reestablish tranquility in some Indian villages in these provinces, have buried this plate at the mouth of the River Chinodahichiltha [Chino-da-hitch-iltha] on the 18th of August near the River Ohio, otherwise Beautiful

River, as a monument of the renewal of the possession we have taken of the said River Ohio, and of all those which empty into it, and of all the lands on both sides as far as the sources of said rivers, as enjoyed or ought to have been enjoyed by the kings of France preceding, and as they have there maintained themselves by arms and by treaties, especially those of Ryswick, Utrecht, and Aix la Chapelle.”

Andy Talkov: There's also an inscription on the back, also stamped. The inscription on the back is “Paul La Brosse Thicket” [that] in Latin essentially means “Paul La Brosse Made This.” So, we know who made it, and because Paul La Brosse was primarily a surveyor and engineer in Montreal, we know that the plate was likely made in Montreal sometime around the year 1749.

Ren Hollis: Since the plate was made in Montreal, Canada, why is this an important artifact to the Virginia Museum of History & Culture?

Andy Talkov: Although it wasn't made in Virginia, this particular plate is one of six that was actually found in Virginia. But really, the major significance of this is that the French in this period were basically laying claim to territory that Virginia, by its 1609 charter, also said was theirs. So, the British claimed the area called the Ohio Country. It's an area that extends west of the Appalachian Mountains and north of the Ohio River. So, it basically consisted of modern-day Ohio, eastern Indiana, western Pennsylvania, and northwestern West Virginia, as we know them today. But at the time, the area was inhabited by Native people who were engaging with both the French and the English in trade but were very much in the middle of these European powers' disputes over land in America. It's significant to Virginia because it was the Virginia governor who reacted to the placement of these plaques [and] sent an emissary to basically tell the French to get out of the Ohio Country.

Ren Hollis: An emissary, in this context, is a person chosen to go on a diplomatic mission or to deliver a message.

Andy Talkov: It's interesting because a lot of our collections are things like the Céloron plate. We didn't buy it, it was gifted to the museum. Most of the objects in our collection have been gifted to us. So when people bring in things, sometimes things just come in like a paper bag. It's been sitting in someone's attic or closet or basement for, quite a long time.

Ren Hollis: The Céloron Plate has made many journeys around the Eastern United States since its creation, but how did it make its way into the hands of the VMHC?

Andy Talkov: So, it was uncovered in 1846 by three boys near Point Pleasant, now West Virginia. They were looking for little stones to serve as sinkers for their fishing lines, and they saw the plate sort of sticking out of the tangled roots of an old elm tree. And so they uncovered it and brought the plate to the uncle of one of the boys. His name was James Beal. And then he took the plate to a local teacher who could translate it and then give them some sense of its historical significance.

Ren Hollis: James Beal most likely gave the Céloron Plate to James S. Laidley, who was a member of the General Assembly from Kanawha County, Virginia. Laidley then brought the plate to Richmond to the Virginia Historical Society, now the Virginia Museum of History & Culture. So this artifact has been under the VMHC's care since 1849!

Now that we have the origin story of how the Céloron Plate was discovered and made its way to Virginia, Andy explains who Céloron is and why he made this plate in the first place.

Andy Talkov: His full name is Captain Pierre Joseph Céloron de Blainville, and he was born in Montreal in 1693. And he entered the military service at 13 years old, and he remained with the army, the French army, for the rest of his life. So, from 1744 to 1748, before the plate was made, Britain and France, who were colonial rivals in the Americas, were at war. There were a number of wars that happened between the French and the English and other colonial powers that occurred in Europe. And oftentimes, those would spill over into their colonies. The effect of that is that it significantly inhibited the fur trade that the French had been involved in, and it inhibited their relationships with the indigenous people who lived in that region.

