Mountain air, wild scenery and healing waters: elements of retreat and the revival of a Virginia Spring

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Abstract

Historic research into the Virginia Springs reveals a collection of vital interconnected seasonal communities centered on retreat from the unhealthy environs of the coast and devoted to resort in the mountains. Prior to the Civil War the Virginia Springs became renowned internationally as the summer home of the region’s and the nation’s elite. The collapse of the southern economy during and following the war meant the reorganization and often the failure of most of the Springs. A revival of sorts took place among the Virginia Springs during the late 19th century, consciously referencing the earlier ‘golden age’. Many of the Virginia Springs found new life as schools, church camps, retirement homes and smaller hotels. Many simply left the scene altogether.

Today little remains in the landscape to suggest the scale and vitality of many of these dynamic seasonal communities. Yet a retreat to a wilderness setting remains appealing. Perhaps most compelling is the persistence of landscape qualities that contributed to their reputations as places of healing and retreat, namely the mountain air, the wild scenery and the healing waters. The Virginia Springs are in fact at an ideal location and represent ideal conditions for a new chapter in our own relationship with wild nature. Preservation efforts ought to focus on articulating such a relationship of building to landscape. While the scale of such a retreat might not equal that of its predecessors, a revived Virginia Spring, such as the Healing Springs of Bath County, can say much about how we retreat in the 21st century.
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Table of Contents

List of Figures

I. Introduction - Springs of the Virginias

II. Methodology - a cultural landscape approach

III. Landscape History – the Virginia Springs Tour revisited

IV. Regional Pattern – survey and documentation

V. Distillation – context for design

VI. Site – selection and analysis

VII. Proposal – redevelopment of Healing Springs

VIII. Findings – afterwords and notions of retreat

Bibliography

Vita
List of Figures

Figure 1.1 New River at Eggleston Springs, Virginia 1

Figure 2.1 Hamlet of Warm Springs, Bath County, Virginia 4

Figure 3.1 *The Homestead*, Hot Springs, Virginia (ca. 1903) 9
Figure 3.2 'MAP OF ROUTES AND DISTANCES TO THE VIRGINIA SPRINGS', 13
Figure 3.3 Undated print of Old Sweet Springs, Virginia 15
Figure 3.4 Red Sulphur Springs 15
Figure 3.5 Sweet Chalybeate Springs, Allegheny County, VA 16
Figure 3.6 Sweet Chalybeate Springs, Main Building 16
Figure 3.7 Sweet Chalybeate Springs, Spring House 16
Figure 3.8 Sweet Chalybeate Springs, North Guest Range & Cottage 16
Figure 3.9 Salt Sulphur Springs, Looking North 17
Figure 3.10 Salt Sulphur Springs, Bath house 17

Figure 3.11 Salt Sulphur Springs, Cottages 17
Figure 3.12 Salt Sulphur Springs, Main Building 17
Figure 3.13 Map to Sweet Springs, Virginia 20
Figure 3.14 Old Sweet Springs, Main Hotel 23
Figure 3.15 Old Sweet Springs, Main Hotel 23
Figure 3.16 Baltimore Row, White Sulphur Springs, West Virginia 24
Figure 3.17 Paradise Row, White Sulphur Springs 24
Figure 3.18 Fauquier Sulphur Springs, Va. Hotel 26
Figure 3.19 Headquarters at Salt Sulphur Springs -1862 26
Figure 3.20 The New Greenbrier, White Sulphur Springs, W. Va.

Figure 4.1 Jefferson Pools, Warm Springs, Virginia
Figure 4.2 Pence Hotel, Pence Springs, WV
Figure 4.3 Red Sulphur Springs, WV
Figure 4.4 Hotel at Capon Springs, WV
Figure 4.5 Hotel at Old Sweet Springs, WV
Figure 4.6 Back side Cascade Inn Healing Springs, VA
Figure 4.7 Hotel at Capon Springs, WV
Figure 4.8 Front Porch – Pence Hotel Pence Springs, WV
Figure 4.9 Porticoes – Old Sweet Springs, WV
Figure 4.10 Cabin at Warm Springs, VA

Figure 4.11 Row of Cabins, Warm Springs, VA
Figure 4.12 Cottage in ruin – Warm Springs, VA
Figure 4.13 Cottages at Salt Sulphur Springs, WV
Figure 4.14 Terrace and Cottages at Salt Sulphur Springs, WV
Figure 4.15 Terrace and Cottages at Salt Sulphur Springs, WV
Figure 4.16 Brick Cottage Under Repair, Old Sweet Springs, WV
Figure 4.17 Back side of Range at Capon Springs, WV
Figure 4.18 Range with Portico at Warm Springs, VA
Figure 4.19 Range and green at Capon Springs, WV
Figure 4.20 Cottages at Salt Sulphur Springs, WV
Figure 4.21 Range and Hotel at Capon Springs, WV
Figure 4.22 Square at Berkeley Springs, WV
Figure 4.23 Square and pools at Berkeley Springs, WV
Figure 4.24 Bath House and pool at Hot Springs, VA
Figure 4.25 Green at Pence Spring, WV
Figure 4.26 Main lawn at The Homestead, Hot Springs, VA
Figure 4.27 Pools and channels at Berkeley Springs, WV
Figure 4.28 Stone-lined pool at Berkeley Springs, WV
Figure 4.29 Roman Bath at Berkeley Springs, WV
Figure 4.30 Bathing pool at Berkeley Springs, WV

