

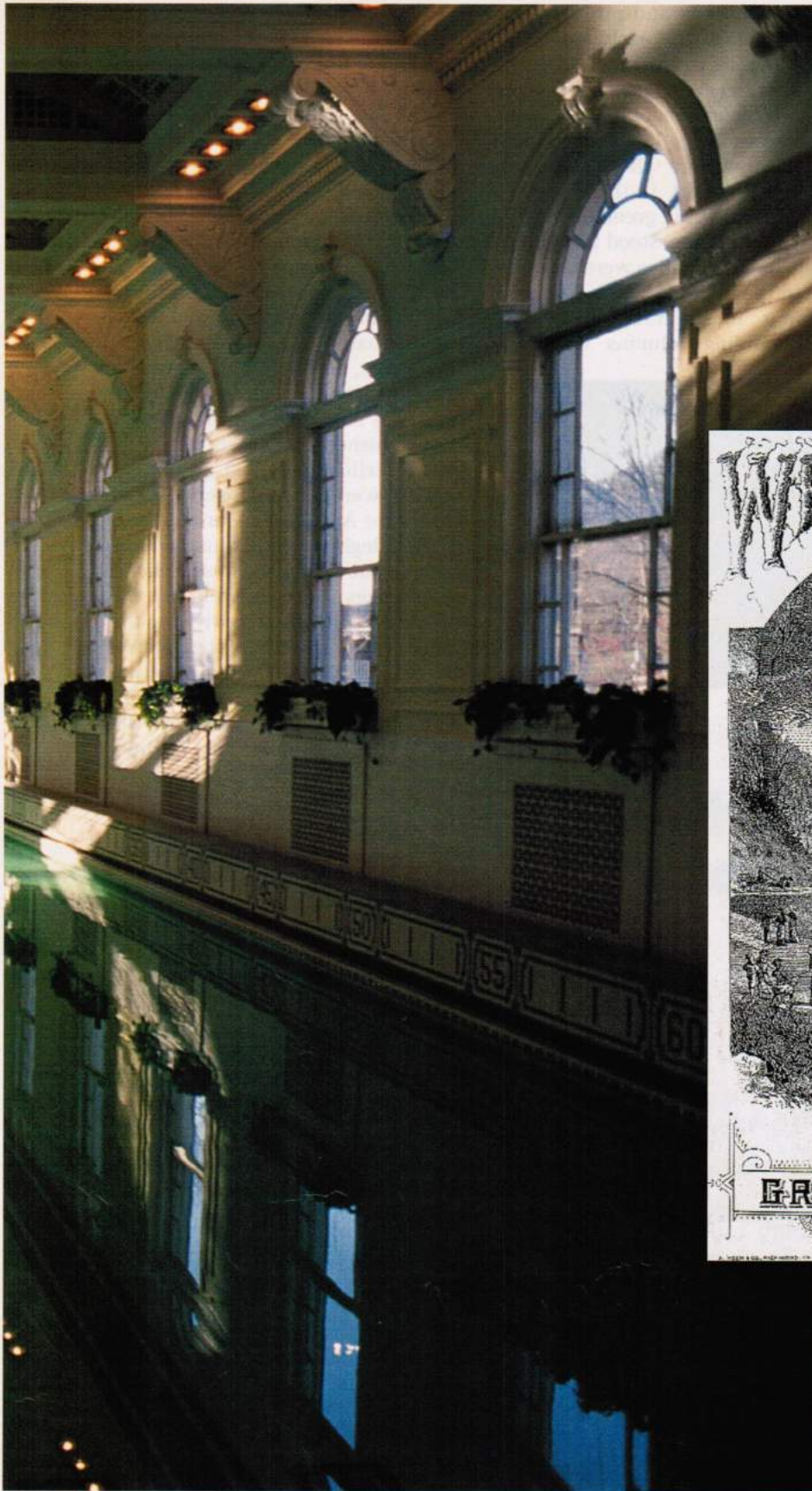


Appalachia's SPRINGS

THE SHARDS OF THE
GRAND OLD RESORTS STILL TELL STORIES

BY JONATHAN LERNER

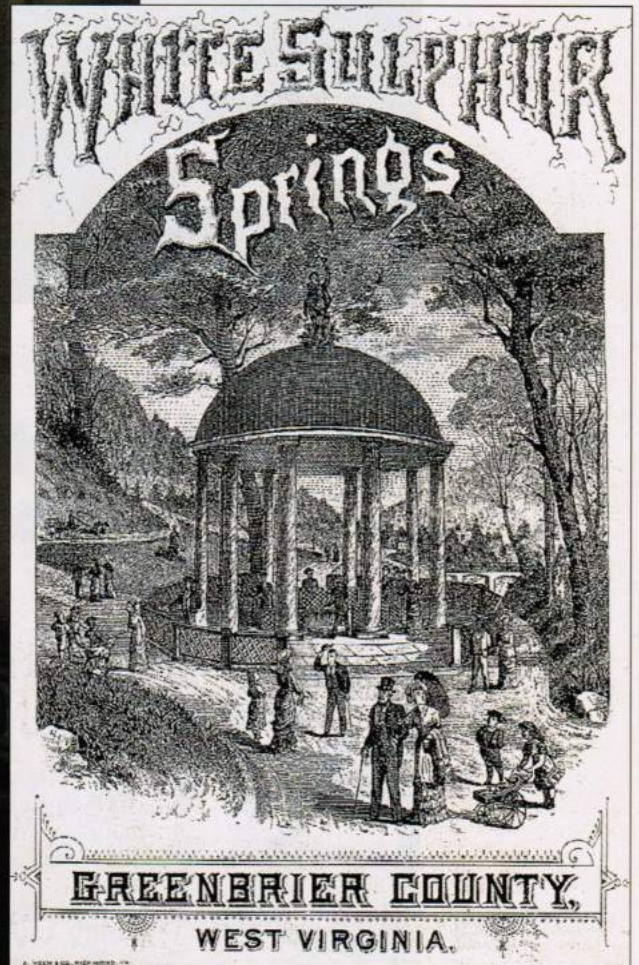
I was on a quest designed to satisfy two of my passions: natural springs and historic buildings. The driving-tour map on the passenger seat urged me on with a seductive sketch of an old springhouse. A miniature Greek temple, four columns to a side, it was a picture of serenity and balance. A book I'd found described the hotel as it had looked when it was built in the 1830s. Verandas ran the length



LEFT: RICHARD T. NOWITZ; RIGHT: COURTESY THE GREENBRIER

of its three stories; rows of cottages bounded its sweeping lawn. It accommodated 200 guests plus servants. This was Blue Sulphur Springs in West Virginia, one of the mineral springs resorts where our young country's elite traveled each summer to escape the lowland heat, to socialize, and to take the waters.

The coiling road to Blue Sulphur Springs passed antique farmhouses, stony fields, and flocks of sheep. With every turn, another vista of tumbling green hills unrolled. The paving was only one lane wide; I approached the blind curves on the



The original springs pool outside the Homestead in Hot Springs, Virginia (opening page), looks almost as inviting as the hotel's more "modern" indoor one (left). The front cover of a post-Civil War era brochure (above) touts the warmth of Greenbrier society rather than the healing effects of the resort's waters.

Below: The Homestead now owns and operates these Colonial-style bathhouses in Warm Springs, Virginia, five miles north of the main resort. Bottom: The Greenbrier Hotel in all its glory, right after its opening in 1914.

