ELASTIC, PURE, AND INVIGORATING:
A COTTAGE ROW FOR YELLOW SULPHUR SPRINGS
Thesis submitted to the faculty of
the School of Architecture + Design at
Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Architecture

Defence: 29 April 2008
Research and Demonstration Facility
College of Architecture and Urban Studies
Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University

Hans Rott, Committee Chair

Steven Thompson, Committee Member

Scott Gartner, Committee Member
ELASTIC PURE AND INVIGORATING:
A COTTAGE ROW FOR YELLOW SULPHUR SPRINGS
graduate thesis by Dustin Albright

ABSTRACT:

Situated between Blacksburg and Christiansburg in Montgomery County, Virginia, the Yellow Sulphur Springs Resort began in 1810 as a collection of rustic cabins and closed in 1923 with two hotels, numerous cottages, a bowling alley, and a springhouse gazebo. In the interim, the resort hosted summer travelers seeking refreshment and leisure. Whether drinking the medicinal spring waters or catching up with last summer’s acquaintances, guests found Yellow Sulphur to be a peaceful and rejuvenating stop on the springs circuit. Currently, the property is privately owned and its owners have expressed interest in renovating the remaining hotel and opening a restaurant in its first floor.

Presupposing this renovation and a subsequent reopening of the Yellow Sulphur Springs Resort, I propose a new series of seasonal cottage rows to house resort visitors and have designed one row in particular that overlooks a small spring on the site. Each cottage was divided into public, private, and most private spaces, both formally and systematically. Additionally, a distinction was made between the sulphurous spring water below and fresh rain water, which is collected above to reflect summer light into the bathrooms following afternoon showers.
CONTENTS:

the site and the cottage row, pp. 1-6

the cottage, pp. 7-16

points of interest, pp. 17-19
  a. fresh water’s path, pp. 17-18
  b. connection details, p. 19

appendix, pp. 20-22:
  “Architectural Fashion and the Changing Faces of Yellow Sulphur Springs”

acknowledgments, p. 23
“Five miles south-west of the Montgomery White Sulphur is the Yellow Sulphur Spring. It is most conveniently reached by stages passing over four miles of well-graded turnpike from Christiansburg, on the Virginia and Tennessee Railroad. We are now in the most elevated part of Montgomery county. The spring rises on the east side of the Alleghany and flows into the headwaters of the Roanoke river, two miles away. We are surrounded by variegated and interesting scenery; but what is most remarkable and the most pleasant distinction to the visitor, who already feels his translation into a new atmosphere, is the great altitude of the spring. It is not more than sixty feet above the summit-level of the mountain from which it flows. In consequence of this elevation, the air, as may well be imagined, is elastic, pure and invigorating during the hottest days of summer; and the advantages of a salubrious climate are added in more than ordinary measure to the virtue of the water, to which Nature has given a place so lofty and secluded.”

-Edward Pollard, *The Virginia Tourist*, 1870

These sentiments were vital to my project. I spent my early site visits noting the architectural features and proportions of the remaining structures and how the buildings were positioned relative to each other on the grounds. Equipped with Pollard’s record, however, my understanding of this place deepened. Yellow Sulphur was a humbler resort than many other springs sites in the region, but it was unrivaled, perhaps, in its measure of refreshment. The many porches, in particular, seemed to be manifestations of Pollard’s observations. Each was oriented toward the valley and the spring running through it. They were the primary and unifying elements among the various buildings, and were as important for enjoying the remarkable summer breezes and the sounds of the waters as they were for chatting and circulating. I started to recognize the springhouse itself as a particularly prominent porch above the springhead, and when I found a photograph of the resort’s second hotel (see page 21), I began to view the whole site as an extension of its second-story veranda.

The porch was an indispensable element and was therefore carried forward and given a prominent role in the new cottage row. Here it is an elevated street, from which visitors can depart and ascend into their cottages. Otherwise, they can continue to the east-end, where a more sizable porch provides a place for gathering. Coffee would be brewed here each morning and the days news would be read and discussed.

