The French and Indian War is usually dated 1754-1763 in the United States. In Europe and in Canada it is referred to as the Seven Years War, which is dated 1756-1763. This is confusing enough, but in fact neither of these dates are entirely accurate. In the 17th century the Dutch in New Holland sold arms to the Iroquois, and in so doing destabilized the Indian balance of power among the various tribes in the Valleys of the Ohio, Hudson, St. Lawrence, and Ottawa Rivers. Stability did not return until well into the 19th Century. As France grew in strength in Quebec, and the English along the Atlantic Coast these conflicts polarized into a worldwide conflict for trade and empire.

In 1714 the French built a trading post at the site of present Nashville, Tennessee. It was called French Lick. As it was located on the intersection of the Natchez Trace, which connected Kentucky with the Deep South, and with the Cumberland River, which was a route leading to the Tennessee River via a portage to Chattanooga, it pointed straight into the heart of the Cherokee country. The French also had mines in Eastern Kentucky, and finally put a fort and trading post at the Ford of French Broad River east of Knoxville, Tennessee. In 1673 the French explorers Marquette and Joliet explored down the Alleghany, Ohio, and Mississippi Rivers, and as a result France claimed those watersheds. In the 1740's King George II became alarmed at these developments. His remedy was to settle large numbers of “dissenters” (often called “heretics”), who were in practical reality, the Scots-Irish and German pietists, along the western frontier of the English settlements. This effort was organized around two land companies set up to encourage and formalize the process. The Ohio Company was given charge of the Ohio River and its tributaries, such as the Greenbrier (actually a translation of the French name for it, the Ronceverte), the Monongahela, and the Kanawha.

In 1750 the Ohio Company dispatched Christopher Gist to explore the Ohio Country. He spent the winter of 1750-1751 living among the Shawnee of southern Ohio. He noted many Frenchmen integrated among the Indians, providing them with such services as blacksmithing.

It is pointless to try to fix a date to the onset of hostilities. It is enough to say that they were inevitable, that they did occur, and that they increased in frequency. In fact, the war was going on for two years before is sank in on the Europeans that something was going on in North America. That is the reason for the difference in
the formal starting dates given for the French and Indian War and the Seven Years War. In a similar vein, the Europeans negotiated a peace treaty in 1763, but failed to convince the French allied Indians to quit fighting the English settlers. This later phase of what was in reality a continuation of the French and Indian War under another name is referred to as Pontiac’s War, named after the chief who led it.

The Kerr’s Creek Massacres of 1759, and of late 1763 and again in 1764 are the best examples of the ambiguities of the standard definitions of this ongoing conflict as it was fought in Virginia. (6, and covering the following discussion) It is the lasting effects of these massacres on the unlikely location of the Clinch Valley of Virginia that is the theme of this discussion.

Some of the Scots-Irish who settled on the Pennsylvania frontier were run out of the colony by William Pitt because they had settled on forbidden Indian land. They moved down the Valley of Virginia, and in 1736 resettled in a beautiful valley six miles or so to the northwest of Lexington. The site was part of the Benjamin Burden (Borden) Patent. An earlier name for the valley was Tea’s (Tee’s) Creek, but the name soon changed to Kerr’s Creek (sometimes referred to as Carr’s Creek). A more dangerous place could not have been chosen. Two of the main war trails in North America east of the Mississippi River intersected at Lexington. The Great Warrior’s Path originating in the Hudson River Valley of New York ran down the Valley of Virginia to end in the Blue Grass of Kentucky. The Midland trail originated at Hampton Rhodes at the mouth of the James River, and followed US 60 to the Ohio River at Huntington, West Virginia. There is no indication that the settlers had any idea of the strategic location that they occupied.
This settlement did not go unnoticed by the Shawnee Indians, nor by their French allies. In 1755 the Shawnee attacked Draper’s Meadows (present Blacksburg, Virginia), which was a similarly strategic trail hub on the Wilderness Trail, and other routes. The effect was a major depopulation of the New River Valley in Virginia. (7)

Taking heart from this success, Cornstalk and his Shawnee in 1759 attacked Kerr’s Creek for the first time. They killed ten people. To start a continuing thread in our narrative, among the dead were John Gilmore and his wife, Agnes. Many of the settlers retreated into the Blue Ridge Mountains across the Valley of Virginia to the Southeast.

By 1763 the settlers had returned to Kerr’s Creek, and Cornstalk and his warriors returned that July. It is doubtful that they had heard that the French and English had called the war off that February. They killed about fifty settlers.

The Indians who had been allied with the French became very upset when the French garrisons on the frontier were replaced by English troops. The treaty just signed by the Europeans in Paris, France was a moot point to the Indians. Chief Pontiac, who had been a leader at Braddock’s Defeat, united the tribes of the Old Northwest Territory, and coordinated attacks succeeded in clearing out most of these now British garrisons.

