

# Gilmer County History

*The following history appears on the County Commissioners' of West Virginia website.*

Gilmer County was created by an act of the Virginia General Assembly on February 3, 1845 from parts of Lewis and Kanawha counties. It was named in honor of Thomas Walker Gilmer (1802-1844).

Thomas Walker Gilmer was born on April 6, 1802 in Albemarle County, Virginia. He studied law and was an attorney in Charlottesville. He represented Albemarle County in the Virginia General Assembly from 1829 to 1840, with the exception of two sessions, and served as Speaker of the Assembly in 1838 and 1839. He was elected Governor of Virginia in 1840, but resigned shortly after being elected to take a seat in U.S. House of Representatives. An outspoken critic of Henry Clay, he was appointed the Secretary of the Navy by President Taylor on February 14, 1844. Unfortunately, he was killed by the bursting of a cannon on board the American war ship Princeton at Mount Vernon on February 28, 1844, just two weeks after his appointment. Abel Parker Upshur, the Secretary of State and the namesake of Upshur County, was also killed in the explosion. President Tyler was present for the testing of the new gun, but survived the explosion.

## ***First Settlers***

Remnants of the ancient Mound Builders civilization, also known as the Adena people, can be found throughout Gilmer County, particularly in the areas along both Steer and Sinking Creeks. The largest mound in the county is located on the "Fetty Farm" on Sinking Creek. It is sixty feet in diameter. When these mounds were first opened, flat sandstones, charcoal, and bone fragments were found inside. The sandstone is especially interesting because it is not native to the Gilmer County area. A second mound located on Steer Creek contained the remains of two large men surrounded by various artifacts, including ancient arrowheads and a pipe.

Local legend claims that the so-called De Kalb Camp in Gilmer County was the site of a major Indian battle. There is a high concentration of stone tools and weapons as well as two grave sites at the camp. However, the absence of wounds on the skeletons found in the grave sites have led archaeologists to the conclusion that the area was an Indian camp, not the site of a major battle.

According to missionary reports, several thousand Hurons occupied present-day West Virginia, including present-day Gilmer County, during the late 1500s and early 1600s. They were driven out of the state during the 1600s by the powerful Iroquois Confederacy (consisting of the Mohawk, Onondaga, Cayuga, Oneida and Seneca tribes, and joined later by the Tuscaroras tribe). The Iroquois Confederacy was headquartered in New York and was not interested in occupying present-day West Virginia. Instead, they used it as a hunting ground during the spring and summer months.

During the early 1700s, central West Virginia, including present-day Gilmer County, was used as a hunting ground by the Mingo, who lived in both the Tygart Valley and along the Ohio River in West Virginia's northern panhandle region, the Delaware, who lived in present-day eastern Pennsylvania, New Jersey, and Delaware, but had several autonomous settlements as far south as present-day Braxton County, and by other members of the Iroquois Confederacy, especially the Seneca, one of the largest and most powerful members of the Iroquois Confederacy.

The Mingo were not actually an Indian tribe, but a multi-cultural group of Indians that established several communities within present-day West Virginia. They lacked a central government and, like all other Indians within the region at that time, were subject to the control of the Iroquois Confederacy. The Mingo originally lived closer to the Atlantic Coast, but European settlement pushed them into western Virginia and eastern Ohio.

The Seneca, headquartered in western New York, was the closest member of the Iroquois Confederacy to West Virginia and took great interest in the state. In 1744, the Seneca boasted to Virginia officials that they had conquered the several nations living on the back of the great mountains of Virginia. Among the conquered nations were the last of the Canawese or Conoy people who became incorporated into some of the Iroquois communities in New York. The Conoy continue to be remembered today through the naming of two of West Virginia's largest rivers after them, the Little Kanawha and the Great Kanawha.

The Seneca, and other members of the Iroquois Confederacy, claimed all of present-day West Virginia as their own, using it primarily as a hunting ground. Also, war parties from the Seneca and other members of the Iroquois Confederacy often traveled through the state to protect its claim to southern West Virginia from the Cherokee. The Cherokee were headquartered in western North Carolina and eastern Tennessee and rivaled the Iroquois nation in both size and influence. The Cherokee claimed present-day southern West Virginia as their own, setting the stage for conflict with the Iroquois Confederacy.