Ren Hollis: The war, named King George's War, ends in 1748. The following year—in 1749—France wants to reestablish its dominance in the Ohio Country and reignite its relationships and trade with the indigenous people of the region. To do that, the governor of New France, Marquis de La Galissonnière, sent Captain Céloron and 250 soldiers down the Ohio River to meet with local tribes and to order any British traders to leave the region. Captain Céloron then made his way from Montreal down the Allegheny River, now known as modern-day Pittsburgh. At the major river junctures, he buried a total of six Céloron plates. Along with each plate he attached a metal plaque to a tree nearby, stating that the plate was there to claim the Ohio Country land for the French. Captain Céloron and his soldiers make the journey through the remainder of the Ohio Country and back to Montreal.

Andy Talkov: But of course, by doing this, he initiated a response from the English, who claimed all of that land despite the fact that there were already Indigenous people living

there. The British sort of disregard that and claim it as their own. The Ohio Company [of Virginia's] first response when they're given notification that these plates have been placed, the first thing they do is they send someone to create a map of the Ohio Country and his name is Christopher Gist.

Ren Hollis: The Ohio Company [of Virginia], represented the trading and land prospecting interests of a wide range of Virginia planters and was founded in 1747. Speculation of western lands was a common source of wealth for westelites. The boundaries of Virginia as defined by the colonial charter extended beyond the Shenandoah Valley and north of the Ohio River. Planters in eastern Virginia formed the Ohio Company and were authorized by the Board of Trade in London to take control of hundreds of thousands of acres in the Ohio Valley. In response, the French erected new forts to claim the same land as their own. Between 1750 and 1751, Gist worked on the mapping of the Ohio Country, which the English used to move from the East Coast into the interior near Pittsburgh to claim land before the French.

Andy Talkov: And then in 1753, the governor of Virginia in Williamsburg, his name is Lieutenant Governor Robert Dinwiddie, decides that they need to send someone out there to tell the French to get off their land. He decides to send, a major in the Virginia militia, 21 years old, named George Washington.

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Ren Hollis: This is the first time that George Washington is involved in a military campaign. Let's take a minute to talk about what Washington's life was like up to this point!

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Andy Talkov: Washington, in his early teens, wanted to join the Royal Navy, sort of following in the footsteps of his brother Lawrence, but his brother had married into the incredibly wealthy and well-established Fairfax family of Virginia. And so, Lord Thomas Fairfax basically took Washington under his wing and took a great interest in Washington. One of Washington's first jobs, outside of participating in agriculture, was as a land surveyor for the Fairfax family. And so, Washington spent three years or so as a surveyor. He learned some of his surveying skills through his education. The Fairfaxes sent him out with a surveying team. So, he was able over the course of a month to not only learn about surveying. But you have to understand that surveying in Colonial America—like in places like, you know, he was in Culpeper County and out in the Shenandoah Valley— this was the wilderness. So, he spent long periods of time exposed to the elements, cutting new trails

into unsettled lands by the English. This is a really important moment in his life because he's gaining these skills that are going to play a major role in what's going to happen next.

Ren Hollis: When Washington was 19 years old, his eldest brother Lawrence got sick with smallpox, and ultimately died from the illness in 1752. Since Lawrence had been a Major in the Virginia Militia, his death not only created an absence but also an opportunity. Around this time, Lieutenant Governor Robert Dinwiddie was looking for a representative to travel to Ohio Country and tell the French to vacate land the English claimed was theirs. He would select the 21-year-old Washington for this role in 1753. Despite having no formal military training himself, Washington had dreamed of joining since childhood and the surveying skills and social background he'd gained from the Fairfax family prepared him well to enforce British claims to the region!

Andy Talkov: Dinwiddie sends Washington off with a letter. Dinwiddie writes:
"The lands upon the River Ohio, in the western parts of the Colony of Virginia, are so notoriously known to be the property of the Crown of Great Britain that it is a matter of equal concern and surprise to me, to hear that a body of French forces are erecting a fortresses and making settlements upon that river, within his Majesty's dominions."
So, this is part of a letter that Washington is going to carry with him too, to confront the French.