Figure 4.31 Gentlemen’s Bath House -Warm Springs, VA
Figure 4.32 Ladies Bath House – Warm Springs, VA
Figure 4.33 Stone Bath Houses – Salt Sulphur Springs, WV
Figure 4.34 Spring House – Craig Healing Springs, VA
Figure 4.35 Spring House – Blue Sulphur Springs, WV
Figure 4.36 Reflecting Pool – Hot Springs, VA
Figure 4.37 Drinking Spring – Pence Springs, WV
Figure 4.38 Drinking Spring at Old Sweet
Figure 4.39 Cold Water Pool – Capon Springs, WV
Figure 4.40 Bear Wallow Spring Pavilion – Orkney Springs, VA

Figure 4.41 Ladies Bath house Warm Springs, VA
Figure 4.42 ‘Campus’ – Warm Springs, VA
Figure 4.43 Bath house Old Sweet Springs, Sweet Springs, WV
Figure 4.44 Exterior of bath house – Old Sweet Springs, WV 38
Figure 4.45 Ridgeline visible at Warm Springs, VA 39
Figure 4.46 Ridgeline above Old Sweet Springs, WV 39
Figure 4.47 Ridgeline at Blue Sulphur Springs, WV 39
Figure 4.48 Ridges above cabins -Warm Springs, VA 39
Figure 4.49 Capon Springs, WV 39
Figure 4.50 Berkeley Springs, WV 39

Figure 4.51 Salt Sulfur Springs, WV 39
Figure 4.52 Berkeley Springs, WV 39
Figure 4.53 Blue Sulphur Springs, WV- Pavilion in pasture 40
Figure 4.54 Stone channel at Berkeley Springs, WV 40
Figure 4.55 Warm Springs Run below Gentleman's Bath, Warm Springs, VA 40
Figure 4.56 Stone channel at Old Sweet Springs, WV 40
Figure 4.57 'Berkeley Castle', Berkeley Springs, WV 40
Figure 4.58 Cottage with broad porches at Red Sulphur Springs, WV 40
Figure 4.59 Front porch with view from promontory at Pence Hotel, Pence Springs, WV 40
Figure 4.60 Cottage on terrace above Capon Springs, WV 40

Figure 4.61 View from bath house at Old Sweet Springs, WV 41
Figure 4.62 20th century colonnade and walkway at The Homestead, Hot Springs, VA 41
Figure 4.63 Covered walkway at front of bath house, Old Sweet Springs, WV 41
Figure 4.64 Walkway to spring house from Pence Hotel, Pence Springs, WV 41
Figure 4.65 Crossroads in the valley, road and cottage - Red Sulphur Springs, WV 41
Figure 4.66 Crossroads in the valley, road and cottage - Red Sulphur Springs, WV 41
Figure 4.67 Stone general store and church along highway, Salt Sulphur Springs, WV 41
Figure 4.68 State highway through hamlet, Warm Springs, VA 41

Figure 5.1 Conceptual section through showing natural air circulation, ornamental and scenic forests, and healing waters 44
Figure 5.2 Overhead canopies of trees, open bottom lands 46
Figure 5.3 Building construction allowing for circulation 46
Figure 5.4 Diagram of cooling microclimate found at many springs 46
Figure 5.5 Stone foundation walls allowed cooling from below 47
Figure 5.6 Raised building creates space for outdoor circulation of air 47
Figure 5.7 Cabins located near limbed up trees enjoy shade 47
Figure 5.8 Spring pavilion White Sulphur Springs WV 48
Figure 5.9 Red Sulphur Springs, Monroe Co., W Va 48
Figure 5.10 Stone bath house at Salt Sulphur Springs, WV 49

Figure 5.11 Bath house and mineral pool at Warm Springs, VA 49

Figure 6.1 Cascade Inn and Motel, Healing Springs, Virginia 51
Figure 6.2 Cascade Inn viewed from State Route 220, 1946 52
Figure 6.3 Handbill advertising the Bath County Springs 52
Figure 6.4 1996 Aerial photograph of Cascade Inn and Motel and vicinity, Healing Springs, Bath County, Virginia 53

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