In 1744, Virginia officials purchased the Iroquois title of ownership to West Virginia in the Treaty of Lancaster. The treaty reduced the Iroquois Confederacy's presence in the state.

During the mid-1700s, the English had made it clear to the various Indian tribes that they intended to settle the frontier. The French, on the other hand, were more interested in trade. This influenced the Mingo to side with the French during the French and Indian War (1755-1763). Although the Iroquois Confederacy officially remained neutral, many in the Iroquois Confederacy also allied with the French. Unfortunately for them, the French lost the war and ceded the all of its North American possessions to the British. Following the war, the Mingo retreated to their homes along the banks of the Ohio River and were rarely seen in central West Virginia.

Although the war was officially over, many Indians continued to see the British as a threat to their sovereignty and continued to fight them. In the summer of 1763, Pontiac, an Ottawa chief, led raids on key British forts. Shawnee chief Keigh-tugh-qua, or Cornstalk, led similar attacks on western Virginia settlements in present-day Greenbrier County. By the end of July, Indians had captured all British forts west of the Alleghenies except Detroit, Fort Pitt, and Fort Niagara. Then, on August 6, 1763, British forces under the command of Colonel Henry Bouquet retaliated and destroyed Delaware and Shawnee forces at Bushy Run in western Pennsylvania, ending the hostilities.

Fearing more tension between Native Americans and settlers, England's King George III issued the Proclamation of 1763, prohibiting settlement west of the Allegheny Mountains. However, many land speculators, including George Washington, violated the proclamation by claiming vast acreage in western Virginia. The next five years were relatively peaceful on the frontier. In 1768, the Iroquois Confederacy (often called the Six Nations) and the Cherokee signed the Treaty of Hard Labour and the Treaty of Fort Stanwix, relinquishing their claims on the territory between the Ohio River and the Alleghenies to the British. With the frontier now open, settlers, once again, began to enter into present-day West Virginia.

During the American Revolution (1776-1783), the Mingo and Shawnee, headquartered at Chillicothe, Ohio, allied themselves with the British. In 1777, a party of 350 Wyandots, Shawnees, and Mingos, armed by the British, attacked Fort Henry, near present-day Wheeling. Nearly half of the Americans manning the fort were killed in the three-day assault. The Indians then left the Fort celebrating their victory. For the remainder of the war, smaller raiding parties of Mingo, Shawnee, and other Indian tribes terrorized settlers throughout West Virginia. As a result, European settlement in the state came to a virtual standstill until the war's conclusion. Following the war, the Mingo and Shawnee, once again allied with the losing side, returned to their homes. However, as the number of settlers in the region began to grow, and with their numbers depleted by the war, both the Mingo and the Shawnee moved further inland.

## *European Pioneers and Settlers*

Indian scouts, William Lowther and Jesse and Elias Hughes, were the first Englishmen to set foot on the land that currently comprises Gilmer County. They explored the area during the autumn of 1772. The first permanent English settler in the county was Peter McCune. He had explored the area shortly after the end of the American Revolutionary War with his father-in-law, Adam O'Brien, and decided to move his family to the county in 1810. He built a cabin at the mouth of Leading Creek.

In 1816, William Stalnaker received a grant of 30,000 acres in the county for his service as a Lieutenant in the War of 1812. Gilmer County became home to many veterans following the war of 1812, including George H. Beall, Townshend Beall, Joseph Bennett, Alexander McQuian, and James Farnsworth. He built a temporary home and brought his family (wife Elizabeth and son Salathiel) and twenty slaves to the site of an abandoned Indian village on the Little Kanawha River, near the mouth of Mill Seat Run. By 1820, his tobacco plantation was doing very well and he had a two-story brick mansion constructed on the property. A second mansion was later built on the property for his son and, on March 24, 1845, it served as the meeting place for the first session of the Gilmer County court. By that time, a large number of families lived in the area and it was known as DeKalb, named by William Stalnaker in honor of his hero Johann, Baron de Kalb, companion of the Marquis de Lafayette.

