



## MEANINGFUL MISS

# Today is anniversary of event that nearly changed history

Paula Grubbs Eagle Staff Writer

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Re-enactors portray the near shooting of young George Washington while with guide Christopher Gist on Dec. 27, 1753, in Forward Township. Washington came out of the event unscathed, and the rest is history.

**BUTLER EAGLE FILE PHOTO**

FORWARD TWP – More than half of the countries on Earth have a democratic government, which might not have been the case if an event 265 years ago in Butler County had played out differently.

That's the word from retired county Judge Martin O'Brien, who invites all county residents to celebrate the poor shooting skills of a Native American who fired at and missed Maj. George Washington on Dec. 27, 1753, near the current township municipal building.

Of course, Washington went on to become the nation's first president and took great pains to hold the 13 colonies together with the idea of creating a larger democracy.

O'Brien, who is a longtime member of Washington's Trail Association, said the idea of citizens making decisions and not a king or queen was unheard of in the mid-18th century.

But Washington was resolute in his pursuit of this new form of government.

“Without him and his personality and ability, I don't think the U.S. would have survived and I think we would have a bunch of little independent states,” he said.

O'Brien said in 1753 Washington had been dispatched by Virginia Gov. Robert Dinwiddie to travel north from Williamsburg some 500 miles to Fort LeBoeuf near Erie to order the French out of the forts they had established in the uncharted Ohio Valley and Great Lakes. The English, French and Native Americans all claimed ownership of the region.

The French refused, so Washington, then 21 years old, headed back to Virginia to alert Dinwiddie of the hard line taken by the French.

In what is now Franklin, Venango County, the horses ridden by Washington and his guide, Christopher Gist, were exhausted. The duo set out on foot down the Venango Trail, which is roughly the location of the current Route 528.



Retired Judge Martin O'Brien shows a commissioned painting which was unveiled at the Heinz History Center in Pittsburgh in 2008. The piece, titled "The Shot," depicts an event in the local travels of George Washington and guide Christopher Gist.

**BUTLER EAGLE FILE PHOTO**

Washington and Gist eventually arrived in a place named "Murtheringtown" or "Murderingtown" near Harmony.

"There they met what Washington called a French Indian who offered to lead them to the Allegheny River," O'Brien said.

For unknown reasons, the Native American, about 15 paces ahead of Washington and Gist near the Connoquenessing Creek, turned and fired a

musket at Washington.

“Fortunately, he missed,” O'Brien said.

Washington and Gist captured the Native American, O'Brien said, and Gist wanted to kill him on the spot.

Washington released the man, who said his village was “two yelps away.”

In case the shooter planned to return and finish the job, the duo built a fire to indicate their overnight location and moved quickly south.

When they arrived at what is now Etna, Allegheny County, the pair tried to cross the cold river at the current location of the 40th Street Bridge via a raft and pole.

“Washington pole-vaulted himself into the river, and Gist got him back on the raft,” O'Brien said. “They crossed the next morning because the river was frozen.”

In the span of a few days, Washington had experienced two life-threatening situations.

“The world would be very different if Washington had not lived through those experiences,” O'Brien said.

Washington and Gist eventually made it back to Williamsburg to alert Dinwiddie of the refusal by the French, and the French and Indian War soon began.

O'Brien said historians give short shrift to the near murder of Washington near the banks of Connoquenessing Creek in Forward Township.

“If (the shot) had occurred in Philadelphia, we'd have a museum the size of three Heinz History Centers,” O'Brien said.



Martin O'Brien

O'Brien feels that the closest spot to the scene of the attempted shooting is a concrete marker along Route 68 near the township road department. The marker was erected in the 1920s by the local chapter of the Daughters of the American Revolution.

While the Washington's Trail Association offers a driving map where the historically minded can view Washington's route, its members will likely pause to recall the shot 265 years ago that could have altered the course of history.

"I think it's very important that people know the history of this country and we should be very aware of the events that took place in Butler County that contributed to the establishment of the U.S.," O'Brien said.

The county commissioners on Nov. 14 issued a proclamation on the upcoming 265th anniversary of "the shot."

"Butler County Commissioners do hereby commend to all citizens and patriots a proper remembrance and celebration of the 265th anniversary of George Washington's first Military and Diplomatic mission through Butler County and the all important event, first shot, sparing the life of the future first president of the U.S.," the proclamation reads.

More information on the 500-mile Washington's Trail, including a driving brochure, is available at [www.washingtonstrail.org](http://www.washingtonstrail.org).



## Dec. 27th Marks Anniversary Of Washington's Trek Through Butler Co.

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Washington's Trail commemorates young George Washington's first military and diplomatic venture in the Fall and Winter 1753 - 1754.

Thursday marks the 265<sup>th</sup> anniversary of when our country's first president trekked through Butler County.

It was this day- Dec. 27<sup>th</sup> - in 1753 when George Washington passed through Butler as he was returning to Williamsburg after hand-delivering a letter from the British Crown to the French soldiers at Fort LeBoeuf.

According to Washington's journal, it was near Harmony when an Indian attempted to take Washington's life by shooting at him at very close range. The event became known as "The First Shot" and was a prelude to the French and Indian War.

"The significance of it is Washington turned out to be the leader of the revolution, the leader of the Continental Congress, and the founding leader of this country," retired county judge, and member of Washington's Trail Association, Marty O'Brien said in an interview. "This is one of the greatest events in history that is generally overlooked by most historians."

There is a monument in Butler County representing the event. It's located near the Forward Township building on Route 68.

"The monument represents Washington's trip through here and the attempt to kill him," O'Brien said.

Now, Butler County residents can travel the exact path that Washington did. 'Washington's Trail' is a signed and self-guided driving route through 10 counties in western Pennsylvania.

The trail is currently under review by the National Park Service for potential National Historic Trail status.

There's only one national historic trail in eastern United States, it marks Washington's route from Rhode Island down to Yorktown, which led to the end of the revolutionary war.