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Andy Talkov: Washington departs Williamsburg in December 1753. He's traveling with Christopher Gist, who earlier we talked about had mapped that region. And added to that group is Captain Jacob van Braam, and four leaders of indigenous tribes from the area. A very influential Seneca leader named Tanagrisson chosen by the Haudenosaunee Iroquois to speak for the groups of indigenous people that lived in the Ohio Country, which included the Delaware, the Shawnee, and the Mingo. Tanagrisson gets to the region in the late 1740s. And in 1753, about the same time that Washington is about to make his journey into the Ohio Country, Tanagrisson had sent messages to the French telling them to get the heck out of his land, his country. And so, when Washington arrived, he found an ally in Tanagrisson because they both had the goal of getting the French to leave. And so, Tanagrisson joins him on this journey.

Ren Hollis: Washington reaches the main French fort called Fort LeBeouf in December of 1753 after a treacherous journey through the mountains, but he's not met by the French as an invader. Instead, he receives a significant amount of respect. Washington presents the French with Governor Dinwiddie's letter but the French decline to leave the land. There wasn't anything else Washington could do, so he took note of the size of the fort and French forces and returned to Virginia.

Andy Talkov: His journey on the way back is pretty treacherous. Between present-day Franklin, Pennsylvania, and Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, he almost died twice. One [incident] is [when] one of the Native Americans who's joined them on this journey takes a shot at Washington and misses and is disarmed by the group. But during the journey, Washington and Gist also make a handmade raft and try to float down the Allegheny River. They are both thrown into the freezing water and nearly drowned. They spend the night on this small island, and the next morning they wake up and the river is frozen. So that couldn't have been a very comfortable night.

So how do we know all of this? Well, we know all of this because Washington wrote reports to Governor Dinwiddie and Governor Dinwiddie took it upon himself to publish Washington's reports in Williamsburg. This journal, called the "Journal of Major George Washington", was published in 1754. The printed copies get all the way as far as England, and Washington becomes very well-known on both sides of the Atlantic for this "confrontation with the French."

So that's Chapter One. Washington goes out into the Ohio Country, meets the French, and delivers his message. They say, "Thank you, but no thank you," and he comes back to Virginia. This, of course, doesn't sit very well with the colonial governor. So, Washington is sent out again, but this time he's sent out as part of a military force.

The governor offers Washington the opportunity to lead this effort as a colonel. Washington recognizes that he doesn't really have a lot of military experience. So, he's like: well, I'm not going to be the Colonel, but I'll be the Lieutenant Colonel! And Dinwiddie had ordered that a fort be constructed at the forks of the Ohio River. So, basically, where Pittsburgh is today. Washington and his men and the men that were part of this expeditionary force (which was actually led by Colonel Joshua Fry) are going out there to secure the fort and to tell the French to go away.

Ren Hollis: George Washington's orders, according to Governor Dinwiddie were as follows:

"...act on the Defensive, but in Case any Attempts are made to obstruct the Works or interrupt our Settlements by any Persons whatsoever, You are to restrain all such Offenders, & in Case of resistance to make Prisoners of or kill & destroy them."

Ren Hollis: By the time Washington and the approximately 100 British soldiers who accompanied him arrived at the fort, the French had seized the half-built fort that was at the fork of the Ohio River. Washington and his men needed a place to regroup and wait for the rest of the British army to join him.

On May 27th, 1754, Washington reached a plot of land to set up an advance named Great Meadows, which today is near Farmington, Pennsylvania. Tanagrisson sends Washington a message warning him that there is a large number of French soldiers camped nearby. In response, Washington takes 40 men with him to meet Tanagrisson and the tribal warriors he is leading. This combined group sneaks up on the French camp and surround it. What happens next is unclear because historical records show different accounts from the parties involved.