Since Cornstalk had experience in the Valley of Virginia, he and his Shawnee were given the task of cleaning out Kerr’s Creek once and for all. In 1764 they attacked and killed “many”. Among the dead was Thomas Gilmore, a son of John and Agnes. Thirty captives were taken back to Ohio, including Eliza, Thomas’s wife, and two of their daughters and a son.

Historians like to divide history into manageable segments, to which they give names. In fact, the warfare between the Shawnee and the settlers in the Great Valley of Virginia smoldered along for another decade. Cornstalk again led the Shawnee attacks in 1768 that wiped out the settlements as the Big Levels, or present Lewisburg (current West Virginia). The settlements moved further to the southwest, and the Shawnee’s attacks followed this pattern. In 1774 the Shawnee, allied with the Mingo, and again under Chief Cornstalk, made a ‘do or die’ attempt to stop the settlement of western Virginia and of Kentucky. The Mingo attacked the settlements in the Valleys of the Clinch and Powell in Virginia, while the Shawnee attempted to clean out the New River Valley.
A climactic battle was fought at the mouth of the Kanawha River, which is the name for the lower reaches of the New River. The specific location is Point Pleasant, West Virginia. It was one of the truly major battles between Indians and Europeans in North America. The militia from the Valleys of the Holston, Clinch and Powell Rivers were participants. The Shawnee lost the battle, and were pursued back to their homes on the Pickaway Plains of Southern Ohio, where they signed a peace treaty. (8)

Oddly enough, Cornstalk had spoken against this campaign. After making peace, he genuinely tried to promote it. After the Battle of Point Pleasant the Augusta County Militia, as part of the Revolutionary War effort, built Fort Randolph at Point Pleasant. Augusta County at that time included Kerr’s Creek. The British incited the Shawnee to attack the Americans. Cornstalk spoke against it, but the Shawnee again voted for war. Cornstalk came to Fort Randolph and told the militia commander about the coming attacks. He gave specific details of the Shawnee Villages in Ohio. Cornstalk was placed under house arrest within the fort.

Days passed. Cornstalk’s son, Ellinipsico, and his friend Red Hawk, came looking for him, and were peacefully admitted into the fort. Robert Gilmore and a friend of the Augusta Co. Militia crossed the Kanawha to go deer hunting. There were Shawnee warriors lurking there. Gilmore was killed, scalped, and mutilated. His friend brought his body back to Fort Randolph, and the militiamen became so agitated that another Gilmore from Kerr’s Creek had been killed by the Shawnee that they rushed the building where Cornstalk, Ellinipsico, and Red Hawk were and killed them. Governor Patrick Henry promised to bring the case to trial, but could find no one who would testify.(9)
GILMORE FAMILY OF KERR'S CREEK

Thomas Gilmore, Sr. (1)     Mariam (Mary) Sterling (1)

Agness Hamilton (2)        John, Sr. (2)       Thomas, Jr. (2)    (Jenny) Eliza (3)    William (2)

Robert (4)                 two of three children (2)       James or John (3) daughter (3) daughter (3)

(1) Born in Coleraine, Londonderry, Ulster, Ireland
(2) Killed in the Kerr's Creek Massacres
(3) Carried to Ohio as captives
(4) Killed at Fort Randolph

The above is not without discrepancies and ambiguities.
It is fascinating to observe how the people and culture of Kerr’s Creek moved on west. There are two families from Kerr’s Creek that migrated to far Southwestern Virginia that continue to helped to define the area from the earliest day. These are the Gilmers (derived from Gilmore) and the Dicksons. In 1769 two Dickinson brothers were among the Morgan party that settled Lower Castlewood in current Russell County. The first court house in that county was at Dickinsonsville. They continued to fan out, and a county to the west of Russell was named after them. The surname is very common in Wise County. Fannie Dickinson Scott Johnson is perhaps the best known. It was she that was carried off into captivity by Chief Benge in 1785, and is buried at the approach to Hayter’s Gap from Elk Garden.

The Gilmer family is an excellent one to follow on west for several reasons. The first is that they are related by marriage to several prominent icons of the region, both past and present. Indeed, the Dicksons and Gilmers are intermarried. By recounting these connections, one can construct a skeletal framework of regional history, onto which one can hang many events.

A William Gilmore, of uncertain connections to the family of Kerr’s Creek, moved to Russell County, where he died in about 1798. Some genealogies say that he was a son of Agnes and John, Sr. Gilmore who were killed in the second massacre on Kerr’s Creek.

One of his sons was the Rev. William Morgan “Billy” Gilmer (10-8-1767 to 10-17-1841), who married Elizabeth Bowen Wright, who was of the Maiden Spring Bowen family. He was a Methodist minister, and they lived in Elk Garden. Three of their children started different lines of Gilmers that we will present with interest.

The first line is that of their son, Joseph Bowen Gilmer (11-4-1826 to 1-12-1893), who married Caroline Virginia Dickenson.

Their son was Dr. Aaron Kemper Gilmer (born 1874), who married Alberta Dickenson. The above generations of Gilmers had large land holdings in the Hansonville area of Russell County.