The cottage row’s orientation is perpendicular to the slope of the land, and it overlooks the spring below. The concrete retaining wall serves to divide the cottages and establish a bedroom that is suspended above the ground and a bathroom that is sunken into it. I thought of the bedroom and its adjacent dining area as having an affinity for the air, and the bathroom as having an affinity for the earth.
The decision to elevate the bedroom and sink the bathroom led to different systems of construction for each. The bathroom is cast-in-place concrete except for the walls dividing bath, sink, and water closet, which contain plumbing and are simply sheathed with concrete tiles. The bathroom walls and roof are poured after the retaining wall and defer to it where they meet; the narrow gap conceals the joint and makes clear this order. The lofted bedroom called for less weight in the roof and walls. Wood framing atop a concrete platform was utilized to this end. The bedroom walls support beams which in turn support the rafters. In addition to their structural role in these east-west frames, the walls are themselves framed panels. The ceiling and the dining platform are also panels, hanging from and resting on the superstructure respectively.
DAYLIGHT STUDY
Rain water above the bedrooms runs down the vaults and along the roofs above the entries, mimicking the path of the visitor. It passes through an incision in the dividing wall and joins the water from the bathroom vaults. Together they flow onto the holding shelves below the bathroom clerestories. Outlets at the east and west ends of the row prevent overflows. Excess water that drains to these ends is collected and used by the resort’s gardeners.
Connections for the porch columns were derived from concentric stairs that frame the springhead. The brass connections mediate between the steel tension rod, the pair of wood compression members, and any rafters framing in.
APPENDIX

This essay stemmed from my initial visits to the site and my early research into its history. It was published in Volume XII of *The Smithfield Review* and is reprinted here with permission.
Architectural Fashion and the Changing Faces of Yellow Sulphur Springs
Dustin Albright

The Yellow Sulphur Springs Resort in Montgomery County, Virginia traces its origin to the year 1800 and owner David Robinson, whose family had purchased the land from James Patton in 1753. Around this time Robinson rented the spring site to Charles Taylor, who assisted in constructing a small set of log buildings to host travelers and guests seeking the health benefits of the spring water. It is one of these buildings from 1810 with its meager 20' x 20' footprint that evolved into the hotel that remains on the site today. In the interim Yellow Sulphur Springs grew significantly in popularity before falling into obscurity just before the Depression. Its increase in prominence stemmed from its proximity to new railroad lines, its inclusion in a summer springs circuit, and good publicity from artists such as Edward Beyer and writers such as Edward Pollard. Setting aside the particulars of these influences as well as the medicinal history of the springs, we can perceive at least one important trait of the spring resorts through a brief analysis of the architecture.

A walk around the grounds of Yellow Sulphur Springs or a tour through photographs taken there reveals a revolving door of architectural styles, sometimes blended or overlaid and sometimes set in opposition to one another. These incongruities proceed in part from the varying tastes of the resort's owners but are also a sign of their singular intention. The attraction of Yellow Sulphur Springs, like the other mineral springs resorts of its day, was somewhat less about the springs themselves and more about the fashion of visiting them, less about the ancient waters from the ground and more about new attractions on the grounds. This reality was understood by its owners and is demonstrated in the architecture of the three hotel buildings that, at one time or another, have stood on the site.

In 1842 Armistead W. Forrest purchased the resort and began a series of building projects. In addition to expanding the hotel, Forrest concentrated on a series of cottage rows in the “Greek cottage style.” Similar measures were taken following the 1853 purchase by Thomas H. Foulkes, Charles P. Gardner, and James B. Edmundson. This time a more cohesive Greek Revival style characterized the new cottage rows and a new porch accompanied the expansion to the hotel. The columns of the porch, regularly spaced at 10 feet, presented a symmetrical façade to mask the asymmetries of the doors and windows. The owners' preference for Greek Revival was consistent with the time period, and this style was also chosen for the renovations to Solitude.

This aerial photograph from 2002 shows the location of the Yellow Sulphur Springs Resort.¹

This 1871 photograph shows the old hotel following the addition of the porch.² The springhouse pavilion on the right was a new addition.