shoulder. It was a driver's road—a stick shift, rack-and-pinion, disc brake road. In the early days, the ladies and the infirm made the trek in bouncing carriages; gentlemen followed on horseback.

I entered a long, flat-bottomed valley. There was no village, barely a structure in sight. In the distance, solitary against the green of what is now a cow pasture, stood the springhouse. Its proportions were clunkier than in the drawing. When I parked and approached on foot, I saw that the crumbling columns were not

marble but stuccoed brick. Where there once was a floor, weeds and wildflowers thrived. But at the building's center there was still a gin-clear pool, giving off an eggy odor. This was all that remained of the resort.

From the late 1700s to the early 1900s, the southern Appalachians were dotted with springs resorts: There were more than 80 in Virginia and West Virginia alone. Some have survived as camps or hospitals. A few continue to rent out unmodernized cabins or rooms. A couple of historic bathhouses remain open to the public, and here and there is a spring where folks still come to fill jugs. But most are now in ruins or have vanished altogether.

The earliest and most prominent of them were in the densely packed part of the Appalachian range known as the Allegheny Mountains, and this remains the best place to search out their traces. Here, as well, are the two resorts that have survived to the present day, inheriting the genteel tradition of the mountain watering hole: The Greenbrier, in White Sulphur Springs, West Virginia, and the Homestead, in Hot Springs, Virginia.