Andy Talkov: It's not 100% clear what happens, but what we do know is that there's a 15-minute skirmish that the French lose. They're forced to surrender. Their commander, Ensign Joseph Coulon de Villiers de Jumonville, is killed. It's a little unclear as to exactly how this happens. So the French basically say, because there was a French survivor who escapes, that the Virginians just opened fire on them without any warning. Washington says that one of the Frenchmen saw his troops coming, and they opened fire on them. We know that Washington's men fired two volleys into the French camp. It's questionable about whether it was in those first volleys that Jumonville is killed outright or if he's wounded. He's certainly wounded in the firefight that happens.

Ren Hollis: After this firefight, Washington wrote a letter on May 31, 1754, to his brother John Augustine Washington recounting his first military experience.

Andy Talkov: He [Washington] writes:

"I heard the bullets whistle, and believe me there is something charming in that sound."

Which I think is an interesting response to being under fire for the first time. I don't think Washington is going to hold on to this idea for very much longer, based on what's going to happen next.

There are some accounts that say that while the engagement was happening, Jumonville was actually trying to yell that he was on basically a diplomatic mission to talk to Washington but is wounded. According to the French, they were there to parlay with Washington's force.

Ren Hollis: Parlay is a rule of war when one party wants to call a ceasefire in order to talk with the other party to discuss a solution other than battle.

Andy Talkov: Washington completely disputes this because he's like: Well, if they were supposed to do that, why wouldn't they have just come and talked to us? Why were they hiding a short distance from our camp? There are some accounts that suggest that Tanagrisson killed outright Jumonville after the fighting and when he was wounded. So, this small little skirmish is going to have major, major implications.

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Andy Talkov: Washington takes 21 prisoners back to Great Meadows. He sends them back to Virginia as prisoners, with a report to Dinwiddie that they were spies and not to believe anything that they say. And so when Washington gets back to Great Meadows having engaged in this battle, he and his men build a blockhouse, which is a small little cabin. And they surround that with a palisade of upright logs that could probably hold about 70 men. Ultimately, Washington is going to have about 400 men at Great Meadows.

Ren Hollis: In Washington's report back to Dinwiddie explaining what happened, he writes:
"Your honor may depend. I will not be surprised. Let them come. What hour they will. And this is as much as I can promise. But my best endeavors shall not be wanting to deserve more. I doubt not, but if you hear, I am beaten. But you will at the same time hear that we have done our duty in fighting as long as there was a possibility of hope."

As we observe this moment in history from George Washington's perspective, he doesn't know that he just fought the first battle that would come to be known as the "French and Indian War" in North America or the "Seven Years War" in Europe. This all begins at a location called Jumonville Glen, the fallen French commander. After the battle, Washington hunkers down at Fort Necessity to wait for reinforcements and for the French's next move. The British and the French fought over land that they both claimed was theirs when, in actuality, it belonged to the many Native American tribes who had been living there long before the British and French arrived.

Andy Talkov: The French and the British had tribes that decided that they would support their cause over the other. We have to remember that there is conflict among indigenous people, too. And so, there are relationships between tribes that also are part of all of the

interplay between the colonizers and the indigenous people because the colonists, the Europeans, are seen in some ways by the indigenous people as a vehicle to be used to their advantage, to claim land that's ancestral land or to settle disputes between tribes that they don't get along with. They're not bystanders in any of this. I mean, they're [indigenous peoples] largely trying to ensure that their lands and their rights are respected by these colonists, which is not the case, really, in the case of the French or the English; there are attempts made, but many treaties broken, and many arrangements broken over a very painful history of those relationships.

Ren Hollis: The plate serves as a physical reminder of this intense geopolitical rivalry and the lengths to which colonial powers went to assert their dominance.

