Local tradition once relayed that Captain Jeremiah Smith was the first white settler west of Virginia’s Shenandoah Valley. In fact, two men, Owen Thomas and Isaac Thomas, were probably the first two settlers in the region, known as the Back Creek Valley, when they put down roots as farmers in the 1730s.

Regional historian Wilmer Kerns believes that Smith, a native of New Jersey, began living as a squatter on Owen’s land sometime in the years following. Over time, the Thomases receded from historical view. Smith, however, attained regional historical prominence — as a frontiersman, a road builder, an Indian fighter, and a land developer.

Smith may have made several trips to the Back Creek Valley, before he eventually settled there in the mid-1730s. In 1736, while living as a squatter on Owen Thomas’ 806 acres, he assisted a Col. James Wood in surveying land belonging to Isaac Thomas.

In 1749, Thomas, 6th Lord Fairfax, made his initial land grants in the upper Back Creek Valley. At that time, Lord Fairfax split Owen Thomas’ original tract between Owen’s...
widow, Sarah, and Smith. Lord Fairfax had ordered new surveys of the lands of both Sarah Thomas and Isaac Thomas. Fairfax claimed that the old surveys were longer and narrower than was allowed under colonial Virginia law and took up too much of the bottom land along both Back Creek and Isaac’s Creek to the north, which flowed into Back Creek. Fairfax reclaimed what he said was excess acreage, and sold Sarah’s land (formerly Owen’s land) to Smith.

Eventually, Jeremiah Smith’s land holdings grew to exceed 1,000 acres. He used squatters rights to claim 450 acres in 1750 when he and several neighbors petitioned Lord Fairfax to grant him property. In petitioning for the land, Smith and his neighbors claimed that Smith’s original tract was so “Hilley” and “Stoney” that most of it was untillable. In the years that followed, Smith received an additional 263 acres through land grants in 1754 and 1762.

In 1742, the Orange County Court (Frederick County had not yet been created from Orange County) ordered Smith and another man to “view and lay” a road between a mill near modern-day Winchester, Virginia, and a prominent home near modern-day Capon Bridge, West Virginia. This road, in essence, became the forerunner of U.S. 50. Smith built a home for him and his family along the road. He strategically situated it on sloped land from which he could see any Indians that came down to Back Creek Valley — either from Great North Mountain to the east or Little Timber Ridge to the west. (The house still stands today as the front portion of an existing farmhouse; it is considered to be one of the oldest houses in Frederick County.)
In 1756, about 50 Indian warriors, led by a French officer, crossed the Allegheny Mountains and began preying on the frontier settlers. Lord Fairfax called a meeting of local militia captains, but the meeting proved indecisive. Smith then decided himself to raise a company of 20 men, who marched under his command to intercept the Indians.

Capt. Smith and his men eventually collided with the French and Indian forces near Lost River in what is now Hardy County, West Virginia. Fighting between the two sides was fierce. Tradition relates that Smith’s forces killed five of the French and Indian fighters, with Smith himself presumably slaying the French captain. As the story goes, the slain captain was found to be carrying detailed plans for attacking Fort Frederick in Maryland and blowing up its powder magazines.

Burial site of Jeremiah Smith (large obelisk in top photo) and members of his family, on his farmland outside of Gore, Virginia.

Jeremiah Smith was my great-great-great-great-grandfather through my mother, Edna Mae (Heath) Rymph.

Jeremiah Smith (1711 – 9/4/1787) = Mary Elizabeth _________ (1732 – ?)

Jeremiah Smith (1758 – 10/8/1794) = Elizabeth Ann Snyder (1753 – bef. 9/7/1796)

Samuel Albin (1/12/1785 – 10/30/1844) = Sarah Smith (2/14/1785 – 2/16/1845)


Albert James Rymph (living) = Edna Mae Heath (living)

Bradley Budd Rymph (living) = José Verzosa Baquiran III (living)