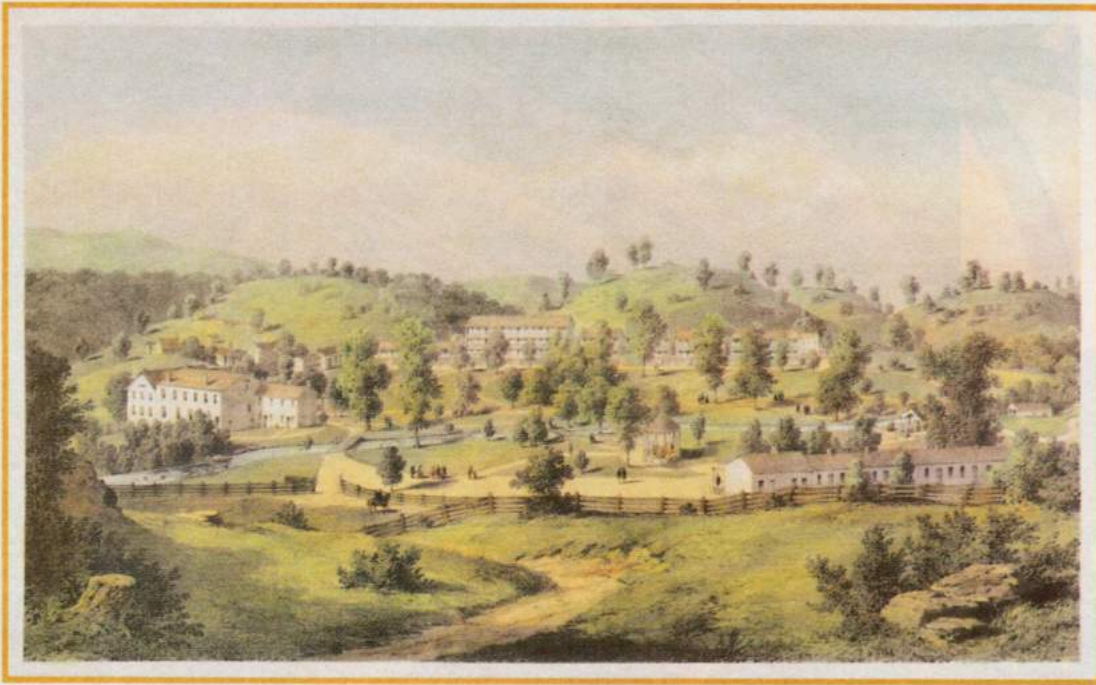
In the 19th century the wealthier citizens of the South, along with much of official Washington, made an annual circuit of these springs. Whole families, with retinues of servants, stopped a week here, two there, ostensibly to drink or bathe (or both) at the various springs, each of which was supposed to have its specific curative properties. Every spring also had its own regimen—a glass of the water before every meal, say, or a dip of a prescribed length each afternoon.

The claims now sound quaintly preposterous. Bathing in Virginia's Sweet Springs, wrote an 1839 observer, "is serviceable in the varieties of dyspepsia... calculus and nephritic complaints... chronic enlargement of the liver... hemorrhoidal affections, and uterine derangement. The water being only tepid, the bath is not recommended for chronic rheumatism or gout."

But with endless festive reunions and farewells, picnics and dances, and gut-busting dinners, springs life wasn't really meant for the sick.



TOP: RICHARD T. NOWITZ; BOTTOM: COURTESY THE GREENBRIER



Folks from coastal states caught up on gossip with cousins who had resettled farther west. A planter's son could hunt with the president in the morning and court the chief justice's niece at dusk.

After the Civil War, summers at the springs helped heal rifts at the top. "Sectional lines are disappearing," declared *Harper's* in 1878, and White Sulphur Springs, the magazine declared, would likely remain "the chosen resort of the really 'best society' of the whole country, North and South." In a sense, it has.

By the turn of this century, railroads made resorts elsewhere accessible. Southerners could now summer as easily at Saratoga Springs, New York, or on the cool New England coast. Medical beliefs were changing, too, and the southern springs declined.

But if railroads killed most of the other Appalachian resorts, they saved the two present-day survivors. Each is on a rail line, and each was purchased by big railroad money to be kept alive as a destination for passengers. "Golf was a factor, too," notes Greenbrier historian Robert Conte. "They both had enough land for courses."

Golf is still a big draw at these resorts, as are other sports requiring

specialized togs, such as tennis, shooting, riding, and fishing. In fact, old-fashioned dress codes are observed from morning to midnight. It's precisely their suggestion of tradition and formality, softened with courtly southern manners, that keeps people coming back to The Greenbrier and the Homestead.

Basic amenities have long since been replaced by lavish ones. The Homestead has just poured \$22 million into restoration; Greenbrier literature implies that the sumptuous decor installed there in 1948, when it reopened after serving as a World War II military hospital, will be preserved unchanged forever.

At either place you may share an elevator with honchos of commerce or politics. Indeed, The Greenbrier is the site of a recently decommissioned underground bunker with 1,000 beds, meant to shelter the entire Congress in the event of a nuclear war. Nowadays, guests are lead through it as part of the tour conducted by Conte. You can still take mineral baths at The Greenbrier, too.

The resorts no longer make medical claims, but it's hard to argue with the soothing effect of a good soak, which I indulged in after I checked in at the Homestead. Leaving my guest room, I *(continued on page 251)*

Built in 1820, Salt Sulphur Springs looked like this when Henry Clay stayed there, but all that's left today is a chapel, a store, a spring-house, and one modest apartment.