The second hotel after its completion in 1871³

¹ The Smithfield Review, Volume XII, 2008
² The Smithfield Review, Volume XII, 2008
³ The Smithfield Review, Volume XII, 2008
by Robert and Mary Preston, circa 1851. In the case of Yellow Sulphur Springs, and particularly for the hotel, it is evident that the style, as with most vernacular examples, was highly superficial in nature.

The resort grew steadily in popularity before and after the Civil War until it was bought by J.J. Wade and J. Wade in 1871. Seeking to lodge more guests and to keep pace with other area resorts, the Wades built a second hotel with 40 guestrooms. Its bilateral symmetry, defined center, horizontal divisions, and rectangular spaces were strong neo-classical features, but its extensive verandas and mansard roof were romantic elements, familiar to many of the metropolitan visitors. This sort of architectural accessorizing demonstrates again the importance placed on fashionable accommodations. Standing opposite the old hotel and serving as a complimentary bookend, the new hotel also helped to formally frame the space between, which served as a prime spot to see and be seen while on walks to and from the springhouse.

Unfortunately for the Wades, their new building burned in 1873, leading to a period of financial turmoil. In 1886, Capt. Ridgway Holt purchased the property for $4,653, less than one-fifth the price paid by the Wades fifteen years earlier. Seeking to capitalize on the bargain, Holt invested heavily in a new hotel with 60 guestrooms. By 1888 the new building was complete, and whereas the second hotel had straddled the line between the Greek and romantic revivals, the third presented a full-blown romantic aesthetic and picturesque style. It was asymmetrical; emphasized vertical elements, such as its corner turret; and featured non-rectangular interior spaces.

Curiously, though, the third hotel was located on the same spot where the second had stood. This decision is perhaps the most indicative of all that these buildings served as fashionable set pieces. It was not located in a grove of massive oaks, nor on a distant hill overlooking the road, nor any other spot particularly consistent with the English gardens or picturesque landscape paintings that preceded it. Instead it was propped up on the most convenient spot and near the entrance to the resort where guests could quickly note its contemporary face.

What a marvelous face it was, though, and what a fascinating play it assisted in staging. The Yellow Sulphur Springs Resort closed in 1923, and following years of neglect, the third hotel was dismantled in 1944. As with the second hotel, however, it lives on in the few photographs that remain, and these are enough to give at least a little insight into the fashion consciousness of the spring resorts and their guests.

Endnotes
1. VGIN Aerial Survey, Montgomery County [aerial photographs], Not to Scale (Chester, Va.: Geographic Information Network, 2002); hereafter referred to as VGIN Photographs.
6. The Old Hotel and Lodge at Yellow Sulphur Springs (1871) VT ImageBase, Digital Library and Archives, University Libraries, Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University, www.spec.lib.vt.edu/imagebase/templateimages/t2-7/full/t121.jpg
10. VGIN photographs.

The Smithfield Review, Volume XII, 2009
WORKS CITED


NOTE: All photographs were taken by me, unless otherwise noted, in which case, they are from the Virginia Tech ImageBase and the photographer is unknown, or from a 2002 VGIN Aerial Survey. These photographs have been evaluated according to the four “fair-use factors” for copyrighted materials and deemed to be fair. Additionally, they were used with permission.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I sincerely thank my committee members, Hans Rott, Steve Thompson, and Scott Gottner, for their careful attention to this thesis, and for their guidance, which helped to refine and clarify the project.

Thank you to each of my other professors (Kay Edge, Frank Weiner, Jim Jones, Bill Galloway, and Heiner Schnoede) for their commitment to my education.

Thank you to Lynn Eichorn, for the summer work and the opportunity to gain a measure of experience.

Thank you to Hugh Campbell and Ed Brooks for their assistance with the Smithfield Review submission.

Thank you to my classmates for their friendship, their critiques, and their dedication to high-quality work.

Thank you to my parents and Amy’s parents for their encouragement throughout my longer-than-average search for vocational direction.

A most loving thank you to my wife, Amy, for her love, patience, and kindness.

A humble thank you to my Lord, Jesus Christ, for His sacrifice and His example.