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Ren Hollis: The Céloron Plate is displayed on a pedestal covered by a clear glass and aluminum stand. The pedestal was made with a drawer that can provide easy access to the plate and for curators to be able to insert silica gel, which is a desiccant, that removes moisture out of the air. The plate is monitored very closely so that it's maintained at about 20% humidity because when humidity rises above that amount, the plate could start to corrode, resulting in a white, powdery substance on the lead surface, known as a "bloom". Andy explains the importance of keeping the plate in such a protected condition.

Andy Talkov: Always, we try to maintain climate control and lighting levels in our exhibits that are friendly to the objects. The lighting in *Treasuries [of Virginia]* is really low to protect the objects from light. I mean, these are some of our most significant holdings. And I would argue that the Céloron Plate may very well be the most important object in our collection given its significance in this much larger story and because it's one of six that were created and it's the only one that survives, miraculously. The thing about the Céloron Plate is that it's made of lead. We don't have a lot of lead objects on display; usually the lead objects that we have on display from our collection are things like bullets. One of the things that we know about lead and have experienced with the Céloron Plate is that it's not very susceptible to light unlike a textile or paper, where we would be concerned about the lighting levels. But what it is very sensitive to is changes in humidity.

So the Céloron Plate, you know, it not only doesn't like high humidity, it also doesn't really get along with any of the materials that we would typically build an exhibit out of. So it doesn't like standard paint. It doesn't like natural materials like wood, it doesn't like plastic and we've displayed the Céloron Plate before. It was loaned out to some institutions before it was installed in our *Story of Virginia* exhibit, but in the iteration that opened in 1998. So it had been on display for a while. And then in 2015 when we tried, when we redid the

Story of Virginia, we tried to create a much healthier case for it, and that didn't work. So we actually removed it from that exhibit. In the lead up to opening *Treasures of Virginia*, we wanted to create an environment where the plate would be happy.

The case is made of aluminum and glass. We also designed the case so that right now it sits on a pedestal. So it's on display at a level that people can see it. When we remove it from the exhibit, eventually, that case will also be the way that it's stored in our storage area. So we handle it as little as possible. It's exposed to the environment as little as possible. So I'm not going to say that the case is hermetically sealed, but it's definitely designed in a way to control the one thing that's really dangerous to it, which is moisture.

Ren Hollis: With the Céloron Plate being such a significant part of American History, Andy explains the importance of understanding how the different parties involved with the Céloron Plate would have viewed this artifact.

Andy Talkov: I think it's always important to think about not only how do you see the object, but how someone else might. So this one object, the Céloron Plate, has different meanings to different people. So, for instance, to the French, it was a way that they could claim dominance of territory that they believed or wanted to be theirs. For the indigenous people in this area, it meant invasion, right? It meant that the French had claimed land that was their home. To the Virginians, I think it represented someone throwing down the gantlet and saying, "this is ours, what are you going to do about it?"

To George Washington thinking if he were to sit and have a conversation with you and think about the Céloron Plate, I think he would probably think about it as an opportunity, right? Like this journey that surrounds the Céloron Plate was his opportunity to prove himself as a military leader, to prove himself as a gentleman.

And as we talked about, just think about how that is the source of these grand historical events and stories. And not every object is like that, but every object has stories that can be revealed. People look at them in different ways. So I think that's one thing that I think is important for people who come to this museum or any museum to think about: how would someone else look at this from their perspective?

Ren Hollis: Thank you for listening to the Virginia Museum of History & Culture Podcast. We hope you enjoyed this deep dive into a fascinating part of Virginia's history. Special thanks to today's guest, Andy Talkov.

See the Céloron Plate in person daily from 10 am to 5 pm in the *Treasures of Virginia* exhibition at the Virginia Museum of History & Culture in Richmond, Virginia. Visit VirginiaHistory.org to plan your visit today.



I am your host, Ren Hollis.

The Virginia Museum of History & Culture Podcast was produced by Nicole Martorana, Ren Hollis, Tracy Schneider, and Hailey Fenner.

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