(from page 143) followed the building's rambling corridors to the bathhouse for a swim. The long indoor pool, fed by the hot spring, is within a tall, delicate, many-windowed pavilion built in 1903 that sparkles with fresh retiling.

Using the Homestead as my base, I spent the following day at the antique village of Warm Springs five miles up the road. I visited two simple wooden, octagonal bathhouses—one for gentlemen, one for ladies—that date from 1761 and 1836. Thomas Jefferson bathed at the older one, and so did I, in blissful solitude, save for a gracious attendant. Although Warm Springs is owned and operated by the Homestead, it's open to nonguests as well.

The next day I moved 45 miles west to The Greenbrier. From there I poked around other, nearby springs with the aid of a local driving-tour map. Salt Sulphur Springs, on little-traveled Route 219, near the southeast border of Virginia and West Virginia, has an age-old calm. Opened as a resort in 1820, it counted Martin Van Buren and Henry Clay among its guests. The handsome surviving buildings include a chapel, a store, a springhouse, and part of an 1836 hotel whose present owner has carved out an apartment available for overnight lodging. All are built of honey-gold limestone quarried right on site.

Heading northeast on Route 3, just before the road enters Virginia and turns into Highway 311, I found the stately brick resort at Sweet Springs, with its gorgeous lawn, rambling hotel with white-columned porticoes, a few standing cottages, and a roofless, Romanesque, still-working bathhouse. Sweet Springs was planned by William Phillips, who had worked with Jefferson in designing the famous campus at the University of Virginia.

Reminiscent of those designs, Sweet Springs was to have had a second hotel facing the first, with crescents of cottages enclosing an oval park between them. This ring of buildings was never completed, though the artist Edward Beyer, who painted many of the springs resorts in the 1850s, portrayed it as if it had been.

Just one mile up the road, in Sweet

Chalybeate, Virginia, the mineral spring feeds a tree-shaded swimming pool, now only erratically open to the public. One of the two long, galleried wooden hotel buildings nearby is falling in, and the other has been divided into apartments; but the two exquisite Greek Revival cottages they flank somehow appear to be in perfect shape.

The resort sites on the driving-tour loop (there are eight on the map) could be visited in a long day. However, I preferred the more languid approach of making several shorter excursions, each capped by an appointment to be boiled, sprayed, pummeled, and steamed in The Greenbrier's gleaming spa.

If you're heading north from The Greenbrier, aim for the baths at Berkeley Springs, West Virginia, near the Potomac. This is one of the oldest mineral springs resorts in the

Appalachians, if not the very first. European settlers were taking its waters as early as 1730, and it is said that for centuries before, Native American nations that were not friendly to one another considered it a neutral healing place for all to use in peace. George Washington first arrived there at the age of 16, while on a surveying expedition, and later, during his presidency, he built his own cottage at the resort—the first summer White House.

A railroad link to Berkeley Springs was opened in 1888, and if two major hotels had not been destroyed by fire (in 1898 and 1901), perhaps the resort would have survived with its luxurious and aristocratic character intact, as did The Greenbrier and the Homestead. Instead, the spring is now within a state park, operating as a no-frills, low-cost spa where you can get a bath and massage. Perhaps because of its proximity to Washington, D.C., and other mid-Atlantic population centers, the town is once again a thriving retreat, with civilized inns and restaurants and a sizable resident artist community whose output can be seen at local galleries.

If you're heading south from The Greenbrier, you'll find more survivors just over the North Carolina border. A pretty lane leads alongside a creek to Historic Healing Springs, near the hamlet of Crumpler, where you can walk beneath a flower-draped trellis to the springhouse and fill your jug, or rent one of the original rustic cabins. Nearby Shatley Springs offers the same, along with a family-style restaurant that serves southern country cooking.

Farther south, at Hot Springs, near Asheville, an 1880s hotel once boasted a quarter mile of glassed-in verandas, 16 marble bathing pools, and the Southeast's first golf course. That's all gone, but there's a campground with private outdoor tubs where you can take a soak and ponder the appeal of Appalachian springs. ■

Jonathan Lerner writes on travel and historic preservation for Metropolitan Home and Town & Country.

Dive In

The Greenbrier Rooms (including breakfast and dinner) run from \$154 to \$313 depending on the package and the season. Call 800/624-6070.

The Homestead Rooms run from \$117 to \$480 and include breakfast and dinner; prices vary depending on the package and the season. Call 800/838-1766.

Historic Springs of the Virginias, a Pictorial History, by Stan Cohen (\$12.95), is sold at The Greenbrier and the Homestead, but you can also order a copy from Pictorial Histories Publishing Company; 4103 Virginia Ave., SE; Charleston, WV 25304; 304/925-7611. The Springs Trail driving-tour map is readily available in the area, or by mail from the Monroe County Historical Society; Box 465; Union, WV 24983.