Their son was Dr. Giles Quarles Gilmer (1917-1990), who spent his life practicing medicine in Lebanon, Virginia. He bought part of the “Old Rosedale” estate from the Smithfield farm to the west of State 80.

His son, Dr. Robert Dickenson Gilmer, initially practiced in Tazewell, Virginia, and then became the first anesthesiologist in Virginia west of Roanoke and practiced in Abingdon. He inherited the Elk Garden property.

The second line descended from The Rev. William Morgan “Billy” Gilmer which will be presented, is that of their son, (John) Axley Gilmer (1814 or 1816 to
1850). He, also, was a Methodist minister, and married Temperance Gose of Russell Co.

The Gose family was iconic in Tazewell County. Phillip Gose (6-8-1774 to 1-4-1832) had been born in Cripple Creek (some say North Carolina or Pennsylvania) a few miles to the south of Wytheville. In 1794 Phillip had taken his family in a three team ox drawn wagon from Ceres up the southern face of Burke's Garden, and then down the interior slope dragging a log as a brake, to become the first permanent settler to have arrived by wagon. He built the mill dam that is still located at the entrance to Burke’s Garden. The family grew and spilled over into Tazewell, where there is a street named after them.

Axley and Nettie’s son was Dr. George C. Gilmer (2-26-1847 to 6-18-1918), who was born at Hansonville. He was in the Confederate Army, graduated from MCV, and practiced first in Gate City, and then in Turkey Cove, Lee County, and for the last eight years, in Big Stone Gap. He married Nettie Reasor of Turkey Cove, who was related to the Slemps there. The Slemps were movers and shakers in the developing coal industry in the late 19th and early 20th Centuries. The Slemps moved from Turkey Cove to Big Stone Gap around 1890. In 1903 the Gilmers built the house at 206 East 1st St. North in Big Stone Gap.

The Slemps and Reasors had come to Turkey Cove together from Sugar Grove south of Marion. The Reasors (also spelled and pronounced as ‘Razor’) had gotten to Sugar Grove first, and Frederick Slemp (Schlemp) moved in beside them. Both had iron works. Sebastian Slemp married Margaret Reasor, and they moved to Turkey Cove, Lee County. She was the granddaughter of Andrew Jackson. Sebastian became a member of the House of Delegates. His daughter, Susan, married a
Pridemore, thus linking the families of the two Col. of the 64th Virginia (CSA) Mounted Infantry Regiment – Campbell Bascom Slemp and Auburn Pridemore. Col. Slemp’s son, C. Bascom, became a Congressman, and Secretary to President Calvin Coolidge.

The Gilmers had two sons survive to adulthood. Guy H. Gilmer became superintendent of the Interstate Railroad, and his brother, John Axley (1-24-1881 to 6-13-1954), became a physician and took up his father’s practice. After marrying Margaret Elizabeth Litton of Dot, they moved into the Gilmer house in Big Stone Gap. The two doctors Gilmer of Big Stone Gap are buried with their wives in Glencoe Cemetery in Big Stone Gap.
THE GRAVES OF DR. GEORGE C. GILMER, NETTIE REASOR GILMER, DR. JOHN A. GILMER, MARGARET ELIZABETH LITTON GILMER, AND GEORGE CARL GILMER

The third line of interest coming from The Rev. William Morgan “Billy” Gilmer was that of son Cummings Gilmer (1799 to 1870). His grandson was Henry G. Gilmer, an attorney, who became an officer of the 1st National Bank of Norton, and in 1920 became Treasurer of Wise Co., President of the Norton Insurance Co., and President of Old Dominion Power Co. in Norton. He was a Mason and a Methodist. He became Secretary of the Stallard Land Company of Appalachia in 1910. In 1934 he was on the State of Virginia Highway Commission, and in 1946 was Comptroller of the Commonwealth of Virginia.

When the pioneers moved west they took their culture with them. Towering over the head of Kerr’s Creek is a mountain named “The Loop”. (37.898N 79.520W) Together with the hills forming the sides of Kerr’s Creek Valley it formed a configuration that reminded someone of an architectural feature of some European castles. Originally called a ‘wolf trap’, the name became shortened to simple ‘The Wolf’, or ‘Lupus’ in Latin, or ‘Loupe’ in French. No one knows who brought the concept with them to Elk Garden, but the massif called by the settlers there ‘Big and Little Rye Grass Mountain’ were renamed ‘The Loop’. As the only two surnames
shared by both Kerr’s Creek and Elk Garden were the Gilmers and the Dickersons, one suspects that they were the ones who did it. (12)
TOPO OF THE LOOP OF ELK GARDEN

LOUP MOUNTAIN, FRANCE
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As an overall statement, Dr. Robert Gilmer of Elk Garden and of Abingdon, Virginia was the seminal source of much of this information. This is especially true concerning the Loop of Kerr’s Creek.

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