## *Important Events During the 1800s*

During the 1840's, Gilmer County was home to a roving band of militant pioneers known as the Hell-fired Band. They opposed any improvements to the area, such as the building of new roads and the clearing of forests. They preferred living off the land as nature intended, like true hardy pioneers. In 1843, several members of the Hell-fired band, including Daniel McCune, Joseph Parsons, Alexander Turner, and Jackson Cottrell, were convicted of murdering Jonathan Nichols and sent to prison in Richmond, Va. to serve an eighteen-year sentence. Jackson Cottrell, the youngest of the group at age seventeen, was released after serving five years of his eighteen-year sentence. Alexander Turner died in Greenbrier County on the way to the prison. Joseph Parsons died soon after his arrival at the prison, and Daniel McCune served about eight years of his sentence until he also died.

In 1845, as tensions in the United States were rising over the slavery issue, southern sympathizers within Gilmer County's Methodist Church broke away from the Methodist Church and formed the Methodist Church South. They constructed their own church, called Job Temple, in 1860. In 1979, it became Gilmer County's first site to be placed on the National Register of Historic Places.

The Civil War brought life in Gilmer County to a stand still. During the war, the county's government basically ceased to function as various groups of "Rangers" or "Bushwhackers" roamed the county terrorizing the civilian population. Also, so-called "Home Guards," organized by both the Union and the Confederacy, took action against anyone who was believed to hold the wrong political beliefs.

Although there was some northern support in Gilmer county, Republican Abraham Lincoln did not receive a single vote in Glenville during the presidential election of 1860.

In 1861, Currence Conrad, the delegate representing Gilmer, Calhoun, and Wirt Counties in the Virginia secession convention voted for Virginia to remain in the Union. Upon making his vote, Conrad promptly left Richmond for his home in western Virginia fearing that he might be lynched for voting against succession.

Glenville State College's origins can be traced to February 1872, when the West Virginia Legislature created it

as a State Normal School. During its first fifteen years of existence, the school had an enrollment of under one hundred students, mostly from the central West Virginia area. In 1931, the school's name was changed to Glenville State Teachers College, and, in 1943, to Glenville State College.

In 1885, the West Virginia state song, "The West Virginia Hills," was composed by New Jersey's Mrs. Ellen King. She wrote the song, originally penned as a poem, while she was visiting father, Captain Stephen S. Ruddell, in Glenville. The poem appeared in the local newspaper and was noticed by Mr. N. E. Engle, a resident of Braxton County. He converted the poem into a song, adding chorus lines and accompanying music.

### ***Important Events During the 1900s***

The West Virginia State Folk Festival got its start in Glenville in June 1950 and has since become a central West Virginia tradition. The festival celebrates Appalachian culture and features folk music and arts and crafts. It was first organized by Dr. Patrick Gainer, a resident of Tanner, Gilmer County. The festival evolved out of a classroom assignment given by Dr. Gainer, and it has grown to become a huge summer event as people come from all over to see West Virginia's cultural heritage on display.

### ***County Seat***

The William Stalnaker family, located in DeKalb, was the most prominent in Gilmer County throughout the early 1800s and were both surprised and disappointed when the county's voters selected Glenville over DeKalb as the county seat.

Glenville had previously been known as Stewart's Creek, Hartford, and "The Ford." It was called "The Ford" because the old State Road from Weston to Charleston crossed the Little Kanawha River there. Samuel L. Hays laid out the town on the land of William H. Ball in 1845. It was named Glendale by Colonel C. B. Conrad because of the town's location in a glen. William Howell was the first known settler in the town. He built a grist mill there in 1812.

At first, the Stalnaker family, and those allied with it, refused to accept Glenville as the county seat. Several county government officials, including the county clerk, refusing to attend government meetings in Glenville. Once that was settled another problem arose when the deed to the land of the proposed site for the county courthouse in Glenville was contested. Having no where to go, it was agreed to hold the county court, once again, at the home of Salathiel Stalnaker in DeKalb. On April 28, 1846 the county court was moved to the home of William Ball in Glenville where it continued to meet until the court house was completed in 1850. Once it was established that Glenville was to be the center of government, the town of DeKalb began to decline. By the time Glenville was incorporated on March 10, 1856, DeKalb was a ghost town, literally. It was said that the spirit of the aforementioned Daniel McCune, who was tried, convicted and sentenced for the murder of Jonathan Nicholas in 1843, haunted the town.

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